
Most recently, we managed to raise more than £22,000 for the Somali Museum, smashing our target by more than £5000. It was an astonishing show of support from not only the Somali community, but also from fellow Britons and we even received donations internationally. It has become increasingly clear that this is a project that must happen, with more than enough support and interest surpassing our expectations. The potential for this project is incredible, offering a Somali-led museum and archive space, in which we can exchange cultural heritage with the London Somali community whilst pioneering a unique and innovative strategy of proactive archiving, and platform their success through exhibiting their output from engagement activities, in order to promote awareness and appreciation of Somali material heritage within the Somali community and the wider British public.



SALMA KEIZE BIHI

Numbi Arts

Salma Keize Bihi works with Numbi Arts (numbi.org), a non-profit production organisation based in London that produces cross-art projects and works in partnership with artists, educators and peer organisations locally, nationally and internationally. She tweets at @salmabihi_. Numbi Arts tweets at @numbiarts and Numbi's Somali Museum project at @SomalimuseumUK.

Photo credit: Nadyah Issa

EVERYDAY MUSLIM: FRAMING AND DOCUMENTING BLACK MUSLIM HISTORY IN BRITAIN

BY SADIYA AHMED

This piece discusses the importance of documenting and preserving the history and heritage of Muslims in Britain through archiving. It explores why this is a necessary undertaking for Muslim communities from grassroots to professional levels as a means of ensuring not just representation but, an authentic representation, within the archives and the heritage sector as a whole. Not doing so, it argues, causes a social disconnect between Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) British communities, wider British society, and their associated histories.

WHAT IS THE EVERYDAY MUSLIM ARCHIVE AND HERITAGE INITIATIVE?



The Everyday Muslim Heritage and Archive Initiative (EMHAI) was established in 2013. It is a voluntary-led community group set up to address misrepresentation, the lack of representation, and constant assertion of stereotypes of Muslims in both mainstream and minority (e.g. Black or Asian) archive collections. In doing so, it endeavours to provide an alternative narrative to the limited framing of Muslims within the context of British social, political, and economic history.

EMHAI also works closely with community groups, schools, academics, researchers, mosques, madrassas, museums and archives to produce educational teaching resources that inform a broader perspective of British history. To encourage sustainability and provide a context from a Muslim perspective, we are also working towards forging partnerships with universities to provide guidance, research opportunities and encouragement for more people from a Muslim background to enter the heritage sector and become trained archivists, researchers and historians.



The EMHAI archive collection is an ever-expanding collection of video and audio recordings and oral history interviews from Muslims of diverse ethnic backgrounds across the UK. There is also, a wide-ranging depository of approximately 2000 digitised documents and photographs, that provide both a historical and contemporary narrative of the everyday lives and diversity of the Muslim communities living in Britain.

The collections are available online, partially catalogued and archived at archival institutions across the UK; an intrinsic aim of the initiative is to place Muslim history and heritage directly within the context of broader British history.

WHAT ARE ARCHIVES?

An archive is a collection usually consisting of documents or records that provide information about a place, institution, person or group of people. These can include letters, photographs, film or audio recordings, minutes of meetings, publications, leaflets, newsletters and many other examples relevant to a family or an organisation. Over time these records can become of historical significance.

WHY ARCHIVES?

Although archives can be seen as quite dull, often consisting of documents such as; shipping registers, minutes of meetings, birth and death records, they are essential in establishing a historical narrative. From the perspective of within the Muslim community, collecting community archival material helps us to reflect the complex and varying nature of the collective 'Muslim community.' Recording accounts of our lives help us to provide a self-authored statement of activities and experiences either at the grassroots level or in a professional capacity.

The current lack of documentation of these and preceding testimonies and the noticeable absence of the efforts by organisations and individuals to better represent and serve our communities in both the archives and social history means future generations are starting from the beginning. Often unaware and unable to benefit from what went on before them and thus, negating the existence of individuals, whole communities and their achievements.



Mapping history, Willesden Library, 2018

MORE THAN JUST REPRESENTATION

When archives and the history that is derived from them are from a singular subjective viewpoint, the narrative that emerges becomes biased and narrow. The consequences can cause a lack of a sense of belonging and a disconnect within broader society. This point is very well articulated by the poet Benjamin Zephaniah (2020):

I wasn't interested in history at school, because I was being taught that Black people had no history. We were usually being 'discovered' by great white explorers, civilised by the great white conquerors and missionaries, or freed by the great white abolitionists. It was only when I started to listen to reggae music that I began hearing about my own history.

From personal experience of history lessons at school, I also grew up with a narrow perspective of our (BAACB and Asian) history in Britain. This was mainly framed around the stereotypes that there were very few people of Black, African, or Afro-Caribbean (BAACB) or Asian heritage in Britain until the post-war migration period, including that of the 'Windrush' generation. Yet in reality, the earliest historical evidence of a Black presence in Britain dates back to Roman times (National Archives). The framing of the post-war migration history made me feel that it was one of 'salvation and subjugation.' In reality, the BAACB and South Asian migration to Britain was encouraged by the British Government to fill the labour shortage in mills and factories, a situation which arose from low morale after the Second World War and of

⁶ Presently, EMHAI is working on making the archive collection wholly available online. A digital copy of the (BAACB) will be deposited at partner archive organisations George Padmore Institute, Brent Museums and Archive.

poor working conditions and low wages. Other reasons for migration included civil unrest and poverty in their home countries, which were mostly the consequences of centuries of British colonial annexation and looting.

Over six years of collecting oral history interviews, photographs and documents we have built an unparalleled account of the lived experience of Muslims in the UK. The real - life testimonies directly challenge the widely documented narrowly focussed post-war migration period as one of unskilled, non-English speaking labourers coming to the UK to support the declining manufacturing industry. In reality, the interviews reveal that this generation was not only instrumental in supporting the manufacturing industry, but they also undertook many professional roles in schools and the civil service along with bolstering the flagging economy by setting up new businesses and strengthening the workforce in the understaffed NHS.

In 2020, as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement campaigns and the subsequent resulting discussions around how history is curated, there has been a rush of 'statements of change' from history, arts and heritage institutions. These statements acknowledge the inequality in the depiction of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) histories and experience, as well as the complacent oversight of expertise of their BAME staff. This is in favour of the majority white employees, some of whom are often replicating the framing of their interpretations similar to orientalist and colonial frameworks found in academia with little regard to authenticated descriptions. Oforiatta explains why this is problematic:

In the British Museum, you have the African galleries, and it's like, 'This drum is from 1500 Ashanti,' but there is nothing else about it. You don't know what it is used for, what context it's from, how it was brought here, who stole it. The museum as it exists today is so much an imperialist project and is so much about power.

BLACK HISTORY IS NOT ENOUGH

Whilst there are some established BAACB archives and historical institutions such as: The Africa Centre, The Black Cultural Archives and the George Padmore Institute, the experiences and stories of those who are of BAACB and of Muslim faith are evidently absent. At the same time, it is essential to highlight that Muslims do not live in segregation and that their history should not be pigeon-holed to either a Black or Muslim account. In actuality, it is very much intertwined in the broader British narrative of social history. The fascinating story of Malik Al Nasir, illustrates this point evocatively.

Malik (Al Nasir and Thomas, 2020) saw a photograph of a man who is the first Black footballer in Britain during a news report. His resemblance to Malik was uncanny, and a phone call from his mother, who saw the same story confirmed his first instinct. Could this man be related to him? Malik started life in Liverpool as Mark, who lived most of his life in social care growing up in the Sixties in an overtly racist system and society, leaving school with no qualifications. However, the photograph instigated several years of researching and collecting archival material. His journey uncovered familial links not just to the said footballer, Andrew Watson,

but astonishingly Lord Mayors, Colonial Governors, High Sheriffs, MPs and aristocrats. There were even links to the British Prime Minister, William Gladstone. Malik uncovered his family was not only linked to descendants of plantation slaves but also a slave-trading family from which Andrew Watson was descended. Malik is now starting a PhD at Cambridge University to continue research into the company, Sandbach Tinne, that is at the heart of his connections to both Liverpool, Guyana, slavery, and the British Empire.

DOCUMENTING BLACK MUSLIM HERITAGE

The double discrimination faced by the community in the archives and the subsequent reporting of that history alongside Malik's story encapsulates the complex reasons why EMHAI believes it is necessary to document and preserve the hidden history and heritage of the BAACB community. We began engagement with the community at the end of 2015. The partnership resulted in the first archive to maintain the narrative of the Black Muslim community in a historical and contemporary context and we hope to continue to collect material to expand the collection. The archive collection entitled: Exploring the Diversity of Black British Muslim Heritage in London is a unique digital archive consisting of oral history interviews and photographs which document a crucial social history and heritage of Black Muslim communities across London from the 1960s to 2017. It is a direct personal account of the civic, social, cultural experiences, challenges, achievements, and contributions of African, African Caribbean, and Black Muslims in London.

The archive collection consists of approximately 400 items of the following types of material: filmed oral history interviews, transcripts, photographs, curriculum-related lesson plans, filmed events, performances, academic presentations and workshops, together with digitised exhibition panels and promotional videos. The entire collection will be accessible on the Everyday Muslim website later in the year.

One of the highlights of this project came in March 2017. EMHAI held their first symposium dedicated to the history and heritage of Black Muslim communities in Britain - 'An Exploration of Black Muslims in British History and Heritage' at Rich Mix, in east London. The event was attended by over 120 people from across Britain and Europe. The day was packed with presentations, panel discussions, open mic performances and a photographic exhibition celebrating Black Muslim women by photographer Wasi Daniju (whose work mainly focuses on portraiture, live performance, theatre and photojournalism). Many spoke of how it was the first time they had the opportunity to openly discuss topics such as anti-Blackness within the Muslim community, share their 'everyday' experiences outside of their own community and, most importantly, were thrilled to know that we would begin to document and preserve their memories and experiences of many generations in an archive collection.

However, this would not be the first time that a non-Black led organisation has actively taken action to highlight the often-hidden existence and experiences of the Black Muslim community. As mentioned by the esteemed filmmaker and lecturer at Winchester University Imruh Bakari: There are instructive lessons to be learnt from Brent Eid Festival 1997, organised by [the late

Fuad Nahdi of] Q-News and [Khalida and Humera Khan of] An-Nisa Society. Much more than a single event, this festival was one moment of actualising the diversity of the Muslims communities in the Borough of Brent. In essence, the festival indicated the value of ongoing and sustained social and cultural work (I. Bukhari, personal communication, 12 May 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, to balance the impartial and narrow focus in the framing and portrayal of BAACB in the history and heritage in Britain, we need to train teachers, historians, archivists, and curators of BAACB heritage. To ensure the insights of the community are included and to provide a ‘lived’ understanding of context and experience, they should be involved in policy and decision-making roles to ensure that a more comprehensive viewpoint is achieved.

For these recommendations to be implemented there needs to be greater financial support and advocacy from; academia, local and national museums and archives, heritage bodies such as the National Archives, English Heritage, Government departments such as Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and the Muslim community. Only, a unified investment into the community from all agencies can ensure a sustainable future for ‘Muslim’ community history in the UK.



SADIYA AHMED
*Founder/Director
Everyday Muslim Heritage
and Archive Initiative*

Sadiya Ahmed is Director and Founder of the Everyday Muslim Heritage and Archive Initiative first established in 2013. She has been instrumental in fundraising, project planning and managing heritage and archive projects on the subject of British Muslim history and heritage. She has also initiated and brokered collaborations and partnerships with museums and archives, academics, artists, media professionals and community groups across Britain.

She also established the Khizra Foundation in 2010 as a community group to tackle the lack of representation of the Muslim community across the heritage sector. Subsequently, the Everyday Muslim Heritage and Archive Initiative was established as an umbrella project that has formally begun to archive Muslim life in the UK.

SECTION 3.2
#BLACKLIVESMATTER 2020