

How To Trace Your African Roots

By STEPHEN HANKS

Everyone who has started to trace their family ancestral line usually wants to trace all the way to their ancestor's country of origin. For African Americans, they already know that at least one of their ancestors originated from the continent of Africa. But how can they find out which particular country in Africa that ancestor is from? Is there also some way they can even discover which specific tribal ethnic group their family descended from? The answer is Yes, there is a way! But how?

Hundreds of thousands of African born men, women and children were brought to America as slaves and had their African names and languages taken from them. The slave traders and plantation owners replacing them with non-African names (American, Spanish, French, etc.) and the English language. But the new name and language was what they spoke and were called by in public. What do you think they spoke and called themselves by in private?

Africans knew who they were and the places they came from, handing that information down to their children and to other slaves who may have intermarried with them and became part of their African-slave extended family community. African customs and language words were fused into their now new, American language and environment. This created an "Afro-American" culture. Those original African words, phrases and customs still lay embedded in the Afro-American culture today after 250 years. If one can isolate those unique words, names, phrases or customs within one's family interviews and notes, they may be the key to unlocking the secret to an African ancestor's tribe and/or country of origin. Alex Haley did it, by studying his ancestor's name "Kunte Kinte" from the "River Kambay Bilongo." I finally was able to do it too, about two years ago, when I discovered the estate inventory of my family's slaveholder which listed slaves on it having African names. How can you do it? Look for these clues:

1. FEDERAL CENSUS FREE/SLAVESCHEDULE: Since Afro-Americans were not considered U.S. citizens until the passage of the fourteenth Amendment, they were not included

into the "free" population federal census schedules of 1790-1860. The only exceptions to this were if any Afro Americans had received "manumission", a term used for those who had been "legally" freed from slavery in the courts, either by purchasing their own freedom, special service, or stipulated in the last will and testament of a slave owner upon his or her death. Thus, those who were manumitted were recorded on the census along with the rest of the free population in the normal way: name, age, gender, nationality, occupation, value of real/personal estate, and other statistical information. So it's a good idea to check to see if any of one's family members were recorded as being free. If so, then check the courts for any manumission records.

However, if your family was not free, then they were recorded onto the federal census slave schedules. The slave schedules went by the name of each slaveholder, followed by the listing of each of their slaves, recording the slave's age, gender, and sometimes a remark about their description. The slave's name would not be listed. The slave's name would be listed, however, if they died within the calendar year before the census was taken, and put on a special list called the Mortality Schedule, listing the name, age, gender and cause of death. You might ask: What good is it to examine the slave schedules if my ancestor's name is not listed? The value of the slave schedules is that if you can locate your family on it under the slaveholder's name, then the ages and genders of all of the slaveholder's slaves can be compared to the ages, genders and names of your family taken from the 1870 census. In other words, use it for verification purposes. Also, thousands of Black Americans died before 1870. The slave schedule may be one of the few recorded documents that you might find on your family during the slavery period. The ages on the slave schedules also helps you determine time of birth, as well as what time period you may need to go back to on a particular owner's family, especially if your ancestors were "inherited" down through the same family. For example, suppose you located under the slaveholder name of Mr. _____, your great-grandfather who was born in 1845 on the 1850 slave schedule. He

would have been listed as: "1 male, 5 years." But suppose you also see listed under that same slaveholder's name an Afro American listed as being 65 years old. That should alert you to check the family records of Mr. _____ at least to 1785.

2. FAMILY NAMES: Are there any names in your family, or nicknames, that sound African? Get a hold of books on African names at the public library or Portland State University, and see if you can find what languages those names came from. Check the original meanings and root words for those family nicknames that have been passed down in the family. Chances are they were passed down through slavery. Look them up in a copy of Webster's New International Dictionary which you can also order and purchase through a book store. Some of my great uncles' nicknames were ones that pointed to unique phrases and child-naming customs of a certain language and tribes in Africa. African child-naming customs centered around naming their children by the day of week born, time of day born, season of birth and order of birth. Check the meaning and origin of any African-sounding names found from estate inventories, last wills and testaments and slave bills of sale.

3. REGIONAL AREAS: East Coast black communities in the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida have been documented and written about concerning a unique language dialect called "Gullah", a fusion of different African language words created by African slaves of different tribes, who found themselves working together on the coastal rice plantations, in order to communicate to one another. Many words of this language can be traced to specific African regions. Another dialect created by Africans brought to Georgia, was called "Geechee". Descendants of both Gullah and Geechee still speak those unique words and phrases. Does your research show that your family descended from these East coast areas? Similarly, in Louisiana and lower Alabama & Mississippi is found the Creole dialect, created by descendants from Africa and the West Indies. For example, the word "Samba", the name of a popular dance, is from the Wolof language.

The Islands of the West Indies and Mexico were also stops of the slave

ships. Particularly to Jamaica were brought Africans from Ghana, called in the pages of Jamaican history as "Maroons" or "Coromantees" because many of them were purchased and put on board ships docked at the Gold coast slave port called Cormanine. Many of these Africans from Ghana escaped in Jamaica and fled into the woods, defending themselves from recapture by the British soldiers. After many wars, finally a treaty was signed. Later many of these "Maroons" were transported to Nova Scotia, Canada and Sierra Leone, West Africa. Does your family tree lead to these countries?

4. SLAVE SHIP RECORDS: Certain American coastal port ship registries or manifests can be obtained through the National Archives in Washington, D.C. for selected time periods. Other ship records can be obtained by visiting the State Archive Library of interest and examining the County Court minutes or County Order Books, of the particular county you are focusing in on. If you can get the Court Minutes in book form, usually most state libraries (located usually in the Capitol city) have the abstracts, with the names of ships listed in the index. Of course, not all ships entering a county were slave ships. That is something you will have to determine. Slave ship arrivals were also advertised in town newspapers, as well as what African region the ship and the Africans came from.

5. WEST AFRICAN COAST AREAS: When examining the slave trade ship records or newspaper advertisements, certain terms were used referring to different regions of Africa that are no longer used. Here are some of the terms and their equivalent meanings today:

Gold Coast=Ghana; Guinea=The West coast line from Senegal to The Congo; Ivory Coast=Cote d' Ivoire; Windward Coast=Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Cote d' Ivoire; Grain/Pepper Coast=Liberia. Finally, the Colonization Movements during the 19th century transported thousands of Black Americans who were born in the United States to Sierra Leone and Liberia.

The story in my family is that one of my great-great grandmother's relatives was a school teacher who went

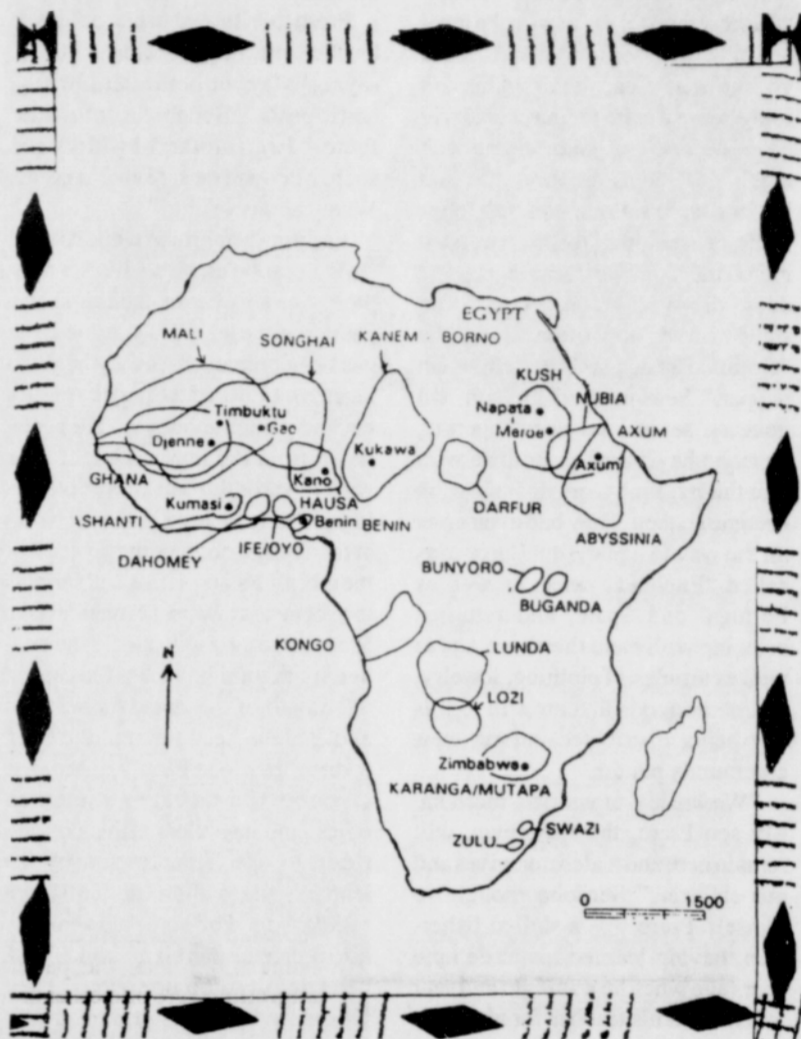
to Africa during the 1920's and came back describing his trip to his school class. I am still waiting for documentation to prove if this is true. If you have reason to believe an ancestor immigrated to Africa, write to the National Archives for passport records prior to 1923. For passport after 1923, write to The Dept. of State, Washington, D.C. If he or she immigrated through a colonization society, see if you can locate its records. The 4th floor at PSU's library has books on some of the societies.

Whatever country your ancestors came from, their experiences, beliefs, stories, customs and personalities are part of you. Whether you succeed in making that connection to Africa or not, embrace your present rich, wonderful heritage that is with you now and appreciate the struggles and risks your family took to pave your birth.



Stephen Hanks

(Below) A map of ancient Africa



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