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Interview

Prof. Dr. Paul Ade Silva, Editor of JAMMO, Interviews Khalil Charles, Deputy Editor News TRT World & Editor Middle East Monitor

The News Media: Prejudices and Discrimination

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Short Biography Khalil Charles

I come from a very small island called St Lucia, in the Caribbean; which has a population of about 100,000 people, but I was born in London in 1964.

After a short career in banking, I went to my local radio station and volunteered to be a radio researcher and then became regular presenter. I joined the BBC as a Local Radio Trainee Reporter in 1986.

My first job took me to Birmingham's Pebble Mill as a Researcher on BBC 2 TV Ebony. That meant journeys into inner-city Britain to make documentaries and forays into Africa, in particular to the Gambia, Guinea Bissau and Cameroon. From there as Assistant Producer, I worked on the 40 minutes' documentary series and BBC flagship documentaries in the 90s called Inside Story and 40 minutes.

Then I dabbled with TV presentation and co-hosted a chat show called Hearsay again in the early nineties. I stayed with my passion, in between teaching to make a living, when I moved briefly to Sudan as Editor of a daily newspaper and a monthly English language magazine.

On my return to the UK and after a brief spell in communications, I joined Islam Channel, first as a News Producer and then as News Editor. Also, as a presenter of weekly magazine show called Africa This Week. For a brief period, I was Writer/Editor at Middle East Monitor before moving to Islambul, here at TRT World.



Short biography Paul Ade (Kemal Yusuf) Silva

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PKAYS: Introduction: My guest in this edition needs no introduction as he's an internationally well-known journalist who is well respected and liked across Africa and the Middle East (or Western Asia, if you would) not to mention North America, Europe and the United Kingdom.

I would like to start our interview with where you are right now as the Deputy News Editor for TRT World and as Writer/Editor for Middle East Monitor, and try to work back to your earliest times in the broadcast media provided you're fine with this approach.

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PKAYS: You've been writing about the process of normalization between Sudan and Israel, could you bring us to speed with where we are on that and what you see as the danger and attenuating benefit to this process.

KC: In assessing the pros and cons of establishing relations with Israel, it is fair to say that much of the world's negative stance towards Sudan, particularly the Europeans, has been because of its refusal to open diplomatic channels with the Zionist state. So, in many ways, there was pressure put on the Sudanese government. Therefore, the lack of investment and harsh economic sanctions and the continuing Civil War which have decimated the country's economy were to some respects due to Sudan's support of the Palestinians and its opposition to Israel. The new transitional government see contact with Israel as a means to demonstrate pragmatic politics and to ease the international pressure on the country to allow it to become part of the international community once again.

It is also fair to say that the average Sudanese doesn't have an immovable objection to doing business with Israel because for them the main concern is to continue in their quest to improve basic living standards. Therefore, there is a feeling that if indeed the stance against Israel will not change the economic situation in the country, then negotiations must be pursued.

However, the resumption of relationship with Israel will lose Sudan credibility in the Arab world where the populace supports the Palestinian cause, but the leadership continues to fail to respond to the demands of its own people.

Sudan is therefore seen at this point in history as the last bastion of resistance in support of the Palestinians. Those who oppose the normalisation of diplomatic relations point to the fact that diplomatic relations with other African countries has not brought about any kind of real benefit for those countries that have long since maintained relations with Israel.

In addition, there is also a feeling amongst those who are against normalisation that to abandon the cause of the Palestinians is tantamount to a betrayal.

Lastly the objection towards normalisation also means that there is a fear that foreign policy will ultimately be determined by its relationship with the American's biggest ally - Israel - and as such American influence in Sudan's political future will be inescapable.

PKAYS: What's your understanding of the relationship between Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan of Sudan and Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel? Have you been able to verify the authenticity of the reports concerning the conditions that Sudan must fulfil in order to be removed from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism that supposedly would ultimately lead to the removal of economic sanctions on Sudan?

KC: I do not believe there is a relationship between the two men. I do not imagine that the two are exchanging phone calls and pleasantries. But as a journalist it is difficult to officially verify the details of the agreements that have been made between the two leaders.

However, with the sources that I have working inside of governments and the assessment of the agreement it is easy to measure it against the events that have subsequently unfolded.

For example, Israel is now flying over Sudanese airspace - one of the conditions from the talks between the two leaders. The rest of the information comes, of course, from the Israel media. One can read between the lines of what actually transpired or certainly get a close picture of the issues at stake.

As a writer, I take great care not to reveal the sources of my information that would jeopardise their positions and prevent a steady flow of information. It is anybody's guess as to when the sanctions will be lifted, but the American Congress has tabled a motion for that process to be considered with some alacrity.

However, with the coronavirus situation that may be put on hold for some time to come, because it means that the Congress is not functioning and will not be able to consider the issue at hand.



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PKAYS: On the issue of the ousted President of Sudan, Omar Al-Bashir extradition to the International Court (ICC); do you think Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan is just making the "right noises" strategically, or do you suspect there is more to it than that given that Sudan military leaders have vowed in the past, not to cross such red line?

KC: To my mind, I am 99% certain that the former President of Sudan will not be sent to the International Criminal Court nor will anybody else that was considered culpable in the genocide and crimes in the mass killings that took place in the western Darfur region.

Ironically, this is the one issue that the military leaders will not countenance, they are united, and no matter the pressure it is highly unlikely that they will yield. There is a suggestion, however, that the former President could be tried in a court established by the International Criminal Court within Sudan.

This may be the only way for those crimes to be considered. A committee has been set up to deal with those issues because some are keen to show that Sudan is capable of bringing the former President to justice but whatever happens Al-Bashir will live out the rest of his days in Sudan.

PKAYS: Now, might be the right time to ask you about how you got into working in the broadcast media. What was your motivation and what do you think of the media today on issues affecting the African continent and her people when you consider the onset of your career in the media and where you are today?

KC: I was one of 12 people chosen by the BBC to be trained as a reporter for local radio stations in the UK. The training lasted a year. Prior to being accepted by the BBC I had volunteered as a presenter for my local radio station and began to present a programme for the local African-Caribbean community. I got the bug and decided to turn it into a career. But in the early 90s there were not many black people on TV. I was motivated by being one of the first to reflect stories from Africa and the African Diaspora.

PKAYS: Has the News Media been a force for good in the world, or is it just a manipulative institution serving the interest of the "great powers" in view of the concentration of media ownership in few hands?

KC: I am not sure the media per se has been a force for good. Sadly, it has been used as part of the system which perpetuates and exacerbates differences rather than the similarities that we have as human beings.

The over concentration with disaster and death still sadden me. When all is said and done, the media and particularly the news industry is about reflecting the values of your employer.

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I am happy being in TRT WORLD because Turkey is in an exciting place in the world and in the main, I agree with its values.

I think the big difference between when I first began and now - would be that in the beginning I was keen to exploit people for getting the story and was prepared to intrude as much as I could into their private lives - now I see my role differently and prefer to reflect the nuances in the governments and institutions' behaviours around the world so that the viewing public may be aware of the kind of world they are living in.

PKAYS: It's telling when the media assumes the position that it is sharing its reflection on the conduct of the institutions of State with its viewers so they can know the world in which they're residing. Tell us more about the agenda setting of the media and how it has managed to establish Opinion Leaders for the people.

KC: Well the media differs in different parts of the world. Obviously, in places like Africa the media can sometimes just be a mouthpiece for government, but it can also be a means by which development is put on the agenda and promoted to benefit the society. In the west, as far as the media is concerned [,] Think tanks, public pressure, and global narratives play their own separate part in shaping what we see on our screens or allowed in newspapers. Although it is changing, we are still in a world governed by White Anglo-Saxon Protestant men. That means what we see is still predicated on the standards of journalism that have been taught in colleges and classrooms around the world. Therefore, what is News, and news values, is driven by the standards traditionally set which in the main can be discriminatory and prejudicial. So, the opinion leaders are there for those who continually meet the requirements of the establishment or who decide to take part in the status quo. Alternative voices are still not common, depth and analysis tend to be shallow and sound bites with slogans dominate the airways and cyberspace.

PKAYS: Let's talk about your work as the Deputy News Editor for TRT World and what that entails. Discuss any interesting assignments that you would like to share with us.

KC: My daily job entails monitoring the news as it happens and responding very quickly with the correspondence in the particular part of the world to give us an update about developing situation. Those correspondents are either linked by direct satellite or by Skype systems and in some cases on the phone. My department is the engine of the newsroom. We receive the work of all the import departments, such as our own correspondents or our planning teams and make them available in a timely way to our output teams who ultimately make the final decision on what should be seen on screen. In terms of assignments because I am up to date with the situation in Sudan, I have travelled there more than six times in the past two years to cover the events there. This I have done on my own picking up local camera crews and filing reports back to Istanbul. It has felt good to be back on front

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line reporting, although I prefer being at my desk away from what has sometimes been a fraught with danger and frightening experience.

PKAYS: You were also an assistant producer for BBC in the 90s, working in the inner cities Britain producing documentaries. How's that experience and knowledge empowered you in your work, today?

KC: You know, being out in the communities in the 90s taught me a lot about people, a lot about ordinary lives, and allowed me to connect with all kinds of people. In the early days, the strength of my skills allowed me to go into places that I would not be welcome ordinarily. For example, I entered drug dens, illicit alcohol factories, secret training camps to expose wrongdoing. I was also able to build a sixth sense of where danger would occur and take the necessary steps to remove myself from any impending hazard, whilst "getting the story." In addition, I was able to build up an understanding of how a particular story would develop. Today, that has come in useful in my work out in the field and indeed in making assessments about the validity of stories. In addition, my humble beginnings in local radio gave me the ability to get the news despite there being a dearth of news content. On slow news day, finding stories to report on is a treasured ability.

PKAYS: On the issues affecting the African Diaspora, which ones do you consider pertinent and urgently needing to be addressed that you would like to discuss, and you may point out similarities and differences between other racial groups such as Syrians, Palestinians and Armenians.

KC: Unfortunately, the mass media still associates African stories with disease and conflict. The economic powerhouse that the continent is proving to be does not get the same attention. Africa still plays into stereotypical notions of who the Africans are and what they are able to do. In many ways the treatment of the African continent is no different from the Middle East when it comes to illustrating the differences between people and the points of conflicts and wars that are taking place. However, such is the nature of news that much of the reporting lacks analysis, context or informed commentary. Some channels do well to carry African stories in a positive light, but others never have anything to say about the continent unless it is negative. It is one of the areas that I would like to see my channel do more.

PKAYS: To the elephant in the room, by that I mean the Coronavirus pandemic. You recently wrote, in the Middle East Monitor, about the death of the Defence Secretary of Sudan, Lt. General Jumal Omar and how his death is increasing social and political tensions amid the pandemic. Take us through the ramifications of the situation for Sudan and also the region.

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KC: The ramification of the coronavirus for Sudan like any other African country is if a large number of people is affected by the disease, the present health systems as they are constituted are woefully inadequate to cope with the spread of the disease. In Sudan in many ways the culvert virus has been a welcome intervention because it has allowed the government to put in measures to take people off the street and to ease the tension surrounding the economic and political differences in the country.

There is a growing awareness that the virus could badly affect the economy and the ability for people to earn money. This would only increase the pressure on the outside diaspora to send remittance to family and friends. The lockdown or evening curfew that has been introduced is not going to be able to allow the souvenirs in the long term to optimise job opportunities. Therefore, the virus whilst having some political benefits for the government is likely to lead to hardship amongst the population. Coupled with the difficulties created by the lack of trade with its neighbours for example Egypt, Sudan economic recovery could be in jeopardy. However, there is a worst-case scenario and that is the continued dissatisfaction with the economic condition exacerbated by the virus may mean that the Sudanese people will once again take to the streets in a bid to remove its government.

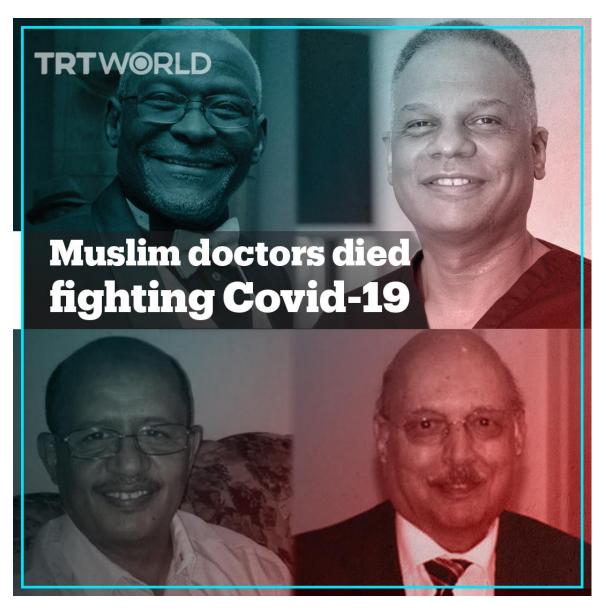
There are those who believe that the army is prepared and have already drawn up plans to again take over control. It remains to be seen whether in fact the economic situation despite all the negative predictions could be turned around. However, it is certain that the pressure on the government will increase long before it decreases.

PKAYS: Information is saturating the Social Media that the Covid-19 is a by-product of radiation damages to the human cell as a result of the rolling out of the 5G technology in Wuhan; and that the places that have suffered the worst cases are places with the installation of the 5G technological apparatus. What are your views or understanding of the situation?

KC: Cursory examination at this theory reveals that much of what is said does not add up. While it's true to say that we don't completely know the truth with regards to the virus nor do we know how to deal with the crisis the statements about its connection with 5G technology do not stand up to scrutiny. As a journalist I feel responsible when analysing the official version of any controversial issue. Generally, I am always willing to accept that governments have agendas that they don't want to disclose. I am not one to dismiss as a mere conspiracy story, a plausible form of scepticism which might reveal the truth. Rather I start from the premise that most government are involved in underhand and unscrupulous activities that might harm the freedom of ordinary citizens. Therefore, when the 5G conspiracy theory came out, I took it seriously. However, for any theory to be substantiated the salient points must be irrefutable. It has been pointed out that China was not the first place that 5G was rolled out; in fact, that was South Korea. It's also true to say that

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countries like Iran may not have begun the program of 5G but have recorded the highest number of casualties and confirmed cases in the Middle East. But perhaps the biggest floor to the argument is its claim that mutations of body cells can biologically lead to a virus. That is according to all scientific principles impossible. That is not to say that we are getting the complete truth, but I think we can look elsewhere for the moment when it comes to the question of 5G.



PKAYS: I noticed when looking through your biography that you have been working in the media on Islamic programmes as early as in the 90s. How do you see the media representation of Islam and what does it mean to you as a Moslem, working in the media with all its discrimination and biases?

KC: The media have never been sympathetic towards Islam. The principal reason for that is by nature Islam calls for sobriety and is a challenge to the western dominated way of life. I believe, as many do, that the fall of the Soviet Union created a vacuum for an enemy to emerge. Academics began to talk about this in the mid-80s. Their pontifications were complimented by the film industry and the media has played its part in demonising the religion of Islam. I do not feel proud in saying that I played a small part in the demonization process when I fronted a programme on BBC Two talking about religion and politics. Looking back my mockery and dim view of Islam meant that I perpetuated negative stereotypes. Less than two years later, I had become a Muslim, and only then did I realise how dismissive and flippant I had been towards followers of the faith. However, to be fair to myself society at that time regarded the Islamic way of life as an apparition worthy of contempt.

Any study of the media since that time and to date reveals the inordinate amount of coverage given to Muslim terrorism and the vitriolic language used when describing Muslims. The spate of hate crimes directed at Muslims can to some extent be attributed to the negative coverage that Muslims are receiving from the media. Sometimes, I believe, Muslims damage their own cause by continually being defensive when the basic principles and tenets of Islam are nothing, but peace and social justice. It is in Islam where community and societies have a place, and the responsibility of individuals to ensure social cohesion, co-operation and harmony remains.

Regrettably the nature of the media is to attract viewers and readers and therefore the insensitivity displayed is a natural extension of the judgements made about what constitutes News and News value. Until that has changed that we are no longer dependent on news agencies that perpetuate simplistic worldviews, it's regrettable that we will continue as Muslims to witness discrimination and to be subjected to Islamophobia.

There is however some light at the end of the tunnel if and only if we are prepared to roll out alternative news agencies that are more concerned with the impact of the news they are presenting and genuinely seek ways of providing their readership or viewing public with a nuanced, balanced and just description of events that are unfolding in the world. That's one of the reasons why towards my retirement I will be trying to put together news agencies and publications that portray a different worldview.

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We need to start looking at the world differently and work hard to eradicate the binary notions of us and them. That can only come when our news is sensitive to the negative impacts it can have by either over concentrating on conflicts and crisis or by invading the boundaries of privacy of individuals. In short, our news values have to change. Otherwise we will continue to look for scapegoats and to see the world in a binary way.

PKAYS: Thank you Brother Khalil for your openness with which you've answered my questions and for your humility in reflecting on your own professional contributions in the many roles that you've been playing in the dissemination of news and your devotion to peace and understanding amongst all people especially for your relentless positive promotion of Africa, the African Diaspora and Muslims, all over the world.

As the Editor of JAMMO, I would be honoured if you'd accept our invitation to join our editorial board and continue your contribution to re-defining the paradigm of news value and news worthiness. We encourage you to bring in people who are able to continue to work to reshape the existing news value and news gathering methods to dent the anomaly in "bad news is news".

Finally, to wrap up our interview; I would like to reference Sudan, but in a different light than we have talked about her so far. By this I am referring to the late dynasty of Ancient Egypt which had ruled Egypt for a century starting from 744 BCE and was led by pharaohs including Piye, Shabaqo, and Taharqa, who won battles, and had been the powers behind the boom of the final fantastic pyramid building. The Kushite Empire referred to as Nubia by the Greeks is none other than Sudan, today.

Many scholars believed that these powerful pharaohs were black, but outdated stereotyping dismissed the idea as myth. In recent years, new evidence has shown that the 25th dynasty was indeed ruled by these great black pharaohs who were conquerors from Egypt's southern neighbor Nubia, now Sudan.

The latest research on the Kush Empire from leading archaeologists is revealed in a new [...] Science Channel special, Lost Kingdom [of] The Black Pharaohs, [...]. For most of the last century research on ancient Nubia had been limited, but in the last few years, as war in Sudan died down, there has been an explosion of exploration there with more than 30 teams of archaeologists working along the Sudanese Nile.

Large scale excavations are taking place that are uncovering new evidence that Nubia was a great civilization equal to that of Egypt's. Lost Kingdom [of] The

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Black Pharaohs tells this incredible story of the Kusch Empire's 100-year reign over Egypt while also going back further to detail the overall history of Nubia. "This is unique and special program with rare and privileged access, that sets out to right a wrong perpetrated by early archaeologists who refused to see or acknowledge the contributions of the black pharaohs to the glory of ancient Egypt," said Neil Laird, Executive Producer, Science Channel.

Lost Kingdom Of The Black Pharaohs follows research teams that include Geoff Emberling of the University of Michigan and Pierce Paul Creasman of the University of Arizona, who are unearthing a lost fortified city, opening newly discovered pyramids, and extracting DNA from the ancient dead, to show how this African culture, home to fabulous wealth, monumental architecture, and a rich culture, all led by a black dynasty, should now be given its place alongside the great revered ancient civilizations.

Lost Kingdom [of] The Black Pharaohs is produced by Alleycats Films for Science Channel. The producer/director is David Starkey and executive producers are Emma Parkins and Ed Stobart. Neil Laird serves as Executive Producer for Science Channel.

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9PLWGeyolk)

I invite your last reflection on this startling new revelation on Sudan, on which note, it would be appropriate to finish our interview.

KC: This is a new interesting development about Sudan, and we should see how far the research would go and what they would be able to find. I can tell you my experience in Sudan, when I was looking for somewhere after I embraced Islam to go and learn Arabic. I was looking for somewhere to learn a bit about Islam. So, I was told through friends of mine who [have remained] dear friends until this day that Sudan was an option. That they had an international university there, where people were learning Arabic and [...] religion. And I decided why not. Well, let's just give it a go. So, the course was one year to learn Arabic and then I was thinking I'd come back to the UK but I enjoyed it so much that one year ...[of] being in a Muslim country, hearing the Ezan...Just having people say Salaam alaikum... Wa alaikum salaam. It was just so wonderful; the people were so kind and [...] friendly that I stayed on. I came back briefly to England for [...] actually after a year of being in Sudan. And then went back to Sudan and stayed in Sudan for thirteen/fourteen years working as a teacher and as a journalist and really enjoying the time that I was there because the Sudanese were [...] hospitable [...] [to me].

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