

## Ivan May presents a rare George Pemba work to the Ifa Lethu Foundation Collection



Ifa Lethu was delighted to receive a rare work by George Pemba (1912 – 2001) from Board member Ivan May. Painted in oils, also a rare medium for Pemba, this portrait of Dr James Aggrey depicts a truly unique individual whose own story is a fascinating account of this outstanding and amazing African.

### **Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir Aggrey**

**Date of Birth:**

1927-07-30

**Place:**

Anamabu

### **18 OCTOBER 1875 - 30 JULY 1927**

As the early morning sun rose on Monday, 18 October 1875 in the rural Gold Coast village of Anamabu, a newborn babe's cry rent the crisp air. The great-man-to-be, James Aggrey, made his entry into the world. Born of a father of esteemed lineage, Aggrey was to speak with great emotion and pride of a family line traceable to the Kings who participated in the battle and siege of Ghineah in the eleventh century.

Aggrey's father, Kodwo Kwegyir, was born in 1816 and as he entered his 60th year, fathered young James. He brought to his child the great wisdom of age and a maturity that was to guide his young son in pursuit of excellence in all that he was to do and ultimately accomplish in his relatively short 52 years on earth.

Kodwo Kwegyir was the most influential elder in the Council of Amonu IV, the Paramount Chief of Anambu. He held the inherited position of Kyiame, the Spokesman of the great Akan Paramount

Chief. James grew with an awed respect for the traditions and culture into which he was born. He listened carefully and thoughtfully as stories were told of his greatly respected father mediating disputes and finally, acting as the arbitrator appointed by British Governor Cruikshank, to hear and settle the bloody fratricidal war between Cape Coast and Anamabu State.

He heard the legends of his father's bravery in battle as the Captain of the Akomfudzi, the fighting battalion of the men of Anamabu. His valor in the battle of Wassaw in 1862, against the Dutch in 1867 and with the Ashanti in 1873 were told and retold with great pride in the villages of James' youth. Though proud of his father's exploits, he had little ambition to emulate him. His early interests were pointed towards more scholarly pursuits.

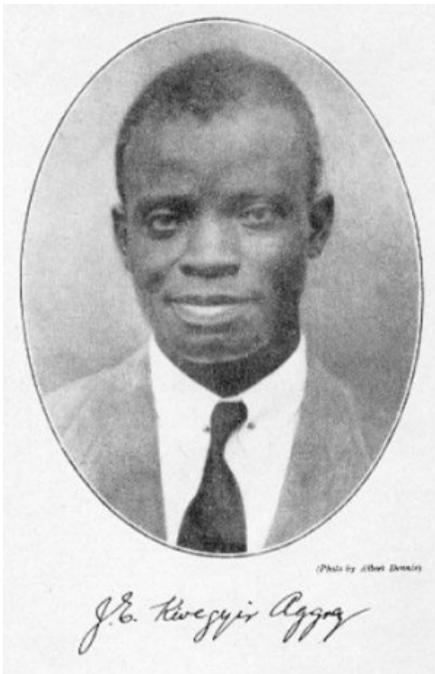
While still a youngster, James began to form the vision of his life's role. At age 9, he articulated his vision, "I will be a spokesman for my entire country, Africa, my Africa". His mother, Abna Andu, the daughter of a mystical man, a great healer, envisioned for her son James, an education leading to a career as a medical doctor. Mother Abna's vision was to be partially fulfilled. Young James had a passion for knowledge, an all consuming desire to learn all about the world he was now a part of.

On 24 June, 1883, he was baptized into the Christian world as a member of the Wesleyan Church where he received the "foreign" name by which we know him today, "James". His introduction to Christianity expanded his universe far beyond his village horizons, as missionaries told him of what lay beyond. His spirituality deepened, revealing an unsurpassed love for his fellow man, a deep sense of dignity and honor, characteristics that were to mark his life forevermore.

At age 8, James entered the Wesleyan Methodist school at Cape Coast. Exceptional teachers quickly recognized their exceptional student. He reveled in the books and the accoutrements of learning. He feasted on knowledge. Everyday at school was an adventure. Everyday away was a torment of waiting in anticipation of more worldly revelations.

It was apparent to all, including James' mother and father, that he was indeed a scholar with a penchant for learning that far outstripped the modest teaching institutions found in the Gold Coast at the close of the 19th century. Latin and Greek beckoned, formal English and French called to him, mathematics and the sciences tantalized him and frustration enveloped him. Finally, in early 1898 "opportunity knocked" for James Aggrey. African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church Bishop John Bryan Small of Barbados, visited the Gold Coast seeking educationally qualified young men to go to America for training, men who would ultimately return to the Gold coast in missionary service. On 10 July, 1898, James Aggrey set sail on the S. S. Accra for England and thence on to America.

Aggrey settled in Salisbury, North Carolina, to attend Livingstone College, the chief educational institution of the church. He excelled in the classics. Plato, Cicero, Virgil, Homer and others became his intellectual friends. He excelled at debate. The writings of Demosthenes and Herodotus were consumed for relaxation and fun. Astronomy, logic, chemistry, physics and comparative literature were consumed as soon as they were offered. Then on to Aeschylus and Tacitus, philosophy, comparative religions, economics and political science. Aggrey never met a subject or book that he did not enjoy! In May, 1902, Aggrey graduated first in his class with great honors, presented with the college's three prized gold medals for Scholarship, English and Department. Educated now beyond most people's dreams, fluent in English, German, French, Latin, Ancient Greek and Modern Greek, Aggrey's quest for knowledge was far from satisfied and in fact, would never be satisfied.



(Photo by Albert Dennis)

On 30 November, 1903, Aggrey took the next step in his spiritual journey. He was ordained an Elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, assuming new duties locally in Salisbury. But little Salisbury with a turn-of-the-century population of less than 2000 was not sufficient to hold the tempestuous and driven Aggrey for long. In 1903, he met the woman with whom he would share life. Miss Rose Douglas of Portsmouth, Virginia was indeed Aggrey's soulmate. Their deep mutual interests in all matters scholarly, from Shakespeare to world history, along with the attractions of youth, combined to deepen their love for one another.

For a brief period, they separated while James attended a summer and fall session at Columbia University in New York City. For the first time in his life, his academic work was mediocre as his mind was focused on Miss Douglas in Virginia. Finally, returning to her side, she accepted his proposal of marriage. On 8 November 1905, they became husband and wife, a union that was destined to be of extraordinary happiness, respect and great mutual experiences, despite many separations. Four children, two boys and two girls, were to bless their lives and give them great joy and happiness. It is interesting to note in one small incident, just how far ahead of their times the Aggrey's were. During each of the four pregnancies, hours were spent reading aloud for fetal benefit the Odes and Epistles of Horace in the original, the great plays of Shakespeare and French poetry while listening to classical music. Interestingly, all four children eventually went on to significant academic achievement in their own right, mastering languages, the mysteries of the sciences, mathematics and the humanities while enjoying and participating in the very same great music.

In May, 1912, Aggrey upon completion of dissertations, was awarded a Masters degree by Livingstone College and the degree of Doctor of Divinity by Hood Theological Seminary. During this very same period, he was enrolled in a legitimate, intense, four year correspondence course with the International College of Osteopathy in Elgin, Illinois, earning the degree of Doctor of Osteopathy in February, 1914, with high honors! In November 1914, Dr. Aggrey accepted a temporary post as Pastor of a church at the tiny black farming town of Sandy Ridge, North Carolina. But once again, Aggrey's dreams far outstripped the miniscule hamlet of fewer than 100 souls.

Each summer from 1915 to 1917, Dr. Aggrey journeyed to Morningside Heights in New York City to attend summer courses at Columbia University. Finally in July, 1918, he matriculated to Columbia with a goal of earning his Ph.D.

His ever-fertile mind wandered giddily through Columbia's outstanding academic menu. From sociology, psychology, education, to the Japanese language, Aggrey tried and learned them all. He befriended students and faculty alike, breaking down the racial barriers of the day and proved to be the same superb scholar at world esteemed Columbia University that he had been in the Gold Coast and at humble, church-run Livingstone College.

In June 1920, Aggrey earned the Teacher's Life Professional Certificate and was carefully weighing his future when great and unimaginable opportunity presented itself. Dr. Paul Monroe, esteemed Professor at Columbia and member of Board of Trustees of the Phelps-Stokes Fund recommended the inclusion of James Aggrey as a member of the Phelps-Stokes African Education Commission. The goal of the commission's forthcoming trip to Africa was to ascertain the requirements necessary to improve the educational status of the "Natives of Africa". And so, with this Great Epic adventure facing him, a new chapter began in the amazing life of Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir Aggrey.

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