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Ancestors Change Constantly: Subversive Religious Colonial Deconstruction in the Religion of Black Panther

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Abstract

This is one of a series of film reviews of *Black Panther* (2018), directed by Ryan Coogler.

Keywords

Black Panther, Marvel, Race, Superheroes



In the tapestry of the movie *Black Panther*, something very overt yet very subtle occurs. Wakanda, which is a meshing of ways of life from several parts of the continent now known as “Africa,” creates original Afro-syncretic sites of ingenuity, possibility, imagination, and resistance. One of the major instances of resistance is the way in which ancestral communion and African spirituality plays a huge role in the metaphysics of the movie. I would assert that African ancestral traditions in this film: 1) provide a bridge between the past and the present in such a way that the line between the two is obscured (if not erased); 2) are utilized to distribute regions of wisdom that serve as both means of rebuke for actions of the past and methods of ascribing agency for the future; and 3) deconstruct and circumvent the Christian influence that so many times seems inseparable from any cultural production even peripherally involving European colonization or its fortunate (and rare) absence. It is my contention that 1 and 2 also perform the function of 3. Therefore, I consider these elements as interdependent in my analysis of the movie.

1) As we know, many philosophies of life emerging from the region we now know as “Africa” are heavily rooted in this tradition of communing with the ancestors who have advanced beyond the physical world. In Wakanda, everyone who takes on the

mantle of king must travel on a journey from the physical world to the other side, where one engages in a conversation with their ancestors. In the case of T'Challa, this ancestor is his recently deceased father, T'Chaka. When T'Challa enters this non-empirical realm, it looks to be not entirely otherworldly, but in many ways another world very similar to ours. It seems as if the point were to portray the otherworld not as a mystical region, but as a space very similar to ours in which life continues. This sets up the playing field for communication between the two worlds as transcendent naturalism; this realm, while other than the physical world, is normal and not paranormal. In other words, this Yoruba-esque metaphysic in which the ancestors (*oku-orun*) participate in earthly affairs is not out of the ordinary (as in some Western understandings of ancestor spirituality), but *is* the ordinary.¹ This symbolism reminds those of us who are of African descent in a post-colonial diaspora of possible parts of our pre-Western Christian anthropologies. These moments reveal not a sacred/secular dichotomy, a thing that in many ways was the convention of Western Christian compartmentalization in the service of separating the spiritual from the social and demarcation of non-European “religious” others, but a mode of becoming in which the sacred ancestors are perpetually a part and parcel of the holistic functioning of the society.² Therefore, it is very interesting how *Black Panther* presents the spiritual as it relates to the passing of political authority, a deconstruction of many modern Western understandings of a separation of so-called “religion” and the public and political square.

2) In *Black Panther*, this fluidity between the beyond and the present physical world creates a critical bridge for those beyond to provide wisdom for those who have to make critical decisions in the empirical situation. This is what T'Challa gains from

T'Chaka when he passes over into afterlife during his inauguration as king. In response to T'Challa's apprehension concerning not only taking on the role of king of Wakanda but also carrying on in the earthly realm without his father, T'Chaka assures him of how equipped he is to do both. Process theologian Monica A. Coleman reminds us that a key characteristic of African and Afro-diasporic spirituality is this strand of "learning from the past," from the ancestors, who in some ways assume divine attributes.³

This communication between the past and the present also takes another direction. Instead of wisdom and rebuke being passed solely from the past to the present, it also passes from the present to the past. This is evidenced in T'Challa's second encounter with T'Chaka in the afterlife. T'Challa rebukes his father for hiding the fact that he killed his brother N'Jobu to protect Zuri (T'Chaka's companion and bodyguard) and left Killmonger without a father. T'Challa expects more of his father, and in this moment, seems to lose some respect for the character he held in untouchable regard at one point in time. Even the ancestors can make choices that are not the best. But the ancestors in some sense can orchestrate a redemption for the ill effects of their actions from the afterlife, similar to (but in some ways very different from) how a Whiteheadian understanding of God can redistribute the past to the present as data for more fruitful outcomes in the future.⁴

3. I love the fact that *Black Panther* did not appeal to any sort of notions of Western Christianity in its construction of or contrast to what many might refer to as "religion." Why would it? Wakanda, as an isolated part of the world, would have a difficult time encountering even original non-European instantiations of Christianity to incorporate into its manifold of a storyline. It doesn't need it. Wakanda is intentionally

isolated for a reason: widespread knowledge of its advanced technology could lead to the colonization that befell many other nations on the African continent. What we see in Wakanda is a demonstration of holistic ways of being/becoming from government to warfare practices without the overt juxtaposition of Western Christian symbols of normalcy. Whether intentional or not, this independence of Wakandan “religion” from any post-colonial referencing of their traditions to Christian categories (a move which occurs in many movies depicting the antebellum and post-antebellum South, and for reasons of historical accuracy) serves as a victory for the status of African ways of understanding the world standing on their own. The trend in much of religious studies is to observe and define non-Western religious ideas through Western categories, but in the world of *Black Panther*, we find no European religious center from which to analyze the rich traditions of Wakandans.

¹ Jacqueline Trimier, “The Myth of Authenticity: Personhood, Traditional Culture, and African Philosophy.” In *From Africa to Zen: An Introduction to World Philosophy*, ed. Robert Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2003), 177.

² Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 20–22.

³ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 114, 115.

⁴ Coleman, 75–76.

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