

Dr Agnes Yewande Savage - West Africa's First Woman Doctor (1906-1964)

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Dr Agnes Yewande Savage was the first West African woman to qualify in medicine. An outstanding student at Edinburgh, Agnes obtained first class honours in all her subjects and won the prestigious Dorothy Gilfillan Memorial Prize for the best woman graduate in 1929. Born in Edinburgh to a Nigerian father and Scottish mother, once she qualified Agnes faced huge institutional barriers - dictated both by race and sex. These barriers, in turn, have meant it has only been possible to reconstruct Agnes' remarkable life history through correspondence with her niece and nephew, Margaret and Mike Savage - despite the key roles she played in the early histories of numerous important Ghanaian institutions. Though better qualified than most of her white male counterparts when appointed as a junior medical officer in colonial Ghana, Agnes was paid discriminatory wages and lived in servants' quarters. In 1931, Andrew Fraser, headmaster of Achimota College - a new school established to educate a new generation of African leaders - heard of her struggles and recruited Agnes as both a teacher and medical officer. Agnes went on to establish a nurses' training school and worked in Korle Bu Hospital's maternity department - considerable achievements - but it was not until 1945 after extensive and exacting correspondence with the Colonial Office that Agnes, as a black European, was given equal terms of employment, salary and retirement. She retired in 1947, exhausted after a life fighting institutional racism. Her remarkable life has only been sparingly referenced elsewhere.

Part of the Savage medical dynasty, which had numerous connections to Edinburgh's medical school, Agnes followed in the footsteps of her father and brother, as well as her working-class Scottish mother, in coming to Edinburgh University. Agnes' Nigerian father, Richard Akiwande Savage Snr married Maggie S Bowie, a Scottish iron turner's daughter in 1899. A Nigerian medical student, Richard Savage Snr was also sub-editor of *The Student* during his time in Edinburgh and graduated with a MB ChB in 1900. As a student, he was vice president of the Afro-West Indian Society - a student association whose object was "the promotion of social life and intellectual improvement among African and West Indian students in Edinburgh" - and attended the trail-blazing 1900 Pan-African Conference organized by Henry Sylvester Williams in London, along with Trinidadians William Meyer (who attacked pseudo-scientific racism for "trying to prove that negroes were worthless and depraved persons who had no right to live") and John Alcindor (who went on to become president of the Africa Progress Union).[1] Richard Savage Snr left Edinburgh in 1903 to work as a government doctor in Lagos, Nigeria, where he also established a newspaper. In 1906, colonial officials decided that Richard Savage would be better employed in colonial Ghana, and he was given a medical job in Cape Coast - becoming the last African medical officer in the West African Medical Service after the introduction of a colour bar blocking the employment of black doctors. Richard Savage Snr continued his newspaper work in Ghana - publishing the *Gold Coast Leader*. The Savage family returned to Lagos in 1915 - where Richard founded the *Nigerian Spectator*. An important early African nationalist figure, who believed: "When we think of a united Nigeria we must also think of a united British West Africa", Richard Savage Snr was an enigmatic figure. Walking along the Lagos beachfront, with Maggie, one Sunday afternoon "when they passed a cigarette stall the salesman said, 'See that Doctor, he be proud oh.'...[Richard] spun round and responded in pigeon, "This doctor no be proud. Dis Doctor he swank." [2] The future Nigerian president, Nnamdi Azikiwe, admired Richard Snr as a 'cosmopolitan', and for the 'superb English of his editorials'. [3]

Agnes' older brother Richard Gabriel Akiwande Savage, who was also born in 15 Buccleuch Place in 1903, similarly went on to graduate from Edinburgh's medical school in 1926 and qualified in 1927, becoming a "forgotten pioneer of African medical history", and the first West African to receive a British Army officer's commission. He was demoted once it was discovered he was black. Subsequently he distinguished himself as a captain in Burma and was awarded an OBE. An "immensely caring man...of mixed Scottish and Gold Coast ancestry", Mike Savage retells how Richard Jnr

went on to work for many years in Nigeria where he became a much loved figure and, eventually, the chief medical officer of one of the country's largest hospitals in Enugu. His first wife Phyllis, a strikingly beautiful woman of mixed Ghanaian and European descent tragically died of yellow fever in 1940. His second Dora, an English woman was a superb surgeon. Married in 1954, they worked together in Nigeria and Ghana. After their retirement they did locums all over the world in countries such as Sierra Leone, Zambia, Nazareth and a leper colony off Hong Kong. A thoughtful and spirited man, Dr. Ritchie Savage eventually died in 1993 after a long illness. [4]

The Savage Collection, donated by Richard Jnr to the National Library of Scotland in 1988, contains a rich range of sources on 18th and 19th West African history.

Agnes Yewande Smith Bowie Savage, herself, was born in 15 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh at 5:15 am on 21st February 1906.[5] She “was clearly exceptional from childhood. A studious, serious-minded child, she excelled at school and is on record as having passed the exams of the Royal Academy of Music in 1919 at the tender age of thirteen.” As the child “of a distinguished father who was not just a renowned doctor but also a newspaper publisher and nationalist politician, she found that a lot was expected of her – and she delivered beyond all expectations.”[6] In 1923 she won a scholarship to free tuition at George Watson’s Ladies College, obtained Standard Certificates in all her subjects, won a prize for General Proficiency in Class Work and passed the Scottish Higher Education Leaving Certificate allowing her to matriculate into Edinburgh University.[7]

At Edinburgh, Agnes clearly excelled, with Professor WT Ritchie later writing that Agnes worked “with much diligence, zeal and skill.” In her 4th year at Edinburgh she obtained first class honours in all her subjects, won a prize in ‘Diseases of the Skin’ and a medal in Forensic Medicine - becoming the first woman to do so. On leaving Edinburgh, lecturer Edwin Matthew reflected, “She will I feel sure make a successful doctor.”[8]

Mike Savage, Agnes’ nephew, has retold that after graduating from Edinburgh, in 1930 Agnes

was appointed as a junior medical officer in the Gold Coast. Her early years were particularly hard. The Colonial Office was her employer and she was employed under local terms. Though rich by local standards, Agnes could not afford to hire a cook; meat was a luxury; she had to travel by bus; and had three weeks holiday every year. Her white British colleagues, frequently not as skillful, educated or dedicated, had salaries that enabled them to eat whatever they pleased; food that had been cooked, served and cleaned by an army of servants; rode in their own cars driven by uniform-clad chauffeurs; sent their children to the best British fee-paying schools and universities; and had three months paid leave in the UK every three years (transport home paid). So, though better educated, qualified, and skillful than most of her white British colleagues, being black, Agnes lived as a local employee in hospital servants’ quarters without any chance of ever again seeing her mother, home or friends.

Agnes Savage’s plight came to the attention of Andrew Fraser, headmaster of Achimota College a newly established institution close to Accra the capital, that aspired to educate the future leaders of the Gold Coast. Apart from her broad range of educational skills, he saw Agnes as a remarkable model for his pupils. In 1931 he recruited her as both a teacher and medical officer. Fraser pleaded her case with the Colonial Office, and Agnes was given a European contract. For four years Agnes worked at Achimota where she really enjoyed her time before rejoining the Colonial Office medical service. When she did so, a concession was made and Agnes was given, “...leave and passage terms of a European.” Her joint appointment was being given charge of the infant welfare clinics associated with the Korle Bu Hospital, Kumasi; assistant medical officer to the maternity department; and

warden of the nurses' hostel. In addition, Agnes supervised the establishment of the Nurses Training School at Korle Bu where a nurses' ward is named after her. However, it was not until 1945 after extensive correspondence with the Colonial Office that Agnes as a black European was offered the same terms of service, salary and retirement as a white one. Fighting this racism took a toll. She became physically and psychologically exhausted, was invalided from the service, and officially retired in 1947. However, with her friend Esther Appleyard [who had been Chief Education Officer in Ghana] she lived a comfortable life in Hertfordshire, England, caring for her brother's son and daughter during their school holidays though ghosts from the past did haunt her. She died of a stroke in 1964.[9]

Further research into Agnes' clearly remarkable, but still ambiguous, life is much needed. Her contributions to the history of Ghanaian development, medicine and education, alongside fellow Edinburgh graduates Dr Matilda Clerk and Dr Susan Gyankoromae de Graft-Johnson, would make a fantastic thesis. Stephen Addae, for example, has argued that both white women and black male doctors both struggled to find employment within the West African Medical Service, between 1902 and the late 1940s, and that those outside the WAMS were banned from running private clinics in Ghana. Yet both the lives of Agnes and her father circumvent this analysis of the broader medical labour market in colonial Ghana. [10]

Nonetheless, as set out by Keazor, it can still be confidently asserted that: "Agnes Yewande Savage left one of the greatest legacies for Nigerian women by becoming the first Nigerian female graduate and medical doctor. Thousands have followed in her footsteps, but her outstanding academic achievements, her pedigree, and the quality of her work stand out." Whilst the details, and the fraught politics of Agnes' life are still shrouded by institutional silences, she clearly "set a sterling example for several generations of Nigerian women to follow in years to come. Her life shows that hard work and self-belief can allow one to break barriers." [11]

References

[1] I'm heavily indebted to Mike Savage for his correspondence and photos of Agnes, Ed Keazor for access to his research and the photo of the Savage family, and Marika Sherwood, Ian Duffield, and LaRay Denzer for access to their research notes and feedback. P. Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, p.283.

[2] Correspondence with Mike Savage, 25/09/1991.

[3] M. Sherwood, 'Two Pan-African political activists emanating from Edinburgh University: Drs John Randle and Richard Akiwande Savage' on Afe Adogame and Andrew Lawrence (eds), *Africa in Scotland, Scotland in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

[4] E. Keazor, 'Tracking Captain Savage: The Forgotten Pioneer of African Military History', accessed <http://nsibidiinstitute.org/tracking-captain-savage-the-forgotten-pioneer-of-african-military-history/> 17/08/2016; correspondence with Mike Savage, 08/10/2016. The *British Medical Journal*, 345 (2012) contains the obituary for Dora Janet Burman Savage: "Former Surgeon (b. 1911; q. Royal Free Hospital Medical School 1935; FRCS (Edin)), d. 18 December 2010. During the Second World War Dora Janet Burman Savage (nee Falconer) worked in Hounslow, treating victims of the Blitz and carrying out a great deal of major trauma

surgery. She joined the Royal Army Medical Corps during the war and was posted to East Africa, where she treated wounded soldiers from the Far East. She was then transferred to Nigeria, ending up with the rank of lieutenant colonel. She met and married Richard Gabriel Akiwande Savage in 1954. 'Ritchie' was a fellow surgeon, and they worked together in the government medical service at the Enugu General Hospital. When Ritchie reached 60 and Nigeria became independent in 1960, they retired from those positions and worked together in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Malawi, and finally in a leper colony in Hong Kong. Dora continued to do locum posts in accident and emergency medicine until the 1990s. She worked with the first aid nursing yeomanry, teaching first aid after her retirement, and she remained active at home despite failing eyesight and hearing until two years before she died. She was widowed in 1994; she predeceased her only brother and had no children of her own, although she leaves two stepchildren, Miguel and Margaret Savage."

[5] Birth certificate of Agnes Yewande Savage, available at the Scottish National Archives.

[6] E. Keazor, *120 Great Nigerians*, p.409.

[7] *Nigerian Spectator*, 18/08/1923. Many thanks to LaRay Denzer for supplying these references.

[8] *Nigerian Spectator*, 05/05/1928; *Nigerian Spectator*, 21/07/1928; correspondence with Mike Savage 07/10/2016.

[9] Correspondence with Mike Savage, 24/09/2016.

[10] S. Addae, *The Evolution of Modern Medicine in a Developing Country: Ghana 1880-1960*, (Durham, 1996).

[11] E. Keazor, *120 Great Nigerians*, p.410.