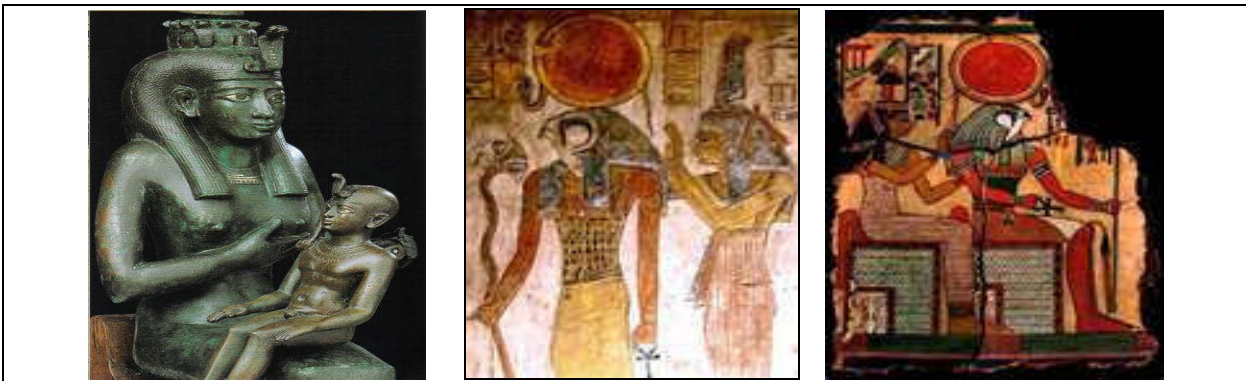


The Contemporary Black Comic Book Hero / Superhero: Waging an Epic Battle!

Akin to the classic epics of **Heru** (Kemetic / Ægyptian ca. 7500 B.C.), **Gilgamesh** (Sumer-Chaldean ca. 2000 B.C.), the **Iliad** and the **Odyssey** (Greek ca. 800 B.C.), the **Mahabharata** (Indian ca. 400 B.C. - A.D. 200), the **Æneid** (Greek ca. 30 B.C.), **Beowulf** (English ca. A.D. 800), the Eddas (Scandinavian ca. A.D. 1179 - 1241), and **Sundiata** (Malian ca. A.D. 1200) is the contemporary medium of comic books (U.S.A. ca. A.D. 1938). The hero is the focus of these ancient epics as the superhero is the focus of the more contemporary medium of comic books. The term "hero" in English derives from the Greek term "heros," which is derived from the Ægypto-Kemetic title / name "Heru." Heru represents the archetypal protagonist and savior. Heru is the most ancient, documented historical and mythological protagonist. The epic of **Heru, the Avenger**, is summarized herein very briefly:



Depicted in the most elaborate ancient examples of sequential art and story-telling is the epic struggle waged between good and evil in Kemet (ancient Ægypt) ca. 8th Millennium B.C. The pre-eminent pharaoh of Kemet, Ausar (Osiris), was deceived by his wicked brother, Sutekh (Set), and dismembered into 14 pieces. These 14 pieces were spread throughout the land of Kemet. Auset (Isis), the wife of Ausar, was determined to restore Ausar to his former self. Auset traveled throughout the land to retrieve the dismembered pieces of Ausar. Once they were gathered, she used a divine incantation (hekau) to re-member Ausar and conceive with him, resulting in the birth of Heru (Horus)! A particular account of this myth has Auset locating all of the dismembered pieces of Ausar, except for his phallus. This account is used to explain why there are tekhehs (obelisks) in the land of Kemet. According to this account, they were erected by Auset to serve as a reminder of this missing member. This myth is also the first account of an "immaculate" conception. Heru's sole purpose in life after he has achieved manhood was to vanquish evil, personified as his uncle, Sutekh, and, especially, to avenge his father, Ausar. Thus, Heru is known as "The Avenger!" Heru and Sutekh had several battles, all of which increased the knowledge and wisdom of Heru. Having been educated in Kemet through the System of Sacred Wisdom, Heru, zoomorphically depicted with the head of a hawk, was a sky god who was able to multiply his skills and wisdom with each battle with Sutekh.

This entire myth is symbolic of the hero's growth through education, adversity and praxis. This myth is the prototype of subsequent epic myths, and is linked directly to the guiding principles of ancient mythologies and contemporary heroes.

Comic books in the U.S.A. (and worldwide) have become the modern literary and pictorial epic, having evolved from the traditional ancient oral epic. This medium is the contemporary epic mythology which represents humankind's aspiration to be transformed into beings of higher spiritual, intellectual and physical prowess and potential while combating and confronting an antithetical force. Epic myths incorporate the mystic and metaphysical with the traditional. The hero of the epic myth represents an individual and / or a collective transformation, as does the superhero of contemporary mythology as illustrated in comic books.

There have been hundreds of comic book companies and comic book subsidiaries and thousands of characters. New characters, and companies, it seems, are created daily. The only limit is the imagination. And, imagination is what makes comics such an attractive and powerful medium.

Since the late 1930's / early 1940's superhero comic book characters have been instrumental in projecting the image of the superior and extraordinary man. With the exception of cartoonist Zelda "Jackie" Ormes' "Torchy Brown" character that appeared in the Black-owned Pittsburgh Courier (1937), up until the 1960's, women who were called heroines were often merely the girlfriends of the heroes. This hero was always mysterious, muscular, attractive, admired, or envied, by both men and women, capable of executing almost any feat, and always of European descent! Even when the hero was an alien being, he was aesthetically and phenotypically Europoid ("White").

Detective Comics (DC) is the oldest existing comic book publishing house in the U.S. The first actual superhero comic book format was created in 1938 when DC released "Action Comics #1." DC's first and greatest superhero was "Superman of Krypton." In 1939 Marvel Comics, known then as Timely Comics, the second oldest existing comic book company created "Marvel Comics #1," which introduced the "Sub-Mariner" and the original "Human Torch." This same year the "Batman" (DC) was created, and joined in 1940 by the first teenage side-kick: "Robin, the Boy Wonder." Fawcett Comics debuted "Captain Marvel" ("SHAZAM!") in 1940, and the "Shadow" and "Doc Savage" were soon to follow. The latter three characters made a successful transition from the medium of radio to that of comic books. Timely Comics' "Captain America" and DC's first superheroine, "Wonder Woman," were introduced in 1941.

Comic books serve a three-fold purpose: first, they are the neo-myth of contemporary cultures; second, they are a source of entertainment and education; and third, they are part and parcel of a multi-million dollar industry. The comic book industry continues to expand with graphic novels, trade paperbacks, prestige format comics, hardcovers, magazines, reprints / revisions, limited editions, independents, and, most recently, on-line / Internet forays and multi-million dollar movies / videos. Currently, comic books hold the interest and enthusiasm of millions of readers, especially with the number of comic book-based movies that have premiered over the last 10 years. The popularity of the recent films based on comic book characters, such as "Batman" (DC), "Hulk" (Marvel), "Spiderman" (Marvel) and "Iron Man" (Marvel), is phenomenal and evidences that fact.

All of these characters represent the collective prototype of the American (U.S.A.) superhero. Even though they have distinct origins and are based in distinct scientific, mythological, metaphysical or extraterrestrial concepts, their ethos and aesthetic are

decidedly Europoid ("White"). If one recalls the motto of "Superman" from comic book to television, he "fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American way." With the advent of World War II, (1938-1945), new heroes and villains with which ethnic European-Americans could identify were created. DC and Marvel superheroes like "Wonder Woman" and "Captain America," respectively, were an even more effective propaganda than that issued by the U.S. government.

By the end of 1954 the Comics Code Authority was created to standardize the comic industry. In 1956, DC introduced the "Flash" in the comic book entitled "Showcase," adding more success to the comic book industry. DC dominated in the industry until 1961 when Marvel Comics introduced the "Fantastic Four." The "Hulk," the "Amazing Spiderman," the "Avengers" and the "X-Men" were soon to follow. The comics' code, no doubt, impacted the type and kind of characters comic book companies would create, including characters that comic book publishers assumed would not be "offensive" to the "general public." The "general public" did not include people of African descent. Thus, the stereotypical mold set in the previously for Africoid ("Black") characters would be upheld with few exceptions.

Comic Book Historian, Prof. William H. Foster III, who is also the curator of a perpetual exhibit entitled, "**The Changing Image of African Americans in Comics: 1890's-1990's**," states: "Images of Black people at the turn of the 20th century were anything but flattering. And, even though images of Black people go back to the first acknowledged comic strip (**The Yellow Kid, 1895**), they are very stereotypical. This kind of image of Blacks as ugly savages in Africa or as jockeys, maids and porters continued right up until the late 1950's. Although a small company in the late 1940's published **All-Negro Comics #1**, it was aimed strictly at a Black readership, and contained its own stereotypical characters. It was a worthy effort, however, because in the world of mainstream comic book publishers, Black characters were nearly non-existent."

Prof. Foster's reference is to the first documented Black comic book superhero, "**Lion Man**," created in 1947 by **Mr. Orrin C. Evans** ("The Father of Black Comic Books") for **All-Negro Comics #1** in Philadelphia, PA. To add to this acclaim, **All-Negro Comics #1** is the first independently produced Black comic book.

Special mention must be given to **Mr. Bertram A. Fitzgerald** (b. 1932) in Harlem, NY to Bertram Fitzgerald, Sr. and Hattie Sessoms. Mr. Fitzgerald was the publisher of the **Golden Legacy Series** of Black history comic books (1966 - 1976). Mr. Fitzgerald served as editor and publisher of the 16-issue historical series, and authored nearly half of the series.

I have been a comic book enthusiast, archivist, collector and trader since 1975. For over three decades I have collected data on the overall portrayal of Black super-powered characters in Marvel and DC Trademark Comics. With few exceptions, these portrayals leave much to be desired. However, the more recent character portrayals, although few and far between, are hopeful!

Also, according to Prof. Foster, "This [lack of ethnic and image diversity in comic books] was challenged in the late 1960's and early 1970's, coinciding with the Civil Rights Era, the Black Power Movement and [the creation of] the Black Panther Party."

The plight of the Black super-powered character is exemplified by the fact that until the 1970's DC Comics had no Black or Africoid characters in its line-up. Marvel Comics was

slightly ahead of its time when it introduced the first African continental superhero character. Yes, there were intermittent Black characters that were side-kicks, soldiers and the like, but the first time we see a bona fide "Black" costumed superhero in the mainstream (Eurostream) is in 1966 in Marvel Comics' **Fantastic Four #52** in the guise of the Black Panther! This character, the king of the scientifically and technologically advanced fictitious African nation of Wakanda remains popular after 43 years!

Since that time, DC, Marvel and the independent comic companies have created literally thousands of super-powered characters that have appeared in thousands of issues of comic books. Ironically, or perhaps not so ironically, out of the thousands of super-powered characters created by these comic companies from 1938-2009, most were insignificant and inconsequential, and less than twenty-five were Black or Africoid. And, of these, only 5 per company, max, are potentially critical to the respective comic universes. That is to say, that if the Black super-powered characters in these universes were to disappear, with exception of 5 or so of these characters, their absence would mean absolutely nothing! Of those few, one or two from each company who had their own titles had those titles only briefly.

To address this general absence of Black super-powered characters, from 1990 - 1995, there was an attempt on the part of independent African American comic creators / publishers to produce more Black super-powered characters. This impetus was followed by the two major comic book conglomerates (Marvel & DC), particularly with the creation of *DC's Milestone Media*, and some of the newly-formed independent comic companies like *Image*. Generally, Marvel and DC claimed that their readership was not interested in such characters! And, thus, they did not feel an obligation to their readership to develop Black or Africoid super-powered characters.

Since 1990 there has been a surge of Black or Africoid super-powered characters that have been categorized as Heruic, Africentric / Afrocentric, Pan-African or "Black Age." The latter term is referenced by Mr. Turtel Onli, an independent artist in Chicago who made one of the earliest attempts (1981) to produce a "Black Age" comic book.

Here is a very meager but broad-based sampling of some of the independent initiatives that creatively filled the void:

NOG: Protector of the Pyramids (1981). Created and written by Turtel Onli / Onli Studios / Chicago, IL;

Parallax: The 3rd Wave (1987). Created by Nijel Binns / TCN Comics / Los Angeles, CA;

Black Thunder (1990). Created by Ernest Gibbs, Jr. / Breeze Comics / Rock Hill, SC;

Brotherman (1990). Created Jason, David and Guy Sims / Big City Comics, Inc. / Irving, TX;

Captain Africa (1990). Created by Dwayne Ferguson / African Prince Productions / Somerville, NJ;

Horus: Son of Osiris (1990). Created by Roger Barnes / ACME Comics / Harlem, NY;

Numidian Force (1990). Created by Kamal Shariff / Kamite Comics / Cambridge, MA;

Ebony Warrior (1992). Created by Eric Griffin / Africa Rising Comics / Cupertino, CA;

Original Man (1992). Created by Tony Jappa and Alonso Washington / Omega 7 Comics / Kansas City, KS;

Lionheart (1993). Created by McKinley Mitchell, Jr. / Prophecy Comics / South Haven, MI.

As I wrote in an article (1992) entitled, **A New Direction in Original American Mythology: The Africentric Superhero Comic Book Tradition**, there are untapped markets in the U.S.A. (and the world), but the struggle is for the minds and imagination of people who have been exposed primarily to Eurostream and Eurocentric images on a planetary and universal scale. This over-exposure hinders, disables or precludes the general "suspension of belief" when it comes to Black imagery in comic books and sci-fi. That is to say, that the general comic book readership is unable to see Black super-powered characters in the same light (no pun intended!) as the White super-powered characters. Because of this, it takes an extra effort to make the switch from the "real" world to that of the comic book, or for that matter to any realm that does not cast the Black character in a stereotypical or "expected" role.

The question is never anything as trite and cliché as: "Is it time for a Black superhero?" or "Where are the Black superheroes?" The fact is that Black superheroes date as far back as 10,000 B.C.! Superheroes are not created in a vacuum. The contemporary comic book reader has been removed from the historic continuum and exposed to images that confine and limit the imagination to prescribed parameters.

In fact, in 2009, there is a plethora of Black super-powered characters. All one has to do is visit Mr. Omar Bilal's website for the Museum of Black Superheroes: www.blacksuperhero.com. There is no shortage of creativity, ideas or even money! What is still lacking after more than 70 years is opportunity, business sense and an operational strategy to distribute and market these characters in the face of a distribution, marketing and media monopoly.

Enter:



AD 1986: First World Komix (FWK), Inc. is an educational and social-change entity designed to incorporate ancient, contemporary and neo-mythologies, art and imagery to address, promote and unveil the universality of the "Hero" and the interconnectedness of the Human Family through the FWK Curriculum: Kemet & Komix in the Classroom (created in 1982 and revised in 1988).

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AD 2002: The East Coast Black Age of Comics Convention (ECBACC), Inc., created initially to serve as a medium using comic books to address statutory illiteracy in the U.S.A (1619 - 1957) and its current educational consequences by networking with comic book creators to produce positive and ennobling comic book, science fiction and fantasy imagery, the ECBACC, a replicable model for community-based comic book conventions, has successfully cultivated images of Black super-powered characters and has effectively served as a nexus, conduit and catalyst for Black comic book creators, their colleagues and fans since 2002!

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