As a boy, Alex Haley spent his summers on his grandmother’s front porch in Henning, Tennessee, listening to her and her sisters tell stories of the family’s history back through the days of slavery. The “furthest-back person” they spoke of was an ancestor they called “The African,” who was kidnapped in his native country, shipped to Annapolis, Maryland, and sold into slavery. These stories stayed with young Alex throughout his life.

One Saturday in 1965 I happened to be walking past the National Archives building in Washington. Across the interim years I had thought of Grandma’s old stories—otherwise I can’t think what diverted me up the Archives’ steps. And when a main reading room desk attendant asked if he could help me, I wouldn’t have dreamed of admitting to him some curiosity hanging on from boyhood about my slave forebears. I kind of bumbled that I was interested in census records of Alamance County, North Carolina, just after the Civil War.

△ Critical Viewing
Does this photograph remind you of anywhere you have been? Explain.
[Connect]

Reading Skill
Author’s Purpose
What details here show that the author wants to describe a personal experience?
The microfilm rolls were delivered, and I turned them through the machine with a building sense of intrigue, viewing in different census takers' penmanship an endless parade of names. After about a dozen microfilmed rolls, I was beginning to tire, when in utter astonishment I looked upon the names of Grandma's parents: Tom Murray, Irene Murray...older sisters of Grandma's as well—every one of them a name that I'd heard countless times on her front porch.

It wasn't that I hadn't believed Grandma. You just didn't not believe my Grandma. It was simply so uncanny actually seeing those names in print and in official U.S. Government records.

During the next several months I was back in Washington whenever possible, in the Archives, the Library of Congress, the Daughters of the American Revolution Library. (Whenever black attendants understood the idea of my search, documents I requested reached me with miraculous speed.) In one source or another during 1966 I was able to document at least the highlights of the cherished family story. I would have given anything to have told Grandma, but, sadly, in 1949 she had gone. So I went and told the only survivor of those Henning front-porch storytellers: Cousin Georgia Anderson, now in her 80's in Kansas City, Kan. Wrinkled, bent, not well herself, she was so overjoyed, repeating to me the old stories and sounds; they were like Henning echoes: "Yeah, boy, that African say his name was 'Kin-tay'; he say the banjo was 'ko,' an' the river 'Kamby Bolong,' an' he was off choppin' some wood to make his drum when they grabbed 'im!" Cousin Georgia grew so excited we had to stop her, calm her down, "You go 'head, boy! Your grandma an' all of 'em—they up there watching what you do!"

That week I flew to London on a magazine assignment. Since by now I was steeped in the old, in the past, scarcely a tour guide missed me—I was awed at so many historical places and treasures I'd heard of and read of. I came upon the Rosetta stone in the British Museum, marveling anew at how Jean Champollion, the French archaeologist, had miraculously deciphered its ancient demotic and hieroglyphic texts.  

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1. cherished (cher' isht) n. beloved; valued.
2. demotic and hieroglyphic texts (dā māt' ik and hī or Ø' gîf' ik) ancient Egyptian writing, using symbols and pictures to represent words.
3. quench
The thrill of that just kept hanging around in my head. I was on a jet returning to New York when a thought hit me. Those strange, unknown-tongue sounds, always part of our family’s old story . . . they were obviously bits of our original African “Kín-tay’s” native tongue. What specific tongue? Could I somehow find out?

Back in New York, I began making visits to the United Nations Headquarters lobby; it wasn’t hard to spot Africans. I’d stop any I could, asking if my bits of phonetic sounds held any meaning for them. A couple of dozen Africans quickly looked at me, listened, and took off—understandably dubious about some Tennessean’s accent alleging “African” sounds.

My research assistant, George Sims (we grew up together in Henning), brought me some names of ranking scholars of African linguistics. One was particularly intriguing: a Belgian- and English-educated Dr. Jan Vansina; he had spent his early career living in West African villages, studying and tape-recording countless oral histories that were narrated by certain very old African men; he had written a standard textbook, “The Oral Tradition.”

So I flew to the University of Wisconsin to see Dr. Vansina. In his living room I told him every bit of the family story in the fullest detail that I could remember it. Then, intensely, he queried me about the story’s relay across the generations, about the gibberish of “k” sounds Grandma had fiercely muttered to herself while doing her housework, with my brothers and me giggling beyond her hearing at what we had dubbed “Grandma’s noises.”

Dr. Vansina, his manner very serious, finally said, “These sounds your family has kept sound very probably of the tongue called ‘Mandinka.’”

I’d never heard of any “Mandinka.” Grandma just told of the African saying “ko” for banjo, or “Kamby Bolong” for a Virginia river.

Among Mandinka stringed instruments, Dr. Vansina said, one of the oldest was the “kora.”

“Bolong,” he said, was clearly Mandinka for “river.” Preceded by “Kamby,” it very likely meant “Gambia River.”

Dr. Vansina telephoned an eminent Africanist colleague, Dr. Philip Curtin. He said that the phonetic “Kín-tay” was correctly spelled “Kinte,” a very old clan that had originated

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**Reading Skill**

*Author’s Purpose*

What details in this paragraph show that the author wanted to include humor in his story?

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**Vocabulary Builder**

**Eminent** *(em’ e nant)*

*adj.* distinguished or outstanding

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**Reading Check**

What does Haley learn about the strange sounds his Grandma used to make?
in Old Mali. The Kinte men traditionally were blacksmiths, and the women were potters and weavers.

I knew I must get to the Gambia River.

The first native Gambian I could locate in the U.S. was named Ebou Manga, then a junior attending Hamilton College in upstate Clinton, N.Y. He and I flew to Dakar, Senegal, then took a smaller plane to Yundum Airport, and rode in a van to Gambia’s capital, Bathurst. Ebou and his father assembled eight Gambia government officials. I told them Grandma’s stories, every detail I could remember, as they listened intently, then reacted. “‘Kamby Bolong’ of course is Gambia River!” I heard. “But more clue is your fore-father’s saying his name was ‘Kinte.’” Then they told me something I would never ever have fantasized—that in places in the back country lived very old men, commonly called griots, who could tell centuries of the histories of certain very old family clans. As for Kintes, they pointed out to me on a map some family villages, Kinte-Kundah, and Kinte-Kundah Janneh-Ya, for instance.

The Gambian officials said they would try to help me. I returned to New York dazed. It is embarrassing to me now, but despite Grandma’s stories, I’d never been concerned much with Africa, and I had the routine images of African people living mostly in exotic jungles. But a compulsion now laid hold of me to learn all I could, and I began devouring books about Africa, especially about the slave trade. Then one Thursday’s mail contained a letter from one of the Gambian officials, inviting me to return there.

Monday I was back in Bathurst. It galvanized me when the officials said that a griot had been located who told the Kinte clan history—his name was Kebba Kanga Fofana. To reach him, I discovered, required a modified safari: renting
a launch to get upriver, two land vehicles to carry supplies by
a roundabout land route, and employing finally 14 people,
including three interpreters and four musicians, since a griot
would not speak the revered clan histories without back-
ground music.

The boat Baddibu vibrated upriver, with me acutely tense:
Were these Africans maybe viewing me as but another of the
pith-helmets? After about two hours, we put in at James
Island, for me to see the ruins of the once British-operated
James Fort. Here two centuries of slave ships had loaded thou-
sands of cargoes of Gambian tribespeople. The crumbling
stones, the deeply oxidized swivel cannon, even some remnant
links of chain seemed all but impossible to believe. Then we
continued upriver to the left-bank village of Albreda, and there
put ashore to continue on foot to Juffure [jʊərə fɔːrə], village of
the griot. Once more we stopped, for me to see toubab kolong,
the “white man’s well,” now almost filled in, in a swampy area
with abundant, tall, saw-toothed grass. It was dug two centu-
ries ago to “17 men’s height deep” to insure survival drinking
water for long-driven, famishing coffles5 of slaves.

Walking on, I kept wishing that Grandma could hear how
her stories had led me to the “Kamby Bolong.” (Our surviving
storyteller Cousin Georgia died in a Kansas City hospital dur-
ing this same morning. I would learn later.) Finally, Juffure
village’s playing children, sighting us, flashed an alert. The
70-odd people came rushing from their circular, thatch-
roofed, mud-walled huts, with goats bounding up and about,
and parrots squawking from up in the palms. I sensed him in
advance somehow, the small man amid them, wearing a pill-
box cap and an off-white robe—the griot. Then the interpre-
ters went to him, as the villagers thronged around me.

And it hit me like a gale wind: every one of them, the whole
crowd, was jet black. An enormous sense of guilt swept me—a
sense of being some kind of hybrid . . . a sense of being
impure among the pure. It was an awful sensation.

The old griot stepped away from my interpreters and the
crowd quickly swarmed around him—all of them buzzing. An
interpreter named A.B.C. Salla came to me; he whispered:
“Why they stare at you so, they have never seen here a black
American.” And that hit me: I was symbolizing for them

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4. pith-helmets jargon tourists or hunters on safari, who typically wore these hard hats.
5. coffles (kōˈfəlz) n. groups of animals or slaves chained or tied together in a line.
twenty-five millions of us they had never seen. What did they think of me—of us? Then abruptly the old griot was briskly walking toward me. His eyes boring into mine, he spoke in Mandinka, as if instinctively I should understand—and A.B.C. Salla translated: “Yes . . . we have been told by the forefathers . . . that many of us from this place are in exile . . . in that place called America . . . and in other places.” I suppose I physically wavered, and they thought it was the heat; rustling whispers went through the crowd, and a man brought me a low stool. Now the whispering hushed—the musicians had softly begun playing kora and balafon, and a canvas sling lawn seat was taken by the griot, Kebba Kanga Fofana, aged 73 “rains” (one rainy season each year). He seemed to gather himself into a physical rigidity, and he began speaking the Kinte clan’s ancestral oral history; it came rolling from his mouth across the next hours . . . 17th- and 18th-century Kinte lineage details, predominantly what men took wives; the children they “begot,” in the order of their births; those children’s mates and children.

Events frequently were dated by some proximate singular physical occurrence. It was as if some ancient scroll were printed indelibly within the griot’s brain. Each few sentences or so, he would pause for an interpreter’s translation to me. I distill here the essence:

The Kinte clan began in Old Mali, the men generally blacksmiths “. . . who conquered fire,” and the women potters and weavers. One large branch of the clan moved to

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6. proximate (präk’sə mit) adj. near in time.

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retania from where one son of the clan, Kairaba Kunta, a Moslem Marabout holy man, entered Gambia. He first in the village of Pakali N'Ding; he moved next to a strong village; “... and then he came here, into our own age of Juffure.”

1 Juffure, Kairaba Kunta Kinte took his first wife, “... a ndinka maiden, whose name was Sireng. By her, he begot sons, whose names were Janneh and Saloun. Then he a second wife, Yaisa. By her, he begot a son, Omo-. The three sons became men in Juffure. Janneh and Saloun nt off and found a new village, Kinte-Kundah Janneh-Ya. Xd then Omo-, the youngest son, when he had 30 rains, p as a wife a maiden, Binta Kebba.

“... and by her, he begot four sons—Kunta, Lamin, Suwadu, id Madi...”

Sometimes, a “begotten,” after his naming, would be accom-panied by some later—occurring detail, perhaps as “... in time f big water (flood), he slew a water buffalo.” Having named hose four sons, now the griot stated such a detail.

“... and the time the king’s soldiers came, the eldest of these our sons, Kunta, when he had about 16 rains, went away from his village, to chop wood to make a drum... and he was never seen again...”

Goose-pimpls the size of lemons seemed to pop all over me.

In my knapsack were my cumulative notebooks, the first of them including how in my boyhood, my Grandma, Cousin Georgia and the others told of the African “Kun-tay” who always said he was kidnapped near his village—while chopping wood to make a drum...

I showed the interpreter, he showed and told the griot, who excitedly told the people; they grew very agitated. Abruptly they formed a human ring, encircling me, dancing and chanting. Perhaps a dozen of the women carrying their infant babies rushed in toward me, thrusting the infants into my arms conveying, I would later learn, “the laying on of hands... through this flesh which is us, we are you, and you are us.” The men hurried me into their mosque, their Arabic praying later being translated outside: “Thanks be to Allah for returning the long lost from among us.” Direct descendants of Kunta Kinte’s blood brothers were hastened, some of them from nearby villages, for a family portrait to be taken with me, surrounded by actual ancestral sixth cousins. More symbolic acts filled the remaining day.

Reading Skill
Author’s Purpose
Why do you think Haley includes these incidents related by the griot?

Literary Analysis
Historical Context
What do the activities described here reveal about the traditions and values of the culture?

Reading Check
What happens after Haley shows his notebooks about his ancestor?
When they would let me leave, for some reason I wanted to go away over the African land. Dazed, silent in the bumping Land Rover, I heard the cutting staccato of talking drums. Then when we sighted the next village, its people came thronging to meet us. They were all—little naked ones to wizened elders—waving, beaming; amid a cacophony of crying out; and then my ears identified their words: "Meester Kinte! Meester Kinte!"

Let me tell you something: I am a man. But I remember the sob surging up from my feet, flinging up my hands before my face and bawling as I had not done since I was a baby . . . the jet-black Africans were jostling,\(^7\) staring . . . I didn’t care, with the feelings surging. If you really knew the odyssey of us millions of black Americans, if you really knew how we came in the seeds of our forefathers, captured, driven, beaten, inspected, bought, branded, chained in foul ships, if you really knew, you needed weeping . . .

Back home, I knew that what I must write, really, was our black saga, where any individual’s past is the essence of the millions’. Now flat broke, I went to some editors I knew, describing the Gambian miracle, and my desire to pursue the research; Doubleday contracted to publish, and Reader’s Digest to condense the projected book; then I had advances to travel further.

What ship brought Kinte to Grandma’s “Naplis” (Annapolis, Md., obviously)? The old griot’s time reference to “king’s soldiers” sent me flying to London. Feverish searching at last identified, in British Parliament records, “Colonel O’Hare’s Forces,” dispatched in mid-1767 to protect the then British-held James Fort whose ruins I’d visited. So Kunta Kinte was down in some ship probably sailing later that summer from the Gambia River to Annapolis.

Now I feel it was fated that I had taught myself to write in the U.S. Coast Guard. For the sea dramas I had concentrated on had given me years of experience searching among yellowing old U.S. maritime records. So now in English 18th Century marine records I finally tracked ships reporting themselves in and out to the Commandant of the Gambia River’s James Fort. And then early one afternoon I found that a Lord Ligonier under a Captain Thomas Davies had sailed on the Sabbath of

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\(^7\) jostling (jōst’ ing) v. bumping and pushing, as in a crowd.
July 5, 1767. Her cargo: 3,265 elephants’ teeth, 3,700 pounds of beeswax, 800 pounds of cotton, 32 ounces of Gambian gold and 140 slaves; her destination: “Annapolis.”

That night I recrossed the Atlantic. In the Library of Congress the Lord Ligonier’s arrival was one brief line in “Shipping In The Port Of Annapolis—1748-1775.” I located the author, Vaughan W. Brown, in his Baltimore brokerage office. He drove to Historic Annapolis, the city’s historical society, and found me further documentation of her arrival on Sept. 29, 1767. (Exactly two centuries later, Sept. 29, 1967, standing, staring seaward from an Annapolis pier, again I knew tears.) More help came in the Maryland Hall of Records. Archivist Phebe Jacobsen found the Lord Ligonier’s arriving customs declaration listing, “98 Negroes”—so in her 86-day crossing, 42 Gambians had died, one among the survivors being 16-year-old Kunta Kinte. Then the microfilmed Oct. 1, 1767, Maryland Gazette contained, on page two, an announcement to prospective buyers from the ship’s agents, Daniel of St. Thos. Jenifer and John Ridout (the Governor’s secretary): “from the River GAMBIA, in AFRICA . . . a cargo of choice, healthy SLAVES . . .”

A Critical Viewing
In what way does this quilt give a good representation of Haley’s visit to Africa? [Connect]

Vocabulary Builder
destination (des’tə nə’ shən) n. place to which something is being sent