

## **Tribute: MR S.H.A. SAWYERR**

I am most grateful to the Association for this opportunity to pay tribute to our former Principal Mr S.H.A. Sawyerr.\* I know I do not overstate the case when I say that the entire Princewalean community, as well as Mr Sawyerr's many friends and colleagues in his other spheres of life, were deeply shocked and saddened by news of his death in London in the fortnight before Christmas 2002.

There was a time, in the 1970s, when Pa Sawyerr (as most of us have always known and referred to him) was probably the best-known Principal in Sierra Leone. And rightly so, for he was, in many ways, a trailblazer who set the standards that other school heads had to endeavour to emulate if their schools were to have any chance of keeping up with the high-flying "POW" of those days. That time in the 70s to which I refer also happens, by happy coincidence, to more or less represent the years when I was myself a pupil there, hence the proud sense of "ownership" and rather proprietorial references to "our Principal" in what follows here.



The last time I spoke in public about Pa Sawyerr was on the altogether happier occasion of his son Keith's wedding (in London), when I had the unexpected privilege of proposing the toast to the Bridegroom's parents. Pa Sawyerr was unavoidably absent from the ceremony, which gave me the courage to share some reflections of my POW years under his tutelage with my audience. I recalled, then, that to many of my generation at the Prince of Wales School, our Principal Pa Sawyerr was, quite simply, a bad man, and to a few of us, at least, he was an outright very, very, bad man indeed. I also noted that, in order for Pa Sawyerr to qualify for such dramatic epithets in the eyes of "battle-hardened" schoolchildren of my day, he had to have been, in reality, a very, very, good disciplinarian and educationist indeed.

And he was 'Our Principal', as I remember him, was a fine example of what School mastering should be all about. Times have changed, but in those days one was, first and foremost, in an in statu pupillari/in loco parentis relationship, and the schoolmaster/schoolmistress played a real and essential role in the lives of their young charges. To those who did not see Pa Sawyerr in action, it will be hard to convey a true measure of his contribution to the Prince of Wales ethos that emerged so triumphantly in the mid 1960s and 70s. A simple list of his major roles – Schoolmaster, Principal, Administrator, Education Attaché to the High Commission in London, etc – impressive though that list might be, indicates nothing of the style, effectiveness or panache with which these roles were undertaken and accomplished. The sheer professionalism, organizational ability and mathematician's attention to detail that he brought to these jobs was a source of inspiration to those working with and for him.

I remember Pa Sawyerr as a tall and imposing figure, always impeccably dressed and demanding at all times equally high standards of sartorial elegance from the pupils in his charge, particularly on those first days of term when full ceremonial uniform was de rigueur. Form Tutors were required to carry out comprehensive uniform

inspections on such days, and even the most minor of transgressions (such as the wrong colour of socks) meant you had to dress up all over again at the start of the following week and report for re-inspection.

Pa Sawyerr in the classroom was the ultimate in formidability. He did not suffer fools gladly (and I should know), insisting always in his Mathematics lessons on what he called “Speed and Accuracy.” He had just been newly installed as our Principal when I entered the school, and was my Mathematics teacher in the First Form. My failure to appreciate the significance of “speed and accuracy” sometimes (to be perfectly accurate I should say frequently) resulted in my being advised by Pa Sawyerr to “take a trip” to his friend Mr Johnson and, as he would put it with a wry smile on those occasions, “give him my regards”. We all soon realized that this was a trip best avoided, because Mr Johnson was the Woodwork Master and the reward for conveying Pa Sawyer’s “regards” was between 6 and 12 strokes of his very large cane.

Acts of genius such as Pa Sawyerr’s in shaping the Prince of Wales School of his time so decisively in his image always happen, of course, in a context. They have a history, a purpose, and a future. Pa Sawyerr fits effortlessly into that “Great Tradition” of Sierra Leonean (and Prince of Wales School-related) Educationists which includes such names as E. B. Williams, Rev. Ejesa Osora, Constant and Sam Tuboku-Metzger, Sam Forster and Davidson Nicol. He recognized the rich diversity of the Prince of Wales School’s intake, and worked tirelessly with Alhaji M.S. Mustapha, Sir Banja Tejan-Sie, Madiana Sanusi et al to secure the establishment of that genuinely multi-faith; genuinely ecumenical school community which remains one of the most distinctive features of the Prince of Wales School today.

Needless to say, Pa Sawyerr set high standards and expected every student to live up to them. As I remarked at Keith’s wedding, it is undoubtedly an indication of Pa Sawyerr’s majestic intellect and positive role-modelling that in all his years as principal of a school located on the edge of Kroo Bay, none of his pupils, to the best of my knowledge, ended up as fishermen or deep-sea divers. If any of them did, on the other hand, they will almost certainly be the best-educated fishermen/deep sea divers to come out of our part of Africa for some time.

Pa Sawyerr would wish, of course, to be remembered as a family man. He was, and quite rightly so, intensely proud of the achievements of his devoted wife and his children. Mrs Princess Sawyerr and her children – Keith, Gordon, Amabel, Agatha – should be comforted by the fact that their husband and father enriched so many lives, and that through his influence many of us are better people than we were before our encounter with him.

*His life was gentle, and the elements  
So mixed in him, that nature might  
Stand up and say to all the world:  
“This was a Man.”  
May his soul rest in perfect peace.*

KAYODE ROBBIN-COKER (1969 – 1974)

Delivered on the occasion of the School’s Foundation Day Celebrations in London; April 2003)

*Samuel Haggai Adjaie Sawyerr; Born in Freetown 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1921; died in London 11<sup>th</sup> December 2002. Schoolmaster, Scholar and International Educationist; Principal of the Prince of Wales Secondary School and Education Attaché, Sierra Leone High Commission in London.*