

● African Diaspora Approaches to Family History & the Collections of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

“African diaspora approaches to family history and genealogy involves looking at maps, documentary records, oral history and DNA; all important resources in reclaiming and defining our identity, building our resilience, and provides a platform to understand and develop our own solutions in tackling inequality, racism and the negative impact of globalisation.” Patrick Vernon

Introduction

Patrick Vernon, an expert on African and Caribbean Diaspora family genealogy, was commissioned to create this guide to assist people wishing to research their family histories using the Society’s collections. This guide was developed as part of a wider project, entitled ‘Rediscovering African Geographies’ that reinterpreted the Society’s African map collection in partnership with African community members based in London. Maps dating from 1400 onwards were exhibited in March – April 2011 that covered a range of topics including a look at ancient African empires, African contact with countries and cultures on other continents and present day issues. The project, funded by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, Designation Development Fund, also included a programme of activity specifically aimed at family history research for people with African and Caribbean ancestry.

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What is Diaspora Family History?

A world history perspective is essential in understanding the complexity of family history in an African context. Exploring and defining the African diaspora can be useful using the following historical dimensions:

- **Primordial:** An early phase that genetically connects all humans. It is not, however, a direct link.
- **Prehistoric:** Applying to groups of people who possess physical evidence of African heritage in places such as Melanesia and the Andaman Islands. Despite this physical connection, there is no cultural or historical evidence of their African heritage remaining.
- **African Empires:** Understanding the impact of African civilisations and kingdoms from 3100 BC onwards on regional politics, culture and internal migrations. Kingdoms such as the Kushite, Nok, Aksumite, Nri, Wolof, Monomotapa, Kongo, Asante, Songhai, Fulani, Bamana, Benin and Buganda are just a few of the many known providing reference to researchers.
- **Arabian /Indian Ocean Diaspora:** Applying to people of African descent taken to countries on the Arabian Peninsula via the Indian Ocean trade in enslaved peoples and those that travelled independently. There is evidence of the link although few cultural links still exist.
- **Atlantic Diaspora:** For people of African descent who were taken to the Americas and Caribbean where there is a physical as well as an ancestral memory of their African heritage.
- **Inter-Continental Diaspora:** Migration within Africa, Caribbean, South America and North America.
- **Windrush Generation:** Post World War II migration from the Caribbean and other Commonwealth countries to Britain to help with rebuilding after the war
- **New Diaspora:** Applying to the post-Cold War period and the migration of Africans from post-independence African states to and within mainly Europe and North America. Many whom maintain a strong cultural ties with Africa

Challenges to African Diaspora Genealogy

It is often assumed that if you are born in the UK or have links to the Caribbean, Southern/ Northern America, and to a limited extent born in the continent of Africa, it is either impossible or difficult to trace your family history for the following reasons:

- The presence of Africans in Britain and Europe over the last 1000 years leading to integration into European society. It is estimated that 1 in 10 white British people have an African or Asian ancestor;
- The impact of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans; the depopulation of Africa, and the displacement of Africans to the Caribbean, South America, USA, Canada, Europe;
- The effects of civil war, genocide, famine/ HIV/AIDS epidemics in Africa;
- Impact of migration to towns and cities within the African continent;
- Impact of globalisation, which can undermine the preservation of oral history, cultural/regional traditions and intergenerational learning.

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Why trace your family heritage?

Over the last 60 years many of the African diaspora have started to undertake family history research. The most celebrated example is by African–American Alex Haley. *Roots*, his seminal book and television series from the 1970s are based on research of his family in Gambia. Since then Gambia has become a major cultural tourist destination and the *Roots Homecoming Festival* promotes dialogue and offers a place of pilgrimage to people of the African diaspora from around the world wanting to connect culturally, emotionally and socially to Africa.



A family history trail has been established in Gambia based on Alex Haley’s research that includes St James Island, a slave fort built in 1651 on the river Gambia. The village Jufureh, home of Kunta Kinte, a descendant of Alex Haley and the main character in *Roots*, is the focal point here and cultural tourists can meet members of the existing Kinte family. Visitors also have the opportunity to take part in a rites of passage ceremony and learn traditional dances, often performed in front of the President of Gambia. New cultural events continue to develop across Africa such a *Panafest* in Ghana and *Emancipation Day* across the Caribbean.



Using maps in tracing family history

Maps are becoming an invaluable resource in tracing family history. The Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) has an extensive collection of maps of Africa and the Caribbean, consisting of 50,000 items relating to Africa and several thousand to the Caribbean. These include maps, charts and atlases ranging from representations in the Society's earliest printed item, a hybrid atlas of Ptolemy's *Cosmographia (Geographia)* published in Ulm in 1486, to unique 19th century manuscript maps. Contemporary maps and atlases also provide coverage for modern-day Africa and the Caribbean.

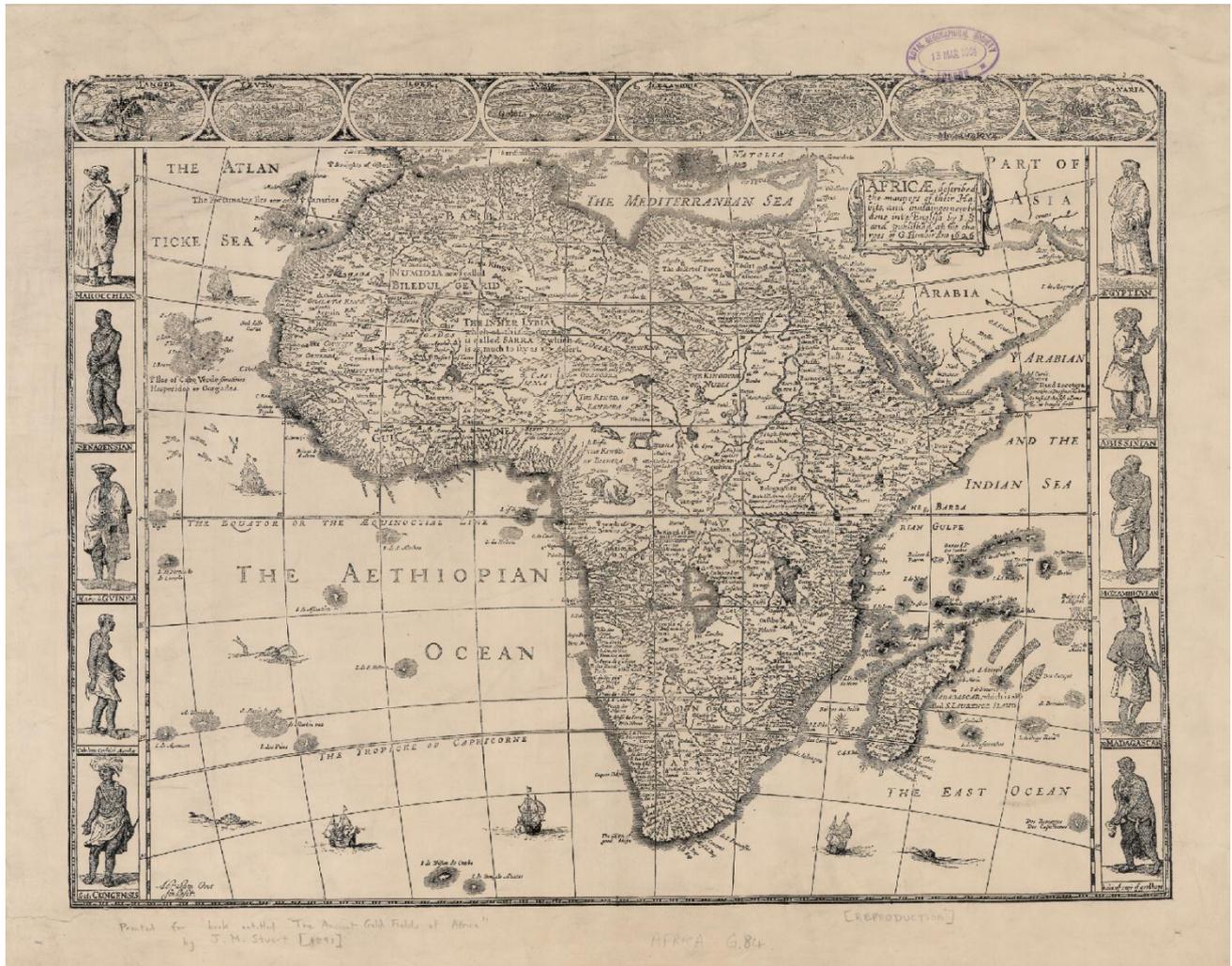
Historically maps were developed using information from a variety of sources. European missionaries, soldiers, entrepreneurs, diplomats and explorers over the centuries have all added to map-making, often reflecting their 'interests', illustrating opportunities, and to an extent, used maps to justify colonisation. Interpretation of these colonial and earlier maps can offer insights of the political, social and environmental factors that have, and continue to shape African diaspora family history whilst providing practical information such as plantation and shipping information, and shifting borders that can locate people and histories. The *Rediscovering African Geographies* exhibition illustrates how mapping can be used to reveal insights of Africa and related Diasporas over the centuries.

African (maps)

- Early African Kingdoms
- Spread of Islam and Christianity
- Indian Ocean and Transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans
- Rise of empires and movement of tribal groupings
- Trade and movement of goods and services
- Impact of colonisation by European and Arabic countries
- Creation and definition of nation states
- Impact of climate change and globalisation

Caribbean and South American (maps)

- Creation of colonies by different European powers
- Demise of Amerindians and Taintos societies
- Details of plantations and owners
- Nature of the terrain around slave rebellions and development of Maroon societies
- Land ownership during slavery and emancipation
- Recreation of parishes and names of towns and villages from the UK
- Modern development of nation states (Dutch Guyana to Suriname)

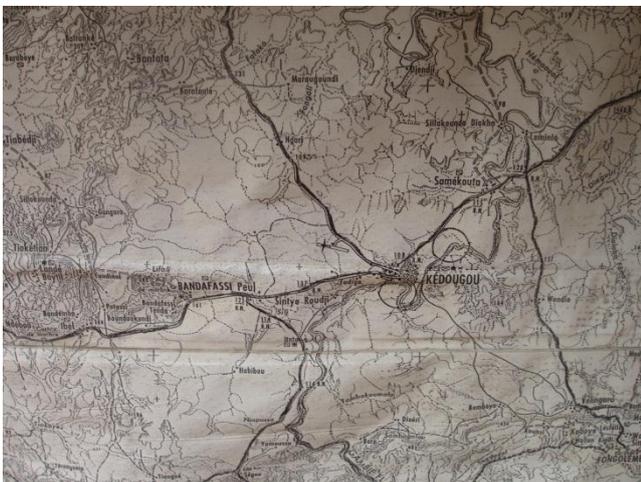


Africae, described, the manners of their Habits and buildings: newly done into English by John Sudbury (London: G. Humble, 1626)
RGS-IBG Ref: mr Africa G.84/ 543967

His journey to Senegal included stops at Dakar and Goree Island where the French built a fort in 1780 known as *The House of Slaves*; it was the final destination of enslaved Africans being transported to the Americas and the Caribbean. To reach the village of Kedougou, approximately 30 kilometres from the border of Guinea, he travelled the same route which was used during the slave trade, a 15 hour drive across Senegal. In the village, which is now the size of small town, Patrick was able to contact descendants of the founding fathers of the village belonging to the *Diahanké* people. They described at length the local history, including the migration of tribes from Guinea and surrounding regions to Senegal, and activity around the slave trade and the impact it had on the village and people.

Patrick stayed a week in the village and everyone commented on his features and physique.

"I would say to people which tribe do you think I came from? Whether young or old they would give the same answer - Fulani. I would ask how they could be so certain, that in reality my descendants are from Jamaica, and that Jamaicans are mixed up with Europeans, Chinese, Indian and other people from Africa? However, they would still say Fulani!"



Top: Goree Island (left); Area near Kedougou where people were captured and the place their journey started to Goree Island (right)
Bottom: Map showing Kedougou (left); Patrick Vernon at Dindefelo Falls (right)

Embracing this discovery, Patrick researched the *Fulani*. It was one of the main nomadic tribes in North and West Africa. Many of the *Fulani* travelled from Guinea to settle in surrounding areas of Kedougou. A trip to Dindefelo Falls which borders Senegal and Guinea provided the opportunity for him to reflect on his journey; the emotions of coming to terms with the past of his ancestors, the lives they may have led and what would be like to be captured and enslaved...

“Although I could not find the ancestors of Sally Skiers in Kedougou I did see a strong resemblance to this area and the place my families come from in St James in Jamaica, both lush with foliage, flowing rivers and hills everywhere. I guess this was my homecoming and a journey of a lifetime which I still reflect on every day as part of reclaiming and sharing my family history.”

Patrick Vernon is a publisher, film maker and specialist in African and Caribbean genealogy studies. He is the founder of Every Generation website and 100 Great Black Britons Campaign.

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Motherland: A genetic journey: You tube video of the programmes
www.google.co.uk/search?q=motherland+a+genetic+journey&hl=en&prmd=ivns&source=univ&tbm=vid&tbo=u&ei=-ALcTd-BMovF8QOxrZ0P&sa=X&oi=video_result_group&ct=title&resnum=1&ved=0CBoQqwQwAA

Caribbean and Black & Asian History www.casbah.ac.uk

Cyndi's List www.cyndislist.com

Family Search (Church of Jesus Christ and Latter-Day Saints) www.familysearch.org

Genes Connected www.genesreunited.co.uk

Moving Here www.movinghere.org.uk

Society of Genealogists www.sog.org.uk

Tombstones and burials (Barbados and Antigua) www.tombstones.bb

Channel4 website: Empire's Children www.channel4.com/programmes/empires-children

Every Generation websites and interviews:

www.everygeneration.co.uk

www.100greatblackbritons.com

www.whenweruled.com

www.charmedlifecampaign.wordpress.com

Interviews and articles on Patrick Vernon tracing his family tree:

www.jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20110518/news/news3.html

www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/hometruths/0324african_discovery.shtml

Panel discussion with Colin Jackson CBE, Jackie Osei-Tutu, Patrick Vernon, Kathy Chater and Paul Crooks on Caribbean family history www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/podcasts/legacy.htm

African American Lives: Henry Louis Gates, TV programmes featuring high profile African American family histories www.pbs.org/wnet/aalives/index.html

Free family history maps and tools that you can download www.accessgenealogy.com/family_tree_chart.htm

International DNA project www.dnaancestryproject.com

DNA testing company www.rootsforreal.com

Roots Festival Gambia www.rootsgambia.gm

Panafest Ghana www.panafest.us