

Roots (2016)

TV Miniseries, History Channel

I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me?"

Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?"

Psalms 42:9

The remake of the 1977 version of Alex Haley's groundbreaking book is a stirring reminder of the darker side of so-called "Western Civilization." It benefits from better make-up and special effects, and more historical knowledge. An example of the latter is that we see the inter-tribal struggles, with some tribes willingly engaged in capturing and selling slaves. Also that the Africans are Muslims. LaVar Burton's Kunta Kinte dwelt in a humble village, whereas Malachi Kirby's Kinte is shown as a member of a substantial clan living in what amounts to a small city, Gambia's Juffure. The scenes of life, including the tough initiation of Kinte and his peers into the life of a warrior, belie the old white myth that the slaves were plucked from a life of ignorant savagery.

The Middle Passage scene is as stark as ever, with the captives seeking to work together toward taking over the ship. The importance of supportive relationships is seen when one of the older men urges Kunta Kinte, who had been refusing to eat, even when force-fed, to live. This will be repeated at the end of this episode when Fiddler (Forest Whitaker), kneeling and holding the nearly whipped to death youth, pleads with him to live.

Kunta Kinte is the ultimate example of the need to cling to one's roots so as to remain one's dignity and integrity—just as Fiddler is the example of one who has put accommodation or

survival at the center of his existence. Dressed in his master's cast-off but once elegant clothing, he is obsequious, speaking in servile tones. And yet he still retains a sense of his dignity when he and the overseer engage in a fight. Atop the white man who had been stronger than he only because of his whip and position, Fiddler, casting aside his usual slave mask, angrily tells the thug that he is not at all like him. His meaning is clear, that any man who exists by mistreating others so cruelly is the lowliest of the low, even if his skin is white.

Fiddler's memory of his past is awakened by a beautiful African lullaby that he hears Kinte singing. He remembers his mother singing it to him. He says that he will learn to play it, but Kinte says that the song is his, not to be shared. As the two become friends, it will be Fiddler's playing that haunting tune at their master's Christmas party that will provide the cover for the younger man's escape on their mistress's horse.

Due to the suspicious overseer's checking the shed where Kinte had been chained, the escape is discovered, and the runaway captured and returned. At his scourging, the brutality of which will recall *The Passion* (though fortunately the depiction is far shorter!), there is a struggle within Kunta Kinte between dignity and survival. He has refused to accept the name his mistress has given him, "Toby." The overseer demands to know his victim's name, and after each answer of "Kunta Kinte," he lashes the slave's back. Only after it is in shreds does the man give in, feebly answering "Toby." Fiddler hearing the first soft answer, had rushed in to stop the flogging, but it will take a couple more answers before the brutal overseer hears and stops.

We will see in the next episode how Kunta Kinte, now answering to "Toby," manages to survive without losing all of his rebelliousness and African heritage.