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Since 1618

**HAMMERSMITH
UNITED
CHARITIES**

The Somali Sailors

Ethnic Communities Oral History Project

Supporting the community since 1618

“If English is not your first and most fluent language, how do you share your life experiences with others, not familiar with yours... ‘ordinary people’s life histories deserve as wide a readership as possible.’”

Sav Kyriacou

Former project coordinator
The Ethnic Communities Oral History Project

Introduction

In the late 80s/early 90s, the Hammersmith and Fulham Ethnic Communities Oral History Project published a set of 12 memoirs chronicling the collective experiences of the communities that make up our very diverse borough through the specific stories of individual members of them.

“After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.”

Philip Pullman

Nearly a quarter of a century later, as part of our marking 400 years of bringing this community together, Hammersmith United Charities is republishing these stories. We will publish one a month, each launched at a special lunch held in a venue which also reflects the community in question. We can think of no better way of celebrating the depth and richness of the heritage of our Area of Benefit nor of showcasing the range of talents and experiences from which it benefits than through the republication of these stories.

“He who is different from meenriches me. Our unity is constituted in something higher than ourselves - in Man... For no man seeks to hear his own echo, or to find his reflection in the glass.”

(Antoine de Saint-Exupéry)

This is the full list of publications, we hope you enjoy them as much as we have.

1. The Irish in Exile - Stories of Emigration
2. Passport to Exile - The Polish Way to London
3. In Exile - Iranian Recollections
4. The Motherland Calls - African-Caribbean Experiences
5. The Forgotten Lives - Gypsies and Travellers on the Westway Site
6. Xenia - Greek-Cypriots in London
7. Ship of Hope - The Basque Children
8. Aunt Esther’s Story (with Stephen Bourne)
9. Somali Sailors
10. Asian Voices - Life Stories from the Indian Sub-continent
11. Sailing on Two Boats - Second Generation Perspectives
12. Such a Long Story! - Chinese Voices in Britain

The Somali Sailors

The presence of a Somali community in Britain dates back over 100 years. Somalia, which became independent in 1960 was a British protectorate - the former British Somaliland - from 1886 to 1960.

There are records of Somali's living in Britain before the first world war in all the major ports of Cardiff, Liverpool, South Shields and London's east end.

The Somali's have a long tradition of emigrating and working at sea. Many originally went to find work in Aden, which was then a British colony and an important shipping centre. From there they came to Britain, although some came directly from Somalia.

From the nineteenth century onwards charitable organizations built hostels in the east end for the accommodation of seamen. London was then one of the busiest ports in the world and thousands of seamen had to be accommodated between ships.

Between the first and second world wars many Somali seamen began making their homes in east London. Stepney and Poplar, East and West Ham, being the areas bordering the docks were places where they found themselves settling down.

Many of the elder Somali seamen still live in the few remaining seamen's hostels. On Tower Bridge you can see Somali names amongst the 25,000 Bengalis who lost their lives in both the first and second world wars.

Discrimination and racial attacks against Black seamen (including Somalis) took place periodically during periods of economic recession after the first world war in 1919 and in 1930.

In 1919 there were anti-Black riots in Liverpool, Cardiff, South Shields and London, the brunt of which was borne by the Black communities settled in and around the port areas.

MOHAMED YUSUF SALAD

Born in Aden 1907

Can you tell us about Aden?

Oh Aden, I was in Aden, I start the job and I was 15 maybe and I work about 13 years with BP, they were called Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Also in the war time 1940, throughout the war, we delivered the oil to all the ships, navy ships, cargo ships. We worked day and night we don't mind whether we die or not die, nobody stop the job. We work day and night, we were on stand-by always. Day and night the ships go in, out, in, out, every country was coming to Aden during the war. The people mix too, African, Arab, English, anybody you can see in Aden, anybody, in the war time.

Can you tell me about the first time you left home to go to sea as a sailor?

I came from Aden, I come on a ship here in 1948, from Australia to here it was 9 months and fifteen days. And I pay off in Surrey docks. England, what I seen in that time and this time its a big difference. Everything was cheaper then.

What sort of work were you doing on the ship?

I worked at that time on a ship called the India Endeavour in the fire room, with coal you know. But I changed again on this ship. Sometimes engine room, sometimes on the deck. The last time I worked I was an AP, you know, AP on the deck.

Why did you decide to go to sea, what made you become a sailor?

Well I wanted money you see, and all the Somali's go to sea. Everybody get a ship at that time, nobody work on the land, they worked on the ships. The Somalis maybe the first one's when they came, up till today it's maybe 200 years ago.

So when you were at home in Aden did you know of people before, who had gone to England as sailors?

Yes, I said they had been coming maybe since 200 years ago coming to England, mostly to Cardiff the first time. Our people they used to come in those ships with sails like the dhows. I used to talk to the old men when I was there, in Cardiff, they told me "I came 50 years before and they never give me a job and I had to go to court".

So you first came here in 1948?

Yes I paid off in Surrey dock.

Were you living in the East End of London at that time?

Yes, Leman street, 137 Leman Street E1

What was it like, were the people friendly when you came?

The people they was very good. Now they've changed.

Were there many Somali's living in Leman St at that time?

We had 5 restaurants at that time and they were mostly in Leman St.

(Looking at seamens book). This book was given to you by the ship when you were working?

When you pay off, they give you a book, in Cardiff.

Did everybody have a book?

Everybody, any seamen he gets a book.

What did they write in the book?

They write how long you stay on the ship, how long you work, how many months you work. The first time when you sign, if you stay ten months or one year when you pay off you get the book. They write if you were good or not. Different places you pay off, different places you sign on on the ship.

When did you finish going to sea?

I finish in 1974 June 14th, that's when I finish the ship then I pay off and I got my pension. The last ship was the Cape York, I was three years with this ship.

You came from Holland with that ship?

Antwerp, I pay off there , than I came back to England.

This is the British Seamens card. Did all the African sailors have one of these?

No only the British one's had it. When you are a British citizen they give you that. Because I am born British. You had to carry this with you when you are on the way, out of the country.

What would happen if you had lost this?

Well if you lost it, no good, no good for you, after maybe you sign a white paper. After when you work on one or two ship you will get another one. But you must be careful for that, otherwise how can the people understand you whether you are a seaman or what. You must be careful for that.

I want to talk some more about your wife Mariam, she's a nice lady isn't she?

Yes she's very, very nice.

So she came to visit Britain?

Yes she was here and the government said you can stay forever, the Home Office, they gave her permission. They said, you can stay forever if you like, but after she went for two years visiting in Somalia she never came back! Her mother she was sick, so she stayed there. But maybe sometime I bring her back.

Did she like it here?

Yes, we was in Liverpool and we were happy and she liked it.

Which part of Liverpool were you living in?

It was called Liverpool 8, Princes Road.

Were there a lot of Somali's in the area?

There were a lot of people over there you know, they had some boarding houses.

How did Mariam come from Aden, did she come with a ship?

No, she came with an aeroplane. First time we were in Jeddah, and after Jeddah we been to Germany after Germany we came to London, then we get another aeroplane to Liverpool. Mariam had to have an operation on her eye. After that we went again to Mecca to the Haj and then back to Somalia, Mogadishu.

Out of all the places you have stayed in England which place do you like the best?

Always I like London you know, the first time when I come 1948, I come to the Surrey Docks and I pay off here and I come in London and I stay here. After that sometimes I stay in Liverpool sometimes Cardiff, but always I like London myself.

Can you tell me about some of the other places you have travelled to when you were on the ships?

Well I've been anywhere you can ask me, Japan, China, Canada, I've been in America, I've been to Russia, Europe, Arabia and all over Africa, South Africa I've been, many times, many times. Mombassa, the last ship I was on, we've been from Australia to Mombassa three times with tea you know, we loaded the tea in Mombassa on the Cape York.

What were the conditions like on the ship when you were working?

Oh it was alright, in the daytime you work and in the nighttime if you are AP, some of the people they go to watch, from 4 o'clock for 3 or 4 hours to look the ship. you and another officer, will stay on the ship while everyone has gone to sleep, after that another man will come for four hours to take over the watch to look for sea. But in the daytime everybody work on the deck, painting, cleaning everything you know we do the chores.

Out of all the places you have visited which one do you like the best?

Oh! well, some places I like more . I like Canada, Australia we've been three times and Japan. Mombassa is a very nice place, yes its a good place. We've been three times coming from Australia. I like it. There are a lot of Somali's over there, they have schools and everything. It looks like Somalia! People mix together, no trouble, no problem.

ALI MOHAMED ELMI

My name is Ali Mohamed Elmi, I was born 1925, August 1925 in British Somaliland in the district of Erigavo, but my family always call me Nour Elmi, I'm very well known as Nour Elmi. I grew up in the town called Mayat in that area, and I joined the school in Erigavo, an elementary school. Before I could go to the secondary school the war broke out in British Somaliland 1940 and the Italians take over my country in September in 1940. I left home when I was 16 years of age during the war in 1941. I came to Aden, Aden Colony, and I lived there and I grew up in Aden after that.

Well Aden was an Arab country they call Aden colony, it was a marvellous area to live in and many of my family was there and they used to look after me. But I missed the school, that's the most important thing there was no education, they closed all the schools during the war time, there was no schools in Somalia, even in Aden. So most of us in that age missed the school.

Experience of war

I left Aden in 1944, beginning of 1944 . I went to Eritrea, Massawa, for training. I spent there 6 months, then we go back to Aden and I joined my first ship. It was a minesweeper and we went to the Far East. I spent there about 8 months and we came back to Aden. I left that ship in Aden and I joined the other ship, because my agreement was three years, I got to finish the agreement that's why I go back.

I joined the British forces, Royal Air Force, Marine Unit craft and then I was transfered to the Royal Navy. I was just about 19. I spent 3 years in the Royal Navy, when I finished I left the ship in Bahrain which is in the Persian Gulf. It was a very lovely time to spend at sea when you are young, go to the different places and see the world. It was fantastic to me. We went to China, India, Ceylon, Australia, New Zealand and Phillipines after the Japanese left.

There were 28 ships full of Somali's in the Far East and many of us left after the war, but my ship stayed there. We came to the Persian Gulf and my last ship was HMS Wild Goose, it was a sloop. We stayed in the Persian Gulf two years. I was a stoker in the engineering department.

Working in the Persian gulf

Later on I stayed in the Arab countries, like Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait all round this area working for the oil company. I was the captain of a boat, it was really a yacht which belonged to the agent for the oil company and on the other side he was the British government agent. So we used to go to Iraq, Abu Dhabi, Qatar, sometimes Kuwait. Then I left after one year and six months and I joined an oil company in Saudi Arabia and I was a captain there in a big tanker boat, we used to take goods all over the Persian Gulf area. I was there for about two years and then I left and became a mechanic, a heavy duty mechanic. After that I left Saudi Arabia completely I didn't like it and I come over to England.

So after you left home in 1940, you didn't go back home for a long time?

No, I didn't go back for thirty years, thirty years I spent overseas. I come over to England and in 1970 I went back home.

Coming to England

Well, when I came it was September, a foggy day and I crossed the channel from France to Newhaven. It was a foggy, rainy day, too cold and I didn't like it. My first impression was that it was a horrible place to come over. I got a train to Victoria station, got a taxi and I went to my friend who lived in Leman St, 137 Leman St. I stayed there a couple of weeks and it seemed to be very bad, but as I continued to go to the North and different places like Manchester and Newcastle, then come back to Middlesborough, Birmingham, then I decided to settle in London.

I stayed in the Somali boarding house, they had a cafe/restaurant boarding, everything there, complete. There were a lot of young Somali's there especially in east London. Mostly working, some of them seamen and there was quite a lot at that time. Most of the coloured people here were Somali's, very few West Indian seamen used to be here, but there was no other black people around. The Indians wasn't here.

I went to Manchester first. My cousin used to live there and he had a restaurant as well. He came in 1928 and I stay with him three weeks. Then I went to Newcastle, because I had a friend down there as well, he had a boarding house as well, I stayed one month with him, then I come to Middlesborough, where Mr Doobeh used to live, he's my cousin as well.

History of Somali's in British sea ports

Even in Glasgow, there was a lot of Somali's, North Shields, Hull, all over the place, especially in seaside areas. There was some in Birmingham and Sheffield as well. They came over in 1915 and before that, even Doobeh come here 1914.

Somali's like to travel around, you will find everywhere Somali's. They start in the 19th century, that's the first time they come over to Europe, but before that they used to go to the Far East, Middle East and so on. Like India, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, they always like to travel around. But in Europe they started at the end of the 19th century. When the Suez canal opened that's the time they come, many of them over to Europe.

Family life

Those days there were not many Somali families, they all were men in the beginning. Somali women came later, my wife she was the third woman to come over here in April 1962.

We used to live in Shoreditch, 35 years ago I used to live in 14 Cookham buildings on Nichol St, and that time there was no Black people around. But the people who live in the building or next door to me they was very nice to me. There was no problem at all, I didn't face any problem. That was before I got married. When I got married in 1962 we had three boys in a small flat and we used to live in one bedroom and a sitting room. Then we got a house in Virginia Road, but no heating, we had a bath and hot water only. But all the people in the area was nice to me.

We moved to Waltham Forest and after five years we move back. I had a hell of a lot of trouble down there, with the transport and with the racists, there was no black people in that area and they don't want us there.

Two of my children, Yusuf and Suliman they went to Somalia 1979. They spend there three months, they like it.

Reasons for more recent arrival of Somali's in Britain

There was a lot Somali's before 1960, then we got independence and most of them they go back home. There were about 3,000 of them left in the United Kingdom. But now we had a civil war back home and then the country go upside down. Everything is upside down. Many of them go overseas, many of them are refugees in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, all over the world. So they are just helpless, and they come over here and British allow them to come here. There's maybe 15,000 or 16,000, I haven't got the accurate number, but now they are increasing, in East London alone there's over 5,000 Somali's.

History of Somalia - wars with colonial powers and civil wars

They fought many different wars in Somalia during the last century and this century as well. We fought with the British in the beginning, they come to our country ninety years ago and they couldn't win the war then they go back. After 30 years they come back again. Anyhow, they had a civil war 1901 in Somalia, that's the time the British get into the country, they supported one side, the side they supported won the war! So they took over in 1922, and since then the British was there; we have never been a colony we were a British protectorate. But on the other side, the east and southern side was Italian, and the Italians won in 1924.

The same thing happened, the Somali's fought against the Italians 3 times, the third time the Italian's won. And the western side was France, so all the European's they come inside one country and we can't stand for them, so they won the war. Since then they rule us over seventy years - we were under British rule. Unfortunately, British and Somali's they never agreed. That's the problem, all the time problems arising and when they left they didn't leave nothing for us.

No industry, no mining, no oil, no nothing. Even there was no road in my country! So they left us for nothing, and when we got the independence we face a lot of trouble. Between North and South Somalia because we come from different cultures. It was Italian rule, they were a colony. On our side we were a protectorate, we were neither British nor Somali, we were in the middle. So the British Somalia they try to join the southern side with the Italian colony.

Anyway, after 5 years everything go upside down and after ten years the military take over. Mohamed Siad Barre, he rule 21 years in my country. In the beginning he bring the communism, Russia get into the country. He had a great military in African country and he attack Ethiopia in 1976.

Then Russia decided to side with Ethiopia. Somali's when they find out that, they tell Russia to move out from our country. Then we lose the war again. When they lose the war, you know the army when they lost the war, always disarray, they have no decision they have no control. So since then they come back to Somalia , make all the country upside down. Robbery, killing, chasing, so the civil war start again.

Now the president lost the war and Somalia is free again especially British Somaliland, the Southern Somalia is still fighting against each other, tribalism, that's the problem now, tribalism in the country. But British Somaliland, everything clear, quite good at the moment.

Do you think that things will settle down in the future, that there will be an end to this fighting?

I hope, I hope, but nothing's sure, nothing's sure.

IBRAHIM ISMAA'IL

Ibrahim Ismaa'il, a Somali seaman and poet who was living in Cardiff in 1919, refers to the Millicent Street fighting in his remarkable autobiography. A Warsangeli, from the eastern part of what was then British Somaliland protectorate, Ismaa'il was between 18 and 23 years old and worked as a ship's fireman. He and some companions had only just come to Cardiff...

"Shortly after our arrival the black people in Cardiff were attacked by crowds of white people...A Warsangeli named 'Abdi Langara had a boarding house in Millicent Street, right in the European part of the town. It is there that I used to have my dinner every day. 'Abdi acted as a sort of agent for the Warsangeli, who left their money with him when they went to sea, and also had their letters sent to his place.

As soon as the fight started, all the Warsangeli who were in Cardiff went to Millicent Street to defend 'Abdi's house in case it was attacked. But to me and to my best friend - who has since died in Mecca - they said: 'you are too young to come, and you have never faced difficulties of this kind.' We insisted, for we could not bear to stay away when our brothers were in danger of being killed, but our plea was of no avail... So we went to the Somali boarding house of Haadzi 'Aali and there we waited, ready for an attack, as we expected that a crowd of white people might break in at any moment.

In Millicent Street, the fight started at about 7:30pm and lasted a fairly long time. 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 the front room and was later carried to the hospital where he recovered; some escaped through a neighbouring house and came to tell us the story of what had happened, the others gave themselves up to the police, and we did not see them for a long time."

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