Storytelling and Culture

I didn't go to my grandfather's funeral.
The shaman told me I should not go.
If I went, he said,
I would never see my grandfather again.
If I did not go,
my grandfather would visit me in my dreams.
The shaman spoke the truth.
My grandfather has come often into my dreams,
keeping alive the stories he had told me when I slept
with him in our tent, many years ago.

Norman Ekoomiak in An Arctic Childhood

The Art of Inuit Storytelling

By Zacharias Kunuk[1]

I was born in 1957 in a sod house at Kapuivik, my family's winter campsite in our life on the land. We were living happily like my ancestors waking up with frozen kamiks for a pillow. In 1965 my parents were told by Government workers, "You should send your kids to school or you could lose your family allowance." I was nine years old getting ready to be like my father. The next summer I was on the boat to Igloolik with my brother. While my parents lived on the land I stayed in town and learned the English language. Most weeks they showed movies at the Community Hall. They cost a quarter to get in. That's when I started carving soapstone to get money for the movies. I remember John Wayne in the West. He spearheads the US cavalry and kills some Indians at the fort. One time the scouts didn't return. We go out where there's arrows sticking out of dead soldiers and horses and one soldier says, "What kind of Indians did this!" I was shocked too. That's what I learned in my education, to think like one of the soldiers.

When I began to see myself as an aboriginal person and a filmmaker I learned there are different ways to tell the same story. People in Igloolik learned through storytelling who we were and where we came from for 4,000 years without a written language. Then foreign missionaries preached Paul's Epistles to my parents in Inuktitut saying, "Turn away from your old way of life." These days Igloolik young people are suiciding at a terrible rate.

4,000 years of oral history silenced by fifty years of priests, schools and cable TV? This death of history is happening in my lifetime. How were shamans tied? Where do suicides go? What will I answer when I'm an Elder and don't know anything about it? Will I have anything to say? Lately I want to write to the Bishop and say, "Let my people go!"

[1] From the Iglulik Isuma web site www.isuma.ca

In the 1970s Igloolik voted twice against TV from the south since there was nothing in Inuktitut, nothing in it for us. But I noticed when my father and his friends came back from hunting they would always sit down with tea and tell the story of their hunt. And I thought it would be great to film hunting trips so you wouldn't have to tell it, just show it. In 1981 I sold some carvings and bought a video camera. When I watched my videos I noticed kids gathered outside my window looking in to see the TV. That was how special it was at the beginning.

In 1985 I received my first Canada Council grant to produce an independent video, *From Inuk Point of View*, on my summer holiday. I was the director, Paul Apak the editor, Pauloosie Qulitalik the cultural narrator, and Norman Cohn, the cameraman. This became our Isuma team.

Can Inuit bring storytelling into the new millennium? Can we listen to our Elders before they all pass away? Can we save our youth from killing themselves at ten times the national rate? Can producing community TV in Igloolik make our community, region and country stronger? Is there room in Canadian filmmaking for our way of seeing ourselves?

To try to answer these questions we want to show how our ancestors survived by the strength of their community and their wits, and how new ways of storytelling today can help our community survive another thousand years.

Our name Isuma means 'to think', as in Thinking Productions. Our building in the centre of Igloolik has a big sign on the front that says Isuma. Think. Young and old work together to keep our ancestors' knowledge alive. We create traditional artifacts, digital multimedia and desperately needed jobs in the same activity. Our productions give an artist's view for all to see where we came from: what Inuit were able to do then and what we are able to do now.

Why is Oral Tradition Important?

From *Inuuqatigiit, The Curriculum from the Inuit Perspective*[1]

Traditionally, Inuit did not have a written language. All of Inuit history, knowledge, values and beliefs were passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth. The information was contained in both songs and stories, repeated to children by their parents and grandparents as they grew.

Knowledge, traditions, stories, legends, myths, songs, beliefs and history were passed on. Often, a family camp would have an Elder who was the historian and storyteller. There were also others within the camp who told stories. Stories and songs were shared at special celebrations or during storms, but were also told every day as a way to get children to sleep or behave, or to give instruction in hunting or sewing skills. The storyteller often started by saying, "I will tell it as it was told to me, I will not alter it...." There would often be chants and songs in the story which the listeners got involved with through facial expressions, body language, murmurs of wonder and a great deal of enjoyment.

Some family groups state that one must never change the words of a story, that one must always tell it in the traditional way. But, if a legend with adult content was not appropriate for children, then a simpler version would be told.

Hunting stories were often told in the evenings after a hunt as the men related what happened during the day. Young boys would listen, learning the ways of their fathers and given advice on how to do something better during a hunt. This was important as it helped them see that the observation of a hunt continued in the evenings as it was recalled. The men would also bring up previous hunts or stories of hunts that they had heard. Techniques and strategies were honed not just at the time of the kill.

In families where storytelling was common, the children were more likely to be storytellers. As the lifestyle of the Inuit changed, this chain was broken in some families. There was a period after Inuit moved into larger communities and children started to go to school that the stories were almost forgotten. By telling stories yourself and by having storytellers invited to your classroom, Inuuqatigiit is an excellent way to reintroduce the oral traditions of the Inuit.

[1] From *Inuuqatigiit Curriculum Document, Kindergarten – 12*, GNWT Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 1996

Before the writing system was introduced in the Canadian Arctic, story telling was one way in which a small portion of our history was preserved. The Elder women were especially noted for their ability to recite Inuit legends in a way that made a person feel as though he were part of that story. Inuit legends, like any other stories, carry with them a lesson or principle to remember, and I believe that this is why they were quite important to our people.

Mark Kalluak, Uqaqta, December 1985[2]

The limits of my language are the limits of my world.

Wittgenstein Ludwig

[2] Also from *Inuuqatigiit*

What it Means to Be an Inuk

By Abraham Okpik, Written in August 1960[1]

We the Inuit, where do we come from and how did we get here? This is a big question to all of us, even in the qallunaaq's way of thinking or learning. We are still a mystery to them, but our ancestors are the ones we give praise to for all that they have achieved – to live, to feel, to survive for centuries before the white people came. Some of the qallunaat came with good intentions to teach us a better way to live; some came to destroy our livelihood and culture. But there is one thing we must not forget, and that is how our ancestors brought us this far, in spite of severe cold, and constantly searching for food. Or are we forgetting?

Let us think back fifty years and compare our people's living conditions then with our present living environment. We have added very little to what our forefathers have left us.

So let's realize today that we are living without observing what we are losing, our own Inuit culture, which our grandfathers have passed on to us from generation to generation. Are we keeping our old traditions, or are we going to forget them for good? I am sorry to say that we are forgetting them now, and if we do not do something to preserve our culture it will just disappear. The songs of our fathers, our old stories which we used to hear from older people will be gone and we will never hear them again. All this will be lost, so let us wake up and restore our old methods and culture while there is still time. If we lose it, it will be a tragedy, after all our ancestors have shown us. We must remember this: where no other people could have survived, our ancestors did, with the hope that some day we would be known to the other parts of the world, not as the people of this present new day, but as the people of old who lived well-ordered lives, who had a strong culture, and who helped and cared for each other. And who kept learning what life demanded of them. Today if we can think like our ancestors and put to use what they have achieved for us and adopt the qallunaaq's way of learning, at the same time, keep our own, we will be further ahead. We should learn as much as we can from this new culture, but we must not forget our own culture which is important to us.

[1] From *Inuktitut* #70, 1989

So let us wake up to a new day, with new thoughts, new gifts, and new learning from the new culture. But we must remember our ancestors who had to endure the cold, with the help of their knowledge and ingenuity. We could put our learning with this new modern way of living, and only then will we have a bright future, with the white people's learning and our own culture.

To you older people I want to say this: you are the people who can pass our culture to the younger generation. At the moment we Inuit seem to be of two different minds. First, the older people know the old way of living, know the language because their forefathers taught them well; and second, the young people are not interested in keeping their own language. They are not being taught to keep their own language. It is important to have our language. At least it will be something we have inherited from our fathers if we keep it.

We should be happy to be who we are, living and working together, keeping our culture strong. After all, we are most comfortable with our own language.

When you learn to work and live the qallunaaq's way you lose the Inuit way. This can't be helped. We want progress and comfort and education and security. We can have these things – and still keep our language. We need our language to keep us happy together. An Inuk who has lost his language is completely lost. He doesn't belong anywhere.

Cultural Change

By David Webster, Editorial from *'Inuktitut'* magazine, Winter 1985

Cultural change, and the disappearance of many aspects of people's lives, is something that affects societies the world over. But it is not enough to simply say "the old ways were the best" and blame others for the loss of culture while doing nothing about it. What is really at stake is finding ways to keep those aspects of culture which give a people their identity and their values while adapting to inevitable change – for all change is not bad.

Most people, no matter where they live, obviously do not stubbornly cling to all aspects of their old ways when new ways of doing things appear. Why would someone continue to do something an old way when, for example, a new technology makes doing it easier? Inuit quickly threw away their bows and arrows and lances when firearms became available. They speedily accepted the freighter canoe in preference to the qajaq. Snowmobiles replaced dog teams; wooden houses replaced snowhouses, and so on. Every one of those changes made a difference to Inuit life, or Inuit culture, as we often call it.

Most people are sad about the passing of 'the good old days'. We forget about the bad parts of those days, and tend to remember only the good things. We may remember happy days of strong family ties, for example, and choose not to think so much about times of great hardship. This happened in the Arctic, too. For awhile, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, the older people were too busy coping with the changes that were taking place to worry about what they were giving up. For a time, their children did not want to hear about the old days. They were interested only in the new ways of life and the new material things that their parents never had.

These days many people are beginning to think differently, as the stories in this issue show. Inuit today are working together, in many cases with qablunaat, to try to keep Inuit culture alive. More and more young people are becoming interested in what life was like in the past. Last summer, some young people from Arviat went to the site of an old Ihalmiut camp at Ennadai Lake in the barrens. There they got things ready so that Elders could visit – for two weeks – the area that had been their home 30 years ago.

We hope that, in the years to come, there will be a strengthening of ties between today's generation and their Elders. We hope they can work together to record in books, art and music what is rediscovered about the culture and values of the past. In that ways, no matter how much Inuit culture changes (as all cultures must), the Inuit will know what their roots are and, at the same time, can build for the future.

This is an excerpt from David Webster's editorial. You can read the rest of his editorial and more about the return to Ennadai Lake in "Inuktitut" #62, Winter 1985.

Unikkaaqtuat

Unikkaaqtuat (Old Stories) and Children. Excerpt from an interview with Uqsuralik Ottokie[1]

The unikkaaqtuat are beneficial to children. At one time these stories were true, but because they are so old they just became stories. They are very useful for children. There are all sorts of stories that can be told to children. Most times, children start settling down when you tell a story. Most of the stories that we heard were true and they have a definite benefit for children.

At last I was able to get a man
called Apagkaq to tell me stories.
This was at Liverpool Bay.
I agreed to pay him $50 to tell me stories
for five days. He thought I was crazy
to be doing this work (collecting stories)
but he proved to be very good at it
and we became good friends.

Knud Rasmussen from Fifth Thule Expedition

From *Fifth Thule Expedition Volume Three*, published by the Department of Education, GNWT, 1976

[1] From *Childrearing Practices* from the Interviewing Inuit Elders series, with Naqi Ekho and Uqsuralik Ottokie, published by Nunavut Arctic College, Iqaluit, 2000

Immersion in the Stories and Customs

By Paul Ongtooguk from *Aspects of Traditional Inupiat Education*[1]

As the child is immersed in the stories and customs of the communities, he learns more about the traditions, values, and beliefs associated with hunting in an Inupiat community. Before his first hunt, he has listened to hunting stories for years. These were both entertaining and informative. As a result of these stories told by Elders and veteran hunters, the young child constructs a mental image of all that is required and some sense of the important aspects of preparing and engaging in the hunt.

Many of the stories he listens to as a child were stories that emphasized the disposition, the attitude, of the hunter. In these stories bragging and pride in personal accomplishment would be condemned. In the stories animals can read the mind of the hunter and either give themselves or not, in part based on an appreciation of the giving of the physical body. Even after the animal gives up the body, respect should be shown in definite ways according to the stories and traditions. This is why some hunters, who are deacons and respected members of churches, still pour fresh water in the mouth of a seal after it has been shot. The belief is that the seal likes fresh water and that the undying nature of the seal will remember the gesture and bring another body for the hunters later.

The stories about animals giving themselves to hunters might not seem to make sense to outsiders, but it is difficult to imagine anything else, if a person has hunted very long. There are times, when in spite of careful planning and preparation, cautious stalking and quiet approaches, no animal will allow a hunter to even remotely approach. At other times a person will be setting up camp and a caribou or moose will walk within a stone's throw and then patiently wait for the hunter to take advantage of their good fortune. How else to account for these turns of events that have so little to do with skill and more to do with the disposition of the animal? Today, some Westerners might deride such practices and beliefs.

[1] From the Alaskool web site www.alaskool.org

But perhaps the stories are actually about protecting and helping the hunter. Respect for the animal being hunted may prevent the hunter from becoming overly confident or prideful. Pride often produces carelessness and may prevent learning and observation from occurring. In fact, pride and arrogance can be fatal in the Arctic where the best lesson to keep in mind is how little we actually know and how easily we can be swept from the world.

Showing respect for the animals also ensures that better care will be taken of the physical remains of the animal. The importance of such a disposition for the Inupiat hunter is obvious. Often the stories children hear will emphasize how clever, thoughtful, and ingenious a person has been in becoming successful as a hunter and a provider to the community.

Black History

Black History, Oral History and Genealogy. By Alex Haley[1]

When I was a little boy I lived in a little town which you probably never heard of called Henning, Tennessee, about fifty miles north of Memphis. I lived there with my parents in the home of my mother's mother. My grandmother and I were very, very close. Every summer that I can remember, growing up in Henning, my grandmother would have, as visitors, members of the family, who were always women, always of her general age range, the late forties, early fifties. They came from places that sounded pretty exotic to me – Dyersburg, Tennessee; Inkster, Michigan, St. Louis, Kansas City – places like that. They were like Cousin Georgia, Aunt Plus, Aunt Liz, so forth. Every evening, after the supper dishes were washed, they would go out on the front porch and sit in cane-bottomed rocking chairs, and I would always sit behind grandma's chair. Every single evening of those summers, unless there was some particularly hot gossip that would overrule it, they would talk about the same thing. It was bits and pieces and patches of what I later would learn was a long narrative history of the family, which had been passed down across generations.

As a little boy I didn't have the orientation to understand most of what they talked about. Sometimes they would talk about individuals, and I didn't know what these individuals were; I didn't know what an old massa was and I didn't know what an old missus was. They would talk about locales; I didn't know what a plantation was. At other times, interspersed with these, they'd talk about anecdotes, incidents which had happened to these people or these places. The furthest-back person that they ever talked about was someone whom they would call 'The African'. I know that the first time I ever heard the word Africa or African was from their mouths, there on the front porch in Henning.

[1] From *The Oral History Reader*, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, published by Routledge, 1998

I think that my first impression that these things they spoke of went a long way back, came from the fact that they were wrinkled, greying, or completely grey in some cases, and I was a little boy, three, four, five, and now and then when some of them would get animatedly talking about something, they would fling their finger or hand down towards me and say something like 'I wasn't any bigger than this young'un here'. The very idea that someone as old and wrinkled as she had at one time been no older than I, just blew my mind. I knew it must be way, way back that they were talking about.

When they were speaking of this African, the furthest-back person of all, they would tell how he was brought on a ship to this country to a place they pronounced as 'Naplis'. He was bought off this ship by a man whose name was John Waller, who had a plantation in a place called Spotsylvania County, Virginia. They would tell how he was on this plantation and he kept trying to escape. The first three times he escaped he was caught and given a worse beating than previously as his punishment. The fourth time he escaped he had the misfortune to be caught by a professional slave catcher. I grew up hearing how this slave catcher decided to make an example of him. I grew up hearing how he gave the African the choice either to be castrated or to have a foot cut off. The African chose the foot. I grew up hearing how his foot was put against a stump, and with an ax was cut off across the arch. It was a very hideous act. But as it turned out, that act was to play a very major role in the keeping of a narrative across a family for a long time.

The reasons were two. One of them was that in the middle 1700s in Virginia, almost all slaves were sold at auction. A male slave in good condition would bring on the average about $750. At the end of every slave auction they would have what they called the scrap sale, and those who were incapacitated, ill, or otherwise not so valuable for market, would be sold generally for amounts of $100 or less in cash. This particular African managed to survive and then to convalesce, and he posed then to his master an economic question. His master decided that he was crippled and hobbled about, but could still do limited work. The master decided that he would be worth more kept on that plantation than he would be worth sold away for cash of less than $100. That was how it happened that this particular African was kept on one plantation for quite a long period of time.

Now that came at a time when, if there was any single thing that probably characterized slaves, it was that they had almost no sense of what we today know and value and revere as family continuity. The reason simply was that slaves were sold back and forth so much. Characteristically slave children would grow up without an awareness of who their parents were, and particularly male parents. This African, now kept on the plantation by his master's decision, hobbling about and doing the limited work he could, finally met and mated with another slave on that plantation, and her name (in the stories told by my grandmother and the others on the front porch in Henning) was Bell the big house cook. Of that union was born a little girl who was given the name Kizzy. As Kizzy got to be four or five or so, this African would take that little girl by the hand, and he would take her around and point to various natural objects, and he would tell her the name for that thing – tree, rock, cow, sky, so forth. The names that he told her were instinctively in his native tongue, and to the girl they were strange phonetic sounds which in time, with repetitive hearing, the girl could repeat. He would point at a guitar and he would make a single sound as if it were spelled 'ko'. She came in time to know that ko was guitar in his terms. There were other strange phonetic sounds for other objects. Perhaps the most involved of them was that contiguous to the plantation there was a river, and whenever this African would point out this river to his daughter Kizzy he would say to her 'Kamby Bolongo'. She came to know that Kamby Bolongo in his terms meant river.

There was another thing about this African which is in the background of all the Black people in this country, that was whoever bought them off the slave ship, when they got them to a plantation, their first act was giving them an Anglicized name. For all practical purposes that was the first step in the psychic dehumanization of an individual or collectively of a people. In the case of this particular African his master gave him the name Toby. But whenever any of the other adult slaves would address him as Toby, this African would strenuously rebuff and reject it and he would tell them his name was 'Kin-tay', a sharp, angular two-syllabic sound that the little girl Kizzy came to know her father said was his name.

There was yet another thing about this African characteristic of all those original Africans in our background, that they had been brought from a place where they spoke their native tongue, and brought to this place where it became necessary to learn English for sheer survival's sake. Gradually, haltingly, all those original Africans learned a word here, a phrase there, of the new tongue – English. As this process began to happen with this African, and he began to be able to express himself in more detailed ways, he began to tell his little daughter Kizzy little vignettes about himself. He told her, for instance, how he had been captured. He said that he had not been far away from his village chopping wood to make himself a drum when he had been set upon by four men, overwhelmed, and taken thusly into slavery. She came to know along with many other stories the story of how he was chopping wood when he was captured.

To compress what would happen over the next decade, the girl Kizzy stayed on the plantation in Spotsylvania County directly exposed to her father who had come directly from Africa, and to his stories, until she had a considerable repertoire of knowledge about him from his own mouth. When Kizzy was sixteen years of age, she was sold away to a new master whose name was Tom Lea and he had a much smaller plantation in North Carolina. It was on this plantation that after a while Kizzy gave birth to her first child, a boy who was given the name George. The father was the new master Tom Lea. As George got to be four or five or so, it was his mother Kizzy who began to tell him the stories that she heard from her father. The boy began to discover the rather common phenomenon that slave children rarely knew who their fathers were, let alone a grandfather. He had something which made him rather singular. So it was with considerable pride the boy began to tell his peers the story of his grandfather; this African who said his name was Kin-tay, who called a river Kamby Bolongo, and called a guitar ko and other sounds for other things, and who said that he had been chopping wood when he was set upon and captured and brought into slavery.

When the boy George got to be about twelve, he was apprenticed to an old slave to learn the handling of the master's fighting gamecocks. This boy had an innate, green thumb ability for fighting gamecocks. By the time he was in his mid-teens he had been given (for his local and regional renown as an expert slave handler and pitter of fighting gamecocks) the nickname he would take to his grave decades later – Chicken George.

When Chicken George was about eighteen he met and mated with a slave girl. Her name was Matilda, and in time Matilda gave birth to seven children. Now for the first time that story which had come down from this African began to fan out within the breadth of a family. The stories as they would be told on the front porch in Henning by grandma and the others were those of the winter evenings after the harvest when families would entertain themselves by sitting together and the Elders would talk and the young would listen. Now Chicken George would sit with his seven children around the hearth. The story was that they would roast sweet potatoes in the hot ashes, and night after night after night across the winters, Chicken George would tell his seven children a story unusual among slaves, and that was direct knowledge of a great-grandfather; this same African who said his name was Kin-tay, who called the river Kamby Bolongo, and a guitar ko, and who said that he was chopping wood when he was captured.

Those children grew up, took mates and had children. One of them was named Tom. Tom became an apprenticed blacksmith. He was sold in his mid-teens to a man named Murray who had a tobacco plantation in Alamance County, North Carolina. It was on this plantation that Tom, who became that plantation's blacksmith, met and mated with a slave girl whose name was Irene and who was the plantation weaver. Irene also in time bore seven children. Now it was yet another generation, another section of the state of North Carolina and another set of seven children who would sit in yet another cabin, around the hearth in the winter evenings with the sweet potatoes in the hot ashes. Now the father was Tom telling his children about something virtually unique in the knowledge of slaves, direct knowledge of a great-great-grandfather, this same African, who said his

name was Kin-tay, who called the river Kamby Bolongo, who said he was chopping wood when he was captured, and the other parts of the story that had come down in that way.

Of that second set of seven children, in Alamance County, North Carolina, the youngest was a little girl whose name was Cynthia, and Cynthia was my maternal grandmother. I grew up in her home in Henning, Tennessee, and grandma pumped that story into me as if it were plasma. It was by all odds the most precious thing in her life – the story which had come down across the generations about the family going back to that original African.

I stayed at grandma's home until I was in my mid-teens. By that time I had two younger brothers, George and Julius. Our father was a teacher at small black land grant colleges about the South and we began now to move around wherever he was teaching, and thus I went to school through two years of college. When World War II came along I was one of the many people who thought that if I could hurry and get into an organization of which I had recently heard, called the US Coast Guard, that maybe I could spend the war walking the coast. I got into the service and to my great shock rather suddenly found myself on an ammunition ship in the Southwest Pacific, which was not at all what I had in mind. But when I look back upon it now, it was the first of a series of what seemed to be accidental things, but now seem to be part of a pattern of many things that were just meant to be, to make a certain book possible, in time. On the ships in the Coast Guard, totally by accident, I stumbled into the long road to becoming a writer. It was something I had never have dreamed of...

Many Years Later

One morning, I was in the British Museum and I came upon something, I had vaguely heard of it, the Rosetta Stone. It just really entranced me. I read about it, and I found how, when this stone was discovered in 1799, it seemed to have three sets of texts chiseled into the stone: one of them in Greek characters, which Greek scholars could read, the second in a then-unknown set of characters, the third in the ancient hieroglyphics which it was assumed no one would ever translate. Then I read how a French scholar, Jean Champollion, had come along and had taken that second unknown set of script, character for character, matched it with the Greek and finally had come up with a thesis he could prove – that the text was the same as the Greek. Then in a superhuman feat of scholarship he had taken the terribly intricate characters of the hieroglyphics and cross matched them with the preceding two in almost geometric progression, and had proved that too was the same text. That was what opened up to the whole world of scholarship, all that hitherto had been hidden behind the mystery of the allegedly undecipherable hieroglyphics.

That thing just fascinated me. I would find myself going around London doing all sorts of other things and at odd times I would see in my mind's eye, almost as if it were projected in my head, the Rosetta Stone. To me, it just had some kind of special significance, but I couldn't make head or tail of what it might be. Finally I was on a plane coming back to this country, when an idea hit me. It was rough, raw, crude, but it got me to thinking. Now what this scholar worked with was language chiseled into the stone. What he did was to take that which had been unknown and match it with that which was known, and thus found out the meaning of what hitherto had been unknown. Then I got to thinking of an analogy: that story always told in our family that I had heard on the front porch in Henning. The unknown quotient was those strange phonetic sounds. I got to thinking, now maybe I could find out where these sounds came from. Obviously these strange sounds are threads of some African tongue. My whole thing was to see if maybe I could find out, just in curiosity, what tongue did they represent. It seemed obvious to me what I had to do was try to get in touch with as wide a range of Africans as

I could, simply because there were many, many tongues spoken in Africa. I lived in New York, so I began doing what seemed to me logical. I began going up to the United Nations lobby about quitting time. It wasn't hard to spot Africans, and every time I could I'd stop one. I would say to him my little sounds. In a couple of weeks I stopped a couple of dozen Africans, each and every one of which took a quick look, quick listen to me, and took off. Which I well understand; me with a Tennessee accent trying to tell them some African sounds, I wasn't going to get it.

I have a friend, a master researcher, George Sims, who knew what I was trying to do and he came to me with a listing of about a dozen people renowned for their knowledge of African linguistics. One who intrigued me right off the bat was not an African at all, but a Belgian. Educated in England, much of it at the School of Oriental and African Studies, he had done his early work living in African villages, studying the language or the tongue as spoken in those villages. He had finally written a book called in French, *La Tradition Orale*. His name: Dr. Jan Vansina, University of Wisconsin. I phoned Dr. Vansina and he very graciously said I could see him. I got on a plane and flew to Madison, Wisconsin, with no dream of what was about to happen. In the living room of the Vansinas that evening I told Dr. Vansina every little bit I could remember of what I'd heard as a little boy on the front porch in Henning. Dr. Vansina listened most intently and then began to question me. Being an oral historian, he was particularly interested in the physical transmission of the story down across the generations. I would answer everything I could and I couldn't answer most of what he asked. Around midnight, Dr. Vansina said, "I wonder if you'd spend the night at our home," and I did. The following morning, before breakfast, Dr. Vansina came down with a very serious expression on his face. I was later to learn that he had already been on the phone with colleagues, and he said to me, "the ramifications of what you have brought here could be enormous." He and his colleagues felt almost certain that the collective sounds that I had been able to bring there, which had been passed down across the family in the manner I had described to him, represented the Mandinka tongue. I'd never heard the word. He told me that that was the tongue spoken by the Mandingo people. He then began to guess translate certain sounds. There was a sound that probably meant cow or cattle; another probably meant the bow-bow

tree, generic in West Africa. I had told him that from the time I was knee-high I'd heard about how this African would point to a guitar and say ko. Now he told me that almost surely this would refer to one of the oldest stringed instruments among the Mandingo people, an instrument made of a gourd covered with goat skin, a long neck, 21 strings, called the kora. He came finally to the most involved of the sounds that I had heard and had brought to him – Kamby Bolongo. He said without question in Mandinka, bolongo meant river; preceded by Kamby it probably would mean Gambia River. I'd never heard of that river.

It was Thursday morning when I heard those words, Monday morning I was in Africa. I just had to go. There was no sense in messing around. On Friday I found that of the numerous African students in this country, there were a few from that very, very small country called Gambia. The one who physically was closest to me was a fellow in Hamilton College, Clinton, New York. I hit that campus about 3:30 Friday afternoon and practically snatched Ebou Manga out of an economics class and got us on Pan American that night. We flew through the night to Dakar, Senegal, where we caught a light plane that flew over to a little airstrip called Yundum – they literally had to run monkeys off the runway to get in there. Then we got a van and we went into the small city of Bathurst, the capital of Gambia. Ebou Manga, his father Alhaji Manga (it's a predominantly Moslem culture there), assembled a group of about eight men, members of the government, who came into the patio of the Atlantic Hotel, and they sat in kind of a semi-circle as I told them the history that had come down across the family to my grandmother and thence to me; told them everything I could remember.

When I finished, the Africans irritated me considerably because Kamby Bolongo, the sounds which had gotten me specifically to them, they tended almost to poo-poo. They said, "Well, of course Kamby Bolongo would mean Gambia River; anyone would know that." What these Africans reacted to was another sound: a mere two syllables that I had brought them without the slightest comprehension that it had any particular significance. They said, "There may be some significance in that your forefather stated his name was Kin-tay." I said, "Well, there was nothing more explicit in the story than the pronunciation of his name, Kin-tay."

They said, “Our oldest villages tend to be named for those families which founded those villages centuries ago.” Then they sent for a little map and they said, “Look, here is the village of Kinte-Kundah, and not too far from it is the village of Kinte-Kundah-Janneh-Ya.” then they told me about something I never had any concept existed in this world. They told me that in the back country, and particularly in the older villages of the back country, there were old men called griots, who are in effect walking, living archives of oral history. They are the old men who, from the time they had been in their teen-ages, have been part of a line of men who tell the stories as they have been told since the time of their forefathers, literally down across centuries. The incumbent griot will be a man usually in his late sixties, early seventies, and underneath him will be men separated by about decade intervals, sixty, fifty, forty, thirty, twenty, and a teen-age boy, and each line of griots will be the experts in the story of a major family clan; another line of griots another clan; and so on for dozens of group of villages. Another would go into the history of the empires which had preceded it, and so forth. The stories were told in a narrative, oral history way, not verbatim, but the essential same way they had been told down across the time since the forefathers. The way they were trained was that the teen-age boy was exposed to that story for forty or fifty years before he would become the oral historian incumbent.

It astounds us now to realize that men like these, not only in Africa but other cultures, can literally talk for days telling a story in the most explicit details and not repeat themselves. The reason it astounds us is because in our culture we have become so conditioned to the crush of print that most people have almost forgotten what the human memory is capable of if it is trained to keep things in it. These men, I was told, existed in the back country, and they told me that since my forefather had said his name was Kin-tay they would see what they could do to help me.

I came back to this country enormously bewildered. I didn’t know what to do. It embarrasses me to say that up to that time I really hadn’t thought all that much about Africa. I knew where it was and I had the standard cliché images of it,

the Tarzan Africa and stuff like that. Well, now it was almost as if some religious zealotry came into me. I just began to devour everything I could lay eyes on about Africa, particularly slavery. I can remember after reading all day I'd sit on the edge of a bed at night with a map of Africa, studying the positions of the countries, one with relation with the other.

It was about six weeks later when an innocuous looking letter came to me which suggested that when it was possible I should come back. I was back over there as quick as I could make it. The same men, with whom I had previously talked rather matter-of-factly, told me that the word had been put out in the back country and that there had indeed been found a griot of the Kinte clan. His name, they said, was Kebba Kanga Fofana. When I heard there was such a man I was ready to have a fit. Where is he? I figured from my experience as an American magazine writer, the government should have had him there with a public relations man for me to talk to. They looked at me oddly and they said, he's in his village.

I discovered at that point that if I was to see this man, I was going to have to do something I'd never dreamed before: I would have to organize a safari. It took me three days to rent a launch to get up the river, lorry, Land-Rover to take supplies by the back route, to hire finally a total of fourteen people, including three interpreters, four musicians (they told me in the back country these old oral historians would not talk without music in the background), bearers and so forth. On the fourth day we went vibrating in this launch up the Gambia River. I was very uncomfortable. I had the feeling of being alien. I had the queasy feeling of what do they see me as, another pith-helmet? We got up the river to a little village called Albreda on the left bank. Then we went ashore. Now our destination by foot was a village called Juffure where this man was said to live.

There's an expression called 'the peak experience'. It is that which emotionally nothing in your life ever can transcend. I know I have had mine that first day in the back country in black West Africa. When we got up within sight of the village of Juffure the children who had inevitably been playing outside African villages,

gave the word and the people came flocking out of their huts. It's a rather small village, only about seventy people. Villages in the back country are very much today as they were two hundred years ago, circular mud huts with conical thatched roofs. From a distance I could see this small man with a pillbox hat and an off-white robe, and even from a distance there was an aura of 'somebodiness' about him. I just knew that was the man we had come to see. When we got closer the interpreters left our party and went straight to him. I had stepped unwittingly into a sequence of emotional events that always I feel awkward trying to describe, simply because I never ever verbally could convey, the physical power of emotional occurrences.

These people quickly filtered closely around me in kind of a horseshoe design with me at the base. If I had put up my hands I would have touched the nearest ones on either side. There were about three, four deep all around. The first thing that hit me was the intensity of the way they were staring at me. The eyes just raped. The foreheads were forward in the intensity of the staring. It was an uncomfortable feeling. While this was happening there began to occur inside me a kind of feeling as if something was turgid, rolling, surging around. I had this eerie feeling that I knew inside why it was happening and what it was about, but consciously I could not identify what had me so upset. After a while it began to roll in: it was rather like a galeforce wind that you couldn't see but it just rolled in and hit you – bam! It was enough to knock you down. I suddenly realized what upset me so was that I was looking at a crowd of people and for the first time in my life every one of them was jet black. I was standing there rather rocked by that, and in the way that we tend to do if we are discomforted, we drop our glance. I remember dropping my glance, and my glance falling on my own hand, my own complexion, in context with their complexion. Now there came rolling in another surging galeforce that hit me perhaps harder than the first one. A feeling of guilt, a feeling rather of being hybrid, a feeling of being the impure among the pure.

The old man suddenly left the interpreters, walked away, and the people quickly filtered away from me to the old man. They began talking in an animated, high metallic Mandinka tongue. One of the interpreters, A.B.C. Salla, whispered in my ear and the significance of what he whispered probably got me as much as all the rest of it collectively. He said, "They stare at you so because they have never seen a black American." What hit me was they were not looking at Alex Haley, writer, they didn't know who he was, they couldn't care less. What they saw was a symbol of twenty-five million black Americans whom they had never seen. It was just an awesome thing to realize that someone had thrust that kind of symbolism upon me. There's a language that's universal, a language of gestures, noises, inflections, expressions. Somehow looking at them, hearing them, though I couldn't understand a syllable, I knew what they were talking about. I somehow knew they were trying to arrive at a consensus of how they collectively felt about me as a symbol of all the millions of us over here whom they never had seen. There came a time when the old man quickly turned. He walked right through the people, he walked right past three interpreters, he walked right up to me, looking piercingly into my eyes and spoke in Mandinka, as if instinctively he felt I should be able to understand it. The translation came from the side. The way they collectively saw me, the symbol of all the millions of black people here whom they never had seen was, "Yes, we have been told by the forefathers that there are many of us from this place who are in exile in that place called America and in other places." That was the way they saw it.

The old man, the griot, the oral historian, Kebba Kanga Fofana, seventy-three rains of age (their way of saying seventy-three years, one rainy season a year), began to tell me the ancestral history of the Kinte clan as it had been told down the centuries, from the times of the forefathers. It was as if a scroll was being read. It wasn't just talk as we talk. It was a very formal occasion. The people became mouse quiet, rigid. The old man sat in a chair and when he would speak he would come up forward, his body would grow rigid, the cords in his neck stood out and he spoke words as though they were physical objects coming out of his mouth.

He'd speak a sentence or so, he would go limp, relax, and the translation would come. Out of this man's head came spilling lineage details incredible to behold. Two, three centuries back. Who married whom, who had what children, what children married whom and their children, and so forth, just unbelievable. I was struck not only by the profusion of details, but also by the biblical pattern of the way they expressed it. It would be something like: 'and so and so took as a wife so and so and begat and begat and begat', and he'd name their mates and their children, and so forth. When they would date things it was not with calendar dates, but they would date things with physical events, such as, 'in the year of the big water he slew a water buffalo', the year of the big water referring to a flood. If you wanted to know the date calendar-wise you had to find when that flood occurred.

I can strip out of the hours that I heard of the history of the Kinte clan (my forefather had said his name was Kin-tay), the immediate vertical essence of it, leaving out all the details of the brothers and the cousins and the other marriages and so forth. The griot, Kebba Kanga Fofana, said that the Kinte clan had been begun in a country called Old Mali. Traditionally the Kinte men were blacksmiths who had conquered fire. The women were potters and weavers. A branch of the clan had moved into the country called Mauretania. It was from the country of Mauretania that a son of the clan, whose name was Kairaba Kunta Kinte (he was a Marabout, which is to say a holy man of the Moslem faith), came down into the country called the Gambia. He went first to a village called Pakali n'Ding. He stayed there for a while. He went next to a village called Jiffarong; thence he went to a village called Juffure. In the village of Juffure the young Marabout Kairaba Kunta Kinte took his first wife, a Mandinka maiden whose name was Sireng. By her he begat two sons whose names were Janneh and Saloum. Then he took a second wife; her name, Yaisa. By Yaisa he begat a son whose name was Omoro. Those three sons grew up in the village of Juffure until they came of age. The Elder two, Janneh and Saloum, went away and started a new village called Kinte-Kundah Janneh-Ya. It is there today and literally translated means 'The Home of Janneh Kinte'. The youngest son, Omoro, stayed in the village until he had thirty rains, and then he took a wife, a Mandinka maiden, her name Binta Kebba. By Binta Kebba, roughly between 1750 and 1760, Omoro Kinte begat four sons, whose names were Kunta, Lamin, Suwadu and Madi.

By the time he got down to that level of the family, the griot had talked for probably five hours. He had stopped maybe fifty times in the course of that narrative and a translation came into me. Then a translation came as all the others had come, calmly, and it began, "About the time the king's soldiers came." That was one of those time-fixing references. Later in England, in British Parliamentary records, I went feverishly searching to find out what he was talking about, because I had to have the calendar date. But now in back country Africa, the griot Kebba Kanga Fofana, the oral historian, was telling the story as it had come down for centuries from the time of the forefathers of the Kinte clan. "About the time the king's soldiers came, the eldest of these four sons, Kunta, went away from this village to chop wood and was seen never again." He went on with his story.

I sat there as if I was carved out of rock. Goose-pimples came out on me I guess the size of marbles. He just had no way in the world to know that he had told me that which meshed with what I'd heard on the front porch in Henning, Tennessee, from grandma, from Cousin Georgia, from Aunt Liz, from Cousin Plus, all the other old ladies who sat there on that porch. I managed to get myself together enough to pull out my notebook, which had in it what grandma had always said. I got the interpreter Salla and showed it to him and he got rather agitated, and he went to the old man, and he got agitated, and the old man went to the people and they got agitated.

I don't remember it actually happening. I don't remember anyone giving an order, but those seventy people formed a ring around me, moving counter-clockwise, chanting, loudly, softly, loudly, softly, their bodies were close together, the physical action was like drum majorettes with their high knee action. You got the feeling they were an undulating mass of people moving around. I'm standing in the middle like an Adam in the desert. I don't know how I felt; how could you feel at a thing like that? I remember looking at the first lady who broke from that circle (there were about a dozen ladies who had little infant children slung across their backs), and she with a scowl on this jet black face, her bare feet slapping against the hard earth, came charging in towards me. She took her baby and roughly thrust it out. The gesture said, 'Take it!' and I took the baby and I clasped it, at

which point she snatched it away and another lady, another baby, and I guess I had clasped about a dozen babies in about two minutes. It would be almost two years later at Harvard when Dr. Jerome Bruner told me, you were participating in one of the oldest ceremonies of humankind called 'the laying on of hands'; that in their way they were saying to you, 'through this flesh which is us, we are you, and you are us'. There were many, many other things that happened in that village that day, but I was particularly struck with the enormity of the fact that they were dealing with me and seeing me in the perspective of, for them, the symbol of twenty-five million black people in this country whom they never had seen. They took me into their mosque. They prayed in Arabic which I couldn't understand. Later the crux of the prayer was translated, 'Praise be to Allah for one long lost from us whom Allah has returned.' That was the way they saw that.

When it was possible to leave, since we'd come by water, I wanted to go out over the land. My five senses had become muted, truncated. They didn't work right. If I wanted to feel something I would have to squeeze to register the sense of feeling. Things were misty. I didn't hear well. I would become aware the driver sitting right by me was almost shouting something and I just hadn't heard him up to that point. I began now, as we drove out over the back country road, with drums distantly heard around, to see in my mind's eye, as if it were being projected somehow on a film, a screen almost, rough, ragged, out of focus, almost a portrayal of what I had studied so, so much about: the background of us as a people, the way that ancestrally we who are in this country were brought out of Africa.

The late Alex Haley is best known as the co-author of "Autobiography of Malcolm X" (1965) and author of "Roots: The Saga of an American Family" (1976).

Jose Kusugak, on establishing a common circumpolar Inuktitut writing system...

"I think Inuit will have to trust linguists and mandate professional users of the Inuktitut language, such as teachers, curriculum developers, writers and others.

People will have to leave their emotional attachments out of it. If you do it scientifically, it's workable because there is a natural similarity and same history and background. So, if it is the will of the people to develop a common writing system internationally, it can be done. At some point it will be absolutely necessary because of computers and the Inuit Circumpolar Conference. If we develop a virtual university, for example, and if we want to read each other's newspapers and e-mails and so on, we will need a common Inuktitut writing system that we can all read and understand."

Inuktitut 93, 2003