Black Panther and the Problem of
the Black Radical

by

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A short while ago 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 population in the world (see *World Hunger Facts*) [www.freedomfromhunger.org/world-hunger-facts].

The numerous advertisements that screened in between the trailers of other upcoming movies for over 30 minutes before the movie began were a great reminder of how my time is used to pay for the new cinema that Vaal Mall (a large shopping centre in Vanderbijilpark, 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" 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, the international market (minus Africa) spent US$304 million on the movie, and the opening night in South Africa raised R16.8 million (over US$1.4 million], the Black community will not materially benefit. On the other hand, what we cannot measure monetarily are the long-term by-product benefits of the role of the *Black Panther* movie in the struggle against the inferiority complex that many 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 prepare 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 notable 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 of the human face as is the economic integration of Africa and the Cape-to-Cairo vision coming to fruition for commodities and peoples subject to meeting economic criteria. Another taken for granted aspect of the African renaissance, which Tebogo Bantu brought to my attention, is the proliferation of African people 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 African people in the globe, is an aspect that we cannot overlook in the quest for rebuilding the lives of African people globally. The responsibility of healing and the signification of ancestral connections means that the understanding of how ancestors work, especially the belief that one's positive deeds committed in the world while alive is their ticket to the world of the 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 Noncqawuse 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 African people 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 apperception of meaning in existence, and the degree to which one is motivated by such meaning. [Thus,] Spirituality… unites thought and feelings and thereby allows for intuitive understanding. This cognitive/affective sense is transmitted through collective ancestral relationship."[1] Drawing from this conceptualisation of spirituality as being aware, especially relating to racism and social injustice, 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 South African Xhosa language affirmation, Camaqu, to the scenes where T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) and Erik Killmonger Stevens (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 through cinematography, similar to text, is a project and 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."[2] 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."[3] *Black Panther*, on the other hand, helps us to politically imagine a society that strikes a balance between tradition and modernisation. And Mazrui conceptualises modernisation as an "expanding consciousness of the future, and a readiness to plan one's behaviour with reference to those expectations."[4]

In the movie, Winston Duke's character (the leader of the Jabari) embodies the kind of African who seeks to be retained in the past as noted in the combat speech he uttered prior to his battle for the Wakanda throne. This appears to have been 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 more from African values and Africa-centred economics exemplified by communalism than buttressing the idea of a self-serving middle and upper class Africa which marginalises, excludes and sustains class struggle in Africa. While on the subject of the 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, by the fact that it has been embraced and widely celebrated by Black people globally, it does have the potential of it being a mythical icon that Marimba Ani argues has consequences for collective political action, for instance, the myth of the superiority of whiteness that informed the racist civilising crusade and colonisation of "othered people" by Europeans.

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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 person that should be/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, Black people judged with Eurocentric lenses (the Jabari).

How this is done is through the representation of the ancestral world as a space of arrival. N'Jobu, who sought to help Black people in the diaspora militantly fight for freedom through the assistance of African resources, was 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 posthumous exclusion, being stuck in limbo with his son Killmonger, 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 African nation. What the movie essentially suggests is that Frantz Fanon did not make it into the abode of the ancestors. I am guessing that even if he did not, being a revolutionary Black person 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 go. The denial of entry and being stuck in the projects/ghetto can also be seen as being posthumously tied to Black identity and the realities of the lived experiences of many 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 also argue that the scene captures the representation of the ancestral realm as a space of freedom. Those stuck outside the realm continue to be subjects of systematic racism as symbolised by the small box/project home that Erik (Michael B. Jordan) and his father N'Jobu were "locked" in for eternity.

Becoming an ancestor is a posthumous existential state of freedom and as such it emancipates one from the constructs of this world, the constructs that oppress black bodies and that subjects the same bodies to continuous psycho-material bondage. It can be argued as the only avenue that Black people can claim ownership of in this modern colonial world, whether the abode is "real" or mythical. 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 its 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, the *Black Panther* movie helps us imagine.

Moving back to the concept of unacceptable Black people, the demonization of Erik, evident with him being named Killmonger, is also reminiscent of how Black revolutionaries are portrayed. It is interesting that T'Challa does not have a surname, which some have noted as colonial constructs, and that Erik has one suggesting that he is a product of colonial violence and attack on African identity. However, T'Challa'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 is an African. And it creates the illusion of the T'Challas of this world being free from the consequence of post-colonial white-led identity construction violence. That violence 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 nation. The violence is present in phrases and slogans like "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 as well as the 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 African people 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 nations. Kwame Nkrumah did not escape this demonization and so too with 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 person is upheld while the death of the Black radical is symbolic of dictating what kind of political and economic route we should follow as Black people. 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 who would be embedded in the symbolic foundation of Wakanda's incorporation into the world. It is symbolic of the rescuing of economic warfare waged through economic policies of the West that caused havoc and to some extent are incompatible with African values. The CIA operative 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 and it captures a dependency of African people 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 it has 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, who 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 by non-African people as notable with the media and economic policies.

It also symbolically cements the US's 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 African people. 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 who 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 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 African people would have benefited materially from the millions spent on the movie by Black people globally.

Notes

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[1] Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994): xxvii.

[2] Ali Al'Amin Mazrui and Hasu H. Patel, eds. *Africa, the Next Thirty Years* (London: Julian Friedmann 1974). 1

[3] ibid.

[4] ibid.

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