

# **Arts and Islam – background material**

## **Episodes in British Muslim History**

### **The portside struggles of the Muslim seamen and their communities 1850-1945**

By Hassan Mahamdallie

#### **Introduction 1 – first encounters**

**There has been a small Muslim presence in Britain stretching back hundreds of years, undermining present day notions that Muslims are ‘foreign’ newcomers to British society.**

Islam came out of 7th century Arabia and as a highly successful social, political and economic formation spread its empire into Europe and Asia. At that time Britain was not strategically important. The odd Arab sailor or pirate landed on the south coast to take provisions – or sometimes to snatch captives back to North Africa. One of the first recorded Muslim visitors was a famous intellectual named Al Idrisi – a North African Arab patronised by Sicilian kings who toured the West of England in the early 1100s.

With the rise of the Ottoman Empire there began more formal links. In 1588 Elizabeth I offered a treaty to ally with Ottoman Sultan Murad III against Catholic Spain. Elizabeth considered Islam closer to Protestantism than the Catholics were, whom she considered idolaters (for worshipping statues). Under Elizabeth, Muslim traders were given protection in England, and in return English traders were given free passage in Muslim territories.

So the English were not unaccustomed to Muslims, and writings from the time, including Shakespeare, burst with both fascination and fear for these traders, soldiers and diplomats.

Thousands of English mercenaries served under rulers in North Africa and Turkey where they might convert to Islam. Muslims could be feared (for their armies), objects of curiosity (for their religion and cultural ways), admired (for their trading skills), and so on – but they were never regarded as inferior. In fact, if anything, they were resented because of their superiority.

Small groups of Muslims began to settle in Britain. We know that by 1627 there was a ‘community’ of poor Muslims living in central London. They mingled with poor whites and scraped along as tailors, shoemakers, pedlars and button makers.

## **Introduction 2 – impact of the British Empire**

**As the British Empire grew through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain shifted from propping up the fading 400 year old Ottoman Empire to challenging it and taking it over.**

This produced differing, changing and sometimes violent attitudes to Muslims. Powerful voices began to consistently portray the fading Ottoman Empire as the enemy and its official religion as part of the problem. The only solution it was argued was to colonise the Ottomans and purge their religion. This bred at home a chauvinist reaction against Muslims and their identity became transformed into the 'heathens in our midst'.

Where Islam was regarded as a challenge to colonial rule it was denigrated and its followers abused. In 1835 Macaulay wrote his infamous 'Minute on Education' over British policy in India and demanded total assimilation of Muslims to English 'taste, opinions, morals, and intellect'.

William Muir wrote his notorious diatribe against Islam, *Life of Mohamet*: 'The sword of Mohamet and the Koran are the most fatal enemies of civilisation, liberty and the truth the world has ever known.' Muir believed Islam a false religion that kept Muslims in 'a backward and...barbarous state'.

Later on in the 19th century – when Britain came into direct military conflict with Turkey over control of the Middle East – the Liberal prime minister William Gladstone was criticized for played on anti-Muslim feeling to justify war. He called the Koran 'that accursed book' and branded Muslims as 'anti-human specimens of humanity'. In the First World War the Turkish ruling class sided with Germany. Muslims in Britain were looked upon suspiciously as 'un-British', while the Liberal prime minister, Lloyd George, dubbed military operations in Palestine as 'the British Crusade'.

Lloyd George declared, 'We are undertaking a great civilising duty – a mission which Providence had assigned our race, which we are discharging to people living under the shadow of great tyranny, trembling with fear, appealing with uplifted hands for our protection. Turkish misgovernment...shall come to an end now that Britain and the Allies have triumphed'.

## **The opening of the Suez Canal**

**The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 marked the beginning of significant Muslim immigration.**

The port of Aden, seized by the British in 1837, became a major stop off and refuelling point and attracted migrants from Yemen and northern Somalia, doubling the port's population by the end of the 19th century. Ship owners from Europe began to employ these migrants in increasing numbers predominantly as segregated unskilled labourers in shoveling coal in the engine rooms.

These Muslim sailors joined a floating multiracial and multinational proletariat that had up to that point been populated by Indian 'lascars', West Africans and West Indians, as well as British and Europeans. By the end of the 19th century small itinerant port communities were establishing themselves along the trade routes, including Europe's seaports, especially those of France and Britain. Arabs could be found boarding in the dockside areas of Cardiff, South Shields, and to a lesser extent Liverpool and Hull. In Cardiff they joined other migrant workers from Africa, the West Indies, India, China, Malta, Greece, Italy, Germany and other countries. Portside licensed boarding houses and cafes sprang up to service the Muslim sailors, becoming hubs for welfare and community needs.

Richard Lawless, in his groundbreaking book about the Yemeni community in the north east of England, *From Ta'izz to Tyneside*, tells how, 'for Arab seamen arriving in a strange land with little knowledge of its language and customs, the Arab boarding-house was virtually essential for their survival', providing 'not only accommodation and food that was lawful according to their religion, but essential assistance in securing another ship, and credit if their resources ran out before they signed on for the next voyage'.

Some seamen began to put down semi-permanent or permanent roots, often resulting from relationships that had grown up between them and local women. Women who married the seamen would often convert to Islam and take a Muslim surname, to be passed onto their children as the families became members of the dockside working class population. Prayer rooms and eventually mosques with koranic schools were established in both Cardiff and South Shields, where in the 1930s:

Elaborate and colourful processions through the streets were organised to mark the major Muslim festivals, occasions when members of the Arab community were able to make a strong public declaration of their faith. Muslims from other parts of the north east sometimes took part in these processions and groups of Arabs from Cardiff also participated.

In Cardiff the religious culture of the seamen could mark them out in some respects. An invaluable 1940s sociological study by Kenneth Little of the city's Butetown area observed of Muslims:

'The adherents of this creed not only carry out their ritual and religious obligations with vastly more fervour and enthusiasm than the rest of the community, but are correspondingly surer both of themselves and their own way of life. The principle injunctions of Islam are fulfilled assiduously, and the various prohibitions enjoined by the prophet are on the whole rigorously observed as are Ramadan and other fasts and festivals... This constant display of devotion is regarded by the rest of the community with a certain amount of respect and even a little admiration. There is a feeling that it gives 'tone' to the district'.

Nevertheless Muslim seamen, like the other black populations, met with fluctuating, sometimes extreme and sustained, levels of racism, hostility and prejudice.

Former prejudices founded on notions of biological superiority of the 'white race' now mixed with assumptions of cultural superiority and a corresponding contempt for the histories, cultures and religions of the colonised.

The British colonisation of Muslim countries gave the racism of empire an anti-Islamic twist, an echo perhaps of older fears and prejudices produced at the time when Western Europe felt threatened by ascendant Islamic empires. Humayun Ansari in his recent history of Muslims has written how 'the early 19th century saw the emergence in Britain of 'a new sense of cultural superiority' with the decline of the Ottoman Empire that had once challenged Europe from the East. 'British elites saw their nation vibrant and expanding' and gained 'a sense of superiority' from 'the expansion and consolidation of European influence over Muslim territories' so that: popular prejudice against non-Europeans and Christian hostility towards 'heathens' in Britain...gained considerable currency; colour was an outward reflection of mental and moral inferiority... By the 1860s negative images of Islam and Muslims were embraced in the hardening religious and racial prejudices that were beginning to be articulated in the form of pseudo-scientific theories of race in Britain.

This general racism was sharpened by local antagonisms in the ports, especially when scarcity of employment could set British seamen against their black and Arab counterparts. The migrant seamen were herded into close-knit slum areas around the docks, with a colour bar in jobs and housing that tended to keep them from integrating with the local population. It was the policy of Cardiff council and estate agents to refuse 'coloured' families housing outside of Butetown and as late as the 1940s they faced 'ostracism, oral or newspaper comment, refusal to serve, non-admission to dance halls, hotels etc'.

Officials could argue that 'coloured men who have come to dwell in our cities are being made to adopt a standard of civilisation they cannot be expected to understand. They are not imbued with moral codes similar to our own and they have not assimilated our conventions of life'. The local press agitated for repatriation on the basis that the seamen did not 'belong to the social system we have evolved on these islands'.

Black and Arab seafarers faced a further obstacle in the generally hostile attitude that the trade unions had towards them. The seamen's unions sought to bar foreigners from trade union membership, until union leader J Havelock Wilson reversed it, seemingly just on the practical grounds that it was better to contain the foreign seamen inside the unions than give the ship-owners a free hand with them. By 1902 Wilson was taunting white seamen with claims that 40 percent of his union's membership was made up of foreign labour—which meant that in many areas they must have been the backbone of the union and a major contributor to its coffers.

The shipping bosses used pitifully paid and badly treated lascars to undermine the wages and conditions of white seamen. The employers asserted that foreign crews were eager to do the work, and that Muslims seamen in particular were teetotal and compliant.

Sexual jealousy and a horror at the prospect of white women marrying Arab seamen and having children was a permanent racist motif throughout the first half of the 20th century.

In Tyneside a correspondent to a local newspaper betrayed how racism encouraged by economic competition could fuse with the cultural racism of empire: 'No matter how bad conditions are aboard ship, Mohamed (who can live on the smell of an oily rag or a stick of incense for a week) will not complain, but a Britisher always does. This is why poor, puzzled, ostracised, uncomplaining Mohamed is given preference to Britishers'.

The outbreak of the First World War resulted in a sudden increase in demand for seamen in the merchant navy, and the migrant seafaring population of Tyneside, made up mostly of Yemenis, increased fourfold. But the situation dramatically altered again when the war drew to a close. The Arabs were hit by a double blow. They found themselves out of work, once more suffering pre-war racist hiring practices by the shipping lines. And they also faced hostile mobs of demobilised seamen accusing them of taking their jobs.

The antagonisms exploded into the 'race riots' in the first half of 1919. The attacks have, paradoxically, to be seen in the context of the huge outbreak in class struggle that rocked the British ruling class that year.

The First World War came to an end amid turmoil throughout British society as workers returning from the front found, not a 'land fit for heroes', but rising prices and the threat of being pushed into the ranks of the unemployed and poverty. They rebelled with a massive wave of strikes. But as the militancy ebbed, some elements went looking for scapegoats – and the poor Muslim minority fitted the bill in many ways, although other groups – especially Chinese - suffered immensely as well.

Blacks and Arabs were set upon in all Britain's major ports and suffered savage beatings, fire bombings and murders. It started in Glasgow in January 1919. In February the violence erupted in South Shields, in April in the London docks; in May it hit Liverpool and Cardiff in June. The intensity of the violence seems to have increased at each stage. In Cardiff the rioting lasted several days, and resulted in three deaths. A Cardiff Somali, Ibrahim Ismaa'il, later remembered in his memoirs that:

'A Warsangeli [from a Northern Somali kabil or clan], Abdi Langara, had a boarding house right in the European part of town... As soon as the fight started all the Warsangeli went to defend Abdi's house... Seven or eight Warsangeli defended the house and most of them got badly wounded. Some of the white people also received wounds. In the end the whites took possession of the first floor, soaked it with paraffin

oil and set it alight. The Somalis managed to keep up the fight until the police arrived—one of them was left for dead.’

In Liverpool a West Indian sailor, Charles Wotten, was cornered by a crowd of 200 to 300 racists who threw him into the docks and pelted him with stones until he drowned.

There were some reported spontaneous acts of solidarity from individual English people but in the main the blacks and Arabs were left to put up resistance by themselves against the mobs and their organised collaborators in the forces of ‘law and order’.

### **The seamen and the inter-war years**

#### **The reaction of the authorities to the 1919 mob violence was to further crack down on the Muslim seamen.**

Arab and Somali sailors were reclassified from their previous status as British passport holding workers to unwelcome and problematic ‘aliens’, and their rights as British subjects stripped away.

In 1921 the Cardiff Town Clerk recommended that destitute seamen ‘be repatriated forthwith, or accommodated in a concentration camp’ and in 1922 hundreds of Adenese were repatriated out of the city. Seamen, including numbers of Somalis and Yemenis in South Shields who had lived in Britain for a long time, many with white wives and British-born children, were told that they had to prove their citizenship rights from scratch, and many had their British status removed for lack of documentation or financial resources to register it.

One historian describes how: ‘All coloured alien seamen were henceforth to be registered with the police and to carry an identity card marked ‘SEAMAN’ in red ink bearing a photograph and a thumb-print. It was argued that the last was necessary because it was more difficult to tell coloured men apart and some more positive means of identification was needed! The holder was not a person but an invisible man, a black; only the criminal associations of a thumb-print could give him an identity’.

A later order specified that;

‘A white card shall be issued...to any Somali or Arab who satisfies the Port Consultants that he is a bona fide seaman and lawful in this country. The white card shall only be issued after being stamped by the National Union of Seamen and the Shipping Federation... Officers engaging Somalis or Arab crews shall be informed that it is very undesirable to mix Somalis and Arabs of other races, and asked to specify which one they prefer’.

The Arab and Somali seamen responded to the attack on their already precarious existence by launching a militant and vigorous campaign to smash the rota, picketing shipping offices and lobbying to get the union’s position changed. The violent confrontations that took place in Cardiff and South Shields as a result ended with Arab

---

and Somali sailors being prosecuted and receiving 'exemplary' sentences tagged with judicial recommendations of deportation.

The seamen looked to radical forces to help them. In Cardiff they were drawn via activists in the Seaman's Minority Movement and the International Transport Workers' Federation into a working alliance with the Communist Party and the Colonial Defence Association it influenced.

These Muslim communities organised among themselves for their political, social and religious needs as well as forging links with radical anti-racist organisations. In Cardiff the British Somali Society (BSS) and the Somali Youth League (connected to organisations in Somalia) were formed in the mid-1930s. The United Committee of Coloured and Colonial Peoples Organisations, set up to unite the migrant seamen of Cardiff across national, ethnic and religion divides, sent an Arab delegate, Mohamed Hassan, to the landmark 1945 Pan-African Congress in Manchester, along with two delegates from a Somali Society.

There were also welfare organisations and a religious grouping, the Islamia Allawia Friendly Society, in Cardiff and similar formations in South Shields. As Humayun Ansari has written, 'Muslims in Britain found themselves forming part of a broader multicultural identity, which coexisted with and sometimes transcended religion'.

After the Second World War renewed migration from the colonies boosted the Yemeni populations. As Richard Lawless has written:

'In the 1950s and 1960s a new influx of Yemenis into Britain found employment not in shipping but in heavy industry, especially in the steel and metal-working plants in Sheffield and Birmingham... Some Arab seafarers moved to the Midlands where new employment opportunities were opening up in industry and in this way forged a link between the two phases of Yemeni migration to Britain'. The most well known Yemeni descendant from Sheffield is the champion boxer Prince Naseem (Naseem Hamed).

Racism in the ports was hard to shake off. A sharp reminder of its power to harm came in 1952 when a Somali seaman, Hussein Mattan, was fitted up by the police for the murder of a local woman and hanged after a sham trial. It was not until 1998, 46 years later, that his widow Laura and sons Omar and Mervyn managed to get this gross miscarriage of justice recognised as such and Mattan's name cleared.

The Muslim sailors, their families and descendants, were pioneers, and the story of their struggles deserves to be wider known.

---

## Bibliography

**Humayun Ansari**, *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain since 1800* (Hurst & Company, 2004)

**Nabil Matar**, *Turks, Moors & Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (Columbia University Press, 1999)

**Richard I Lawless**, *From Ta'izz to Tyneside: An Arab Community in the North East of England During the Early 20th Century* (University of Exeter Press, 1995)

**Kenneth Little**, *Negroes in Britain* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972)

**Colin Holmes**, *John Bull's Island: Immigration & British Society, 1871—1971* (Macmillan, 1988)

**Rozina Visram**, *Asians in Britain 400 Years of History* (Pluto Press, 2002)

**Kenneth Lunn** (ed), *Race and Labour in 20th Century Britain* (Frank Cass, 1985)

**Trades Union Congress** Minutes 1925

**Peter Fryer**, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (Pluto Press, 1984),

**Earnest Marke**, *In Troubled Waters: Memoirs of my Seventy Years in England!* (Karia Press, 1986)

**Chanie Rosenberg**, *1919: Britain on the Brink of Revolution* (Bookmarks 1987)

**Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood**, *The 1945 Manchester Pan-African Congress Revisited* (New Beacon Books, 1995)

**Note:** *this material is adapted from previous articles by Hassan Mahamdallie. The above essay does not represent the views of Arts Council England.*