

James Kwegyir Aggrey (1875- 1927)

Kwegyir Aggrey was born in Anomabo. At the age of eight, he was baptized and given his Christian name James. He also attended the above mentioned Wesleyan elementary school.¹ In 1898, the Bishop John Bryan Small (?- 1915) of the "African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church" (USA) came to Gold Coast. He had been there, before, when he had come from Barbados/ Bahamas as a clerk of the British Army, but had resigned because of British aggression towards the Asante. He then had travelled to the US to become a minister at the AME Zion Church. In Gold Coast, he was looking for educationally qualified young men who would go to the US for training and later return as missionaries. Small stayed for only six years and then returned to the US. Nevertheless, when he died, some of his last words were: "Don't let my African work fail!"²

Small selected Aggrey because he was known to be very bright. Aggrey was brought to Salisbury/ North Carolina and attended the Livingstone College where he graduated in 1902 with three academic degrees. He was appointed minister of the AME Zion Church in Salisbury and married Rose Douglas, a native of Virginia, with whom he had four children. Aggrey began to teach at the college. In 1920, Dr. Paul Monroe,³ professor at Columbia University, offered to him the opportunity to join the otherwise all-white African Education Commission of the Phelps-Stokes Fund⁴ to assess the educational needs in Africa. Aggrey agreed and started a voyage visiting areas in the today countries Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola. He also came to South Africa, where he gave 120 lectures. Due to the racial climate in this colony, Aggrey faced great trouble at times being prevented from driving together in one car with his colleagues or from entering the venue where he was to speak.⁵ He nonetheless, took the abuse with humility and dignity and did his best to rise above it. In one of the lectures, he commented that you could play a melody of sorts with just the black keys on a piano; you could do the same with the white keys. However, for full and perfect harmony, you need both. This illustration became an important symbol for racial reconciliation and harmony,

¹ Mark Wineka, "Aggrey Legacy- Marker First to Honor a Couple", *Salisbury Post*, Nov. 2004

² Sylvia M. Jacobs, "African Missions and the African-American Christian Churches" in Vaughn J. Walston and Robert J. Stevens, eds., *African-American Experience in World Mission- A Call Beyond Community* (California: William Carey Library Publ., 2002), 35.

³ Thomas Jesse Jones, *Education in Africa: A Study of West, South and Equatorial Africa by the African Education Commission* (NY: Phelps- Stokes Fund, 1922), 25.26.

⁴ Edward H Berman, "Comparative Education Review", *Colonialism and Education*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1971): 132-145.

⁵ V.F. Calverton, ed., *Anthology of American Negro Literature* (NY: Modern Library Publ., 1929), 449.

ever since.⁶ Aggrey also once said: "I am proud of my colour; anyone who is not proud of his colour is not fit to live". But he steadfastly refused to view humanity in terms primarily dictated by race.⁷ According to him, race is a component of our identity and thus to be valued, but our ultimate worth is that we are made in the image of God, and thus need to work to develop our fullest potential in honour of this greater identity. He often quoted a famous Akan parable of an eagle caught by a man who treated and fed it like a chicken until a naturalist came and helped the eagle to fly, again. This image stood for after being colonized by white people, Africans need to come back to their roots and organize their own ways of life, again. When he returned to America, Aggrey toured the United States and Canada giving extemporaneous lectures followed by question and answer sessions. During this, he made one of his most famous statements: "Only the best is good enough for Africa."⁸ In 1924, Aggrey again travelled to Africa with the Phelps-Stokes Commission; this time visiting Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zanzibar, Malawi, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Gold Coast.

He was appointed Vice Principal of "Achimota College" in Accra, which had been founded in 1924 and was officially opened in 1927 by the Canadian Sir Frederick Gordon Guggisberg (1869- 1930), Governor of the Gold Coast. This man also helped to build a harbour in Takoradi and a very modern hospital in Accra as well as a railroad. Close association with native Africans during his work convinced Guggisberg that the African races were capable of attaining the development levels of modern Europe. He said: "My practical experience (...) during the last twenty-seven years has convinced me that what individuals have achieved, in spite of ill-selected systems of education, can be achieved by the race generally, provided we alter our educational methods."⁹ Up to date, Guggisberg is known in Ghana as a white person who didn't focus on the interest of the Western world, but tried his best to help the native people increase facilities for their own. The British people objected Aggrey as Vice Principal of the collage because he was black. He played an important role in African education on a tremendous number of levels, so that he was called "the Father of African Education" and "the Booker T.

Washington of Africa." His educational philosophy was not simply about learning, but a holistic training of "the head, hand, and heart" to make one socially efficient. Further, Aggrey believed

⁶ Walter Hagemann, *Die Revision der Kolonialmethoden in Afrika- Deuschtum und Ausland* (Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlh., 1929), 44.

⁷ Adrian Hastings, *African Christianity* (NY: The Seabury Press, 1976), 8.

⁸ Mkandawire Thandika, "Africa- Beyond Recovery" in *Aggrey-Fraser-Guggisberg Memorial Lecture Series*, (Ghana: Sub-Saharan Univers Publ., 2015), 58.

⁹ Ronald E. Wraith, "Guggisberg" in *West African History Series* (Oxford: Univers. Press, 1967), 342.

that women needed to be educated on the same level as men. He was able to convince Guggisberg to make the Achimota College co-educational, telling the governor: "The surest way to keep a people down is to educate the men and neglect the women. If you educate a man, you simply educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a family."¹⁰

Unfortunately, Aggrey died of a sickness at the young age of 52 during a stay in the United States. In the regions he had visited in Africa, he had made a significant impression when stressing the importance of education. This way, Aggrey had influenced remarkable personalities like Hastings Kamuzu Banda (1898- 1997), the later president of Malawi, Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904- 1996), the first president of Nigeria, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah (1909- 1972), the first president of Ghana and also John S. Mbiti who has been mentioned, before. The last said about him: "From the first time I heard the story of (...) Aggrey of Achimota (...), it kindled in me a burning desire and ambition for education".¹¹ Both the late presidents Nnamdi Azikiwe and Dr. Kwame Nkrumah respectively registered their profound sorrow at the death of Aggrey who had influenced and inspired them, strongly. They wrote about him in their autobiographies. Dr. Azikiwe told about an incident when Aggrey had given him a book on Negro education which was revolutionary new, at that time.¹² Dr. Nkrumah had known him at Achimota College. We read: "The sudden shock of this news about (Dr.) Aggrey's death in America followed by the gradual realization that I had lost forever the guidance of this great man (...) It was because of my great admiration for Aggrey, both as a man and as a scholar, that I first formed the idea of furthering my studies in the United States of America".⁶¹

¹⁰ Angela Thody, *Educating Tomorrow- Lessons from Managing Girls' Education in Africa*, (South Africa: Juta and Co. Ltd, 2000), 45.

¹¹ Augustine C. Musopole, *Being Human in Africa- Toward an African Christian Anthropology* (NY: Peter Lang Publ. Inc., 1994), 18.

¹² Nnamdi Azikiwe, *My Odyssey- An Autobiography* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1970), 36-40. ⁶¹ Kwame Nkrumah, *Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (Edinburgh: T. Nelson, 1957) 46.