

THEME 01

Imagining an African renaissance

AFRICA

EMANCIPATION

REPUTATION

The new movie Black Panther has broken records and provoked wide public debate on oppression, emancipation and the representation of Africa. The optimistic 'Afrofuturism' of Black Panther is more than just fiction, however. Three trends tie in with a more positive future for African societies.

Our observations

- [Marvel Studio's movie Black Panther was the fifth biggest](#) opening of all time and has broken the record for February releases. Netflix already released Luke Cage, the first series about a black superhero. Black Panther is the first to bring this to the big screen. The movie not only stars a black superhero and mostly black cast, but it is an exercise in 'Afrofuturism'. In fiction, it imagines an African country (Wakanda) that is the most technologically advanced society on earth.
- Globally, [African fashion](#) as well as music are becoming more mainstream. In pop culture, a young generation of [African icons](#) is on the rise. Recently, the translation appeared of Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe's book *The Critique of Black Reason*, which has been widely popular around the globe.
- On February 15, Cyril Ramaphosa took over from Jacob Zuma and became South Africa's fifth president. He faces a range of long-term [socio-economic challenges](#) as well as [acute water shortages](#) in the short term. Nevertheless, his presidency represents a turning point for South Africa.
- At the end of 2017, Emmerson Mnangagwa, after having fled to South Africa, [deposed](#) Robert Mugabe. It was the first power transition in Zimbabwe since it became independent in 1980.



Connecting the dots

Representations of African societies tend to be negative and they often emphasize poverty and violence. Indeed, demographic trends in Africa point to bleak future scenarios. There are, however, also more optimistic developments and the new movie Black Panther can serve as a catalyst for a change in perspective.

The movie stars characters that can be associated with current debates on discrimination, the legacy of slavery and maltreatment by the police, issues underscored by organizations like Black Lives Matter. Indeed, the movie has spurred a lot of debate in progressive groups. Interestingly, however, Wakandan society imagines a position beyond emancipatory struggle. It depicts an African society that is self-confident, a utopia that is technologically advanced while simultaneously celebrating African music, dance, architecture and aesthetics.

Black Panther is of course fiction, but good fiction creates a lens through which to look at the world differently. From this perspective, we can tie together three contemporary developments that point towards a different, more positive and emancipated African future.

First is the popularity of African youth culture. African millennials are connected through mobile telephony and are increasingly alienated from older generations that brought dictatorship and civil strife. This different mentality has created a popular culture, including music, fashion and movies (“Nollywood”), that has global appeal.

A second trend concerns Afro-Americans who are increasingly oriented towards Africa’s plight. This holds for people like Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey, but it is especially visible in very young Afro-American music artists. A video by French Montana and Swae Lee is shot in Kampala, Uganda, and a Solange Knowles video depicts African fashion styles in Cape Town. This ties in with a trend away from hyper-masculinity in Afro-American culture. We can see Afro-Americans as an African diaspora that can be a catalyst for development, similar to the diasporas of China, the Philippines and India.

The third trend pointing towards a brighter African future is the leadership transition in South Africa. Jacob Zuma’s nine-year rule was filled with corruption scandals and socio-economic problems. Although there are great challenges, Cyril Ramaphosa brings good hope for improvement, addressing corruption, education and job creation. Having the most advanced economy, South Africa is the natural leader of the continent and it is already increasing its regional clout in countries like Zimbabwe and Zambia. South African leaders have developed many progressive ideas for the continent. Desmond Tutu coined the term ‘rainbow nation’. Nelson Mandela promoted the African philosophy of ‘Ubuntu’ that emphasizes the social nature of humanity. Thabo Mbeki spoke of an ‘African Renaissance’.

In an environment of great challenges, these three trends are steps in the direction of such a renaissance. And a work of fiction like Black Panther can be a catalyst for this development.

Implications

- Based on its strong fundamentals and legacy as regional leader, serious reforms can bring about a shift in South Africa’s development. After about a decade of perceived misrule, it could (again) become a promising emerging market. Within Africa, it could become a force of continental integration in fields like trade and infrastructure.
- A more independent and self-confident Africa can become an active force in growing trade networks like China’s BRI or the Indo-Japanese AAGC. Particularly southern and eastern African counties can participate in south-south links.