Movie Character Analysis: T'Challa of *The Black Panther*

SBS 3201: Gender, Dress, & Society

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Character: T'Challa

Film: *The Black Panther*

  The Black Panther is a comic book hero that has finally reached the big screen and has captivated audiences worldwide. Not just for the signature handshake seen in the film but for its futuristic costume design inspired by modern-day African fashion. T'Challa, also known as the *Black Panther*, dresses in accordance to his title as king and his superhero role. He is able to do so by wearing distinctive styles of dress. Clothing often gives an insight of one's status, occupation, and other aspects of a person's lifestyle. The costume designers of the film wanted to ensure that roles of the characters, especially that of T'Challa, would be interpreted correctly by the *Black Panther* audiences. By analyzing the wardrobe of T'Challa, one is able to further dissect the *Black Panther* film.

  T'Challa, in *The Black Panther* (2018) becomes king after the tragic passing of his father. In this case, T'Challa becoming the successor to the throne is both an *ascribed* and *achieved status*. An *ascribed status* is one that an individual is born into and was not earned but inherited while an *achieved status* is one that is attained by an individual (Lennon, Johnson, & Rudd, 2017). Being that T'Challa was of royal blood he was deemed to be the next in line to become king. This is considered to T'Challa's *ascribed status* in his society. However, when the leader of the mountain tribe challenged his title, T'Challa had to earn his title through a duel. This would make him becoming king somewhat of an *achieved status*. Later on in the film, T'Challa's title is challenged again. This time by Kilmonger who was found to be a relative of the royal family that was raised outside of Wakanda. The fictional nation of Wakanada, which he now rules, is a

futuristic nation in Africa that was never conquered by a European nation. It consists of

five subgroups that live together in harmony. Wakanada, from the point-of-view of the

outside world, is a third world country that needs aid. This is a front that the Wakanda

has kept for years in order to protect their nation and the vibranium from evil.

Vibranium, or the "heart-shaped herb", is the fictional substance that allows T'Challa to

have the superhuman powers of the Black Panther and power the entire country of

Wakanda.

T'Challa's clothing has regal embellishments that resemble his title in society.

Also, because Wakanda is a technologically advanced nation, his clothing reflects that.

The costume designers of the film made it a point to have T'Challa's wardrobe differ

from that of his predecessor. Shuri, T'Challa's sister, in the film upgrades his clothing in

order to incorporate technology into his African influenced clothing. This is essentially

what the costume designers behind of the film did in order to captivate and resonate with

the *Black Panther* audience. The costume design of the film fuses futuristic designs with

African tribal fashion from that of the Massai, Xhosa, Zulu and other tribal communities.

These characteristics are found in both T'Challa's normal garb and his Black Panther

suit. T'Challa's *prescribed roles* changed throughout the film and his wardrobe change

with it. A *prescribed role* is one that describes a "set of behaviors that a group of

individuals expect should be done when any individual assumes a status (Lennon,

Johnson, & Rudd, 2017)". As the Black Panther, T'Challa switched into a suit that would

have him appear to be incognito. In addition to his *prescribed role* changing, his *role*

performance also adapts to his environment. One's *role performance* is the "behavior of

an individual in a role (Lennon, Johnson, & Rudd, 2017)". As the Black Panther, he

becomes a physical defender of Wakanda and not just simply a king making demands. Essentially becoming a warrior figure for the nation of Wakanda .

The Black Panther suit's design consisted of triangle patterns that were not placed by a coincidence. Although the main costume designer behind of the Black Panther suit was Ryan Meinerding, he had costumer designer Ruth Carter, create the triangular pattern seen on the suit. The costume designer, Ruth Carter, in an interview stated that the triangle is "the sacred geometry of Africa (Yu, 2018)" and because of its importance she incorporated it into the design of the Black Panther suit. Carter went on to "call that pattern the 'Okavango' pattern. I felt that it made his suit have this character that would, in the wide shots, make him this superhero but in the close-up, you see this beautiful pattern that is consistent with a lot of the art of Africa and would turn him into this African king (Ye, 2018) ". *Role perception* was an important aspect behind the costume designs of *Black Panther* especially with T'Challa's character. *Role perception* refers to the "actual behavior of an individual in a role (Lennon, Johnson, & Rudd, 2017)". The artistry that is seen in the suit is also found in the designs of T'Challa's wardrobe. His clothing, like that of Figure 2, is adorned with African inspired embroidery and intricate designs.

Carter wanted T'Challa's character to be differentiated by the other characters in the film with his elaborate clothing. Giving him authoritative look using elements that would be help the audience visualize that of a king with that of military figure. She wanted T'Challa's wardrobe to exude a "Wakandan kingly drape that moves around very elegantly, and we see it on him early, when he's walking with Nakia through the town. Everyone else around him is dressed in full-out colors and Afropunk, and it separates him

and presents him as the king (Buchanan, 2018)". The look seen in Figure 2 was inspired by Nigerian fashion fused with the structure of a cutaway coat from 18th-century fashion. The embroidery of this outfit is placed on the center of the garment and on the sleeves.

The intricacy of T'Challa's dress is what resonates with the audience because of its foundation and the way that it can be traced back to past centuries of African wardrobe. Coupled with the imagination of the future and all of its possible innovation, *Black Panther* allows for the creation of an entirely new perspective of the African culture and dress without discounting or diminishing the value of what preceded it. Rather, it essentially subjects it to worldwide criticism and acknowledgement because of the fact that it is a major motion picture. T'Challa's suit was the key aspect of this because it tied together both past and present by allowing him to have ease and formality whilst fighting and the ability to absorb energy from blows made to the suit while in combat. However, what was most expressive about it was its relevancy and modern day impact that it made and the lasting impact it will continue to make.

Figure 1: Black Panther suit (Evans, 2018)

Figure 2: T' Challa in royal clothing (Perrone, 2018)

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