GENEALOGY RECLAIMING THE PAST (AND MAYBE A CONTINENT, TOO)
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Legacies uncovered through fast DNA tests may stir American blacks to aid Africa.

When I think about DNA technology, I think of the time and trouble it would have saved Alex Haley in searching for his ancestral groove. He had to do it the hard way. After 12 years of genealogical detective work, shaking family trees on three continents, he finally traced his maternal family to a village in Gambia.

Haley's feat set off a genealogical renaissance that sent blacks rummaging through musty files in government buildings, leafing the brittle pages of old family Bibles and walking in long forgotten cemeteries in search of ties to people from the days of slavery. DNA technology allows at least some people to reclaim their stolen legacy in a matter of weeks through the once-unimaginable idea of tracing their bloodlines to specific regions of Africa.

The Alex Haley of this new century is a Howard University microbiologist named Rick Kittles, who has developed a method to help black Americans find their own Gambia. In addition to co-directing molecular genetics at Howard's National Genome Center, Kittles has joined with entrepreneur Gina Paige to set up African Ancestry Inc. (www.africanancestry.com).

From DNA collected by a quick swipe with a cotton swab inside one's cheek - plus $349 - this private company will match your DNA against its database of 85 ethnic groups in Africa. You won't learn your entire family tree, but you will end up knowing a lot more about yourself than you did the day before.

The company has been in business since February and is processing more than 60 tests a month. One of its clients is former KMOV-TV anchor Julius Hunter, now a vice president at St. Louis University. By the time he contracted for a test, Hunter already had traced his family to a great-great-grandfather, Ned Rounds, who owned hundreds of acres of prime farmland and helped found a Baptist church in Honey Island, Miss.

To Hunter's surprise, his DNA test showed he was of Nigerian descent, with lineage to the Hausa people now living in the northern part of the nation. Hunter wasted no time in sharing this information with his two daughters in Boston and with his sisters. Like him, they all were elated over being able to trace their descendants to a particular tribe in Africa, although Hunter concedes he has lots of work ahead in filling the link from Hausa to Honey Island.

In any case, this kind of liberating and empowering knowledge could reawaken America's growing black middle class - the most economically privileged group of black people in the world - to Africa's needs, as well as to its grandeur. Paige, the president of African Ancestry, mentions a Chicago client who traced his roots to the Kru people of Liberia. He wasted no time in lobbying his
government to help Kru refugees whose lives were disrupted by Liberia's civil war. Why? "They're my people," he said.

Africa needs more people like him, people who can give voice to the continent's many woes, its AIDS epidemic, its destabilizing debt and its internecine warfare. Who better to articulate these concerns than sons and daughters of Africa who are now in a position to influence public policy?

This rediscovery of genuine ethnic ties to Africa may change the way black Americans view the continent's problems. When they look at news photographs of African babies with distended bellies and matchstick limbs, pictures of children toting AK-47s instead of school books and images of refugees fleeing the latest atrocity, maybe they will see something additional; perhaps they will recognize pieces of themselves in these pictures.

These sights and plights might move blacks to lobby harder for relief for the suffering masses on the continent and move them, moreover, to dig deeper into their own pockets for something extra to help their distant cousins.

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