Being Muslim the Swedish way

Centre aims to help immigrants adapt to local culture while practising their faith

Hariz Baharudin

It is the eve of Eid al-Adha, the Muslim festival known in Singapore as Hari Raya Haji that involves korban or animal sacrifice. As at many Islamic institutions all over the world, the Khadijah Islamic Centre in Kista, Stockholm, was busy preparing for the special day.

When I got there, however, I was surprised to find that there would be no slaughter of sheep.

Instead, balloons were being blown up and tied to the ceiling, alongside colourful streamers. Small plastic bags were being packed with candy and chocolate, and children were laughing as they tried to keep some of the treats for themselves.

I had never seen Eid celebrated this way before.

By ushering in the special day with the Swedish tradition of preparing sweets and holding a party, the Khadijah centre, which opened in August, hoped to promote this aspect of Swedish culture. It is characteristic of the centre's aim to help Muslim immigrants find a middle ground between their faith and Swedish culture, and to establish a sense of community for people to draw support from.

PHOTOS: HARIZ BAHARUDINN

The Khadijah Islamic Centre in Stockholm aims to be more than just a place for Muslims to come together and pray. It is also where people like Mr Imadur Rahman and his wife Ailin Abdullah (below) can take some time off to play with their friends' children.

PHOTO: HARIZ BAHARUDIN

Mr Abdul Kadir Habib, an administrator at the Khadijah centre, helps his sons – Yusuf, seven, and Ibrahim, nine – inflate balloons for the Eid al-Adha celebrations.

The centre used to be a public library, and its activity rooms are now used for religious classes and community events. Those facing difficulties in settling down in Sweden come here to seek advice from Muslims who have been in the country longer.

"When you are a small community in a big country, you always need to be part of the wider society. What we hope to do here is to welcome people into our community and reconcile between a Muslim identity and a Swedish identity," said Mr Imadur Rahman, a member of the centre's board of management.

Although many people use Khadijah as a place of worship, its aim of being a community centre is slowly being realised, and people visit to interact with others.

"We used to pray in the basement of a restaurant and it was not comfortable. But to me the best thing is how Khadijah has a community spirit, and everyone is helpful. Whenever you need someone to talk to, you can go there," said Mr Usman Berg, 42, a researcher. He is from Pakistan.

About 5 per cent of Sweden's population of 9.7 million are Muslim and most are immigrants or the descendants of immigrants.

The number of Muslim immigrants is growing fast as awareness spreads of Sweden's welfare state, with its comprehensive, low-cost health care and free Swedish-language classes for all newcomers. According to the Swedish Statistical Board, the top four largest growing groups of foreign-born residents last year were people from Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan and Eritrea.

Also, people born in Iraq, Iran, Somalia and Turkey were among the 10 largest groups of foreign-born persons in the Swedish civil registry last year.

Celebrating Muslim festival the sweet Swedish way

By ushering in the special day with the Swedish tradition of preparing sweets and holding a party, the Khadijah centre hoped to promote this aspect of Swedish culture.

Muslims have been moving to Sweden in recent decades and, like many other immigrants, tend to live in immigrant-heavy enclaves. In the capital Stockholm, these areas include the districts of Husby, Rinkeby and Kista.

"People come from all over, from Somalia, from Malaysia, from Bangladesh, from Sudan," said Mr Rahman from the Khadijah centre. The 30-year-old arrived from Bangladesh when he was 23, and works as a researcher at the telecommunications giant Ericsson.

With people from so many different countries, yet sharing the same faith, he said, it is important to establish a sense of community spirit for immigrants making a new life in an unfamiliar new country.

"Our job is to come up with strategies and find activities for people to bond over. Especially young people, at some point of their lives they could become isolated from society," he added, referring to the challenges of practising Islam in Sweden.

The centre has its work cut out for it, even if its officials prefer not to discuss more sensitive aspects of the growing Muslim presence in Sweden.

Just recently, Agence France-Presse reported Sweden's head of intelligence services Anders Thornberg as saying that as many as 300 Swedes could have joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militant group, whose barbarous tactics in the name of Islam have been condemned by Muslims everywhere.

"A hundred cases of people who have left to join the fighting have been confirmed, then there are the presumed cases, and there are those that have not been counted, which brings the total to between 250 and 300," he was quoted as saying.

Small Muslim community part of big Swedish society

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MR IMADUR RAHMAN, a member of the Khadijah centre's board of management

Expressing concern about the rising number of young Swedish men becoming militants in Syria, Mr Thornberg said: "They're going beyond the limits of human behaviour. They're fighting and killing other people."

In October, Sweden passed a law banning its citizens from taking part in foreign-armed conflicts.

My attempt to ask people at the Khadijah centre to discuss what it means when Swedish Muslims join a group like ISIS were unsuccessful, as they preferred not to comment.

They stressed that their focus is community building, and that they want their centre to be not only a place where Muslims can perform their prayers but also meet and bond.

They want to help new arrivals to dispel doubts about settling in Sweden, and encourage them to work hard at school or at their jobs.

"Many Muslims who come here are nervous and get advice that is not good. They think they do not have to work because they will not be taken seriously, and end up just depending on the welfare system," said Mr Abdul Kadir Habib, 43, another Khadijah board member, who is from Eritrea.

"But then someone says to them 'Assalamualaikum' ("peace be upon you"), they hear something familiar in this very unfamiliar place. They open up their hearts and they start listening and working. They take the first steps to living their life in Sweden."

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Immigrant women outperform men

Ms Simet Sager is 26 and living the life she always dreamed of. After graduating with a degree in nursing, she moved 500km from her family home in the southern Swedish city of Lund to the capital Stockholm, where she landed a job at a children's hospital.

The ethnic Iraqi's life would have been quite different if her family had not emigrated to Sweden when she was seven.

The move meant she was educated all the way to university and could choose her career. For daughters of immigrants from conservative societies, living in Sweden has opened up opportunities they might never have otherwise had.

These girls are not only thriving, but also outperforming immigrant boys.

Still, many struggle to reconcile their ethnic identity and Swedish nationality.

Ms Sager recalls how she had dreaded telling her mother that she wanted to be a nurse. To some in Iraq, she said, nurses were regarded as "bad girls" because they worked long, late hours.

Her parents surprised her by being supportive, but her mother had friends who would ask: "Are you happy she's a nurse?"

And when she left home for Stockholm, it raised relatives' eyebrows. "They were like, 'You're not married. Why are you on your own? You should be with your parents'," she said.

Life is always a balancing act. "My relatives are a part of this society but, at the same time, they don't want us to forget where we came from," she said. "You are always in between."

Immigration to Sweden has changed over the decades. While there was an influx from Nordic countries in the 1950s and 1960s, the early 1970s saw more refugee immigration and family reunifications from countries in the Middle East and Latin America.

In 2000, about 11 per cent of the Swedish population was foreign-born. That has risen to around 16 per cent of its 9.7 million people now. Sweden has received more than 70,000 asylum requests so far this year, with Syrians making up the largest group.

Not everyone welcomes the newcomers. In recent elections, the Sweden Democrats, a nationalist anti-immigrant party, gained a surprising 13 per cent of the vote, adding a twist to social tensions.

As the immigrants settle in and their children go to school, the girls outshine the boys.

According to Statistics Sweden, 28 per cent of foreign-born women aged between 25 and 64 have three or more years of post-secondary education, compared to 23 per cent of the men.

More girls with foreign backgrounds apply for places in tertiary institutions than their male counterparts too.

There are many reasons tossed up to explain why the girls outperform the boys.

For one thing, conservative immigrant parents expect their daughters to stay indoors, so unlike the boys, the girls are spared the possibility of mixing with bad company.

And although immigrant parents push their children to do well in school, researchers say the girls are more motivated to succeed.

"It's a reaction, a compensation mechanism," said Professor Mehrdad Darvishpour, 54, a senior lecturer at Malarden University, referring to immigrant women. "You have to gain more education before you can find a good position in society. You are in a lower position compared to both other immigrant men and the (ethnic) Swedish."

But as immigrant women end up empowered by better education, Sweden's equal rights and the more liberal culture, the immigrant men struggle with a loss of status at home and in society.

"Women's situations become better than in their home countries and, for men, it's the opposite," said Professor Darvishpour.

In more patriarchal societies, men have a higher status and are the breadwinners of the family.

As immigrant men struggle with unemployment or with doing lower-level jobs than before and their womenfolk go to work, traditional gender roles are affected. The women become more confident and less dependent on their husbands and expect more from life.

In some immigrant groups like Chileans and Iranians, the rate of divorce is considerably higher than for ethnic Swedes. Often, it is the women who initiate the break-up.

Conflicts arise especially in families that are not financially secure and have problems integrating into Swedish society.

Ms Diana Waruhiu, a 33-year-old new immigrant from Kenya, says even having to share household responsibilities when women go out to work could be a challenge for the men.

Mr Arian Furi, a 25-year-old ethnic Iranian, feels it can be hard being an immigrant man in Sweden. While immigrants in general face some discrimination, he said the prejudice is amplified for men because they are overrepresented in crime statistics.

"You're not only discriminated against, you're also feared. People don't want to sit next to you, people don't want to look you in the eye; you become intimidating to the majority," said the Swedish language teacher at an adult education institute.

"Being a man and an immigrant, it's like you're being judged both ways."

Seow Bei Yi

PHOTO: TAN PEI LIN

For many immigrants, learning Swedish is the first and most important step to integration. The country provides free Swedish-language classes for all newcomers. Here, a teacher uses actions and songs to help her students remember Swedish words.

School's uphill battle to shake off reputation as a poor immigrant outfit

Seow Bei Yi

It is a Monday morning in Tensta, a suburb north-west of Stockholm. All is quiet but for merchants setting up the fruit market, and a stream of students making their way to school.

They tread across the gravel courtyard, wearing windbreakers, jackets and, for some girls, Islamic headscarves. Blond, blue-eyed Swedes are nowhere to be seen.

The Ross Tensta Gymnasium is a multicultural high school which adopted American-inspired teaching methods more than 10 years ago. It is no stranger to change but grapples with an image problem for being in an immigrant-heavy area.

Ethnicity is not usually mentioned in Swedish schools, but principal Sofie Abrahamsson does not shirk from the topic if it crops up.

The 40-year-old recalls a recent conversation with a student. It was not about homework or the school's programmes, but identity. He had told her: "I'm a Turk."

Like many of his schoolmates, the teenager was born and raised in Sweden and speaks Swedish fluently. Yet, when asked his nationality, he said he considered himself to be both Turkish and Swedish.

It underscores Ross Tensta Gymnasium's challenge in trying to be a good school. Almost 90 per cent of Tensta's 18,800 residents have immigrant roots.

The school is therefore often perceived as non-Swedish, despite most of its students having lived all their lives in Sweden. There are about 700 students, aged 16 to 18, of almost 50 ethnicities with roots in Somalia, Turkey and Iran, among others.

As it is the main high school in the area, its reputation is closely tied to the social issues of its neighbourhood and it is not all rosy in Tensta. The suburb has thrice the unemployment rate of Stockholm, and almost five times as many residents on financial assistance.

In 2011, there were almost twice as many reported muggings and snatch thefts as in the capital. These are among factors that put off students from outside the area.

"Most of our students are Swedish, but they identify with something else," said Ms Abrahamsson, one of the school's two principals. "That is something we can't change. But we want to give our students something. We're here to educate them."

She and the other head, Mr Runar Krantz, 46, believe their multicultural school offers students a wider worldview and allows them to learn to communicate better with people of different backgrounds.

Every student has a teacher-mentor. The staff look out for those with learning difficulties or behavioural issues in relating to teachers or peers.

"Apart from grades, we want the students to have a sense of identity and the belief that they can become who they want to become," said Ms Abrahamsson.

Students and alumni interviewed say they appreciate that their teachers go the extra mile to offer support, especially as many have parents who cannot help them with schoolwork and cannot afford private tuition.

Mr Rani Alhallak remembers how his parents could not help him with learning Swedish because they are from Lebanon and know little of the language themselves.

"In Tensta, the students need more help, more people to talk to, and a person to look up to," said the 25-year-old, who now works as a bank manager.

His teachers were a big help to him.

PHOTO: TAN PEI LIN

Chemistry and biology teacher Hazha Mohammed Fadhi, 44, teaching a class at Ross Tensta Gymnasium. With natural sciences being one of the hardest courses in the school, many students transfer out of the course.

"It felt like your teacher was your friend," he said. "This didn't have to do only with your studies. If you had problems, you could just go to your teacher and talk to him."

When he was in school, about half his class of about 28 were ethnic Swedes. They came from outside Tensta, attracted to the natural science programme that the school runs in collaboration with the prestigious Karolinska Institute.

But that has changed. Since free school choice was introduced in the early 1990s, students no longer have to go to schools near their homes. More middle-class students are choosing city centre schools instead.

Mr Alhallak thinks that having the word "Tensta" in the school name is probably turning off some students.

Being in an immigrant-heavy suburb means the school has to battle the perception that it has poor teachers, produces poor results and, above all, that its students are not "Swedish".

It has not been able to shrug off these notions despite drastic changes more than 10 years ago when it adapted teaching methods of an American private school.

The Ross School was started in East Hampton, New York, in 1991 by Mrs Courtney Ross and her late husband, former Time Warner chairman Stephen Ross.

It has children from pre-nursery to grade 12, and prides itself on having an interdisciplinary curriculum with a strong emphasis on history and culture.

In 2002, the Stockholm supervisor of secondary schools suggested that Tensta Gymnasium adopt the Ross teaching model as a way to combat falling enrolment. The revamp started in 2003 with 30 million kronor (S$5.3 million) set aside for it.

Class size was reduced from an average of 32 to 20, with every student given a laptop for research and presentations. In the staff room, teachers were grouped into inter-disciplinary teams so they could come up with project work and extra teaching materials using knowledge from their respective subjects.

The premises were renovated to provide more open study areas and encourage interaction between students and teachers, and between teachers and administrators.

PHOTO: TAN PEI LIN

Ross Tensta English teacher Elisabeth Braconier says the ethnicity of her students does not make a difference to her. The school, located in an immigrant-heavy suburb in Stockholm, is generally perceived to be "non-Swedish".

The result is a cosy environment with open discussion spaces, display cases for student projects and natural lighting indoors. It is a contrast to the drab uniformity of Tensta, with its apartment blocks from the 1960s. The school, originally called Tensta Gymnasium, added the "Ross" brand in 2009.

"It wasn't easy, but it was very, very fun," recalled former principal Inger Nyrell of the long process. "I've always believed in the development of education and I think it's good for teachers to develop and to change. Otherwise, you lose your passion for teaching."

Although many younger teachers supported the changes, some older ones believed that a public school should be free from "foreign influence". After their retirement, in 2012, they published a strongly worded letter protesting against the Ross model.

Ms Nyrell, who is retired, maintains that the change was a success overall. "A lot of municipal schools in Stockholm have closed," she pointed out. "But this school, despite being in a suburb and having a large immigrant population, has survived and maintained its number of students."

Alumni like Mr Alhallak say the Ross name has increased interest in the school, and people do ask about its programmes. But it remains a neighbourhood school with students who enter with low academic scores.

Still, students who thrive there speak up strongly against its negative stereotypes. Zaynab Gohari, 17, was hesitant about applying until a teacher adviser at her previous school told her Ross Tensta Gymnasium produced many students who had gone on to find success.

"Everyone else said not to go there, that the teachers were not good," said Zaynab, who had better grades than most of her peers when she joined.

She found the school better than she expected.

"The teachers are very good, but there are students who don't want to get educated, and don't have the interest to get educated," she said. "That's what destroys the reputation of the school. Our school has a low entry point, everyone can come in."

Alumnus Ahmed Abdirahman, 28, shares her view. Now a researcher at a broadcasting corporation, he was at Tensta Gymnasium when it first picked up the Ross concept and still maintains close ties with his alma mater.

"It's a beautiful school," he says. "It's modern, it's multicultural, and there are great teachers. But not many choose to go there because of how it is labelled."

As long as Tensta's socio-economic problems persist, efforts to change the school's reputation are likely to have limited success.

"No matter how much investment the school has done, from buying a new education model, to travelling the world and rebuilding the whole space, it will all come back. That means the grades of incoming students remain low," he said.

Principal Abrahamsson remains steadfast in believing in her school's potential. Of its battle against negative perceptions, she said: "The whole world is in our school. But we're in Stockholm, in Sweden. Unfortunately, in Sweden, the name still matters."

Now in the midst of planning its vision for the next five years, she said: "It's not easy to transform a school into something new, but in that, we have succeeded."

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Students are Swedish and something else

"Most of our students are Swedish, but they identify with something else."

MS SOFIE ABRAHAMSSON, Ross Tensta Gymnasium principal

GOING THE DISTANCE

ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

The reports and photographs on these pages are by journalism students (from left) Tan Pei Lin, Hariz Baharudin and Seow Bei Yi of Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information.

They were part of a group selected to visit Sweden last month for Go-Far, the school's overseas reporting programme.