

From Slave Ship to Canterbury Cathedral

Helen Fallon

The Library at Fourah Bay College was a place of dark wooden furniture, portraits in gilt-edged frames and a collection of books that would have sat equally comfortably on the shelves of any British university in the 1950s. Most of the collection had come, before Independence in 1961, from Britain. It reflected what was being taught in universities there at that time.

I was teaching librarianship in Fourah Bay and, after finishing my lectures, I often spent time amongst the book stacks, my rummaging disturbed only by the occasional termite that scuttled from a dusty book where it had probably languished comfortably for quite some time.

THE DREADED SLAVING SHIP

One of the portraits that adorned the library walls was of an elderly African man who wore the ermine garb of a bishop. The first student, in 1827, of what was then a Church of England mission, he, like me, was not from Sierra Leone. His arrival there, however, had been somewhat more dramatic than mine.

Born in 1810, a Yoruba from what is now the south west of Nigeria, Adjai, as he was then called, was the son of a weaver who specialised in country cloth. His family were also small farmers. When Adjai was twelve, an enemy army surrounded his hometown, Ochugu. They quickly captured and set fire to the town.

In a letter written in 1841, Adjai recorded, "there was not much slaughter as the aim was to capture as many as they could." The plan was to sell those captured as slaves. While slave trading had been declared illegal, by the British Abolition Act of 1807, the practice was still widespread.

Adjai, his mother, two sisters and a cousin were led away – nooses about their necks – by the invaders. They were soon to be parted. Adjai was traded a total of six times; once for a horse, another time for a bag of tobacco. In a slave market, on the shore of the Lagos River, he caught his first glimpse of white people – three Portuguese men. He was later sold to white slave traders, brought to the coast and placed on board a slaving ship.

The fate which befell over twelve million Africans who crossed the Atlantic into slavery was not however to be Adjai's. The British Navy captured the Portuguese slaving ship. When Adjai and the other captives were brought up on deck, they were surprised to find their Portuguese masters in chains and themselves at liberty.

FREEDOM AND FRIENDSHIP

The liberated Africans were taken to the appropriately named Freetown in Sierra Leone. Thousands of miles from home and penniless, there would have been no possibility of going home for Adjai or any of the others.

The Province of Freedom, a twenty-eight-mile stretch of peninsular land on the coast of Sierra Leone, had been established by the British Anti-Slavery Movement (initially a group of twelve English people, six of whom were Quakers) in 1787.

In April of that year, four hundred and eleven people set out from Plymouth for Sierra Leone. These settlers were later joined by freed slaves from North America and Jamaica. Later still, the liberated Africans arrived. This was the group to whom Adjai belonged. Between 1807 and 1863, when the last shipload of freed slaves



The first African to be ordained by the Church Missionary Society, Samuel Crowther was consecrated Bishop of the Niger Territory in 1864 in Canterbury Cathedral. Sold into slavery at the age of twelve, Crowther was rescued by the British Navy and brought to Freetown in Sierra Leone, where he was educated in a mission school and baptised.

was put ashore at Freetown, some fifty thousand former captives found a new home in Sierra Leone.

Adjai stayed with an Anglican missionary couple in Bathurst, a mountain village outside Freetown and a few miles from Leicester, the village where I lived from 1989 to 1991. He was baptised into the Anglican Church, taking the baptismal names Samuel Crowther. He received a good early education and, when it was established in 1827, Samuel was one of the first students in Fourah Bay College. He was ordained a minister in 1843 and, shortly afterwards, married Asano Susan, a schoolmistress, who had been on the same ship that first brought him to Freetown. They had two sons.

AFRICA'S FIRST ANGLICAN BISHOP

He returned to Nigeria, was reunited with his mother and, for the rest of his life, ministered as an Anglican missionary in his extensive Yoruba homeland and beyond.

He was much admired and was consecrated a bishop in Canterbury Cathedral in 1864; the first African bishop of the Anglican Church. Special trains ran from London to Canterbury and there was barely room for the crowds who attended. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert discussed with him how the Lagos slave trade might be stopped.

A talented linguist, Bishop Crowther translated the Bible into Yoruba and produced a Yoruba version of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. Aged eighty-one, he died in 1891.

In late afternoon, as I made my way home from Fourah Bay College to Leicester, I sometimes thought of the young boy who walked the same path almost two hundred years earlier. ■

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