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***Jumping the Broom: Myth, Memory and Neo-Traditionalism in  
African-American Weddings***

**Table of Contents**

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: THE ROOTS AND <i>ROOTS</i> OF A RITUAL</b>	<b>4</b>
FICTIONAL SAGAS AND ORAL HISTORIES	4
THE ORIGIN DEBATE	7
THE 'SYMBOLIC CODE' OF RITUAL ADOPTION	13
POPULAR RESURGENCE AND CULTURAL AGENDAS	15
<b>CHAPTER 2: IDENTITY AND THE HISTORIO-POLITICAL MOMENT</b>	<b>20</b>
THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN THE <i>ROOTS</i> AWAKENING	20
FROM NEGRO TO BLACK: THE MOTIVES OF BLACK NATIONALISM	22
THE CONSTRUCTION OF A POLITICAL IDENTITY THROUGH RITUAL	26
<b>CHAPTER 3: NEO-TRADITIONALISM, MYTH, AND SOCIAL MEMORY</b>	<b>32</b>
SOCIAL MEMORY AND THE PERFORMANCE OF IDENTITY	32
THE PERFORMATIVE NATURE OF RITUAL	34
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>38</b>

## Introduction

The ceremonial ritual of “jumping the broom” in African-American weddings is significant due to its links to the culture’s unique history, the harsh realities of American chattel slavery, and to its wider implications concerning the performative production of identity and the ways in which communities engage with popular media to define and redefine their common understandings of history and culture. The practice has been heavily debated by folklorists in terms of the authenticity of its origins and there has been much push and pull between those who claim European origins for the practice and those who argue for West African roots. At the crux of this examination is not the search for an “authentic” or “legitimate” origin for the practice as defined by widely accepted academic and historical data, but rather the impetus behind the struggle to connect the practice to Africa, and thereby connect its practitioners to the continent, implying the preservation of cultural links not severed by the brutality of slavery.

This paper will examine this practice from its post-1976 revival and the ways in which media, myth, and memory are mobilized to create cultural consciousness in its enactment. Through a review of relevant literatures, this study will address wider discourses on identity, tradition, and the politics of neo-traditionalism as they relate to the particular experiences of oppression, displacement, fracturing, and historical uncertainty of African-Americans who place importance on and continue to include “jumping the broom” in their wedding ceremonies. The symbolic memory enacted in such a practice will be explored in light of literature concerning collective memory, cultural narrative, and history.



## Chapter 1: The Roots and *Roots* of a Ritual

### Fictional Sagas and Oral Histories

In 1976, Alex Haley's *Roots: Saga of an American Family* was released to the American public. The novel is based on his family's history chronicling the kidnapping and enslavement of Kunta Kinte, whom he believed to be ancestor, from Gambia. The book was eventually made into a television miniseries and has since become an important cultural reference point for African-Americans, referenced in movies, comedy routines, music, and other popular media. This work has had a lasting impact on African-American culture and historical consciousness and imagining, a fact that is made most apparent through the revival of the practice of "jumping the broom" after or during a wedding ceremony. Kunta Kinte is depicted jumping over a broom with his bride in the novel and miniseries and, today, many African-Americans use this practice as an expression of heritage and cultural symbolism in their own marriage ceremonies.

In *Roots*, Kinte jumped the broom with his wife, Bell, in lieu of a state marriage ceremony, consistent with the historical reality that American slaves, legally considered property no different from animals or land, were denied recognized marriages and even those marriages which they performed amongst themselves often had to be approved by a white master. Haley's story of Kinte's broom-jumping is similar in language to actual slave narratives that recount the same. He writes that a marriage "would meet the very worst kind of bad luck if the feet of either person should touch the broomstick, and whoever did it would be the first to die" (Haley 1976). This retelling has marked similarities to the recountings recorded in the *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, a project

designed to record the experiences of freed slaves, in which an ex-slave spoke of masters encouraging an enslaved couple to jump the broom backwards to determine who would rule the house. The account of a formerly enslaved woman named Tempie Durham recalls this practice in detail:

After Uncle Edmond said de las' words over me an' Exter, Marse George got to have his little fun. He say, "Come on, Exter, you an' Tempie got to jump over de broomstick backwards. You go to do dat to see which one gwine be boss of your househol'." ...Marse George hold de broom 'bout a foot high off de floor. De one dat jump over it backwards an' never touch de handle gwine boss de house, an' if bofe of dem jump over widout touchin' it, dey ain't gwine be no bossin'; dey jus' gwine be'genial. I jumped fus', an' you ought to seed me. I sailed right over dat broomstick, same as a cricket. But when Exter jump, he done had a big dram an' his feets was so big an' clumsy dat dey got all tangled up in dat broom, an' he fell headlong. Marse George, he laugh an' laugh, an' tole Exter he gwine be bossed till he skeered to speak less'n I tole him to speak.<sup>1</sup>

The many and varied references to the practice in oral histories and slave narratives leave little historical doubt that the practice occurred with some frequency during slavery in the American South. Charles Joyner, the author of *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture*, asserts that jumping the broom was "nearly universal in the south as a wedding ritual" in the antebellum period and, likely, for some time afterward (Joyner 1999). The ritual symbolism of the practice varies across accounts and is re-imagined in its various representations in popular media.

The impact of *Roots* on the interior consciousness of the African-American community, with its in-depth historicization of the horrors of slavery and humanized characterization of enslaved people, is undeniable. Michael Eric Dyson, a prominent

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<sup>1</sup> Rawrick, George P. *American Slave: North Carolina Narratives* 14(1): 284-290  
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/wpa/durham1.html/>

African-American scholar, writes in the introduction to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Roots*, that the book “tapped deeply into the black American hunger for an African ancestral home that had been savaged by centuries of slavery and racial dislocation” (Dyson 2007). He argues that, though the book has been critiqued by historians and literary scholars alike, it is “more than the sum of its historical and literary parts” in that it served a higher purpose of changing the way African-Americans thought about themselves (Dyson 2007). The book did indeed give many African-Americans a narrative to which they could connect in the absence of family histories by reaching back to the sights and sounds of pre-capture Africa in Kunta Kinte’s fictionalized memory. This story has gained incredible purchase in the African-American canon as a widely recognized archetypal tale of slavery. The mini-series, which claimed nine Emmys, a Golden Globe, and a Peabody Award, was well-received and disseminated the story of Kunta Kinte widely, reaching audiences that might or might not have been inclined to read Haley’s large tome.

Haley himself claims that much of his historical data was passed down through the oral histories of his own family and defends this, stating that there was quite a bit that was provable about black oral histories in what might be considered “surfacely” white records. The goal of privileging oral history, Haley contends, is “not just some euphemistic cry on the part of people trying to make some spurious case for themselves but... does happen to be a matter of disciplined documented dedicated truth” (Haley 1973). Ritual aspects, stories of passage and plantation life, as well as the genealogy connecting him to the long-deceased Kinte were, according to Haley, the product of such

document research prompted by oral history. Broom-jumping was in fact a well-known ritual in the antebellum period and a worthy inclusion in Haley's re-imagining, regardless of its accuracy for Kinte himself.

### The Origin Debate

The origins of ceremonial broom jumping are heavily debated, and it has been found to have roots in Welsh Romani practices and also in Victorian English expressions in reference to sham or legally unrecognized ceremonies. Some speculate that it has West African origins and other practices with brooms in marriage ceremonies are thought to be connected. Such historians and folklorists as W. Rhys Jones and John Gillis have determined that the practice has strong roots in rural Wales.<sup>2</sup> Rhys-Jones conducted fieldwork in a village in the Ceiriog Valley and determined that “it was a real marriage estimation of the public” while Gillis claims that nearly sixty percent of the births in another Welsh village were products of such a union (Rhys-Jones 1928; Gillis 1985). Rhys-Jones states that Welsh couples placed a “birch besom” on the threshold of their marriage home over which the groom jumped first, followed by the bride. The marriage could be considered invalid if one or the other touched the broom while jumping.

This symbolism is similar to Tempie Durham's memory of her former master's insistence on determining the “boss” of the marital home through the spouse who does not touch the raised broom while jumping over it. It is not out of the realm of possibility, even probability, that the practice emerged from a European practice, especially with

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<sup>2</sup> This practice was also studied by T. Gwynn Jones, who identifies the Welsh phrase *priodas coes ysgub* as “broom-stick wedding” or “irregular wedding,” and C. W. Sullivan, who studied the legal acceptance of such weddings.

literary accounts that link the phrase “jumping the broom” with a derogatory expression of a non-state wedding in Victorian England. In Charls Dickens’ *Household Narrative of Current Events*, written in 1850, a woman is depicted as having been tricked into believing that her marriage was legally binding after jumping over a broomstick in a bar. Over twenty years later, St. Romwold’s poem “The Blasphemer’s Warning” describes maids who are to “marry, by taking a jump o’er a broomstick.” That there is literary evidence of an awareness of the practice in Europe during and after slavery in the United States is not sufficient historical evidence for a declaration of origin, but does indicate the presence of the practice in Europe at and before this time.

Alan Dundes, a folklorist who has studied the practice, has cited several slave accounts of broom-jumping ceremonies and concludes from the fact that the custom is documented in Europe in the exact form and purpose as it was used in slave socieites and that there does not appear to be evidence that “the ritual per se” is practiced currently anywhere in Africa, that the custom does not, as some would like to assert, have African origins (Dundes 1996). He cites commercially published primers on wedding planning, as books that use a false connection of the ritual to Africa in an attempt to encourage African-Americans to utilitze the ritual in their ceremonies.

What is interesting about Dundes’ interpretation of many accounts of broom-jumping, from that of a young woman who recalls her master marrying her and several others by laying down a broom for them to step over to the recollections of a Texas ex-slave whose master pronounced couples man and wife after they jumped the broom, is that he believes that slaves were forced to perform the ritual. “What is fascinating,” he

writes, “is that a custom which slaves were *forced* (emphasis in the original) to observe by their white masters has been revived a century later by African-Americans as a treasured tradition” (Dundes 1996). This interpretation can only stem from the fact that, in many of the accounts listed, the master was present or involved in some way with the ceremony. However, the presence of a slave master alone is not indicative of a forced practice as much as it is indicative of a sanctioning of it. Chattel slavery in the United States was, by its very definition, an untenable situation for the enslaved in which a master’s consent for any kind of recognized joining would be required, and was sometimes orchestrated in an attempt to “breed” more slaves for the plantation. Since slave masters had self-appointed dominion over every aspect of the lives of the enslaved, it does not seem out of the ordinary that this might be the case, but asserting that it was *forced* is a leap too far.

In contrast to the “European or African,” “forced or brought,” false dichotomies, Tyler D. Parry makes a strong case for the cultural intermixture of Welsh and slave communities in the antebellum period. Parry contributes to studies on the Atlantic World that, he contends, reveal a “paradigm in which folk customs and practices can be analyzed as products of this transatlantic exchange,” meaning that far more than just “slaves” as bodies were transplanted across the Atlantic, but that their customs, languages, and memory travelled with them and interacted with those of the whites with whom they came into contact. Parry supports the folklore research that points to Welsh roots for the practice by noting the isolation of Welsh communities, which allowed them

to retain their customs, and the cultural distinction of Welsh from British communities in the United States.

That the Welsh could have had significant cultural influence on African enslaved people in the States is made apparent through accounts of Africans speaking fluent Welsh and Gaelic as a result of contact. Parry argues that lower-class and indentured Welsh settlers would have had a “special relationship” with slaves in colonial times in opposition to “the master class” and as a result of cultural exclusion by British settlers (Parry 2011). He also argues that sailors and slaves would have had opportunity and motive to share stories and customs, as life on ship tended to provide a lucrative and relatively equal alternative to slave life for captured Africans. He quotes a West Indian slave named Alexander who claimed that he “came to England in a Welsh ship and now I can speak, I can write, I can read, and I can sing in Welsh” (Parry 2011). Parry notes that racism did exist, but “cultural borrowing was a reality, even if the descendents of these antebellum whites would later deny the possibility,” and that jumping the broom as a ritual exchange, “was no different” (Parry 2011).

The crux of Parry’s argument concerning cultural contact seems to be simple: enslaved people were, in fact, people. They contributed to cultural exchange and received from it equally. The common image of slavery is as an uneven exchange in which the enslaved had no influence over the cultures of whites and were incapable of having actual relationships with them in which such influence could occur, such as friendships and love relationships. Arguments that support such an image by assuming that slaves were “forced” to perform these rituals, denying the possibility that they incorporated the ritual

for their own purposes are incredibly damaging to the memory of enslaved people in the United States. Even in instances of forced marriage using the ritual, they could not have been forced, within their own ranks, to recognize the sacredness or binding nature of such a union for more than procreation.

Broom-jumping is, for contemporary African-Americans, far bigger than its origins, as evidenced by the initial importance placed on them in the moment of its resurgence and the continued struggle over the roots and definition of the practice. I would posit that the chasm between the two camps, as it were, of academic thought on the practice, that of the historians and folklorists who have attributed the ritual to Wales and that of the African-American folklore creators (authors like Haley and wedding planning enthusiasts like Cole and Green Roundtree), is only widened by incomplete discourse on the theory surrounding cultural transfer and ritual adoption.

The academic search for evidence of Welsh roots of the practice by folklore scholars is unmatched by a similar pursuit of evidence that might link the practice to West Africa, as is claimed and uncorroborated in modern media concerning broom-jumping ceremonies. Folklorists such as Dundes seem to have precluded the possibility of the practice's origination in Africa by debunking the unsupported assertions of authors that are not, and do not claim to be, African folklore scholars or historians. The presentation of evidence that the practice existed in Europe, therefore, does not lead to an *a priori* understanding that similar practices did not also exist in West Africa. The implication of such a lopsided investigation can be seen as a perpetuation of a *tabula rasa*, or "blank slate," understanding of African-American ancestral cultural removal

from Africa. The denial of the possibility of cultural continuity stemming from Africa is predicated on an assumption of the absolute power of slave masters to alter the mindsets, memories, and cultural awareness of those they considered property and of the absolute powerlessness of enslaved people to resist these attempts. John Roberts writes that *tabula rasa* as a concept applied to African-Americans “claims that the process of enslavement itself was sufficient to wipe clean their memories of a previous cultural heritage” (Roberts 2009). By adopting this view more through assumptions such as those stated above than through overt assertions, Roberts argues that “folklorists and other scholars erased...an African cultural heritage” or the possibilities of their contribution to other cultures or engagement in cultural exchange.

It could be that folklorists, wedding planners, and historians alike have been overlooking the common understanding that would have made it possible to adopt a ritual. The belief that it granted one full extra-legal and spiritual marital rights could very well have been forged on the basis of there being in existence a similar practice in West Africa whose component parts (jumping, or wood, perhaps, or a broom as Cole argues) held the same sacred qualities in one culture as in the other. This does assume, however a measure of choice on the part of the enslaved person. The practical reasons for slaves to adopt the broom-jumping ritual are well documented throughout the works of folklorists that have studied the topic including Dudes and Sullivan. Parry, however, notes that what is lacking is an understanding of the frequent and sometimes violent rebellions of slaves in their attempts to marry. The use of the ritual then, in the absence of a legally recognized marriage, would have been a hard-won choice.

## The 'Symbolic Code' of Ritual Adoption

The ritual of jumping the broom is not the only instance in which ritual elements have been adopted from other cultures into weddings. Far from it, the ritual is but one of many that have been adopted including, notably, the popular adoption of the “white wedding” and wedding cake in non-Western weddings. Monica Wilson writes of the new rituals surrounding the wedding cake amongst the Nguni of southern Africa. Traditional elements of Western weddings were introduced through contact with white missionaries and began to be incorporated into Christian and “pagan” weddings alike. Wilson argues that the white wedding gown was able to become a part of Nguni weddings because it reflected existent values in the indigenous culture, including the prized virgin bride (Wilson 1972). The wedding cake, however, came to reflect “traditional ideas about the dichotomy between lineages and the control of senior relatives over fertility” by having not one, but two cakes each made by the bride and groom’s respective families, becoming a source of competition and one-upmanship (Wilson 1972). In this sense, the adoption of one ritual practice became rife with alternative cultural meanings not imbued into its European or Western incarnation.

Edwards, however, argues that we cannot know if it is the whiteness of the dress “rather than its size, shape, or mode of manufacture,” that provides it with meaning (Edwards 1982). He cites Victor Turner’s assertion that ritual elements display “multivocality” or polysemy, defined by Edwards as having “a wide range of different or

even contradictory meanings at different levels” and code, therefore, cannot be “directly observed by the analyst” leaving the problem of how to verify the analyst’s suppositions (Edwards 1982) . Edwards argues that the questions surrounding the adoption of the wedding cake in Japan as a symbol of fertility are irrelevant insofar as they concern whether or not the symbolism came from Europe or was “arrived at independently.” Rather, he states, the one thing that we can know about the adoption or adaptation of the symbol is that it would “not have been possible had there not been a way for the cake to be perceived as a fertility symbol in terms of the Japanese symbolic code” (Edwards 1982).

Similarly, we cannot know whether it was the broom, the act of jumping, or the use of wood, that caused slaves to adopt the binding ritual and to *accept* its validity in their own private culture, even away from slavemasters’ prying eyes and possibly for use in rebellion of a master’s wishes. We can be sure, however, that there must have been some connecting code within the multivocality of the ritual elements that allowed it to be perceived as a symbol of a lifelong bond. In his exploration of the ritual, Dundes cites William Wells Brown’s assertion that “this custom had as binding a force with negroes as if they had been joined by clergymen,” yet does not seek to explore what connection in symbolic code could have made such belief in the ritual possible, considering there was more than one culture at play (Brown 1968). The recent incarnations of the ritual are, therefore, in remembrance of African roots as well as of a slave past in which ancestors brought over or adopted a method of forming family. From this perspective, ritual “authenticity” is still in the hands of the community as the adoption of such a ritual would

have had to be, in at least one of its elements, coherent to the “symbolic code” of those practicing it.

## Popular Resurgence and Cultural Agendas

“Jumping the broom” is a commonly-heard phrase in the African-American cultural vocabulary, invoking images of both the practice itself and the wedding it accompanies. It is used colloquially to refer to marriage ceremonies in conversation and popular literature. It is widely discussed and debated as it relates to cross-cultural and interracial marriage ceremonies, and is depicted in African-American themed romance novels and children’s books. Recently, an episode of “Braxton Family Values,” a reality television show following a famous African-American family of entertainers, involved a discussion of whether or not the family matriarch would “jump the broom” with her new fiancée, leading to questions of how one sister felt about engaging in the ritual with her Latino husband<sup>3</sup>. The phrase has become so synonymous with “wedding” that, in 2011, a feature film about a wedding between two African-American families from different class backgrounds was released under the same title.<sup>4</sup> The popular presence of such references encourages the examination of how this practice become so entrenched in the African-American cultural imaginary if, as folklorists have determined, there is so little currently unearthed historical evidence tying it to Africa and so much to imply that it came from Europe.

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<sup>3</sup> Braxton Family Values. 2012. WE tv.

<sup>4</sup> Jumping the Broom. 2011. TriStar Pictures.

Broom-jumping is depicted in key media concerning African-American wedding planning as a creative act of resistance, enslaved people performing their own non-state marriages and defying the dehumanization of laws stating that they, as property, could not form recognized families. Two oft-cited authors on African-American wedding planning and traditions, Dania Green Roundtree and Henriette Cole, both writing in the early 1990's, mark the recent resurgence of the practice after the publication of *Roots*. In *The African-American Wedding Planner*, Cole writes that the practice's current popularity is due in part to Alex Haley's writing, but takes pains to link the ritual to the Kgatla people of southern Africa, stating that it was their custom to have the bride sweep the courtyard of her in-laws' home to symbolize her willingness to assist in housework until they could find their own place (Cole 1993). This statement was unsupported in the text by a source. She goes on to state that a couple would "literally jump over a broom into the seat of matrimony" during slavery, citing recorded slave narratives that reference the ceremony.

. Green Roundtree's argument that the ritual is "an African tradition that has been Americanized" and was brought to Romani in the British Isles by "Moors during the Crusades," was expanded and supported by Dr. Tolagbe Ogunleye in 2005 (Green Roundtree 1992). Ogunleye, in *Jumping the Broom: An African Tradition*, attempts to show connections between West African and Celtic cultures, arguing that Africans were among the first settlers in the British Isles and therefore had significant influence on the practices and rituals of the people. Parry, however, notes that these claims are undermined both by their lack of reliable source material and by the ritual's sole prevalence in North

America rather than in places like Brazil or Cuba that had more significant enslaved populations from West Africa. It could be argued, along Ogunleye's line of reasoning, that this is due to different European populations in those locations who were not as influenced by the Celtic cultures that had been influenced, according to her, by African settlers, but the questions concerning the ritual's apparent disappearance from West Africa since ancient times would remain.

. Dundes asserts that jumping the broom is an "undeniable borrowing from European folklore" and was a "de facto form of customary marriage" in slavery. He claims that the fact that it was used in slavery makes it a "legitimate and longstanding" tradition for African-Americans, from which perspective its origins "might be considered irrelevant" (Dundes 1996). He is thus disturbed by the "ideological insistence upon an African origin," though he notes that only scholars seem to become "exercised" about matters such as origins, rather than the "folk" that they study. Though he sees it as natural and "healthy" to adopt rituals from the past, as contemporary African-Americans have done, what is "less positive," he claims, are "unscholarly" attempts to claim the the ritual came from Africa (Dundes 1996).

Cole's hearkening back to the Kgatla people is positioned in such a way that it is clear that her intent is to link the use of a broom in marriage ceremonies of slaves to another use of a broom in Africa. Green Roundtree and Ogunleye's arguments of cultural re-transferral from Ancient Africa to Ancient Europe to Africans in America, is equally questionable. The historical accuracy of these connections may be debated, however what is of more interest here is the purpose behind creating that fragile link. The quest for

“roots” in ritual and practice and the establishment of the locus of cultural legitimacy in connections to an Africa real or imagined have increased over time. Interestingly, African-American authors and political or academic public figures have not always appreciated ties to Africa, however at the time of *Roots*’ popular emergence, there was a confluence of events that created a climate ripe for a public acceptance of African cultural continuity and preservation in African-American cultures that was so strong as to prompt a renewed desire to participate in a long-forgotten ceremony. The practice’s revival post-1976 is surely an act of myth and memory designed to bring a past of oppression and resistance into the forefront of otherwise European traditional marriage ceremonies.

The search for African “roots” of this practice echo a similar practice as examined by Kamari Maxine Clarke. “Roots tourism” to Africa by African-Americans and the “globalization of cultural heritage opportunities,” Clarke writes, increase “claims to African membership” that are “deterritorialized and far more negotiable and manipulatable than ever before” (Clarke 2006). Clarke determines that the publication of Haley’s *Roots: Saga of an American Family* was “critical to new imaginings of the African past” and a “key force in the shift in black American imaginings of their connection to the African heritage” (Clarke 2006). The new narratives of slavery, Clarke writes, reconfigured the textual narratives of the early twentieth century to a “nobility” narrative of African capture. The “collective experience of a nation watching the story of slavery unfold” through the televised adaptation of *Roots* had the “experiential power” of reconstituting collective memory and redefining association. Kunta Kinte was, effectively,

an “ancestor” of many, a founding father, and conceptualized thusly in the African-American imaginary, provided a storied connection to Africa that could be expressed through ritual, Afrocentric discourse and dress, Pan-African politics, and cultural heritage trips or “roots tourism.”

## Chapter 2: Identity and the Historio-Political Moment

### The Role of Media in the *Roots* Awakening

Media, according to Ball-Rokeach, et al., plays an important role in the “value inculcation and reinforcement” that are central to the perpetuation of social systems and ideologies “because they empower a legitimacy that is a prerequisite to people developing sufficient motivation and allegiance to support and participate in system-regulated activities,” such as those of a movement toward “black consciousness” (Ball-Rokeach, et al. 1981). They go on to discuss what they define as “structural media dependencies” in which the audience is a recipient of information rather than a social agent and the individual goals of the audience members are reliant on the information provided by a media system that is not dependent on them or their resources. It does, however, receive significant resources from political systems and, as such, has an interest in upholding their values, rhetoric, and objectives. Literature and other media can certainly be seen to have a profound effect on the cultural awareness and associations of black Americans with blacks elsewhere.

Parry notes that *Roots* was released “at a point in American history where Afrocentric discourses and Pan-African identification were gaining global recognition” through decolonization efforts abroad and civil rights struggles in the United States. The political moment of the *Roots* awakening lent itself to the production of certain salient values and a political identity formed around the connection to Africa. A formerly “rootless” community now had the mythic structures in the form of the larger-than-life figure

of Kunta Kinte and the story created around his abduction from the African continent. One man's family history, as it was passed down orally through generations, became the written and re-imagined history of millions. The chasm of history and memory created by the transatlantic slave trade was now filled with possibility as people engaged in imagining Africa. This was a useful and necessary alternative to continuously striving for acceptance as the integral part of American culture, society, and history that African-Americans have always been.

In a review of relevant literature concerning reactions to the *Roots* miniseries, Fairchild, Stockard, and Bowman found that much of the research was lacking an adequate number of Black survey respondents, tended to focus on white reactions to the show and to homogenize black reactions across education and income level, as well as region. Utilizing questions asked about the series in the National Survey of Black Americans, Fairchild, et al. find that the perceived historical and educational value of the miniseries was greater amongst more highly educated African-Americans in Northern urban areas. They speculate that for rural Southerners, the story may be a bit "too close to contemporary life conditions" (Fairchild 1986). The researchers note that both education and selective exposure are "positively related to Black Consciousness" which "connotes an identification with and interest in issues related to Blacks" (Fairchild 1986). It is this consciousness that certain movements before and during the production of *Roots* sought to engender in the wider African-American population.

## From Negro to Black: The Motives of Black Nationalism

The widespread impact of *Roots* was due in part to its emergence at a particular historical moment of political turmoil and changing consciousness within African-American community movements. In the post-Civil Rights era, there was considerable backlash to the work of Melville Herskovits on “Africanisms” in African-American and Afro-Caribbean cultures. His work was interpreted by some as racist in its intention to link African-Americans to Africa and, thus, to difference and an implied incompatibility with wider American culture. With a political-academic focus on assimilation, uplift, social improvement, and anti-segregationist policies, the African-American body politic had not yet become receptive to the search for “Africanisms” or other connections to the continent.

Years later, as an advocate of a strike-back approach to inequality and structural violence against African-Americans, Malcolm X ushered in a new era of black nationalism on the backs of previous separatists such as Marcus Garvey, whose desire for African-Americans was a return to Africa, and pan-African ideology. In 1964 in Cleveland, Ohio, X’s speech, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” expressed an urgent need for racial and economic separatism, a cohesive and politically Black identity and the eschewal of those members of the race who sought to assimilate through compromising practices he famously named “Toms,” a play on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that has since become synonymous with accommodationism and racial betrayal. In this speech, Malcolm X also advocates for a release of the term “Negro,” stating that,

Right now, in this country, if you and I, 22 million African-Americans -- that's what we are -- Africans who are in America. You're nothing but Africans. Nothing but Africans. In fact, you'd get farther calling yourself African instead of Negro. Africans don't catch hell. You're the only one catching hell. They don't have to pass civil-rights bills for Africans. An African can go anywhere he wants right now. All you've got to do is tie your head up. That's right, go anywhere you want. Just stop being a Negro. (X 1964)

At the time of this speech, many young African-Americans were beginning to see the efficacy in identifying vocally as Black and embracing a solidarity with Africa in reaction to the wholesale exclusion forced upon them due to American racial stratification. Stokely Carmichael, leader of the Black Panther Party, wrote that “an aroused and continuing Black consciousness will provide the basis for political strength” (Carmichael 1966). Of Carmichael’s role in the Black Power movement, Peniel E. Joseph writes that by 1974, Pan-Africanism which Carmichael had “described to skeptical audiences six years earlier in Oakland” was the “dominant mode of radical black activism around the country” (Joseph 2006). Joseph goes on to state that a “cross-section” of the African-American community, from the politically radical Black Panthers to the elite and prestigious Congressional Black Caucus “paid homage to the continent’s ascension in domestic affairs” and participated in Pan-African coalitions (Joseph 2006).

The construction of an Afrocentric and Black Nationalist consciousness in mainstream African-American culture was integral to the reception of Haley’s seminal work, giving it the fertile ground necessary to sow seeds of identity-formation and social memory in service to a wider imperative for a coherent narrative of African-American history. This coherent narrative brought with it new politics of acceptability for community members, a desire to be as far removed from X’s distorted image of the

“Tom” as possible. What could be less assimilationist than a vocal support for Afrocentricity in a decidedly Eurocentric America? In *Community* (2001), Zygmunt Bauman writes that the “no-choice situation into which the act of summary exclusion has cast the ‘ethnic minority’ rebounds in a no-choice situation for the individual members when it comes to their communal duties” (Bauman 2001). He asserts that while the rhetoric of community is often considered positive, there is a sinister undertone to the communal spirit and that rejected groups, especially, develop a “besieged fortress” spirit” which requires the “unconditional loyalty” of their members, giving them a “survivalist edge” over the dominant society or culture (Bauman 2001). Such a spirit is apparent in a review of the sociopolitical climate from which *Roots* emerged and gained rapid popularity. The public claiming of “Blackness” as identity was as much a litmus test for community loyalty as it was a process of self-affirmation. The performance of such an identity through dress, action, ritual, and affiliation was equally fraught.

In “From Negro to Black to African-American: The Power of Names and Naming,” Martin examines the differences in political movements surrounding the different names for the community. Marking the move from “Negro” to “Black” of the late 1960’s, Martin discusses the shift in group preference as evidenced by *Newsweek* polls. One poll, conducted in 1968, had less than 6 percent of Negroes interviewed that preferred to be called Black, whereas a later Roper Poll in 1974 found that a solid majority preferred to be called Black. This relatively rapid shift in self-definition was precipitated by political and elite action in determining the name members of the community should find acceptable. To identify as Black was an opposition to whiteness

but also a demand for “race consciousness and self-acceptance” that rejected any and all assimilationist models. Of the shift from “Black” to “African-American” of the late 1980’s, Martin notes that critics deny the impetus of noting a “cultural homeland” in the term because, as one critic writes, Black American cultural traditions are “virtually unrelated” to Africa and “the overwhelming majority of black Americans are at least six or seven generations culturally removed from Africa. They speak no African language... They have no relatives in Africa” (Gay in Martin 1991) The term “African-American” is then attaching an “artificial sense” of nationality to a “huge heterogeneous continent” (Martin 1991).

Martin does note, however, that nationalisms are “inherently more or less artificial” and based on boundaries and symbolic social cohesion, supposed historical continuity, an ancient past, and invented traditions (Martin 1991). “New ethnicities” on America’s shores in the 1970’s, Martin writes, referred less to “original immigrant cultures than to the ‘reconstructed ethnicity’ of later generations’ adaptations to the American environment” (Martin 1991). He concludes that actual ties to African cultures matter less if the “purpose of the African-American cultural offensive” was to engender unity and cohesive cultural identification in the community. Citing Lester Singer, Martin discusses naming in terms of “ethnogenesis,” a process by which ethnic groups are formed as “autochthonous myths of human origin from a given sacred place” to create the notion that “one’s group arrived ‘here’ from elsewhere” (Singer in Martin 1991). The same is true of African-American narratives of belonging, despite the fact that much documentation and ancestral history was lost during the transatlantic slave trade. The

essentialization of “Africa” as a monolithic motherland and the imagined or exaggerated ritual connection to African cultures is a method by which a sense of autochthony and place is created.

Peter Geschiere’s *The Perils of Belonging* contrasts notions of autochthony and citizenship in Africa and Europe, exploring understandings of belonging and boundary-making practices surrounding these ideas. Autochthony, Geschiere writes, is the claim to being “born from the soil” and is accompanied by similar claims to unique rights over land and citizenship. The advent of the nation-state brings with it its own host of issues of exclusion and rights-denial as the confluence of nationality and culture create de-historicized narratives of belonging and ownership. The unique situation of African-Americans, being the only minority group brought against their will to the American “melting pot” of cultures and histories exacerbates a sense of a stolen, rather than merely lost, history and justifies a desire for roots elsewhere.

### **The Construction of a Political Identity through Ritual**

Jonathan Friedman writes on the ways in which groups re-define the past for the construction of a politicized identity and identifies Greek state-making efforts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as an archetypal example. He notes that Greece’s reputation in Europe for being a truly ancient society and the root of Western “classical civilization” is one that was largely co-opted into a national identity and involved the acceptance of some historical facts and the outright rejection of others. Friedman identifies the Renaissance as a

mutually beneficial moment of granting Europe ancient roots in Greece and also elevating the status of a Greek identity that was largely fragmented before the advent of Christianity and, after European conversion to the Christian religion, viewed as backward and pagan. This analysis of the production of Greek nationalism serves Friedman's wider argument concerning the facility of reconstructing the past in an attempt to guide the future of a nation or community. The Greek nationalist effort thus described does not differ greatly from the Black Nationalist movement of the late 1960's to the 1970's into which Haley inserted his narrative contribution. It is fairly apparent that the attempt to look beyond America's shores to embrace a diasporic history, when much historical and cultural data had been lost or poorly documented during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, would require a redefinition of black Americans' identities to include this largely unknown ancestral past. This perspective reveals the possibilities for understanding the motives of such a project as they relate to ritual and perceived cultural retention and continuity.

Similarly, Friedman's explanation of post-colonial nationalistic efforts in Hawaii demonstrates the ways in which traditions are constructed or re-constructed in opposition to hegemonic forces and identities are formed through their enactment. Modernists, he argues, will see Hawaiian culture defined academically as "the social order that predated contact with the British," which has been written and preserved through the works of Western missionaries and anthropologists, creating an "absolute and unbridgable gap" between "true" culture that has been lost and Hawaiian's "self-designated" culture (Friedman 1992). Concepts and terms that have become widely associated with

Hawaiian culture, such as *ohana* or the solidarity of the extended family, *aloha* or a commitment to others' needs, and *aloha aina* or love of the land, have become integral to modern Hawaiian identity and are, Friedman believes, in line with the "tendencies toward Hawaiian closed-corporateness" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a "social defense mechanism" (Friedman 1992). The encroachment of other cultures, large political and economic powers, and the hegemony of external definition caused modern Hawaiians to develop a cultural identity based on factors that are, as Friedman writes, "disauthenticated only by a discourse predicated on the opposition between the pristine and the colonial" (Friedman 1992). Hawaiian self-definition, reconstruction of the past, even "myth"-making, as Friedman implies, are summarily discredited in an Academy that bends toward a Western paradigm of truth and authenticity.

To this, he posits that the "Western modernist view of knowledge" is rooted in the idea that "there is but one true version of the past," that there is a structure to the past (following along an "arbitrarily chosen segment of a temporal continuum"), and that this structure is the product of research and is objective, thereby defining the singular truth. From this perspective, the "native's point of view" becomes classified as "folk" and is subject to "misrepresentation and misinformation" (Friedman 1992). The question, in Friedman's Hawaiian example and in the discussion of an adopted African-American ritual, becomes one of the freedom within a community or culture to engage with others, redefine itself and its history, adopt and create rituals, and "own" them without the official stamp of "Authenticity".

John Roberts writes on the classification of “folk” in the academic canon and on African-American belief narratives, specifically works that deal with the production of rumors and conspiracies in African-American culture. He identifies the scholarly tendency to focus on the lack of a factual basis for such narrative traditions, such as a widely held theory that a fried chicken fast food chain found in predominately African-American communities is run by the Ku Klux Klan and a similar legend that the KKK manufactured a sports brand popular amongst black youth, as participating in a wider “discourse of folkness” (Roberts 2009). This discourse emerged out of a classification previously designated for European peasants and was mapped onto American racial and class difference, implying an “ontological and epistemological distinction between the ‘folk’ and ‘non-folk’” (Roberts 2009). He analyzes these belief narratives in terms of their connection to African practices of witchcraft that have been preserved in African-American “hoo-doo” and “conjuring” and, he argues, have widespread influence over African-American approaches to political and economic exclusion, resulting in theories such as the one described above. The creation of “rumors and legends,” Roberts asserts, has both practical function and cultural continuity, maintaining the oral traditions of African ancestors and utilizing them to warn against ills that do befall African-American communities by, for instance, steering consumers away from companies that *do* opportunistically gear their advertising toward a community that cannot afford their products (i.e. the expensive sportswear supposedly made by the KKK) or raise revenue by selling low-priced and low-quality foods to low-income families whose health will suffer in the long run.

The “folk distinction” is but one way in which Western academia has delineated those narratives, histories, and practices that are considered legitimate and those whose legitimacy is undermined by their deviation from the majority. By defining the sole worth of a narrative belief in its factual basis, Roberts argues, academics ignore rich cultural practice in favor of writing large chunks of a cultural community off as simply ignorant. Similarly, “revealing” the actual origins of the practice of jumping the broom and simultaneously ignoring the intricate construction of political values, narratives, and identities tied up in the redefinition of the ritual as an African holdover is missing the point entirely.

The incorporation of these rituals in modern African-American weddings might be considered cathartic in both their expression of agency and their redefinition of narrative. By reconstructing or imagining the ritual as one that was brought from Africa, performed without slavemasters’ permission or actively against their wishes, and in defiance of laws that deemed enslaved people less than human and unable to have a recognized union, authors are counteracting a prevalent image of enslaved people as inactive, nonresistant subjects to their masters’ will and whims<sup>5</sup>. The reality of the ritual is perhaps more varied and mundane, however. Parry writes of several cases of active defiance in his examination of the roots of the ritual, but notes that most slave owners were likely “ambivalent as to how their slaves solemnized their vows,” indicating that

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<sup>5</sup> For media examples of this narrative, see websites such as African American Roots, Inc. [http://www.african-weddings.com/jumping\\_the\\_broom](http://www.african-weddings.com/jumping_the_broom) and the African-American Registry [http://www.aaregistry.org/historic\\_events/view/jumping-broom-short-history](http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/jumping-broom-short-history)

while some used the ritual to rebel, there were likely some who simply used it in an uncontested union (Parry 2011).

The attempt to claim African origins for the practice is, however, largely found outside of scholarly works, in wedding planners' books and fictionalized accounts. It is a cultural-political objective that aims to further the cause of an African-America connected to its "motherland." This ritual, and any others emergent from slavery that seem to not have been born on America's shores, such as conjuring, is one more strand to tie those of African descent in America to their ancestors and participate in the hope and belief that all was not lost in the passage. Any ideas of *tabula rasa* can be pushed aside with an examination of human nature and the understanding that slaves were, for all else that they were forced to endure, still that—with their own memories, preferences, and cultures to be passed along and mingled with others.

## Chapter 3: Neo-Traditionalism, Myth, and Social Memory

### Social Memory and the Performance of Identity

It is apparent that *Roots*, and the fictionalized rendering of Kunta Kinte in particular, has taken on mythological proportions in African-American cultural life and narrative such that the performance of the ritual in a wedding ceremony is removed from its actual historical roots and placed in the realm of community re-imaginings as prompted by Haley's historical novel. Paul Connerton, in *How Societies Remember*, notes the importance of shared memory to a community and, in doing so, implies its construction and regulation through performance. This social memory, he contends, is the cornerstone of identity, consisting of habit and ritual and is made observable through the widespread practice of both. Connerton argues that social memory is partially constructed through commemorative ceremonies, which he defines as "rites which explicitly refer to prototypical persons and events, whether these are understood to have historical or mythological existence" (Connerton 1989). He argues that these performative rituals and ceremonies are "mnemonic systems" that allow a community to be "reminded of its identity as represented by....a master narrative" (Connerton 1989). This reminder of identity, a self-narrated past agreed upon by the leaders in the community, intellectual and otherwise, is exactly the function of the broom-jumping ceremony in modern African-American weddings.

Golden, in defining the difference between memory and history, addresses memory as "selective reconstructions of past events that serve a present collective need"

and history as a non-static and open to debate and re-examination. Much of the world around us, he contends, is “intended to evoke memories—memories that are perceived to be shared with others” and that we use these to locate ourselves as individuals in relation to time, place, and social space. The act of memory itself, then, is a social act that involves multiple perspectives and histories both actively creating and stemming from identification with groups and interpersonal interaction. Golden understands collective memory as a “potent political tool” in the creation of community and salient identification. It is the way, Golden claims, that political leaders create “official histories that record for posterity one group’s version of social memory to the exclusion of others” (Golden 2005). To this end, the various revolutions in elite and mass consciousness within the African-American community and the accompanying discourses, rhetoric, symbolism, and rituals served to further a narrative of identity as a forcibly displaced and noble group, worthy of cultural distinctiveness from the rest of American society and the distinction of being a “minority amongst minorities” especially exploited through slavery, Jim Crow, and systemic racism and uniquely worthy of reparation and respect, both internal and external.

The rituals surrounding social memory are of particular importance here and the evocative physicality of an action such as jumping the broom cannot be denied as a ritual rife with all of the social elements of memory, group membership, and political motivation (even in its most neutral forms and settings). This is due, in large part, to the era in which it came to be popular as a method of asserting identity and evoking the past. It should also not be discounted that, where for many African-Americans, thoughts and

memories of slavery are painful—and even shameful—and some distance from an enslaved past is desired, the act of jumping the broom is presented in media depictions as a joyful, rather than somber, moment of remembrance and cultural insertion.

## **The Performative Nature of Ritual**

Schechner argues that rituals are performative and “codified, repeatable actions” defined by the functions of theater “entertainment, celebration, enhancement of social solidarity, education...and healing” (Schechner 1994). Ortner, similarly contends that ritual is a “type of cultural performance,” but goes farther than Schechner to state that they are not predicated on social truths but rather “arrive at them” by starting with a “cultural problem, stated or unstated” and then, through performance, develop “‘solutions’ involving regurgitations and reinterpretations of the elements that produce a newly meaningful whole” (Ortner 1978). For Ortner, ritual is a method by which groups “collectively state what they believe themselves to be,” and promote social learning by developing a consciousness of the newly established norms (Ortner 1978). Rituals, then, at once define and shape culture and reiterate it by encouraging repetitive and performative social action that brings a certain type of desirable “social-structural...consciousness in ‘everyday life’” (Ortner 1978).

Jumping the broom may have begun as an adopted and adapted ritual into Southern and slave societies from Welsh villages in lieu of state marriages, but in its rebirth post-1976, it became a method of expressing a consciousness of past and

history and a particular pan-African or Afrocentric political and intellectual awareness. By jumping the broom, modern African-Americans are expressing and performing a powerful statement of their own identities and affiliations and, by popularly accepting that the ritual is an “Africanism” that survived slavery, these same African-Americans are valuing a Pan-African identity and cultural continuity.

## Conclusion

A number of African-Americans believe “jumping the broom” to be a distinctively African-American cultural ritual, as reflected across wedding planning books, novels, movies, and web forums. The ritual became popular after its description in Alex Haley’s *Roots* and subsequent portrayal in the highly popular miniseries by the same name. The actual historical evidence connecting the ritual to Africa is vague at best and seemingly unrelated at worst, but there appears to be a persistence in attempts to prove that it did, in fact, come from the continent of Africa. Some authors have even gone so far as to argue that it was brought to Europe by Africans in ancient times and returned to Africans by Europeans in American slavery. As far-fetched as such an argument may sound, the question thus becomes “What is the motive behind supporting this supposed connection to Africa when there is so little concrete evidence of its existence?” In the face of persuasive evidence of Welsh roots for the ritual, considering the records of such from pre-slavery times and the proposed fraternization of the Welsh lower class and African slaves in early America, the claims by Afrocentric scholars and wedding planners alike fall short.

With the recorded impact of mass media on the consciousness of Americans and the identities and political leanings of minorities especially, it is easy to see how the *Roots* miniseries might have attacked the interior consciousness of the wider African-American community to create a greater awareness of the history of slavery and encourage a pride in what the race has overcome. This narrative of overcoming, of pride in oral narrative, of embracing and finding African roots came in conjunction with a

political movement toward radical Black Nationalism that embraced exactly these same principles. This movement brought with it a political identity and a group policing that encouraged the adoption of rituals such as jumping the broom and the dogged protectiveness surrounding their “African roots.”

By understanding ritual as a method of creating, performing, and reiterating social values and consciousness, we can understand the new meaning of this ritual for modern African-American weddings. Though, as Parry has noted, it was abandoned by the formerly enslaved in favor of assimilation and traditional American state weddings, it has been renewed in meaning by younger generations to indicate an engagement with the past and, notably, with an imagined Africa. Africa, in this sense, is symbolic of roots far and away from the historic pain and oppression of American citizenship and, thus, cultural continuity and connection are desired in a quest for place and acceptance, as demonstrated by such practices as roots tourism.

Narrative and social memory play an important role in the popular construction of this ritual, particularly in its efficacy as a vehicle for political objectives of social movements. The nationalistic projects involving the creation of rituals as central aspects of national identity are echoed in the post-Civil Rights Movement Black Nationalist project into which *Roots* and its accompanying discourses and rituals were received. Becoming a part of this narrative performance of transnational black identity predicated on non-specific African ancestry, jumping the broom bridged a gap that allowed otherwise “Western” weddings to have an African element and a more joyful reminder of the long and arduous path of the race.

As for the origins of the practice, the focus on the Welsh roots ignores the crucial component of its adoption into slave culture as a sacred alternative to weddings, which might have included a religious ceremonial component but were sometimes performed in opposition to the wishes of slavemasters and thus lacked formal sanctioning. This means that the ritual must have been in accordance, at least partially, with the values of its earliest African participants in order to hold true ritual significance. By operating from the standpoint that enslaved people had a measure of choice, engaged frequently in acts of rebellion (both large and small) and retained, through inter-generational transmission, distinct cultural values and practices from Africa, we are left with the conclusion that the ritual must therefore have been similar enough to that with which they were familiar in symbolic meaning or component elements to have been adopted into slave practices.

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