



The Blurred Beginnings Of A Terrible Tragedy

Helen Fallon

An old woman sits on a wooden bench surrounded by onlookers. A makeshift structure with a thatch roof offers some shelter from the glare of the sun.

The woman is silent as strangers – some black, some white – come and sit beside her. A camera clicks and a few coins are placed on a chipped enamel plate at the woman's feet. Another person approaches and the action is repeated.

I notice a chameleon creeping stealthily along the whitewashed wall behind the woman, and wonder if it will be visible in the photograph which will be shown back home in Dallas or Dublin or Dakar.

Someone will show their holiday photographs and say to their friends, "Do you remember the television series *Roots*? It was about a man called Kunta Kinte who was taken as a slave from Africa to work on a plantation in America. Well, that's me with Kunta Kinte's descendant, Binde. She still lives on Juffureh, an island off the coast of The Gambia from where Kunta was taken from."

"From his grandmother, Cynthia, Alex (Haley) heard the story of his great-great-great-great grandfather, an African called Kunta Kinte..."

A REMARKABLE TELEVISION SERIES

Before the publication of Alex Haley's autobiographical novel, *Roots*, in 1976, Binde probably lived a life much like any of the other women in that tiny West African village. On her remote island home, undisturbed by tourists, she never learned to read or write, married young, bore children, pounded groundnuts into paste, boiled rice on a three-stone fire and lived life totally unaware of a man called Alex Haley growing up in faraway Tennessee.

Born in New York, Haley's mother died when he was a young boy. His father, a teacher, remarried and the family moved to

Tennessee where his grandfather owned a timber company. From his grandmother, Cynthia, Alex heard the story of his great-great-great-great grandfather, an African called Kunta Kinte who along with millions of others was brought across the Atlantic and into slavery.



That story later prompted Haley to set out on a journey to West Africa to trace his roots. In The Gambia he met a griot – a storyteller who is charged with recording the history of a people through the spoken rather than the written word. Haley claimed that, from talking to the griot and from his own research, he discovered that Kunta Kinte came from the island of Juffureh, was shipped to America in 1767, and sold to a plantation owner in Virginia.

LINGERING DOUBTS

Women pound cassava leaves to the sound of cameras clicking, barefoot children hawk already-peeled oranges. Local men sell wood carvings of great African warriors like Kunta Kinte. Somewhere in the distance I can hear the faint sound of a radio. The smell of charcoal from open cooking fires hangs on the air.

An American, on holidays from Ghana where he lectures in sociology, suggests to our local guide, Brimar, that the link between this island and Alex Haley's family, is tenuous enough. Brimar agrees that Haley's ancestors may have been from another part of West Africa.

His reasoning is that Haley did not invite the people who are supposed to be his relatives to participate in his American life. For Brimar, living in a culture where the concept of family is all-embracing and covers many generations, this is difficult to understand.

Roots was published in 1976, and was broadcast as a television series in 1977. Within two years of its publication, over eight million copies had been sold. It was translated into twenty-six languages.

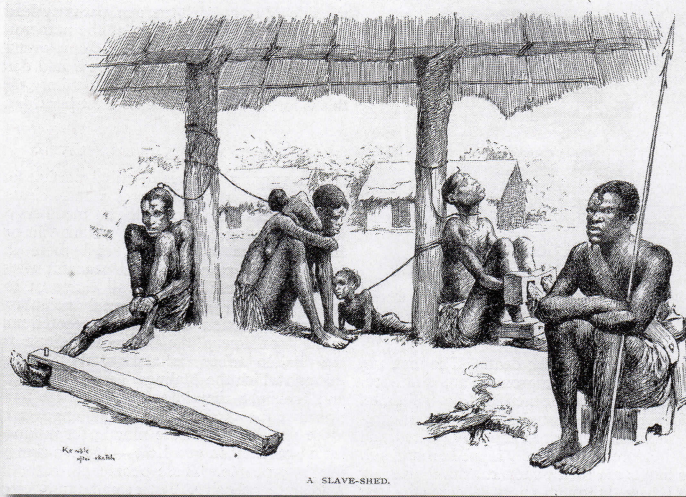
But with success came problems. Claims that he copied sections of his book from *The African*, a novel by Harold Courlander, a specialist in African folklore, resulted in Haley paying substantial out-of-court compensation to Courlander. Some scholars have questioned the authenticity of his research.

Haley died in 1992, in serious debt despite the success of *Roots*. His book has prompted thousands of people of African descent to visit The Gambia and a Roots

Homecoming Festival, organised biennially, has become a major tourist attraction.

THE UNQUESTIONABLE REALITY

We make our way back to the boat and travel to the nearby James Island. All that remains of the St James slave fort is the damp, dark dungeon, the walls standing tall and roofless against a vast African sky.



"When enough slaves had been acquired to fill a ship, the journey across the Atlantic began."

Drawing from E.J. Glave, *The Slave-Trade in the Congo Basin*

It was from here that captives, like Kunta Kinte, were held, chained and fearful, waiting to begin a journey that would bring those that survived to the tobacco fields of Virginia, the rice fields of South Carolina and the sugarcane plantations of the Caribbean and Brazil.

For weeks, months, sometimes as long as a year, the captives waited in the dungeon of this and other trading forts scattered along the West African coast. They were usually people taken in

battle or thieves or those accused of witchcraft. The slave traders – British, Dutch and Portuguese – set up the forts which served as trading posts, offices, living quarters and prisons.

The forts were established with the cooperation of the local chiefs who levied a kind of customs duty on the traders. European goods were traded for slaves. When enough slaves had been acquired to fill a ship, the journey across the Atlantic began.

Brimar, our guide, tells us how the slave traders on Juffureh built a graveyard for themselves. The many captives who died in the dungeon were thrown to the sharks.

Coastal erosion swallowed up the graveyard and much of the island many years ago.

NOT TO BE FORGOTTEN

Silently we make our way back to the boat. A few pale, almost leafless trees, with thick stubby trunks, are the only living thing about.

Sitting on the deck of the boat and watching the island become a tiny speck on the horizon, I imagine the many long journeys that began here over three hundred years ago. ■

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