

**DR. JAMES EMMANUEL KWEGYIR AGGREY**

**(1875 - 1927)**



(Photo by Albert Dennis)

*J. E. Kwegyir Aggrey*

Source: <http://www.greatpicbooks.com/epics>

*Excerpted from: "Gallery of Gold Coast Celebrities" - Dr. I.S. Ephson,  
and ILEN PUBLICATIONS, LTD,  
ACCRA, GHANA, 1969*

One of the leading figures in the history of education in Africa was undoubtedly Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir Aggrey, more popularly known as "Aggrey of Africa". Noted as a great sociologist, orator, preacher, and far-sighted politician, and equally famous for his witty and epigrammatic sayings, Aggrey, an apostle of inter-racial co-operation, advocated and helped to cut the path of progress for the African race in many fields, particularly in the direction of Religion, Education, and Agriculture.

Born on Monday, 18th October, 1875, at Anomabu in the Central Region of the Gold Coast, of Princess Abena Annuah of Ajumaku, and Prince Kodwo Kwegyir, Chief Linguist in the court of King Amonoo V of Anomabu, Aggrey was the fourth of eight children; his father married three times, and Aggrey was a child of his last wife.

He was baptised on June 24th, 1883, with his brother Kodwo Awir when the christian names of James and William, were by custom bestowed on him and his brother respectively.

He entered the Wesleyan School in Cape Coast soon afterwards, whence his father left with his mother to seek employment as a "goldtaker" with Mr. John Sarbah (father of the late lawyer John Mensah Sarbah, CMG), a prosperous merchant and member of the Legislative Council, after the bankruptcy of Hon. George Kuntu-Blankson, in whose firm Kodwo Kwegyir had held a similar position for several years at Anomabu, fifteen miles east of Cape Coast.

In no time young Emmanuel distinguished himself in all branches of knowledge, and easily won the admiration of the Rev. Dennis Kemp, a Wesleyan missionary who had arrived in Cape Coast from Barbados, West Indies. In the spacious mission home, "the most palatial residence in Cape Coast," Aggrey and twenty-three other lads received instruction in joinery, blacksmithery, home decoration and painting, in addition to formal literary education.

Two years afterwards, Aggrey completed his course at this college, and accepted the post of temporary pupil teacher at Abura-Dunkwa (20 miles east of Cape Coast) on a monthly salary of 35 shillings. Here, Rev. Dennis Kemp had been appointed to the spiritual oversight of the Coast to the Prahso district), and Aggrey and Rev. Dennis Kemp made a two-day journey to this large circuit. At Ekroful, they were handicapped for lack of accomodation, there being no hotels or lodging houses, so they slept in the chapel; Rev. Kemp in the pulpit, and

Aggrey in one of the pews.

A year afterwards, Aggrey transferred to Cape Coast, which was now becoming more prosperous; several Christian missionaries had arrived and fraternal, literary and social clubs, the Singing Band, Band of Hope, and the Chris't Little Band and the Y.M.C.A. were establishing themselves. Trade was becoming prosperous, with speculation in gold mines and the use of machinery increasing; railways had been introduced in the nearby district and banks were also established, newspapers were springing up, and the study of the English language was becoming popular.

Aggrey now joined the staff of the Wesleyan Memorial School, (built in 1881 and here he taught for many years). Largely on account of his excellent teaching methods, his ability to sit and pass examinations in the Fanti language in exchange for lessons in French, Latin and Psychology). Aggrey became more popular at this school.

In 1889, when the Rev. J.B. Graham entered the ministry, Aggrey became the Headmaster of the school. He took all the Teachers' Certificate examinations offered by the Department of Education; and in the last and most important of these (in 1895) he stood first among the 119 candidates all over the country who entered and was the only one who gained a second class. The certificate of distinction he obtained qualified him without further examination, "to teach in any similar school in any British Colony, the world over." The Legislative Council voted (NC30.00) 15 pounds in his favour for the purchase of books in appreciation. His success in making the Cape Coast Wesleyan School the best school in the Colony, as stated by the then Director of Education with its 400 enrolled students, made Aggrey a figure of great consequence in the Gold Coast even at that time.

From 1895 - 1898, we hear of Aggrey not only as an educational giant, but also as a politician and a soldier. Aggrey became a recording Secretary of the Aborigines Rights Protection Society, and for a short time acted as Chief Secretary of the Society. He carried about a petition for signatures against the notorious Public Lands Bill (1897). On one occasion, he performed the splendid task of walking, in the course of a single day, 36 miles to Manso to send an important cablegram to London on behalf of the Society.

Aggrey contributed many articles to the Gold Coast Methodist Times of which his friend Rev. Jacob Anaman was then the editor, thereby helping to get this

unpopular Bill eventually withdrawn.

As a soldier in the Fanti-Ashanti war, we find Aggrey serving with the expedition under Colonel Sir Francis Cunningham Scott, a veteran of the Gold Coast Constabulary, and who had on his staff two British princes. Prince Henry of Battenberg and Prince Christian Victor. Aggrey was an interpreter and was paid 7/6d. per day. He was attached to the Telegraph Unit under Captain R. S. Curtis and Lieutenant McInnes, who marched from Cape Coast to Kumasi in December, 1896. He saw fighting in Kumasi the following year, and returned to Cape Coast unhurt. Immediately afterwards, his father's people made him Tufuhene (Field Marshall) according to native custom, but although he accepted the honour he politely sought to be relieved of that office, as it would have stood in the way of his education and other civic programmes. This refusal, as we have seen, was not for lack of interest in African customs, but because he felt he could not fulfil all these functions at one time with justice to all.

For the next twenty-six years, (from 10th July, 1898 to October 15th 1924), we hear of Aggrey steeping himself in pursuit of knowledge and education in America, for through the generous offer of Rev. John Bryan Small, a native of Barbados, Aggrey proceeded to America to be trained to join the Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Reluctantly, Aggrey left for the United States on 10th July, 1898 by SS "Accra" reaching America a month later. During this period, Aggrey, aptly described as a life-time student, successfully took examinations every year: He became Registrar and Professor of Livingstone College in 1902, ordained an Elder of the Zion Methodist Church in 1903, obtained his Doctorate Degrees in Hood Theological Seminary in 1912, became Pastor at Miller's Chapel and Sandy Ridge in 1914, and obtained his Doctorate in Philosophy Degree in Columbia University in 1923. Then he returned home to Achimota College as foundation member of the staff in 1924 and as Assistant Vice-Principal, thanks to Governor Guggisbery, who made the foundation of the College possible.

It is apt at this juncture to mention Aggrey's contribution to the welfare of the Gold Coast in particular and Africa in general in three major fields.

He served as the only African member on two internationally reputed education commissions for Africa - the Phelps-Stokes fund Commission, which was regarded as the key-stone to raising the standard of education in

Africa. In her will dated 1909, Miss Caroline Phelps-Stokes bequeathed her fortune, amounting to almost a million dollars, to trustees with the instruction that the income be used, inter alia, "for the education of Negroes, both in Africa and the United States, North American Indian and needy and deserving white students". Out of this came forth two Commissions, which toured almost every country in Africa for fact-finding, on both of which Aggrey features prominently.

Thus we hear of Aggrey in Sierra Leone and Liberia in September, 1920, in the Gold Coast in October to November, 1920 in Nigeria and Fernando Po in November to December 1920, the Cameroons in December 1920, the Belgian Congo in January 1921, Angola in January to February 1924, Kenya in February to March 1924, Uganda in March 1924, Tanganyika and Zanzibar in March to April 1924, Nyasaland and Rhodesia in April to June 1924, South Africa again in June 1924, and again in the Gold Coast in October, 1924.

In South Africa, he so much impressed the white settlers at public lectures that his audience wildly and admiringly exclaimed, "Damn his colour, he's a saint."

His idea of education was the "All inclusive" type, "Secular education" was abhorrent to him; to him education meant the full development of the human personality. "By education," he said, "I do not mean simply learning. I mean the training of the mind, in morals and in a hand that helps to make one socially efficient. Not simply the three R's, but the three H's the head, the hand and the heart." He wanted this all-round training for girls as well as boys; "No race or people can rise half slave, half free. 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."

Of University education, he said it should combine the best of east with the best of the west - the best of Africa with the best of Europe, Asia and America. "It should encourage original thinking, encourage research, help to add to human knowledge....we of West Africa have proved that we can get the classics, theology and philosophy. We are past masters in jurisprudence and dialectics. The question is, can we turn such knowledge more and more into the service of the common weal? Can we give back with interest what

we have received? I believe, we can. It is for University Education to prove what scientific training can do. University education should aim to give women parallel training and some day co-education....to subdue the earth....Training for character: that is must be religious, must be christian: Christianity versus Church-going."

While in the United States, he did a great deal to help the needy negroes who were at the mercy of money lenders by encouraging the formation of Co-operative Farmers' Association, Farmers Unions Credit Union Banks, and other agricultural enterprises to relieve the negro of his financial embarrassment.

On his return to the Gold Coast, while on the staff at Achimota, he sought permission of the Director of Agriculture and toured the length and breadth of the Gold Coast, preaching the same ideals. The result was that the output and quality of farmers' crops in the twenties improved radically.

As an advocate for inter-racial co-operation, Aggrey contributed a lot to the cause of peace. His ideas were based on bi-racial grouping, and stood for civic pride and social betterment, taking pride in one's own race but seeking friendly relationship with other races. This was the radical opposite view of ultra-racial group of thinkers and the ultra-conservative school of intellectuals of whom Marcus Garvey was described as a great champion. Aggrey always urged his people to be proud of their race and colour. He believed they should remain distinct because they had their definite and particular contribution to make to the harmony of mankind. Not amalgamation, nor conflict, but co-operation was Aggrey's ideal. He expressed this by his example of Piano Keys: "You can play a tune of sorts on the black keys, and you can play a tune of sorts on the white keys, but for harmony you must use both the black and the white." "True co-operation," he said "involves a certain measure of equality - equality of opportunity, if not of actual political status. It means that each side has something to contribute - something more than braun on one side, brain on the other - to the well-being of both".

Aggrey was noted for the hundreds of conferences he attended, in most of which he acted as president, secretary or leading member, sometimes representing his university, sometimes the church, sometimes Africa generally. They were too numerous to be listed, but a few of them can be mentioned here: the National Conference of Methodist Episcopal Church,

Foreign Missions Conference of North America, Kennedy School Mission Conference, the School of Theology and the School of Religious Pedagogy, the Congregational Missionary Society Conference, First Congregational Church of Jersey City Conference, Eastern Union of Students Volunteers Conference, National Conference of Canadian students and the International Convention of the Students Volunteer Movement Conference, and the British West Africa Congress.

Nor had Aggrey everything smooth. He suffered many perils, but did his best to overcome them all. He even escaped a shipwreck on October 17th, 1925, as he and Mrs. Aggrey sailed in SS "Cedric" for America.

Earlier, in July 1925, he experienced his real baptism of fire while away in Koforidua (Eastern part of the Gold Coast) during the long vacation - "all my things were stolen including 9 suits, 25 shirts, trunks, a brand new suit-case, and 6 pounds 11 shillings in cash. They left one old trunk and my visiting cards...I lost very heavily - I can never restore some of the valuables stolen, much less those above value - I determined not to give up, but move on to success". This was a big blow to him and his family.

Aggrey, it is recorded, had financial troubles. He had mortgaged his house in America and furniture for 500 pounds, and the mortgagor wished it redeemed; and it is further related that to raise funds to redeem it, Aggrey had to sell his farm together with other property at a considerable loss. He lost over NC 3,400.00 on the transaction.

But he was a man who was always in good spirits - nothing could depress him. He had an unexhaustible fund of wise saying, a few of which are recorded hereunder as a matter of interest:

"I am proud of my colour; whoever is not proud of his colour is not fit to live."

"Keep your temper and smile," he would say, "that's what Jesus meant when he told men to turn the other cheek."

"I have no time for revenge - That's not African."

"Some white people ought to be transformed to negroes just for a few days, so as to feel what we feel and suffer what we suffer."

"If I find a man scowling at me, I just smile back. He scowls again, and I smile. I don't often find anyone scowl a third time."

"I prefer to be a Spokesman for my entire country: Africa, my Africa."

"You can never beat prejudice by a frontal attack. Because there is mere emotion at the root of it. Always flank it. You can catch more flies with molasses than you can with the vinegar."

"I often receive kicks from both sides - white and black. But all of that is in the day's work. One needn't be surprised."

"Only the best is good for Africa."

Aggrey was also a far-sighted man. Those who doubted his words lived to see the truth therein in the end. He compared Africa to the Sleeping Beauty, and asserted his confidence in her future that she would one day wake up to find herself very important in the comity of nations.

This he put in a letter to Dr. Jesse Jones, a highly reputed American minister of religion and a great intellectual, who was Aggrey's great friend.

"It seems to me," he wrote to Dr. Jones in September, 1919, "that this is the psychological moment for Africa, and I believe you are destined metaphorically to stoop down and kiss Sleeping Beauty Africa back into life from her centuries of sleep." Dr. Jones confessed that what Aggrey said seemed a gross exaggeration to him; "they were to me the fantastic imaginations of an emotional African. Much as I believed in Aggrey, I could not share his forecasts." But he came to see that Aggrey was right. Looking back upon the gratifying results that followed the Commission, he wrote; "In answer to my own doubts and in acknowledgement of my error, I here record that Aggrey's dreams have come true with almost miraculous accuracy. Signs of the future indicate that they will continue in their realization until Aggrey's Africa will take its place amongst the continents of the world."

Aggrey, for all his greatness, was a man of very simple life even when Headmaster of the most outstanding school in his time (1895). He always washed his own clothes although his younger brother, Awir, "as soon as he began clerkship, employed a laundress."

While in America as a professor, in spite of illness he preached four times every Sunday. "I did not want to disappoint the public, so I told sickness to hold off for a day, and Monday it returned with a vengeance."



He was a man full of humour, one whose sense of humour even captivated and subdued the intentions of his enemies. Once, when he was Assistant Vice-Principal, at Achimota, he proceeded to Sierra Leone to represent the College at the Centenary Celebrations of Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone. The situation was delicate, but the occasion very important. Aggrey had many friends in Freetown, but some of these friends, and several others, (rightly) looked askance at Achimota. Fourah Bay College had long occupied the pre-eminent position on the West Coast, its graduates were to be found everywhere in West Africa, and consequently it stood emphatically for the academic tradition in education, at least in West Africa. It was affiliated to Durham University in Great Britain. On the contrary, Achimota was not even the first nor the second college in the Gold Coast, and was looked upon as an upstart; its ideals were not the Fourah Bay ideals. And here, Aggrey was expected to attend a conference at Fourah Bay College as a spokesman of a serious competitor – Achimota. It was even feared that he would be mobbed and killed. It required the tact, shrewdness, and intelligence, which could be Aggrey's alone. He got up and started, "My case reminds me of a young girl who returned home from a party and told her father that a young man had kissed her. Her father said, "how many times did he kiss you?" She looked into his face and replied: "Father, I came to confess, not to boast." He had come, Aggrey continued, "not to boast of Achimota, but to confess what debt Achimota, Gold Coast, owed to Fourah Bay College. Fourah Bay College stands to the Gold Coast as the symbol of the African's educational capacity."

It is recorded that "after the speech every door and every heart was open to him". Between November 19th and December 4th, he was called upon to deliver twenty-four speeches.

Enough has been said so far of "Aggrey the Great" himself, and something now must be said about his family or private life. Aggrey was married to a young pretty and learned American negress, a Miss Rosebud Douglas of Portsmouth, USA and the wedding took place on November 8th, 1905, at Portsmouth. Within five years of marriage, three children were born to them, namely, Abena Azalea (1907), Kwegyir (1908), and Rosebud (1910). On 24th July, 1926 a fourth child was born, Orson Rudolf Guggisberg. Aggrey was a great lover of children, and took great pains to train his children, advising them on how to be careful in life.

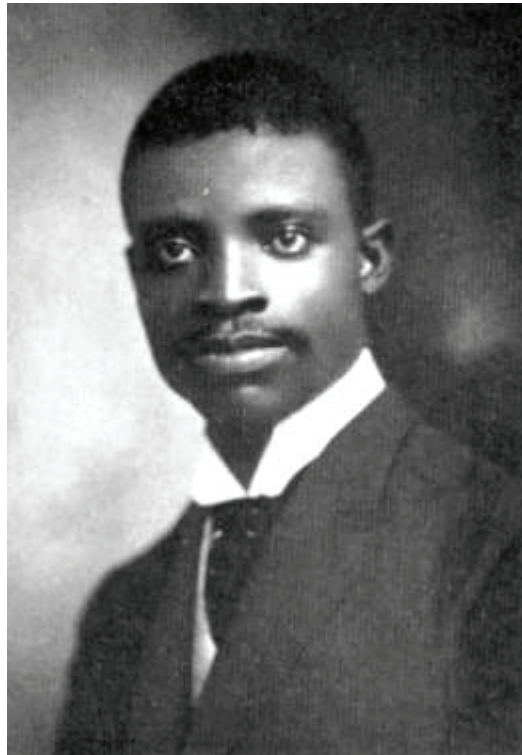
But his end was drawing near. Aggrey, a co-founder of Achimota College, first in many of the examinations he took; holder of the degrees of Master of Arts (Livingstone College), Doctor of Divinity (Hood Theological Seminary), Master of Arts (Columbia), Doctor of Philosophy (Columbia), and holder of many diplomas, joined the staff of Achimota in July, 1924. He left for America in July, 1926, returned in November that year. Achimota (Gold Coast) his dream, was formally opened on 28th January, 1927, and in May that year he left for England and America once more, only to die on 30th July of pneumococcal meningitis.

His death was a sad but great affair; he was mourned in all the continents. Two thousand mourners, white and black, attended the service in the auditorium of Livingstone College. Bishop W. J. Walls conducted the service, and tributes were paid by many dignitaries, including Dr. W.H. Goler, ex-President of the College, Professor Branley of Shaw University, Dr. Jesse Jones, Bishop W.W. Jones, Dr. George E. Davis of the State Department of Public Instruction, and Dr. S. G. Aikins, President of the Teachers' College at Winston-Salem.

The honorary pall-bearers were all white citizens of Salisbury: Mr. E.C. Gregory the ex-Mayor, A.L. Smoot, Mr. J.M. McCorkle, Mr. A Buerbaum, Mr. W.H. Leonard and Mr. J.C. Kasler. In Europe, Africa, Asia, America and Australia similar ovations and last respects were offered in his honour: and in the Gold Coast (the land of his birth), every town and village observed his death by weeping and mourning.

For that was the physical end of the man everybody loved, the man who apparently never had an enemy, and the man whose talent and virtues were admired by all classes of the society.

The Aggrey Students' Society, formed in April, 1928, in America and the Gold Coast, and the Aggrey House, Achimota (Ghana), together with millions of Africans and Europeans who admire his noble achievements will always make Aggrey immortal, and inspire those of later generations to further greatness.



Source: <http://www.greatpicbooks.com/epics>