

Title

Interview Osman Braimah Barri (Former Arabic translator for the OAU)

Creator

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Description

Osman Barri makes the argument that Muslim children are capable for secular education. Using his personal story, he also argues that an educated Ghanaian Muslim is capable of remaining loyal to the country and the communities within.

Interview with Osman Briama Barry
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Interview in Accra, Ghana

Q: Can you please introduce yourself for this interview?

A. My name is Osman Briama Barry. I was born in Accra and went to school at Nima and then went to the traditional Quranic school which was held at our house--the first such school to be established in Nima (Accra) and it was ran by my father. After that, I went to Egypt to continue with my secondary education and through the tertiary level. I ended up at the American University (of Cairo) where I pursued my post graduate education (Masters Degree) and I also studied at the Institute of Higher Islamic Studies at Cairo. I also hold a bachelors degree in education and literature from Cairo. At Cairo, I also studied the principles in Islamic studies and came back [to Ghana] in 1971. I joined the Saudi Arabian Embassy as a translator and interpreter and at the same time as their Home Base Secretary for the Embassy. I was there for nine years, and after that I joined the Organization of African Unity (OAU) where I spent over 22 years as their translator, conference organizer, and interpreter at the same time. I also did some publications (translating some voluminous books for the Organization of African Unity from English to Arabic--Volume I and II together run about 1000 pages which was sponsored by the OAU and published in Nigeria. I also have my personal writings on the root of Islamic civilization in West Africa which I wrote in Arabic and I also have other publication in English--"Islam or Christianity" The Upright View". This was a sort of comparative studies of the 2 religions. I wrote on leadership in Nigeria which was a political cum religious and social commentary. I have delivered a lot of lecture on the challenges facing Muslim youth in the 20th century, and the position of Muslim in the 21st century and beyond. I do not remember all of them right now.

Q. As you did the introduction and talked about your Islamic education, you did not mention how you learnt [to speak the] English [language].

A. I told you that in Cairo, I joined the Ashrams University where I studied literature (in English). I did Islamic literature at al-Azhar University in Cairo and did comparative literature at the American University [also in Cairo which was taught in English].

Q. Let me change the question a little bit. The research that Dr. Sey and I are doing we talk about Islamic Education in Ghana--the long history of it; the one that the majority of Ghanaians know until recently has been on the Quranic School. What are your comments on the Quranic Schools in Ghana and the relations it has to national development?

A. Well, if you look at the Quranic School here in Nima for example where Dr. Sey and I were brought up which my father introduced before 1946 when the first modern Islamic schools were introduced, so my father was the first to introduce Quranic School. The beautiful thing about the school was that though we were not mutually introduced to the meaning of the Quran to understand it [but just recited it], we still believe that the Quranic education has helped and contributed a lot to our moral development that we are uprightly brought up in such a secular society as this one in Ghana. The teachings we had in the early beginning helped us to comport ourselves compared to what we witness in our society today. I am very sure that that kind of leaning/scholarship has prevailed and has had a great influence in the moral upbringing of our community.

Q. There are people who will argue and have observed from other societies that kind of education has contributed to fundamentalism and therefore the problem of Islam these days. Do you have any comment on this?

A. Well, I think that anybody is entitled to his view but this kind of terminology of the so-called fundamentalism is a recent innovation and it has its own connotations in global politics. Now, we do not look at it in this way. Even during the colonial era here in Ghana, Muslims were the people in the country that the Bursitis could trust because they were perceived not to tell lies. When there was anything at all at the courts, we the Muslims were told that we were believed because we prayed and that if we tell lies the Quran will deal with you. So the little the person knew [of the Quranic verses] that he recited in his personal life kept him comport himself and that whatever he was going to say as a witness was right and nothing by right. He will never attempt not tell lies and even the British and other people at that time knew and took it in confidence that a Muslim will never lie. Thus the very little of the religion they knew kept them upright. As I am sure that those who say that Quranic education leads to fundamentalism therefore have their own views but as far as Ghana is concern and the Muslim communities are concerned, I do not think that we [accept that view].

Q. Is Quranic education the only contribution of Muslims to tolerance to the Ghanaian community or is there something else very unique as culture and society that you want to mention.

A. If you look at the history of Islam in this country, Islam came though individual efforts. The people who brought the religious in the early days relied on their individual efforts. Nobody paid them to do it and they are not sponsored by missionary activities. So you can see that they are very innocent in their own teachings. I think that we can see difference when we get into the missionary activities of Islam such as that which is

sponsored by some organizations. This is where we have the differences and the controversies. But on the individual basis, there is no conflict. If you look at the typical Ghanaian family or the family set up, you will see a family that lives at the same house compound, [it is not uncommon to find a person in the same family] being a Christian, the other as a traditionalist, and even another as a Muslim and yet they live in harmony. When it is Sunday, the Christian gets up and goes to Church, and when it is Friday the Muslim will get up and go to his Mosque, and any other day that the pagan needs to worship he will go about his religious activities. Nothing [came to cause conflict among them] it is only--I believe-- when Ghana is opened to many influences from the outside that we may witness the introduction of different approaches from the normal peaceful co-existence that we knew [from our religious past].

Q. Before I go to the issue of influences coming from outside, why don't we talk about the history of Muslims in this country with regards to multi-linguistic abilities and their role in commerce. Has that contributed to the issue of tolerance in the country?

A. Definitely. If you look, Islam came to Ghana from two different directions. From the East--Togo, Benin, Nigeria, and probable Niger. Look at the West here; you go through Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Liberia. But basically, from the East, Islam came to us from Nigeria and the West from Mali but through individual efforts and this is how Islam came to the country. As I said earlier, these were individual traders or adventurers searching for fortune. They did not come in purposefully to spread Islam as a purpose of mission. They came as innocent people looking for fortune and they found the environment to be friendly and therefore their own behavior became the gateway for people to accept them and therefore established a [tradition of peaceful relations].

Q. From my own observations, I find that Ghanaian Muslims to be multi-lingual and they speak many of the local languages than the local people do.

A. That is true because of the different tribes that we have in Ghana. Those who also brought the religion had a different language so there was the need for the [outsiders] to learn the local languages and this contributed to diversified culture of language.

Q. Now the outside influences. What are outside influences on Islam in Ghana and what do you perceive to be the long term ramifications of this?

A. When I say outside influences--for example in Ghana prior to the introduction of the Ahmadiyya Mission, there weren't any missionary activities as far as Islam was concerned. But when the Ahmadiyyas came here first in 1922 that was the first time we started to notes conflict because Ghana was welcoming a group that has their own understanding of Islam [that was different from that which already existed]. So that was the first outside influence. Then as time went on there were some people who went to Egypt and other went to Saudi Arabic, others went to Libya, and others went to Kuwait in such of Islamic knowledge. These come back with a vast culture of Islam that might have been different from that which [they knew before]. So definitely they came back with some influences that can be regarded as foreign influences on Islam in Ghana.

Q. Has those influences caused conflict among Muslims community?

A. Not at all because even if there is conflict, it is an intellectual discourse but not physical conflict. Islam is a culture and if it is opened for other ideas to come in, obviously there must be some conflict. It could be positive and it could be negative but if the conflict is limited to the intellectual activities then it must be fine but it must not go beyond that to go into physical conflict and violence. I do not think we have gone that [direction] except of course the pockets of incidents in the past about Sufism or mysticism and the Wahabis [on radical interpretation of the Quranic verses and the traditional of the prophets] That could have given way to conflict but I do not consider them as religious violence or conflict.

Q. My last question: Muslim-Christian relations

A. It is very interesting and very cordial. Here in Ghana we have not noticed any Christian and Islam conflicts. We know of many converts who came to Islam who originally were Christians. And perhaps there were some Muslims who crossed to the Christian side. Most of the converts to Islam came from the Christian side which I am quite sure that because of the tolerance [that exist in the country] that you can have conversions into and from Islam in a peaceful manner.

Q. Do you have examples of Christian organizations and Muslim organization [working together in Ghana for a common purpose]?

A. Yes, Christian and Muslim organizations have dialogues that have taken place in the past. The Christians invite the Muslims to come for dialogue and at times the Muslims invite the Christians for dialogue. But dialogue is dialogue that allows open conversations, open criticisms, open understanding. If anything at all we try to come together and try to be opened. I do not think there are any problems with this at all [in Ghana].

Thank you very much....END OF CONVERSATION.