

# Crowther's Journey



The life and times of  
Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther

## Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther Timeline

- 1809** Born in Osogun, Yorubaland, Nigeria
- 1821** Kidnapped and sold to slave-traders  
Rescued by the Royal Navy Anti-Slavery Patrol and taken to Freetown, Sierra Leone
- 1825** Baptised and takes the name Samuel Ajayi Crowther
- 1826** Travels to London to attend Islington Parish School
- 1827** Attends Fourah Bay College, Freetown, Sierra Leone  
Marries Susan Asano Thompson at age 18 years
- 1841** Accompanies an anti-slavery mission up the River Niger
- 1842** Returns to England to be ordained as a minister
- 1843** Receives Holy Orders from the Bishop of London  
Starts to translate the Bible into Yoruba
- 1848** Is reunited with his mother Afala, who is christened with his sister
- 1857** Writes an Ibo language primer
- 1864** Compiles a Nupe language dictionary and grammar  
Awarded a doctorate in Divinity from Oxford University and received by Queen Victoria  
Consecrated Bishop of the Niger at Canterbury Cathedral
- 1870** Personally ordains his son Dandeson in 1870  
at St. Mary Islington
- 1877** Wife Susan dies, survived by two sons  
and three daughters
- 1891** Dies from a stroke on New Year's Eve



*Samuel Ajayi Crowther  
Bishop, Niger Territory  
Oct 19 1891*

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## Introduction

Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther was the Anglican church's first African-born bishop. Born in Osogun, Yorubaland, Nigeria, his journey from slavery to a bishopric is little-known nowadays.

When he was twelve years old, he was kidnapped and sold to slave-traders. He was rescued by a British naval patrol which delivered him to Sierra Leone where he would spend most of his life. Bishop Crowther dedicated much of his missionary work to the eradication of slavery throughout West Africa.

He compiled dictionaries for a number of African languages and translated the Bible into Yoruba, and, despite obstacles placed in his way by the Anglican church, Crowther did much to introduce the idea of African-centred Christianity.

In 2008 members of Southwark Pensioners Centre Black History Group decided to find out more about his life and times. Their *Crowther's Journey* project was a series of weekly sessions which included research, lively discussion and visits to places of significance in the Crowther story, including St Mary Islington, Anti-Slavery International and Holy Trinity Clapham. This booklet focuses on their responses and reflections.

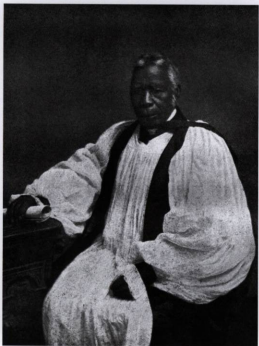
Southwark Pensioners Centre Black History Group at St Mary Islington



## The First Black Anglican Bishop

*During the mid-C19th, Africans did not have much mention in international scenes, except as slaves, and to have one of them become a Bishop of the Anglican church was a great feat. He must have been a man of extraordinary talents. A man who was ahead of his time.*

**Marie**



*He was saved to serve God. In God's Kingdom you have a place, a purpose, a role and a function to fulfil. Just as it is said in Jeremiah 29:11 'For I know the plans I have for you', declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'.*

**Joyce**

*I think he was born with the gift of a fighter and he used it wisely. It had nothing to do with God. He was determined.*

**Sibyl**

*In Sierra Leone, we were taught about Wilberforce, Sharpe and Buxton, but never about Crowther.*

**Olu**

*While people had benefited positively from missionary involvement, the questioning of some of the missionary actions began during the 70s and 80s. There was a realisation of something missing - our own heroes, our own crafts and culture. We had been learning all about the white man. Did this mean we didn't have any heroes or great people?*

**Marie**

*In England we were at school looking at the big areas of red on the maps. These large areas were the British Empire. That's what we were learning.*

**Eric**

*First when I read about him I thought what did it have to do with us from the Caribbean because it's mostly about Africa. But I started thinking that we are from African descent as well. I wanted to know why we were concentrating on this one man. It made me think about the story how it opens up a lot about slavery .*

**Myrtle C**

## Crowther's African Mission

After being rescued, Crowther was taken to Sierra Leone where he was placed in a missionary school. He was baptised three years later and this is when he took the name Samuel Crowther, keeping his Yoruba name Ajayi. He travelled to London where he attended Islington Parish school, before returning to Fourah Bay College in Freetown, Sierra Leone.



The Bishop with fellow clergymen

*He was rescued from slavery and taken to Sierra Leone and educated by several families of missionaries. They made sure he got the best education.*

Olu

In 1841, Crowther accompanied an expedition up the River Niger. He was instrumental in translation and conversion on this controversial mission.

*He was useful to the church, because he was born in Nigeria he could travel up and down the Niger and was familiar with all the languages and traditions.*

Sid

*He was the first to translate the Bible into Yoruba, Ibo and Hausa. He was also in Badagry where he did work to stop slavery in Nigeria.*

Esther

*What I want to know is, what was it about this man that made people listen and follow him? I would like to find out if there are any records of his sermons.*

Eric

Fourah Bay College, Freetown, Sierra Leone where Crowther was a student



## Crowther in England

Visits to St Mary Islington, Holy Trinity Clapham and Anti-Slavery International



Crowther's Journey extended to St Mary Islington, after having studied at the Church Missionary Society's college on the opposite side of Upper Street.

He was ordained as a minister here in 1843. He would later ordain his son Dandeson at the same church in 1870.

This church had a long-standing relationship with the Church Missionary Society, West Africa in general and Sierra Leone, in particular.

One of Crowther's descendants visited the church in 2007 as part of the bi-centenary of the passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807.



At Holy Trinity, Clapham, furniture, fittings and stained glass reveal the building's connections to William Wilberforce, the Clapham Sect and the black presence in London.

It was the members of the Clapham Sect who pushed for a settlement of freed slaves in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Close to Holy Trinity is Anti-Slavery International where *Recovered Histories* tells the story of the transatlantic slave trade from the narratives of the individuals whose lives it affected. One of the lives touched upon is Bishop Crowther. There is a notice from a 19th century anti-slavery meeting in Manchester at which Crowther was recorded as an attendee. There are images of Crowther including a photograph of him seated with other African clergymen, a view of Fourah Bay College in Freetown, Sierra Leone, a portrait of Crowther's son, and an engraving of a church mission settlement in Sierra Leone.



## **Crowther's Journey and the Caribbean**

The slaves in Jamaica were mainly from the Fante, Ashanti, Ibo and Yoruba tribes on the West Coast of Africa. At first traders bought captured warriors and other prisoners from local chieftains. Many worked on the sugar plantations. As demand soared there were huge raids in West Africa and vast numbers of people were captured and sold into slavery. Many passed through Jamaica which acted as a trading post for the rest of the Caribbean.



*My grandmother in Jamaica told me about slavery. There are no headstones, no names. I know the Caribbean people were descended from Africa, but I didn't know about languages or nothing.*

**Myrtle C**

*In the Caribbean, we don't know our names because of slavery.*

**Myrtle E**

*We lost our names through Baptism.*

**Sibyl**

*In British Guyana there were missionaries too – church knights like shepherds...In those days we couldn't ask questions.*

*We were frightened of our teachers and our parents.*

**Saffina**

## Crowther, African Religions & Languages

Crowther kept his Yoruba name Ajayi after his conversion to Christianity.

*Ajayi is a Yoruba name given to a child whose mother bled through her pregnancy.*

### Esther

*No-one knows his religion when he was born. He was not a Christian and Islam had not penetrated.*

### Olu

*Before Crowther, people followed the Orisa tradition – people worshipping idols and attending Ogboni Fraternities, some of which are still influential.*

### Ola

*In the 50s and 60s in Nigeria people were fined for speaking native African languages. People learnt English in schools.*

### Marie

*“The effort one makes of forcing another to be like oneself, makes one an unpleasant person”.*

### Yoruba proverb

Nigerians in London today come mainly from the Yoruba or Igbo community. Each has its respective language.



Idols given up to Bishop Crowther by King Ockiya of Brass

## **A Man of all Peoples**

Miracle of his generation  
Amazing, his rescue and liberation  
His Grace gave him freedom, no trepidation  
Sent to Christ the best situation  
At ten, to Christ missionary society  
In Sierra Leone he gave his loyalty  
They taught him to read and showed him to write  
Sent him to UK, more knowledge from the white  
Became excellent, winning souls for Christ.  
Made him Bishop 1864  
1st Black man, no such before  
Called him 'Bishop of the Niger'  
Sent him to Nigeria  
Came back to Africa to preach love of god  
All boundaries were broken for the common good  
One of Africa's most effective missionaries  
Once a slave, became a visionary  
An acorn that became an oak tree  
Among different peoples across Niger sea  
We love you, Bishop Sam Ajayi Crowther  
Hope we meet you on resurrection day!

**Marie**

*Crowther was known in Nigeria and developed from his youth as a Yoruba. He used and adopted Nigerian traditions. He also kept his name... we learned about him at school. There are no Nigerian people who have not heard of him. He's the most important person in our school studies.*

**Esther**

*First and foremost he was Nigerian. His name locks him into the culture. He adopted Sierra Leonean culture where he has since been adopted as one of their own.*

**Marie**

*Crowther belongs to the Black race. He was a Creole. There is a memorial church in Freetown which carries his name. We were not taught about him in Sierra Leone. All we have is the church and amphitheatre which are named after him. Even in the village where he went to school he is not known.*

**Olu**

*He was a just man. He was not interested in boundaries.*

**Eric**

*Crowther was Nigerian because you can see the name Ajayi. He is from Oshun. He never claimed he was Sierra Leonean.*

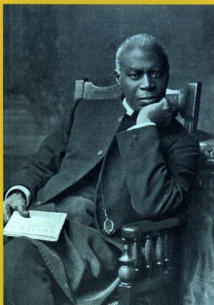
**Ola**

## Crowther's Legacy

*Starting with Bishop Crowther all the members of my family have been well educated. He proved that you can succeed in spite of your circumstances. Every year my cousins in Nigeria celebrate his birthday. The name Samuel is still given to male children in my family.*

*He should be taught more because he gives the black man hope. A lot of people can relate to him because of where he travelled to and all the different black people he met.*

*Elaine Baudouin, a direct descendant of Crowther*



Crowther's son, Dandeson

## The Man in his own Words

### From 'Journal of an Expedition up the Niger'

The most sorrowful scene imaginable was to be witnessed, ~~women, some with three, four, and six~~ children clinging to their arms, with the infants on their backs, running as fast as they could through prickly shrubs... While trying to disentangle themselves from the ropy shrubs, they were overtaken and caught by the enemies, by a rope noose thrown over the neck of every individual, to be led in the manner of goats tied together.

#### On being enslaved

The plan of studying the language of the people, and translating the Scriptures into it, ought to be immediately adopted by every Missionary sent into the heathen world... once the foundation is laid, the top-stones will gradually follow each other, till the work is completed, to the great advantage of the people...

#### On translating the Bible

...after many years of experience, I have found that the Bible must fight its own battle, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

#### On the Bible

We could not say much, but sat still, casting many an affectionate look towards each other, an affection which 25 years had not extinguished.

#### On meeting his mother and family again

**Thank you to all the people who have contributed  
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