



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on March 12, 2012

## Alex Haley's Fraudulent Roots

This is worth commenting upon only because, for as provocative and entertaining as both book and movie undoubtedly are — I read the book twice and watched the miniseries numerous times — *Roots*, the author's assertions to the contrary notwithstanding, is a work of fiction through and through. To listen to Oprah and the actors with whom she was accompanied, one could be forgiven for regarding this as news.

In fact, to describe *Roots* merely as "fiction" is to treat Haley with more charity than he deserves. In at least three critical respects, Haley was downright dishonest.



### Haley and the History of Slavery

Black commentator Stanley Crouch doesn't mince words when it comes to Alex Haley. Haley, Crouch insists, was a "ruthless hustler" and "one of the biggest damn liars this country has ever seen." Crouch likens Haley to Tawana Brawley, the young black woman who infamously lied about being raped and humiliated by a white police officer. Like the lie concocted by Brawley and abetted by the likes of Al Sharpton, Haley's story is also a "hoax" that beautifully illustrates "how history and tragic fact can be pillaged by an individual willing to exploit whatever the naïve might consider sacred."

Crouch explains: "Haley came on the scene when Negroes were becoming obsessed with their African ancestry and were having overwrought reactions to a tale of slavery that always, conveniently, left out the crucial role of the cooperative and profiting Africans."

Black thinker Thomas Sowell, who has written prolifically on race and slavery, makes the same point as Crouch — even if not quite as bluntly. Regarding the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Sowell remarks that *Roots* "presented some crucially false pictures of what had actually happened — false pictures that continue to dominate thinking today."

For instance, "*Roots* has a white man leading a slave raid in West Africa, where the hero, Kunta Kinte [supposedly, Haley's ancestor] was captured, looking bewildered at the chains put on him as he was led away in bondage." Moreover, even "the village elders" likewise appeared perplexed by the sight of these "white men" who were "carrying their people away." In glaring contrast to this depiction, Sowell correctly asserts, the location from which Kunta Kinte was taken — West Africa — had been "a center of slave trading before the first white man arrived there — and slavery continues in parts of it to this very moment." He adds: "Africans *sold* vast numbers of other Africans to Europeans. But they hardly let Europeans go running around in their territory, catching people willy-nilly." (Emphasis added.)

According to Sowell, *Roots* did more harm than good in fueling "the gross misconception that slavery was about white people enslaving black people." In reality, "the tragedy of slavery was of a far greater magnitude than that." Slavery knew no racial boundaries. "People of every race and color were both slaves and enslavers, for thousands of years, all around the world." Sowell likens slavery to cancer in



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that it transcends time and place. He concludes: "If reparations were to be paid for slavery, everybody on this planet would owe everybody else."

Hayley was, to put it mildly, a "historical revisionist" when it came to the issue of slavery. But this in and of itself certainly doesn't warrant the verdict, issued in no uncertain terms by Stanley Crouch, that Hayley was a "ruthless hustler." After all, Hayley's "historical revisionism" on this score is very much a function of the leftist moral imagination that came to dominate the post-1960s intelligentsia. Rather, if Hayley could be said to be guilty of nothing more than subscription to an intellectually and ethically shallow political-moral vision, it would not be difficult to issue him a pardon.

Yet matters are far worse than this.

### **Haley and Plagiarism**

As Philip Nobile writes, Haley was a "literary rogue," an "impostor" whose "prose was so inept that he required ghosts [ghost writers] throughout his career." Upon reading Haley's posthumously released private papers and interviewing one of his original editors for *Roots*, Nobile was able to determine that the *Roots*' real author was Murray Fisher, Haley's editor from his time at *Playboy*. Fisher was also, incidentally, white.

This piece of deception, however, is part and parcel of a much larger web of the same.

At least Fisher consented to write *Roots*. Harry Courlander did not.

In the late 1960s, Harry Courlander — a white man — composed *The African*, a fictional work about a young African boy who is captured, made to endure the horrors of the mid-Atlantic passage, and eventually sold into slavery in America. In 1978 he sued Haley for plagiarism. Upon expressing regret that at least 81 passages were lifted virtually verbatim from Courlander's novel and recast in *Roots*, and upon the Judge's unambiguous finding that Haley was guilty of plagiarism, Haley agreed to an out of court settlement whereby he would pay Courlander \$650,000 (roughly \$2 million in today's currency).

In his pre-trial memorandum, Courlander argued that had Haley not copied from his novel, "*Roots* would have been a very different and less successful novel, and indeed it is doubtful that Mr. Haley could written *Roots* without *The African*." *Roots*, Courlander continues, "copied [from *The African*] language, thoughts, attitudes, incidents, situations, plot and character."

An English professor from Columbia University, Michael Wood, submitted an Expert Witness Report to the court. His comparative analysis of the two novels thoroughly substantiated Courlander's allegations. "The evidence of copying from *The African* in both the novel and television dramatization of *Roots*," he declared, "is clear and irrefutable." The plagiarism, Wood insisted, "is significant and extensive." Whether it is "copied" or "modified," *The African* is "always" "consulted" by the author of *Roots*. The "essential elements" of Courlander's work — "phrases, situations, ideas, aspects of style and plot" — constitute "the life" of *Roots*.

Judge Robert J. Ward concluded: "Copying there was, period." Years later, Ward came forth in an interview with the BBC and admitted that Haley "had perpetrated a hoax on the public."

During the trial, Haley swore that he personally had never read *The African* and that "the life" of Courlander's book had found its way into *Roots* courtesy of careless research assistants who failed to document their material. However, a "minorities' studies" professor, Joseph Brucac from Skidmore College, signed a sworn affidavit in which he noted that he and Haley had indeed discussed *The African* at least five years prior to the publication of *Roots*. In fact, Brucac even lent Haley his own copy of it.

**Haley and his Roots**

Haley's claims to the contrary aside, professional genealogists Gary B. and Elizabeth Shown Mills have demonstrated beyond a doubt that there is no formal documentation to corroborate "the oral tradition" regarding Haley's family history. Moreover, the very documentation to which Haley refers — "plantation records, wills, census records" — *repudiates* this tradition. The Mills are to the point: "In truth, those same plantation records, wills, and censuses cited by Mr. Haley not only *fail to document* his story, but they *contradict* each and every pre-Civil War statement of Afro-American lineage in *Roots*." (Emphasis in original.)

Haley claims that his great-great-great-great grandfather, Kunta Kinte, arrived in Annapolis, Maryland, aboard the slave ship *Lord Ligonier* in September of 1767. There he was purchased by John Waller of Spotsylvania County, Virginia, who gave him the name "Toby."

But Haley can know for sure that Kunta Kinte is Toby *if and only if* he is correct regarding the date of Kunta's arrival in America. As the Mills assert, "this determination of *date* of arrival is crucial to the establishment of Kinte's American identity." (Emphasis original.) The problem, for Haley, is that he pre-selected this date. Precisely the same documentation upon which he relies to establish that his ancestor and the Waller slave Toby are one and the same person actually proves that this is impossible. "Had Mr. Hayley not chosen arbitrarily to limit his research to only those records filed *after* the arrival of the ship that he had already 'identified' upon questionable premises, had his research indeed been as exhaustive as assumed, he would have discovered that *this Waller slave Toby appeared in six separate documents of record over a period of four years preceding the arrival of the Lord Ligonier.*" (Emphasis in original.)

In short: "Toby Waller was not Kunta Kinte."

The slave Toby belonged to the Wallers, but there is no record as to when, or even if, he was purchased. It appears that, against Haley's account, he *first* belonged to Dr. William Waller and was *then* conveyed to his brother John. Sometime later, Toby once more became the property of William. It would also seem that Toby Waller died between five and ten years *prior* to the birth of "Kizzy," the woman who, Haley says, Kunta Kinte fathered.

As to the person with whom Kunta is supposed to have fathered Kizzy — Haley identifies her as "Bell" — there is no record. There is an "Isbell" who belonged to the father of John and William Waller. Yet she never belonged to either of his two sons. Thus, she could not have been married to Toby.

Neither are there any documents in existence that confirm anything that Haley has to say about the woman whom he describes as his great-great-great grandmother — Kizzy.

According to Haley, compliments of William Waller's niece and Kizzy's childhood friend "Missy Anne," Kizzy was literate. When her childhood sweetheart "Noah" planned to escape from the Waller plantation, Kizzy armed him with a traveling pass on which she forged Missy Anne's name. Noah was caught, tortured into confessing the source of the traveling pass, and sold. Kizzy then too was sold to Tom Lea, of North Carolina. The problem here is that there are no records to substantiate any of this. What we can determine is that there is no way that Anne Waller and the Kizzy about whom Haley speaks could have been childhood friends, for Waller was already a grown woman in her twenties by the time that Kizzy was supposed to have been born.

The Mills state that "there remains the inarguable conclusion that the 182 pages and thirty-nine chapters in which the Virginia lives of Haley's 'ancestors' are chronicled have no basis in fact. Neither



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of the two relationships that are crucial to his pedigree (the identity of Kizzy as daughter of Kinte alias Toby, and the relationship of Bell as wife of Kinte and mother of Kizzy) can be established by even the weakest genealogical evidence.”

If “the Virginia chapters of his saga” fail abysmally to “represent a documented ancestry for” Haley “or for the descendants of the white family alleged to have owned his family,” the North Carolina chapters beginning with Kizzy’s arrival at the property of Tom Lea is just as abysmal in these regards. Not only is Tom Lea — who is allegedly Haley’s ancestor by virtue of his rape of Kizzy — not the poor white trash that Haley depicts him as, there is zero evidence that he ever owned a slave name “Kizzy.”

It isn’t just radical inconsistencies in Haley’s *antebellum* ancestry with which he has to reckon. There are all sorts of questions that his claims on the part of his post-Civil War ancestry raise as well. As the Mills say, “Not only the authenticity of *Roots* evidence is called into question by the *total* absence of documentation for any alleged event, individual, or relationship, but doubt also falls upon the very essence of family life portrayed in *Roots*.” (Emphasis added.)

There is one final point. *Roots* climaxes with Haley discovering the village from which his ancestor, Kunta Kinte, was supposed to have been captured. Supposedly, a [griot](#) from the village of Juffure — Fofana — confirmed the account of Kinte’s abduction that Haley had grown up hearing about from his aunts.

Professor Donald R. Wright, “a specialist in African pre-history with extensive experience in the collection of Gambian oral traditions,” visited Juffure twice. What he discovered was that Fofana was a fake. Fofana “showed no inclination to recite long (or short) genealogies of any families.” When it came to Kunta Kinte, though, “he was eager ... to speak.” Kinte, Wright continues, “was the only individual about whom Fofana provided any specific information.”

There is a reason for this. In advance of his exchange with Fofana, Haley relayed to Gambian officials the account of Kunta Kinte’s capture that had supposedly been transmitted to him by his relatives. He told them as well that it was confirmation of this account that he sought. Seeing the potentially boundless profits to be reaped from tourism and the like, the officials insured that Haley would hear what he wanted to hear.

The second time Professor Wright visited Juffure he did not seek out Fofana by name. Rather, he sought out “the person best versed in the history of the village and its families.” Wright was taken to listen to four people. Fofana’s name was never even mentioned.

## **Conclusion**

Alex Haley’s *Roots* is undeniably as epic a television drama as it is a book. Yet this does nothing to change the fact that neither version conveys fact. Nor does it alter the sad truth that Haley was a fraud.



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