

REFLECTION

The real gift of Wakanda



Robbie Young, who lives in the Focolare in South Africa, reflects on the futuristic film 'Black Panther'. He argues that the West is impoverished when it ignores the richness and diversity of Africa and its people.

In his *Philosophy of History* the German philosopher Hegel didn't have much to say about Africa; and the little he says isn't exactly brimming over with admiration for its achievements. He writes:

'What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History ... At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World.'

Black Panther

The recently published book *World Order* by Henry Kissinger dwells extensively on Europe, the United States, the Middle East and Asia, but Africa hardly gets a mention, except to provide examples of what he regards as failing states like the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic. It's not surprising then if people of African origin feel the need and the desire to present a different picture of their continent. To a large extent that's the driving force behind Marvel Comics' latest blockbuster *Black Panther*. Set in the imaginary kingdom of Wakanda, it portrays a country hidden away from the outside world which has achieved a highly advanced state of scientific and technological development based on the wonder-metal vibranium. As a piece of Afrofuturistic film-making it doesn't disappoint, with the added attraction of giving us all a momentary glimpse of a different sort of Africa than the one that is all too often presented on our television screens.



Photo: Marvel Cinematic Universe Wiki

The hidden resource

There is a sort of implicit suggestion in the film that anything Silicon Valley can do Wakanda can do better. Taken a step further, this could be taken to mean that if Africa wants to compete it must do so within the dominant scientific/technological paradigm that characterises the Western model of an advanced society. Yet, as someone who has lived in Africa for a good part of my life, I am convinced that the great hidden resource of this continent, undiscovered for millennia, one which is real and not part

of a fantasy comic world, is the African person. I don't mean this in any romanticised way. Just like everywhere else Africa has its saints and sinners. I am talking about the ordinary people I have met in South Africa, Namibia, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Mozambique, Malawi, Lesotho, Swaziland and Angola. It's enough to encounter their smiles, gestures, songs, dances, conversations, celebrations, wisdom, to know you are in the presence of something unique, a treasure beyond compare.

Standards of progress?

But if we want to compare the best that is to be found in cultures, who can really say which ones are more



'advanced' and which are less 'advanced'? And even if it were possible somehow to grade nations and continents in terms of some universal standard of progress the last word has not been written; as Bob Dylan said, 'don't speak too soon, for the wheel's still in spin'. At the half-way stage of a marathon no one can tell for sure who is going to win. If we were to put our money down, could we really bet on the scientific/technological cultures to lead us towards some bright beaming future? I begin to be worried when Apple builds its headquarters with a

material that is so stunningly transparent that its employees have to receive first-aid when they unknowingly walk into it. The *Black Panther* film fantasises about an African kingdom that has something to offer to the world because it has been able to hide from the chaos of modernity with its murderous ideologies, the carnage of its world wars, and its ecological disasters. That doesn't have to be mere fantasy. Africa has suffered all the collateral consequences of this chaos, but it hasn't been its cause. If the state of the Western world can be compared to the hallucinations and delirium of the drug taker, Africa can point to its suffering as one who has been assaulted by the addict. But in the long run the only hope of the drug taker is the mature and loving care of those who have remained free from drugs.

Attunement to reality

The philosopher Eric Voegelin views attunement to reality as the great challenge that faces every culture. The three great areas of reality that have come to the fore in the histories of cultures are God, society and the natural world. In being attuned to all three, Africa scores highly, with, of course, limitations that are part and parcel of the human condition. As a contrast, we have Western culture which in Nietzsche's phrase, has 'murdered God', has fragmented society with the virus of individualism, and has treated the natural world as dead matter to be plundered for pure profit.

Waiting for Africa

Where does Christianity fit into all of this? The Christian message has become so intertwined with Western culture that it's difficult to view it as a source of spiritual luminosity in its own right. The Christianity that came to Africa can all too easily be seen as just one of the elements in the process of colonisation carried out by the Western nations. But if we manage to see Christianity for what it really is, that is, as a potential for renewing all cultures, not just once, but constantly, the picture looks very different. On a large time scale we can view the first wave of Christianity lasting two thousand years as having penetrated in different ways the peoples of Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas, bringing about in different degrees various forms of transformation in the existing cultures. We can speculate on a second wave of Christianity bringing with it an entirely new burst of spiritual luminosity. And why shouldn't Africa lead the way? 🍷

