

ISMAIL, Sheikh SAEED HASSAN (1930 - 2011), Muslim leader

Name: Sheikh Saeed Hassan Ismail
Date of birth: 1930
Date of death: 2011
Gender: Male
Occupation: Muslim leader
Area of activity: Religion
Author: Samuel Bartlett

Saeed Hassan Ismail was born in September 1930 in South Shields, Tyne and Wear. He was the only son of a Yemeni seafaring father and a mother of Welsh and Italian extraction. His father died when Saeed was seven. Though a Christian at the time, his mother ensured her children, Saeed and his three sisters, maintained the religious duties and identity of their Muslim father. His mother later became one of many British women from UK dock cities who converted to Islam after marrying Muslim sailors.

During a period of unemployment, Saeed's father had met a Sufi Sheikh, who initiated him into the Alawi Tariqah, a religious brotherhood that had been established in Algeria by the Sheikh Ahmed al-Alawi. By the 1920s Ahmed al-Alawi was reported to have had over one hundred thousand disciples, many of whom were given orders to spread his teachings across Europe. This eventually saw Muslim leaders such as [Abdullah Ali al-Hakimi](#) establish strong communities in British dock cities such as South Shields and Cardiff.

At the age of ten, the trajectory of Saeed's life altered dramatically when he was taken into the care of Sheikh Hassan Ismail, then recognised as the spiritual leader of Britain's Yemeni community. Hassan Ismail would spend months at a time travelling from his base in Cardiff to visit the Yemeni Muslim communities in other British cities. Upon hearing of Saeed's situation, he asked his mother if he could take him back with him to Cardiff, where he would take charge of his care and education. After some persuasion, his mother eventually agreed to allow her son to leave for a probation period of six months. After seeing his development, she allowed him to stay in Cardiff indefinitely as Hassan Ismail's foster-son, taking his surname.

He spent his teenage years in Butetown, known as Tiger Bay, a multicultural area which was home to one of Britain's earliest Muslim communities. He attended a local school, before taking a year-long secretarial course at college. At the age of sixteen he accompanied his foster-father to Yemen where he spent five years in his foster father's village outside the city of Taiz. In Yemen he perfected his Arabic, while also attending the nearest madrasa, or religious school, where he underwent a period of intensive training in the Islamic religious sciences. His time in Yemen prepared him for what was to come when he returned to Cardiff.

When Hassan Ismail decided to remain in Yemen permanently in 1956, the Muslim community in Butetown invited Saeed Ismail to replace him as their Imam. At the age of twenty-five, Saeed accepted the role he would serve in the community for the next five decades, taking the title Sheikh and becoming one of Britain's longest-serving Imams. This role involved all the regular duties expected of an Imam, leading the five daily prayers, delivering the Friday sermons, teaching the *Quran* and Islamic Studies to the community's children, as well as wider pastoral duties, such as settling disputes in the local community. He played a key role in establishing the iconic South Wales Islamic Centre on Alice Street in Butetown, travelling across the Arab world to help raise the funds used for the mosque's building. He was never paid for the work he did as an Imam, combining a schedule of night-shift factory work as a welder with the religious duties he performed during the day.

Saeed Ismail acquired a unique status in Cardiff's wider civic life. Being for a long period the only Imam in Cardiff who was legally authorized to act as a registrar of births, deaths, and marriages, thousands of Muslims across Cardiff would have gone to him directly to fulfil these essential requirements. He was also the first Welsh Muslim to serve as a chaplain to a civic leader, working with Paddy Kitson, the Chairman of South Glamorgan County Council. The Sheikh's social capital and wide influence meant he was often called upon by Welsh politicians across the political spectrum for guidance. According to Wales's former First Minister Rhodri Morgan, 'his wise counsel at times of crisis made him a truly significant figure in the shaping of modern Wales'.

Saeed Ismail met his first wife Gallila in Aden, following her abandonment and divorce by her then husband. The couple remained childless, so he took a second wife, Wilaya, who bore him two daughters and a son. He died on 23 March 2011, and was buried on 25 March in Cardiff's Western Cemetery, Western Section G, plot number 2044.

Author

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Published date: 2024-05-29

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