



Miami Herald columnist Leonard Pitts, second from left, sits with Songhay elders Issa Harouna, left, chief Amirou Namaro and Hellassi Maiga in Namaro Village in Niger. After an interview, chief Amirou Namaro invited the visitor to sit with him for a photograph – a significant moment for Pitts.

As a way of sharing his heritage journey with his family, Pitts scoops up dirt from Freetown as a gift for his brother.



With her baby tied to her in the traditional way, a Mende woman strolls through Yoyema, Sierra Leone.

Journey Yields Glim

Seventeen hours later, you land in Niamey, Niger.

Unbending gratefully from your seat, you gather your things and make your way out to the top of the steps. Then you stop, halted by the need to press this moment in your mind like roses in the family Bible. ...

Standing there at the top of the stairs, you sift through the knowable generations of your family: the farmer, the poet, the factory worker, the soldiers and domestics who came before you. Almost certainly, none of them ever made this journey. Which means you are probably the first member of your family to stand under African skies since the day its unknown progenitors were taken away centuries ago. Africa. Finally, Africa.

My name is Leonard Pitts Jr. I am the oldest child of Leonard and Agnes, the grandson of John and Annie on my father's side and of Rachel, and a man named Pearl, on my mother's. Beyond that, I don't know.

Well, that's not quite true. I have a few names, fragments and tantalizing scraps of information either passed down to me or ferreted out by me. But as far as what I know and can recite with certainty, that goes back two generations only.

It's a limitation you find a lot among black people. We have no Ellis Island stories, no passed-down tales of the old people in the old country. Slavery, still looming as mountains do all these years

later, makes that impossible.

After all, our sojourn here began with a mass kidnapping, a voyage of no return for 20 million mothers, brothers, sisters, sons. ... The past is hard to know for all of us. But for African-Americans, it is worse than mystery. It is a broken bridge, a missing piece. It is that untethered feeling that comes when your history is only two generations long.

Which is why I was intrigued several years ago when I heard about Dr. Rick Kittles and his work with the National Human Genome Center at Howard University in Washington, D.C.

Kittles was building what is now a data-

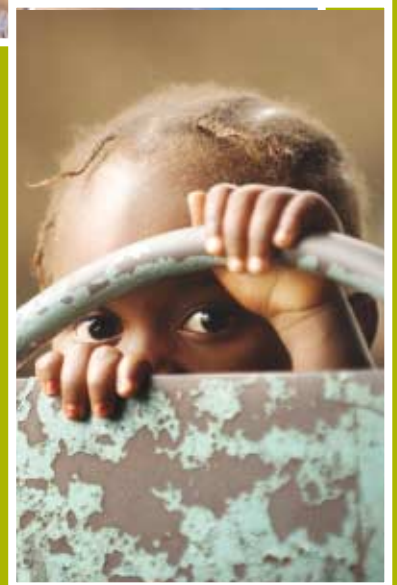


Pitts samples a local drink while visiting Tera Village, a Songhay village about 175 kilometers from Niamey. The drink, called donou, is made of millet – a staple Songhay crop – and goat milk. Pitts said, “It tastes like warm yogurt.”



Pitts films children in the Kroo Bay section of Freetown, Sierra Leone.

A young Mende girl peers over a chair arm at Pitts while he conducts an interview with elders in Yoyema Village, a Mende village in Sierra Leone, outside of Freetown.



Discovery of Missing Past

base of 22,000 DNA samples representing 135 African population groups. And last year, when he began to commercially exploit that research, offering DNA tests to help American blacks determine what part of Africa and what peoples of Africa their

ancestry traced to, I was among the first in line.

I went to www.africanancestry.com and ordered two of the company's tests, one each for maternal and paternal lineage. ... Six weeks later, I received the results. My

paternal line traces to the Mende people of Sierra Leone. My maternal link is here, among the Songhay people of Niger.

I have come to Africa to find out what that means. ><

Miami Herald columnist Leonard Pitts had wondered from time to time exactly where his ancestors had lived. The African Ancestry DNA-testing service gave him a way to find out. His mother, he learned, was from the Songhay people in Niger; his father, from the Mende of Sierra Leone.

“It made me want to know more. Made me want to go there,”

Pitts wrote.

Last summer, he made the trip, accompanied by Philadelphia Inquirer photographer Sarah J. Glover, already in Africa on an Ethel Payne Fellowship from the National Association of Black Journalists.

To read the complete work, go to www.kri.com/pittsancestry



Glover



Pitts