



LAMINE KONATE

Lamine Konate is a professional accountant specialising in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) since 2010 and now runs his own accountancy practice based in South London. He is currently the Secretary General of the African Ivorian Islamic Trust and the Deputy Imam of Peckham High Street Mosque.

Lamine is also a junior policy adviser to the Ivory Coast Embassy in London for international organisations and a financial analyst at the Department of Credit Institutions and External Finance (Treasury and Public Accounting). Lamine also serves as the Vice Chair of the Southwark Muslim Forum and works with the Southwark Interfaith forum. He also participates in the Southwark Faith and Health program in the borough and the funding project for Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital charity for the local community in Southwark and Lambeth.

MORE THAN A MOSQUE: HOW AN INSTITUTION CREATES COMMUNITY COHESION

BY IBRAHIM ADEWUSI

The Muslim Association of Nigeria (MAN UK) was established in 1961 by a group of Nigerian students in London. In 1991, the association bought and renovated a pub on Old Kent Road in Southwark and set up a fully functional mosque and Islamic cultural centre established to serve the local Muslim community. In the past 25 years since its establishment, the MAN UK/Old Kent Road Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre has provided a welcoming space for all Muslims in London as well as the wider community in the London Borough of Southwark. The Centre caters to congregants who include indigenous British Muslims as well as migrants from Nigeria, Afghanistan, Algeria, Morocco, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Ghana, Sierra-Leone, Somalia, Eritrea and the Caribbean. In addition to providing space for worship, the Centre also provides dedicated Islamic counselling, organises educational workshops and seminars, community and civic issues. The centre promotes social integration and organises youth engagement activities including supplementary education and Arabic and Islamic classes for children as well as adults.

The MAN UK/Old Kent Road Mosque & Islamic Cultural Centre contributes to the enhancement of understanding amongst faith communities, in particular the London Borough of Southwark. The organisation is a member of the Southwark Multi-Faith Forum (SMFF). It participates in interfaith activities and coordinates school visits to the Centre to help to foster understanding of the religion of Islam, whilst dispelling myths or misconceptions.

In addition, the Centre has an important role to play in wider society. It runs outreach programmes and increasingly uses the Mosque's space to provide refuge for the homeless. Also, our Imams provide spiritual and pastoral care in many schools and prisons across London. Further, we continue to engage in local and national endeavours such as community involvement with the Southwark Muslim Forum, the National Council for the Welfare of the Muslim Prisoners, and Muslim Council of Britain.

THE NATURE OF COMMUNITY COHESION

Community cohesion describes the ability of all communities to function and grow in harmony together rather than in conflict. It is this spirit of cohesion that encapsulates and informs the activities of MAN UK/Old Kent Road Mosque & Islamic Cultural Centre. Mr Alabi, who served as President of MAN UK/OKR Mosque from 2015-2019, commented in the most recent annual report that "the Centre has become not just a place of worship and spiritual upliftment but also a social hub where community engagement, development and empowerment of our members and the general community is the number one priority."⁴⁹

In the past decades, the challenges faced by Black Muslims living in the United Kingdom include racial discrimination in both local communities and at the workplace. Black Muslims were less involved in civic activities within wider society, and an inability of individuals to harness opportunities for growth and community development.

The above issues inform the set-up of MAN UK/OKR Mosque & Islamic Cultural Centre as

⁴⁹ See MAN UK/Old Kent Road Mosque. (2019). Annual Report 2016-2019 [available on request from MANUK].

a community institution. More so, these issues drive the institution's active involvement and commitment to the cause of community cohesion. It is the strong conviction of the MAN Centre leadership that active involvement in community cohesion would empower and also provide the leverage for its community development and growth. The expectation is that such active community engagement would deliver a community at peace with its neighbours whilst developing a sense of belonging, and active development of social and educational programs and activities to create awareness of and facilitate access of its community members to local and wider societal opportunities. Above all, the expectation is to provide institutional leverage for the recognition of Black Muslims' contribution to the local and wider societal developments.

As reported by the Department of Communities and Local Government (Local Government Association, 2004), the approach for the delivery of community cohesion is predicated on three ways of living together involving a shared future and sense of belonging; a focus on what new and existing communities have in common, alongside a recognition of the value of diversity; and strong and positive and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds.

Hence, the community cohesion activities being delivered by the MAN UK/Old Kent Road Mosque & Islamic Cultural Centre includes collaboration with Southwark Council community engagement; working with faith communities; working with the police; providing social interaction; and services for older people and youth. Each of these activities is described below.

COMMUNITY COHESION IN PRACTICE

COLLABORATING WITH THE LOCAL AUTHORITY

Below are some ways the Centre initiates or collaborates on civic projects that encourage social cohesion and integration in London.

The organisation, MAN UK/Old Kent Road Mosque & Islamic Centre, is working collaboration with the Southwark Council Community Engagement at several levels. The collaboration includes participating in forums including Southwark Council Forum Meetings, Community Southwark Faith and Social Action Focus Group, the Faith and Community Assembly, the Southwark Interfaith Forum, and the Southwark Muslim Forum.

All of the collaboration has been made feasible by working closely with the team at Southwark Council Community Engagement. The collaborative activities were duly recognised and praised by the Minister for Faith and Communities Lord Bourne at the Department of Housing, Community and Local Government attendance at the Special Inter-Faith Twinning Program on the 19th of January 2018.

WORKING WITH FAITH COMMUNITIES

In working with the faith community, the organisation actively participates in and hosts the rotational meetings of Southwark Interfaith forum. The Centre hosted the Southwark Inter-

Faith Youth and Children Speak Out event at the Old Kent Road Mosque, and collaborated regularly with the London Sustainability Exchange on delivering a Faith and Utilities workshop to learn about conserving energy and living more sustainably.

The mosque, during its Ramadan breaking of fast (*iftar*), hosted the Most Reverend & Right Honourable Justin Welby in 2018, civic and municipal leaders including Deputy Mayor of London, the Mayor of Southwark, and local councillors.

Also, in appreciation of the Centre's contribution to local interfaith relations, a certificate of recognition by the Faith & Belief Forum was awarded to its Deputy Imam Kazeem Fatai (Gbedemuke) as a Community Champion.



Figure 3: Ramadan Hosting: The Archbishop of Canterbury, The Most Reverend and Rt Hon Justin Welby (2018)



Figure 4: The Ramadan Iftar Hosting: The Archbishop of Canterbury and Rt Hon Justin Welby (2018)

WORKING WITH THE POLICE

The organisation is actively involved in tackling crime and collaborates with the Metropolitan Police on issues of community policing and other national issues on security and safety. For example, MAN UK/OKR Mosque have hosted workshops on gun and knife crimes, cybersecurity, as well as a 'Stay Safe' workshop aimed at protecting worshippers and premises from attacks.

PROVIDING SOCIAL INTERACTION

The Centre takes seriously the need to interact with the wider communities, both as individuals and as organisations. The management committee puts together social interaction events such as 'The Street Iftar' during Ramadan that attracted a cross-section of the residents of Southwark Borough on the 2nd of June 2018.

The Centre has an important role to play in education in the borough. For example, it hosted visits for students and faculty from the Southwark School and from the St Frances School. Another event the Centre collaborated on was the Lego Robotic Science workshop for children in association with Engineering Mind.

In addition to educational engagement, the Centre has a role to play in civil society. These collaborations include awareness workshops on Modern Day Slavery in partnership with Africans United Against Child Abuse (AFRUCA). There were other partnerships including one with LCC Studio and with the Football Association. Other forms of fostering broader civic engagement includes the role it played in the Visit My Mosque program, organised by the Muslim Council of Britain, with a cross-section of individual visitors from the neighbourhood and London.

In recognition of MAN UK as an organisation that caters to the Nigerian diaspora, His Royal Highness and Duchess of Cornwall invited the Centre for a celebration of British West African Communities on 24th October 2018.

As part of regular interaction with government as well as non-governmental stakeholders, local MP Neil Coyle paid a special solidarity visit in 2019 to express condolence on the New Zealand attack on Muslims and to reassure the community of support of the British government. These examples demonstrate the various forms of the social interactions delivered by the organisation to improve individual's engagement in wider civic activities. It also exposes Black Muslims from our community to growth and development opportunities as well as better community integration.



Figure 5: MET Police at the Workshop on Gun & Knife Workshop (2018)

SERVICE FOR OLDER PEOPLE AND YOUTH

To reinforce the point that the MAN UK/OKR Mosque's activities with older people and youth demonstrate that the Centre is not just a mosque but an institution that builds community. The provision of services for the youth and elderly is a significant part of the MAN UK/Old Kent Road & Islamic Cultural Centre activities. Such collaboration includes Erasmus Plus Youth Exchange Project 'Together We Rise,' the MAN UK Youth food distribution to the Homeless, the annual MAN UK Elders Trips, and the annual MAN UK Elders recognition award programme. These programmes help to maintain the involvement of our youth and elderly in the organisation as well as stimulate and engage them in health and wellbeing activities.



Figure 6: The Street Ramadan Iftar (2018)

CONCLUSION: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN COHESION

The essence and benefit of the above community cohesion delivery at MAN UK/Old Kent Road Mosque & Islamic Cultural Centre are to engender a common vision and shared sense of belonging for all groups in society. To ensure this aim is sustained, the MAN UK organisation is in agreement with the interfaith community on the need for increasing recognition of the importance of interfaith understanding and cooperation.⁵⁰ It is our view that this could be achieved through working to put interfaith engagement at the heart of local communities and national society. It is also the shared view that through the provision of support to interfaith groups, it can help increase mutual learning, dialogue and cooperation to achieve community cohesion.

⁵⁰ See The Interfaith Network (2020) What We Do - The Inter Faith Network (IFN). <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/about>