



## African American Cultural Identity Reflected in Hurston's *Every Tongue Got To Confess*

Wahju Kusumajanti<sup>1</sup>, Alifia Ramadhani<sup>2</sup>✉  
Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya<sup>1,2</sup>  
✉ [wahjukusumajanti@uinsby.ac.id](mailto:wahjukusumajanti@uinsby.ac.id)

### Abstract:

Zora Neale Hurston was one of the outstanding African American writers. Her last work resulted from her anthropological study of African American folklore in the South. This study explores African American cultural identity through traditions and storytelling practices within the African American community in the United States in Hurston's *Every Tongue Got To Confess*. Using Hall's theory of cultural identity, this research investigates how these traditions were influenced by African diasporic roots, as well as the unique experiences of African Americans in the United States. It is found that African American shaped their identity through spiritual and religious practices.

**Keywords:** African American; culture; identity

### Abstrak:

Zora Neale Hurston adalah salah satu penulis Amerika keturunan Afrika yang terpendang. Karya terakhir yang dia hasilkan adalah studi antropologi tentang cerita rakyat masyarakat Amerika keturunan Afrika di negara bagian di Selatan Amerika Serikat. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi identitas budaya masyarakat Amerika keturunan Afrika melalui tradisi dan praktik mendongeng dalam komunitas mereka di Amerika Serikat dalam karya Hurston *Every Tongue Got To Confess*. Dengan mengaplikasikan teori Hall tentang identitas budaya, penelitian ini akan mengungkapkan bagaimana tradisi masyarakat Amerika keturunan Afrika dipengaruhi oleh akar diaspora Afrika, serta pengalaman unik mereka di Amerika Serikat. Penemuan penelitian ini menunjukkan mereka mempraktikkan spiritualitas dan agama untuk membentuk identitas budayanya.

**Kata kunci:** masyarakat Amerika keturunan Afrika; budaya; identitas

## INTRODUCTION

President John F. Kennedy stated that the United States of America was a country founded by immigrants (2008:1). Among immigrants, Africans are the first non-European immigrants to the United States and currently account for 14.2% of the total United States population (Lopez & Moslimani, 2023). They came to the United States, not of their own accord. They were brought to Virginia in 1619, 12 years after Jamestown was founded. Initially, many of them were considered indentured slaves who could gain freedom.



However, in the 1660s, as the need for agricultural laborers grew in the Southern colonies, the institution of slavery began to restrain them, and Africans were brought to America in shackles for life in forced servitude (Frank & Maas, 2005). Not only was their forced arrival, their physical appearance, skin color, and cultural customs and traditions placed them in a lower status than Whites, which made them subject to prejudice and discrimination (Said, 1979). In short, these differences place immigrants from Africa as ‘others.’ This status led African Americans, later called the Black, to live in their own communities to avoid encounters with Whites and other races to protect themselves from harsh discrimination and maintain their cultural traditions. One of the cultural traditions of Black society is folklore.

On African American folklore, Zora Neale Hurston is an expert. While studying at the Barnard College of Columbia University, she conducted anthropological research focusing on African American folklore for her undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Apart from being a scientist, she is also an author and folklorist. Hurston’s extensive research during the 1920s and 1930s resulted in a collection of folktales, folklore, and oral history later published under the title *Every Tongue Got To Confess*. This book was first published in 2001 posthumously. The stories in *Every Tongue Got To Confess* capture the cultural narratives of Black communities in the Southern United States, particularly in Alabama, Florida, and Louisiana, where Hurston did most of her research. Hurston retained the dialect when she wrote this folk tale and did not translate it into “common English,” thus retaining the feeling of the characters as if the reader were sitting and listening to old relatives tell his tales that entertain, instruct, and reflect on their worldview.

Several researchers have reviewed *Every Tongue Got to Confess*. Byrne (2016) studied the picture book adaptation of *Every Tongue Got to Confess*. The focus is on how folktale is illustrated to give a vivid picture to the target readers, namely children. Meanwhile, Brooks et al. (2016) studied Black female ghosts in the respective book. This study concludes that the collections of folklore in the Devil Tales and Witch and Hant Tales sections are traumatic expressions of the history of African Americans in the past. A thesis written by Alexander (2012) focuses on how Hurston performed *halimuhfack* (storytelling) of African American folktale in 1939. Based on the discussion above, researchers still have room to find how African Americans construct their cultural identity in *Every Tongue Got to Confess*.

This research wants to reveal how the collection of folklore *Every Tongue Got to Confess*, especially the parts of God Tales, Preacher Tales, and Heaven Tales, reflects African American cultural identity. Since the object of this study is literature that uses language as media and written words, Representation theory is used to analyze phrases, sentences, monologues, dialogues, and other symbols and signs related to cultural identity that are found as mental evidence in this book. According to Hall in his book entitled *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, representation is an essential part of the process, which means it is produced and exchanged between members of culture through language. He explained in detail as follows:

However, what does representation have to do with culture: what is the connection between them? To put it simply, culture is about a shared meaning. Now language is the privileged medium in which meaning is produced and exchanged. Meanings can only be shared through our everyday access to language. So language is central to meaning and culture and has always been regarded as the key repository of values and meanings (Hall, 2003:1)

Furthermore, Hall also explains how language can be a medium for forming cultural representations. Hall describes that the practice of all representations is essentially 'language work,' not because they are all written or spoken, but because they all use some element to stand for what we want to say, to express or communicate a thought, concept, idea, or feeling.

Elements, such as sounds, words, notes, movements, expressions, and clothing - are part of our material world, but their importance to language is their function. They construct and transmit meaning. They signify. They have no clear meaning within themselves. Instead, they are vehicles or media that carry the meaning we want to communicate because they operate as symbols that represent (i.e., symbolize) what we want to communicate. Using another metaphor, they function as signs. Signs stand for or represent our concepts, ideas, and feelings in a way that allows others to 'read' or interpret the meanings around us in the same way we do (Hall, 2003:4).

This statement confirms that one person from another can be very different in perceiving or interpreting something because each has different concepts attached to each cultural background. The most significant thing in the representational system is how a group of people with a shared culture have the same way of understanding and interpreting



something. Hall (2003: 17) states that ‘members of the same culture must share concepts, images, and ideas that enable them to think and perceive the world more or less the same way. They must share, generally speaking, all the same, ‘cultural code.’”

## DISCUSSION

In the following data, the reader can see words such as ‘restin,’ ‘makin’ ‘de’ ‘an’ ‘Hissel’ ‘uh’ ‘tuh’ ‘ast’ ‘em’ ‘whut’ and ‘dey’ is found to describe the Black’s language. ‘Restin’ stands for resting, ‘makin’ for making, ‘de’ for the, ‘an’ for and, ‘Hissel’ for Himself, ‘uh’ for of, ‘tuh’ for to, ‘ast’ for ask, ‘em’ for them, ‘whut’ for what, and ‘dey’ for they.

*Why Negroes Have Nothing* tale tells the readers how each nation got its specialty, but the Black is not.

After God thew makin’ de world an’ rested Hissel’ uh little He called all de different nations uh people (races) up tuh Him an’ ast ‘em all whut dey wanted. De white man said he wanted tuh be pretty an’ tuh boss everything; de Jew said he wanted all de money an’ wealth; de Indian said he wanted tuh know all about rovin’ de woods an’ huntin’ an’ sich. De nigger didn’t even come up tuh ast fuh nothin’. He wuz off somewhere restin’. Finally, God got tired uh waitin’ an’ sent one uh His angels tuh wake ‘im up an’ tell ‘im tuh come on up an’ git his, whutever he wanted. He went on up an’ God ast ‘im, say, “Negro, whut do you want? Ah’m givin’ de nations whutever dey wants, but dis is yo’ las’ chance. Now you better look all roun’ an’ see whut you want me tuh give yuh.” De nigger never moved out his tracks. He said, “Ah don’t want nothin’,” and went on back tuh sleep. Thass how come we ain’t got nothin’. —LARKINS WHITE. (p.31).

The Black or Negroes believed that God made them in anger. It is because the Black spent most of his time resting or doing nothing but sleeping. A person usually rests by lying or sleeping. He needs to regain his energy after hard work. So, people take time to rest or sleep and then return to their productivity.

Nonetheless, if the person sleeps all the time, is unwilling to use energy, or lacks care, he is lazy. The White people got what they wanted, i.e., perfect physical appearance such as fair skin, blonde hair, long sharp nose, blue eyes, tall-well built, and they got their supremacy to rule the world. God gave them what they sought. Other races expected White appearances, and most colonizers were White. It is because the White arrived as soon as God called. The skin color cannot be separated from the following tale about why Black people are black.

Why Negroes are Black. The reason Negroes are black is because in the beginning God told everybody to be there at a certain time and get they color. Everybody went back at the right time but the Negroes. They went off somewhere and went to sleep. When they did get there, they were so scered they wouldn't get waited on, they started pushing and shoving and acting crazy, and God pushed them back and said, "Get back!" They misunderstood and got black. —CHARLEY BRADLEY. (p 31).

It is where the Black started their color. Their ignorance of God's instruction and slow moving brought them their blackness.

The next nation that got what it wanted was the Jews. The Jews nowadays are famous for their success in financial matters and intelligence in various fields. Their intelligence makes them leaders in technology and management, providing abundant financial benefits. The Indians, with a request to rule the forest and skilled in hunting, also got it. They are known as a nation close to nature and the master of wilderness. We can see this in Indian historical sites in the United States. God granted the White, the Jews, and the Indian's wishes because they were on time and did not make Him angry.

Meanwhile, the Black people were the opposite. All they did was rest and sleep, came last, and provoked God's anger because He waited so long. Still, he needed to think of what he wanted, but he did not. He just said that he did not need anything and continued his sleeping. They also lack care about the future. It is similar to laziness.

Are Black people really lazy? The historical facts showed that they were exploited as slaves during the colonial period. They are not treated humanely. Working continuously without stopping for the benefit of the plantation owner without proper wages or appreciation and even being traded. Because they are physically exploited, they do not have the energy left to activate their thinking abilities. This could be a symbol of how Black people use their time to rest. The image of black people lounging around can also be an attribute assigned to them by white people. When it is said that black people have nothing, physical perfection, intelligence, wealth, or skill in certain ways can be related to the condition of black people when this folklore is collected. At the beginning of the 20th century in the United States, segregation arose, namely the separation of all public facilities for white and black people. White people do not want to share public facilities with Black people. The worst thing is that black people do not get the facilities that white people have. For example, public transportation is reserved only for Whites. The schools were only for whites. This condition ultimately places Blacks as a marginalized race.



*The Uncle Ike in De Judgement* described the opposite characteristics of the Black. The judgment day was the day when God decided whether a person went to heaven or hell. Uncle Ike, unlike the Black in the previous tales, was punctual because he used to work with the White who demanded punctuality. On Judgement Day, he tried to arrive early with other races and wanted to be judged, as if he believed he would go to heaven as soon as possible. Unfortunately, he was the only Black who came while his Black fellows had not arrived. "... Gabriel turned over a new page for Negroes and called for them to come to the throne. Uncle Ike went on and told the Lord that his race was not there, but he wanted to be judged..." God told him to wait because He did not judge by individuals. Again, the Black was late for two hours, making God angry and sending them all to hell. When Ike heard the judgment, he reminded God that he had been there on time, even before anybody had been judged. God said that He would have to give Ike some consideration. However, He wondered what to do with Ike when all the rest of the Negroes would be gone to hell. Then all the Negroes began to holler and shout to let Ike come with them. They did not want Ike to act like the White.

God told them that Ike was on time and so He felt that He must fix him someplace in heaven; but the colored folks set up such a racket that they woke up saints that had been sleep for thousands of years—way back in the back rooms of heaven, and they came out to see what was the trouble. God couldn't stand all that racket so He told them all to go on to hell where He had assigned them, but they didn't want to leave Ike up there. God sent a band of angels to shoo them on out, but some of the last ones grabbed Ike and dragged him on with them. So you see, even on judgment day Negroes won't let one another get anywhere. We are too much like crabs. —LOUISE NOBLE. (p 32-33).

Uncle Ike represented the Black punctual person. So far, it did not help him to go to heaven, the supernatural place where deities, angels, saints, and souls are said to originate. The laziness and ignorance of the Black are said to make them go to hell instead of going back to heaven. However, prompt, mainly Black like Uncle Ike, had to go to hell too. It can be said that being diligent Black is useless if you are Black. The Black has made God angry.

The data from the *Preacher Tales* below showed how the Black is described as thoughtless though religious. It can be seen from the following example.

The preacher was up preaching and he said: “Every tongue got to confess; everybody got to stand in judgment for thysel; every tub got to stand on its own bottom.” One little tee-ninchy \* woman in the amen corner said: “Lordy, make my bottom wider.”—REBECCA CORBETT. (p 44)

It is where the title of the book was taken *Every Tongue Got To Confess*. The quotation, “Every tub must sit on its own bottom,” seems obvious. A tub cannot very well sit on another tub’s bottom. The meaning, of course, is that people have to be responsible for themselves. There are certain matters about which we must be independent. There are some things that no one else can do for us. We must take care of our own matters. We must sit on our own bottom. However, the one little *tee-ninchy* responded by praying to be given wider bottom. *Tee-ninchy* or *tee-pinchy*, or in Mexican slang, *Pinche* is mostly used to describe someone miserable, worthless, or lousy. They also use it as a noun to describe someone who is being an “asshole.” Since the tee-ninchy wanted a wider bottom, it means the person is a woman. A Black woman is usually described with a comprehensive big bottom. It also means that the *tee-ninchy* was unwilling to think about what the preacher referred the bottom to. She just interpreted it verbatim.

Another description of Black can be seen in the tale about two church deacons, one Methodist and one Baptist. They went out sailing one night in a little boat, and in the late watches of the night, the water began to get rough and stormy, the tides began to rise, and the boat began to wheel and rock to catch water. The Methodist deacon told the Baptist deacon to get busy and dip the water out of the boat with a bucket. The Baptist deacon decided that dipping the water out with a bucket was not getting much results. So the Baptist deacon decided they better pray and said that they better say their prayers. The Methodist deacon said, “No, them little God damn Our Fathers prayers ain’t going to do us any good, dip water.” —CARRIE MCCRAY. (p 44)

The data above was about Christian faiths, i.e., Methodists and Baptists. They have many similarities but, in many ways, also have different views and doctrines. Methodists and Baptists believe in God, the Bible, and the works and teaching of Jesus, whom they accept as Christ, the savior of humanity. In essence, they both believe in baptism and communion as fundamental sacraments, but it is also where their differences lie. Methodists allow the baptism of infants, youth, and adults. They are not discriminating about individuals’ age and mental maturity. They also allow different forms of baptism as



they perform them with immersion, sprinkling, and pouring. For Methodists, communion is welcome to all.

On the other hand, Baptists perform baptism only to confessing youth and adults. Baptism of infants is not practiced since they believe that it should only be administered to individuals who are capable of understanding the true meaning of the rite and also capable of understanding faith. Baptists also perform baptism strictly by immersion. They practice closed communion, where the table is only open for baptized church members. Baptists maintain the doctrine of the 'perseverance of saints' where an expression of 'once saved, always saved' prevails. Baptists teach that once one is saved, that person cannot fall from grace, which completely conflicts with Methodist views. Methodists believe it is the person's choice to be saved, and one can fall from grace by not following God, therefore, losing salvation.

Based on observation, Baptists tend to be stricter and essentially fundamentalists. Their sole basis for faith is the Bible, which they consider infallible. Methodists are looser and broader in their beliefs. Some can be fundamentalists, while some are liberals. They consider their faith based on the Bible, reason, tradition, and personal experience. Methodists believe it is the person's choosing to be saved, while Baptists maintain that once a person is saved, they are always saved and cannot fall from grace.

The quotation showed that the Black were fundamentally religious and practiced what they believed. They can join any denomination as long as it relates them to God. It can be said that the Black practiced spirituals.

## CONCLUSION

The discussion above exposed that the Black use their own English dialects to construct their cultural identity. Only those who share the ethnicity would understand each other. Besides the language, the folktales in *Every Tongue Got to Confess* presented how the Black connect their condition with God's decision. Their skin and their fate of being discriminated against by other supremacy is believed to be their destiny. Even when they try to eliminate the negative stigma about themselves, like in the tale of Uncle Ike in *The Judgment Day*, the result is still the same. As members of the Black race, they only deserve to go to hell, which is equal to suffering.



## REFERENCES

- Alexander, K. J. (2012). Vivacity: Discovering Zora Through Her Words. *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/2092>
- Brooks, K. D., McGee, A., & Schoellman, S. (2016). *SPECULATIVE SANKOFARRATION: Haunting Black Women in Contemporary Horror Fiction on JSTOR*. Obsidian. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44489515>
- Byrne, C. (2016). Every Tongue Silenced So One Voice Resounds: Redefining Zora Neale Hurston's Legacy in Adapted Picture Books. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 41(4), 365–383. <https://doi.org/10.1353/CHQ.2016.0044>
- Frank, A. P., & Maas, C.-M. (2005). *Transnational Longfellow*. Lang.
- Hall, S. (2003). *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*. <https://lib.ui.ac.id>
- Kennedy, J. F. (2008). *A Nation of Immigrants*. Harper Perennial. <https://www.amazon.com/Nation-Immigrants-John-F-Kennedy/dp/0061447544>
- Lopez, M. H., & Moslimani, M. (2023). *Key facts about Black Americans | Pew Research Center*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/02/10/key-facts-about-black-americans/>
- Said, E. W. (1979). *ORIENTALISM* (1st ed.). Vintage Books. <https://archive.org/details/orientalism0000said>