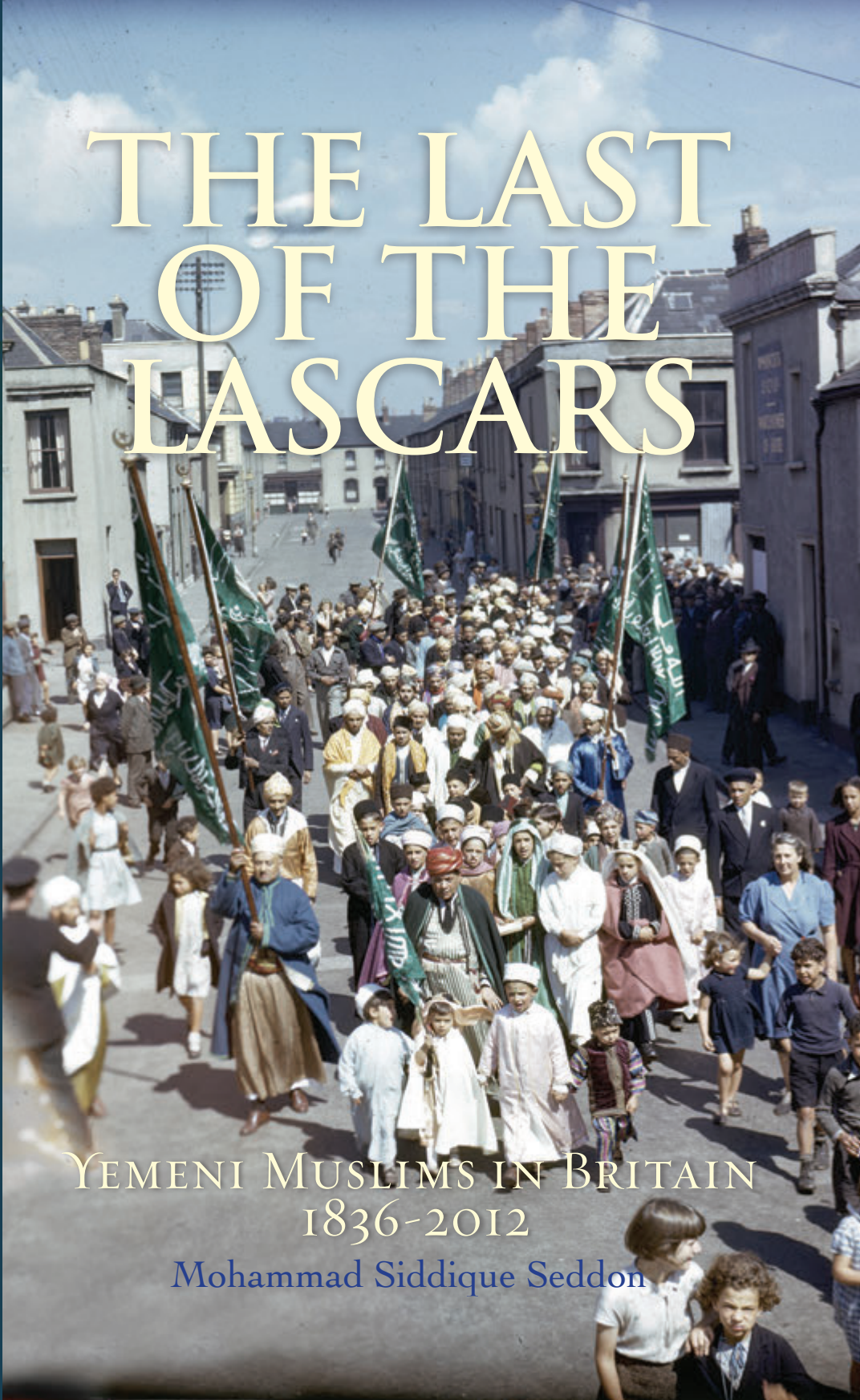
THE LAST OF THE LASCARS



Yemeni Muslims in Britain 1836-2012

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FIRST WORLD WAR: FROM SACRIFICE TO SUFFERANCE

Life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century industrial docklands of Britain was a precarious affair for the transient Oriental lascars. As a result, lascars preferred to congregate within their own ethnic and cultural subgroups: Indian, Arab, African, Malay, etc. This in turn facilitated a small industry for seamen's rest homes and lodgings, usually established by *serangs* and *muqaddam*s who had settled in the various ports and had usually married local, indigenous wives. For the newly-arriving lascars, urgent matters needed to be attended to: registering with the local police, finding work on another ship and refurbishing their kits and stores, all of which was no easy task for someone new to the country and usually with little or no English. All of these necessary tasks required a degree of liaison with the local community and competency in speaking English. Mashuq Ally notes 'it should be borne in mind that many of the Muslim seamen were drawn from the least literate sections of their society and as a consequence were subjected to the most appalling conditions.'[1] In order to avoid misunderstandings and possible mistreatment, lascars often sought advice and surety from someone they could trust and communicate with in their own language, which usually meant their trusted boarding-house keeper. As a consequence of the maltreatment many lascars suffered, a large number abandoned their vessels by literally jumping

ship. Jake Abram, a former tug boat operator on the Manchester Ship Canal, records in his published memoirs that the Strick Line Shipping Company had many vessels docking at Salford sailing to and from the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. The ships were known locally as the 'Baghdad Boats' and Abram recalls pulling a drowning lacsar from Eight Dock after he jumped ship from a platform where he had been painting the side of a 'Baghdad Boat'.[2] He recounts his conversation with the retrieved and soaking lascar, thus:

> 'What are you doing?' 'No like Sarang [*sic*].' That was the name of the head lad. 'Sarang no good, I'm not going back on ship.' I said, 'I'll take you back to the ship.' 'No, no! Please don't take me back.' 'You're going back.' But I put him on the quay and whether he went back or not, I don't know.[3]

This situation resulted in many lascars in British ports seeking better and more secure employment within the docklands and newly-founded associated industries at the turn of the twentieth century when many of the docks became hugely prosperous:[4] the establishment of an efficient network of rail and dock amenities developed in the early 1840s at Cardiff; shipbuilding and heavy engineering industries developed rapidly at Tyneside by the 1890s; the large-scale import of raw cotton and export of finished cotton goods from the ports of Liverpool and Manchester, aided by the completion of the Manchester Ship Canal in 1894; and the creation of the East India Docks and the increased flow of goods meant that more labour was required for the manning of warehousing and additional unloading crews in London – all were markers of Britain's mercantile and economic dominance.[5] The majority of lascars who sought employment in shore jobs were illiterate and unskilled and, therefore, largely directly unemployable within the docks and shipyards.

3.1 – In the centre on board ship is Fireman Muhammad Abdul Aziz, also known as 'George', who was born in Britain to Egyptian parents, circa 1940s. Muhammad later married Sadia, the daughter of al-Hubabi.

Alternatively, some lascars opened small businesses such as cafés and restaurants, others ran seamen's rests and boarding houses and some swept the roads and streets. Fortunately, however, for many of the unemployed lascars, dockland employment prospects increased significantly at the beginning of the twentieth century. In Cardiff, for example, the registered net tonnage of vessels cleared from the port with cargoes and ballast increased from just over one million tons in 1857 to 12.6 million tons in pre-1914 days, far exceeding those of other British ports like Liverpool and London.[6] K. L. Little asserts that it is most probable that the conditions of the British shipping industry were the deciding factor in the settlement of seamen regardless of their racial and ethnic origins throughout the ports in the UK. Added to the ever-growing shipping trade at the docks in Cardiff was a particular form of maritime employment known as the 'Tramp trade', which secured longer voyages than those of traditional liner voyages, but it did not offer permanent employment. Liner routes, Little notes, were less casual in their employment needs and therefore offered securer jobs for lascars.[7]

Trade Unionism and Lascars

In 1911, the great national strike of seamen took place inspired by Havelock Wilson and his colleagues who founded the movement for a national union. The strike was as a result of a growing collective consciousness amongst merchant seamen of their right to industrial recognition in a working culture of poor wages, deplorable working conditions and social deprivation. Among the seamen's grievances was the employment of foreign (lascar) sailors working on British ships.[8] The union argued that ship owners were deliberately discharging indigenous British sailors on 'trumped-up' charges, thereafter replacing them with cheaper foreign labour, leaving the white sailors to either accept the lower wages or else seek employment elsewhere. Another accusation against the ship owners was that, by employing crews of mixed nationalities, they were forestalling any opportunity for their crews to work towards collective rights in pay and working conditions and were, in effect, union-busting.[9] However, British seamen, spurred on by Wilson and his comrades, succeeded in stemming the employment of coloured lascars. Between 1890 and 1903, the numbers of lascar seamen on British ships had increased from 27,000 to 40,000, while in the same period the number of indigenous white seamen had actually decreased by 10,000. However, by 1912, there was an increase of 30,000 white seamen and a reduction of foreign seamen by 9000.[10] After the First World War (1914–18), the unions were able to ensure that foreign sailors must be paid at British rates, a rule that was then enforced by the National Maritime Board. However, the rule only applied to crews signed on at British and European ports. In respect of lascar sailors boarding ship at Calcutta, Bombay, Suez and Aden, 'the gap was left wide open for manipulation of the wage situation in other ways'.[11] As President of the newly-formed National Sailors' and Fireman's Union (NSFU), Havelock Wilson openly exploited racial tensions between lascars and indigenous sailors to further the employment prospects of his overwhelmingly white union members.

Beyond the politics of British working-class employment rights through the development of the trade union movements of the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, racism and discrimination still played a huge part in the marginalization of the settling Yemeni lascar docklands communities. Peter Fryer tells us that 'most white seamen rejected them as shipmates; white dockers too, refused to work along side them'.[12] In John Jones Williams' maritime memoir, published in 1983, he openly stated his hatred of Arabs, recounting:

> The thing I hate most is seeing their dirty faces and their little red caps [*ṭarbūsh*]. My forefathers must have fought the Turk and the Arab [*sic*], and the hatred must be in my blood. [13]

Many lascars either sold off or pawned what few belongings they had and tramped from port to port searching for work. By 1910, a Parliamentary enquiry was established to assess the plight of the abandoned lascars. The Committee on Distressed Colonial and Indian Subjects compiled a report that captured a catalogue of unfortunate lascar tales of poverty, rejection and destitution. A witness from the Colonial Office's West Africa Department, who reported that Africans who called at the offices for help were generally, 'time wasters' and people who would prefer to be on the streets, 'to sponge upon anyone they can'. The witness went on to recommend that 'it might be a useful thing to have some compulsory power of repatriating people like that'.[14] Racial discrimination against the lascars was further increased through Government legislation introduced between 1854 and 1894 designed to prevent their settlement in Britain via a series of amended poor and destitution laws which placed the onus on British shipping companies to regulate and monitor the whereabouts of their lascar crews while docked in Britain.[15] In 1854, ship owners were fined £30 for leaving a lascar behind in Britain and by 1871 the Board of Trade appointed Lascar Transfer Officers at all major British ports with powers to escort lascar crews to London for deportation back to their place of origin.

However, by far the most draconian and discriminatory measure was the Merchant Shipping Act of 1894, Section 125, which empowered ship owners to contractually oblige lascars, once docked

in Britain, to proceed to any other UK port and there sign up for another crew sailing back to India via the port of Aden. Any lascar failing to honour his contract fully was liable to criminal prosecution. This Act was supposed to protect lascars from becoming destitute in Britain, but in essence it simply forced more to jump ship.[16] State laws with respect to lascar sailors were deliberately ambiguous in order to ensure the regular flow of cheap maritime labour from the colonies whilst at the same time racist and discriminatory legislation continued to kerb lascar settlement in Britain. In 1905, the Aliens Act was passed and it reflected a growing xenophobic sentiment across the country. Objections to the migration of large numbers of Eastern European Jews, fleeing persecution from Czarist Russia and the employment of indentured Chinese labour in colonial South Africa lent themselves to the mounting tensions of lascar employment in the British shipping industry.[17] Despite union pressure to 'scapegoat' the lascars and limit their numbers on British ships by demanding a language test – that one in every five lascars of any given crew on a British ship should be fluent in English – the amended Act of 1908 exempted lascars, unlike the Chinese, from the test. Rozina Visram asserts that the reason for this exemption was that lascars had 'special privileges and exemptions' under specific lascar legal articles.[18] However, when a national strike by the sailors' unions broke out in 1911, in which the lascars remained largely neutral, union antagonism against the lascars erupted once again. In order to avoid any charges of being racially motivated, despite one of the main union grievances being that there were 'ten times more Eastern labourers on British ships', union representatives argued that their objections were not because of race and colour 'but because they lowered the standard of life for white men'![19] The union issued an open declaration 'to have one of the biggest fights that the country had ever known' if the government did not act to curtail the collusion between the shipping owners and the Board of Trade attempting to lower the standard of life secured by years of trade union effort.[20]

World War One

The fortunes of Yemeni lascars were changed dramatically by the outbreak of the war in 1914 when Yemeni settlement in Cardiff and South Shields represented the two largest Muslim communities in Britain.[21] Lascars numbering around 51,000 constituted 17.5% of the total number of seamen employed on British registered ships and the average pay for lascars in 1914 was approximately £1.30 for deckhands and £1.20 for firemen a month, compared to approximately £5.50 a month paid to their white counterparts. Added to this severe disparity in wages, lascar crewmen employed from the colonial ports of Bombay, Calcutta, Suez and Aden were further exploited through inadequate and inferior food quality and crew quarters through reduced accommodation sizes on board ship.[22] Further, non-unionized lascars meant a relatively trouble-free ship, provided that the lascar sailors and their white counterparts were kept separate. By 1914, issues of equality, race and religion became somewhat of a problem for British troops during the 'Great War' when it was then believed that white soldiers would refuse orders from 'coloured' officers. Britain had to rely upon its colonial subjects to aid the war effort and India alone volunteered 1.3 million soldiers with many fighting on the front lines. As merchant sailors, Oriental lascars from the Muslim communities throughout the country's docklands shipped vital supplies from British ports. More than 3500 lascars lost their lives, with 1000 coming from the Yemeni community in Cardiff alone. Davies cites Captian Jones' memoir, which recounts the incredible bravery of a Yemeni sailor named 'Ali Mohamed', who was awarded the British Empire Medal (B.E.M.) for his efforts:

> After realising the ship was sinking ... who appeared at my side on the bridge, but one of the Arabs ... he said 'I stay with you, sir', and refused to go to the boat with the rest of the crew. Between us we were responsible for saving two of the crew who had been badly injured ... in my official report to the authorities about the disaster, I gave the little Arab his due and it was to my great satisfaction that I found he had been rewarded by the king and had been given the B.E.M. [23]

Ansari says that 'during the First World War migration from those parts of the empire that had traditionally provided cheap labour accelerated'.[24] Yemeni lascar participation in the First World War was both incredibly dutiful and loyal, given the amount of racism and discrimination they faced as subjugated colonized settlers at Britain's ports. Had Britain not claimed Aden as a colonial Protectorate in 1839, then perhaps Yemeni volunteers would not have readily made such huge sacrifices in defence of the imperial motherland. Whilst it is difficult to attain specific numbers for the amount of Yemeni lascars who lost their lives in the First World War, a government report put the figure of 3427 lascars killed while sailing out from Bombay and Calcutta, with a further 1200 imprisoned in enemy countries.[25] It would appear somewhat unlikely that Yemenis would have featured in these figures in any significant number, but it cannot be ruled out completely given that Aden was still governed by the colonial India Office until 1937, which made ethnic and cultural distinctions between colonized Arabs of Aden and their Asian counterparts of Bombay and Calcutta often indistinguishable.

In addition to the 1000 Yemeni men from the Cardiff community lost at sea during the First World War, a further 400 men were rescued at sea after their ships were sunk with many then being left helpless on the beaches of British ports to die of the effects of exposure.[26] The increased demand for labour to replace the British men called up for military service changed the fortunes of the settling Yemeni lascars away from their maritime employment. Peter Fryer claims that Tyneside's Black population was increased fourfold during the war and in Cardiff the population rose from an estimated 700 in 1914 to over 3000 by April 1919.[27] Added to the settling lascar communities were large numbers of stranded crews of merchant ships that were requisitioned for transporting troops back from the front lines of Europe and for shipping vital supplies and munitions. A number of Yemenis found their way into the munitions and chemical factories in Manchester and others sought unskilled employment either in the shipbuilding industry or in auxiliary industries like the timber yards or manufacturing

industries. It is claimed that within 48 hours of the war declaration 8000 British merchant seamen had joined the armed forces and 900 enemy seamen serving on British ships, which would have included significant numbers of Ottoman Turks and subjects, had lost their jobs.[28] This huge labour hole was filled by colonial lascars and as a result the existing settled communities of Cardiff, South Shields, Liverpool and London underwent rapid expansion. However, this migration wave did not go unnoticed by the local press who were quick to express their concerns over the unusually high numbers of 'Arab seamen' settling in their midst. In a letter to the *Shields Daily Gazette* in May 1916, submitted by 'True Briton', it ranted:

> it seems rather strange that whenever a set of Arabs sign on a particular ship, they are all from the same boarding house. Of course I am aware that they are all members of the Seamen's Union, but still some of these men's relatives maybe conspiring in the desert at this present time. Even C.T. boats are engaging Arabs in preference to Britishers. I was under the impression that vessels under Admiralty orders were not allowed to ship aliens. Now I would like to see our ship owners give orders to their captains and engineers not to engage an Arab whilst there is a Britisher wanting a job. Talk about patriotism why, it makes me sick when we see the way our men are being treated.[29]

By 1916, due to the demands of the war, all lascar maritime contracts were extended to 18 months, but the growing need for manual labour and the higher wages offered in the factories away from the ports enticed many lascars to either desert or jump ship. In May 1916, the Anchor Line shipping company reported several cases of desertion to the India Office, complaining that 'certain parties were canvassing eastern crews'.[30] In a letter to the Board of Trade in July 1916, the influential Liverpool Steam Ship Owners' Association also blamed the increase in lascar desertions on 'organised attempts' to lure them to more profitable employment

on shore. The Association warned the Board of Trade of the serious consequences to the shipping industry in trying to fill the labour gap during wartime and insisted that the 'growing evil' be stopped. The Board of Trade acted swiftly with the help of the India Office and by August 1916, a public warning was issued against enticing and harbouring lascar deserters.[31] After the war colonial soldiers were discharged and many were left stranded in Britain. The economic recession meant that employment was scarce and for the ex-servicemen racial discrimination further lessened their job prospects. In the interwar years, only industrious migrants would find a place in Britain where unemployment and destitution meant the likelihood of deportation.

The 1919 Mill Dam Riots

As the shipping industry employment opportunities declined with modern, faster oil-powered ships replacing steam vessels the lascars, formerly employed as coal stokers, rapidly became redundant. The seamen organized themselves in an effort to protect their jobs, despite government legislation limiting the number of 'coloured seamen' employed on British ships. Dr Khalid Sheldrake of the Western Islamic Association made representations on behalf of the Yemeni Arabs to South Shields City Council and the Port Authorities as early as 1919 in an effort to establish racial equality rights in the shipping industry after employment discrimination and race riots. The riots were fuelled by racist comments often made by union officials. John Fye, a seamen's union official, encapsulated the feelings of white sailors towards the Arabs when, in 1919, he said to Yemenis trying to sign on for a ship in South Shields, 'You black bastards, this ship is not for you.'[32] Similar race riots also occurred in Liverpool and other British ports as white sailors increasingly believed that the 'coloureds' were taking their jobs and, therefore, should be repatriated. The press inflamed the situation and the *Liverpool Courier* claimed that 'one of the chief reasons of popular anger behind the present disturbances lies in the fact that the average Negro is nearer to the animal than is the

average white man.' As the riots spread to London, the national press absolved the aggressors and blamed the lascars, implying that interracial marriages and associations between 'black sailors' and white women were the 'reason' for the riots. In south Wales, three people were killed, dozens injured and large-scale damage caused to property. One rioter told the *South Wales Argus*, 'we are all one in Newport and mean to clear the niggers out.'[33] The Cardiff Yemeni community faced fierce attacks and the army was brought in to restore peace. But when colonial Australian soldiers drew their rifles to fire on the Yemenis, shots were returned by lascars from a minority armed with revolvers. The infamous and misnamed 'Arab riots' that broke out among Yemeni communities during the spring and summer of 1919 across the British docklands of South Shields, Cardiff, Liverpool, London and Hull were precipitated by the demands of indigenous white sailors for the limitation, control and repatriation of 'Arab' (majority Yemeni) seamen.

The broader context of the race riots was raising unemployment and economic recession as a direct result of the First World War.

3.2 – Yemeni seamen arrested during the disturbances at the Mill Dam, South Shields 1919.

However, the wider economic factors only brought to the surface the existing undercurrent of racial tension and hostility towards non-white sailors. In South Shields, where the first of the so-called 'Arab riots' took place, tensions had slowly developed as the settlement of Yemenis, Somalis, West African and West Indian sailors began to form a sizeable community around the docks from as early as the 1860s.[34] The spark that finally ignited the flames of racial hatred occurred in February 1919 when a small group of Yemenis, all British subjects, paid £2 each to clear their union books (updating all outstanding union subscriptions) in order to allow them to 'ship out' but they were then refused work. When the Yemenis raised their objections, John Fye, an official of the Stewards' and Cooks' Union, incited a crowd of white sailors by using foul and racist language against the Arabs, one of whom he then struck. The Yemenis hit back and the crowd then chased the Arabs to the Holborn district of South Shields, where most Yemenis lived and lodged. At Holborn, Yemenis came to the aid of their compatriots and a few individuals, armed with revolvers, fired warning shots over the heads of the pursuing mob. The mob then about-turned and hastily retreated, with the Yemenis chasing them back to the Shipping Offices at Mill Dam. A huge fight then broke out, leaving the offices wrecked and the protagonist, Fye, and a fellow union official severely beaten. Fye was later convicted of using language likely to cause a breach of the peace, but in the affray, army and navy patrols were called in and a number of Arabs were duly arrested. At Durham Assizes, the sentencing magistrate expressed a degree of sympathy for some of the Yemeni defendants, acquitting three, but 12 were sentenced to three months' and two more were given one months' hard labour.[35]

The riots in Wales began on the evening of Saturday 7 June 1919 in Newport, but they quickly spread to nearby Cardiff and Barry. In Cardiff, a crowd of around 2000 white people gathered around the Canal Parade Labour Exchange and began attacking a small group of Yemenis and Somalis. The mob then moved to Bute Street and started attacking the homes of non-white sailors, wrecking an Arab boarding house in the process to frenzied cries

of 'Lynch the bastards!' and 'Kill the bastards!'.[36] The mob continued their onslaught by attacking the home of a resident *imām*, 'Hadji Mohamet' from Somalia, who was married to a local white woman who urged her husband to escape. The *imām* took refuge by climbing up the drainpipe on to the roof of his house from where he helplessly watched the angry mob ransack his home before the police arrived to disperse the aggressors.[37] In the escalating violence that spread across several nights, the Yemeni and Somali communities bravely attempted to defend their lives and properties from the racist thugs. A small number resorted to armed defence and a number of shots were fired above the heads of the racist attackers in a bid to scare them off. Around 15 people were injured, one seriously and another white man was killed. In the aftermath, of the six people who were charged in court for the violence, one was a white man, four were Yemenis and one was a Somali. Two of the Yemenis, Ali Abdul and Mohammed Khaid, were charged with shooting at people including a policeman. The following consecutive nights witnessed repeated violence and even further arrests. Again, shots were fired at the attacking mob and again, it appears that a disproportionate number of Yemenis and Somalis were arrested for a series of offences relating to firearms, affray and public order. As is all too often the case, the victims were portrayed as the aggressors and comments made after the events by the Cardiff branch of the National Union of Railwaymen, who passed a motion crystallizing the racist hostility towards the racial minorities who were, after all, the victims of mob violence, called on the government to 'do their duty by the coloured men in this country and send them back to their homeland.'[38] The sentiment was echoed in the 13 June 1919 issue of *The Western Mail*, in which the editorial stated, 'The Arabs ... are mainly seamen and their repatriation should be a simple matter.'[39] The rioting became so widespread and feelings ran so high that the deportation of some 600 lascars was instituted to pacify the white sailors. But the deportees were not volunteers and for many their status as British citizens was effectively revoked. The Colonial Secretary, Lord Milner, issued a memorandum headed 'Repatriation of coloured men', referring to the bitter resentment

and injustice suffered by the colonial seamen, many of whom had served in the armed forces during the war. But more importantly, he feared that repatriations would have a direct effect on white British minorities living in the colonies. Whilst deportation was seen as the solution to the race riots, the policy failed to protect the lascars and their families as legitimate permanent settlers and British citizens.

'Mixed Race' Marriages and 'Mongrol' Children

Much to the horror of late Victorian and early Edwardian British society, settling lascars were establishing intimate relations with white women across the UK's docklands communities. Despite the imposition of a cultivated racial and social order, which placed the subjugated colonial Muslim 'other' at the bottom of the imperial social hierachy, and a relentless negative portrayal and reception of 'oriental' men as lustful, sexual predators with a particular penchant for white women, many encounters led to permanent relationships and lasting marriages.[40] Whilst British society positively frowned on all such relationships, it usually explained them away as being the result of white women of a 'certain class' and 'ill-repute', giving in to the wanton and unbridled desires of exotic foreign men. Such women and the resultant liaisons were viewed as an inevitable by-product of the dangerous and unruly environments of the dockland areas of imperial Britain. The celebrated Welsh novelist, Howard Spring (1889–1965), in his two-volume autobiography, *Heaven Lies Above Us* (1939) and *In the Meantime* (1942), recalls his early life working as an office-boy at an accountants in Cardiff Bay, before going on to become a messenger-boy at the *South Wales Daily News* and eventually a war correspondent and journalist for the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Evening Standard* respectively. Spring's vivid account of 'Tiger Bay' at the turn of the twentieth century captures both the exoticism and fixation of the multicultural docklands of Britain:

> There was a fascination in the walk through Tiger Bay. Chinks, Dagoes, Lascars and Levantines slippered [*sic*]

> about the faintly evil by-ways that ran-off Bute Street ... The flags of all nations fluttered on the house fronts, and ever and anon the long bellowing moan of a ship coming to the docks or outward bound seemed the very voice of this meeting place of the seven seas. It was a dirty, rotten and romantic district, an offence and an inspiration, and I loved it.[41]

Spring's dangerous and nostalgic description of the Butetown area of Cardiff's dockland captures both the horror and attraction of the burgeoning British maritime communities at the turn of the twentieth century. Cardiff's 'Tiger Bay' like Manchester's 'Barbary Coast' and South Shield's 'Little Arabia' existed in contradistinction from the inland cities and towns of late imperial Britain. To a large extent, their very existence was viewed as a window into Britain's vast empire which, ironically, by the late Victorian and early Edwardian periods had more Muslim subjects than Christian. This uncomfortable reality was perhaps never better realized than in the cosmopolitan and multicultural spaces of Britain's port cities.

The exotic 'Otherness' of the docklands communities was further pronounced by their geographic isolation from the cities to which they belonged. Both Butetown and Trafford Park were cut off from their respective cities by a series of communications networks: canals, roads and railways vital in the transporting of raw materials and finished goods endlessly flowing to and from the harbours of industrial Britain. As a result, the settling Yemeni, Somali and South Asian communities had little reason to visit the centres of their respective cities and, likewise, the local indigenous communities kept well clear of the docklands for fear, often misplaced and irrational, of being robbed, molested or stabbed. This apparent danger lurking amidst the multicultural British docklands is reflected in an account of a former resident of Trafford Park's 'Barbary Coast':

> M'grandmother used to say, 'It's not a nice place to go down passed [*sic*] the [Trafford] park.' She was a lot better off than most of them down there and she used to say it was the

> lowest of the low, that area. There was a street they used to call 'the street of a thousand nations', Monmonth Street was the name of it. They used to say there wasn't a same nation lived next door to each other.[42]

'Arab-Only' Boarding Houses and Cafés

A major contributing factor in the gradual settlement of the transient Yemeni lascar communities across the port cities was the establishment of a growing number of Arab seamen's homes, run largely by settled Yemeni sailors, often married to local wives. These early entrepreneurs were able to offer suitable and friendly temporary accommodation to Arab sailors whilst at the same time facilitating their urgent needs and affairs, such as supplies and liaising with the local police, port authorities and ship owners – effectively becoming a British *muqaddam*, similar to the *muqaddam* prospective sailors encountered in Aden. In South Shields, Arab boarding houses allowed a number of individual settler Yemenis to become both extremely influential and quite prosperous. By the late nineteenth century, stringent legislation and strict regulations were introduced to protect vulnerable sailors from being exploited by private persons accommodating sailors. Instead, sailors were required to lodge in licensed seamen's boarding houses in which the owners had to faithfully adhere to limited numbers of guests, health and general hygiene standards and open inspections by the Medical Officer of Health, the Board of Trade and the police.[43] In addition, boarding-house keepers had to acquire a certificate of good character from the Chief Constable testifying that the keeper was fit and proper and without previous convictions. Yet, despite the tightening of laws and standards for Arab boarding-house keepers enforced by both local and national authorities, the boarding-houses became embroiled in other matters relating to their lascar lodgers.

As the number of Arab boarding houses increased, so did the competition amongst the boarding-house keepers to become a *muwassiṭ* and *muqaddam* between their guests, the port authorities

and ship owners. The dividends for the boarding-house keepers in acting as middlemen were both financial and prestigious. By acting as an employment broker between their lodging lascars and the maritime industry, the boarding-house keepers would earn a small 'fee' from both the lascars and their employers. Additionally, the more successful the boarding-house keepers became at brokering employment, the more lascar lodgers and clients they would attract and, therefore, in turn, the more labour they could supply to the ship owners, thus increasing their personal incomes. In this particular form of lascar employment, South Shields emerged as the UK's centre for lascars seeking maritime jobs. Thus, regardless of where Yemeni lascars docked in Britain, large numbers would make their way to South Shields as a means of bettering their chances of work and thereby avoiding a lengthy period stuck at port awaiting employment.

3.3 – Retired Yemeni 'stoker', Obeya, relaxes in the boarding house in South Shields, circa 2005.

As a result of this inward migration from other British ports to South Shields, the links between the various Yemeni docklands communities were strengthened. Because of the pivotal role the boarding-house keepers (or 'masters', as they were often referred to by the port authorities and shipping companies) assumed, the lascar seamen's homes became important institutions in the Arab seafaring communities. Lawless has stated that, 'The Arab boarding

house master was a man of substance who wielded considerable influence over the seamen lodging with him and indeed within the wider Arab community in the town.'[44] The lodging houses not only ensured future employment through the house keeper's established connections with both the port authorities and the ship companies, they also provided food that was *ḥalāl* ('lawful' according to Islamic law) and often a space was set aside where men could pray and observe their Islamic liturgies. Many Yemeni lascars remained faithful to their religion and devotedly kept their obligatory prayers even on board ship. Some lascar crews prayed in congregation in designated areas, above deck or below in the engine rooms:

> If there was enough rooms to be had, they would set one aside especially for worship and would decorate the walls and floor with special carpets ... when on their knees worshipping and kissing the floor [*sic*], they would always make sure that their heads were towards Mecca.[45]

As late as the 1960s, Badr ud-Din Dahya had noted that little had changed in the single-male Arab boarding houses across Britain, observing that Yemenis spoke the Arabic dialect of the northern highlands tribesmen and wore their traditional Yemeni dress; the *fawṭah* (sarong) and *shawāl* (headdress). Dahya's research also highlighted the importance of prayer in the lives of the Yemeni migrants, stating:

> Most migrant houses have a private *masgid* [*masjid*] or room set aside for prayers. The *masgid* [he observed] is furnished with red carpets and is equipped with copies of the Holy Qur'an, books on catechism ['*aqīdah* or 'doctrine'], *maulid* books, hymn (*qaṣīdah*) books, rosaries and joss sticks.[46]

In addition to operating as a functioning congregational prayer room, Dahya states that the *masjid* fulfilled the same function as the traditional *maqṣūrah*, a recreational and social room usually connected to village mosques in the Yemen highlands, to which, he says, 'the migrants bring their visitors, who may be kinsmen,

villagers or fellow-countrymen, to exchange news, recite the Qur'ān and pray as a congregation.'[47] The relationship between the lascars and their 'masters' was founded on mutual trust and often lodging lascars would leave their belongings and money with the 'masters' as safekeeping. Equally, when employment was scarce, house keepers would loan substantial amounts of money to their lodgers or would allow them free board until they eventually secured worked. Some boarding-house keepers even established links with other *muqaddimūn* in Aden, acting as agents, recovering debts, sending remittances to families in Yemen, forwarding letters and arranging passage for lascars who wished to return home. Even Yemenis who had settled and married local British wives would seek assistance and advice from the boarding-house masters. For example, when a Yemeni lascar named Ali Nagi committed suicide in Durham Prison whilst awaiting deportation in 1935, Mohamed Dowa, a boarding-house master from South Shields, organized a collection from the lascar community to pay for Nagi's funeral.[48]

As individual boarding-house masters became increasingly important to the success and future of the lascar communities, many of them were favoured and patronized by their own tribesmen from Yemen. Lascars inevitably felt both culturally and socially better catered for by someone from their own tribe. Further, should any difficulties or misunderstandings occur, tribal belonging and loyalty (*'aṣabiyyah*) assured that trust and honour would be maintained and respected. This is not to say that the Arab lodging houses were exclusive spaces, catering only for compatriots and tribesmen, as they also took in seamen of other nationalities. Lawless records, for example, how Muhammad Muckble's East Holborn boarding house took in both Indian and Malay lascars, while Somali lascars preferred to lodge with Hassan Mohamed at his boarding house in Chapter Row, South Shields.[49]

The majority of the Arab lodging houses in South Shields were located in East and West Holborn, close to the Shipping Federation Offices at Mill Dam. A variety of Arab lodgings had been established in the area for a number of years, with some establishments having changed ownership a number of times over. The premises

also varied in size and capacity with some lodgings having no more than a couple of rooms where others could easily accommodate as many as 60 or 70 lodgers. Owners would also sometimes reside with their families within private quarters or would live in separate houses close by to their businesses. Usually, the boarding houses would have a common area where the lascars could congregate to take their meals, relax and converse or play cards and dominoes. This space has been compared by Dahya to that of the traditional *maqṣūrah* associated with the village mosques of northern Yemen. Occasionally, Yemenis would recite their own Arabic poetic compositions whilst others might play a reed pipe or even an *ʻūd* (an Arabic lute-like instrument). Most lascars appeared to prefer their own company, avoiding the local pubs and ale houses, so often frequented by their non-Muslim sailor peers. In times of low maritime employment, lascars could wait for weeks and sometimes months for their next commission and this meant that lascars needed some place other than their lodging houses to while away their time.

The pressing need for a culturally conducive, alcohol-free environment soon saw the establishment of Arab-run cafés that, like the boarding houses, became important features of the developing Yemeni docklands communities. The cosmopolitan mix and racial diversity of Britain's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century port cities were catered for by a variety of 'ethnic cafés' which, in addition to the Arab cafés, included Chinese, Indian and Malay eateries. 'Abdul's', a Yemeni café established in Trafford Park, Manchester Docks around the 1940s, was apparently famous amongst Arabs and non-Arabs alike for his tasty cabbage rolls. In addition, the café also offered traditional fish and chips and a Yemeni dish known as *miḥshī* (stuffed vegetables with rice and meat). Collins' study on integration among the burgeoning multicultural docklands communities of the early to mid-twentieth century found that even as late as 1940s, cafés were the de facto community centres of the growing Yemeni communities in Britain. This was certainly true of the Yemeni community in Eccles, Greater Manchester, that later developed where community member, Aziz Bugati, described his visits to one of the Yemeni-run cafés:

> They were like a social place, y'know, they [Yemenis] would get together and it used to be great. We used to go in and because my friend's father owned it, we used to get free drinks [laughs]! So that was good! ... The odd Yemeni used to do a bit of gambling as well, so er ... [laughs], that wasn't so good! I remember that there used to be all Yemenis, they used to all ... our fathers ... play cards there, cards was [*sic*] very popular [laughs]! They used to drink tea and you could buy food ... you could buy *ḥalāl* meat there. But I remember not many used to spend their money [laughs]!'[50]

The cafés not only provided Yemeni food but also a means of relaxing and socializing in a friendly setting and cultural space that belonged to the Yemenis and was therefore less hostile and threatening than the local pubs or seamen's bars. Recreation and work were both arenas of limited social and cultural interchange for Yemenis who worked in the ships' boiler rooms or on the factory floors, usually with their compatriots. The Arab cafés provided an important meeting point and congenial environment that was not only open to Yemenis, but was also frequented by the indigenous population, sometimes even groups of local girls:

> The first [Yemeni] café was [established by] Mohammed Kasseum ... so we had to stay together and we go to Brook Lane café [in Eccles] and look out for the girls [laughs]! I tell you the truth. We were young then, all of us! [51]

No doubt the cafés did provide a convenient and safe environment in which to meet local girls. Another female British Yemeni respondent spoke of how her Yemeni father met her mother, who was of 'mixed race' from a Yemeni father and a Yemeni-Liverpudlian mother, in her grandparent's Arab café back in Liverpool:

> Well, apparently my dad was 25 years older than my mum and my nana [grandmother] used to own a café in Liverpool, and a lot of the Arabs went there. It was a bit like the [Arab] cafés in Eccles. Most of the Arabs met there.[52]

Collins' research further noted that 'cafés and boarding houses provide recreational centres for the [Yemeni] men, who meet daily for conversation or card games, while they drink cups of coffee, tea or milk.'[53] However, many Yemenis preferred to socialize among themselves, largely avoiding mixed social gatherings, instead grouping together with other Yemenis usually from the same tribe. The Arab cafés, like the Arab boarding houses dotted throughout the locales, remained a feature of British Yemeni communities up until the 1980s. A Yemeni who frequented the Arab cafés in the 1960s and 1970s described the atmosphere thus:

> We were all together every Saturday, one day all the men there are not working. On Sunday they all came on there [*sic*], play cards – not for money! We used to play friendly games and we stay there all night until twelve o'clock, dancing to Arabic and Yemeni music and then they tired [*sic*] and they want to go home.[54]

In terms of preserving Muslim identity, religious observances and collective worship, the Arab boarding houses and, to a lesser degree, the Arab cafés facilitated prayers and liturgies within specially allocated spaces in their establishments, as observed by Dahya in his ethnographic research amongst the British Yemeni communities conducted in the 1960s. Collins' study surveyed the number of cafés present in the South Shields' community in the latter half of the twentieth century;

> In the summer of 1950 there were thirteen Moslem [*sic*] cafés and five boarding houses in Tyneside, but as some boarding houses also have cafés, the numbers may be duplicated. Three of these [cafés] were owned by Somalis and one by a Pakistani, while others were owned by Arabs.[55]

Collins observed that the cafés usually opened around nine in the morning and remained open until 11 at night with the clientele usually consisting of single-male Arabs. They would often group together for informal chats, discussing current topical issues or

gossiping over cups of tea or coffee. He also noted that card games were often played that in turn gave way to gambling, which often lasted several hours. Collins also recognized the important role the Arab cafés played 'like the mosque or zoaia [*zāwiyah*], the Moslem [*sic*] café is one of the institutions introduced by the immigrant to perpetuate his native way of life.'[56] But whilst evidence of religious practice in the daily lives of the migrant seamen was faithfully maintained by many Yemeni lascars in the docklands, few references were made to their religious identity in public.

Humayun Ansari explains that most Yemenis developed the opinion that the less they were noticed, the more they would benefit and in comparison, they established rather closer ties with the indigenous population than other Muslim subgroups.[57] Although Yemenis are the oldest established Muslim community in Britain, researchers like Fred Halliday have consistently defined them as an 'immigrant community' for two given reasons: they have worked in the UK as opposed to merely residing in it and, they have established and maintained social structures and networks with fellow emigrants from a particular country of origin through residence in a common urban area.[58] British Yemeni communities have largely developed, as we have seen, through the process of economic 'chain migration'[59] and community social institutions like the Arab boarding houses and Arab cafés provided vital nuclei for establishing social cohesion and community identity. The importance of 'feeling at home' while physically being 'away from home' was facilitated in the Arab cafés and was explained by a respondent, Tariq Mahyoub, who was born in the Yemen but was brought to Britain along with his mother to join his father in the early 1970s, and recalled his first experience of a British Yemeni café:

> When I was a kid my dad took me to the café, on the second day, I think it was, when I'd just arrived [from Yemen] and, erm ... it was really nice to see about 50 old men in the café [which was] facing the mosque. Y'know, they were just playing cards and stuff like that and they were just interested in you, y'know ... like, 'Oh! Who are you?' It was nice really but I didn't see no kids ... erm, then that was it really. We stayed

> and we got some help. We lived about 10 minutes away and everyone was asking me about the Yemen and that.[60]

The cafés soon became a regular feature of the British Yemeni communities and many second- and third-generation British-born progeny fondly remember the cafés as places they would often frequent during their early years.

A British-born Yemeni from Eccles, who was brought up in the 'Barbary Coast' area of Trafford Park, Manchester Docks, recalled affectionately:

> Er, they [the Yemenis] all lived in this area [Trafford Park] but some other places [in the UK], I don't even know. And, erm, they were very good people and there used to be a coffee bar and an Arab restaurant down there [near the docks]. Our house used to be on the same street and I used to go there for a coffee all the time, and there was another one [Arab café], Ali Saeed [was the owner].'[61]

After the creation of Arab boarding houses, the Arab cafés came into their own as places that did not just facilitate recreation and socialization for Yemeni lascars, but became institutions where transient single-migrant Yemenis could catch up with news and events from the Yemen. In the beginning, this was achieved through shared stories of individuals recently arrived from back home and news written in personal letters from relatives in the Yemen. But as communications networks improved, newspapers and magazines began to arrive from the Yemen and then later, as modern technology developed, radio news via the BBC's Arabic Service or Egyptian radio would become a permanent feature of the Arab café experience. A second-generation member of the Eccles Yemeni community reminisced on the demise of the cafés that were once the lifeblood of British Yemeni community socialization:

> We used to go to the Arab cafés, I remember the Arab cafés, I remember three. There was Hadi's [International Restaurant] that used to be across the road [from the mosque] and

> 'Happy Days' [now a takeaway, formerly, 'Freda's Café'] that used to be a café. And there was one near the bingo [hall], now that's just open land.[62]

As an example of how important the cafés were in the formation of British Yemeni community identity it is worth noting that in the small town of Eccles, in Greater Manchester, a location that witnessed a relatively late settlement of Yemenis, starting in the late 1940s. The total population of Eccles is currently around 11,000, at the peak of Yemeni settlement and migration in 1972 the Yemeni population was estimated at 2500, around 20% of the total population. In the same period, there were no less than five Yemeni-owned cafés; one located at 126 Church Street, another, the Tudor Café, at 226 Liverpool Road along with the International Restaurant and Freda's Café, also on the Liverpool Road. The fifth, Mohammad Kasseum's café, was relocated from nearby Monton to new premises facing Eccles Town Hall in 1969.[63]

Muwassiṭ Rivalries

Whilst the bygone era of the Arab cafés appears to evoke an instant nostalgia for many British Yemenis, the reality of regular friction and hostilities seems to be conveniently forgotten. In the same way that the Arab boarding-house masters became community linchpins as a result of their employment-brokering services, the Arab café owners equally came into their own as quasi 'social workers', who would often be required to settle skilfully arguments and disagreements that erupted in their cafés as a consequence of political or religious disagreements or a falling out over a game of cards or dominoes. The cafés also became the first port of call for Yemeni lascars who left one British port city for another in the arduous search for maritime employment known as the 'Tramp trade'. On this journey the cafés were both convenient stops, providing a *ḥalāl* snack and refreshment as well as being places that could, more often than not, refer lascars to a particular boarding-house master or *muqaddam*. In the process, a referring café owner could expect a

commission for directing customers to particular boarding houses. Occasionally, the problems that arose within the British Yemeni communities were more serious than a simple misunderstanding or a disagreement over a game of chance. As Lawless' study on the South Shields Yemeni community during the early twentieth century attests, 'Some boarding house masters were bitter rivals and their rivalry sometimes led to confrontations, even death.'[64] Frequent disputes between the boarding-house masters and their boarders over money resulted in violent incidents. A particular example is the court case for assault between Salah Survie, a ship fireman, who was charged with attacking and wounding Ali Said, his boarding-house master of 72a East Holborn, South Shields, after Survie lunged at Said brandishing a knife in an argument over a debt. After lodging with Said for three weeks without paying, Survie was then thrown out by Said. However, Survie claimed that Said had a large amount of his money in safekeeping but refused to return it. A fight broke out and Said attacked Survie aided by two other men. In self-defence, Survie pulled out a knife and struck at Said.

In another similar case, Abbas Heider, also a ship fireman, was charged with the attempted murder of café owner Ali Hassan, whose premises at 75 East Holborn was a few doors up from Ali Said's boarding house. Heider who had apparently boarded with Hassan, claimed he had left £100 in safekeeping with the café owner to be forwarded by Hassan to Heider's family back in Aden.

Unfortunately, it appears that none of the remittance was ever received. Hassan's defence lawyer explained to the Durham Assizes that the money had not been forwarded because Hassan had used it instead to support a number of unemployed Yemeni lascars who were without any financial means. The judge apparently accepted Hassan's misplaced act of charity and duly sentenced Heider to six months' imprisonment.[65] Whilst a number of other similar disputes and offences came before the courts, there is also strong evidence to suggest that many disputes were amicably settled within the community through the custom of arbitration. It is in this particular context that tribal loyalties (*'aṣabiyyah*) and cultural customs and

traditions (*'urf*) may often have worked to the advantage of the Yemeni lascars. Avoiding the dishonour and inconvenience of a lengthy and sometimes costly court case, the custom of tribal arbitration would allow the problem to be resolved swiftly and satisfactorily, with all parties maintaining *wajh* (literally meaning 'face', but understood as 'personal dignity').

Boarding-house keepers were regularly entrusted with large amounts of cash in their position of trust and as 'honorary bankers' for their lodging lascars. In addition to the safekeeping of large amounts of cash in their trust, the masters would also have extra cash on their premises generated by the nature of their business and enterprises. This left many of them vulnerable to robbers and thieves. Lawless cites a number of individual Arab boarding-house keepers who were murdered by robbers, some as a result of opportunist thieves who struck during the race riots at Mill Dam, South Shields, in 1919.[66] However, some masters refused to leave themselves open to villainy and took matters into their own hands. In December 1924, Ahmed Alwin, a café owner of 42–3 Commercial Road, South Shields, along with his English wife, Kate Amelia, were jointly charged with possessing four revolvers and 179 rounds of ammunition without a firearms certificate. The couple claimed in their defence that they had simply confiscated the weapons from lodging seamen and then forgot to report the matter to the police. They were fined £10 each after a lascar who owned one of the confiscated pistols reported them to the police.[67]

The profession of boarding-house keeper and café owner, although prestigious, was precarious for those operating in the Yemeni lascar communities. As described, there were occasional conflicts and disagreements with their lodgers and clients, issues relating to entrusted belongings and monies, the constant threat of robbery and the thankless task of securing employment and a constant supply of labour for lascars and shipping companies respectively. In addition, Arab boarding-house keepers and café owners were expected to become philanthropists whenever a lascar fell on hard times due to the lack of employment opportunities. This expectation placed a heavy burden on the masters because

for almost every individual residing, albeit temporarily rent-free in their establishments, there was a dependant extended family back in Yemen awaiting receipt of much-needed remittances from their male relative in the UK. This generous provision offered to struggling unemployed lascars was often overlooked by the port authorities, shipping companies, seamen's union officials, police and local councillors, who instead targeted a high degree of adverse criticism and abuse towards the Arab boarding-house keepers. The main allegations were that the boarding-house keepers, as *muwassiṭūn*, were committing corruption and bribery in the employment of Arab seamen on British ships and the illegal entry of Yemeni tribesmen into the country.[68] The general charge aimed at the *muwassiṭūn* was that they actively encouraged, and in some cases even physically and financially aided, the illegal migration of Yemeni sailors into the UK.

3.4 – Retired Yemeni seamen socialize in the boarding house in South Shields, circa 2005.

Sailors unions went even further and asserted that the *muwassiṭūn* were supplying false documents to sailors and facilitating the harbouring and passage of individuals between the British Yemeni communities both to avoid detection and provide maritime employment by illegal means. Inevitably, there was 'no smoke without fire' and a small number of Arab boarding-house keepers were found and charged and, in specific cases, deported, along with the

illegal Yemeni lascars they smuggled into Britain, back to Yemen. Unsympathetically, the accusers blamed the increasing high rates of lascar unemployment on the *muwassiṭūn* themselves, claiming that had the illegal importation of Yemeni lascars not been so readily aided by the Arab boarding-house keepers, they would not be in the position of 'obligation' to their unemployed lascar lodgers. The sailors unions further charged that the increasing numbers of Arab seamen, who were willing to undertake more duties for less pay, were putting indigenous 'white' sailors out of work. By the end of the 1920s, as the onset of the 'Great Depression' gripped industrial post-World War One Britain, the Arab boarding-house masters found themselves having to maintain even greater numbers of unemployed lascars. And, as more and more newcomers continued to arrive at the British docklands looking for work, the masters felt obliged to accept them. By May 1928, a Home Office memorandum reported that:

> It is known that boarding-house keepers are now beginning to feel the pinch of having to keep idle seamen whose irregular landing they have encouraged or connived at; and that this indirect pressure ... is one of the means of checking irregular landing.[69]

In response, the masters kept up the pressure by writing to the government through its colonial India Offices to plead their case. When other Arab boarding-house keepers wrote directly to the High Commissioner of India complaining that their livelihoods had been ruined by providing free food and accommodation to Arab seamen who were penniless and unemployed, Dr Khalid Sheldrake, an English Muslim convert and representative of the Western Islamic Alliance, offered the following explanation:

> The position of the boarding house masters is, I am well aware, desperate. As a matter of fact, I know one whose mortgages on his property are taken up. The reason the boarding house keepers have continued to maintain these men is that there is an unwritten Mohammadan law [*sic*]

> that whatever you have you share with a destitute brother. Therefore, these men have been maintaining the Arabs all along, and have ruined themselves by their kindness.[70]

In an effort to aid the failing Arab boarding-house businesses, the British and Foreign Sailors' Society agreed to offer temporary financial assistance to unemployed lascars in South Shields. In 1921, an agreement was signed between the Society and the masters to pay a weekly allowance for the destitute lascars' upkeep, to be paid directly to the boarding-house masters. This local scheme offered some temporary relief but, as the depression worsened, a far more drastic step of repatriation was discussed between the Society and the lascars. Furthermore, legal restrictions of Arab seamen to Britain in the early 1920s were extended to include all 'coloured sailors' in 1925. The Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order, issued by the Home Office, required all 'coloured alien seamen' to register with the local police within a limited number of days. Initially, the order was implemented to limit 'Adenese' Arabs (Aden Protectorate subjects) only and was restricted to a small number of ports.

Restricting Lascar Settlement

By 1926, the order was applied to all British ports and all 'coloured' sailors, effectively introducing a 'colour bar' into Britain, and thus defining 'British' and 'alien' racially. In Scotland, a number of seamen sought other means of employment away from the racism experienced in the docklands. A 'little Asiatic colony' of Punjabi Muslims referred to as 'steady and industrious' took up employment in the Lanarkshire steel industry but were resented by local (white) trade councils who made representations to the Ministry of Labour requesting their repatriation. In addition to the racism and xenophobia manifest in the infamous riots across the British Yemeni docklands communities in 1919, Yemeni lascars had to further endure a constant restriction on the number of non-white

seamen working on British vessels as a result of tightening legislation. The passing of the Aliens Act 1923 was one measure in a long line of new laws aimed at curbing lascar employment. Blatant discrimination in the job market against non-whites was somewhat innocuously referred to as a 'colour bar'. Fryer says that in industry during the interwar period in twentieth-century Britain 'the colour bar was virtually total'.[71] The 'colour bar' exclusion of non-white British subjects from the job market did not really abate until the 1940s when extra labour was needed for the war effort and Black workers could then find employment in British factories, even if their white colleagues, workers' unions and employers were resistant. Yet, whilst the pressing need for more labour in the wartime factories allowed a degree of job opportunities for non-whites, refusal of admittance to lodgings, service in cafés and restaurants, entrance to dance halls and cinemas and refusal on public transport etc., were all areas of public life from which non-whites were excluded by virtue of the continued 'colour bar'.

At ports across the country, the unions would not allow a coloured man to sign on for a ship while there was a white applicant for the job, as the 1919 so-called 'Arab riots' at Mill Dam, South Shields testified. By the end of the 1920s, when the 'Great Depression' had totally gripped the British economy, devastating the manufacturing industry, 'Tramp shipping', the phenomenon of unemployed lascars moving between port cities in search of maritime work, was hit hardest. Where British ships were given government subsidies to literally keep them afloat, a condition of payment was that British (white) only labour would be employed on subsidized ships.[72] Due to the Aliens Act 1923, all coloured seamen were now registered as 'alien' and were thereby were automatically barred from all subsidized ships. Further laws introduced, such as the Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order 1925, were interpreted by local authorities and police forces to mean that every non-white was an 'alien' regardless of any documentary proof showing that one was British. When indisputable evidence of British citizenship was produced in the form of a passport, the police would simply confiscate it from the lascars without issuing a receipt and any

coloured seamen refusing to hand over their passports were threatened with arrest and imprisonment. Equally, shipping companies would refuse to pay lascars until they produced an alien's certificate of registration, regardless of their British nationality. As 'alien' seamen were usually paid around 20% less than that of their white British peers (a practice that continued in the shipping industry until the 1970s), ship owners could make a considerable saving on labour costs by insisting that non-white sailors registered as 'aliens'. The Yemeni lascar communities were hit badly as a result of these draconian and discriminatory laws. Ethnicity and race were determining factors in how minorities, particularly colonial subjects, were seen and placed within wider British society during this period in Britain's history when the country's imperial power was at its zenith.[73] As a result, colonial subjects, including British Yemenis, were actually seen as inferior and as such, 'deserved' to be treated as less than equals.

Across the job market whether on shore or at sea this pervading colonial attitude resulted in a 'whites first' policy in employment. Whilst maritime labour conditions for British, European and US sailors improved steadily from 1919 onwards, progressed by the founding of the International Labour Organization (ILO), in real terms, working conditions for colonial lascars actually worsened. By 1936, the Convention of International Labour Conference recommended the regulation of lascar sailors working hours after years of exploitation which had established a working practice in which lascars worked for longer hours than their white European counterparts on the same ship for considerably less pay. In response, Black seamen in Cardiff formed the Coloured Seamen's Union in an effort to unite and counter the racism and discrimination they continually faced. In 1935, they sent their leader, Harry O'Connell, to London to liaise with the League of Coloured Peoples and in April of the same year a two-man investigation team travelled to Cardiff for a week to assess the plight of the lascars there. The team later reported that they found a:

> settled, orderly community, trying with desperate success to keep respectable homes under depressing conditions … We met men as British as any Englishman, forced by fraud to register as aliens, after living here since the [First World] war; charges and countercharges; misleading newspaper reports; men in authority bellowing 'repatriation'; muttered resentment against British children called 'half-castes'; and dominating everything, an imminent danger that deliberate trickery would mean for these men and their families expulsion from British shipping and ultimately from Britain.[74]

The investigation undertaken by the League of Coloured Peoples proved beyond doubt that the lascars, many of whom had fought gallantly as voluntary British servicemen in the First World War, were all forced to register as 'aliens' despite the indisputable proof of their British nationality.