

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 176

(7R 50 S 176 P)

ANNC. AND SIG. TUNE:

PETER MWEEMBA:

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Peter Mweemba sitting in for Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And in today's programme we talk to Alex Haley, the author of Roots.

MUSIC: From the LP Roots by Quincy Jones.

PETER MWEEMBA:

Most of you, by now, will probably have heard of Roots, the best selling book by the black American author, Alex Haley, in which he traces his ancestors back to a remote village in The Gambia.

Well, Roots has since been turned into the most popular TV series ever shown on American television and you've just heard some music from the film. Rootsomania has swept America and there's no doubt that Roots has had a profound effect on race relations in the USA. Alex Haley has since been showered with prizes and literary awards and he's become a millionaire in the process.

But doubt have recently been raised about the authenticity of Haley research. A British newspaper the London Sunday Times carried a report recently claiming that Haley took too many liberties in his research in The Gambia to be absolutely certain that he had traced his ancestors Kunta Kinte, a Mandinka warrior, back the village of Juffure. Haley says it was in this village that the local story teller, or griot, told him the same story about how his ancestor had been sold into slavery. A story that Haley first heard as a child on the front porch of his grandmother's house in Tennessee. Haley has since admitted that not everything in Roots is literally true. But he still insists that the substance of the story is basically accurate.

Alex Haley recently passed through London on his way to The Gambia, where he is now making a film called Search, about how he traced his ancestors. While here, he talked to Alex Pascall and two Nigerians, Dr. Eze and Walter Batowei.

ALEX HALEY:

When I was a little boy I grew up in the state of Tennessee, in a little town called Henning, with about 500 people, and there my maternal grandmother was steadily telling me stories about the family. She would tell about her parents who were slaves, and naturally everyone before them were slaves. Well, first of all her father was a blacksmith, his name was Tom. Tom's father was an even far more dramatic character called Chicken Goerge, who was a cock fighter. He was in turn the son of a lady called Kisse, and Kisse was the daughter of an Africa. They used to speak of this African rather as a sort of mythical figure. They would tell how he brought to the United States by ship to Annapolis, Maryland and they would tell how he was bought off that ship by a man named John Waller, who took him to a plantation in Virginia, and how this man gave the African the name Toby. But the African would always strenuously resist this name and insist his name was Kinta and then they told how later this man sold the African to his brother, William Waller.

On the William Waller plantation the African made it with a cook who's name was Bell and they had a daughter who's name was Kisse. She had George who became Chicken Goerge and he had a son called Tom. So I've come forward and back,

Well, I grew up knowing this story rather as I knew the biblical parables that I learnt in Sunday school. In the interest of time, we here make a 30 years jump, during which time I went off to school and then I went into the US Coast Guard as a cook and I learnt to write. I was interested in writing and I got a great great many rejections slips before, in that eighth year, I finally sold my first article and I kept writing. By the time I retired from the service when I was 37, I was writing for magazines like Readers Digest and others occasionally. Then I went out and became a full time freelancer writer. I wrote then for Readers Digest regularly and for Playboy magazine, I did interviews. One of these turned out to be with Malcolm X. Then that led ultimately to writing "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" which was my first book. When that was finished I just got curious about what my grandmother had told me.

With no intent in the world to write a book, but curiously re-researching this story my grandmother had told me I went to microfilm records in Alamans County, North Carolina, where my grandmother said she had been born, where her grandparents had been slaves and I found records of them. That was what grabbed me. I was curious to see how much of that story I could track. This led me into what, ultimately, would become 9 years of researching in the USA, in this country and in Africa, and finally 3 years of writing to produce the books Roots.

ALEX PASCALL:

Yes, what really gets me with the book is the fact, and you have been talking there, of the oral stories. Today we are beginning here and in all parts of the black world, to look at our history from an oral point of view and I've been reading the comments made about how justified you could be. How do you

see history before, in a justified way, as to how they are questioning your justification of your own story today?

ALEX HALEY:

Well, the first problem I have with (and problem is an understatement) the criticism with this fellow in The Times is simply that he is not qualified to criticise. If I spend 9 years working on something, believe me I'm not writing some kind of fantasy. I know what I'm doing and I'm one of the best writers in the USA, and I'm not wanting to boast, I'm just saying I am and I resent when somebody, I don't care who it is, goes and makes a hot week long trip somewhere and comes back and dares challenge across the board, going for the jugular of something that I've taken so long to write.

The thing about it is, you know history is really 3 things. It's what you write, what I write and what really happened. There are three different things and you know, when you consider, there are many ramifications involved here, you consider that for generations, people, I'm not talking about black people, I'm talking about people, black, white, brown, yellow, whomever, have heard of historic Africa which is physically the second largest continent on the face of the earth. The impressions which people have lived and died with, of its peoples, of its cultures, of its traditions, have been derived from Tarzan, Jane and Jungle Jim and obviously nothing could be more distorted than that. But nobody was criticising that, it was fine. It's just when someone comes up and presents a far more accurate, proud picture of that heritage, then it comes under this kind of scrutiny and I'm not even denying anybody the right to criticise, but I ask, criticise legitimately and have strength in your criticisms. That's all.

PETER MWEEBE:

Dr. Eze then spoke to Alex Haley.

DR. EZE:

I am here to reassure you that I saw this film right from the beginning to the end and the story told is not only true but is really a very significant revelation to our black friends all over the world. I think that, if you will allow me to say, it will be a book that will cause quite a healthy revolution and an interesting development among the blacks and also in the relationship between the blacks and the whites.

ALEX PASCALL:

Would anyone else like to put some questions to him ?

DR. EZE:

Well, the question I would like to put to Alex is how he

really intends to follow up the trend of events that this book is really going to cause ?

ALEX HALEY:

Well, one thing that comes to mind when you ask that, and since you are Nigerian, is, I think, one of the most warming, pleasing, inspiring things that has happened to me as one result of the book *Roots*, is that in Washington DC not very long ago, all, totally every single one of the African ambassadors to the USA, got in touch with a friend of mine. They knew he and I were good friends, and asked if he would set up a meeting between us.

Now in the first place, African ambassadors en masse don't go round every day asking for these kind of meetings, and their reason, which really startled me to think about it, was they had been profoundly impressed with the book and one of the things that impressed them was that I have them their first insight into what had happened to the Africans when they were taken out of Africa. You know, in a detailed way.

What we kind of arrived at, I told them my feelings about that what we really had collectively suffered was distorted images, each of the other, that I know I grew up and got to be a grown man and as I have mentioned before, what I thought of Africa, the images I had were from Tarzan and I've asked many Africans "how did you form your first impressions of black people in the USA". What they have told me was from the cinema, the pictures, and various other things which tended to portray us as grinning, shuffling fools and osfs. So we have respectively looked at each other in these distorted ways.

What we need to do is form, what I like to think of, and when you say revolution, I think that's what you had in mind, I think we need to form a psychic bridge, simply that. Get to know and get to recognise that what we are in fact, is cousins. Now let's just take two hypothetical ships. One would leave with, say a 100 Africans, bound for the United States. When they got there, as with Kunta Kinte, they were sold at auction, those who survived, usually about a fourth didn't survive and, as with Kunta Kinte, in the United States where the agriculture was cotton, tobacco, the average plantation had to 5 to 8 people on it and there would be owners of these plantations coming from diverse locations, who would buy one slave and take that slave back to the plantation where, like Kunta Kinte, everything they met attacked their Africa, psychically, physically, drums were outlawed which were the heart beat of Africa. You know, you couldn't even mention Africa, or anything about it. So that individual, like Kunta Kinte, was forced to retain subjectively inside himself, whatever sense of his home culture he had.

Another factor was the changing of his name, or at least,

giving him another name. That was one of the reasons why I insisted that, in the film, one of our major scenes, had to be Kunta Kinte fighting to hold his name and the reason for that was the removal from an individual of his name is the first step in the psychic de-humanisation of that individual. That is all our sense of who we are is embodied in our name and that would happen with everyone who was taken to the USA. The result of it was that by the second generation when the children came along, born in the USA, the Africanist was virtually gone because the child grew up in an atmosphere where the Africanist was ridiculed. So they want no part of Africa.

PETER MWEEMBA:

And the last question from Walter Batowei.

WALTER BATOWEI:

I would like to ask you when you hope to follow up with something in the same idiom as Roots ?

ALEX HALEY:

The next book I write will be called "Search" and it tells the story of how Roots came into being. Roots is written from the point of view of the people in the book and so I could only say what they could know. But I, through research, know a lot more and there was a cliff-hanging suspense drama of how that book came into being in the first place. That's what the book Search will be. I think it is more exciting than Roots. Roots is a chronicle this book is like a detective story.

PETER MWEEMBA:

Alex Haley talking to Arts and Africa.
And that brings us to the end of this weeks programme.
Until next week when Alex Tetteh-Lartey should be back with you, this is Peter Mweemba saying goodbye.

PLAYOUT MUSIC: From the LP "Roots" by Quincy Jones

BROADCASTING RIGHTS: FREE FOR USE
IN BROADCASTING OUTSIDE BRITAIN
IN ENGLISH OR TRANSLATION

PUBLICATION RIGHTS: NOT FREE FOR
USE IN PUBLISHING OUTSIDE BRITAIN
IN ENGLISH OR TRANSLATION