

# The Representation of African Cultural Identity in *Black Panther* Film by Ryan Coogler (The Application of Stuart Hall's Theory)

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## **Abstract**

This study focuses on the analysis of The Representation of African Cultural Identity in *Black Panther*. This study aims to reveal the portrayal of African cultural identity in real life. In analyzing the data the writer used both library and media research related to this study, the writer applied a qualitative descriptive study as the method of this study. The source of data in this study *Black Panther* movie which is directed by Ryan Coogler and it was released in 2018. The data were collected through a process of watching, pausing and interpreting then the writer analyzed those data by using theory of Representation by Stuart Hall through constructionist approach. *Black Panther* movie became a medium to change the audience's perspective about Africa. This movie shows the depiction of various kinds of cultural identity in Africa that can open the audience's thoughts about Africa. The results of this study indicate that the *Black Panther* movie has become a medium to provide a better perspective through the description of several elements related to African identity: representation of African civilization through a symbol of vibranium, cultural ritual, traditional costume, African images through the character those elements are used by Ryan Coogler as director to develop a different perspective of Africa.

**Keywords:** *black panther, cultural Identity, identity, representation, vibranium*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Film becomes different from other forms of audio-visual media because it is able to form its own identity; film is the most effective and most popular media in cultural learning by the public. Through film, we actually learn a lot about culture because the director represents the culture through a film. We know the culture of society through film as it is a media of cultural representation. It is used as a reflection to see how culture works or lives in society. Chris Barker said in his book entitled *Culture Studies* 2004, that representation is the main study in cultural studies. According to Stuart Hall (1997: 13), Representation is one of the important practices that produce cultural identity. In the case of film as a cultural representation, there is a kind of process of exchanging cultural codes

in the act of watching films as cultural representations. One of the films in which there is a depiction of the situation of indigenous people and cultural identity in Africa. Those are made from the reality of cultural identity, the film is *Black Panther* directed by Ryan Coogler. The reason why the writer examines the depiction of African Cultural Identity in the *Black Panther* film by Ryan Coogler because so far the groups considered "different" in America were black people, even various symbols and signs were given by white Americans to them, including negroes, black Africans, slaves, films about black people in the media are getting worse, so that *Black Panther* film by Ryan Coogler was released to construct a other image for Africa, every phenomenon and signs in the *Black Panther* became a depiction of genuine cultural identity of African. This study aims to reveal the portrayal of African cultural identity in real life. Through the film, the author examines the constructs of African Cultural Identities, such as the culture, traditions and African represented in the film Black Panther. Therefore, the title of this study is formulated as follows: *Representation of African Cultural Identity in the film Black Panther by Ryan Coogler*.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study used a descriptive qualitative method. According to Nazir (1988). The purpose of this descriptive study is to make a systematic, factual and accurate description of the facts, properties and relationships between the phenomena investigated. This descriptive qualitative research refers to the process of data collection, data analysis, interpretation of data, and finally a conclusion is formulated that refers to the analysis of the data. Qualitative research also focuses on understanding social phenomena that occur in society. In this research method, the writer uses the perspective of the participant as the preferred image in obtaining the results of the study. Based on the description of qualitative methods, the writer used that method to find and analyze social issues in this research because the writer wants to describe how African Cultural Identity is represented in the *Black Panther* film.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

*Black Panther* movie comes as a proof aimed at the public with a different concept from the depiction that has been consumed by the public. *Black Panther* is also full of cultural elements and moral messages. Not only does it leave the impression for the audience of the cultural identity represented in this *Black Panther* movie that cannot be underestimated. Cultural identity is dependent on how someone makes cultural identity as a position and not the essence, so that people can be "anyone" wherever they are. Stuart Hall explained about cultural identity whose identification problem was not permanent. Hall asserted that identity is not something rigid with fixed characteristics that do not change from time to time. Identity is something that is constantly formed in the framework of history and culture, something that is positioned at a place and time, according to context, looking for a person's identity is always related to the problem of how that person tries to place himself (positioning) in a sphere of society that has placed himself in another sphere (being positioned). (Hall, 1993: 231), but it is encouraged to continue what the director wants to convey and build, the new meaning is produced in *Black Panther* movie, it is very relevant to the cultural situation and life of Africa and it contains elements of revolutionary that raised the issue of social justice and all bad perspective of African. It is related to Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language (Hall, 1997). In the end, Ryan Coogler was able to present an MCU movie that was able to open up different perspectives through several representations depicted in the *Black Panther* movie scenes

### **Representation of African Civilization**

Basically African civilization had advanced before European colonization. In the Middle Ages, West Africa was a prosperous and developed region in contrast to current conditions. Islam began to be accepted by the Dyaogo dynasty of the Tekur Kingdom in early 850 AD, the first Tekur ruler who became a Muslim of the king War-Jabi began to

implement Islamic law. The royal law was amended in accordance with the Shari'a then Islam had such a profound impact on the inhabitants of the country. According to Rahman I Doi in *Spread Islam in West Africa* (2012), in the era of Islamic glory, Tekur Kingdom was a safe, peaceful and calm area. Tekur is the capital of the kingdom being the center of trade and government. Unfortunately most of the movies with a background in Africa always depict Africa as an arid plain full of wild animals so that this leads to the opinion of the audience and thinks that Africa is an outdated country like primitive tribal life until it lags behind in technology. But in reality, Africa is full of beautiful places. The cities there are growing rapidly, abundant natural resources and development running properly like other countries. Through a representation analysis of African civilization in the *Black Panther* can provide an overview of the development of Africa



Picture 1. Vibranium in Wakanda

Vibranium is a type of metal from various original metals which cannot be destroyed. Marvel's fictional metal is said to have come from a large meteor containing a rare mineral, Vibranium is only a fictional essay from the author, it does not exist on Earth. But we cannot interpret the meaning of the vibranium symbol directly; the appearance of the strongest substance in Wakanda by Ryan Coogler wants to represent the abundant natural wealth in Africa. Actually Africa is a very rich continent. They have abundant natural resources. Africa is a region producing some of the largest minerals in the world. According to the U. S. Geological Survey, 2004. About 190,000 tons of gold have been discovered in deposits around the world throughout history. Total remaining world gold resources are currently estimated to be about 100,000 tons. Wakanda is a fictitious city that is created for the setting of the movie *Black Panther*. Wakanda is depicted with views

of the mountains and surrounded by beautiful cliffs. It turned out that a picture of the beauty of Wakanda can be found in the real world, precisely in The Great Rift Valley in Africa, a view that almost resembles Wakanda.



Picture 2. The Great Rift Valley in Africa  
(Courtesy from steemit.com)



Picture 3. Wakanda in *Black Panther*  
(00:12:28)

One example of the development that occurred in Africa is Leonard, the building which became the financial center in Johannesburg was lined up to be the highest building in South Africa. A country that has tall buildings and all the ongoing economic activities in it is proof that the country is developing, and Africa has proven it with this building. Through *Black Panther*, Wakanda visually represents the existence of Africa with towering buildings as if to show that Wakanda as an African representation also has a symbol of development.



Picture 4. Leonardo, the Highest Building in Sandton, South Africa  
(Courtesy from cnn.com )

Symbol is a system of signs. The production of meaning depends on language: 'language is a system of signs.' sounds, images, written word, painting, photographs, etc. function as signs within language 'only when they serve to express or communicate ideas, this

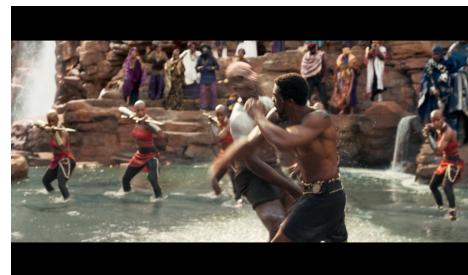
general approach to the study of signs in culture, and of culture as a sort of 'language', is now generally known by the term *semiotics* (Hall 1997: 31).

### **Representation of African Cultural Ritual**

Every country in the world has a traditional ritual as well as Africa. *Black Panther* 'movie from Marvel Universe Cinematic represents the existence of tribes in Africa. The movie is set in Wakanda, a place of fiction in Africa that contains many cultural elements such as rituals performed by several tribes in Wakanda inspired by authentic African culture, so that African culture is very well introduced through this movie, African rituals are full of meaning that builds the new images of Africa. Even some things that seem strange and seem like making it up but actually contain very deep meaning.



Picture 5. Donga Stick Ritual in Suri tribe  
(Courtesy from flickriver.com)



Picture 6. The fight between T'Challa and M'baku from the Jabari tribe created the Wakanda kingdom  
(00:26:00)

The scene when T'Challa Wakanda fought with M'baku from the Jabari tribe to win the throne to become king. This fight is true in Africa, carried out by the Suri Tribe. They fight one on one using sticks. This fight is called Donga, where two men fight using sticks without clothes, fighting until one of them surrenders, even to death.. The rules in the game do not allow opponents to fall after falling on the ground. Through this donga ritual signifies the nature of courage and pride possessed by the in Africa, the courage shown in surrendering themselves in a fight that will even end in death, through this donga ritual we can see the courage that every man in the Suri tribe has and this ritual is also a medium to show the pride of a man that he can win the fight.



Picture 7. Woman in Mursi tribe use Lip Plate  
(Courtesy of Gusjer on Flickr.com)



Picture 8. The Lip-plate of The River Tribe (00:22:27)

One of the five tribes led by the *Black Panther*, the leader has a round disk on his lips. In the real world, the tribe that has a tradition of opening lips and then filling the hole with a round disk is the Mursi Tribe. The tradition in Africa is called a lip plate for Mursi women who have entered puberty. The level of beauty of women in the mursi tribe is determined by how big their lips are. If the Musri tribe the lip plate or *dhebi tugoin* becomes the standard of beauty applied by the people in the mursi tribe, it is different from The River Tribe in the *Black Panther* movie, Ryan Coogler uses a male figure in describing the identity of the mursi tribe through the use of lip plates by tribal leaders river, because Ryan Coogler does not want to show the perspective that there is a standard of beauty that must be applied as in the Musri tribe but he illustrates through the portrayal of men who use the lip plate more as a standard of maturity that is owned by river tribal leaders, where this trait is very needed as a good leader for the people in the river tribe.



Picture 9. T'Challa drinks the Heart-Shaped Herb (00:29:07)

In the past, when the five tribes in Wakanda were at war, Basenga, the ancestor of T'Challa, ate the inside of this flower and gave him a vision of the Panther Gods. After drinking the extract from this flower T'challa will be given the power of the Black Panther and enter the ancestral realm, through this scene giving meaning that their rituals will be subject to obedience to their ancestors who have fought for Wakanda first, this is very related to previous African life, at the time of the triumph of Islam in Africa, the people there were disobedient to their creator (God), they were very religious, and also obedient to the Shari'ah in accordance with the teachings of Islam that African have learned before colonialism.

### **Representation of African Traditional Costume**

*Black Panther* movies become historical evidence in the existence of black culture in Hollywood through things that attract the attention of the audience, such as costumes and accessories used by players who have their own charm. To bring the feel of Africa, Ruth Carter as a costume designer in *Black Panther* movies does research about some ancient African costumes ranging from patterns, colors and fashion to display African aesthetics or philosophy through traditional costumes used by several characters in the movie. Some African traditional costumes are used by the characters in *Black Panther* movie .



Picture 10. Traditional Hat Queen Ramonda  
00:13:48

Queen Ramonda, mother of King T'Challa wears a distinctive white royal attire and turns out to be a tall and wide hat at the top. T'Challa's mother looked elegant with a big hat on her head. This hat is called isicolo and is usually used by the Zulu tribe. Isicolo is made

from grass and woven cotton. The size and color varies, depending on the policy of the people. Isicolo is usually worn by married women. Zulu women in Africa are known for their courage and elegance. According to Stuart Hall Stuart Hall (1997:21), the meaning is not in the thing itself, nor is it in the word. We fix the meaning so firmly that it later becomes natural and inevitable. Meaning is fixed by the code, which sets up the correlation between our conceptual system and our language system. Isiolo is the code that is used by Ramonda. This is to be demonstrated through the graceful character of Ramonda mother from T'Challa in the *Black Panther* with her nature and nature that African women are beautiful and elegant using their cultural identity.



Picture 11. Neck rings used by Dora Milaje  
00:14:28

The necklace worn by Dora Milaje, the troops of T'Challa's king, was in the form of rings and heaps. This accessory is one of the cultural identities used by women in the Ndebele tribe. After marriage, the woman in the Ndebele tribe will be given a neck ring by her husband so that this object shows the status of wealth or social status. In *Black Panther* movie the woman who used the neck rings was Dora Milaje, an army from the king of T'Challa, in general the troops did not belong to the group that had high social status as the neck rings were used as a measure of wealth by women in the Ndebele tribe. Ryan Coogler would like to say that cultural identity is not used only as a standard or a measure of social status, but how the cultural identity of the Ndebele tribe that has the ability of creativity can be used by anyone as something beautiful to use.



Picture 12. T'Challa's Traditional Costume  
00:37:50

Traditional costume worn by King T'challa became a conversation because it was considered similar to the "koko" clothes (clothes worn by Muslim men), the costume was actually inspired by the African traditional dress called Agbada. Agbada is a men's costume commonly worn by the people of Nigeria in West Africa. Islamic element that feels strong in this outfit. In Nigeria at that time, in the 18th century, the arrival of immigrants who brought Islam. They also carried an Islamic tradition in the form of "robes of honor" in the form of embroidered dresses. Nowadays agbada which is popular in Nigeria is not the same as agbada in ancient times, but has experienced growth. All men can wear this costume; it does not need to be king or chief first anymore. Through this costume that is used by the king of Wakanda, T'Challa. Ryan Coogler wants to showcase their African identity in their glory era.

### **Representation of African images through the Character**

Actually, education has been carried out in Africa for a long time, since Islam was brought to West Africa by Muslim traders Berber and Tuareg. Not only limited to beliefs, Islam also forms a political, social and educational system. During the golden age of the Kingdom of Mali, mathematics, astronomy, literature, and art developed rapidly. Mali became independent as a Republican nation in 1960. Timbuktu is one of the cities in Mali, which was once a city of Islamic civilization. There is a famous university called Timbuktu University throughout the Islamic world. A variety of general sciences were taught, besides Islamic science, Arabic, and memorization of the Al-Quran. The media portrays that Africa has limited access to education and resources, thus creating a perspective to the public that

people in Africa are lacking in education and do not have the quality of human resources to be proud of, but in fact Africans are beginning to show that they are also educated to create innovation for the country.



Picture 13. The depiction of intelligent African woman, Zozibini Tunzi as the winner of Miss Universe 2019  
(Courtesy from solopos.com)



Picture 14. Sister of T'Challa, Shuri  
(00:23:53)

Shuri's character is the sister of king T'Challa in Wakanda as a young and intelligent woman is right to be a real picture of Zozibini Tunzi, Zozibini Tunzi is a Miss Universe contestant from South Africa who won in the grand final of Miss Universe 2019 which was held in Georgia, Atlanta, United States. Shuri is the daughter of King T'Chaka and Ramonda, the younger sister of T'Challa who is still 16 years old, she is a scientist and developer of the latest technology in Wakanda. Shuri's knowledge of technology has become efficient in helping her brother deal with threats that come across Wakanda. She is described as a woman who is Smart, meticulous and innovative in developing technology. Zozibini won a bachelor's degree in public relations and image management. That's the message of Zozibini Tunzi, a woman from South Africa who has just been became Miss Universe, Zozibini Tunzi's coronation as Miss Universe is proof of the intelligence and beauty possessed by African women who have been given negative labels, Tunzi in particular received a variety of compliments, with his black skin and short, natural hair. The character of Shuri in the movie *Black Panther* and Zozibini Tunzi completes a series of historical events that African women have tremendous potential. From these characters, the audience can construct their perspective about people in Africa just like Stuart Hall's

Theory , The Constructionist approach is a mixture of reflective and intentional. It is seen as a response to the weaknesses in those other two approaches, as some would argue that they are too simplistic, this approach suggests that the meaning of representation is constructed in the mind of the audience. (Hall 1997: 25-26)

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Theory of Representation by Stuart Hall through a constructionist approach used in this study , this approach is used to construct meaning through language. *Black Panther* movie is a medium used by director Ryan Coogler to build a positive perspective on Africa in society. There are so many elements that can represent African identity as well as Africa in the real life to build new perspective in *Black Panther* Movie which is Africa has always gotten a negative perspective in society through the representation of natural resources, the unique rituals and traditional costume in Africa that are packaged by the director and shown in *Black Panther* movie that is inspired by many tribes with their respective characteristics. All positive aspects of Africa are represented through *Black Panther* movies such as Natural Resources, the development of country through depictions of tall buildings in Wakanda, the traditional costume used by characters in the *Black Panther* movie inspired by various tribes in Africa, cultural ritual was performed to get the throne which was also performed by the Suri tribe but with the aim of capturing the pride of men in Africa. Through the movie *Black Panther*, Ryan Coogler as director of *Black Panther* movie wants to build a better perspective of people about Africa.

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