The Power of Hoodoo: African Relic Symbolism in Amistad and The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave

Alicia M. Simmons
University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor

Part of the American Literature Commons, Comparative Literature Commons, Literature in English, North America Commons, and the Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol2/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.
The Power of Hoodoo: African Relic Symbolism in Amistad and The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave

Keywords
African American Literature, American Literature, Frederick Douglass
The power and significance that an inanimate object can hold is infinite according to the nineteenth-century cultural rituals of both native Africans and their American descendants. Within the belief systems of these black communities, every pain, both physical and emotional, can be cured by use of certain natural substances from the earth. For some ailments, grass clippings were adequate remedies. For others, tree bark was the key ingredient of the medicine. However, what was more remarkable than the advantages received from these environmental drugs was the faith placed in them by each and every member of the African community for this type of treatment was the only help on which they could rely. The unification of the black population, spurred by these beliefs, created cultural pathways along which these customs were passed. The African American community claimed sole possession of their particular cultural plight and of proposed solutions to it, and held that only members of that community were worthy of owning these items. Joseph Cinque’s tooth in Stephen Spielberg’s *Amistad* and Sandy Jenkin’s root in Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* serve as symbols of African culture, signifying hope, renewal, and freedom. It is because of this that these objects were passed on to Frederick Douglass and Theodore Joadson, who, despite their affinities with and assimilation into white society, identified themselves with black culture and were in need of its strength and power.
Because the African American community did not have the same medical or psychological aids as the European American society, its members were forced to rely on each other for survival. "...There was no justice in the courts for them and no regular source of financially reasonable medical aid from the white doctors in town" (Jackson 425). Therefore, blacks relied on hoodoo. Often referred to as voodoo, hoodoo can be sociologically defined as cultural practices that utilize natural surroundings, the only available resource, as tools, and that use intuition, the only available form of knowledge, as instruction. With these features in hand and mind, the ability to care for themselves and others became possible within the African American community. Present within every village were self-appointed conjurers and medicine-men, whose sole purpose was to provide their patients with folk medicine that alleviated their sicknesses or solved their predicaments. The mysteriously logical outcomes and consequences of 'primitive' medicine attracted those of African heritage to its practice. Hoodoo practices were rather commonplace, and it was understood that "...if the magic didn’t work, it meant either that it was done imperfectly or that someone else was working something stronger" (419). In essence, it was the confirmed belief in the African ritual treatments that ensured their usage and endurance.

Evidence of this cultural practice can be seen in the lives of Sandy Jenkins, who appears in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave and Joseph Cinque, a historically based character in the 1998 film Amistad, who wholeheartedly placed their faith in the powers of a root and a tooth, respectively. Jenkins, an enslaved friend from a nearby plantation, existed as a devout supporter of hoodoo, defending its ability to assuage negative emotions. Therefore, when the enslaved Frederick Douglass approached Jenkins, carrying a heart full of fear and indecision, Jenkins’ first reaction was to give him a root. Frederick Douglass received the empowered item after running away from his master. Because slaveholders did not tolerate disobedience, Douglass expected to be whipped upon returning to the plantation. Jenkins saw within the runaway slave a need for strength, and therefore supplied a folk medicine remedy that was believed to repel all harmful forces from its possessor. Acting as an African hoodoo doctor,
Jenkins explained to Douglass how holding the root on the right side of his body would “...render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip [him]” (Douglass 111).

Just as Douglass carried with him the root he received from Jenkins, Cinque carried with him at all times a long, narrow wooden tooth. A meaningful gift from Cinque’s wife, the cusp functioned as a supplier of fortitude and positive faith. As a hard-working Mende tribesman, Cinque relied heavily upon the strength and support of his precious tooth. The battles and struggles that he endured daily, combined with the ubiquitous possibility of enslavement, required him continuously to summon as much power as he could, by any means possible. The tooth’s significance to Cinque became evident when, upon discovering and retrieving it from aboard the vessel Amistad, he clutched it tightly in his palm. Obviously, Cinque’s and Jenkins’ keepsakes had deep ties to their personal and cultural identity and, thus, represented a part of their ethnicity.

The owners of African relics were eager to exchange their artifacts with others, since the continuance of their hoodoo practices was largely contingent upon the items’ passage from generation to generation and person to person. However, not everyone was worthy of the cultural icon. Before an individual could participate in this gift process, two implicit characteristics had to be identified within the potential receiver: his imperative need for help and, most importantly, his maintained cultural relation to the African Diaspora. As a fellow member of the African American and slave communities, Jenkins viewed Douglass as worthy of understanding and embracing African tradition. During a period in which many black laborers were physically distanced from their African homeland, any connection to or preservation of their African roots was honored and received as identification of membership within the black cultural community, where ideas and traditions were shared. Because Jenkins and Douglass underwent similar hardships in their experiences of bondage and racism, they were emotionally connected. As a result of their African descent, they shared similar circumstances. It was because of his cultural relation to the larger African
American community that Sandy Jenkins felt able to bestow his ethnic treasure upon Frederick Douglass.

Although appreciative of Jenkins’ gift, Douglass was not completely confident that the root would render him successful in avoiding the lashings of his master’s switch; in fact, he bluntly pronounced his skepticism when saying, “I at first rejected the idea, that the simple carrying of a root in my pocket would have any such effect as he had said, and was not disposed to take it; . . . to please him, [though,] I at length took the root...” (111). Even when the relic seemed to have worked successfully and prevented him from receiving a beating from Mr. Covey, Douglass rationalized the occurrence, looking beyond the logical nature of this African hoodoo tradition. The proper castigation of a runaway, a severe beating in the public square, simultaneously humiliates the slave and publicly brands his master as a failure. According to Douglass, it was Mr. Covey’s desire to be regarded as “... a first-rate overseer and negro-breaker...” (114), which prevented him from sending Douglass to the whipping-post for public reprimand.

Douglass’s gradual assimilation into European American society caused him to question the folkloric component of his African culture. His omission of his cultural title in the title of his autobiography alludes to his personal separation from the African Diaspora and his assimilation into Anglo-American lifestyles. Douglass taught himself how to read and write, and was therefore on the educational level of whites, unlike most African slaves. He no longer had to rely on the folkloric beliefs of his ancestors for they were not his only means of survival; rather, literacy was his crutch, upon which he leaned for support, guidance, and strength. Additionally, his ability to read taught him how to think of the world in a different way and allowed him to create alternative explanations for his experiences. Having blind faith in the root’s effects did not satisfy him because he now yearned for a detailed clarification of how it was able to work its magic. Without this knowledge, Douglass was forced to remain skeptical of hoodoo practices.
Douglass did not abandon all faith in the root, though. The slave clearly stated dissatisfaction with his own rationalization when asserting, "...The only explanation I can now think of does not entirely satisfy me..." (114). This statement implicitly hints at his attribution of his salvation to African hoodoo folklore, thereby showing some remaining faith in the root and, simultaneously, in his African culture. Douglass's inability to completely repudiate his belief in the root is one way in which his own personal roots and heritage express themselves within his persona. Its coincidental logic, a rationale to which many African descendants cling, resides within Douglass' subconscious. Although Douglass had adopted an educated view of causality similar to that of European Americans, he still retained some part of his African culture.

Unlike Douglass, with his internal cultural disparity, the African Joseph Cinque and Theodore Joadson, an African-American Abolitionist, both believed themselves to be active members of the black community. Cinque's strides to free himself and his Mende people from unjust bondage in America paralleled Joadson's efforts to abolish slavery in the United States. However, Cinque personally renounced Joadson's racial identity. From the outset, Cinque refused to view Joadson as worthy of receiving his African tooth, primarily because of the Abolitionist's similarities to white men. His style of dress, means of transportation, and wealthy status caused the African slave to identify Joadson with whites rather than with blacks. Joadson's inability to communicate with the Mende slaves also created a barrier between them, a dissimilarity which Cinque could not comprehend. Furthermore, Joadson was no longer forced to experience the adversities endured by blacks in slavery since he was a free man within the United States. Cinque, on the other hand, was not fortunate enough to receive this privilege and was still suffering from the racially motivated hierarchical structures present in America. To Cinque, being labeled an African male required possession of both African lineage and the unconscious assumption of what he deemed the universal characteristics of a black man. Joadson's physical, verbal, and socioeconomic characteristics did not fit Cinque's perceptions, motivating the Mende slave to reject acknowledgement of
Joadson’s ancestral heritage. The numerous disparities caused a rift between Cinque and Joadson which neither could close.

Nevertheless, by the culmination of the movie, Cinque was able to see that he and Joadson did in fact hold something in common: cultural understanding. Joadson’s willingness to fight for Cinque’s cause proved that he identified and empathized with his plight; although they were not struggling with the same lifestyle, the unjust treatment endured by blacks was recognized and fully comprehended by both individuals. In fact, Cinque realized that, although a free man, Joadson still needed strength and power to make it through each day. Even in the North in the late 1800s, blacks were not regarded as equal to whites, and Theodore Joadson had to deal with the problems of his inferior status within that society. Therefore, upon becoming a free man by the judgement of the Supreme Court, Cinque passed on his piece of African culture to Joadson, realizing that he too needed the power of the tooth “to keep [him] safe” (Amistad). Cinque’s freedom granted him permission to return to his native country, where he would not have to fight adamantly against racism as he had in the United States. Cinque’s decreased need for strength prompted him to pass on his source of power to Joadson, who remained in need of empowerment within the unharmonious American society. The bestowal of the tooth marked Cinque’s recognition of Joadson’s African descent.

The tooth in Spielberg’s Amistad and the root in the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave play important roles in the development of the African communal aspect of the movie and book. Not only do they illustrate transcendent cultural practices of native Africans, they also make discernible and serve to strengthen the relations formed between identifiable members of the African American population. It is through these cultural symbols that the reader is able to note Frederick Douglass’s concurrent retention of both black and white methodologies and thought processes and that the viewer is able to witness Joadson’s eventual acceptance in and recognition by Cinque’s African society. Through these symbolic items, the tooth and the root, African cultural influences are defended to the audience, hoodoo believers and non-believers alike.
Works Cited

