

# Black Panther's legacy will 'live on forever'

Is the future African? Black Panther fans are grieving the death of the actor who brought the superhero to life. For some, Wakanda was just a fantasy, but for others, it is the future.



**Wakanda:** Chadwick Boseman played the African king of the world's most advanced country. © Walt Disney

"The ancestors spoke through him." Tributes are flooding in for Chadwick Boseman, who died last week aged only 43. He was a "superhero for many" as Black Panther in the Marvel films, a "young, gifted and black" actor who inspired a generation. The final tweet on his Twitter account has become the most "liked" of all time.

This wave of grief reflects the impact the 2018 film had around the world. For millions of fans, **Black Panther** was like nothing they had seen before. A black superhero who was not a sidekick or a subplot but the main character of his own Hollywood blockbuster, surrounded by a predominantly black cast.

Boseman played King T'Challa of Wakanda, a fictionalised African nation, technologically superior to the rest of the world. A **utopian country**, where wealth and power are fairly distributed and natural resources are controlled by Africans.

This futuristic fantasy looks dramatically different from the Africa we usually see in the news. Disparagingly referred to as the **Dark Continent**, it is often represented as a place dominated by war, disease and poverty. A region of the world that belongs to humanity's past, not its future.

Wakanda is an alternative Africa, not limited by these negative stereotypes. It belongs to a cultural movement called

**Afrofuturism**, that envisions a world shaped by African technology and creativity.

It has its critics. Beyoncé's latest film, **Black is King**, was accused of "wakandafication," reducing a diverse continent with a complex history into a simplified product, sold to a Western audience. In other words, positive stereotypes of Africa have replaced negative ones. But it is still fantasy, not reality.

Or is it? The UN expects Africa's population to double in the next 25 years, with 43% of Africans joining the **global middle class** by 2030. With an average age of 20, compared to 43 in Europe, Africa is a young, growing and entrepreneurial continent that may dominate the next century.

Africa lacks Vibranium, the alien metal that powers Wakandan technology. But still, a technological revolution is taking place on the continent. It is driven by mobile phone networks, which in the last decade have expanded to reach 93% of Africans.

In countries with limited access to drinking water, electricity and waste disposal, phones provide solutions to everyday problems. From money transfer in Kenya to motorcycle sharing in Rwanda's busy cities, there is even an app to help farmers **care for their cows**.

Over 600 tech hubs across Africa are training coders and entrepreneurs, while Kenya is creating a "Silicon Savannah" to

rival America's **Silicon Valley**. Tech giants Google, Facebook and Microsoft are all paying attention.

From **Eko Atlantic** in Nigeria to Waterfall City in South Africa, countries are designing smart cities powered by solar power, with futuristic designs that look a lot like Wakanda. Supporters say they will replace Africa's overcrowded slums, critics fear only the wealthy will benefit.

But is the future African?

## Wakanda forever

Some say no, this is science fiction. Wakanda is a utopian vision of Africa without European colonialism and the plundering of its natural resources. The reality is a continent scarred by war and disease, dependent on aid from richer nations, facing the enormous challenges of climate change and population growth. It will take more than phone apps and smart cities to solve Africa's problems.

Other say yes, Africa has untapped potential that will shape our future. Europe, America and China all went through dark periods of war and crisis before emerging as global powers that changed history. Trends show Africa is becoming more peaceful and more democratic and its young population is embracing the digital technologies that will be the key to the 21st century.

## YOU DECIDE

1. Who is the greatest superhero? Why do you think they are the best?
2. Can fiction help create a better world?

## Q & A

### Q: What do we know?

A: It is generally agreed that humanity began in Africa. Our ancestry has been traced back to Lucy, a 3.2 million-year-old skeleton discovered in Ethiopia. Her descendants left Africa 70,000 years ago and spread across the rest of the planet. Over the last 400 years, the continent has been dominated by European interventions, from the Atlantic Slave Trade to direct rule and colonisation. Only after 1957 did African countries win their independence and start to determine their own future.

### Q: What do we not know?

A: One main area of debate is around what it really means to be African. There are 1.3 billion people in Africa, speaking more than 2,000 languages across 54 countries. Some argue that it is impossible to make generalisations about such a vast and diverse population. Others argue that a shared history of racism, slavery and colonialism unite many Africans. Nevertheless, when we talk about an African future, it is important to consider what we mean by Africa and Africans.

## ACTIVITIES

1. Draw a picture of your own utopian country.
2. Write a time traveller's guide for 2100. How has the growth of Africa changed the world?

## WORD WATCH

**Black Panther** – The 2018 film was based on the Marvel Comics character of the same name. Boseman was diagnosed with bowel cancer in 2016, battling the disease through his performance in seven films.

**Utopian country** – The term utopia was coined by the Tudor scholar Sir Thomas More in his 1516 book Utopia, about a perfect society on an island in the Atlantic Ocean.

**Dark Continent** – 19th-century theorists created racist typologies of humanity with black Africans considered the most primitive and inferior. At the same time, European powers were competing to colonise the continent and take control of its resources.

**Afrofuturism** – A diverse movement of writers, artists and musicians who draw on African history and culture to imagine the future. Authors influenced by Afrofuturism include N. K. Jemisin and Colson Whitehead. Musicians include Janelle Monáe and Missy Elliott.

**Black is King** – Beyoncé's 2020 visual album has been acclaimed as a groundbreaking new art form, mixing African imagery, fashion, music and film. It was described as a tribute to black culture and criticised as an African American fantasy of Africa.

**Global middle class** – For the first time in the history of civilisation, more than half the world's population is considered middle class or wealthier, according to the UN. Because the middle class has money to spend on luxuries and recreation, its growth has a dramatic effect on societies.

**Care for their cows** – iCow won a 2010 competition to find the best app in East Africa. Farmers sign up for texts to help them look after their animals and crops.

**Silicon Valley** – A region of the San Francisco Bay Area in California home to many of the world's largest technology companies including Facebook, Google and Apple.

**Eko Atlantic** – The new city near Lagos, Nigeria, is being built on reclaimed land on the Atlantic coast. When complete it will house 250,000 people.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"We must find a way to look after one another, as if we were one single tribe."

Chadwick Boseman as Black Panther (1976 - 2020), American actor.

What do you think?

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