To the Ancestral Plane: African Spiritism in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (Marvel Studios, 2018) and the Desensitization to Spiritualism in Hollywood

by

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To the conservative Christians, Black Panther's display of African spiritism is blatant and jarring against the backdrop of grassroot Black empowerment. Just like the vibranium interwoven into the soil and life force of Wakanda, the *Black Panther* movie is infused with rich Black power, authenticity, and inspiration, and this infuses the viewer. Coogler and Cole serve up food for the Black soul, and it can only be hoped that we can imbibe it in a way that powers and sustains us individually and as a people much like their innovative shrewdness sustains the Wakandans.

I was shocked to learn that the name "Wakanda" may not be African at all but rather Native American and it refers to god[1] or the worship of nature. This is symbolic of what we may expect as we peel back the layers of the film. Spiritism is rife in the plot through conjuring, embodying, crossing over, and rite of initiation.

As a dark skinned Guyanese woman and a child of the hapless Trans-Atlantic diaspora, I am proud of my rich Africanness. For instance, Danai Gurira's Okoye, General of the Dora Milaje, is meant, I suppose, as an ode to me, to activate dark skinned Black women like myself; and it was an honour that two of my fellow Afro-Guyanese had roles in the film, one of whom played the technological genius and smart-mouthed Shuri, sister and handler of King T'Challa, to critical acclaim.

Notwithstanding, I am also a devout Christian with traditional Christian values. This provides the lens through which I filter the world. *Black Panther* is no exception. I do not embrace spiritualism and I am painfully aware that the world is going into the direction of mainstreaming spiritualism. While many people claim that they are not religious, ironically, they practice spirituality religiously. An editor at Religious Link blog noted that "many Americans—especially young people—who shun traditional expressions of faith are attracted to religious messages and symbols, most often in popular culture...perhaps most overt in the superhero figures who are migrating from comic books to movies and television."[2]

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In the movie, spiritualism first appears in the flashback, when King T'Chaka appears in California to his unprepared brother N'Jobu who he confronts as a traitor. Two Dora Milaje officers appear in N'Jobu's apartment and once he confirms his identity, conjure the king with a synchronised tap of their spears. Conjuring powerful beings is a major part of Pan-African religious practice. It was a norm to invoke powerful forces for "the prediction of the future, the explanation of the unknown, and the control of nature, persons, and events… African priests and practitioners were specially trained and empowered to access the supernatural by engaging in ritual discourse with divinities and ancestors and by receiving revelation" according to Yvonne Chireau.[3] In her exploration of religious elements in nineteenth-century African American magic, Chireau recounted the story of one of the most "scholarly and noted" African American clergy who had become utterly discouraged after several failed attempts to attract new worshippers to his congregation. Unexpectedly one day, while praying in his study, a little conjurer came in and whispered to him that he needed a "hand," and that the conjurer could fix him something which would ensure his success. He accepted the "hand" which was a "small, homemade talisman" charm, and found to his surprise that his church was full the very next week and was overflowing every Sunday for the next four years.[4]

The second instance of spiritualism is at the ritual battle at the waterfalls for the rulership of Wakanda. "During the Warrior Falls scene, we see Nakia dancing and her father praising what might possibly be a water deity."[5] Moreover, it becomes apparent that T'Challa is actually possessed with the spirit of the Black Panther after he drinks the potion that Zuri administers which ritually strips him of his powers. We observe an exorcising or un-possessing of T'Challa. It then dawns on the viewer that unlike many other Marvel heroes whose powers are derived from biochemical origins, Black Panther's powers are intertwined with the spiritual. This is not quite new. The *Black Panther* comics have been around for almost 60 years, and it has been noted that religious thought have increasingly been pushed in comic books of late as traditional and modern religious practitioners alike have identified comics as a viable missionary tool[6]

For West African cultures "religion was…a way of life… [where people] were immersed in a spiritual universe; manifested both by the material realm of the senses… and by the realm of the unseen, inhabited by spirits, ancestors, and the dead."[7] However, overt spiritualism in comics was not popular. Though villains were allowed to be dark, sinister, and spiritual, they stood in stark contrast to the light of the capable, rational hero. In *Black Panther*, we find a second wave of 'coming out' for Marvel movies which will no doubt change the direction that comic heroes can take. *Dr. Strange* (Marvel Studios, 2016) was first. Whereas Hollywood stepped away from heavily spiritual heroes, they will now create more of them.

The final instance of spiritualism in *Black Panther* was the ritual burial. This 'going under' is highly symbolic of a baptism or initiation that we witness both T'Challa and Killmonger (N'Jadaka) undertake. A trance-like state is induced by a potion made from the heart-shaped herb and T'Challa is buried under the vibranium-enriched sands of the temple's underground.

He crosses over into the ancestral plane to connect with his dead father and receive his blessings. The ritual is traumatic and harrowing, and the kings always emerge from the sand in shock only to be coaxed to breathe to regain normalcy.

Hollywood does nothing by chance. Some may argue that one cannot have an intrinsically African hero without spiritualism as a necessary statement of his identity. While this was not meant to strip the authenticity and integrity of the Africanism of the film by isolating or vilifying its religion and culture, it is meant to be a critical acknowledgement of the overt display of spiritualism. In this sense, *Black Panther* is an initiation of the Black viewer into a new era of superheroes on Zuri's invitation "to the ancestral plane."

This reflection is meant to be provocative and invoke in us the willingness to stop and accept how jarring the spiritual aspects of the movie are. This is our "come to Jesus" moment. Among the questions we explore and must consider is "What is the meaning of this?" And once answered, "Why?" And like Chireau's hapless clergy, "Could Black Panther be Hollywood's biggest evangelistic tool yet, the 'hand' it takes to fill its pews?"

Notes

[1] Vincent Schilling, "Offensive or Not? 'Black Panther' Fictional Wakanda Translates as 'God' to Some Tribes," *Indian Country Today*, February 20, 2018, https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/culture/arts-entertainment/offensive-not-black-panther-fictional-wakanda-translates-god-tribes/

[2] N.A., "Superheroes and Spirituality: The Religion of the Comic Cook," *Religious Link*, December 3, 2013, http://www.religionlink.com/source-guides/superheroes-and-spirituality-the-religion-of-the-comic-book/

[3] Yvonne Patricia Chireau, "Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (1997): 227. https://works.swarthmore.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1037&context=fac-religion

[4] Ibid., 225.

[5] Kamara Horne. "Everything You Need to Know about the Tribes of Black Panther's Wakanda," *Syfy Wire,*. February 19, 2018, http://www.syfy.com/syfywire/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-tribes-of-Black-panthers-wakanda

[6] "Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels," Edited by David A. Lewis, and Christine Hoff Kraemer (eds.) A&C Black, 2010.

[7] Yvonne Patricia Chireau, "Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (1997): 227.
https://works.swarthmore.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1037&context=fac-religion

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