

Mandela: the myths & and the man

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It was all quite predictable, I suppose, that when Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was rushed to hospital for the fourth time in almost as many months, the media would flock, much like vultures around an expiring stag, to take up positions outside the hospital. That they would be joined by prayerful well wishers and others was also inevitable, as was the massive media outpouring that probably exhausted almost every aspect of the equally inevitable obituaries to come.

One Scandinavian news editor at least had the presence of mind to adopt a slightly different tack: he instructed his Africa correspondent to try to establish who would “carry forward the legacy of Mandela”. Of course, this begs the essential question: what is the Mandela legacy? Where does reality end and myth begin? However, the news editor was reacting to the myth, to the idea of the saintly reconciliator, the virtual demi-god who had spent 27 years in prison before emerging to stride confidently into the spotlight of the world’s media.

Twenty years earlier, had Mandela, at that time still fairly newly released from incarceration, been able to see into this future, he may well have been astounded. Because, in December 1992, sitting in his new office in the headquarters of the African National Congress (ANC) in Johannesburg, he expressed bemused concern about the image of himself that he saw being created. It was the product, he felt, of “naive and romantic” expectations; of “the idea of a messiah armed with a magic wand”.

I was with him in order to “ghost” a personal column to be circulated under his name by the United Nations’ Inter Press Service when he noted: “All I know is that I am no messiah.” Even then it was obvious that this was a role ascribed to him by many — and not least among some who had been among his opponents in previous decades. Myth and material reality were fusing to create the image of what Mandela referred to as belief in “a demi god striding forth”. However, he was at the time convinced that this image was no more than a passing illusion that was already in the process of being demolished.

“I know I was the subject of such illusions when I came out of jail,” he said. And he went on to stress that not only did he not have a magic wand, he and his fellow prisoners “were and are products of a tradition that believes in collective effort, in teamwork”. He went on to predict confidently: “The myths have largely been exploded: we are seen today as ordinary human beings, flesh and blood and subject to all the usual human frailties.”

He was wrong. Because the myth making continued, and focussed on a Mandela figure who is now referred to as a “global icon” a term that amounts, in other words, to a secular messiah, whether alive or dead. This was well summed up in a South African Sunday newspaper, even before there was any sign that Mandela was definitely about to slip in that good night: “Our Mandela is an immortal that (sic) transcends, race, gender, geography, religion and politics. Our Mandela will never die. He is the father of our nation.” At least the writer did acknowledge, however, that this was the product of a “Mandela cult”.

It is a cult that still seems to grow despite Mandela’s own dismissal of it. And it probably has even more adherents in countries beyond South Africa, especially in those liberal parliamentary

democracies that rallied so enthusiastically to the anti-apartheid cause when the ANC conflated his personality with all the idealism embodied in the anti-racist struggle.

Perhaps on the basis of “if you can’t fight it, use it”, Mandela also adapted to the myth, finding that he could leverage, for example, large sums of money from business tycoons to fund pet projects such as schools in his home province of the Eastern Cape. And he saw to the establishment of the Nelson Mandela Centre for Memory that houses not only his own history, and that of others who struggled for human rights, but also continues to collect, collate and analyse ongoing battles for these principles. Significantly, he approved the fact that the image of the centre should be an open hand and not his own face.

But he, especially as South Africa’s president, was often accorded virtual demi-god status by many who paid tributes in cash and kind. He was soon a very wealthy man. His fellow prisoners, sentenced with him in 1964, never attained the same financial status. Nor did they become the political team they had been during their years in the notorious Robben Island prison. Yet, as Mandela himself stressed in 1992: “There is no one individual among us who is above others in position or ability.”

There are several reasons for the fact that Mandela ended up towering above the others, not the least of which was his own ability and personality. But the insistence by his party on developing a personality cult around a man of “flesh and blood, subject to all the usual frailties” played a major role. As did another factor that tends to be buried deep by believers and supporters of the myth. This is because it tarnishes the myth, although not the man. For it is a simple truth that individuals, however dedicated and strong in character, who are subject to the routine and rigours of prison life for 20 years and more, find it impossible to step straight out into the world outside and to function normally.

And, while the other prisoners sentenced with Mandela in 1964 were, for the most part, released directly from prison to a life that had changed immeasurable during their incarceration, Mandela was effectively groomed for his role at the head of the organisation that would negotiate the end to the system of apartheid. He was the obvious leader of the group and accepted as the leader of the largest anti-apartheid movement, the ANC. It was also he — against some opposition from some of his former Rivonia trialists — who had opened discussions with a regime that was already in trouble, both economically and in terms of domestic unrest.

Mandela’s position, along with the massive international publicity built up around his name, persuaded the likes of apartheid justice minister Kobie Coetzee, that Mandela could be someone with whom a deal might be struck. Coetzee, along with the apartheid state’s security supremo Daniel — “Niel” — Barnard was also aware that Mandela was not the radical revolutionary, let alone terrorist, that their own regime had portrayed him to be.

Rolihlahla — “Nelson” — Mandela was an aristocrat and lawyer whose clear aim had been to dismantle the racial bias in the system, not to transform the system itself. As such, he was a reformist who had been forced by South African circumstance, to become a revolutionary. Like Albert Luthuli, his predecessor as president of the ANC, he had always agitated for a national convention, for a negotiated settlement leading to a non-racial parliamentary dispensation.

That he remained true to this ideal throughout nearly two decades of incarceration on Robben Island — and despite numerous blandishments and offered bribes — speaks volumes about the integrity of a man of exceptional ability. That, despite even further blandishments, he refused to budge from his demands when transferred from the island, adds to his stature as a politician. But a man none-the-less. Internationally, however, his status had become that of icon — of a virtual demi god — even before he was moved, after 17 years on Robben Island, to the more relaxed conditions of Pollsmoor

Prison in Cape Town.

In the more spacious, yet still grim confines of Pollsmoor, the food improved and the access to visitors, books and news was better for the prisoner who entered Robben Island as 466/64 and was now D220/82. In 1964 he had been the 466th prisoner into the island's prison; in 1982, he became the 220th convict in the "D" section of Pollsmoor. He had one more move — and one more prison number to add, 1335/88 — before he was finally released on February 11, 1991.

And when the prisoner who had not been seen in public for 27 years emerged from the gates of the Victor Verster prison in Paarl, north of Cape Town he looked fit, healthy, happy — and confident. Few people — apart from a some individuals who had spent lengthy times in prison — found it exceptional that Mandela, apparently held for 27 years in and apartheid jail, was able to stride forth from the gates of a prison, to address the thousands of supporters who thronged Cape Town's Grand Parade.

He was able to do so because the desperate reformers in the apartheid apparatus, led by Kobie Coetzee, realised that they, as much as the ANC, needed a leader who was able to function immediately on release in a world that had changed dramatically since the Rivonia trial of 1964. When the prison doors closed on Mandela and his comrades, there were no fax machines, let alone mobile telephones or personal computers. There had been much rapid change in the outside world while, in prison, the rigours and routine of lock up, of queueing for doors to be opened and locked shut had remained unaltered, day after day, year after year, sometimes for decades.

Newly released long-term prisoners often found even the volume of traffic, the noises, smells and numbers of people disconcerting. So it was that Mandela was first taken on several excursions out of Cape Town. Then, after a spell in the private Constantiaberg clinic where he was treated for tuberculosis, he was transferred to the spacious home of the former deputy governor of Victor Verster prison. This would be, the authorities decreed, his "halfway house" to eventual freedom. It was 1988 and the house contained all mod cons, including a fax machine, television and video recorder, and a swimming pool.

It was a truly gilded cage for the man destined to become the first non-racial president of South Africa. "Anything you need, anything you desire, just ask," he was told and was introduced to his personal chef, Jack Swart, who, although skilled in the culinary arts, was also a prison warden. According to one of the warders present at the time, Mandela smiled, said "thank you" — and refrained from asking for his freedom and a democratic dispensation. He knew he was still a prisoner, that every telephone call and fax message would be monitored. But he was also aware that it was only a matter of time before he would walk free, never having compromised with the regime. He was, effectively, calling the shots.

This was Mandela the pragmatic politician who, if he considered it would benefit the ANC and his vision for the country, would negotiate with dictators such as Mobutu sese Seko of then Zaire and with the Indonesia's Suharto just as he did with the apartheid bosses. As he said, he had "all the usual frailties" — and the demolition of the myths that continue to surround his name, does nothing to diminish the man. It does not topple a demi-god, it shatters illusions and humanises an exceptional individual.

What does tarnish the name is the behaviour of some of his family, who, when it became obvious that Mandela was ailing, began an unseemly squabble to get their hands on his money. These matters are now before the courts. This has nothing to do with the Mandela legacy that, stripped of myth, is simply that it is possible to make the best of whatever circumstances exist while remaining true to core beliefs.

As such, Mandela would probably have been pleased to see Gloria Tibani who came to wish him well outside the Medi-Clinic Heart Hospital in Pretoria. At the same time she sold *vetkoek* (a deep-fried bun) and slices of polony to augment her income.

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P.S.

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