

Obituary for Dr. Sylvanus Nicholas Spencer

It is with great sadness that we announce the untimely death of our dear colleague and member of the LOST research group, Dr. Sylvanus Nicholas Spencer. After his doctorate in 2012, he has been a Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of History and African Studies at the renowned Fourah Bay College in Freetown, Sierra Leone. In recent years Dr. Spencer – Sylvanus – had started to introduce anthropological methods and theory to his classes and aspired to establish an Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology. This initiative dates back to his research on “Freedom of Speech”, which he carried out between 2006-2012 in the frame of the “Travelling Models” project, supported by the German Volkswagen Foundation’s program “Knowledge for Tomorrow”. His project was widely received and highly applauded, particularly also by the funding agency itself, leading to the selection of his portrait as one of the shining examples in the Volkswagen Foundation’s publications (for instance, [Impulse](#) 2012: 43). Since 2016, his collaborations with further projects and LOST scholars continued with work on the Ebola epidemic and the catastrophic land slide in Freetown. He had an admirable love for research. Combining participant observation, interviewing and long-term engagement with archival research, a pronounced future orientation has been part of all of Sylvanus’ endeavors. In his calm and thoughtful way, he did not tire to reflect about his country’s pathway out of the years of terrible civil war towards a peoples’ democracy. He combined this knowledge in an analysis of mistrust in government policies from the war experience to national elections to the [2014 Ebola crisis](#), which hit his country most. Thus, providing deep insights into the phenomenology of war and disease, his outlook was always informed by a deep belief into the human possibilities of making things better. Sometimes the colleagues teased and complimented him by saying that he could also have become a priest, speaking in clear and hopeful words to address the complexities around him. Humorous and full of warmth, his last message to us was of great concern of what would happen to his “dear Germany”, which he observed to be “hard hit by the Corona virus”. He leaves us with thoughtful and as ever caring advice: “Let us all strictly follow the bio-medical prevention and control measures and by God’s grace it will hopefully soon be over like a bad dream.” Tragically, he did not see the end of the bad dream. But he has seen many things evolving from greatest difficulties into new departures. We will deeply miss his guiding voice, his humor, warmth, friendliness, curiosity, academic rigor and collegial friendship. Sylvanus died on 27 June 2021 at the age of 58 after having been admitted to hospital in Freetown. He leaves behind his wife and three daughters. May his soul rest in peace.

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