

Features and Review



A Portfolio



Joy Bridges' Book World

'Malcom X' Author Explores African Heritage

About the Author:

Alex Haley taught himself to write while in the United States Coast Guard. He was Chief Journalist of the Coast Guard when he retired in 1959. He then became a magazine writer and interviewer. His first book was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. He spent twelve years researching and writing *Roots*. Even before publication, reviewers were calling *Roots* "an epic work destined to become a classic of American literature."

Roots-The Saga of an American Family: A Review

When Alex Haley was a child in Henning, Tennessee, his grandmother used to tell him stories of his family all the way back to a man she called "the African." This man was a slave who had been born in Africa where he was captured. After Haley became a writer, he began to search for documentation that might authenticate the narrative that his grandmother had related.

After ten years and extensive travel, he made a fantastic genealogical discovery. He discovered that the name of "the African" was Kunta Kinte, and that he came from the village of Juffure in Gambia, West Africa. Kinte was abducted in 1767 when he was sixteen years old. He was shipped to Maryland where he was sold to a Virginia planter.

Haley went to Juffure where he talked to his African sixth cousins. In *Roots*, Haley re-creates the story of Kunta Kinte and the six generations of his descendants in America.

Haley is the first black American writer to trace his family back to its African roots. His manner of tracing

these roots was as exciting as a mystery novel. He had certain sounds to go by. "The African's" name was Kunta Kinte. He had called a guitar a "ko" and he had called a river "Kamly Bolongo." These words were sharp, angular sounds, with "k" predominating. What African tongue sounded like this? Haley contacted Dr. Jan Vansina who was an expert in African linguistics. Dr. Vansina was an oral historian, too, and was certain that these sounds were from the "mandinka" tongue. Mandinka was spoken by the Mandingo tribe, and in that language, "bolongo" meant river. Therefore, "Kamly Bolongo" probably meant Gambia River.

Haley next located a student from Gambia and flew to Gambia with him. In Gambia, he discovered that most of the oldest villages were named for the families that settled them centuries ago, and that there was a village named Kinte-Kundah.

Haley also discovered that there were very old men, called griots, who lived in the back country and who were walking archives on oral history. These griots spent forty or fifty years memorizing histories of villages, clans, families, and great heroes.

Since the Kinte clan was old and well-known in Gambia, he was able to locate a groit of the Kinte clan. Haley had to organize a safari to reach the groit and he took along three interpreters and four musicians because the groits would not talk without music in the background.

When Haley reached the small village of Juffure, he began to have a "peak

experience"--an experience which transcends any other emotional experience in one's life. Juffure was a small village of only seventy people; it still contained circular mud houses with conical thatched roofs just as it had two hundred years ago.

The groit began to tell the story of the Kinte clan. After he had talked for two hours, he stated: "About the time the king's soldiers came, the eldest of these four sons, Kunta, went away from his village to chop wood....and he was never seen again...." These were exactly the same words Haley had heard as a child on his grandmother's front porch in Tennessee. He relayed this information to the groit who told it to the people of the village. They were excited and pleased, and welcomed him as one of their own. The men of the village took him to their mosque made of bamboo and thatch, and prayed in Arabic, "Praise be to Allah for one long lost from us whom Allah has returned."

Haley was deeply moved by this experience and he continued his research. Lloyds of London opened old English maritime records to him. Through these he identified the slave ship his ancestor was aboard.

Haley wanted *Roots* to be as factual as possible, but part of the story is fictional and a re-creation of the way Haley felt conditions really were like in the times and places he described.

The book re-creates a grim page in American history, but at the same time, it is a testament to the endurance of the black family in the midst of persecution and tribulation.