

## Historical Context: African-American Oral Tradition

Through her years of extensive research as an anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston was able to gather and assimilate information and then write with first-hand knowledge her provocative stories of African-American history and culture. Hurston recognized the value of folklore, religion, and music to the African-American culture, and sought to interweave its richness and history within her novels, short stories, plays, and collections.

One of the most important aspects of the African-American cultures is the oral tradition. Simply put, **oral tradition** is the verbal communication of stories of history, family values, and morals, passed on from generation to generation.

**Folktales** are a part of this oral tradition, and exist in many cultures around the world. Folktales are carried from one place to another as groups of people migrate, and can change and adapt to new situations and settings as these groups of people adapt to their new surroundings and challenges. An oral tradition develops in a culture because often, it is easier to recall information in short phrases, rhythm, and repetition. Folktales act as a common thread within a community, bringing the society closer and providing a common history. Fairy tales, religious tales, and ballads are all types of folktales.

Many African-American folktales traveled from Africa as slaves were brought to America. Since white slaveholders did not understand nor allow the practice of African traditions and customs, slaves were forced to find new forms of expression. Slaves were forced to speak English and were not allowed to learn to read or write. Thus, in order to express themselves, slaves began to tell stories using pantomime, gestures, music, and song.

Early African-American folktales provided a way of broadening a sense of community and unity, as well as an escape from the burdens of slavery and oppression. Stories included heroes, magic, witches, Biblical characters, and more, and were used as a platform for teaching lessons, cultural values, and the importance of family togetherness. The stories “Doc Rabbit, Bruh Fox, and Tar Baby” and “Brer Rabbit and the Briar Patch” are two of the most famous African-American folktales.

Eventually, a new expressionism began to form, as slaves began to tell their stories in song. The **spiritual**, or slave song was created, and remains one of the most important and significant aspects of the African-American culture and history today. Since slaves were not allowed to speak any language other than English, nor were they allowed to read or write, slaves often communicated with each other through song. Songs were used to educate, enlighten, and reflect upon the past, present, and future hopes of the slaves. Once thought by historians to be frivolous and cheerful songs to pass a day’s work, slave spirituals have proven to be significantly more meaningful and deliberate.

Slaves would sing songs expressing love, hope and freedom, and they would sing songs of sorrow, loss, and of their exile from the homeland. Slaves would also use songs to communicate information, such as plans for gatherings, meetings, or escape, or to ask God for freedom. Frederick Douglass, a runaway slave and abolitionist, said such songs “reveal at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.”

Even in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, music and song, from jazz to reggae to rap are seen as an extension of the African-American oral tradition.

*Directions: Answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper using complete sentences.*

1. Why were slaves forced to find new forms of expression?
2. What misconceptions did early historians have about spirituals and slave songs?
3. About what did slaves sing?
4. Why did slaves sing?
5. Many scholars believe that modern-day rap is an extension of the oral tradition of the African-American culture. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? Do raps contain the same characteristics of slave songs or folktales? If so, which ones? Does modern rap serve the same purpose as slave songs or spirituals? Explain.