
Ancestral Fonts of Survivance: Kunta Kinte and Yellanna as Custodians of Memory, Art, and Subaltern Identity

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Abstract

Subaltern communities frequently experience historical erasure through the disruption of memory, language, cultural practices, and genealogical consciousness. Literature therefore becomes an important medium through which marginalized communities recover and transmit histories excluded from dominant archives. This article comparatively examines Kunta Kinte in Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) and Yellanna in G. Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring* (2000) as ancestral figures who function as sources of transgenerational cultural memory. Drawing on Gerald Vizenor's concept of "survivance," the study argues that both characters transform memory and cultural expression into forms of active presence. Kunta Kinte preserves his African identity through his name, language, genealogy, and memories of homeland, while Yellanna represents Dalit cultural continuity through music, dance, oral tradition, and performance. Although Atlantic slavery and the Indian caste system are historically distinct structures and should not be treated as equivalent, both novels illuminate how marginalized communities resist forms of cultural and historical erasure. The article proposes the concept of the "ancestral font" to describe the ancestor as a source of memory, identity, and political consciousness for succeeding generations.

Keywords: Survivance, Kunta Kinte, Yellanna, Dalit literature, African American literature, cultural memory, oral tradition, caste, slavery.

Introduction

Subaltern literature frequently confronts the problem of recovering histories that dominant institutions have suppressed or distorted. For communities subjected to slavery, caste discrimination, colonialism, and social exclusion, remembering the past becomes an important form of cultural self-definition. Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and G. Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring* are significant examples of such literary reclamation. Although the novels emerge from different historical and cultural contexts, both employ intergenerational narratives to explore how marginalized identities survive through memory and cultural transmission.

At the centre of these narratives stand two ancestral figures: Kunta Kinte, the Mandinka youth whose abduction begins the genealogy represented in *Roots*, and Yellanna, whose artistic and cultural practices contribute to the preservation of Dalit memory in *Untouchable Spring*. Their significance extends beyond their biological position within their respective genealogies. They become sources from which later generations inherit cultural memory.

Gerald Vizenor's concept of **survivance** provides a useful framework for understanding these figures. Survivance rejects representations of marginalized communities exclusively as passive victims and emphasizes active cultural presence. As Vizenor explains, survivance involves "an active sense of presence" against historical absence and erasure (*Manifest Manners*). From this perspective, Kunta Kinte and Yellanna are not merely victims of oppressive systems. They are custodians of cultural resources that survive those systems. This article argues that both characters function as **ancestral fonts of survivance**: Kunta through language, naming, and genealogy, and Yellanna through music, performance, and collective cultural memory.

Kunta Kinte: Language as Cultural Survival

Kunta Kinte's story in *Roots* begins in Africa, before his identity is defined by slavery. This narrative choice is crucial because it prevents slavery from becoming the starting point of his existence. Kunta possesses a name, family, language, community, and homeland before his forced transportation to America.

The struggle over his name becomes one of the earliest manifestations of his resistance. His captors attempt to replace "Kunta Kinte" with the slave name "Toby." The imposed name represents the power of slavery to redefine the enslaved person according to the master's authority. Kunta's continued attachment to his original name therefore becomes an assertion of identity.

His memories of Africa perform a similar function. His recollection of the Gambia, his Mandinka heritage, and his family provides an alternative history to the one imposed upon him in America. The memories preserve a world that existed before enslavement and establish that his identity cannot be completely contained by the institution of slavery.

Most importantly, Kunta's cultural memory reaches beyond his own lifetime through his daughter Kizzy. The transmission of African words, names, and stories creates an informal archive within the family. What slavery attempts to destroy institutionally is preserved orally. Language therefore becomes a form of survivance. Kunta may be physically dispossessed, but his memories and linguistic inheritance remain capable of travelling across generations. His role as ancestor consequently becomes political: he provides descendants with an origin that precedes their history as enslaved people.

Yellanna: Performance as Dalit Survivance

In *Untouchable Spring*, G. Kalyana Rao presents the cultural experiences of Dalit communities through oral traditions, songs, stories, music, and performance. The novel challenges historical representations that reduce Dalit existence to oppression while ignoring the richness of Dalit cultural production.

Yellanna is particularly important in this context. His musical and performative abilities represent an alternative form of historical expression. If dominant institutions control written history and social authority, marginalized communities possess other repositories of memory. Song, dance, storytelling, and the thudum become cultural forms through which community experience is preserved.

Yellanna's artistic practice may therefore be understood as a form of **embodied historiography**. His body becomes an instrument through which communal memory is performed. This is significant within the caste system, where the bodies and movements of Dalits have historically been subjected to social and ritual regulation.

Performance creates an alternative cultural space. Through music and dance, Yellanna refuses the idea that dominant caste society possesses the exclusive authority to determine what constitutes culture, art, and history. His artistic practice therefore transforms cultural expression into a form of political presence.

Unlike Kunta Kinte, whose primary mode of cultural preservation is linguistic and genealogical, Yellanna's survivance is predominantly communal and performative. Yet both figures demonstrate that culture can survive even when political and social structures attempt to suppress it.

Comparative Reading: The Ancestor as Political Font

Kunta Kinte and Yellanna represent different historical experiences and should not be treated as equivalent. Atlantic chattel slavery and the Indian caste system developed through different historical, economic, legal, and religious structures. Nevertheless, their literary comparison reveals a shared concern with the preservation of marginalized identities.

Kunta Kinte

Language and naming

African genealogy

Memory of homeland

Familial transmission

Resistance to enslavement

Genealogical continuity

Yellanna

Music and performance

Dalit cultural memory

Community-based artistic tradition

Communal transmission

Resistance to caste hierarchy

Cultural continuity

The comparison demonstrates that survivance can operate through different cultural forms. Kunta preserves identity through language, memory, and genealogy; Yellanna preserves it through performance, music, and collective cultural expression.

Both therefore function as **counter-archives**. Their histories exist outside or alongside dominant systems of documentation. Kunta's memories challenge the historical logic of slavery, while Yellanna's artistic practices challenge the exclusion of Dalit culture from mainstream historiography.

The ancestral figure thus becomes more than a biological predecessor. The ancestor becomes a repository of knowledge through whom later generations acquire a consciousness of their historical identity.

Transgenerational Survivance

The multi-generational structure of both narratives intensifies the importance of ancestry. A single-generation narrative may represent resistance as an individual act, but an intergenerational narrative demonstrates how cultural memory survives historical violence. In *Roots*, Kunta's memory travels through his descendants. His story becomes part of a larger genealogical consciousness. The descendants inherit not only the memory of slavery but also an awareness of an African origin that slavery attempted to erase.

Similarly, *Untouchable Spring* emphasizes the transmission of Dalit cultural memory through generations. Songs, stories, and performances preserve communal experience and allow the past to remain active in the present.

This process can be described as **transgenerational survivance**. Survivance does not mean merely remaining alive; it means maintaining cultural presence across time. The ancestor becomes the point from which this continuity flows.

Thus, Kunta Kinte and Yellanna may be described as “fonts”: sources from which successive generations receive language, memory, cultural identity, and historical consciousness.

Conclusion

Kunta Kinte in *Roots* and Yellanna in *Untouchable Spring* represent two distinct but comparable forms of ancestral survivance. Kunta's preservation of his name, language, genealogy, and African memories challenges the cultural erasure produced by slavery. Yellanna's music, dance, and performance create an alternative archive of Dalit cultural experience within the oppressive structures of caste.

Vizenor's concept of survivance enables these figures to be understood beyond the framework of victimhood. Their importance lies not only in the suffering they experience but in the cultural resources they transmit. Kunta's linguistic memory and Yellanna's artistic expression enable subsequent generations to inherit histories that dominant systems attempted to suppress.

The concept of the **ancestral font** therefore provides a useful way of understanding subaltern genealogy. The ancestor is not simply the beginning of a family tree but a source of cultural and political consciousness. Through memory, language, music, and performance, the past becomes an active force in the present.

Ultimately, both *Roots* and *Untouchable Spring* demonstrate that when dominant histories attempt to erase marginalized communities, cultural memory can become an alternative archive. The ancestral figure becomes its custodian, and survivance becomes the process through which that memory continues to flow across generations.

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