

## Obituaries

### **William Finbarr (Barry) Burgess, 8 October 1948–7 February 2021**

Barry was born on 8 October 1948 in Birmingham and visited Nigeria in his teens when his father worked for Dunlop in Lagos. He enrolled at Trinity College, Dublin but transferred after a year to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), where he started a four-year degree in Hausa and linguistics in 1969. He was keenly interested in languages and developed a knowledge of Gaelic and Yoruba as well as Hausa. On graduating in 1974 he joined the Hausa Service of the BBC, then housed in Bush House, a short walk from SOAS, as a producer. Over the following twenty-five years he rose to become head of the Hausa Service and a familiar name to millions of Hausa speakers across West Africa. His nickname was ‘Barau na Cedi, mai dan kunne’, which means ‘Barau of Cedi (the ward in Kano where he had lodged), with the earring’, and his recruitment tours in Nigeria and Niger looking for journalistic talent meant that he was much in demand.

Mansur Liman, the current director general of the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), who began work at the BBC Hausa Service as a translator while a PhD student and left as head of the Hausa Service in 2015, said, ‘Barry Burgess was a boss who nurtured people. He identified talent and developed it. He was a good boss to work with as he allowed you to learn on the job. He was also easy-going and understanding. His death is a great loss as he was one of the few people who studied and knew Hausa language and culture well.’

Umar Yusuf Karaye, who worked closely with him at the Hausa Service, said:

The late Barry Burgess can simply be called the father of the modern Hausa Service. He worked for the BBC Hausa Service for a good twenty-five years, most of which was as the head of the service. I can remember in 1989 when the then Director of Regions, Mr Peter Udal, summoned us (Barry, the late Deputy Head Roger Ketskemety, and myself as Senior Producer) to his office for a playback session of some of our programmes. Mr Udal, was not at all happy with our programmes and he gave us a period of three months to go and overhaul our programmes. That was when we started recruiting reporters from different parts of Nigeria, Niger Republic, Cameroon and Ghana. We also had a reporter in the former Soviet Union and in China. All of this was done under the able leadership of the late Barry Burgess. As head, he was also very concerned with staff welfare to the extent that he would remind a person of entitlements that they were perhaps not even aware of. He was very passionate about the quality of our programmes and of course the soundness of our editorial decisions.

A major transformation in the BBC Hausa Service took place on Barry Burgess’s watch, driven in part by the rapidly changing technological environment of broadcasting and partly by shifts in the location of editorial power. When he began at the BBC, the work consisted predominantly in translating news bulletins that came directly from the main newsroom in Bush House from English into Hausa, and broadcasting pre-recorded studio interviews with dignitaries passing

through London. As he pointed out in an interview in 2017, news from reporters in Nigeria came through printed telex messages until eventually phone lines began to be sufficiently reliable for the recording of interviews or filing of reports. On the air three times a day for fifteen to thirty minutes in the early days, the service maintained a formula, common to most broadcasters, which started with a news bulletin to be followed by commentary and then a short cultural, science, medical or entertainment item. Balance was an editorial preoccupation along with accuracy of information, and the offices of the Hausa Service buzzed with debate about cultural appropriateness or bias, or how to render into Hausa a new term or concept with perhaps only fifteen minutes before going live on air.

In the 1990s, the World Service, and the Hausa Service within it, moved from splicing tape on reel-to-reel machines and using typewriters and paper to computer screens and the online editing of sound files. This new technology coincided with instant availability of speech down a telephone line, so stringers could report and send 'actuality' direct to the studio in London. In the early days, phone lines from Niger were much more reliable than lines from Nigeria, and so, for a period, an afternoon programme would carry studio reports about Nigeria but on-the-street voices from Zinder or Maradi, something that listeners asked for more of.

This opening up had two policy consequences for the Hausa Service. Barry Burgess began to recruit journalists from areas outside the 'standard Hausa' world of Kano and central northern Nigeria. New voices on the service came first from women, and then from the dialects of Niger, northern Ghana, and other parts of Nigeria. This opening up was accompanied by a shift in the location of power in relation to what made its way onto the airwaves. Barry Burgess and his senior colleagues were involved in daily editorial meetings with management in which they would discuss the progress of particular current events. The English-language Africa Service was in the offices next door in Bush House and their programmes had a reputation that meant that African leaders would telephone Robin White or Elizabeth Ohene directly to make announcements or state their positions. The reputation of the BBC for truthfulness, accuracy and rigour in West Africa came to a considerable extent from their work.

The editorial rule at the time was that the BBC would only broadcast a story if they could confirm it through two independent sources, unless it came from one of their own correspondents who filed the story, in which case they would not necessarily require that corroboration. There were periods when reporting from Nigeria was very difficult and a correspondent might be writing about Nigeria but be based in Abidjan. There were occasions when, with communal tensions very high in parts of Nigeria, the Hausa Service knew that what they broadcast could make or break a riot. With the BBC English-language newsroom making all the decisions about what would go out on the evening broadcast in Hausa, Barry and his colleagues would sometimes find themselves reluctant to broadcast an item that appeared to be unlikely or unreliable but which the newsroom had marked for broadcast. At the same time, they were aware that many of the approximate 12 million listeners (according to BBC International Broadcasting Audience Research figures from about 1990) would tune into Voice of America, Deutsche Welle and other international broadcasters as well as Nigerian radio to hear different versions of the news. When BBC Hausa reported a riot in Zaria that turned out to have been an accident involving a truck in a market,

they discovered the following morning that they had perhaps come close to provoking a riot rather than reporting on one.

Barry Burgess was keen to enhance the agency of, and reliance on, a growing number of Hausa-language reporters for news and commentary, with less reliance on the central newsroom. This move accelerated with the rise of Boko Haram. It was not only that the Hausa Service had boots on the ground and the ability to report accurately on atrocities, assassinations and bombings for the Hausa Service itself; their network was also relied upon by BBC television and radio as a whole. The strength and professionalism of the network of reporters in Nigeria reinforced the possibility of moving the BBC Hausa Service from its home in Bush House on the Aldwych in London to Abuja in Nigeria. While this happened after Barry Burgess's time as head of the Hausa Service, it was a logical development in the direction that he and the advance of technology had set it on.

In 1999, Barry retired from the BBC and later joined SOAS, his alma mater, where, as Lector, he succeeded Malami Buba and taught Hausa alongside Philip Jaggar and me for ten years from 2006. He was an exacting teacher, hot on tones and vowel length, and was committed to his students and to Hausa teaching in SOAS. In recent years he took on an administrative role with the International African Institute, which continued until his death.

Barry passed away unexpectedly on 7 February 2021. He had been looking forward to the end of lockdown, and leaves a sister and her family, friends and journalist colleagues in the UK and in West Africa, and a generation of Hausa speakers in West Africa for whom his voice and his name were so familiar.

*Graham Furniss*

SOAS University of London

[gfl@soas.ac.uk](mailto:gfl@soas.ac.uk)

I first met Barry Burgess sometime in the middle of 1987 when I was registered for a doctorate degree course at University College London. I was a member of staff of Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, at the time. The university had a policy of sending employees for training with their salaries paid, but one had to look for a sponsor to pay the tuition fees. As a result, our states of origin agreed to pay our tuition fees, but they reasoned that, since we were serving organizations other than our state governments, they would not pay our living expenses. Another problem was that one could remit only half of one's salary outside the country. Consequently, I arrived in London with my tuition paid annually and getting about £180 per quarter from the Nigerian Universities Commission in London. That was a pittance for a student with little children.

After settling down, I found my way to the BBC (at Bush House) to meet a close friend (who is now deceased, may Allah shower his mercies on him and grant him Firdaus). He knew the situation under which I went to study, and suggested that we should approach Barry for a part-time translation job. When my friend introduced me to Barry I found him to be a very jovial and kind person, whose command of the Hausa language almost blew me away.

Barry was a very attentive and sympathetic listener who administered the Hausa Service like a close family unit. The same day I met him he gave me a script in English to translate into Hausa and read aloud. He assigned one of the old hands at the time, by the name of Ibrahim Musa Gwangwazo, to supervise the whole process. The translated recording was handed to Barry, who listened and confirmed that it was well done. It was a Friday evening and he asked me if I could start work on the following Monday.

As head of department in a language section, Barry had contacts with organizations needing translation services. As soon as he was approached by an outside organization to recommend a translator from English to Hausa or vice versa, Barry would pass the task to me. That way I was earning some decent extra cash in addition to my BBC part-time work.

One important way in which Barry truly touched my life was when my daughter was born with a heart issue in 1991. My dilemma at the time was that I had completed my study period and as such I had no cover under the NHS scheme. The hospital ruled that since I was no longer a student, I had to bear the cost of my daughter's treatment (who was on life support for about three weeks at the time). When Barry heard about my predicament, he offered to give me a three-year full-time contract to enable me to stay a little longer in the UK to attend to my daughter's health issues while holding an employment visa. As the policy required, I quickly returned to Nigeria with my entire family while Barry arranged for the BBC to send British Caledonian tickets for all of us (via the airway's office in Kano at the time). Shortly afterwards my family and I were back in London, now with a regular employment visa. That was how I eventually earned my UK Indefinite Leave to Remain (permanent residency). It was BBC policy at the time to dispatch a fellow staff member from the language service in question to the airport to welcome newly arriving members. To my pleasant surprise it was Barry himself who turned up to meet us (my family and me as well as Bilkisu Labaran, who was on the same flight, although we didn't know her before that time). That was how thoughtful and considerate Barry Burgess was. He made sure he put us in a cab, paid for it, and concentrated on Bilkisu Labaran (jokingly telling me that I was not a first-timer in London).

When Barry left the BBC he got a teaching job at SOAS. Not surprising at all, he was teaching Hausa. Any time we made contact he would arrange for me to visit his class and converse with his students. According to him, he wanted the students to hear a native Hausa speaker. I used to tease him that his Hausa was better than mine. Talking about Barry's excellent Hausa, I think he had a special gift with languages in general. In my BBC days, I remember him experimenting with words in Fulfulde and Yoruba (apart from European languages such as German, Portuguese and Spanish).

I got a rude shock when Umar Karaye, a former colleague and very close friend, called to inform me that Barry was no more. I understood that he had not become ill but just died in his sleep. He will be missed badly by those of us who came across him and whose lives he touched in one way or another.

Sleep well, Barry.

*Sale Halliru*  
Former BBC journalist