By Dahleen Glanton

September 12, 2004

NEW ORLEANS -- Once each summer, African-Americans gather in Congo Square at sunrise to pay tribute to their ancestors--the slaves who congregated here two centuries ago to worship in their native languages and dance to African rhythms.

Dressed in white, members of the group walk hand-in-hand through the empty streets of the French Quarter to the Mississippi River, where after a brief ceremony they toss white carnations into the muddy water near the area that once served as a busy slave-trade port.

The ceremony that commemorates Maafa--a Swahili term that means "horrific tragedy" and has come to symbolize the African diaspora--is one of many ways in which African-Americans are exploring their past in search of answers for the social problems blacks face today.

Just as Alex Haley's book "Roots" and the TV mini-series based on it ignited an African pride movement in the 1970s, the call for reparations--restitution to blacks for the evils of slavery--has sparked a similar movement 30 years later.

Thousands of African-Americans are seeking to learn more about the Middle Passage, or the transportation of slaves across the Atlantic, to reconcile the legacy of slavery in ways far beyond the "I'm black and I'm proud" movement of the '70s, which manifested itself in big Afros and dashikis.

In the 21st Century the process is more culturally driven, including everything from ceremonial events to DNA testing to determine where one's family originated in Africa. In some cases, it is more simple: taking an African dance or drumming class, enrolling in an African language course, observing Kwanzaa--a late December/early January event based on harvest celebrations in ancient Africa--or reading books about the diaspora.

"Many of us have come to the conclusion that a lot of the things wrong in our communities across the country
are really residuals of the Maafa," said Carol Bebelle, director of the ASHE Cultural Arts Center, which
sponsored the event in New Orleans' Congo Square. "We look like our ancestors of five generations ago, we
carry their names and we also carry their crosses. We have a lot of suppressed anger. And over generations, it
has manifested itself and we have adopted a lot of dysfunctional behavior."

At age 81, Millie Charles, or "Mama Millie" as she is known in New Orleans, has seen generations of
African-Americans achieve unprecedented success and never look back at the communities they left behind.
That, she said, has created a caste system that threatens future generations.

"We are so divided within our race. Those of us who have advanced because of our education have moved
ahead and left others behind to fend for themselves," said Charles, dean of the school of social work at
Southern University at New Orleans. "We must have a sense of wholeness in order to connect with our
ancestors. That is the unifying force that brings us together. And it is what kept us focused during the civil
rights era."

A `new, uplifting' life

Sister Jean Martinez, 58, a Catholic nun from Belize, said she grew up in a Central American culture that
denied its African roots. She comes to New Orleans every year to learn about her heritage.

"I was not black where I came from in Belize," said Martinez, who is attending the Institute for Black Catholic
Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans. "Though there were ethnic problems, we lived without
recognition of color. Because of events such as this, I now understand what it means to be black. I read black
books, and I identify myself as black. It is a new life and it is uplifting."

Rodrigo Fonseca, 65, and his wife, Sheila, 52, also participate in New Orleans every year. It is important, they
said, because they are white.

"People our age can claim we were too young and that we didn't do anything. That's true, but our ancestors
probably did do evil," said Rodrigo Fonseca, who grew up in Chattanooga, Tenn. "At some point, we have to
repent and there should be atonement. For me, this is a reconciliation process for what my ancestors did."

While African-Americans have been calling for reparations for more than two decades, the movement has
gained momentum in recent years as large cities, including Chicago, have passed measures requiring
companies that seek city contracts to reveal whether they profited from slavery. Last spring, eight African-
Americans filed a federal lawsuit in New York that seeks $1 billion in damages and accuses Lloyd's of
London, FleetBoston and R.J. Reynolds Co. of having benefited from the forced work of slaves.

Plaintiff Deadria Farmer-Paellmann used DNA tests that show that she descended from the Mende tribe in
Sierra Leone, giving her a direct link to Africans who suffered during slavery. And during the past year,
hundreds of African-Americans--many of whom have sought for years to trace their roots--have had their
DNA tested in an attempt to learn more about their heritage.

`Roots' inspired digging

"Because of Alex Haley's books, which were translated into several hundred African languages, Africans on
both continents got a document linking us to each other, and it sent people digging to find out more," said Rev.
Al Sampson, a civil rights activist and pastor of Fernwood United Methodist Church in Chicago.

"In the 1970s and 1980s, we had a lot of family reunions, where people sat down with their grandparents and
talked about family lineage," he said. "People also were searching state records and vital statistics data, but after a certain point you run into a roadblock. DNA takes it a step further."

Sampson, 65, is one of 1,500 people who have had their DNA tested through African Ancestry, a company in Washington, D.C.

Sampson, who was adopted as an infant, said he always had longed to know more about his ancestry. And the test told him his family originated from the Temne tribe in Sierra Leone.

As it turns out, he came from the same region as Farmer-Paellmann. So did Andrew Young, 72, another longtime civil rights activist and former ambassador to the United Nations. Young's DNA test revealed that he was part of the Mende tribe in Sierra Leone and is a distant cousin of the leader of the Amistad rebellion, in which slaves took over a trade ship in 1839.

Since DNA testing became more advanced in the past decade, private companies that offer tests for about $350 are popping up across the country, offering African-Americans a genetic map. Some scientists, however, are skeptical.

"One of the greatest myths, and it will be a major problem if we are not careful, is that someone can link you to an African tribe," said Dr. Bruce Jackson, a molecular geneticist at Boston University's medical school and co-founder of the African-American DNA Roots Project. "Anyone who tells you they can is operating from a misconception. There are thousands of ethnic groups in Africa, and there are only a handful that these people are studying. So how can you take a person and link him to a tribe?"

Adding to some scientists' skepticism is that some African ethnic groups have very similar traits.

Jackson, whose Roots Project is studying the lineage of 5,000 African-Americans, said only about 20 African ethnic groups are being studied genetically. Nigeria, for example, has more than 263 ethnic groups, and of those, only three have been studied genetically, he said.

Gina Paige, president of African Ancestry, said the company's database consists of 22,000 indigenous Africans representing 135 ethnic groups. She acknowledged that the group is unable to make a match in about 15 percent of the cases, and that 30 percent of the time it cannot find a paternal African match, primarily because in those cases they tend to be European, the result of white men mating with African women.

"It's not a perfect science, but our goal is to give people some sense of place prior to the period of slavery," Paige said. "We're not telling people where they came from at the beginning of time."

For people such as Stephanie Pegues of Forest Park, Ill., that's sufficient. After more than 10 years of trying to trace her roots, she ran into a dead end because census records held little information about African-Americans. This summer she had a DNA test performed on her uncle Willie Dowell, 65, and found that he was a descendant of the Ewondo tribe in Cameroon.

"You get to a point in the census and the names just aren't there," said Pegues, 41. "So you try to find family Bibles or anything else. It's kind of a lost history, so you have to totally rely on word of mouth.

"When DNA came along, it was fascinating because I knew there was a linkage to Africa, but I didn't know how to get back to it. We didn't care where exactly it was that we came from, we just wanted to know. And this was a godsend."
Maafa also is recognized in more subtle ways. Customers lined up recently at a booth at the Essence Music Festival in New Orleans where jewelry designer Phyllis Marie Bowdwin was selling her Middle Passage African Holocaust pin. The 4-inch pin, which sells for $75 to $120, is in the form of a slave ship, with its cargo--made from cowrie shells or metal slave images--packed inside.

Aiyetoro Kamau, 32, manager of Afrikan Dieli Import Warehouse in Atlanta, also is seeing interest surging, with people traveling to Africa or taking African names.

"This is different than the '70s, during which the concept of black power was more political than cultural," Kamau said. "Though the political climate may be about the same, but not as overt, what we have seen since the 1990s is more of a cultural movement. People are looking at life in America, and not being excited about some of the aspects of it. They are looking for a better way to live and raise their families that is more in tune with who they are."

Copyright © 2004, Chicago Tribune