

Samuel Ajayi Crowther

From slave boy to African national hero

Samuel Ajayi Crowther was the hero of the Christian missionary movement in 19th century West Africa. Working with the newly established Church Missionary Society he successfully delivered the Christian anti-slavery and civilization message to the remotest parts of his home country.

His talents as a linguist helped to spread his Christian message through diverse West African communities, and helped forge a unified African national identity.

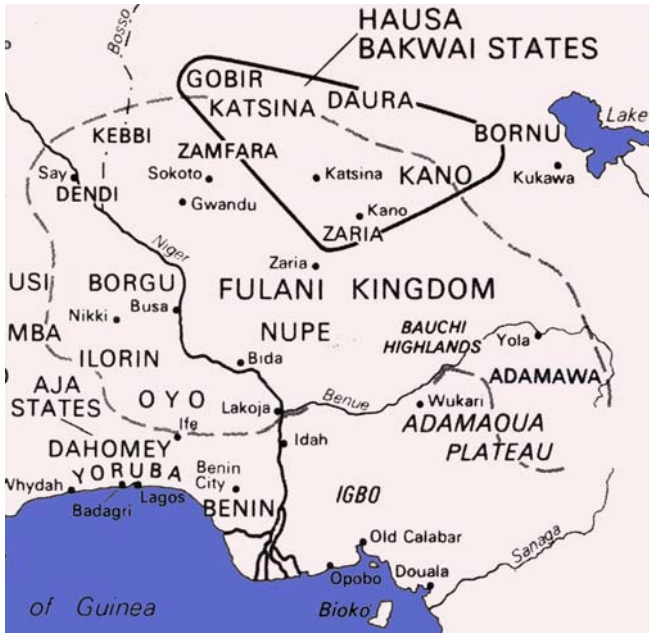
Crowther's proudest moment was to be his ordination as the first Black Anglican bishop. It was recognition of the success of his missionary efforts in the Niger region, and of the promise of an African church run by Africans.

Towards the end of the 19th century Crowther's ministry was greatly diminished by racism from within the Church Missionary Society and his work largely forgotten outside West Africa.

Today he is seen as the father of the modern Anglican church in Nigeria, the largest in the worldwide Anglican community.



Early life



Map showing the various peoples inhabiting Nigeria in the 19th century

Ajayi was born around 200 years ago in the town of Osogun in Yorubaland, part of modern South Western Nigeria. In an account of his childhood Ajayi wrote that Osogun was four miles in circumference with 12,000 inhabitants. It was a farming community and Ajayi's own father was a farmer and weaver.

Ajayi's youth was spent learning farming methods from his father, ultimately to become a farmer himself, but young Ajayi grew up in dangerous times. The break up of the old Yoruba Empire into individual warring states and pressure from the Islamic Fulani tribe meant that war or invasion was a constant threat.

In 1821 this threat was realised when one morning, while most of the inhabitants of Osogun were preparing breakfast, the town was attacked by Fulani raiders.

Ajayi later wrote a vivid account of the attack and his experience as a captive of war. He remembered his town ablaze, being tied up like an animal and the pain of separation from his family.

“Men and boys were at first chained together, with a chain of about six fathoms in length, thrust through an iron fetter on the neck of every individual, and fastened at both ends with padlocks”

Samuel Ajayi Crowther

A snippet of a handwritten manuscript in cursive script, likely Samuel Ajayi Crowther's account of his captivity. The text describes his capture and the loss of his father during a battle. The handwriting is in dark ink on aged paper.

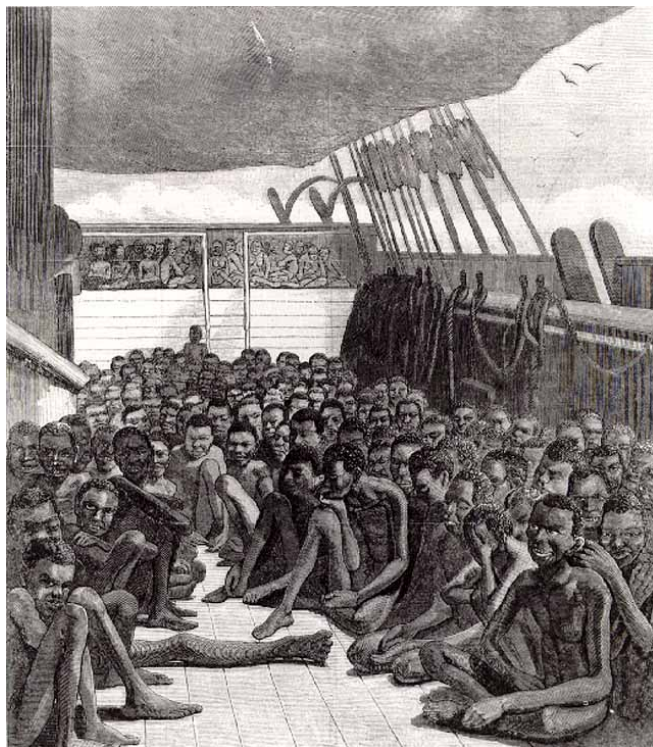
Extract from Crowther's account of his captivity.
Courtesy Church Missionary Society Archive

Ajayi was to change hands six times before being bought by Portuguese slave traders for export to America as a domestic slave.

West African slave trade

For centuries European nations had taken advantage of the West African practice of enslaving prisoners of war and would exchange goods such as cloth, alcohol or weapons for people.

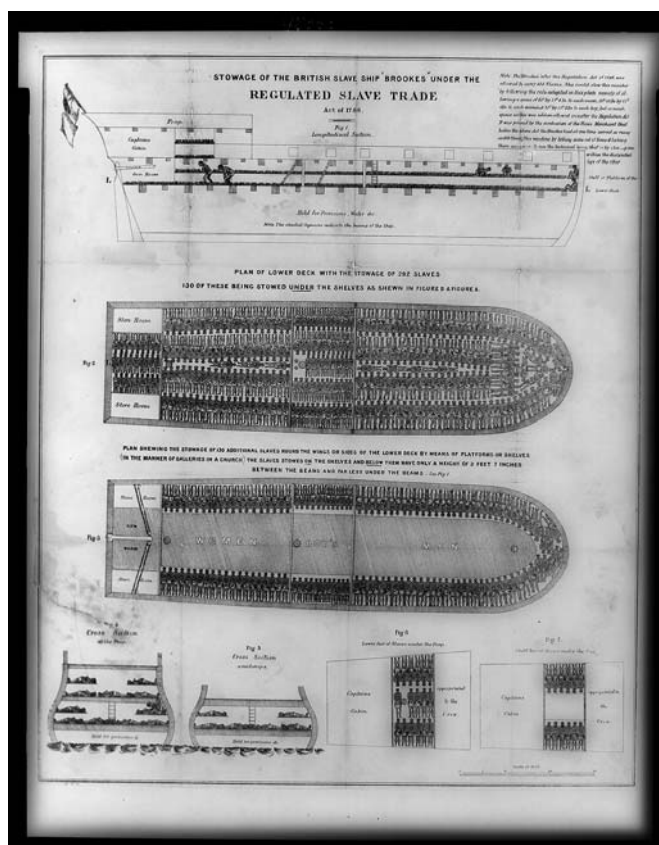
European nations such as England, Spain and Portugal needed a ready supply of slave labour to work in their colonies in America and the West Indies. They discovered that Africans were harder than Europeans and better suited to the hostile climates in these new colonies.



Deck of the slave ship Wildfire

Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807, but other European nations continued to trade. Along the 2600 miles of West African coast over 70 ports were still trading slaves with Spain and Portugal, despite both countries having signed abolition agreements with Britain.

More than 30 years after the ban it was calculated that 100,000 slaves were being shipped to America and the West Indies from West African ports each year. This was enough to persuade the British Treasury to sponsor an expedition up the Niger River in 1841 to investigate the slave trade situation. Within a decade, due to action taken in response to expedition findings, the slave trade in West Africa was all but eradicated.



Plan of British slave ship Brookes, 1788

Ajayi's rescue by the Preventive Squadron

Ajayi and 180 other slaves were packed aboard a Portuguese schooner, ironically named the *Esperanza Feliz* (Free Spirit), and set sail from Lagos on the Nigerian coast. After three days at sea, on April 7th 1822, the *Esperanza* was intercepted by the HMS *Myrmidon*, a ship of the British Royal Navy Preventive Squadron.

In 1807 politicians William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson persuaded Parliament to ban British ships and colonies from transporting and importing slaves. To enforce this law a Preventive Squadron of the Royal Navy was sent to patrol the coast of West Africa where slave trading took place. In 1819 the Navy created a naval station in Freetown, Sierra Leone as an independent command dedicated to the suppression of the slave trade.

Between 1807 and 1860 the West Africa Squadron, to name it properly, seized 1600 ships involved in the slave trade and freed the 150,000 Africans aboard these vessels bound for New World colonies.

In addition to their duties patrolling the coast and intercepting slave ships, the West Africa Squadron negotiated treaties with African chiefs to prevent the continuation of the slave trade.

Despite making a key contribution to ending the slave trade out of West Africa, the Preventive Squadron intercepted only 10 percent of ships involved in the trade.



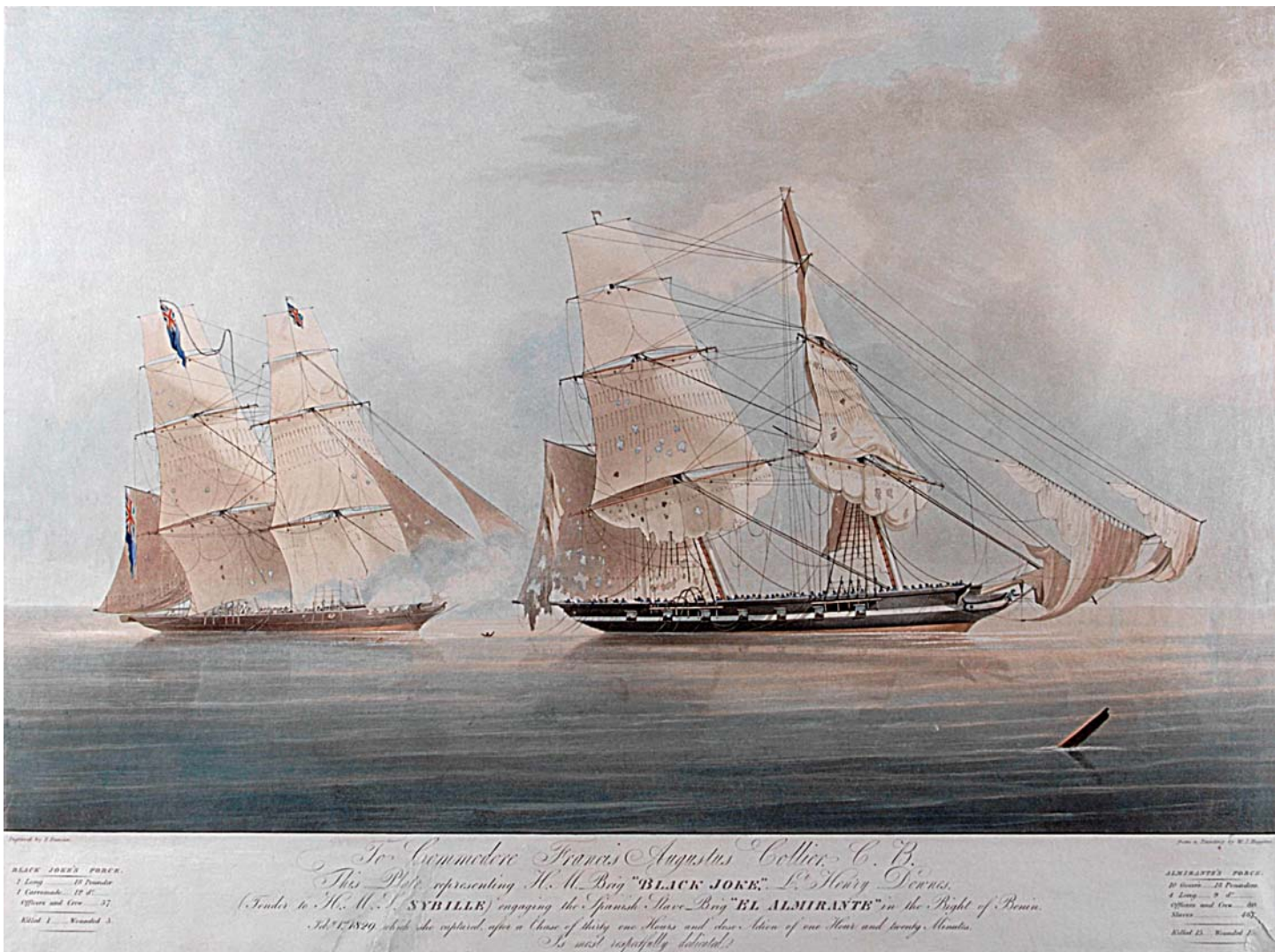
*The Royal Navy attacking Barracoons (slave enclosures).
Courtesy Royal Navy Museum*

Life in the Preventive Squadron

There were few benefits serving on the West Africa Squadron. Daily life was tedious, there were few chances of promotion and disease was common. The African coastal climate, the rivers and swamps proved hazardous to European sailors' health, and many suffered from fevers.

Between 1830 and 1865 approximately 1587 sailors died on the West Africa Squadron from disease, battle, or accidents.

Many Royal Navy ships serving the West Africa Squadron were old and not suited to the task of intercepting slavers. As the Royal Navy began to have some success with their older craft, the slavers responded by swapping their merchant ships for faster American clippers. The Royal Navy struggled to intercept these faster ships, but those that were caught were used against the slavers. One of the most successful ships of the West African Squadron was one such captured ship. Renamed the HMS Black Joke it successfully caught 11 slave ships in one year.



HMS Black Joke intercepting a Spanish slave brig.
Courtesy Royal Navy Museum

Freedom in Sierra Leone



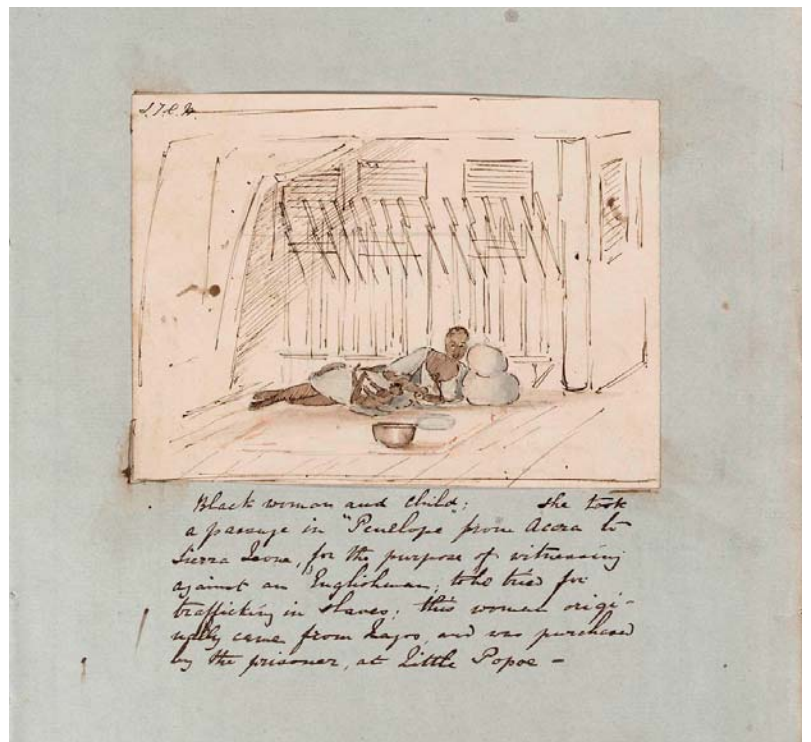
*Bance Island, Sierra Leone, c1805.
A huge staging post for slave traffic.
Courtesy Greenwich Maritime Museum*

After three months patrolling the West African coast, the HMS Myrmidon and its cargo of rescued slaves, including young Ajayi, docked at Freetown harbour in Sierra Leone. The slave ship owners and crew were taken to the Admiralty Court stationed in Freetown and tried. Once judgement was passed and the enslavement declared illegal, the slaves were released.

Sierra Leone had been a thriving centre for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade since the 16th century, but this was to change when British philanthropists founded the Province of Freedom, later Freetown, in 1787 as a settlement for groups of emancipated slaves.

Following Britain's abolition of the slave trade in 1807 the number of freed slaves arriving in Freetown grew rapidly. In 1808 inhabitants numbered 2000, by 1814 the number had risen to 10,000 and continued to rise by about 3000 per year.

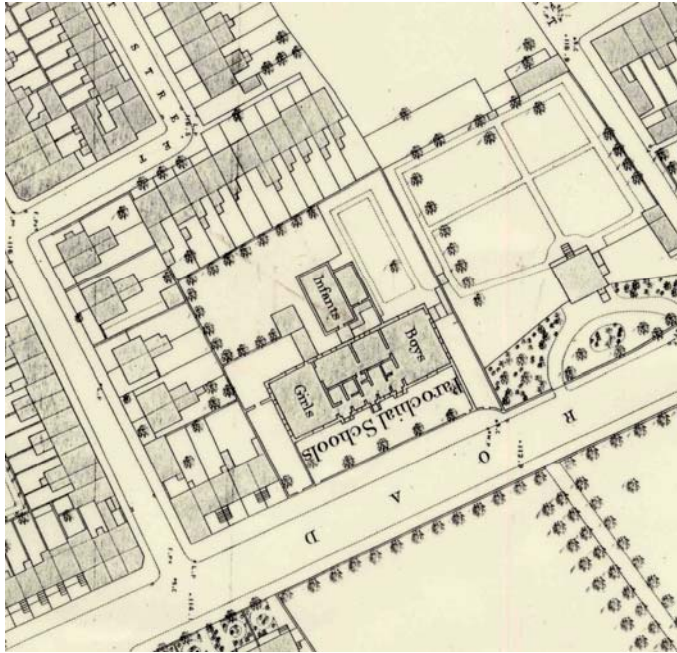
The task of building the freed slaves into a community fell to mission organisations such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS) who believed that Christianity and industry were key to the future and freedom of the African people. Ajayi, an uprooted, emancipated slave from inland Africa soon found himself under the care of the CMS, and so began an association that was to change the course of his life.



Black woman and child; she took a passage in Penelope from Accra to Sierra Leone, for the purpose of witnessing against an Englishman, who tried for trafficking in slaves; the woman originally came from Lagos, and was purchased by the prisoner, at Little Popoe -

A freed slave set down in Sierra Leone to testify against her captors.
Courtesy Greenwich Maritime Museum

Ajayi becomes Samuel Ajayi Crowther, trainee missionary



*St Mary's Parochial Schools, Liverpool Road.
Shown on a map of 1871*

Ajayi was assigned a missionary guardian, Thomas Davey of the Church Missionary Society, who was responsible for his education. Within six months he was able to read the New Testament in English, and was enlisted to help others with their reading and writing.

In 1825 he was baptised and given the name Samuel Crowther after one of the founders of the CMS.

In 1826 Davey took him to England where he attended St Mary's Parochial School, then on Liverpool Road. Davey wanted Crowther to stay in London and receive a proper English education, but due to the high mortality rate of European missionaries in Africa, it was CMS policy to train its promising native missionary students in Africa.

Crowther returned to Sierra Leone and was amongst the first students to attend the missionary college at Fourah Bay set up in Freetown in 1827. Here German missionaries attempted to recreate the religious training they'd received in Europe. By 1834 Crowther was a teacher at the college.

Among the freed slaves of Freetown, Crowther was proving a natural leader. Teamed with his ability to translate numerous West African dialects for his European colleagues, he was the obvious choice for interpreter on the first CMS expedition up the Niger River in 1841. The expedition resulted in failure with nearly one third of the party dead, but Crowther's local knowledge and ability to communicate with native leaders emphasised the case for an African led mission.

Crowther returns to Islington

Crowther completed his missionary education at the Church Missionary Society College on Upper Street, Islington.

The college opened in 1826 for “The education and preparation of missionary students for missionary labours”. In 1915 the college closed. Sutton Dwellings now occupy the site.

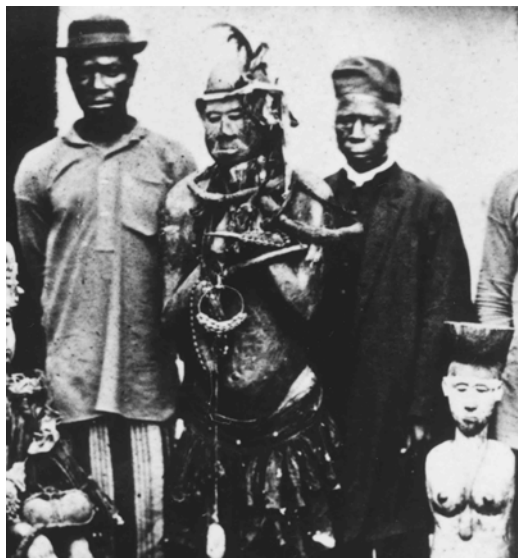
Crowther studied at the college in 1842 and before returning to Africa to begin his missionary work, was ordained at St Mary’s Church in Upper Street. The ordination was performed by Henry Venn, a great friend and supporter of Crowther, and lay secretary of the Church Missionary Society.



The Church Missionary Society Training College, off Upper Street, 1907.

Crowther's missionary work

Reverend Crowther's objectives were those of the CMS, to bring civilization to West Africa through Christianity and industry. Sierra Leone was the shining example of what Christian mission could achieve, and Crowther had the skills to take this example to the rest of his homeland.



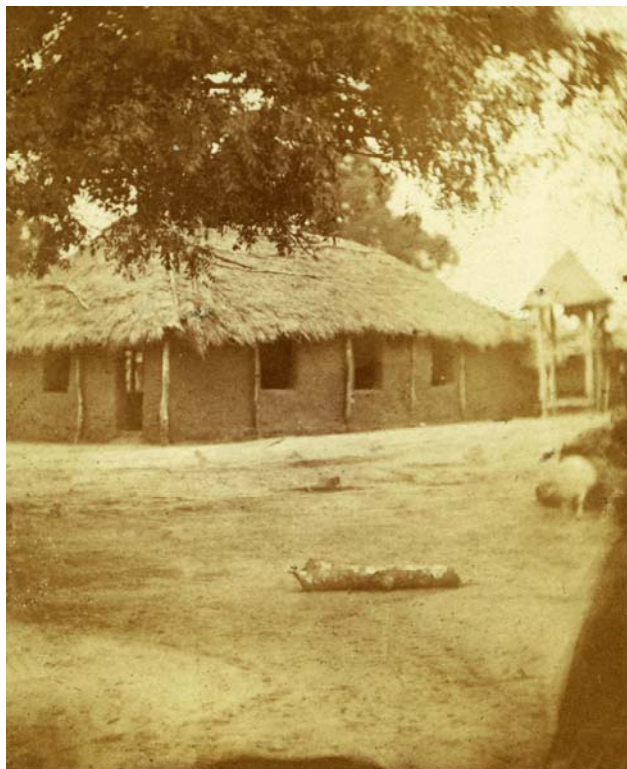
*Crowther with native Yoruba idols.
Courtesy Church Missionary Society*

Crowther used his time in Sierra Leone to study the variety of West African dialects spoken by the freed slaves. He developed a vocabulary and dictionary that unified these dialects into one Yoruba language. Crowther went on to translate the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer into Yoruba, texts that were not only vital to his Christian missionary work inland, but started a whole new written tradition in his homeland.

Rev. Crowther's work as a missionary proper began in 1844 with an expedition along the Niger River to his Yoruba people. In 1846 he established a mission station in Abeokuta. Here the cultivation and trade of cotton were introduced as an alternative to the slave trade.

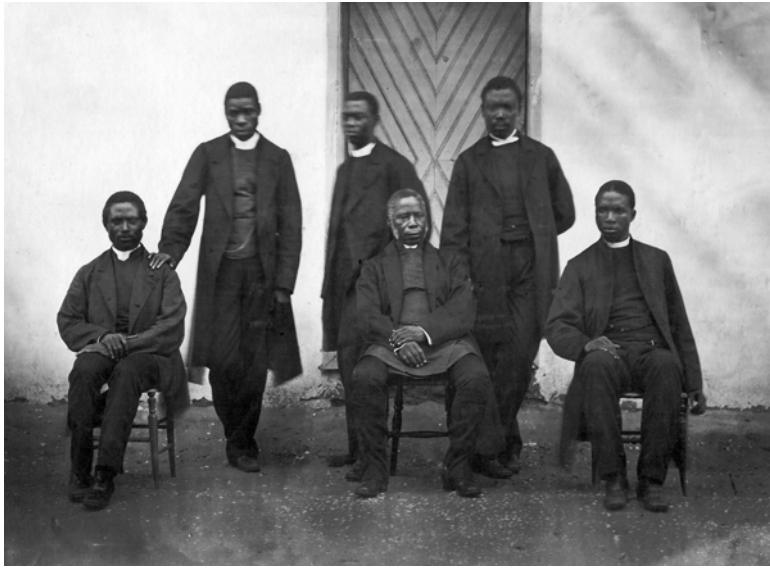
In 1851 Crowther returned to England to promote his missionary work to the British government. While in London he met Queen Victoria and Prince Albert and read the Lord's Prayer to them in Yoruba.

To the British people Crowther personified the success of Christian mission in Africa and convinced the government to invest more heavily in developing West Africa. From here his missionary efforts were able to extend beyond Yorubaland to the east of Nigeria.



*An early Niger Mission church
Courtesy Church Missionary Society*

The Native Agent Crowther is Bishop of the Niger



*Crowther and his native ministers.
Courtesy Church Missionary Society*

To the CMS the goal of any mission was to eventually become a native ministry. This is what Crowther had been trained and ordained for. As a minister he had successfully spread the Christian message throughout his homeland, the time had come for him to lead the Anglican church there.

Crowther's main ally and champion was Henry Venn, the lay secretary of the CMS. Venn and Crowther shared the vision of a self-governing 'native church' in West Africa. Venn successfully lobbied for Crowther's ordination despite racist opposition from some in the CMS and the Anglican church.

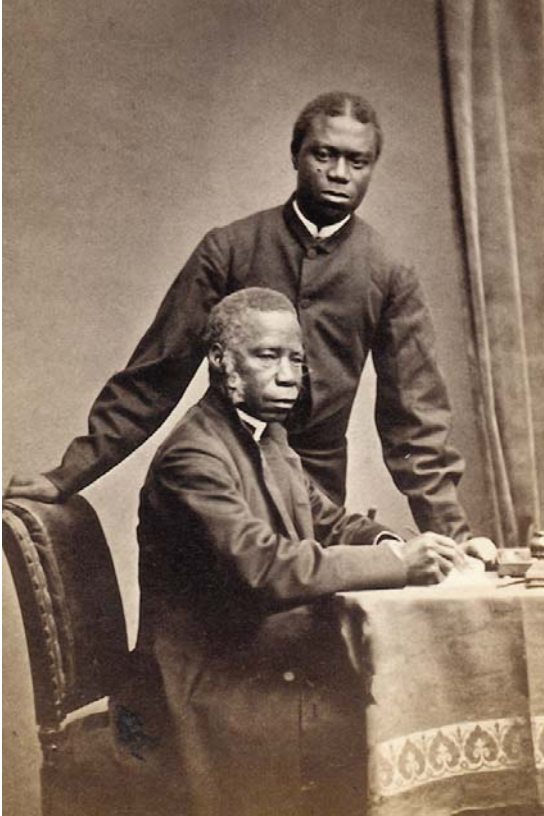
In 1864, Crowther was consecrated Bishop of *"The Countries of Western Africa beyond the limits of the Queen's dominions"*. This arrangement left a European run clergy in Abeokuta and Lagos, who refused to serve an African, under the white bishop of Sierra Leone. Crowther presided over an all-African clergy in the Niger region.

"The Lord has honoured you by making you his instrument for opening the Niger to the Gospel. Should a native Church be established there, and should He call you to preside as a missionary bishop, you would not be the person to run away like Jonah." Henry Venn



*Bishop Crowther of the Niger.
Courtesy Church Missionary Society*

Bishop Crowther's fall from favour



*Crowther and his son
Archdeacon Dandeson Crowther.
Courtesy Church Missionary Society*

Crowther's Niger missions successfully took on a number of roles from establishing new churches to working constructively with Muslim communities. The missions began to offer a viable post-slavery model for Africa, run by Africans. But in later years his leadership and his ministry caused controversy.

Henry Venn retired from the CMS in 1872 and with him went the ideal of a native church in Africa. A new breed of radical European missionary backed by the CMS strongly believed in a European led mission. A smear campaign was started against Crowther's work attacking the alleged luxury of Niger Mission buildings, demanding the sale of the mission steamship, lower African salaries, and ultimately the resignation of Crowther who they considered weak, to be replaced with a white European bishop.

The Niger Delta churches of Crowther's diocese rebelled, detached themselves from CMS control and under the leadership of Crowther's son Dandeson, became a self-governing pastorate.

Bitterly disappointed by the turn of events, Crowther suffered a stroke in July 1891 and died in Lagos, Nigeria on December 31st of that year.



*St Stephen's Church at Bonny, 1880.
Courtesy Church Missionary Society Archive*

Crowther's legacy

The treatment of Crowther and the split from the European mission galvanised the work of the remaining African ministry. The result was an authentically African church which doubled in size every decade after Crowther's death. Today, thanks to Crowther and his native ministry there are 18 times more Anglican worshippers in Nigeria than in the UK.

Not only is Crowther viewed as the father of the African church, but also of the Yoruba people. By bringing together the regional dialects of the Yoruba states into one standardized language, and using this new language to deliver his missionary message, he laid the foundations of a new national identity. The Yoruba ethnicity was born.



*Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther.
Courtesy, Church Missionary Society*