

Hannah Elizabeth Martin, Northumbria University.

Society for the Study of Labour History Research Bursary Research Trip Report: Searching for the BAME working class presence in The National Archives, February 2019.



The National Archives, Kew.

Hostile, and often violent, relationships have been associated with the history of working class Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic British Colonial subjects throughout the early twentieth century. The central aspect of my thesis aims to uncover the formation, maintenance and articulation of everyday experiences of BAME British Colonial Seafarers in the North-East of England 1919-1938, detracting from 'exceptional episodes' of racialised violence thus creating a more relational understanding of place based politics and social interactions. For the most part my work focusses on Adenese, Somali, East and West African and West Indian seafarers in South Shields, North Shields, Blyth, Sunderland and Middlesbrough. My thesis will demonstrate that inter-ethnic relations were fluid, mutable and influenced by wider spatial, social and temporal contexts.

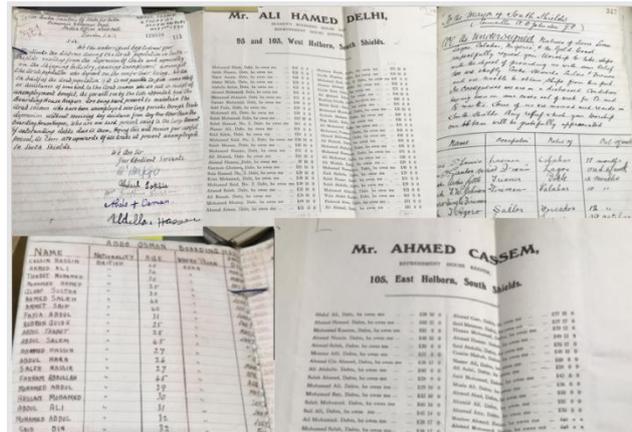
The postgraduate research bursary from the Society for the Study of Labour History enabled me to search for the BAME presence in the National Archives. As this project takes a micro-historical approach, I initially assumed that most of my archival research would be undertaken in regional County Record Offices. However, the institutional and bureaucratic records available in the CRO's ensured that the BAME presence was fragmented, impersonal and centred around times of exceptionality not the everyday.

Although there is a body of material that allows BAME experiences and narratives to surface at the micro-local level, in council libraries and local history collections, I wished to uncover the way that archival scale affects BAME visibility. At the National Archives, I began my search in the Colonial Office and Home Office Records, hoping to reveal how everyday BAME experiences from the North East were discussed at a national level, positioned within discourses regarding the commodification of imperial labour.

Within vast files and folios labelled 'Aden Seamen Miscellaneous Correspondence', were letters from chief inspectors, board of trade officials, Arab boarding house masters and BAME seafarers from across Tyneside. Prior to this visit to the National Archives, I understood that only Arab boarding house masters that escalated their grievances to the national level. However, on the second day of research I uncovered a deputation, forwarded to the Colonial Office from the Mayor of South Shields, from over fifty West African and West Indian Seamen

from the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Barbados and Jamaica, all whom resided in South Shields in 1921. Due to the legacies of slavery and imperialism, their anglicised names had 'whitened' their presence in the archival record. There has been no mention of a West African Community of this size living in South Shields in the 1920s in any of the historiography. It was only when the need arose for them to make explicit claims on their rights as British Subjects, do they appear in the archival record. The deputation lists the names of the men, their place of birth, occupation, length of time unemployed and their marital status.

Similar petitions appear from members of the Arab community in the Home Office and Colonial Office Records throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Not only do these personal letters highlight the voices of the marginalised and situate them within a national discourse, they demonstrate that these men knew their rights as British Colonial Subjects or Protected Persons and were not intimidated to further their complaints to national bodies after attempts to deal with matters through local institutions had been futile. These letters often have telling comments handwritten in their margins by Colonial Office officials' which ridicule the language competence of the author or disrespectfully denounce some of the issues being raised. For example, comments such as 'open to considerable debate!!! - highly unlikely', in regards to claims made to British Subject status and nationality, appear in the margins of a petition for financial relief of unemployed Adenese Seamen made by Mr Hamed Delhi to the Colonial Office in 1930. These annotations serve as a sharp reminder of the nature of the archive in which these narratives are situated.



A selection of material from the Colonial Office and Home Office Collections at the National Archives.

Although the BAME presence in the archival record differs between the national and local level, their narratives are essentially marginalised because they were Black, working class, male, British Colonial Subjects, working in the merchant shipping industry and living in inter-war Britain. The content of the archive and the conditions under which the material was created and maintained has led to the silencing, marginalisation and muting of minority voices. The BAME archival presence in the early 20th century can only be understood against the backdrop of socioeconomic and political issues prevalent in inter-war Britain and on a micro level, inter-war Tyneside.

I would like to thank the SSLH for supporting this research trip to the National Archives that was overwhelmingly productive and integral to my thesis.