

YOUR NAME IS YOUR SHIELD: IDENTITY AND FAMILY

Over the first two nights of *Roots*, you will see how identity is a significant theme in the series. Kunta Kinte and his family members are forced to accept slave names and to give up many meaningful customs and traditions from their cultures. This leads to resistance among enslaved people as they must find ways to maintain their identity and keep their heritage alive while also trying to find freedom in any way possible.

DISCOVERY

For enslaved individuals, identity was a complicated issue. On the one hand, slaves wanted to maintain ties to their homeland and culture, even though doing so meant they risked being punished. On the other hand, enslaved people were often given new names and expected to assimilate to life in the colonies. Use these primary and secondary sources to explore the theme of slave identity, the forces influencing it, and how it developed over several generations.

- Consider the idea of identity development and how it is expressed at worldhistoryforall.sdsu.edu/themes/keytheme5.htm
- Study excerpts from 19th century slave narratives at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/identity/text1/beingaslave.pdf
- Read two poems by George Moses Horton, written when he was a slave, at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/identity/text6/poethorton.pdf
- Investigate “The History of the Idea of Race...And Why It Matters” by Audrey Smedley at www.understandingrace.org/resources/pdf/disease/smedley.pdf
- Examine the speech “I Will Sink or Swim with My Race” by African American abolitionist John S. Rock at www.blackpast.org/1858-john-s-rock-i-will-sink-or-swim-my-race

Now, after viewing Nights 1 and 2 of *Roots*, consider how the development of Kunta's identity and that of his daughter Kizzy reflect changes in America. Cite five specific events in Kunta's and Kizzy's stories that help define who these characters are. Next, list factors and events that influenced the development of the North and the South (both collective and individual) and how slavery impacted the social, economic, and political identities of these regions.

DISCUSSION

- Create identity charts for Kunta and Kizzy, and discuss which aspects of their identities they can shape (such as their beliefs) and which they cannot (such as their ethnicity). Discuss how the identities of each character were shaped by their circumstances as well as by their family and their heritage, focusing specifically on events in Nights 1 and 2 of *Roots*.
- Compare and contrast Kunta's identity in Africa with his identity as an enslaved person.
- Consider how the meaning of Kizzy's name (“you stay put”) influences the development of her identity.
- Assess what Kunta and Kizzy considered the most important elements of their family heritage and personal identity, and explain how they held onto these as enslaved people.
- Discuss which aspects of identity have shaped the ways people have resisted oppression throughout history. For example, how did Kunta pass down his Mandinka heritage and help Kizzy imagine the possibility of freedom? How did people during the Civil Rights Movement think about the past and the importance of identity in making their claims for equality?



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