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Lured by the big city - even if it's racist

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In the final part of his series, this writer visits two contrasting Muslim communities on the Isle of Lewis and in Belfast

ONE SUMMER a number of years ago, while visiting Glasgow, I was taken to meet some Muslim neighbours who had moved into our street in Clarkston. As the host — a fortysomething man with an audacious imagination — told ludicrous tales of his induction into the CIA for the American-led “War on Drugs” in Afghanistan, I was briefly introduced to an elderly Muslim gentleman who had settled in the town of Stornoway, out on the Hebridean island of Lewis, an hour’s flight north of Glasgow.

He bore the thick, almost lyrical — and sometimes impenetrable — inflection of the Scottish isles. “Yes, there has been a small Muslim community on Stornoway since the 1950s. For the main part it is a quiet community,” he told me. “Like any rural community, though, it is shrinking as our children leave for the cities.”

The first Muslim settler to Stornoway, Buta Mohammed, arrived on Lewis in 1945, shortly after the Second World War. Mohammed, then only 18 and already anticipating the end of the British Empire with the impending partition of India, had taken a route worthy of any seafaring explorer — India-London-Rochdale-Glasgow-Stornoway.

Arriving on the island in the middle of winter, speaking no English, and witnessing snowfall for the first time in his life, Mohammed, according to legend, hid out in barns for several weeks, living off the land. A local family eventually gave him shelter, and Mohammed in due course found a trade — going door to door around the island selling household goods out of a briefcase. In those days it was not unusual to find door-to-door businessmen extending credit to their customers. A pair of trousers, for example, that cost five shillings, would, typically, be paid off at a rate of one shilling a month. Mohammed soon prospered: and, in 1959, he invited his brother to the island. By the early Eighties, Stornoway’s Muslim population had grown to around 300.

Nearly 60 years later, on a wind-swept Tuesday evening, I find myself in a modern semidetached house a short walk from Stornoway’s bustling maritime port, listening to Mohammed’s nephew, Arshid, 51, relate his uncle’s exploits. “It must have been hard for him,” says Arshid, who also travels around the island, selling household wares. He continues in the understated manner usual to Hebrideans: “People here had never come across outsiders before.”

As he sits with his wife Mussarad, 50, and sister Balquis, 55, Arshid is part of the generation — and this is typical of most Hebrideans — that is leaving Lewis. While the population of the Hebridean islands currently stands at around 26,500, numbers have steadily declined by 10 per cent in the past decade. Exacerbating that trend, the 300-strong Muslim population of Stornoway has dwindled more dramatically to 25.

“There is nothing much here for us any more,” Mussarad admits, sadly. Her son, now 26, moved to London two years ago and rarely ventures back. She winks: “I’ve seen so many of my friends leave for Edinburgh or Glasgow. I keep telling my husband that we should leave as well.” A slight woman who has the relaxed manner of sitting as if waiting for her armchair to swallow her up, Mussarad groans as the portly Arshid laughs as he digs into spiced potato kebabs. “I’ve told you before,” he says, flatly. “We will leave the island. As soon as I hit those six numbers.”

In keeping with the entrepreneurial spirit of their generation, the Stornoway Muslims boast a close affiliation to their Islamic roots. Mohammed would often exchange his wares for live chickens that he would then, in turn, sacrifice himself. “Things have improved a bit since then,” says Arshid. The Stornoway Muslims now take a monthly delivery of halal meat, spices and vegetable from Glasgow’s Punjab Food Store. “We can even get mangos,” Balquis says. A few years ago, the family equipped themselves with a satellite dish; the resultant Zee TV — an Indian news and film station — has revolutionised their lives. “We’re suddenly in touch with our own culture again,” Balquis says. “Before that, we felt so alone.”

Apart from the legacy of their entrepreneurial skills, though, the Stornoway Muslims have left few other cultural imprints on Lewis. The remaining Muslim families recently announced plans to build a community hall on the island: to date, all religious festivals and weddings are carried out at home. The Muslims have saved £15,000 towards the cost. “We figure that there will always be Muslims here, so we’d like to leave them something,” Arshid says. A number of years ago, the Muslims purchased seven gravesites on the island. “They are all full now,” Balquis says. “We are thinking of buying more.”

Earlier that morning, I meet Khalil Amjad, 50, at his general store in the town centre. Amjad — his boyish choirboy features render him a decade younger on sight — stands behind his glass counter. His customers rush in and out. His store sells everything from CD racks and toy dogs to newspapers and groceries.

Amjad arrived on Stornoway — he had no English — in 1989 from London. “I had an arranged marriage in London,” he says,

fixing two cups of strong tea. "But it didn't work out. So my uncle asked me to come to Stornoway, and I have lived here ever since."

He pauses to help a customer find a greeting card for a friend. "The ground was thick with 18in of snow when I got here," he says, returning to the counter. "Those first few months were hard. I would work all day, and cry all night. I didn't understand the language. I couldn't speak to anyone. Then my uncle arranged my marriage here on the island. My family gave me a sense of purpose. Until that point, I had been thinking of returning to Pakistan. My wedding helped me get over it, though. I needed the responsibility."

He disappears again to help another customer. While the trade is brisk, Amjad concedes that his business has come under fierce competition from another store near by as well as a Woolworth's in town. Add to that a general paucity of jobs in Stornoway which has worsened local financial problems. One taxi driver I spoke to complains of the number of cabs operating on the island. "There are around 70 cabs," he says, bitterly. "That's a ridiculous number given that we don't get that many visitors. Basically, anyone with a car these days is also offering a taxi service to make some money on the side."

"It is getting tougher," Amjad says, returning with more tea. As he fishes out a newspaper for a customer, his banter, inevitably, is dominated by talk of employment, real or illusory:

Amjad: "So are you working, young man?" Customer: "Yeah, got a little bit of labouring on the go."

Amjad: "Well, that'll be good for you. Put some money in that pocket of yours."

Customer: "Not for long. I seem to spend it on the beer as soon as I get it."

Amjad (disapprovingly): "You want to be careful with that. You'll lose those looks of yours."

Customer: "Well, I'll lose my job before that — the labouring is only going to take me about two weeks."

After the customer leaves and the morning trickle subsides, Amjad sits back behind his till. He is increasingly worried, he says. All of the Muslim children have left Stornoway. During my time on the island, in fact, each family informed me that their children were living on the mainland — either studying or working.

"I don't know why they want to leave here," complains Arshid, harshly. "This place is all right. OK, so it is a little quiet. But there is no racism here. I've always found people really friendly. Even after September 11, at a time when Muslims were under the spotlight, I never felt in danger."

But Amjad is already looking for a timely exit from the island. Yet like many of his contemporaries, and much like Hebrideans in general, he has found himself priced out of the Scottish property market. While a family home on Stornoway retails at around £80,000, an equivalent property in Glasgow is double the price. "I don't want to move into a small pokey wee flat in Glasgow," Amjad says. "Like anyone, I want to be able to raise my family in a nice house. And while the shop doesn't make much money, on Stornoway I do have a respectable lifestyle."

When I later relate the anecdote to Arshid, he laughs. And with more than just a hint of triumphalism, adds: "Aye, to get off this island, we're all waiting for those six numbers."

IF STORNOWAY represents, to some considerable degree, a multicultural idyll, the religiously divided city of Belfast is its binary opposite. According to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy Minister, Northern Ireland was the scene of around 350 racist incidents in the years 1996 to 1999. That figure has risen radically: from April 2002 to April 2003, more than 226 racist episodes were reported to the police. In a University of Ulster poll conducted in 2001, taking in around 1,000 locals, levels of racism were found to be twice as common as levels of sectarianism.

Sitting in the Belfast Islamic Centre, an incongruous white building in the affluent area around the Malone Road, Jamal Iweida, the director of the centre, points to a window facing the street. "We've had that smashed a few times," he says. Iweida, 35, often blunt and forthright in his assertions, was born in Jordan and moved to Belfast five years ago. "The city has a rather diverse Muslim population," he says, of Belfast's 5,000-strong Islamic residents. "We have Muslims from across the Middle East as well as Pakistanis. I would say that that means that we are a more accommodating Muslim population." He continues, occasionally smiling wryly. "The strange thing is," he says, "even though we have a lot of racism here, I am amazed by the number of people who are converting to Islam."

Around ten men and women have converted to Islam this year in Belfast: many of them have subsequently become outcasts from their native communities. "While I think September 11 was obviously a hard time for Muslims, and these tortures at Abu Ghraib don't help much, people are becoming more aware of Islam," Iweida says. "People are getting interested in the spiritual side of the religion. Once they read a bit more, they tend to see beyond the myths."

The next morning, around 11.30, I return to the mosque to sit in on a women's education group. Around half a dozen women, surrounded by an ever-deafening crowd of unruly young children, sit and listen as their teacher, a local social worker, pitches advice on assertion and self-confidence.

Afterwards, while getting ready to depart, the women sit and talk frankly about life in Belfast. Most agree that racism is an ever-worrying concern. One current racist campaign in the city is targeting Filipino nurses, who have to employ security guards to ferry them back and forth from hospitals across the city. "Having said that I don't think I'd ever want to live in a city with a larger Islamic community," says one. A portly woman in her mid-forties, she laughs as she remembers a visit to Bradford five years ago.

"I hated that city; it was so dull and so grey," she remembers. "There are just far too many Muslims living there. It was just like living in Pakistan. I was also shocked by how traditional the people were. If something was needed from the shops, only the men would go out. Here, while we are a smaller community that is spread throughout Northern Ireland, I do feel more independent. I can come and go as I please. I think the diversity helps as well: it is good that we are not all Pakistanis or not all Jordanians. We're much more open to other ways of living."

Another much younger girl, however, is more circumspect in her summation of the city. "I moved here from Pakistan after I got married," she confesses. "I think sometimes there is a lack of community here because we don't all live in the same area." She looks nervously at the other women who continue to listen intently. "I miss hanging around with people of my own religion," she says, eventually.

"We only get to see each other once a week." Also present at the women's group is Jamal Iweida's wife, Hanan, 19. A striking young woman with sunset-red hair, Hanan converted to Islam when she was 17. She sits holding her baby, Fatimah. "The racism is especially shocking," she says. "You'll be walking down the streets and no one thinks twice of calling you a 'Paki'. In many ways the Troubles have a lot to do with it. Northern Ireland has been cut off from the world for a long time."

Hanan's conversion to Islam was a traumatic event. She says she was increasingly interested in Islam for around two years. "I'd never been able to find a faith that I could call my own. So when I started learning about Islam, my parents seemed to think that it was a phase that I was going through. When they realised that I was serious they became really upset. They asked me how I could abandon my Irish roots for Muslims ones. And when they first met Jamal there was definitely hostility. They have got to know him since, though: now they adore him. In the end, I hope it's creating a better understanding of Islam."

I can't help but feel that there is a siege mentality among Belfast's Muslims. Most of the women tell me that they will go home, tend to their children and return to the mosque the next morning. The Islamic Centre, in many ways, has become a fortress where Muslims gather to defend themselves from the city's racism. In my entire week in the city, I rarely saw Muslims in local coffee shops or bars.

"You can't blame Muslims for keeping a low profile here," says Terry McNeill, the director of Springfield, an inter-faith community project. "We have an appalling record on integrating outsiders. There is a feeling in Northern Ireland that while for years Protestants and Catholics couldn't live with each other, now we can't live with other outsiders."

McNeill, who recently helped organise a small cross-religion festival, sighs: "I guess that is the sad thing about life in Northern Ireland. When the peace process started, people felt a sense of optimism. Then, some of them, started to look around for a new focus of their anger. They turned on the Muslims."

Over tea and biscuits, McNeill mentions a recent increase in anti-Asian graffiti in the city. "These attitudes must be captured and changed at a young age," he says, sadly. "It is all about integration. But this is a difficult city to integrate, remember. It has been divided for so long. And even though there is peace between sectarian sides, most of our schools are still segregated."

One of the most overt cases of racism in Northern Ireland exists in Craigavon in County Armagh, a depressed town outside Belfast. As row upon row of boarded-up houses and ramshackle shops swing into view, it is hard to imagine why an outpost of 300 Muslims should wish to live here. Yet they have done since the 1960s, selling household goods in its market places.

Around a year ago, Craigavon's Muslims decided to apply for planning permission with a view to constructing a mosque in the town. The backlash from locals was immediate. Ten families were forced to leave their homes as local racists began a hate campaign using baseball bats. Local Muslims now maintain they have abandoned building a place of worship.

"It is difficult to understand why this mosque has become such a divisive issue," says Dr Zamir Huda, 62, a GP who lives in nearby Dungannon. Huda sits with his friends in the foyer of Craigavon's health centre, a modern building surrounded by a few shops. "The anger with the mosque had much to do with the feelings against Muslims in the aftermath of September 11. There was a genuine fear that the mosque would end up harbouring militants and extremists. I felt that kind of criticism was ridiculous. People really alleged that Muslims from across Ireland would come here to pray."

"That doesn't make any sense at all," says Fazal Alahi, 41. "The only people who would pray here would be people from Craigavon. No one else would come. Belfast has a mosque of its own. And do people here really think that Muslims would come from across Ireland to pray?" Later, as I drive to nearby Belfast airport, I recall interviewing a young asylum seeker, facing deportation from the city back to Algeria. Khaled Benhelli, 37, had told me he had endured more hardship in Belfast than anywhere else. "I cannot describe it," he said. "Perhaps it is the history of the people who live here. They don't like anyone who is not like them."

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