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PRESERVING AND DISSEMINATING CULTURE THROUGH ORAL TRADITION: *ROOTS*

G. M. MADHAVI

Assistant Professor,
Sree Vidyanikethan Engineering College,
A. Rangampet, Tirupati
&

Research Scholar
Department of English
Rayalaseema University, Kurnool
(AP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Oral tradition is a phenomenal record-keeping. Memory, its repository, is not always reliable for interpretation and perception. But for the names of people and places and for the sequence of events when there is no written record, the spoken word is indispensable. Oral traditions play a large role in knowing the ancestor's origins in the novel Roots. African children have grown up listening to and telling family stories. Oral traditions help African Americans preserve most of their heritage. Haley knew his ancestors' African name because Kunta Kinte insisted on keeping it for his daughter Kizzy, who passed it on to her son George, whose son Tom passed it on to his daughter Cynthia, who passed it on to her grandson Alex. The story of Kunta, his capture while in search of wood for a drum and his reluctant accommodation to slavery survived over two hundred years through six generations.

Key Words: *Oral tradition, African Americans, preserve, disseminate and generations.*

INTRODUCTION

Roots is the genealogical novel by an African American writer Alexander Murray Palmer Haley. The novel, published in 1976 is based on his family's history, going back to slavery

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days. It captures the essence of an African people. It is a symbolic representation of saga of all people of African descent.

Oral traditions play a large role in knowing the ancestor's origins in *Roots*. People called *griots* are the central figure in Mandinka culture. They are historians whose memories go back centuries, and they know the entire oral history and traditions of their people. Oral traditions help Mandinka preserve most of their heritage. Oral communication enables them to preserve and disseminate their culture. It also gives them some respite from the unbearable hardships of slavery.

Description

African children have grown up listening to and telling family stories. They live not only their own years but also memories of what went before. These experiences produced writers who have elaborated and transformed family stories into family sagas. Alex Haley is one among them.

Alex Haley heard his family story from his grandmother Cynthia Palmer while sitting on a front porch in Henning, Tennessee. Haley is able to reconstruct his family background and figure out where Kunta, one of Haley's ancestors came from in Africa through these oral narratives. At the end of the novel, when Alex Haley was listening to griots, he was astounded at their ability to narrate facets of African history without repeating themselves. The griots can recite history for days since the days when the writing was not existed. Their memory, mouths and ears were the only means of communication.

Haley begins his account on Kunta Kinte's life. The *Roots* saga begins with the birth of Kunta Kinte, a West African tribe in the village of Juffure. He was born to Omoro Kinte and his second wife Binta Kebba Kinte in 1750 in the Mandinka village of Juffure, Gambia. Omoro took seven days to select his son's name, as was the custom, and chose to name him after Omoro's father and Kunta's grandfather, Kairaba Kunta Kinte. Omoro's family was long ago from Mali, and came to Juffure from Mauretania and saved the village from a famine. As a member of the old and highly esteemed Kinte family, Kunta was schooled in the customs and traditions befitting a future Mandinka warrior.

Haley repeatedly makes the point that ancestry determines identity. Oral traditions become a part of Kunta's identity. Kunta grows up hearing stories that teach lessons, and hearing about his family and village's long history. Thus, the culture is transmitted from one generation to another generation.



Kunta was captured and abducted to America by white slave traders in 1767 around the age of seventeen while searching for a tree section to make a drum. Griots went on with his narrative that the Kunta, the oldest of four sons went away from his village.

Kunta was sold to John Waller and was given the name “Toby” in Annapolis, Maryland. He was sold at a slave auction after a horrifying sea voyage. Kunta was shipped as cargo on *the Lord Ligonier* along with other Africans of various tribes. This incident is filled with pestilence, filth, depravity, and cruelty and serves as a controlling metaphor for the cruelty of the institution of slavery.

Kunta becomes a field worker at the plantation of his owner. Haley represents Kunta’s world as one in which there is no chance to escape for blacks, surrounded by plantations on all sides. He tries to escape four times. His fourth attempt is also futile and fateful. Each time he is caught and brought to painful justice by white people. When he is caught and given a choice of castration or foot amputation he chooses foot amputation.

Kunta marries William Waller’s cook, Bell Waller. Bell represents the submissiveness of the born slave. A strong, mature woman who loves her husband, constantly gets disturbed by Kunta’s Africanisms. She becomes annoyed when Kunta remarks that she looks like a Mandinka woman. Like the most slaves, Bell had disconnected her ties or reminders of her African heritage. Furthermore, she regards Kunta’s adherence to Mandinka practices as dangerous, always fearing what the massa’s reaction might be, and with good reason. Bell’s two daughters from a previous marriage were sold. Ever obedient, ever cautious, Bell fears the breakup of her new family.

Kunta and Bell have a baby girl Kizzy. Bell teaches her daughter how to get along with whites. She delights when Kizzy befriends Waller’s niece and John Waller’s only daughter, Missy Anne. Kizzy plays “school” with this white girl. Kunta repeats his story of capture to her daughter. He teaches her some African words so that she will know who she is and where she comes from.

Kunta, even after twenty-odd years tried to separate himself from the disgrace of blackness. At the age of thirty-seven, Kunta vowed to himself that then more than ever his dignity must become a shield between him and all of those who called themselves niggers. There is only snobbery in his repetitious thought that the other blacks knew nothing of their ancestors, while he could recite the names of Kintes from the ancient clan in old Mali down across the generations.



Kizzy helps her lover Noah escape by using her secret ability to write a fake travelling pass. Noah was caught by slave catchers and dragged back to the plantation after one week of his escape. He was taken into the barn and whipped until he finally reveals it was Kizzy who helped him in forging his travelling pass. Noah is sold off.

Kizzy was sold to a gamecock fighter Tom Lea of Caswell County, North Carolina. Kizzy screams for her parents and Missy Anne to help her. When Kunta and Bell hear Kizzy's anguished screams, they ran out of the house to see her being forcibly taken onto the wagon by ordell.

Kizzy is the great-great-great-grandmother of Alex Haley. The narrative goes on through the American Civil War and all the events leading to the abolition of slavery until it reaches Haley's grandmother.

Kizzy's new master Tom Lea rapes her many a time. Kizzy's last name is changed to Lea. He rapes her to get revenge on William Waller. William Waller, a doctor is the second master of Kunte and John Waller's brother. Waller killed Tom Lea's brother who was shot dead after trying to help the niggers on his plantation. Kizzy gives birth to a son George.

When George was around three years old Kizzy told him that she wanted to pass on the heritage of Kunta Kinte. Kizzy's memory of her father's unflinching pride, a legacy of his free birth in Africa, gives her strength, not only for herself but for her biracial son. Despite being separated from Kunta, his legendary pride has immersed Kizzy with a determination to pass on that attitude to her son and share their family story.

George earns freedom for his services to his master. He earns the nickname "Chicken George" for his colourful, flamboyant personality and for his amazing cock-fighting skills. Chicken George met his future wife Matlida, a loyal Christian slave woman. They got married and had six sons and two daughters.

Kizzy notices George's interest in training his chickens, takes him to a horse. She teaches him how to jump on to the horse. Chicken George does all the Mandinka ways. Kizzy gives him beads that her grandmother gave to Kunta when he became a Mandinka warrior. Kizzy teaches George a lot of words in Mandinka. George becomes furious because he missed training his cocks and does not care about his Mandinka heritage. Kizzy slaps him and says that whenever she looked at him she see in him, Tom Lea. Kizzy first tells the story of their great-grandfather to him and then to his children.



Tom Kinte Murray was born as a slave on Massa Tom Lea's Plantation in Caswell County, North Carolina to "Chicken" George Lea and his wife, Matilda. Tom Murray has five brothers and two sisters. When Lea loses Chicken George in a bet with an Englishman, he promises Chicken George his manumission papers upon his return. George has to go to England to owe his master's debts. Before he leaves, George tells the story of Kunta Kinte to his family. Tom is the grandson of Kizzy and great grandson of Kunta Kinte. He is the great grandfather of Alex Haley. Tom Lea's fortune continues to diminish that he sold young Tom and his family except his grandmother, Kizzy to Massa Murray, a kind rich slave owner who runs a company in Alamance country, North Carolina.

Tom Murray meticulously works to save money to buy freedom for his family members. He marries a half-native American woman, Irene, who brightens the family's lives. They quickly start a family of their own. Their youngest daughter is Cynthia, Alex Haley's grandmother. When George arrives from England, he gets his freedom from a drunken Tom Lea. He arrives on the Tom Murray plantation for a reunion with his family, but is soon forced to leave because free blacks are not allowed to live in the state. Slaves are thus deprived of their liberty.

Tom's youngest daughter Cynthia marries Will Palmer, who becomes the owner of Henning's only lumber business. Cynthia and Will Palmer have a daughter, Bertha, who marries Simon Alexander Haley. Bertha and Simon are blessed with a son, Alex Haley, who will grow up to write the novel *Roots*. Alex spends a lot of time in Henning as a child, developing a close relationship with his grandfather, Will Palmer, and his grandmother Cynthia and with great aunts, particularly after his mother's death. After growing up and becoming a writer, Haley decides to research the family stories he so often heard as a child.

Haley sees the Rosetta Stone in the British Museum and thinks back to his own family's oral traditions when he makes a trip to London. He finds evidence of his ancestor Tom Murray, the blacksmith in the United States Census for Alamance Country, North Carolina. He then attempts to locate the most likely origin of the African words passed down by Kunta Kinte. Alex Haley travels to Gambia and learns of the existence of griots, oral historians who were trained from childhood to memorize and recite the history of a particular village. Kunta was right to insist that his descendants continue to tell the story of him and his family through the centuries. A descendant has returned finally.

Oral tradition is a phenomenal record-keeping. Memory, its repository, is not always reliable for interpretation and perception. But for the names of people and places and for the sequence of events when there is no written record, the spoken word is indispensable.



CONCLUSION

Haley knew his ancestors' African name because Kunta Kinte insisted on keeping it for his daughter Kizzy, who passed it on to her son George, whose son Tom passed it on to his daughter Cynthia, who passed it on to her grandson Alex. The story of Kunta, his capture while in search of wood for a drum and his reluctant accommodation to slavery survived over two hundred years through six generations.

Haley emphasized that African Americans have a long history and that not all of that history is necessarily lost, as many believed. It is a saga of an American family. It is an eye-opener for many blacks and whites alike who believed the old myths about slavery.

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