



# The Importance of Oral Traditions in a Postcolonial World: Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*

Snehaa Kumar<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. M. John Suganya<sup>2</sup>

Department of English

<sup>1\*,2</sup> PSG College of Art & Science, Coimbatore.

<sup>1\*</sup> [snehaakumar236@gmail.com](mailto:snehaakumar236@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> [suganyajohn@gmail.com](mailto:suganyajohn@gmail.com) +919994924381

## Abstract

An African proverb states that “When an old man dies, a library burns to the ground”. A culture’s richness is measured and stored in its oral traditions. It is the culture’s unadulterated perception of their way of life and the world around them as well as a repository of cultural history. Alex Haley’s seminal novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* is a truly African perspective into how oral traditions can preserve the true history of an oppressed group whose identity has been destroyed by an oppressive culture. This paper aims to explore the role and importance of African oral traditions in the fight against European colonization, specifically in terms of the preservation of cultural identity by tracing the history of various African oral traditions, the roles of Griots and how they provide a uniquely African perspective in our postcolonial, globalized world.

## Keywords

Oral literature, African tribal traditions, Griots, Cultural identity, Postcolonialism

## Introduction

This research paper aims to prove the pivotal role of indigenous oral traditions in a postcolonial world. Focusing on African oral traditions in particular, the article explores how the oral traditions can authentically portray the realities of a culture from the perspectives of the native speakers.

Alex Haley’s seminal novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* is the primary text for this research paper. It is a ‘factional’ tale of *Kunta Kinte*, a Mandinka tribesman from Gambia who is sold into slavery at the age of 17 in the plantations of the American South in the 1700’s at the peak of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Kinte decides to record his life story, in the manner of the traditional Mandinka storytellers, the ‘Griots’. “About the time the King's soldiers came, the eldest of these four sons, Kunta, when he had about 16 rains, went away from his village to chop wood to make a drum ... and he was never seen again”(Haley). This becomes a family tradition which carries on for seven generations until the 1920’s when Alex Haley is born.

Haley is fascinated by his family’s unique tradition. He harbors a life-long dream to finally visit his ancestral village. Using linguistic and textual clues in the story such as *Kunta Kinte*, *Naplis*, *Toby* and African words like *ko* which is what Kinte called the guitar. All he knows about the location of the village is that it’s near a river called the Kamby Bolongo. He also uses genealogical records like the United States Census for Alamance County, North Carolina and enlists the help of a linguistics scholar Dr. Jan Vansina to decode the various African words scattered through the narrative.

Both Haley's novel and the consequent search for his ancestral village in Gambia were adapted into two television miniseries titled *Roots* and *Roots: The Next Generation* which aired in 1977 and 1979 respectively. His other works on the realities of Black American life include *Queen: The Story of an American Family* (1992) and *Mama Flora's Family* (1998).

The novel blends a masterful narrative with verified tribal history which shows the immense power a story holds. It proves that a culture's oral narratives which are told from the perspective of the natives themselves, offers a more complete and unbiased picture of their history than the colonised versions passed off as absolute truth by the oppressors.

## Oral Literature

The World Oral Literature Project defines oral literature as:

Oral literature is a broad term which may include ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, musical genres, folk tales, creation tales, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, word games, recitations, life histories or historical narratives. Most simply, *oral literature* refers to any form of verbal art which is transmitted orally or delivered by word of mouth (Definitions and Understandings of Oral Literature).

The novel begins with a re-telling of Kinte's life experiences in the form of the family oral tradition he started. This tradition was faithfully followed by seven generations of his descendants forming a truly unique family history. This oral tradition not only captures historical events in accurate detail but also the primal human urge to preserve one's identity and cultural roots. Hence, this article intends to use both the events in the novel as well as the immense cultural impact it had on American society to prove how vital oral traditions are in establishing one's identity in a world that is yet to recover from the effects of colonisation.

## Griots

Dictionary.com defines Griots as "A member of a hereditary caste among the peoples of western Africa whose function is to keep an oral history of the tribe or village and to entertain with stories, poems, songs, dances, etc" (Griot).

The role of the Griot is indispensable in Haley's search for the truth about his family history. Juffure's Griot not only verifies his family history but gives a broader history of the Kinte clan and how they came to Gambia from Mali and other African nations. The Griot is a staple fixture in the Mandinka tradition and it could even be said that Kinte drew inspiration from the Griots' particular way of storytelling and made it his own, in order to save his identity from erasure by colonising forces.

## Cultural Identity

IGI Global states that, cultural identity "is the identity or feeling of belonging to, as part of the self-conception and self-perception to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality and any kind of social group that have its own distinct culture" (*What is Cultural Identity*).

The question of identity and the quest to regain and establish a connection between his present self and the cultural tradition he belongs to, is the driving force of Haley's novel. The forces of slavery, racism and white colonialism had severed and tried to destroy native cultures and re-write history to justify their cruelty but oral narratives such as Kunta Kinte's keep the cultural ties intact and ultimately preserve cultural identity.

Haley and his family never forget their true family history which is a version of American history that was deliberately hidden by the Whites from the Blacks in order to erase their cultural identity, thanks to the power of the oral narrative passed down in their family.

## Postcolonialism

Encyclopedia.com defines postcolonialism as, "The term Postcolonialism refers broadly to the ways in which race, ethnicity, culture, and human identity itself are represented in the modern era, after many colonized countries gained their independence" (*Encyclopedia.com*).

*Roots: The Saga of an American Family* is a postcolonial novel as it subverts colonial narratives of life under slavery and African tribal cultures. Colonisers like Joseph Conrad in his novel *The Heart of Darkness* portrayed Africa as an exotic but primitive country and diminished the cultural diversity within the continent. The tribal cultures were presented to Western audiences as insignificant and they were led to believe that Africa had not contributed to the progress of the modern world as much as the West had. The colonial mindset was that Africa was technologically as well as culturally inferior to the West.

Colonial narratives portrayed the African as a savage who must be civilized and that it was the burden of the White man to do so. This was how they justified the Slave trade, to them it was an act of benevolence where the cruel means justified the noble ends and not the violation of human rights and the same Christian ideals they claimed to believe in.

Kinte's oral narrative captures the horrors of life under slavery and the spiritual degradation slaves underwent as they were stripped of their true cultural identities and given new identities that were more palatable to White society. The Haley family's oral tradition subverts the conventional history of White America and provides a Black history of Black life in a White ruled America. Thus, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* offers a postcolonial lens into a part of history that was hitherto concealed and diluted by colonial narratives.

The act of storytelling is an act of rebellion when the story that is being told exposes the reality which the oppressors have worked to conceal from both the oppressed society and the oppressors' society too. Colonial narratives are insidious lies that the colonisers tell themselves and force the other members of their society to believe. They aren't factual or unbiased nor intended to educate the colonizing society about the true nature of the colony. Colonial history is propaganda that attempts to justify the economic, political and cultural colonialization of the oppressed. Colonial narratives are taught to natives in order to breed a sense of cultural inferiority in their minds and make them sever their ties to their cultural roots by themselves.

## Conclusion

Most conventional history is often told from the victor's point of view and is therefore biased in favour of the coloniser. Authentic tales from the perspective of the colonized like *Kunta Kinte* offer a true picture of the realities of life as a person on the margins of society during a particular period in time. Hence, oral literature is indeed a legitimate source of historical truth and method to preserve cultural identity.

## References

"Definitions and Understandings of Oral Literature." *Oral Literature*, 11 Nov. 2011, <https://www.oralliterature.org/about/oralliterature.html>.

Griffiths, Eleanor Bley. "Is *Roots* a True Story? Why This Tale of Slavery and Family History Is so Controversial." *RadioTimes*, 1 Mar. 2017, [www.RadioTimes.com](http://www.RadioTimes.com).

"Griot." *Dictionary.com*, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/griot>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2022.

Haley, Alex. "*Roots: The Saga of an American Family*". Vintage Books, 1994.

---. "My Furthest-Back Person—'The African.'" *The New York Times*, 16 July 1972.

"Postcolonialism." *Encyclopedia.com*, 11 June 2018, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/philosophy/philosophy-terms-and-concepts/postcolonialism>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2022.

"What Is Cultural Identity." *IGI Global*, <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/cultural-self-study-as-a-tool-for-critical-reflection-and-learning/6396>.

"When an Old Person Dies, a Library Burns: Biograph: #1 Professional Biographers: Write & Publish Life Stories: Save Time and Experience." *Biograph*, 15 July 2021, <https://www.biographbook.com/when-an-old-person-dies-a-library-burns-to-the-ground-african-proverb/>.