

“Black Panther” movie and the problem of the black radical

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The movie’s narrative dictates the terms of black people’s responses to systematic violence. It does this by critically examining the imagery and story around ancestral connections. The movie is used to craft a modern colonial imagination of Africa’s future.

This past weekend I went to watch *Black Panther* with my family. I need to begin by noting that the amount of money I spent on one single evening for a movie which included purchasing the tickets, one large popcorn because my brother did not want them and three sodas including the 3D glasses cost me R421 (about US \$ 36) which is R20 short of being the total amount of money that South Africans living in extreme poverty utilise a month. According to Statistics South Africa, in 2015, 13.8 million South Africans lived on R441 per month while the whole of Africa (excluding the north) is home to the second largest hungry people in the world (see World Hunger Facts).

The numerous advertisements that screened in between the trailers of other upcoming movies for over 30 minutes before the movie began was a great reminder of how my time is used to pay for the new cinema that Vaal Mall (a large shopping centre in Vanderbijlpark, Gauteng, South Africa) recently built. There is a bombardment of advertisements meant to satisfy our commodity fetish. But the *Black Panther* movie is a different “cinefetish”. It is true that the monetary dividends of the movie will not be benefiting the black community globally. It is also not far from the truth that the movie responded to the gap in the “woke [1]” community and capitalised on that growing consciousness among black people through the commodification of that consciousness.

Although it is true that out of the hundreds of millions that were made in one week by Marvel, for instance according to Consumer News and Business Channel, and the international market (minus Africa) spending US \$304 million on the movie and the opening night in South Africa raising R16. 8 million (over US \$1.4 million), the black community will not materially benefit. On the other hand, what we cannot measure monetarily, but with long-term by-product benefits, is the role of the *Black Panther* movie in the struggle against the inferiority complex that many of black people globally experience. Representation cannot be downplayed but it is important to be critical in our perception and analysis of representation. On a different note, to a certain extent the movie seemed like a prophetic endeavour to ready Africa for its future position as a leading continent in the rebirth of the world. Then there is the remarkable relationship between traditions, technological advancement, Afro-modernity and spirituality in the movie signalling emerging themes in the African renaissance.

The political economy of the African renaissance should be subject to debate especially if our measurement of growth is still devoid on the human face as is the economic integration of Africa and the Cape-to-Cairo vision coming to fruition for commodities. Another taken for granted aspect of the African renaissance, which Tebogo Bantu brought to my attention, is the proliferation of Africans who are getting in touch with their spiritual roots. The initiation of the South African middle class into ancestral healing, which comes in different forms, for our wounding as Africans in the globe is an aspect that we cannot overlook in the quest for rebuilding the lives of Africans globally. The

responsibility of healing and signification of ancestral connections means that with the understanding of how ancestors work, especially the acknowledgement that one's positive deeds committed in the world while alive is their ticket to the world of ancestors, would inspire those with a closer connection to the healing mission of the ancestors to work harder at aligning their service to humanity through the restoration of the brutalised and broken black body collective (at the physical (sic-material poverty) and ontological including consciousness levels).

African spirituality marks African identity in ways that calls us to diversify our understanding of knowledge and ways of knowing including being and ways of being coupled with choices made by people on a daily basis. It also serves the function of an icon that influences actions. Spirituality, as does religion, wields power over individual action and to some extent collective behaviour and choice. Consider for instance the role that prophetess Noncwawuse of the Xhosa people in South Africa played in the resistance against colonialism. She played a directive role in the fight against the encroachment of white imposition in South Africa to a point of rendering the natives a kind of breed that colonialists such as George Grey detested.

This was partly because their military organisation made their subjugation and colonisation process difficult. Another example of the role of African healers in the political resistance project by native Africans is Nehanda of Zimbabwe who was publicly lynched by the Rhodesian government. She too was a powerful force that the colonial administrators found menacing. Ani Marimba defines spirituality as the "apprehension of cosmic interrelationship.

The apprehension of meaning in existence, and the degree to which one is motivated by such meaning. Spirituality... unites thought and feelings and thereby allows for intuitive understanding. This cognitive/affective sense is transmitted through collective ancestral relationship" [2]. Drawing from this conceptualisation of spirituality, the question about purpose influences action and responses to the meaning of our existence shaping thought and action.

The *Black Panther* movie is endowed with scenes that evoke the ancestral realm, from the use of the affirmation *Camaqu*, to the scenes where T'Chala (Chadwick Boseman) and Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan) are ported to the world of the living dead. One senses that the movie has the potential to subconsciously configure this meaning of existence by structuring criteria for entry into the ancestral realm as witnessed in the movie. Entry into the realm functioned as a signifier of identity and deeds and the movie as a mythological project with probable affective influence on collective consciousness for cinematography, as is text, is a process of constructing and reconstructing the world. Ideas proliferated about spirituality cannot be taken for granted especially when public thought is involved.

To indicate the influence of spirituality on the collective, it is worth sharing Ali Mazrui's argument that some traditionalist societies allowed themselves to be "governed by ancestors and their wishes." [3] Mazrui explained that traditionalist societies have "an imbalance in favour of an orientation towards the past, and a deep responsiveness to the dictates of the past.... At a more elaborate [analysis], they evoke an ideology of mystical conservatism to legitimate institutions" [4]. *Black Panther*, on the other hand, helps us politically imagine a society that strikes a balance between tradition and modernisation. Mazrui conceptualises modernisation as an "expanding consciousness of the future, and a readiness to plan one's behaviour with reference to those expectations." [5]

In the movie, Winston Duke's character (the leader of the Jabari) embodies the kind of African that seeks to be retained in the past, this is done to create an antagonistic figure that challenges futurity in the form of technological progress, the kind of progress that is exclusionary I might add. I say it is exclusionary because that technology does not aid in evenly developing Wakanda. It is not

represented in a way that gives a sense of the bridging of the divide between urban and rural inequalities. This is the danger of the mythological political project of the movie; the re-imagination does break with economics of uneven development. Surely another person may argue that it was part of the front (to veil Wakanda from global awareness).

The challenge, however, is that if we are to politically imagine our reality and the movie being a myth making political project, then the movie could have drawn from African values and African centred economics exemplified by communalism than buttressing the idea of a self-serving middle and upper class Africa which marginalises and excludes and sustains the class struggle in Africa. While on the subject of development economics of Wakanda, Africa's future is mythologically configured as a version of a smart city disregarding the rurality of the continent thus evoking this linear notion of development centred on urbanisation. Of course *Black Panther* is just a movie but the fact that it has been embraced and widely celebrated by black people globally, it does have the potential of a being a mythical icon that Marimba Ani argues has consequences for collective political action, for instance the myth of the superiority of whiteness informed the racist civilising crusade and colonisation of "othered people" by Europeans.

What I also found imminent, as a disturbing theme is variation of blackness, which is patriarchal by the way. The movie presents multiple variants of blackness, which is a good thing in the sense that it presents blackness as heterogeneous. The problem I have is the biased value judgement of the kind of black that should/is acceptable by using the concept of ancestors and death as a determinant of those included/acceptable (T'Chaka/John Kani) and those excluded/unacceptable (N'Jobu/Sterling K. Brown) and the tolerable but backward blacks judged with a Eurocentric lenses (The Jabari).

How this is done is through the representation of the ancestral world as a space of arrival and N'Jobu, who sought to help black people in the diaspora militantly fight for freedom through the assistance of African resources, his actions were punishable despite the nobility of his course. The consequence of not just selling weapons to the enemy but being a Malcolm X type of militant radical is the ultimate post-humus exclusion, being stuck in limbo, banished from the ancestral world as if their course was anti-African and anti-black. According to the movie's narrative, these heroes never made it into the ancestral realm in the world hereafter despite their service to the black community and its emancipation.

The movie symbolically creates a myth of rejection and denial of belonging of black people who choose to reciprocate violence while seeking change and justice for the black nation. What the movie essentially suggests is that Frantz Fanon did not make it into the abode of the ancestors and even if he did not, being a revolutionary black in the hereafter is certainly worth aspiring to and perhaps in radical terms, the vast lands of ancestors occupied by assimilationists is not such an ideal place to aspire to be. The denial of entry and being stuck in the projects/ghetto can be seen as being post-humously tied to black identity and the realities of the lived experiences of black people all over the world so as to function as a guide to black people seeking justice in this Eurocentric racist and patriarchal world. One could argue that the scene captures the representation of the ancestral realm as a space of freedom. On the other side, those stuck outside the realm continue to be subjects of systematic racism as symbolised by the small box projects that Erik (Michael B. Jordan) and his father N'Jobu (Sterling K. Brown) were "locked" at.

Becoming an ancestor is post-humus existential state of freedom as such emancipates one from the constructs of this world, the constructs that oppress black bodies and subjects the same bodies to continuous psycho-material bondage. It can be claimed as the only avenue that black people can claim ownership of, whether the abode is "real" or mythical, in this modern colonial world. In this case, death becomes the escape from an imposed systematically induced death of blackened bodies of the breathing living dead. On the notion of ancestral abode and what *Black Panther* has

significantly achieved symbolically is the relationship between freedom and the land. This is done through the cinematic imagery of ancestral arrival and vast land thus our own arrival as a people is predicated on our ownership of land but then this would be the first phase of our arrival. What we do with the land will determine our freedom and a new world that, despite the flaws in mythical Wakanda, *Black Panther* movie helps us imagine.

Moving back to the concept of unacceptable blacks, the demonisation of Erik, evident with him being named Killmonger, is also reminiscent of how black revolutionaries are portrayed. It is also interesting that T'Chala does not have a surname, which some have noted as colonial constructs, and Erik has suggesting that he is a product of colonial violence and attack on African hood. However, T'Chala's lack of a surname deceitfully creates the notion of a resurrected African identity or maybe even an authentic pre-colonial African. This in itself is problematic especially around the construction of what an African is. And it creates the illusion of T'Chalas of this world being free from the product of post-colonial white-led identity construction violence. The violence that seeks to erase the past and its structural continuities in shaping black people's struggles. It is the same with the violence of the South African rainbow.

The violence of "colonialism ended, apartheid ended, move on" or we cultivate an equal opportunity society. Of course we all want to move on, but we cannot without acknowledging and addressing the survival of racist institutions and structures that continue to privilege the minority and reproduction of underdevelopment and socio-economic inequalities. The ill representation of Erik reminds us of the colonial representation of Shaka Zulu whose effort to unite Africans in preparation for resisting colonial invasion has been distorted in Eurocentric history as a blood thirsty maniac. Shalo Mbatha's new book "Uzulu" succeeds in retelling the story of Shaka Zulu's foreign relations with other African tribes/nations.

Kwame Nkrumah did not escape this demonisation and so many other black people who sought systematic change and justice. Moreover, Erik's death represented the symbolic murder of black radical politics in a neoliberal world. The construct of the moderate black is upheld while the death of the black radical is symbolic of dictating what kind of political and economic route we should follow as blacks. This means, we have no room for Thomas Sankara's economics of development or Ama Mazama's blue print for the freedom of black people in contemporary times.

The movie, *Black Panther*, is contributing to moulding our sense of the African that is acceptable in the global project of white supremacy. This acceptable black/African rescues a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agent, which would be embedded in the symbolic foundation of Wakanda's incorporation into the world. It is symbolic of the rescuing of the economic warfare waged through economic policies of the west that caused havoc and to some extent are incompatible with African values. The CIA operative's presence represents the white discourse of the irreplaceable white in the quest for self-determination by black people. This white man's presence signals that nothing can be done without the West, it captures the dependency of Africans that contradicts the words in general Murtala Muhammad's speech delivered at the extraordinary summit conference of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) held in Addis Ababa on 11 January 1976. He articulated that "Africa has come of age, it is no longer under the orbit of any extra continental power... The fortunes of Africa are in our hands to make or mar. For too long have we been kicked around; for too long have we been treated like adolescents who cannot discern their interests and act accordingly. For too long has it been presumed that the African needs outside "experts" to tell him who are his friends and who are his enemies."

This movie, is doing exactly that, telling us who the black enemy is whereas the enemy that is responsible for having destabilised countries and taken human lives, is embraced. The operation of the aircraft by the CIA agent while securely located in a building with access to the technological

operatives of Wakanda also signifies the behind-the-scenes control of non-Africans as notable with the media and economic policies.

It also symbolically cements the US' role and hegemonic influence over resource rich countries. Perhaps it is also a cautious reminder that our entry points and weakness is instability hence the importance of peace in the continent. The movie must also serve as a warning against celebration of the kind of African leader that fails to integrate with other African countries, fails to use its resources to work with its neighbours to build infrastructure that would develop the continent and help improve the lives of all Africans. It must serve to help us critically think about African leadership that is deeply baptised in a neoliberal ethic evident in Wakanda.

With that being said, I love *Black Panther* and I appreciate the replacement of commercialised white superheroes for my son. I acknowledge the psychological dividends of having a hero that looks like black people. The implications for this movie on the black psyche are immense. Consider the doll test experiment by Kenneth Clark and its implication for identity configuration. I may be watching the *Black Panther* movie again next week despite the flaws in it, but this time I will go to the cinema during the weekly half-price special at the request of a friend. Hopefully we will reflect on our privilege and the fact that many hungry Africans would have benefited from the millions spent on the movie by black people globally.

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P.S.

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<https://www.pambazuka.org/arts-books/black-panther-and-problem-black-radical>

Footnotes

[1] to be aware especially relating to racism and social injustice

[2] Ani, Marimba. *Yurugu: An African-centered critique of European cultural thought and behavior*. Africa World Press, 1994 pp xxvii

[3] Mazrui, Ali Al'Amin, and Hasu H. Patel, eds. *Africa, the Next Thirty Years*. Friedmann, 1974, pp. 1

[4] *ibid*

[5] *ibid*