

Black John: Southampton's 16th Century African Entrepreneur

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Julian: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites I'm Julian Gerry, and I'm very pleased to be joined for this episode by Dr. Abdoulie Sanneh, community cohesion and diversity officer at Southampton City Council, who also works for a number of local charities and community organizations. Abdoulie is a member of the Sarah Siddon's Fan Club, a local theatre company which stages prominent productions on a variety of local history topics in and around Southampton. Abdoulie took part in a video production by the Sarah Siddon's Fan Club in 2021. And we'll talk a little bit about that later on, but firstly, Abdoulie could ask you about your background? I understand you were born in the Gambia. So how did you come to be in Southampton?

Abdoulie: Yeah, that's interesting. I was born in Gambia, I went to school in Gambia, did my college in Gambia and I travelled to the Netherlands to complete my studies in health promotion and health education. So when I went back to Gambia, I had a scholarship to come to the UK, to do a master's degree in health education, and health promotion. So I chose Southampton, there are a number of universities that I had the opportunity to attend, including Leeds, but I went online to make a search of certain universities in the UK and I decided to choose Southampton, probably because of its diversity. I know Leeds is diverse, but in the context the things that I saw in Southampton in impressed me, so I thought Southampton would be the best place to go. So that's why I decided to come to Southampton

Julian: And you've become very much a part of the community in Southampton since then. The project that you were involved in with the Sarah Siddons Fan Club was based on research by local historian, Dr. Cheryl Butler, based on local town records and tax records. Cheryl worked with you and other members of the community to develop a book of black histories of Southampton. And details of that book can be found in the show notes for this HistBites episode. And then they created the video in which you appear. Can you tell us about the process of working with Cheryl?

Abdoulie: We invited her to have a workshop with us, which was attended by a lot of people from the African and Caribbean community. And, she told us a little bit of stories about characters, about many characters in the City. And, and wow we thought, oh, this is amazing. Is it possible for us to have a book about this? So the discussion about the book starts there, then. A lot of people ask questions, they thought it is fascinating. I've never heard a story like that before since I came to the city. I thought in terms of Africans perhaps my generation is the first generation of Africans that are settling in the City. I didn't realize that 500 years ago, there were people that came to the city. So we all learn from that day that's a lot that had happened in the past and we want to see how best we can get involved in it.

And we agreed that we will produce a book and we will also do a drama series of characters that, you know, reflect Africans that will live in the city five hundred years ago. And that's how everything started.

Julian: The character that you played Abdoulie was from around 1500 and was known as Black John. At that time, surnames are only just beginning to be used and people were often simply described by reference to their job or their physical characteristics. So Black John had arrived on the Italian galley a few years earlier. At that time, there was a considerable shipping trade with galleys plying between Italy, Antwerp and Southampton. And each galley would have around 150 crew who would spend as much as three months in port before their ship left, during which time they took temporary jobs. Black John himself was a skilled carpenter and opted to stay in Southampton for at least seven or eight years working for the town authorities.

So can you tell us a little bit more about Black John as an immigrant? And how you felt, Abdoulie, about playing his character.

Abdoulie: For me, personally, there were some other characters that we talked about but the one that really came out for me is Black John because Black John's story is a bit similar to mine. And it's also an inspiration for me. Because Black John came to the city, not as a slave and not as the refugee, it was a choice. He was working in the ships and then he decided that he was, wants to work on board, on the land. That's his choice. Those days people don't have those choices and he was brave enough to say, well, I know I have skills. I know my skills is better than all those carpenters working on the land, you know? So I want to be on the land working for Southampton and I know I've got the skills and I can make that decision. So he made a decision to be on the land to compete with other people there and to take the best contract, that is a competitive contract from, from the council in those days. So he, he decided that he was going to pick that contract and to work and he contributed immensely to the economy of the city. Because he was mending the cranes and and those cranes are responsible for boarding or loading and unloading the ships, which is incredible because without those cranes the ships will not be loaded. And he took that job and his contribution to the city was immense. So it was a pride for me to see that happen 500 years ago by somebody who was not born in England, someone who was dark in skin and who, someone who came from abroad to come and make such a difference in this city. Before that I didn't, to be honest with you, I, I felt like I will come to the city, I'll do my education you know, live here for some time and go back to Africa, I could not see real connection with the city to that, that much, that will, that I can feel proud of. That was the moment, that was the turning moment, I felt really proud that there were black people here that inspired me, you know, to do my job I've been inspired by someone who was here 500 years ago, and I want to inspire children also, who will come hundreds of years after me to see the contribution that I have made with the city, me and my colleagues that are dark in skin, have made to the city so it's brilliant for me, to be honest with you.

Julian: Yes, that's excellent. So what I'd like to do is, just pause our conversation for a moment and explain for our listeners that the video we're talking about, by the Sarah Siddons Fan club is entitled *Six Characters in Search of a History*, it comprises six monologues on different aspects over the ages of black history in Southampton. Anyone listening can find the full video on YouTube or by following the links on the show notes for this podcast episode.

Abdoulie: Black John they call me. Well, there are many John's in town.. Every other man is called John. So when we speak of them, we say Lame John, John- that-lives-by-the-tower, Grand John, he is the tall one. They might've have called me John-the-carpenter, for that's my trade. I am not the only carpenter called John, or John- the-galley-man as that's how I arrived here on the Italian galley. Well the town is full of galley-men, so that will not help. John the Jannaway could have been another, Jannaway is what they call the Genoese. They think all those from Italy are Genoese; English are lazy like that. But they call me Black John, there is no confusion in that. I am black and I am John, more precisely Giovanni though I did not come from Italy, not originally, but they were great sailors. All

around the Mediterranean they had outposts. And if you get a job on the galley, it sets you up for life. I am not a sailor, as I told you, I am a carpenter. But they need carpenters in the ships. They take a beating on those long voyages, they always need repairs. They're traveling around, picking up cargo all around the world, bringing it here to trade for English wool. When we arrive in port, we are here for months. First, we savoured the delights of the town. We have money to spend, and we have been at sea a long time. Then it gets boring and we look for work. My friend, Miguel and I were hired by the town to mend the crane. An important job, huh? The crane, a valuable asset for the town loading and unloading cargo, cargo that makes this town rich. And that's when I saw my opportunity. Yes, they've got carpenters, but my skills are better. Plenty of work and I prefer to be on dry land. Though it rains here often. There are other blackamores - that's the other name they call us, anyone with dark skin, no matter where you come from, English are lazy like that.

I find myself lodging in St. Michael and St. John's Parish. You can hear the bells. Italians use St. John's Parish. I keep my contact there in case I want to move on, but I prefer St Michael's. I just need to change into my Sunday best made by one of the finest tailors of the galley, fine clothes, latest fashions. People notice me and they called me John-the-best-dressed [laughs]!

Julian: Black John certainly sounds quite an entertaining and positive character, Abdoulie. Do we know anything about what he did subsequently, after working on the town crane?

Abdoulie: We didn't know much about Black John after that point, you know, we, we've got, this information was collected in bits and pieces here and there, but what we know for sure is the contribution that Black John has made in the city and the influence that it has after all those contributions that he has made, 'cause today I can look back and say, yes, I want to be like Black John and my children can look back and say, well, I want to be, like Black John. I want to be like, my dad, I want to be like the people who have really contributed to the history of, of this city to make it better.

We don't know much about what happened to Black John after that, we don't know where he has gone to, whether he died in Southampton or he's moved to other places, but it's definitely not clear to us, but hopefully we'll be able to find information somewhere that we'll be able to tell the story but for me, as far as I'm concerned, the most significant aspect of this story is the fact that he has, is a black guy. He was a black person and he has contributed, he had made choices. You know, there was no pressure on him at all because those days black people don't have much say on what happens around them. You know, they were told to do things. Even, even the, in terms of accommodation himself, Black John decided that he was going to - he decided where he was going to live in the City when he was here, but that is amazing, absolutely amazing. So he made a choice, of where to live, of where to work and what kind of contract he's going to, he's going to be involved in and how he's going to contribute to the city.

All those things are things that we are not expecting to happen in Southampton during those days, because it was the 16th Century

Julian: Yes. And do we know, how many Black people that would have been in Southampton at that time. Was he, was he in a tiny minority?

Abdoulie: It was, it was a very, very, very tiny minority during those days. But we didn't know how many black people were there, but stories that we have seen so far, it appears black people were very, very tiny minority and even at the time I came to the city actually, black people were a very

tiny minority in this city. Because, I remembered when I came to the city, the university hall, I saw a few black people there, even though my impression was before coming here, that it was a diverse city with a lot of black people. I saw a lot, a lot more Asians than black people. That was 2002. As a result of that, I felt lonely and isolated. And when you go around the city, you don't see any diversity, Black people, you don't see any sign that black people were living in this city.

You go to shopping centres and the majority of the people that you see were white and Asians. So there were no black people anywhere it would seem or to the art or movies or anything that you watch in the area that shows you that black people were around. That was, that was a massive thing for us. So this is why for me, TUVAA was really important.

Because when I, when I was able to establish myself a little bit, get connected with a few African people, we decided to set up an African group called African Society (?). And years later, we're able to set up another group called TUVAA. So TUVAA was to bring in the Nigerians the Ghanaians and the Gambians together to form a community so we can interact. We can share a similar values and we can share our culture but that was a turning point for us. And the reason why we were able to meet Cheryl and start this one is because TUVAA existed. Otherwise it will not happen.

Julian: And just for our listeners benefit, TUVAA stands for the The United Voices of African Associations.

Abdoulie: Yes, yes, yes, an umbrella Organization for African groups in the city.

Julian: So, so clearly playing Black John was very inspirational for you. He was a very strong and impressive character for his time. He's acted as a role model for you. And, and have you been able to use him as an example of a role model for others as well?

Abdoulie: Yes. Yes. When we are doing the book launches that was my story, and people were inspired. And after the story, after the book launch it was 'oh, did you know that you touch my stories?' Exactly. It's similar to your story. You came here as a student and you felt lonely. You didn't know where to go. So I was thinking maybe Black John also felt at that time that he was lonely, despite the fact that he had got all those skills.

Julian: One of the expressions that are Black John used that in the video that sort of stuck with me was when he said "English are lazy like that". Did that expression resonate with you at all in your own experiences?

Abdoulie: I think, I think because what was happening in those days is the type of language they use in those days and the type of language we use now are different. I think, I think laziness is one of the language they use in those days and there is another language called 'blackamore' they used those days. We don't use laziness in this generation, we use racism sometimes. We feel like we've been discriminated against. . You know, so they don't give regard to how you prefer to be called and how you prefer to be talked to.

So they call Italians different names. They call Africans 'blackamores' .They say anything anyhow they like to say. So in this generation you would not consider this as laziness it would have been considered as discrimination or racism or something like that. But I don't see English to be lazy, but I

have experience of racism myself. And I have seen people who have experienced racism even yesterday. We are talking about in the park, the lady that has been experiencing racism.

So yeah, things like that do happen. So it's the context within which the language has been used. Those days they would use laziness, but now would probably use discrimination, or say racism. Those are the kinds of terms that we are more likely to use these days.

Julian: Do we know whether the, the research on lack John identified whether he had been the victim of particular racism at the time?

Abdoulie: Well, if I were to write John's word of laziness, it's considered racism. Then he would have, he had said it already himself, that they have been racist against him. So I don't know whether my opinion as to laziness is the same as racism is correct. But if that's correct then Black John had experienced racism because he said it himself, that the English have been lazy, were lazy, because they were calling people names that were not applicable to them. Yeah.

Julian: Do you know how or where the research tracked down the information on Black John?

Abdoulie: Well, that is, that is, I played the character but the research side is work to do so she's the one who compiled that and she compiled it from the archives that we have around the city. Different archive's, black archives and other archives, and she collaborated with the researchers within the city.

Julian: After the video had been made and released and people that seen it, did you get any feedback? Did it provoke black people in Southampton to share any experiences of theirs with you?

Abdoulie: I had so many positive feedbacks, to be honest I had so many positive feedbacks and because immediately after the launch, and then they watched the video online, I've got people, especially from African backgrounds telling me that, you know, I was telling their story. I was actually telling their story, that the way they came here is some of them, it's their choice. They came here as a choice, but struggles that they encountered, those are the struggles that we can see, you know, in, in, in, when he's talking about laziness, English being lazy because he could not influence those words. He could not influence how English spoke, he could not influence how the English called people's names, couldn't influence that. The only thing that he could influence, was to use his skills to tell his own story. And that's what he did. So we've got a lot of black people here, that came to this country. They experience racism, experienced problems, but they went, you know, to achieve their university degrees and become very skilled people. And they are working in hospitals, working in different areas, solicitors. And so for them, I was telling their story like myself, you know, graduated from the university, did my master's degree, did my PhD and was successful in, what I wanted to achieve at that level.

So, they could, they could relate to me very easy and, they feel like I'm an inspiration to them, you know, that I was able to tell their story. I was able, they were able to connect with me, resonate with me and my story, and also Black John's story. And I think that there was a time that I was spoken to by the cabinet member for cultures and communities. He says the project that we did was perhaps one of his favourite projects, the, the six characters. He said it's really brought to life, history, the stories that were hidden from the 16th century. It brought it to life for people to understand and connect to those stories. And he really, really liked my character's story. He said that we need to do more of that.

So that tells you that not only people from the black and African community, you know, can resonate with that, for someone who is a cabinet member, but the parents or the grandparents come from from the other countries also, relate to the same story that I was telling you, I will say that was incredible. That was, that was, that was really incredible.

Julian: Yes. I would wholeheartedly agree with Abdoulie having watched the complete video myself. It is well worth a watch to get a number of perspectives on Southampton's black history. And it's been fascinating to hear you share the experiences of Black John, but also your own experiences and inspiration in our discussion today. So thank you so much for talking to me.

Abdoulie: Thank you.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information. Thank you.