

OUT OF AFRICA?

WITH THE HELP OF DNA TESTING, I TRIED TO TRACE MY FAMILY ROOTS. BUT THE TALE TOLD BY SCIENCE DIDN'T MATCH UP WITH MY OWN FAMILY'S STORIES.

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS



LIKE ONE OF THOSE HOLLYWOOD actors standing at the podium at the Academy Awards, I awkwardly fumbled with the envelope. Anticipation was definitely in the air, even though I was only standing at my kitchen counter, cell phone at one ear and my younger cousin, Charisse, anxiously shouting into the other ear for me to open it.

Slowly I opened the envelope and plucked open the fancy folder. Inside were the results of the DNA test that would reveal my family's genetic roots. Then, there it was in black and white: My mother's side of the family shares maternal lineage with "THE TIKAR PEOPLE OF CAMEROON."

Unlike Oscar night, there was no cheering, no sighs of relief. The harsh reality is that none of us—my cousin, who recently graduated from college; my friend on the telephone, who is also African-American and is currently wrapping up his Ph.D. in cultural anthropology; or me, with my college degree from a historically black college in Atlanta and an immense sense of self-pride—knew anything about Cameroon. We certainly knew nothing about any specific tribes there. In fact, I had to refer to the map included in the packet to learn that Cameroon is located in the western region of the continent, which is the area from which most American slaves were taken.

The geography lesson was followed by a bizarre phone call to my grandmother, Mildred Williams, in New Orleans who, by the way, has excellent hearing. "The *what?*" she gushed in a bewildered tone. I repeated it again. "Who?" she asked. I finally resorted to just spelling it out. "The T-I-K-A-R people of C-A-M-E-R-O-O-N," I repeated slowly, enunciating each letter. "Okay, thanks," she respond-

DNA technology to help African-Americans trace their roots—reveals a sad reality. Many African-Americans know little to nothing about Africa, unless, of course, you count those television commercials showing starving children or the few paragraphs in our eighth-grade textbooks that mentioned that slavery was very, very bad.

The lack of personal history would not seem as disappointing if I were not surrounded by friends and colleagues who know very clearly where they are "from." My fellow Americans' chests always seem to swell with pride when sharing their family roots. In most of those cases they, like I and Africa, have never actually stepped foot in Ireland, Puerto Rico or Argentina, but somehow they manage to be really proud to march around on St. Patrick's Day, or to eat empanadas and to cheer on Argentina in the World Cup. When you bring up Africa to most American



ed, clearly unsure of what to say next.

Although I was able to find humor in her reaction, our newfound knowledge—thanks to African Ancestry, a Washington, D.C.-based company that uses

ROOTS

A much younger author with her late great-grandmother, Alther LaCroix, long before their lineage was traced to Cameroon.

blacks, they usually cringe and shrug off any connection to the place.

It's true that the passage to America for many blacks is enmeshed with the horrible history of slavery and is wildly different from other Americans' immigrant stories. But we should know where we are from and embrace our history, which extends centuries before slavery in America. That's why I joined the ranks

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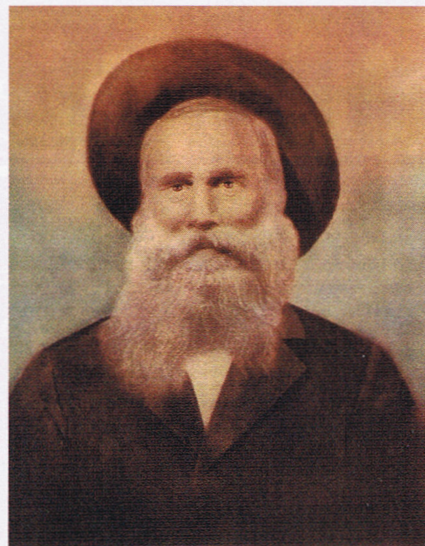
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ON MY MIND

of several notable Atlantans such as former mayor Andrew Young (from Sierra Leone) and WSB-TV anchor Monica Kaufman (also from Cameroon) in turning to African Ancestry in search of a scientific link. For \$349 you can trace your maternal or paternal lineage. For \$590 you can trace both sides. The test basically entails gently rubbing a swab inside your cheek. You mail it in, and then the scientific director analyzes the cells on the swab and compares it to the more than 11,000 DNA sequences currently in the company's database.

In my family's case, the DNA analyzed was found to be an identical match to some people still living in Cameroon. If an exact match is not made, the scientists locate the nearest match. Just to make it interesting (and to reality-check African Ancestry's more commercial approach), I submitted another DNA sample to a similar effort jointly being conducted purely for research purposes by Boston University and the University of South Carolina. The African Roots Project, which has a considerably smaller database, concluded only that my maternal lineage is West African.

All very interesting, but here's the catch: The science has merit, but doesn't match up with what we already know to be true about our family history. According to family stories, my great-great-



The writer's great-great-grandfather, Felix Espadron, was from the Dominican Republic.

my grandmother and her siblings and so on. How Cameroon fits into this picture is unclear. Were Marie's parents from there? Did Felix's family move from Cameroon to Spain? I'm inclined to believe that science doesn't lie; the true challenge is finding the connection between the DNA results and our family history.

In the meantime, this Christmas, I'm going to give my grandmother a framed and matted copy of the certificate and the map of Cameroon. I will also supply her and many of my family members with copies of some information I found on the Internet about the Tikar people of Cameroon. With my Louisiana roots, I found it interesting that French is considered a dominant language there.

This new knowledge about our roots will make for some hearty conversation as my family gathers for the holidays, but it won't change who we are as a family or instantly endow us with an allegiance to Cameroon—or Africa, for that matter. But as we sit around my grandmother's table this Christmas, I am sure that my family and I will wonder about this discovery and feel compelled to dig beyond what we know about our family history and add to it.

For more information about African Ancestry, visit africanancestry.com. To learn about The African Roots Project, see bumc.bu.edu/rootsproject. ✪

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grandfather, Felix Espadron, was a Spaniard from the Dominican Republic who immigrated to Louisiana and owned a rice plantation. He and his wife, Marie, had nine children, including my great-grandmother. She, of course, gave birth to