

From Farms to Foundries

An Arab Community in
Industrial Britain

Kevin Searle

CULTURAL IDENTITY STUDIES

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PETER LANG

Preface

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The story of Yemeni migration to Britain is at once fascinating and obscure, a record of the first Arab, Muslim and, except for the Chinese, third world migrant community that settled in the UK, around a century ago, and also of a community that, never rising to 20,000, and easily assimilated to other, larger, non-white groups, be they Africans or South Asians, was rarely recognised in its own right. If the first generation of Yemenis came in the early part of the twentieth century, like the Chinese, Indians, West Africans and West Indians, as sailors, and settled in major ports (in the Yemeni case Cardiff, Liverpool, South Shields), those who came after World War II tended to go straight into employment as unskilled industrial workers, in major cities of the British Midlands (Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield).

Earlier studies of Yemenis in Britain, my own included, have tended to take a broad historical or anthropological approach, and to set the Yemenis in a general context of migration and settlement in modern Britain. It is among the many merits of Kevin Searle's unique study that he focuses on a limited group of Yemeni migrants, and in a specific space and time, taking as his object of study twenty-five retired Yemeni steelworkers in Sheffield, England's fourth largest city and long the capital of its steel making. The core of this book is based on a series of in-depth interviews, extensively quoted, covering the Yemenis' individual experience of migration, employment, housing, leisure and, finally, as the tide of industrial demand that first brought them to England ebbed, unemployment. Never before have we had such a vivid, informative, intimate and definitive account of how the Yemenis passed their years in Britain, and of the experiences, good and bad, that they underwent. The result of Kevin Searle's meticulous and, for those at least who know Yemen and the Yemeni migrant community, wholly absorbing and convincing account, is a unique and most original contribution to the sociology of migration, industrial decline, and racism in the UK and, at the same time, a rich addition to the literature on the Yemenis themselves.

Beyond its focus on a particular city, and a delimited set of interviewees, this study makes two striking contributions. First, in analysing in depth the way in which Yemenis were integrated, as unskilled and ultimately dispensable labour, into the British economy, and at the same time in showing the degree of extreme isolation from British society that the migrants experienced, Kevin Searle has made a most informative contribution to understandings of institutional racism and of the assimilation of different immigrant communities into a generic, subordinate, category of being 'black'. Secondly, in taking the decision to transcribe, edit and present in lengthy quotations the speech of these immigrants, a combination of spoken industrial Yorkshire speech with the cadences, images and terms of Yemeni discourse, he has done what no previous observer, in written, or media documentary form, has ever done. As a historical document alone, this book is unique.

Kevin Searle makes the point that the earlier studies of the Yemenis used the device of 'literary realism', translating their speech into orthodox English or, more often, indirect speech. One could reinforce his argument by saying that what happened in English also took place in Arabic accounts of the community, which were published in reports and journals sponsored by one or other Yemeni government, and which made the statements of the workers in Britain conform to the phraseology, and political messages, of the home states. The one exception to this formalisation of speech lay in the reproduction, within the local journals of the Yemeni community, 'cyclostyled' in the technology of the 1970s in the back streets of Birmingham and Sheffield, of poetry in Yemeni dialect by members of the community: each city had its *sha'ir sha'abi*, its 'popular poet', and these speeches, read out by the workers themselves at public meetings, equally convey, in Yemeni dialect, a richness of speech, and idiom, that matches the industrial English of Searle's interviewees.

Kevin Searle's work focuses not only on migration, employment and speech, but also on the various forms of 'resistance', self-organisation, and protest in which the Yemenis engaged. As he explains, this always had a dual character – political and social organisation reflecting often as much, or more, the ideas, and issues, prevalent in Yemen, as those prevailing in the UK. Yet for all their marginalisation and apparent assimilation into more visible and pervasive communities, be these 'Muslims', 'Asians' or 'Pakistanis', the Yemenis established and preserved over many decades their own set of distinct social,

religious and political organisations, while, repeatedly, participating in public life and political struggles within England itself. Although few observers noted them as such at the time, Yemenis were, as the photographs of the time show all too clearly, prominent in the 'Mill Dam' protests in South Shields in 1930, a campaign organised by the Communist Party of Great Britain against the exploitation of Asian sailors. At the same time, and from the 1930s, Yemenis were organising the first Muslim prayer meetings, and establishing the first mosques, in the UK, in South Shields and Cardiff, and, in the late 1940s, producing the first Arabic newspaper, *Al Salaam*, in Europe. As the Merchant Seamen Memorial at Pier Head in Liverpool so graphically records, Yemenis gave their lives in considerable numbers in serving on British merchant ships in the Atlantic in World War II. With the rise of campaigns in support of Palestine in the late 1960s and 1970s in the UK, and, a decade later, of a cross-community campaign against racism, and for the recognition of social rights, in Sheffield as elsewhere, Yemeni organisations and personalities played a significant part. With the emergence of a second, and now third generation, of Yemenis in the English Midlands, and with a far greater engagement by local councils with these communities, the possibilities of further participation in political and social activity are many.

In Yemen, there is a sense that migration, a result of economic and political discrimination in the homeland, is a permanent, if unwelcome, fate. As the Yemeni saying goes, *al yamani al muhajir al da'im* – 'the Yemeni is an eternal migrant'. Yet in this migration, not only have Yemenis been able to help their families and villages at home, but they have also, as Kevin Searle shows so eloquently in this book, and with so much rich detail, made their own signal contribution to the cities and cultures of the country in which they have then resided. The first century of Yemeni settlement in Britain is there to prove this point.

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