

*Bishop Samuel Ajaiy Crowther
(1806/9-1891), First Bishop of
Niger and the First Black Bishop
in the Anglican Church, Linguist.*

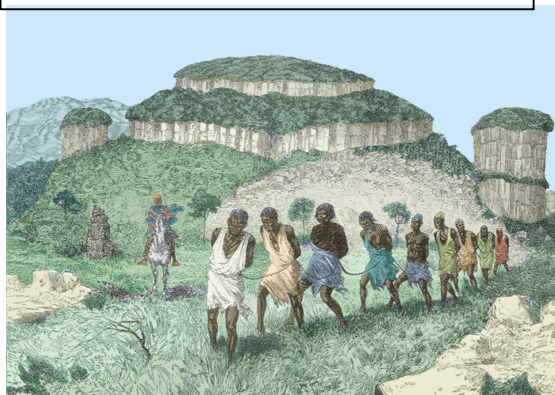


Rt. Rev. Samuel A. Crowther,



Bishop Crowther was born in Yorubaland. Freetown (insert) is the capital of Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone was founded by a coalition of anti-slavery groups with connections to William Wilberforce, the abolitionist, and to the Clapham sect of Anglican Evangelicals. It was hoped that once settled the town would be a refuge for rescued slaves.



Left: *Slave March* (CHI Archives)

Captivity

A boy named Ajaiy, the future Bishop Samuel Crowther, was of the Yoruba people. Legend says that his maternal great-great grandfather was King Abiodun, who acceded to the Yoruba throne in 1770. His mother was a priestess and his father was a successful weaver. His date of birth is uncertain.¹

The bishop wrote that he believed it was at the beginning of 1821 that the Eyó Mohammedans, Foulahs, and foreign slaves who had escaped from their owners joined in a band of 20,000 to gather and sell slaves in Africa and to the captains of the Spanish and Portuguese slaves ships plying the coast. He tells us that the morning was “fair and delightful” and no one was ready for the raid. Ajaiy, his mother and three sisters were among those captured. On his way to the ship he saw his grandmother and cousins briefly in the crowd. Houses were burned, families were separated and those who were unfit for the journey were killed. Over three horrifying months, a chief offered a horse for Ajaiy, later he was bartered for tobacco, and at last arrived at the coast in chains and fetters where he was purchased and taken with over one hundred others to the Portuguese slave ship *Esperanza Felix*.

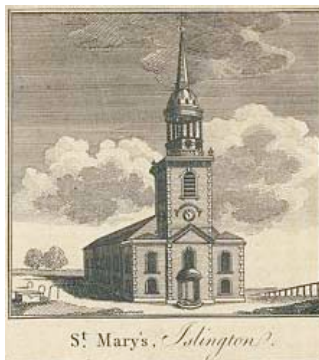
¹ Jesse Page, F.R.G.S., *The Black Bishop*

Rescue and A New Life

On the very next morning, the 7th of April 1822, *The Esperanza Felix* found herself caught between two British men-of-war. She was boarded and the slaves divided between the ships. Ajaiy spent two and one half months aboard the *HMS Myrmidon*, while the ship continued its cruise for slaves. On June 17th, 1822 he arrived at Sierra Leone. He, with others, was sent to Bathurst, a small town, where he attended school and was taught carpentry.

Another pupil at the school was a young lady named Asano, who, was rescued by Captain Charles Phillips of *HMS Bann*, and landed at Sierra Leone in October of 1822. She was baptized Susan Thompson, became an acting schoolmistress and later the bishop's wife.

In 1825 the future bishop was baptized by the Rev. John Raban and given the name of Samuel Crowther after the Reverend Samuel Crowther, Vicar Of Christ Church, Newgate Street, London.



The following year the young Samuel Crowther was sent to the school of St. Mary the Virgin, Islington, England (above) for a year of study. He would return there several times in his life, and in 1870 would ordain his son, Dandeson a deacon in that same church.



Fourah Bay College was founded in 1827 by the Church Mission Society as an Anglican missionary school to develop African Christian leaders. Today it is a public university

Upon his return to Freetown Samuel was enrolled in Fourah Bay College, where he studied Greek, Latin and *Temne*, a language of the Niger-Congo area. By now his linguistic skills were recognized. It was at the completion these courses that he married Asano/Susan Thompson (1815-1881). She was the mother of two sons, one of whom became Archdeacon Dandeson Coates Crowther, and three daughters, each of whom married an African clergyman.

Eventually Samuel was reunited with his mother, who was baptized Hannah by her son on the 5th of February 1848; she lived to be over 100 years old.

“Paul saw in a vision a man of Macedonia, who prayed him to come over to his assistance. But it is no vision that you see now; it is a real man of Africa that stands before you, and on behalf of his countrymen invites you to come over into Africa to help us.”

Bishop Crowther before a large group of students at Cambridge University,

Travels and Ordination

In 1841 Samuel accompanied the missionary James Frederick Schön on the Niger Expedition, which intended to spread commerce, teach agricultural techniques, spread Christianity and end the slave trade. When he returned from the mission he was sent to England to prepare for the ministry. He was ordained priest by the bishop of London. In 1843 he joined Henry Townsend in opening a mission on Abeokuta in what is now Ogun State, Nigeria, where for twenty-one years he produced his translations. Long years were spent traveling as a traveling missionary taking him away from home as long as two and one half years.

Meeting A Queen

On Reverend Crowther's third visit to England in 1851 he was invited by Lord Russell to accompany him to Windsor Castle to meet Prince Albert. The prince was interested in the work in Africa. A lady, very simply dressed, joined the other people in the room. The Bishop continued to talk. It was getting dark so a lamp was lit. As the Prince examined a map the lamp blew out and he asked the lady, "Will your majesty kindly bring us a candle from the mantelpiece?" Reverend Crowther was dumbfounded, but pulled himself together. The queen seemed well-informed and before the bishop left asked him to say the Lord's Prayer in Yoruba, which she declared "was a soft and melodious language."

A Bishop's Life

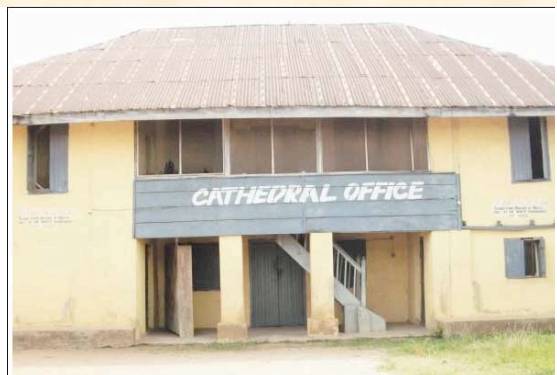
The election of Samuel Crowther as the first Black Anglican Bishop was as much a surprise to Reverend Crowther as to anyone else. He had to be persuaded to accept. He assumed his new position with dignity, simplicity and honor: *Agios*, he is worthy!



Consecration at Canterbury Cathedral

St. Peter's Day, June 29, 1864, was the day chosen for the consecration of the new Bishop Crowther. Special trains ran from London to accommodate the thousands who attended. Among those present were the widow of Bishop Weeks of Sierra Leone, who "taught Ajaiy his alphabet", and Admiral Sir H. Leeke, the young captain aboard the *H.M.S. Myrmidon*, who rescued him from the slave ship.

That same year, while attending a conference in Madeira with his son, Archdeacon Crowther, he received a doctorate of divinity from the University of Oxford.



Bishop Crowther's Office, Lagos, Nigeria
Films, <http://www.nigeriafilms.com>



Top: Bishop Crowther's son, Archdeacon Dandeson Coates Crowther, born 1844

Below: The bishop's grandson, Herbert Macauley (1864-1946) an engineer and journalist. In 1944 Mr. Macauley became president of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) of which he was a co-founder.

“Preach without a prejudiced mind: the hearts into which the seed is sown belong to the Lord, who owns both the seed and the hearts.” Bishop Crowther

Bishop Crowther's Translations

As a young priest Bishop Crowther began translating the Bible in the Yoruba language. In 1843 he published a Yoruba grammar book begun during the first Niger expedition, and after this, a Yoruba version of the Book of Common Prayer. In 1857 he published a primer for the Igbo language, and 1860 one for the Nupe language. Four years later he produced a full grammar and vocabulary of Nupe. The Yoruba Bible, (*Bibeli Mimo*), produced under Bishop Crowther's supervision, was completed in the mid-1880s.

Lagos became the center of the bishop's huge diocese: "the countries of Western Africa beyond the limits of the Queen's dominions", but excluding Lagos and Abeokuta, During all these years the Bishop had been subject to the desires and directive of the Church Mission Society (CMS) founded by Anglicans and Evangelicals in 1799, supported by members of the Clapham sect. The Reverend Henry Venn (1706-1873) was a key figure in the society, advocating mission churches that were self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. His death brought significant changes in the direction of the Society.

Bishop Crowther was spending nine months of the year in Lagos, but trouble was brewing in the diocese. Christians were persecuted, tribal leaders suspected Europeans and especially the "Christian" traders who were now bringing liquor to the villages. A tribal chief kidnapped the bishop briefly. Nevertheless he continued his mission work for which he was given a steamer, the *Henry Venn*, the management of which he thought to place in the hands of an African merchant provided the profits return to the mission. He was overruled in this and the boat put under two white men who also now had authority over the Niger Mission.

Things were going from bad to worse. In 1879 the bishop's authority was undermined when a committee was put in control of the Niger Mission's temporalities. The following year a Commission was appointed to investigate the alleged misconduct of the bishop's African staff. Twelve of which were fired. The bishop protested and was accused of violating his oath of office. He never saw the libelous report. From then on he lived in the shadows. After his death he was replaced by a white bishop,

Perhaps one of the saddest memories of Bishop Crowther's life, rarely referred to, was a letter of January, 1884, seven years before his death, in which he felt obliged to write: *"I know my place as a negro, but I have ever paid my respects to Europeans . . . as the race of our benefactors . . . I have never left undone anything which I thought might conduce to the health and welfare of a white man in Africa."*

It would be reassuring to know that the Bishop wrote this statement with tongue-in-cheek, but that is unlikely. It remains as a sad expression of deep humility from a memorable bishop of the Church of Christ.



Last Days

In 1891 the bishop suffered a stroke and his paralysis severely hampered his activities. During his last illness he stayed in the home of his daughter, Abigail Crowther Macauley, where he died peacefully.



An elderly Bishop Crowther with some of his clergy.