

Challenge Day

Tradition and Revolution in Wakanda

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At its heart, Wakanda has a paradoxical nature: in its integration of technology into daily life, the reclusive nation is more like the industrialized countries of the Western world than its continental neighbors, but in its political structure, it has more in common with the ancient African past. Wakanda uses highly advanced science to improve the lives of its people, and yet it is ruled by kings who are selected through inheritance and ritual combat. In other words, it is a nation of contradictions, ruled by a complex synthesis of reason and tradition.

Moreover, Wakanda controls the Vibranium Mound, which is perhaps the most important resource on earth, a resource that has defined Wakandan society for millennia. Situated inside a mountain, the Vibranium Mound is what remains of a meteor that fell to Earth in the deep past. Though small amounts of vibranium have left Wakanda over the years (showing up in Captain America's shield, US Agent's shield, and in Ulysses Klaue's sonic cannon, for example), the unearthly metal remains the property of Wakanda – and therefore the responsibility of its king.

The paradoxes at the heart of Wakandan society as well as its highly desirable resources mean that it is often the subject of attacks, invasions by outsiders, and attempted political revolutions. Many people have challenged its ancient traditions and political order, claiming to offer a better use of its resources or a more just society than the culture that has evolved organically over the course of millennia (as if it isn't absolutely crazy to try to take over the Black Panther's home turf!).

It seems as if every supervillain and misguided revolutionary thinks that he or she knows better than T'Challa how to run Wakanda. We see this, for example, when Eric Killmonger and Baron Macabre try to stage a coup in *Jungle Action* #17, when Achebe takes over Wakanda early in Christopher Priest's run on the *Black Panther* book, when a radical group called The People tries to overthrow T'Challa's rule in Ta Nehisi Coates's run, and most recently in the *Black Panther* movie when Killmonger briefly

takes over Wakanda in the name of combatting racism and injustice. Though each of these attempts at revolution is fueled by different motivations and values, each proves to be fruitless and costly – both to the revolutionaries and to the people they think they’re saving.

It might be tempting to say that Wakanda just hasn’t seen the “right” kind of revolution yet. Maybe all these revolutions fail because the revolutionaries are corrupt. Maybe their motives are not pure enough. Or maybe their plans simply haven’t been “smart” enough yet. Maybe what Wakanda needs is more moral and more intelligent revolutionaries. It might also be tempting to say that the Wakandan monarchy is simply strong enough to withstand revolutions, that might can overcome right. But there’s more at work in the preservation of Wakanda’s social order than the incompetence and corruption of the revolutionaries or the strength of Wakanda’s rulers in maintaining the status quo.

In fact, the repeated failed attempts at coup and revolution in Wakanda show two important things about political and social change. First, they show that pure reason divorced from tradition and custom cannot provide the social cohesion that is necessary for nations to exist. Second, they show that revolutions often destroy the thing that they seek to preserve – even (and perhaps especially) when they succeed in reinventing societies to fit the ideology of revolutionaries. Nations have to be able to reform and to respond to changing circumstances, but as the British statesman Edmund Burke (1729–1797) argued in a very different time and place than present-day Wakanda, true revolution poisons society rather than saves it.

“Don’t Scare Me Like That, Colonizer!”

At first it might seem a bit dubious to think that Edmund Burke can have anything to say about Wakandan politics. After all, Burke was a member of the British Parliament at a time when European nations had colonized much of Africa. And perhaps more than anything, Wakanda was created as a way of mythologizing what Africa might have been like if colonialism hadn’t happened. But Burke was a much more complicated man than our modern understanding of colonialism would lead us to believe. In fact, Burke spent a great deal of his career criticizing British colonial practices in India and America. Moreover, his ideas about politics and revolutions can easily lend themselves to a critical view of colonialism as a project, and no doubt T’Challa would find Burke to be a potent and persuasive ally in resisting attempted revolutions in Wakanda.

Like the people of Wakanda, Burke lived in a world of contradictions and tension between diverse people. Born in Dublin to a Catholic mother and Protestant father, Burke learned from an early age that an immensely complex system of conventions, arrangements, agreements, customs, and compromises makes it possible for different kinds of people to live together

in a harmonious social order. For him, it was a miracle that the British nation had found a way for its diverse people to coexist in a stable and free society.

During his time in Parliament, Burke devoted himself to reforming the country that he loved. Throughout his career, he helped to reform criminal and financial law, opposed laws restricting religious dissenters, supported William Wilberforce's efforts to end slavery, and worked to improve other aspects of the British government.

But today Burke is probably best known for his opposition to the French Revolution – a position that surprised a lot of people. Most of Burke's contemporaries had expected the staunch Whig reformer to support the French in their efforts to liberalize their nation. Why wouldn't Burke welcome what many considered to be a great reform of an antiquated and unjust system in France? His position made some of his contemporaries disparage him as a man who just wanted to preserve the past for its own sake (apparently, being a tireless reformer is a thankless job!).

The reason for Burke's opposition to revolution lies in how he thought that societies ought to grow and change. His early life had shown him that the bonds that hold societies together are far too complex for human reason to fully understand, so it is both foolish and immoral for anyone to think that reason alone can determine the form of government. Even if we have the best of intentions, we will cause unforeseen consequences when we use pure reason in order to change society and ignore traditions that have built up over a long time. As Burke writes, "Men little think how immorally they act in rashly meddling with what they do not understand. Their delusive good intention is no sort of excuse for their presumption. They who truly mean well must be fearful of acting ill."¹ In other words, pure motives, good intentions, and clear reasoning do not justify us in carrying out revolutions.

And it doesn't matter how intelligent the revolutionaries or their plans are. Even if we gathered together Reed Richards, Tony Stark, and Bruce Banner (three of the smartest people outside Wakanda) and asked them to carry out a revolution that set up a new, rationally based government in Wakanda, the result would be disastrous – and not only because the three of them are unlikely to agree about what the best society would be! Burke would say that not even three of the smartest people on earth could rationally design a system that would satisfy everyone. (Chances are, it would only satisfy people who already think like Reed, Tony, and Bruce.)

Instead of revolution – which tears down society as it is and erects something entirely new in its place – Burke preferred gradual, organic change that builds upon the parts of a society that already work well. "By preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state," he writes, "in what we improve we are never wholly new; in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete."² By following the example of nature, which always builds upon the world as it *is* rather than starting over with something

brand new, we conserve what works in a society while also allowing for change that will be beneficial. This is the model of change that Burke thinks will truly improve societies.

So, if reason alone can't show us how to govern or to change society, we must let the specific traditions and customs of our society help to guide us in ordering it. And reason can't create a one-size-fits-all model of government for nations with different traditions (say, Wakanda, Attilan, and Latveria, for example). In a speech supporting American independence (a cause which Burke didn't regard as a revolution since the Americans had spent centuries developing their own culture and society and just wanted to be left alone), Burke argued that a government must take into account the sentiments and character of its people in deciding how to govern them. Britain's way of governing itself isn't necessarily the right way to govern the American colonies. And, as he says in *Observations on the Late State of the Nation*, "Politics ought to be adjusted not to human reasonings but to human nature, of which reason is but a part and by no means the greatest part."³ In other words, a politics of reason alone attends to only one part of human nature, and such a politics will go wrong by ignoring people's sentiments, traditions, and customs.

"Let the Challenge Begin"

Examples from Wakanda might show that Burke was right. The first *Black Panther* film establishes that Wakanda's monarchy is semi-hereditary, with the oldest (probably male) members of the Panther Tribe being the first in line to rule. When T'Chaka dies in *Captain America: Civil War*, his son, T'Challa, inherits the throne, but who gets to be king is not decided *merely* by inheritance. Before T'Challa officially takes the throne, all of Wakanda's tribes come together and have the chance to offer up a challenger for the throne. Any challengers must fight the presumptive king in ritual combat in order to earn the right to rule.

People from the industrialized West might look at this traditional way of transmitting power and say that it is irrational. Those who favor meritocracy or republicanism might say that being the son of a king does not give a man the right to rule. Moralists might object to the idea that mere physical strength makes a man fit to govern, saying that his moral character is far more important. Feminists might argue that patriarchy is poisonous for society and that Wakanda needs more women in power. Classical liberals would question the very idea of having a king at all, saying that monarchy itself is unjust and dangerous.

While each of these criticisms might have its merits, Burke would probably say that we make a mistake if we seek to throw out the "old ways" of

Wakanda and create new ones built on reason alone. So if revolutionaries with aspirations to abstract ideas like liberty and equality suddenly seized power and abolished the Wakandan monarchy, the result wouldn't necessarily be good. Even though they might seem irrational to outsiders like us, anyone can see from the Challenge Day scene in *Black Panther* that Wakanda's traditions provide social cohesion that a purely rational system cannot possibly create. The reverence that the Wakandans have for their traditions tempers old tribal tensions and petty rivalries that might otherwise develop into social dysfunction or erupt into civil war. Dispensing with the traditions in one fell swoop would result in anything but liberty or equality.

We can see this most clearly when M'Baku arrives with representatives from the Jabari Tribe in order to challenge T'Challa for the throne. The people have gathered at the waterfall to witness their king's coronation, members of each tribe dressed in their ceremonial finery to honor the solemnity of the event. Shuri, T'Challa's brilliant but unorthodox sister, complains about her corset and asks if they can "wrap it up and go home." Though she does not completely disregard the customs involved in the coronation, she does show a youthful irreverence that some might find scandalous. When M'Baku arrives with his men to challenge T'Challa, he complains that Wakanda's "technological advancements have been overseen by a child ... who scoffs at tradition!"

This scene sets up audiences to view M'Baku as one of the film's antagonists (especially those of us who have read the comics). We might see Shuri as a representative of scientific and social progress and M'Baku as a remnant of an antiquated devotion to custom. But first appearances can be deceiving. Indeed, it is M'Baku's reverence for tradition that allows for the peaceful transfer of power. When T'Challa defeats him in ritual combat, M'Baku yields and abandons his bid for the throne. A man with less reverence for tradition might use whatever means necessary to acquire power, starting a civil war.

In a paradoxical way, M'Baku's commitment to the Challenge Day tradition with its underlying might-makes-right assumption could very well protect society from being subjected to something far more irrational. The ritual probably developed as a way to settle disputes between tribes that would cause open warfare and the domination of some tribes by others. By formalizing humanity's old might-makes-right instinct, the Challenge Day ceremony turns it into a ritual that allows for the freedom and dignity of each tribe.

That doesn't mean that the traditions surrounding the transfer of power in Wakanda can't or shouldn't change, of course. But Burke would argue that any change ought to happen organically and slowly. It would be perilous to suddenly abolish the tradition and replace it with a more "rational" means of transferring power.

“Burn It All”

One of the functions that tradition can serve in a society is as a guard against absolute and arbitrary power. In Britain during Burke’s time, for example, the monarchy had a lot of power, but it didn’t rule unchecked. The political and social traditions that had built up in England over centuries helped to balance the power of the monarch against the power of Parliament and against what Burke called the “entailed inheritance”⁴ of the people’s rights and liberties. The monarch might have had more power than a farmer, but the fact that both the king and the farmer lived within the same tradition meant that the farmer enjoyed liberties that he wouldn’t have under a capricious ruler. It meant that the king didn’t have arbitrary and unrestrained power.

We see this kind of tradition at work in Wakanda, as well. The coronation ceremony, for example, helps to instill humility in the king, reminding him that he is responsible to the tribes for his actions. In fact, the Challenge Day ritual suggests that though Wakanda’s monarchy is inherited, the king also serves by consent of the people. We see this in the fact that T’Challa must have the strength of the Black Panther stripped from his body before he can engage in ritual combat with a challenger to the throne. This levels the playing field and makes it possible for a challenger to actually succeed. Though it is probably not written in law, this custom protects the people from the whims of capricious and arbitrary rulers.

From his first appearance in Wakanda, Killmonger shows that he does not care about the traditions that guarantee order and liberty in the nation that he wants to rule. This is why his brief time in power causes so much harm and threatens to destroy the very fabric of Wakandan society. He says that he wants to use Wakanda’s vibranium and weapons to “liberate” the billions of people around the world who are of African descent, letting Wakanda serve as “judge, jury, and executioner” for oppressive people in other places. Moreover, he clearly has no interest in the customs that guarantee a peaceful, orderly, and fair transfer of power. When the leader of the River Tribe says that “it will take weeks” to arrange a new challenge, Killmonger says, “Weeks? I don’t need weeks. The whole country ain’t gotta be there.” In other words, he isn’t interested in the tribes having their say in the rule of Wakanda; he only wants the power to do what *he* believes is right – for everyone in the world.

Perhaps his worst offense against Wakanda’s traditions comes just after he has consumed the Heart-Shaped Herb and gained the strength of the Black Panther. One of the women who attend him during the process says that they preserve the garden of the Herb “so that when it comes time for another king, we will be ready.” Killmonger scoffs and says, “Another king? Yeah, go ahead and burn all that.” The woman appeals to tradition, saying that she cannot burn the Herb, and Killmonger viciously grabs her by the throat, lifting her from the ground: “When I tell you to do something,

I *mean* that shit.” In other words, he is limited by no custom, tradition, or sentiment. His power is unchecked and arbitrary.

It’s hard to tell whether Killmonger doesn’t see the likely results of destroying the Heart-Shaped Herb or if he simply doesn’t care. But it is clear that the consequences won’t be good. Even though Wakanda is protected by the Border Tribe and by its advanced technology, its primary defender is the Black Panther, whose strength comes solely from the Herb. Unless some new source of the Herb is found before T’Challa dies, he will be the last of the Black Panthers. Worse, the destruction of the Herb might not bode well for the next transfer of power. Kingship in Wakanda is closely associated with the role of the Black Panther. The loss of that role will probably have a ripple effect on other aspects of Wakandan tradition. When the time comes for a new king, the other tribes might wonder what makes the royal family special without the Heart-Shaped Herb. They might wonder why a Challenge Day ritual is even necessary at all, and once they begin to wonder about that, tribal strife will probably erupt. In other words, the peace and social cohesion that Wakanda has developed over millennia could be destroyed by a single man who thinks that he knows better than Wakanda’s traditions.

“What Has Happened to Our Wakanda?”

After Killmonger throws T’Challa over the waterfall during their ritual combat and assumes power, Wakandan society finds itself torn in two. Nakiya, a Wakandan spy, and Okoye, a member of the Dora Milaje, find themselves at odds about what it means to be loyal to Wakanda. Nakiya asks Okoye to help her overthrow Killmonger “before he becomes too strong.” Okoye will have none of it: “I am loyal to the throne, no matter who sits upon it!” Knowing how important Wakanda’s traditions are to the stability and peace of the nation, she is desperate to protect those traditions. “You *serve* your country,” she says, and Nakiya replies, “No, I *save* my country.”

The disagreement between the two women speaks to one of the gravest consequences of revolutions like Killmonger’s. Though each woman loves her country, Killmonger drives a wedge between them over how to best serve Wakanda. To the dutiful Okoye, serving Wakanda means serving a king she despises in the hope that she can maintain order in her country and usher it through a difficult time. To Nakiya, patriotism requires her to fight a man whose rule might be technically legitimate, but who blatantly opposes everything that Wakanda holds sacred. For a time, this means that two close friends find themselves on opposite sides of a conflict.

The wedge drives deeper, however. The Border Tribe happily embraces Wakanda’s new king, aiding him in preparing to wage war on the rest of the world. This leads to Wakandans hurting and killing their own people.

As W’Kabi says in a deleted scene, “There will be war and death, but in the end it will be beautiful.” In helping Killmonger, the Border Tribe causes outright civil war – a war that alienates friends, spouses, and countrymen.

“Just Because Something Works ...”

Those who are loyal to Wakanda have to oppose Killmonger with force, but what truly brings order and peace back to Wakanda is a reassertion of the traditions and customs that have shaped Wakandan society for millennia. Having stolen a single Heart-Shaped Herb from the garden before Killmonger had it burned, Nakiya flees with Shuri and Ramonda to the Jabari Tribe in the mountains. In her desperation, she intends to give the Herb to M’Baku so that he can have the strength to overthrow the new king. What she doesn’t know is that M’Baku recovered T’Challa’s comatose body after Killmonger threw him over the waterfall.

A man less devoted to the traditions of his country might accept the Herb and take advantage of the chaos in Wakanda in order to advance his own power, but instead, M’Baku allows the women to use the Herb to revive their comatose king. So, the man who seemed backward in his traditionalism at the beginning of the film turns out to be the key not only to the restoration of peace in Wakanda, but also to saving the world from Killmonger’s murderous revolution.

Moreover, when T’Challa recovers from the coma and returns to the Vibranium Mound to oppose Killmonger, he legitimizes his actions by asserting that the ritual combat isn’t over: “I never yielded, and as you can see, I am not dead!” Killmonger and the Border Tribe reject this reasoning, of course, but when the Dora Milaje and others see that Killmonger doesn’t yet have a rightful claim to the throne, they join T’Challa in stopping him from sending Wakandan weapons across the border and beginning a war on the rest of the world.

Burke might have predicted all of this. The division sewn by Killmonger’s effort to single-handedly reshape Wakandan society; the civil war; the willingness of some to shed the blood of their fellow citizens; the restoration of peace through a reassertion of tradition – each of these things is evidence of the danger of revolution that Burke warned against and the value that he saw in tradition.

None of this means that Wakanda has to remain “stuck in the past,” however. Far from it. In fact, T’Challa *does* begin to reform his country after he defeats Killmonger and resumes his place as king. Having seen that Wakanda could use its resources to help the rest of the world – “the world we wish to join,” as T’Chaka says in *Captain America: Civil War* – he begins establishing outreach centers in other countries. It isn’t the radical course reversal that revolutionaries like Killmonger and W’Kabi

wanted, of course, but the incrementalist approach allows Wakanda to grow without subjecting itself to the dangerous turmoil that rapid change causes. It represents the kind of organic development that Burke thought was healthy for nations, and allows the reclusive nation to reform and open up to the world without losing its true identity.

Wakanda forever!

Notes

1. Edmund Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, In Consequence of Some Late Discussions in Parliament, Relative to the Reflections on the French Revolution*, 4th ed. (London: J. Dodsley, 1791), 472.
2. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in Francis Canavan ed., *Selected Works of Edmund Burke*, vol. 2 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 122.
3. Edmund Burke, *Observations on the Late State of the Nation*, in Paul Langford ed., *The Writings of Edmund Burke*, vol. 2 (London: Clarendon Press, 1981), 196.
4. Burke (1999), 121.