

Hamba Khale, Madiba: The Contestation Between Symbolism and Mythologies

As Mandela passes on to join the ancestors, a wave of sadness sweeps the entire planet. There can be few places and few people who are not in some way deeply affected by this event.

Madiba symbolizes many things for many people. For the survivors of the brutality of apartheid, he is the symbol of the victory of their struggle for freedom and justice, the symbol of the possibility of a future that is about creating a better world, and not a world built on bitterness for past crimes, the symbol of all those values on which the South African constitution was founded. For the oppressed and exploited across Africa, he represents the finest qualities of integrity and principled leadership, the hero who dared to re-assert the humanity of the colonized over the tyranny of empire. For those unjustly imprisoned, he symbolizes the hope of freedom. For anti-apartheid activists across the world, Mandela represents the worth of the years of persistent organizing and creative campaigning. For groups like Amnesty International, he represents their shame for failing to recognize him as a political prisoner. For capital (international and local), Mandela is the saint who delivered a peaceful transition from apartheid that ensured that their hegemony continued undisturbed. For the international financial institutions and World Bank, the rapid implementation of structural adjustment programmes in South Africa would not have been possible without the endorsement of Madiba.

All these symbols of Mandela, and many others, co-exist. They are all in some ways true, and yet none of them are wholly accurate. Physically small in stature, Mandela is universally recognized as a giant of our era for good reason. The example of his life of courage, compassion, and determination in the face of extreme violence and injustice reaches into the dark prisons of our times and into the hearts of millions of people around the world who hope and struggle for a better future for humanity.

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It is the tragedy of great people that their passing provides the opportunity for those in power to create a myth to serve their own interests, a myth that often serves to arrest the very vitality that such lives inspired. We are already witnessing the creation of mythologies of Mandela. (Or perhaps consolidation is a better word, for this process has been going on for some time, especially since he resigned as President). The mythologies will be articulated through obituaries in corporate media, through the speeches of politicians, through the eulogies sung at his funeral, through the proclamations of commemorative holidays, biographies, institutions, and so on.

Mythologies about great people, whether they portray them as saints or as villains, are idealized representations, and as such, fundamentally reactionary. Mythologies are the sustenance of all forms of fundamentalism, whether religious or ideological (e.g. the market fundamentalism of neo-liberalism). The contributions of great people are frequently reduced to a few simple 'truths', truths that are based on the denial of uncomfortable aspects of their stories, and thus ironically based also on lies.

The process of mythologizing represents a contestation between symbolism and mythology. The greatest disservice that we could pay to Mandela is to allow the complexity, courage and humanity of his long life to be reduced to a fairy tale. Mandela represents for so many the finest values of courage, liberation and freedom. For all his exceptional greatness, he lived and struggled in the world as a human being with others. His legacy should not be placed on a pedestal of myth but rather inspire us to take lessons from the complexity and imperfections of those struggles as we continue the long walk to freedom.

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