

# Africana Religion, *Black Panther*, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)

by

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The viral phenomenon known as the “M’Baku Challenge,” inspired by a scene in the film *Black Panther*, instantiates a moment that caused me pause in my viewing of the movie *Black Panther*. As M’Baku, leader of the Jabari tribe challenges T’Challa for the leadership of Wakanda, he utters the phrase, “Glory to Hanuman,” before they commence combat.

While not a serious follower of the comic book series, as a child of the Seventies I was attracted to the Black Panther along with characters such as Luke Cage and Black Lightning. Years later, I was re-introduced to the Black Panther through the short run animated series created by Reginald Hudlin for BET in 2010. The idea of an independent African nation with advanced technology and culture, which had never succumbed to subjugation and colonization by Europe and the West, was inspiring. A few years later still, when I learned that there would be the introduction of Black Panther into the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), I was jubilant.

For me, one of the most intriguing aspects of the inclusion of Black Panther in the MCU was to see how the story might be re-imagined in light of influences from Afro-futurism. As an aesthetic and orientation, Afro-futurism attempts to imagine or reimagine what it is to be Black and human. As a genre, it pulls from elements of science fiction along with traditions, cultures, and “ways of being” associated with African peoples across space and time. The results are often creative, imaginative, and evocative assemblages that center Africa and the African Diaspora.

In the case of *Black Panther*, this is particularly intriguing since white writers and illustrators such as Stan Lee and Jack Kirby created the foundational narrative. Whatever their conception of Africa and African peoples, the Black Panther film marked an opportunity to bring forth something auspicious.

Consequently, as a scholar of Africana religion, I was caught off-guard by the reference to Hanuman in the film. I knew that Hanuman was one of the most beloved deities in the Hindu pantheon and his appearance is that of a monkey. Yet, why would a movie associated with Africa invoke a Hindu emanation of the divine?

As earlier stated, I came to the film with a cursory knowledge of the fictive African nation of Wakanda including its religious traditions. I knew that the different peoples that constituted the nation of Wakanda each had their own beliefs, but the dominant religious cult, indeed the state religion of Wakanda, was that of the Black Panther. While the other cults received minor attention, there was a notable exception, the White Gorilla Cult. The adherents of this cult were strident adversaries of the Wakandan monarchy. Eventually outlawed, a remnant of the cult persisted. Among its devotees were the Jabari and their leader, M'Baku. A powerful warrior, M'Baku had obtained mystical powers akin to that of the Black Panther by killing and devouring the heart of the rare White Mountain gorilla. Indeed, in the Marvel Universe M'Baku is commonly known by the name Man-Ape.

After a more thorough investigation of the Black Panther literature, I began to see how the Marvel Universe had intentionally appropriated ancient mythologies to create new ones. With respect to the deities upon whom the Wakandan religious cults were associated, from the inception, the Black Panther cult was associated with the ancient Egyptian gods, particularly Bast, the ancient Egyptian goddess of protection and cats. She was the daughter of Ra the sun god and a defender of the Pharaoh. Also known as Bastet, Ubasti, and Pasch, she was the most popular of the feline deities, belonging to the order of the Ennead, a group of nine deities most frequently appearing in ancient Egyptian mythology. In the Marvel Universe, the Ennead are reimagined as extradimensional humanoid beings worshipped by the ancient Egyptians. They lived in Heliopolis, a small "pocket dimension" adjacent to Earth. These beings helped form Egyptian civilization.<sup>1</sup>

The Wakandans appear to be inheritors of elements of this tradition. According to the *Marvel Handbook*, there were Wakandan cults associated with several gods of Egypt, namely Thoth, Bast, Kokou, Mujaji, and Ptah. However, there does not appear to be definitive mythological cosmology. Other ancient Egyptian deities such as Sekhmet (the Lion God) and Sobek (the Crocodile God) as well as devotees of African cults were often woven into Black Panther narratives. Indeed, in *Black Panther #15*, T'Challa mentions Nyami, which is a likely variant on Nyame, the Supreme God of the Akan people of West Africa.<sup>2</sup>

In the Marvel mythos, Nyame is an alias of the Buluku, the father of the Vodun who, like the Ennead, are extra-dimensional beings worshipped as gods. Historically, Nana Buluku is the creator deity of the Fon and Ewe peoples as well as a Supreme Being venerated by other ethnic groups in West Africa, most notably the devotees of Vodun.<sup>3</sup> Returning once more to the Marvel Universe, Bulukuis, known to the Baoulé of West Africa as Alouroua, is the father of Ghekre. To aficionados of *Black Panther* collected works, Ghekre is the customary name for the Gorilla God of Wakanda's Jabari tribe.

The name Ghekre likely derives from the term “gbekre” which has long been used to designate the monkey figures of the Baoulé. Scholarship of recent vintage suggests that the association of the monkey figures with the “gbekre” is an error. According to Claessens and Danis, with or without diacritics, gbekre always means ‘mouse’ and should be avoided when referencing Baoulé bowl-bearing monkey figures.<sup>4</sup> According to some scholars, these figures are more properly associated with the Baoulé deity Mbotumbo. Mbotumbo has the head of an ape and is particularly interested in the welfare of his own priests, though the ordinary people also regard him as a protective god.<sup>5</sup>

From such a cursory study, it seems that there are several ape deities among African-centered religious traditions. What, then, is the basis of the association of the Jabari Gorilla cult with Hanuman? Indeed, from whence came the decision to deviate from the canonical Black Panther texts?

In my reading on the matter, one often-repeated argument asserts that the reference to Hanuman serves to acknowledge the deep historical connections between the Africans and the peoples of the Indian subcontinent. If this was the case, it is ironic that the Central Board of Film Certification censored all references to Hanuman from screenings of *Black Panther* in the Republic of India.<sup>6</sup>

Although Wakanda is a creation of the imagination and not “real,” *Black Panther’s* potential to shape perceptions of Africa and African peoples is genuine. As an academic, I experience the film as more than just a source of entertainment. It is my hope that it may be a catalyst for some budding scholar to pursue the study of Africa and the lived experience of its people. To that end, I maintain that the reference to Hanuman is a misstep in this artistic production.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> N.A., *The Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe A to Z*, 5 (New York: Marvel, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, et al. *Black Panther* 6, nos. 13 and 15, (New York: Marvel, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> According to this entry, at one time the White Gorilla god was conjectured to be Thoth in his ape incarnation. However, it seems that Thoth appears in the traditions of Wakanda as only an Ibis. Anthony Flamini, *Thor & Hercules: Encyclopaedia Mythologica* (New York: Marvel, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Claessens Bruno, and Jean-Louis Danis. *Baule Monkeys* (Brussels, Belgium: Mercatorfonds, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Manfred Lurker, *A Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses, Devils and Demons* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> N.A., “CBFC Mutes ‘Glory to Hanuman’ Reference in *Black Panther*, *The Quint*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/black-panther-hanuman-reference-beeped-out>.

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