

Nana Kojo Jantuah Obituary

Reconciliator of the transatlantic slave trade



Nana Kojo Jantuah, who has died aged 52, was a leading mover behind attempts to reconcile the lasting effects of the transatlantic slave trade.

Jantuah hailed from a prominent family of politicians, diplomats, barristers and judges. His father and uncle were ministers in Kwame Nkrumah's pre- and post-independence governments of the Gold Coast / Ghana. Following in their footsteps, Jantuah read law in the UK, but gave up a career as a barrister to pursue his calling to heal the wounds of the slave trade.

His mother had told him that he had Danish ancestry, and this inspired him as a young man to undertake a perilous crossing of the Sahara desert to reach his Scandinavian roots. That journey involved arduous days of trekking through soft sand in scorching heat, in a life-and-death race against raging thirst. He would describe the bones of those who had succumbed lining the route, which served as grim reminders to the many thousands who had perished centuries earlier in the slave caravans that used to ply the same path.

Jantuah then experienced a little of the life of a slave, spending a hard year working for pittance on an agricultural plantation in Libya.

Those experiences led him to do an MA at the Diplomatic Academy of London, with a dissertation on the politics of reconciliation concerning the transatlantic slave trade. He hosted the Goodenough-Chevening conference on slavery 'Looking back and moving forwards' in London in 2001, and became a well-known figure in the debate on how reconciliation should be achieved.

Eschewing an academic career, Jantuah chose instead to start the process of healing from within. His great-grandmother was born with the Danish surname Swedstrup, and after years of searching

Jantuah discovered in 2003 that he descended from a Lt. Johan Wilhelm Svedstrup who had headed the Danish garrison at fort Prindsenstein on the Gold Coast of Ghana during 1844-1848.

There then followed a string of visits to Denmark, during which Jantuah established contact with distant cousins through an extraordinary series of apparently divine appointments. He realised that reconnecting the past provided part of the answer to his burning quest to find out how to achieve reconciliation for the various legacies of the slave trade – from the capture, sale, shipping and exploitation of the enslaved, to the consequent severance of families across continents.

One of Jantuah's great-grandmothers had been captured by slave raiders in the interior of Ghana, and separated from her little brother who was shipped to the New World. Lt. Svedstrup had taken a local wife who was herself half-Danish, and all connection with her and their child was forcibly lost when he was ordered back to Denmark to fight in the 1848-1851 Slesvig-Holstein war. By the time it was over, Denmark had sold its forts on the Gold Coast to Britain, ending centuries of regular contact with the now abandoned Ghanaian Danes.

Jantuah became a bridge between Denmark and the communities who had lived around its Gold Coast forts. He lectured in Denmark, the UK and even in a US prison about his life journey that had led him to discover that our true identity lies in recognising our oneness with the rest of humanity. On the awkward issue of uniting victims and perpetrators of the slave trade, he reasoned that as slave raiding was so widespread in West Africa, the descendants of the enslaved could equally well also be descendants of earlier generations who had themselves engaged in slave raiding.



The messages of inner journey, seeking identity, oneness and reconciliation were central themes in Jantuah's portrayals in Danish documentaries, on the BBC radio 4 'Ramblings' programme in 2012, and in his own book 'Odyssey to Elsinore' which was published just two weeks before he

died. He had many ideas for potential further work that will sadly go unrealised. He was a dear and wise friend to many, a true Christian gentleman who will be much missed.

Jantuah is survived by his daughter Bianca and his 94 year-old father, as well as a huge extended family in Ghana and Denmark.

Nana Jantuah Svedstrup Jantuah, historian and reconciler, born 29th April 1963; died 5th August 2015

