

The month of November 1967 was the 75th anniversary of the birth of Mr. Kobina Sekyi, and to commemorate the occasion we present a fragment of his biography below. - Ed.

KOBINA SEKYI: A Fragment of Biography

His full name was William Essuman-Gwira Sekyi, or W. Essuman-Gwira Sekyi; either way, it is a resplendent looking and mouth filling name, entirely in tune with the personality of its owner. But in everyday life he was known simply as Kobina Sekyi.

Lawyer, philosopher, wit, iconoclast and rebel, Kobina Sekyi was, possibly, unique in the history of Ghana, and his kind may not be repeated soon. The elements were not only mixed in him but many. A man of adamantine will and strength character; a man so uncompromising in his beliefs about what was right and proper, that practically to his last breath he put the leadership claims of the old Aborigines Rights Protection Society before those of any other "national" organization, past or present; a man of such great intellect and crushing wit as to strike fear and create apprehension in his opponents - Kobina Sekyi went through life knocking down other people's idols right and left and setting up his own.

Clad defiantly in his Kente cloth once outside the law courts, Sekyi looked out with ill-concealed pity and scorn at many kinds of people. Especially did he despise those African compatriots who so pathetically showed they could not live outside some of the more ridiculous habits they had cultivated from the West, like wearing black woolen coats and striped trousers in the middle of the torturing heat of Africa, or affecting English food tastes exclusively or habitually. He laughed at ineptitude, held ignorance in contempt, execrated imitation, and, to repeat, despised all "Europeanised Africans" - who could not dispense with himself Western philosophy, and poured out Plato, Justinian, and Blackstone with frequency and often without cause. But the more European philosophy he read, the more African he became No, there has not been a character in recent Ghana history quite like Kobina Sekyi, and without his story it would be a poorer history. If Britain cannot afford to miss her Bernard Shaws and Bertrand Russells, neither could Ghana have afforded to have missed her Kobina Sekyi.

This remarkable man first came to public notice when, soon after his philosophy and law studies at Cambridge and the London Inns, he read a paper on education at one of the early meetings of the West African National Congress. He was soon at loggerheads with those of the chiefs who were then opposed to the Congress, although in principle he was never himself against chieftaincy as such. Indeed his extreme Africanism would itself have made nonsense of such a position on his part. But this would not have been because self-contradiction was foreign to Sekyi's nature; it was just that in this case he was merely opposing people who were opposed to ideals he believed in. In spite of his sponsorship of the National Congress of British West Africa, which he upheld for a long time, Sekyi's life-long sympathies were with his beloved, Oguaa-created Aborigines Society, which he always invoked and urged upon the rest of the country as soon as there was an emergency.

The Aborigines was in fact an obsession, but this obsession went deeper than just Sekyi's attachment to original things. Part of the attachment was also to fundamental, elemental, things - like the elemental thing of land, which was the cause of a fundamental thing like a society set up to protect the rights of aborigines against foreign encroachment and usurpation. Things less basic than these were a trial to the spirit of Kobina Sekyi, and this was half the trouble with him and his contemporaries; it was also at least half the explanation of the impracticality which kept him most of his later years the isolated "Sage of Cape Coast".

But before the isolation became itself part of the legend, Sekyi had, by his inimitable, irascible ways, made the general lines of his philosophy of life clear, both to his own generation and the one after. One of these ways of self-revelation was the written word. His connection with the 1920s, '30s, - and '40s was the massive volume of his writings in and to the newspapers, beginning with his first reactions to 20th-century life among educated and sophisticated Africans after his return from England, and continuing through his attacks on the colonial Government: for land policy, legislative programmes, unenlightenment, and wickedness on the question of self-rule, to the inevitable and lonely preferment of the Aborigines. On his countrymen he was generally ambivalent, even schizophrenic; he attacked them at home and defended them abroad, with equal intensity. He was almost like Samuel Johnson, who would not let anyone praise Garrick in front of him without contradicting the praiser, and would not let anyone run Garrick down either, without vehemently opposing the blamer.

The Gold Coast Leader of the 1920's is full of the writings of Kobina Sekyi. His style called for twice as many words as he needed ever to have used, and some of his sentences practically never stopped. But there was compensation for the reader in the sheer wholeheartedness of Sekyi's "attack-attack-attack" method, and in the scorn he could not help. (See below). Later, his writings, as exemplified in the Cape Coast Observer during the stormy 'Thirties and the 1940's, became more and more ponderous and abstruse, as he lost more and more sympathy with the modern world and as the modern world remembered him less and less.

But one thing more must be said about the personality of Kobina Sekyi. With all his impatience with society generally, and with all the opposition and antagonism that he, quite naturally, also aroused in others, he was in reality a very charming man in private life. To have been allowed to visit and talk with him at his home in Cape Coast was both a privilege and a delight not soon forgotten. To the last he did poke fun at everybody, young and old, but more gently, more indulgently, than in 1922, when, for instance, he attacked the new Marriage Ordinance and what he considered to be its evil effects on young Africa. I close this fragment on Kobina Sekyi with two short passages on this and another subject, from articles sent by him to the Cape Coast Observer in the 1920's:

.... A very fruitful source of trouble in this respect, is the partiality, or assumed or expected partiality, of people marrying under the Ordinance, to what are loosely termed 'parties', at which manners prescribed in books such as 'How to Dance', 'Rules and Manners of Good Society', 'Don't', 'Etiquette for Gentlemen', and a host of other misguiding compilations are de rigeur. There is always now-a-days a plentiful supply of 'clubs' to pander to this sort of forced appetite. It is not suggested that this sort of thing is bad in itself, but only that it is bad since it is forced and unnatural A man may, for example, cultivate a taste for high game or gorgonzola cheese, if he is an epicure and naturally inclined towards gamey

confections; but he is a most insufferable prig if he cultivates such a taste merely because it is fashionable, for to hanker after such evil-tasting and vile-smelling preparations merely to become fashionable is to subvert one's ordinary and natural senses for an artificial purpose, a line of physical and social retrogression or maldevelopment....

The more Western philosophy Kobina Sekyi read, the more African he remained in his social beliefs, as has been indicated before. The second passage I have chosen here illustrates this point:

Now, there can be no doubt that of the two social systems contrasted in this part of this article, that which makes for unhampered development of the individual is that of the English white man resident in England; but it is a matter to be debated whether it is good for the individual to obtain the opportunity he has in the English system to develop without encumbrances. I would submit that the individual who, in spite of the many burdens which he must bear in the matter of assisting relatives under the Akan-Fanti social system, nevertheless thrives, becomes a better man, and is better fitted to look after other human beings: my point is that the person who goes through the Akan-Fanti system of growing up becomes a fuller man, and has all that is good in him brought out, and all that is bad restrained or suppressed by the discipline which in a well-set-up family is exerted on the thriftless individual through the disapproval [of the family] .

To the very last this was the truth as it appeared to Kobina Sekyi, while all round him - seated as he was in the storied house which had become in fact and in philosophy his ivory tower - all around him the old African order of things crumbled and fell into the Cape Coast dust. The ageing and ailing tiger-man would not believe that Africa too was

after all only human, and that there were weaknesses in the African character and on the African scene which were not necessarily all derived or all induced from abroad or from "above"; or that change in all directions - not just for home-rule - was both inevitable and desirable.

He was, in short, in some things as deeply conservative as he was in others angrily radical. This kind of combination is common, of course; it is not what made Kobina Sekyi almost unique. What made him unique was the inimitable way in which he wore his contradictions, and the sheer exuberance of his intellectual arrogance, which, in his type of personality alone, became a thing not for spite but for boundless admiration. For through it all: the rock, the flint and the fire, shone the sincerity and the trustworthiness of "The Sage of Cape Coast": W. Essuman-Gwira Sekyi - a name fit for the ages, and Africa.

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