

"My Furthest-Back Person- The African" (The Inspiration for Roots) by Alex Haley

[Adapted and abridged from the essay by Alex Haley,
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As a boy, Alex Haley spent his summers on his grandmother's front porch in Tennessee, listening to her and her sisters tell stories of the family's history back through the days of slavery. The "furthest-back person" they spoke of was an ancestor they called "The African," who was kidnapped in his native country, shipped to Annapolis, Maryland, and sold into slavery. He remembered hearing:

"Yeah, boy, that African say his name was 'Kin-tay' he say the banjo was 'ko' and' the river 'Kamby Bolong,' an' he was choppin' some wood to make his drum when they grabbed 'im!"

These stories stayed with young Alex throughout his life. And he became obsessed with finding his family's roots in Africa.

With the help of some friends and a **linguist** from West Africa, he learned that some of the words in his grandmother's stories were like Mandinka words (a language spoken by some tribes), and that the river she spoke of as 'Kamby Bolong' was probably the Gambia River. Alex knew that he must get to the Gambia River.

With the help of Gambian officials, he learned that a **griot**, or oral historian, knew the history of a Kin-tay family. Could this be his own family? Alex Haley began his own trip up the Gambia River to find out.

"The boat vibrated upriver, with me very tense. After about two hours, we put in at James Island, for me to see the ruins of the once British-operated James Fort. Here two centuries of slave ships had loaded thousand of cargoes of Gambian tribespeople. The crumbling stones, the deeply **oxidized** [rusted] cannon, even some remnant links of chain

seemed all but impossible to believe. Then we continued upriver to the left-bank village of Albreda, and there put shore to continue on foot to Juffure, village of the griot."

"Walking on, I kept wishing that Grandmas could hear how her stories had led me to the Kamby Bolong (the Gambia River). Finally, Juffure village's playing children, sighting us, flashed an alert. The 70-odd people came rushing from their circular, thatch-roofed, mud-walled huts, with goats bounding up and about, and parrots squawking from up in the palms. I sensed him in advance somehow, the small man amid them, wearing a pillbox cap and an off-white robe, the griot. Then the interpreters went to him, as the villagers thronged around me.

"And it hit me like a gale wind: every one of them, the whole crowd, was jet black. An enormous sense of guilt swept me - a sense of being some kind of hybrid... a sense of being impure among the pure. It was an awful sensation.

"The old griot stepped away from my interpreters and the crowd quickly swarmed around him, all of them buzzing. An interpreter came to me and whispered: "Why they stare at you so, they have never seen here a black American." And that hit me: I was symbolizing for them twenty-five million of us they had never seen. What did they think of me - of us?

"Then abruptly the old griot was briskly walking toward me. His eyes boring into mine, he spoke in Mandinka, as if instinctively I should understand, and this was translated:

"Yes... we have been told by the forefathers... that many of us from this place are in exile... in that place called America... and in other places."

... A man brought me a low stool. Now the whispering hushed - the musicians had softly begun playing kora and balafon, and the griot, aged 73 years, took a seat. ...He began speaking the Kinte clan's ancestral oral history; it came rolling from his mouth across the next hours... 17th- and 18th-century Kinte lineage details, predominantly what men took wives; they children they had, in the order of their births; those children's mates and children.

"...It was as if some ancient scroll were printed indelibly within the griot's brain. Each few sentences or so, he would pause for an interpreter's translation to me. I **distill here the essence** [give the summary]:

"The Kinte clan began in Old Mali, the men generally blacksmiths who conquered fire, and the women potters and weavers. One large branch of the family moved to Mauritania from where one son of the clan, Kairaba Kunta Kinte, a Moslem Marabout holy man, entered Gambia... and moved to our own village of Juffure."

"In Juffure, he took his first wife, a Mandinka maiden, by whom he begot two sons. Then he got a second wife, Yaisa. By her he begot a son, Omoro. Omoro, the youngest son, when he had 30 rains [was 30 years old] took as a wife a maiden, Binta. And by her, he begot four sons - Kunta, Lamin, Suwadu, and Madi..."

"About that time the king's soldiers came, the eldest of these four sons, Kunta, when he had about 16 rains, went away from his village, to chop wood to make a drum... and he was never seen again..."

"Goose-pimples the size of lemons seemed to pop all over me. In my knapsack were my cumulative notebooks, the first of them including how in my boyhood, my Grandma and others told of the African "Kin-tay" who always said he was kidnapped near his village while chopping wood to make a drum...

"I showed the interpreter, he showed and told the griot, who excitedly told the people; they grew very agitated. **Abruptly** [suddenly] then they formed a human ring, encircling me, dancing and chanting. Perhaps a dozen of the women carrying their infant babies rushed in toward me, thrusting the infants into my arms conveying, I would later learn, "the laying on of hands... through this flesh which is us, we are you, and you are us." The men hurried me into their mosque, their Arabic praying later being translated outside: "*Thanks be to Allah for*

returning the long lost from among us." Direct descendants of Kunta Kinte's blood brothers were hastened, some of them from nearby villages, for a family portrait to be taken with me, surrounded by actual ancestral sixth cousins. More symbolic acts filled the remaining day... They called me "*Meester Kinte! Meester Kinte!*"

"Let me tell you something: I am a man. But I remember the sob surging up from my feet, flinging up my hands before my face and bawling as I had not done since I was a baby... the jet-black Africans were jostling, staring... I didn't care, with the feeling surging. If you really knew the **odyssey** [a powerful story going for generations] of us millions of black Americans, if you really knew how we came in the seeds of our forefathers, captured, driven, beaten, inspected, bought, branded, chained in foul ships, if you really knew, you needed weeping...