



## **K. A. Gbedemah – A Political Colossus**

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Komla Agbeli Gbedemah – Ghana's first Finance Minister

Komla Agbeli 'Afro Gbede' Gbedemah of Anyako was a revolutionary youth activist and an iconic statesman who, as a senior architect of both pre-colonial and postcolonial Ghana, played a critical role in statecraft and shaped the political landscape of our Republic for decades. He is widely recognised as the mastermind who propelled the image of Kwame Nkrumah – the father of Pan-Africanism – to national attention.

Gbedemah understood the chess of the old guard, perhaps, better than most of his contemporaries, and shrewdly manoeuvred his way through a muddled political arena. Komla always maintained a position of power on the chessboard until the very hour he kicked the bucket.

## **Early Life, Journalism & Venture Capitalism**

K. A. Gbedemah was born on 17 June 1913 at Warri, Nigeria where his father, Awumee Gbedemah, plied his trade as a government pharmacist.

His early childhood experiences brought a unique exposure to Afro Gbede about life in British West Africa, since he had been domiciled in four typically colonial cosmopolitan cities, namely Warri; Keta; Cape Coast and Accra, by the age of 10.

Afro Gbede's formal education began at the Keta-based Local Roman Catholic School before he relocated to Accra in 1923 to live with his maternal uncle, Carl Dey, an educationist who served as a master at the Government Teacher's Training College.

Gbedemah's father had him enrolled at the SPG Grammar School, upon the recommendation of the principal, S. R. A. Nicholas. This was where he sat the Junior School Certificate Examination and was awarded the King Edward XII scholarship to attend the elite Prince of Wales (Achimota) College.

Gbedemah, together with William Ofori-Atta and Edward Akufo-Addo (the latter was appointed as the first senior prefect of the Achimota College), were part of the first batch of students to ever graduate from the Achimota College.

Afro Gbede, the youngest amongst the three students, obtained a Bachelor of Science degree upon completion of studies at the Achimota College.

Afro Gbede had his eyes set on a career as a medical practitioner but couldn't earn a scholarship to support this academic aspiration. But as a well-connected pioneer old boy from the prestigious Achimota College, the future was not at all dim.

He gained employment shortly after as the proof reader and, subsequently, editor for Times of West Africa; a newspaper owned by the illustrious J. B. Danquah, a man of letters.

Gbedemah developed his craft as an all-rounded communicator during his apprenticeship under J. B. Danquah. He became abreast with current affairs and popular culture. An unusually industrious young man, even by the standards of your quintessential workaholic, with a rare appetite for venture capitalism, Afro Gbede soon set up a number of successful enterprises and earned a decent living for himself before getting involved in Gold Coast politics. His former boss, J. B. Danquah, had served as Secretary of the Ghana Youth Conference from 1937 to 1947.

Afro Gbede established timber and construction businesses which supplied material when edifices such as the Accra Airport, 37 Military Hospital and Accra Sports Stadium were under construction. He also worked with multinational corporations such as H. B. Green, a European building firm headquartered in the capital of the Gold Coast.

## **Gold Coast & Ghanaian Politics**

In 1941, aged 28, Gbedemah settled down and tied the knot with Adelaide Plange in a beautiful marriage ceremony. Seven years later, in August 1948, Gbedemah became a member of the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) — a conservative political organisation of which his former classmates, William Ofori-Atta and Edward Akufo-Addo, were members. He was appointed Chairman of the Convention Youth Organisation, the youth wing of the UGCC, with Kojo Botsio serving as its Secretary.

When Nkrumah arrived in the Gold Coast, on 16 December 1947, after a carefully considered offer made by J. B. Danquah, to become the General Secretary of the UGCC, Gbedemah was the one who warmly received him on behalf of the organisation. Upon encountering each other, Gbedemah and Nkrumah were both awakened to the fact that the political direction of the Gold Coast had changed forever and committed themselves, unconditionally, to building a modern democratic Republic.

Gbedemah and Nkrumah stood for universal adult suffrage and valued self-determination. They did not agree with the political position that the UGCC had taken. The UGCC preferred a system of democracy where select-few aristocrats and a handful of the intelligentsia would be appointed to the Legislative Assembly, as the chosen political representatives of the Gold Coast, through some form of the elitist electoral college that excluded the general mass of the people.

Nkrumah and Gbedemah, together with Kojo Botsio, would form a triangular brotherhood that lasted for decades without decay until it was strained by unforeseen and regrettable circumstances.

On 12 June 1949, when the mass-based Convention People's Party was established after a breakaway from the UGCC, Gbedemah was appointed as its first Vice-Chairman. An exceptionally media-savvy and sage gentleman, he was the ideal candidate to run the propaganda machinery of the CPP – The Accra Evening News; a daily Newspaper founded by Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah in 1948 to mobilise the masses for the herculean challenge of political autonomy.

Afro Gbede's fiery posts in print press landed him in jail at the James Fort Prison from October 17, 1949, to March 2, 1950, for "publishing false news likely to cause harm". A naturally gifted propagandist with a flair for politics, he introduced the Prisons Graduate Cap (P. G. Cap) so that politically active citizens who had been imprisoned for positive action would be celebrated with this special hat. A symbol of defiance, the P. G. Cap represented honour and prestige within the ranks of the party.

Kwame Nkrumah, who also ended up in jail, sent a number of communiques to Gbedemah which were handwritten on toilet paper and smuggled out of the Ussher Fort prison. Nkrumah had a secret agenda to contest the Accra Central electoral district seat and placed full trust in Gbedemah to manifest his political ambitions.

In a strategic move to protect Nkrumah's seat, and as a diversionary tactic, so that the colonial administration would not anticipate Nkrumah's next move, or worse of, disqualify Nkrumah from the election, Afro Gbede decided to front himself as the prospective candidate for the seat. He only substituted his name for Nkrumah's at the eleventh hour. And consequently, Nkrumah's intention to contest the seat in the 1951 Legislative Assembly took everyone by surprise. The plot was successful and Nkrumah won the election. Gbedemah had, instead, opted for a seat at the Keta constituency and was elected to the Legislative Assembly too.

On 8 February 1951, K. A. Gbedemah was appointed by Nkrumah, who by then became the first African Prime Minister, as Minister for Health and Labour. Afro Gbede also served in two different cabinet portfolios between 1952-1954.

In 1952, Gbedemah opened the first clinic in Accra near the Palladium Cinema Hall. He also set up the Sir John Maude's Commission, in 1952, to lay the foundations for an improved and progressive healthcare sector.

In 1954, at the age of 41, K. A. Gbedemah shattered the age-old status quo and became the first African in post-colonial Africa to hold the position of Finance Minister. In his first budget speech, in July 1954, Afro Gbede paid tribute to his predecessor, Kenneth Tours, and signed the contract that introduced Ghana's first currency – the Ghana Pound Sterling. He initiated a broad range of economic reforms to create an atmosphere where indigenous businesses could thrive. Gbedemah further pushed for the representation of Africans in the International Monetary Fund, which eventually led to the formation of an African Department, administered by Africans. And from 1952 – 1961, he made 23 trips to Europe and America to negotiate the Volta River Project.

Gbedemah, together with Kojo Botsio, flew to London in 1957 to deliberate with the British Foreign Minister, Lennox Boyd, about full self-governance for Ghana. Prince D. K. T. Djokoto — an aristocrat, pioneer Ghanaian diplomat and judge — who had been appointed by Kwame Nkrumah, as Second Secretary of Foreign Affairs at the Ghana High Commission, was closely involved in the final consultations, together with Gbedemah and Botsio, before Ghana was granted its independence on March 6, 1957.

Gbedemah soon fell out with Nkrumah and was asked to leave the latter's cabinet in 1961. He returned to Ghana on June 16 1966, 114 days after the overthrow of Nkrumah. He later instituted the National Alliance of Liberals in 1969 which contested elections, winning 29 out of the 140 seats in Parliament. The Progress Party (PP), led by K. A. Busia, won 69 seats.

K.A. Gbedemah won a seat, on the ticket of the National Alliance for Liberals, to represent the Keta Constituency once more. However, the Progress Party, using the controversial Article 71 of the 1969 constitution – which disqualified persons against whom adverse findings were made, by the Commission of Enquiry, from holding public office – prevented Gbedemah's return to Parliament. He, therefore, could not take up his official post as the Leader of Opposition.

In 1972, when the PP Government of Prime Minister Busia was overthrown, Gbedemah was appointed as Ambassador Plenipotentiary, a position he held from April to June 1972. But as a staunch democrat, he disagreed with the style of governance that the National Redemption Council (NRC), and later Supreme Military Council (SMC), had adopted. It wasn't long before Gbedemah led a resilient demand for a return to civilian rule from military dictatorship.

Gbedemah also formed the Popular Movement for Freedom and Justice (PMFJ) with William Ofori-Atta, Lt. Gen A. A. Afrifa, Victor Owusu, Professor A. A. Boahen, K.S.P. Jantuah and others. Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo served as Secretary for the PMFJ.

K. A. Gbedemah – a political colossus – died on Saturday, July 11, 1998, at the ripe age of 85.