

## Archetypal hero or living saint? The veneration of Nelson Mandela

Paul Maylam\*

It is now a commonplace that Nelson Mandela – Madiba – has become the most venerated, iconic political figure of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Accolades and awards have been heaped upon him. In the words of Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary-General, “To this day, Madiba remains probably the single most admired, most respected international figure in the entire world”.<sup>1</sup> “In these times of global warfare and strife,” remarks Desmond Tutu, “... Nelson Mandela stands out as a global icon for peace, love, reconciliation and magnanimity.”<sup>2</sup> In the international media, Mandela has been variously described as the only living saint,<sup>3</sup> and as “a moral colossus” towering over the world.<sup>4</sup> Nadine Gordimer views Gandhi and Mandela as “the two indisputably magnificent great people of the last millennium.”<sup>5</sup> The former Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, was determined, when still in office, that a statue of Mandela be built in Trafalgar Square “so Nelson on his column and Nelson Mandela on his pedestal would in a sense encapsulate the beginning and the end of the British Empire.”<sup>6</sup> There are actual plans afoot to construct a massive statue of Mandela, along the lines of the Statue of Liberty, overlooking the harbour in Port Elizabeth.

To add to this acclaim, are the numerous awards and other forms of recognition accorded to Mandela over the past four decades or more. At least 80 universities in 30 or so countries have conferred honorary doctorates on him. Forty-two cities have granted him their “freedom”. Streets, sporting events, and a university (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth) have been named after him. He has been the recipient of over 60 international human rights awards – the most important being the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded jointly with F.W. de Klerk in 1993.<sup>7</sup> On top of this, there has been a spate of books. Some have been serious biographies, such as those by Meer, Meredith, Sampson, Lodge and Boehmer, while others have been produced as glossy, “coffee-table” publications.

It might be imagined that such reverence would preclude criticism of Mandela. Certainly critique has generally been muted, with a few exceptions. There were predictable outcries from the USA right wing when Mandela slammed the planned

---

\* Paul Maylam is Professor of History at Rhodes University. The most recent of his five books is *The Cult of Rhodes: Remembering an Imperialist in Africa* (2005)

1 M Maharaj, A Kathrada and K Parkin (eds), *Mandela: the Authorised Portrait* (Bloomsbury, London, 2006), p 5

2 X Mangcu (ed), *The Meaning of Mandela* (HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2006), p viii

3 C Smith, *Mandela* (Struik Publishers, Cape Town, 1999), p 140

4 M Kalungu-Banda, *Leading like Madiba: Leadership Lessons from Nelson Mandela* (Double Storey, Cape Town, 2006)

5 Maharaj, Kathrada & Parkin (eds), *Mandela*, p 314

6 Maharaj, Kathrada & Parkin (eds), *Mandela*, p 324

7 J Daniel, “Soldiering on: the post-presidential years of Nelson Mandela 1999-2005”, in R Southall and H Melber (eds), *Legacies of Power: Leadership Change and Former Presidents in African Politics* (HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2006), pp 45-46

invasion of Iraq early in 2003. Michael Ledeen, a neoconservative commentator, described Mandela as “yet another African loudmouth, giving moral lessons to the world and tolerating corruption and misery on his own continent”.<sup>8</sup> Of more consequence have been some sharp critiques from the left, such as that put forward by John Pilger who subjected Mandela to a tough, searching interview in 1997. The thrust of Pilger’s questioning was that in the aftermath of apartheid, Mandela’s government had done little to redress inequality and socio-economic imbalances, neglecting to improve the lot of impoverished communities. Pilger was also critical of the Mandela government’s failure to pay sufficient attention to human rights issues in its foreign policy.<sup>9</sup> Patrick Bond has offered a similar critique, arguing that when Mandela’s government in 1996 adopted a new economic policy, known as Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), it was in effect succumbing to neo-liberalism. Under GEAR there was resort to privatisation, and to trade liberalisation, opening the country to cheap imports and weakening its manufacturing base. The policy shift was designed to attract foreign investment, but this did not materialise to the expected extent. Instead the rate of economic growth declined in the two years after the introduction of GEAR. Even worse, was the rising unemployment levels: it has been reckoned that half-a-million jobs were lost during Mandela’s presidency.<sup>10</sup>

In a thoughtful newspaper article, Bongani Madondo, a South African journalist, has bemoaned the way in which the widespread veneration of Mandela has hampered serious analysis: “Out there, in the publishing world, Nelson Mandela, the person, the father, the political hero, the media celebrity, the moral voice, the political statesman, has metamorphosed into St Nelson: the god figurine of our age”. Madondo continues:

Making him a saint or, worse still, failing to question his beliefs, his doings and his persona as a human being, as a man, as a father, far beyond a political construct, has results opposite to the desired canonisation

Our reluctance to appreciate the different layers of this man – his complexity, inconsistencies and faults, alongside his beauty and vision – is robbing him of his lasting impression on global psycho-political reality<sup>11</sup>

Elleke Boehmer, in similar vein, has suggested that Mandela’s life has become the national story, “South Africa’s main governing tale, its modern myth, as reflected in government school-readers and children’s cartoon-book histories”. She goes on to state that the main biographers of Mandela have tended “to approach him by his own lights, as, for example, the determined leader of the more militant tendency in the ANC, or the disciplined pilot of his country’s destiny”. For these biographers “Mandela embodies a post-apartheid South Africa. For some, additionally, he is a model, a history with a nationalist moral attached, a pedagogic tale bearing political truth”.<sup>12</sup>

---

8 *National Review Online*, 3 February 2003

9 J Pilger, *Freedom Next Time* (Transworld Publishers, London, 2006), pp 256-260

10 P Bond, *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neo-Liberalism in South Africa* (Pluto Press, London, 2000), pp 51, 193-194; A Sparks, *Beyond the Miracle: Inside the New South Africa* (Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 2003), pp 21-26, 198

11 *Sunday Times* [South Africa], 25 February 2007

12 E Boehmer, *Nelson Mandela: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008), pp 5-6

## The archetypal hero

“Unhappy the land that has no heroes,” says Andrea, a character in Brecht’s play, *The Life of Galileo*. “No,” replies Galileo, “unhappy the land that needs heroes.” Andrea’s view was in accord with that of Thomas Carlyle whose book, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, was published in 1841. Carlyle believed that the “Veneration of great men is perennial in the nature of man,”<sup>13</sup> and that such veneration is an entirely desirable human trait:

... in all times and places, the Hero has been worshipped. It will ever be so. We all love great men; love, venerate and bow down submissive before great men: nay can we honestly bow down to anything else? Ah, does not every true man feel that he is himself made higher by doing reverence to what is really above him? No nobler or more blessed feeling dwells in man’s heart.<sup>14</sup>

For Carlyle hero-worship was as important to human society as heroism itself.

It is now difficult to take seriously such sentiments, or the purple, sexist language. Galileo’s riposte carries more salience today. At the same time, though, Jungian theory has given rise to some important work on heroic archetypes and hero-myths. Archetypes in general embody the particular characteristics of a particular type of human – characteristics that have been collectively displayed by that type over the ages. According to the theory, all people live out their lives, more or less instinctively or unconsciously, along the lines of particular archetypes. One Jungian scholar has defined archetypes as “innate neuropsychic centres”, as phenomena not too different from instincts that shape human behaviour.<sup>15</sup> Heroic archetypes in particular represent a deep psychological aspect of human existence. Hero myths, according to Anthony Storr, “give shape, form, and often artistic expression to emotional experience.”<sup>16</sup> The hero’s journey is likened to that of an individual’s growth path from infancy to adulthood, freeing the self from dependence on parents or, perhaps, striving to restrain animal-like instincts.

Hero stories have abounded throughout history – in religion, in ancient mythology, and in modern movies. It might be the story of Moses, or Odysseus, or Aeneas; it might be *Star Wars*, or *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Such stories have a universal appeal because, in the words of Christopher Vogler, “they well up from a universal source in the shared unconscious and reflect universal concerns”.<sup>17</sup> Since the late nineteenth century, these stories have been analysed and theorised. The anthropologist, Edward Tylor, in the early 1870s suggested that many of these stories follow a similar trajectory: “the hero is exposed at birth, is saved by other humans or animals, and grows up to become a national hero.”<sup>18</sup>

---

13 M K Goldberg, “Notes and Introduction”, in T Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1993), p lxi

14 Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p 14

15 A Stevens, *Archetype Revisited* (Brunner-Routledge, London, 2002), pp 60, 85-86

16 A Storr, *Jung* (Fontana, London, 1982), p 37

17 C Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey* (Michael Wiese Productions, Studio City, 1998), p 11

18 R A Segal, “Introduction”, in R A Segal (ed), *Hero Myths* (Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2000), p 12

In South African history, two other figures in particular, besides Mandela, have been accorded heroic status, by various constituencies in specific contexts: Shaka and Rhodes. As Dan Wylie has shown, accounts of Shaka's life, mostly based on the flimsiest of evidence, have been embellished and fashioned into stories resembling folk-tales. For European writers, Zulu nationalists and Pan-Africanists alike, he has been represented as the heroic nation-builder.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, for at least the first sixty years of the twentieth century, admirers of Cecil Rhodes – biographers and commemorators – strove to glorify him as the heroic, visionary empire-builder.<sup>20</sup>

Among the foremost theorists of hero stories has been Joseph Campbell, whose book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, first published in 1949, has been described as “the classic Jungian analysis of hero myths”.<sup>21</sup> For Campbell, these heroes are viewed as Jungian archetypes – characters who appear and recur in diverse cultures over the ages, and who manifest the deepest, often unconscious, dreams and urges of humankind.

The core of Campbell's book is an outline of what he calls “the hero's journey”. This journey generally plays out according to a broad pattern:

The mythological hero, setting forth from his common day hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark ... or be slain by the opposition and descend in death ... Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward ... The final work is that of the return ... At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir).<sup>22</sup>

This pattern is not followed in exactly the same form by all heroes, but the essential elements of separation and return always seem to be there.

In the separation phase, the hero “may be carried or sent abroad by some benign or malignant agent, as was Odysseus, driven about the Mediterranean by the winds of the angered god, Poseidon”.<sup>23</sup> He (it is generally “he”) is taken to a “fateful region” – perhaps “a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state”.<sup>24</sup> There the hero is “swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died”.<sup>25</sup> And there “he must survive a succession of trials. This is a favourite phase of the myth-adventure. It has produced a world literature of miraculous tests and

---

19 D Wylie, *Savage Delight: White Myths of Shaka* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2000), pp 198-201

20 See P Maylam, *The Cult of Rhodes: Remembering an Imperialist in Africa* (David Philip, Cape Town, 2005)

21 Segal, “Introduction”, p 17

22 J Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1949), pp 245-246

23 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p 58

24 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p 58

25 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p 90

ordeals”.<sup>26</sup> In confronting and surviving these dreadful trials and tribulations, the hero is purified and reborn, able to return to the real world “made great and filled with creative power”.<sup>27</sup> Upon this return, the hero “brings back from his adventure the means for the regeneration of his society as a whole”.<sup>28</sup> And this regeneration is achieved: “The effect of the successful adventure of the hero is the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world.”<sup>29</sup>

Campbell provides well-known examples: Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, experiencing trauma and salvation in the wilderness of Sinai. Or Aeneas, leaving the fallen Troy, passing through the underworld, before moving on to lay the foundations for the city of Rome.<sup>30</sup> Then there is Odysseus, who experiences many dangers and traumas during his wanderings, but survives and returns to recover and restore the kingdom of Ithaca. In these heroic lives “the really creative acts”, states Campbell, “are represented as those derived from some sort of dying to the world”. The hero then “comes back as one reborn, made great and filled with creative power”.<sup>31</sup>

To what extent does Mandela’s life accord with this standard narrative of the archetypal hero? Clearly there are basic areas in which they do correspond. The “separation-initiation-return” trajectory would seem to be applicable to Mandela’s life from the time of his imprisonment through to his release and accession to the presidency. It is therefore worth exploring in more detail the usefulness of Campbell’s model for understanding the “Mandela phenomenon”.

While the focus of such an exploration will necessarily be on the years of Mandela’s imprisonment and beyond, it is also evident that there are heroic, romantic elements in the Mandela narrative even before his prison years. He is, for instance, the “country boy” – words that Mandela himself has used for self-description – who moves to the city and becomes a militant activist and leader in the anti-apartheid struggle. His heart lies in the rural Transkei, but he is propelled into a higher endeavour in support of a just cause.

During the 1950s in Johannesburg, Mandela established himself as an important political actor in the ANC, but he was not yet the romantic, heroic figure that he would become. The aura and mystique began to take on in the early 1960s. After the Sharpeville massacre in March 1960, Mandela was arrested and detained for five months. Following his release, he was forced to go underground. Known as the “Black Pimpernel” – the romantic fugitive hero – he took on various disguises and moved around the country rallying support for a mass stay away set for the end of May 1961, to coincide with South Africa becoming a republic. He remained on the run for months, during which time he was able to escape South Africa to visit other African countries, before being detected and arrested in August 1962.<sup>32</sup>

---

26 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p 97

27 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pp 35-36

28 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p 38

29 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p 40

30 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pp 34-35

31 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pp 35-36

32 A Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorised Biography* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1999), pp 142, 151-156; M Meredith, *Nelson Mandela: A Biography* (Penguin Books, London, 1997), pp 196-197, 206-207

The 1963-1964 Rivonia Trial marks a defining episode in establishing Mandela's heroic status and image. The key moment of the trial, which took place over a period of almost eight months, was Mandela's speech from the dock. Instead of taking the stand as a defence witness, Mandela chose to read out a long, four-hour historic statement outlining why he and the ANC had resorted to more militant forms of opposition in the face of unremitting racial oppression. It is an extraordinarily powerful speech – principled, defiant, uncompromising, lofty and dignified, revealing Mandela's own great integrity and spirit of self-sacrifice. Most telling of all are the final words of the speech:

I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.<sup>33</sup>

Lodge has described this speech as “one of the most effective rhetorical texts delivered by a South African politician”.<sup>34</sup> Mandela refused to tone down the speech so as to gain a more lenient sentence and avoid the death penalty.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Mandela made it clear that he would not launch an appeal, should the death penalty be imposed.<sup>36</sup> Here we see two other elements in the hero's journey – confrontation with death, and self-sacrifice. The hero comes close to death, but survives. And he is willing to make an enormous sacrifice – his freedom, or even his life – for a greater, noble cause.

The final words of Mandela's speech were also some of his last words to be heard in public for almost the next twenty-six years. As Sampson has put it, “Mandela went to jail with all the glory of a lost leader, in an aura of martyrdom.”<sup>37</sup> The Rivonia verdict and sentence – life imprisonment – marked the beginning of Mandela's journey into the “underworld”, into a dark, oppressive cavern: a journey in which he would be subjected to severe tribulations, tests and temptations – the journey of so many mythical heroes. It is the start of Campbell's three-stage odyssey of “separation-initiation-return”. As Mandela is dispatched to prison on Robben Island in 1964, he “disappears” from the public eye, and is separated from the outside world. The Western media, at least in the short-to-medium term, lose interest in him; and in the South African media he is effectively obliterated for years with draconian laws prohibiting coverage of the imprisoned leaders.

During the early years of their incarceration, Mandela and his fellow prisoners were subjected to extreme hardship and tested to the full. Prison conditions were appalling. Mandela occupied a small cell, eight by seven foot in size. His “bed” comprised a straw mat and three blankets, laid out on a cold cement floor. A light shone all night in the cell. There was no access to a radio or newspaper, and watches were not permitted. One letter could be written and one received, subject to tight censorship, every six months. Communication between prisoners was heavily restricted. Some of the prison officers and warders were gratuitously brutal. Hard labour was undertaken in a lime quarry, where the bright light was damaging to

---

33 Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, p 268

34 T. Lodge, *Mandela: A Critical Life* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006), p 113

35 Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, pp 262-263

36 Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, pp 271-272

37 Sampson, *Mandela*, p 199

eyes.<sup>38</sup> From 1967, though, there would be a slow but gradual improvement in the treatment and conditions of the prisoners, partly as a result of intervention by outsiders like Helen Suzman, the Progressive Party MP.

For Mandela, there were also times of extreme emotional anguish and grief. In 1968, he was visited by his mother and three other family members. A few weeks later he received a telegram to inform him that his mother had died. He requested permission to bury her in the Transkei, but was bluntly turned down. More dreadful tidings came in 1969 – news that his son, Thembi, had been killed in a car accident. Again, Mandela was refused permission to attend the funeral.<sup>39</sup>

The archetypal hero endures and survives such agonies and ordeals. Mandela developed his own survival strategies. In his autobiography he stresses the importance of gaining satisfaction in one's daily life, deriving fulfilment from basic tasks such as washing clothes. When he was allowed to develop a small vegetable garden, he gained particular satisfaction.<sup>40</sup> A regular exercise routine kept him physically fit – rising at 05:30 in the morning, running on the spot for 45 minutes, followed by numerous press-ups, sit-ups, and knee-bends.<sup>41</sup> Mandela developed techniques for managing his relations with prison officers and warders. Without compromising himself, he tried to maintain good working relations. He saw warders as human beings, deserving of respect, and themselves victims of the apartheid system. A patient attitude was more effective than anger in their interactions, but Mandela would not tolerate affronts to his dignity, and would never descend into a fawning subservience. Indeed, over time he was able to become assertive towards warders, manifesting his own enormous moral authority and impressing with his legal knowledge.<sup>42</sup>

In prison, Mandela was also subjected to temptation, in the form of two conditional offers of release. In December 1974, Mandela was visited on Robben Island by the Minister of Justice, Jimmy Kruger. An uninformed, unsophisticated man, Kruger proposed to Mandela that he might be released if he agreed to live quietly in his childhood home of rural Transkei and recognise the Transkei government headed by his nephew, Kaiser Matanzima. Mandela rejected the offer outright, refusing to give any kind of legitimacy to the government's bantustan policy. Kruger returned a month later to repeat the offer, only to meet with firm rejection once more.<sup>43</sup>

In January 1985, President P.W. Botha offered to free Mandela on condition that he renounce violence. This time his rejection of the offer was a much more public affair. Mandela's response to Botha was read out by his daughter, Zindzi, at a mass rally in Soweto in February 1985 – the first words of Mandela to be heard in public since the Rivonia Trial over twenty years before. The response stressed how in the 1950s, Mandela had called for peaceful dialogue with the government, only for his

---

38 Sampson, *Mandela*, pp 205-208, 222-225; Lodge, *Mandela*, pp 116-118

39 Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, pp 306-308; Sampson, *Mandela*, p 247

40 N Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Macdonald Purnell, Johannesburg, 1994), pp 475-477

41 Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, pp 314-317

42 Sampson, *Mandela*, pp 215-217; Lodge, *Mandela*, pp 122-123; Maharaj, Kathrada & Parkin (eds), *Mandela*, p 169

43 Sampson, *Mandela*, p 241; Maharaj, Kathrada & Parkin (eds), *Mandela*, p 166

overtures to be spurned. It was up to Botha to renounce violence and dismantle apartheid. Mandela continued:

I cherish my own freedom dearly, but I care even more for your freedom. Too many have died since I went to prison. Too many have suffered for the love of freedom ... Not only I have suffered during these long, lonely, wasted years. I am not less life-loving than you are. But I cannot sell my birthright, nor am I prepared to sell the birthright of the people to be free ... Only free men can negotiate. Prisoners cannot enter into contracts ... I cannot and will not give any undertaking at a time when I and you, the people, are not free<sup>44</sup>

How tempting these offers must have been? After ten years of arduous, oppressive prison life, Kruger's proposal must have been enticing. But there is nothing in the historical record to suggest that Mandela ever wavered. Had he accepted the offer, he would have been spared another fifteen years of imprisonment. The public renunciation of Botha's offer ten years later underlined Mandela's spirit of self-sacrifice and confirmed his heroism. In his "journey through the underworld" of prison, Mandela was showing himself to be master, overcoming the trials, tribulations and temptations before him.

Prison hugely enhanced Mandela's heroic status and the mystique surrounding him. He became ever more of an iconic figure around the world. Many of his awards – twelve of the honorary doctorates, for instance – were bestowed on him while he was in prison.<sup>45</sup> Mandela was a remote figure, unheard and unseen – for years after 1965 no new pictures of him were seen. As Tom Lodge has noted, "The imprisonment and isolation from public view kept the narrative and the images that accompanied it pristine, invested with the glamour of martyrdom, but reinforced by the apocalyptic possibilities of a second coming."<sup>46</sup> In past ages many rulers have been endowed with semi-divine status. To sustain such sacred authority, they would generally have to set themselves apart from their people. As gods are unseen, so had they to live remote, secluded lives. In a paradoxical sense, prison for Mandela was both hell and heaven – subjecting him to extreme hardship inside, but elevating him to sainthood outside.

Writing soon after Mandela's release from prison in 1990, Rob Nixon highlighted the messianism that surrounded Mandela's return to the free world. By imprisoning Mandela, the South African state had "helped station the idea of Nelson Mandela on the threshold between the dead and the living, between commemoration and expectation."<sup>47</sup> Just before Mandela's release, one white South African told Ted Koppel on his TV programme, "Nightline", that "we need a Messiah to lead us out of the wilderness. Maybe Nelson Mandela is that man".<sup>48</sup>

This sanctification of Mandela, and the messianic expectations surrounding him, carried possible future dangers. If the iconic figure were to be released from prison, would he, in a world of harsh realities and in a country with a long history of oppression and conflict, live up to the idealised image? Was Mandela, as pictured

---

44 Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, p 356

45 Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, p 343; Lodge, *Mandela*, p 190

46 Lodge, *Mandela*, pp 192-193

47 R. Nixon, "Mandela, Messianism, and the Media", *Transition*, 51, 1991, p 44

48 Nixon, "Mandela, Messianism, and the Media", p 47



around the world, more mythical than real? Some predicted rapid deflation of the image. For instance, Credo Mutwa, a self-styled soothsayer, claimed in 1986 that after release, Mandela would soon cease to be a hero, becoming instead “a spent force like an arrow which has spent its passion.”<sup>49</sup> There was even whispering that it might be better for Mandela to be assassinated – that he was more valuable to the liberation movement as an icon, than as a real person with ordinary human frailties.<sup>50</sup>

As it turned out, such fears would not be realised. Mandela’s return – the final leg of Campbell’s three-stage journey – for the most part confirmed his iconic status. Mandela continued to live out the role of the archetypal hero. The actual day of his release, 11 February 1990, proved to be one of those memorable historical moments, captured live worldwide. As Sampson puts it, Mandela’s walk out of prison

provided the most powerful image of the time, even in an era of charismatic heroes overcoming tyrannies in Eastern Europe and Russia: of Gorbachev, Walesa, Havel and the fall of the Berlin Wall. For Mandela embodied a more elemental and universal myth, like a revolutionary opera or *The Odyssey*, depicting the triumph of the human spirit, the return of the lost leader.<sup>51</sup>

Soon after his release from prison, Mandela did a tour of South African cities, where huge rallies were held in his honour. At the Soweto rally, Mandela was introduced by Peter Mokaba, President of the South African Youth Congress: “Comrade President, here are your people, gathered to pay tribute to their messiah, their saviour whom the Apartheid regime failed dismally to silence.”<sup>52</sup>

Following a round of South African rallies, Mandela in mid-1990 went on an international tour, during which the homage and acclaim were just as impassioned. This was especially so in the USA – in New York Mandela’s motorcade passed through a 25-kilometre long tickertape parade.<sup>53</sup> He was welcomed by the city’s mayor as a new Moses, “leading the people of South Africa out of enslavement at the hands of the pharaoh”.<sup>54</sup> Mandela featured prominently in an issue of *Time* magazine which described him as the archetypal hero “who has emerged from a symbolic grave reborn, made great, and filled with creative power ... What Bolivar was to South America, what Lincoln was to America, Nelson Mandela is to Africa: the liberator”.<sup>55</sup>

Would such frenzied acclaim continue beyond the glowing aftermath of his release? Could Mandela live up to the messianic image of the saviour? Could he reasonably be expected to rescue a country scarred by decades of conflict, oppression and inequality? Could he hold together the ANC, which itself was divided between a militant wing determined to complete the revolutionary overthrow of the apartheid state, and a moderate element believing that negotiation and some degree of compromise offered the best hope for the future? Mandela opted for the latter position, but in so doing endangered his standing with militants who feared he would become a sell-out. For over three years, from mid-1990, there would be a protracted,

---

49 Lodge, *Mandela*, p 193

50 Maharaj, Kathrada & Parkin (eds), *Mandela*, p 7

51 Sampson, *Mandela*, p 407

52 Lodge, *Mandela*, p 196

53 Maharaj, Kathrada & Parkin (eds), *Mandela*, p 242

54 Lodge, *Mandela*, p 198

55 Sampson, *Mandela*, p 417

often fraught, negotiation process between the government and the ANC. The negotiations were carried on amidst ongoing violence and killing, which at times threatened to derail the whole process. Mandela often displayed a steely toughness towards the government, especially towards President De Klerk, while remaining committed to achieving a peaceful settlement. Cyril Ramaphosa, a key member of the ANC's negotiating team, later reflected on Mandela's style and approach: "There are moments when Madiba is pliable, moments when Madiba is compromising, when he understands the viewpoint of his adversaries and tries to find solutions that are mutually beneficial, but then there are moments ... when he is pushed too far he hits back."<sup>56</sup> Many analysts take the view that Mandela's role was crucial in South Africa's transition to full democracy. Lodge, for instance, contends that "Mandela's moral endorsement of political compromise was certainly indispensable in the success of South Africa's 'pacted' political transition."<sup>57</sup>

If the first part of Mandela's saviour role was to steer the negotiation process to a successful conclusion, the second part was to serve as South Africa's first democratically elected president in such a way as to bring some unity to a conflict-ridden country, to redress the awful imbalances and inequalities bequeathed by apartheid, and to instil national and international confidence in the new ANC-led government. Mandela's presidency from 1994 to 1999 has been subjected to critical analysis by some commentators and scholars. For the most part, though, the failings have been downplayed so as not to tarnish the image of Mandela as a great "nation-builder" – as the person who rose above his own past hardships and injustices and led the country into a new era of reconciliation and restoration.

Some have observed that during much of his term of office, Mandela was not really a decision-making president, but more a kind of regal, ceremonial figurehead. Deputy President Thabo Mbeki was in effect the chief decision-maker, especially after 1996.<sup>58</sup> During his first two years in office, from 1994 to 1996, Mandela did play a more decisive role – and, in the view of critics, displayed shortcomings as a leader. He made some poor appointments, often out of loyalty to long-standing allies and supporters. He could be slow to act against prominent ANC figures who became embroiled in corruption scandals. For instance, he stood solidly behind Allan Boesak, a Western Cape ANC leader, at a time when there was damning evidence of his role in a major corruption case. There were other instances, too, of Mandela maintaining a stubborn solidarity with leading ANC figures under suspicion for corruption.<sup>59</sup> Critics have also pointed to his tardy response to the AIDS pandemic, and to some seemingly confused aspects of his foreign policy, which laid stress on human rights in international affairs, but overlooked this concern when maintaining friendly relations with countries like Indonesia and Libya, that had dubious human rights records.<sup>60</sup>

Mandela's presidency, however, is unlikely to be remembered for its shortcomings. Ten years after leaving office, the glowing aura around Mandela has not dimmed at all. This may be partly due to the important humanitarian work that he

---

56 Maharaj, Kathrada & Parkin (eds), *Mandela*, p 251  
57 Lodge, *Mandela*, p 200  
58 Lodge, *Mandela*, pp 210-211; Sampson, *Mandela*, p 584  
59 Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, pp 542-545  
60 Sampson, *Mandela*, pp 556-560

has sponsored during these years, and to the charm, warmth and dignity that he consistently exudes. More important, the popular memory of his presidency continues to highlight his role as the nation-building saviour, glossing over the failings. Mandela's spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation will long be seen as the hallmark of his presidency. "Mandela", comments Sampson, "had become famous above all as the man who forgave the enemies who had jailed him."<sup>61</sup> He extended his hand in particular to Afrikaners, believing that they could be won round into an acceptance of majority rule. So Mandela paid visits to ex-president P.W. Botha, and Betsie Verwoerd, widow of the late premier often seen as one of apartheid's prime architects. He dined with General Willems, one of his former commanders on Robben Island, and with Percy Yutar, the unrelenting prosecutor at the Rivonia Trial.<sup>62</sup> These and other gestures soon made him remarkably popular with whites, for most of whom he had carried the image of a dangerous terrorist only a few years before.

Such is a reading of Mandela as the archetypal hero – as the man who rises to political prominence in his country, who "disappears" for over a quarter of a century, and then reappears as a saint-like saviour to rescue his country from the brink of a racial bloodbath. To read Mandela in this way is problematic. It can diminish and demean him by implying that there is not a "real" Mandela, only an imagined, constructed hero. He is reduced to a mythical, almost fictional character, like Odysseus or Aeneas. It can lead to the conclusion that his heroic image and iconic status have been accorded to him largely to satisfy the collective unconscious of a people desperate for peace, security and the resolution of racial division and conflict. Mandela fits the bill of the archetype, and so meets the collective need.

#### **b. The human dimension**

While it is tempting to read Mandela as an archetypal hero, given that his life narrative fits well into Campbell's model, I prefer to interpret him in a different way. Mandela's enormous global appeal, I suggest, lies not just in his heroism, but in his deep humanity. He stands out among world leaders of the last century as a person not obsessed with power, not entangled in the politics of manipulation and spin, not enticed into conspicuous consumption, but forever humble, honest and human.

In the previous section it is argued that Mandela's 27-year imprisonment was an essential phase in the making of the archetypal hero. It is also contended here, in a rather different way, that the prison experience is crucial to understanding Mandela's deep humanity. It might seem perverse to suggest that such a lengthy incarceration, taking out a huge chunk of his life, could in any way benefit a person, but it was undoubtedly a significant formative experience, however gruelling and painful. Mandela himself told the visiting Eminent Persons' Group in 1986 that "There is nothing like a long spell in prison to focus your mind and to bring you to a more sober appreciation of the realities of your society."<sup>63</sup>

---

61 Sampson, *Mandela*, p 520

62 Sampson, *Mandela*, pp 521-525

63 Sampson, *Mandela*, p 348

A number of writers have drawn attention to the significance of Mandela's prison experience. Charlene Smith, for instance, puts it this way: "Before prison Mandela was a gifted leader who tended to arrogance. Prison hardship taught him patience; the denial of rights – wisdom; the empathy of others less privileged than himself – compassion. Prison made him one of the greatest leaders of history."<sup>64</sup> Sampson contends that prison transformed "the headstrong activist into the reflective and self-disciplined world statesman."<sup>65</sup> In jail there was endless time to think, reflect – and, after the heavy restrictions of the early prison years were relaxed, to read. It was a time for probing political analysis, and for self-examination. As Mandela wrote in a letter to Winnie from prison, "at least, if nothing else, the cell gives you the opportunity to look daily into your entire conduct to overcome the bad and develop whatever is good in you."<sup>66</sup> He built up empathy for others, especially the prison warders. He became more patient and learnt to control his emotions – not without bitterness, but better able to control it. After his release Mandela reflected on his prison experience and said, quite simply, "I came out mature".<sup>67</sup>

Prison also allowed Mandela a certain independence of thought. Although there were ongoing political debates among prisoners on Robben Island – about the merits of socialism, for instance, or the question of black participation in government-created political institutions – there was little danger of them becoming locked into any particular paradigm or discourse. Their ideas and statements could not be made public, so nobody could be accused of deviationism, unacceptable revisionism, or even selling out. Ironically prison accorded a certain freedom of thought to inmates like Mandela – a freedom often denied to political leaders who may be bound by public opinion or by dominant ideologies and discourses. As Sampson notes, while in jail Mandela moved beyond "his early anti-colonialist clichés"<sup>68</sup> and delved more deeply into issues. One wonders what political paths Mandela might have followed had he not been imprisoned? Would he have become ever more militant, radical and revolutionary as the apartheid government remained brutally oppressive and intransigent? Would he have been driven along by a rising tide of popular anger? How much more difficult would it have been for Mandela eventually to engage in the politics of compromise and reconciliation? These are counterfactual questions upon which one can only speculate, but they do serve to highlight the significance of the prison experience not only for Mandela, but also for the later political outcome in South Africa.

Mandela went to prison late in 1962, almost two years after J.F. Kennedy had become president of the USA. Perhaps more than anybody else, Kennedy had been responsible for adapting to the television age and establishing a new type of politics that would gain ever greater momentum in the Western world throughout the time of Mandela's imprisonment. This was a politics of image, style, spin, advertising and playing to the media – a politics that would devalue the importance of substantive ideas, serious debate, and genuine engagement with the public. Mandela would have little exposure to this brand of politics. This became very apparent when he emerged

---

64 Smith, *Mandela*, p 64

65 Sampson, *Mandela*, p xv

66 Sampson, *Mandela*, p 253

67 Maharaj, Kathrada & Parkin (eds), *Mandela*, pp 168-169; Sampson, *Mandela*, p 581

68 Sampson, *Mandela*, p 581

from prison in 1990. His speeches show him to be concerned more with principles than image, with content rather than style. The speeches were delivered in a rather dry, stiff manner, without rhetorical flourish. Mandela himself has admitted as much: "I am not the greatest of speakers among the men and women that waged the struggle against apartheid. I am not even eloquent."<sup>69</sup> As Nixon has put it, "Mandela's public manner had been shaped by the live politics of the fifties, two decades before South Africa got television."<sup>70</sup>

Nor was Mandela during his imprisonment embroiled in political intrigue, manoeuvring, machination and power-playing. He could emerge from prison untainted by the dirtier side of politics. It could therefore be argued that Mandela's seemingly antiquated, unfashionable approach to politics does actually have popular appeal in this age of spin-doctoring, blatant lying, and media management – that Mandela is revered precisely because he has stayed outside this realm. Is there not some hope that Mandela's example may in the future see a restoration of principle, honesty, and serious debate to Western politics?

As a political leader and head of government, Mandela has displayed very few of the unseemly characteristics that have typified so many of his counterparts all around the world over the decades. Personal aggrandisement has never been part of Mandela's agenda. It is true that he was once reputed to have said that he would be South Africa's first black president,<sup>71</sup> but according to one fellow prisoner he never proclaimed any personal ambition or showed any power-seeking tendency.<sup>72</sup> He believed that personal interests should not be allowed to obstruct or damage the greater cause.<sup>73</sup> Tutu describes Mandela's leadership in these terms:

He learned that a leader ultimately exists for the sake of the led. It was not something to do with self-aggrandisement. It was the best form of altruism ... The led are quick to sense when one is there for them and not around to manipulate or to exploit them. That is one reason why Madiba has captured their hearts and their devotion.<sup>74</sup>

Over the past twenty years or more, perhaps longer, a massive personality cult has grown around Mandela, but this is not something that Mandela himself has cultivated. Indeed, he has distanced himself from the popular exaltation and veneration: "I am sorry if I am seen as a demi-god ...," he once said, "I am the peg on which to hang all the aspirations of the African National Congress."<sup>75</sup> Mandela has defined himself as a "vessel" or a "symbol" for the liberation movement,<sup>76</sup> not as its indispensable, semi-divine leader; and he has constantly insisted that proper recognition be accorded to other heroes of the struggle. He saw the dangers inherent in excessive veneration and personality cults, which had been damaging to other African countries.<sup>77</sup>

---

69 Kalungu-Banda, *Leading like Madiba*, pp 35-36

70 Nixon, "Mandela, Messianism, and the Media", p 51

71 Sampson, *Mandela*, p 68

72 Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, p 487

73 Mandela, *Long Walk*, p 215

74 K Asmal, D Chidester and W James (eds), *Nelson Mandela: From Freedom to the Future* (Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg & Cape Town, 2003), p 316

75 Sampson, *Mandela*, p 417

76 Kalungu-Banda, *Leading Like Madiba*, p 36

77 Sampson, *Mandela*, p 581

Leaders who deliberately and actively build and promote personality cults around themselves also tend to be the ones who indulge in gross conspicuous consumption. Mandela stands out as a figure who has shunned extravagance and excessive display. Before his imprisonment Mandela often struggled financially; and for most of his 27 years in jail, if less so the final few years, he experienced extreme deprivation. It might have been tempting to make up for this upon release by living lavishly, especially when he became president. This would not be the case at all. He lived comfortably, but also with frugality. He donated one-third of his salary to the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, the charitable foundation that he established. Other income also went to charity, or to the ANC. He was determined to bring an end to the political "grave train", but his example would not always be followed by his fellow members of the new post-apartheid political elite.<sup>78</sup>

This exemplary lifestyle enhanced Mandela's moral authority, but this authority was derived more than anything from his personality and behaviour. He stood out as a man of principle rather than a man of power. Jakes Gerwel, formerly Mandela's chief of staff in the president's office, has put it this way: "If pushed to offer a single word that would capture most fully the character of Nelson Mandela, it would be integrity. His is a life in which things cohere, are dynamically integrated to wholeness and wholesomeness."<sup>79</sup>

Along with integrity many other human qualities can be listed: a concern for basic courtesies and decency in everyday human interactions, for instance. "His social manner brought together, in disarming union," states Nixon, "the militancy of the populist hero with the civility of his mission school training."<sup>80</sup> More important has been Mandela's deep respect for people – for ordinary, fallible people, even for his oppressors. He recognised that everybody had a better side which could be drawn out. This sympathy for others is best illustrated in his interaction with warders while in prison. He treated warders with respect, and often with restraint – holding back his anger at times when mistreated or abused – but never descending into subservience or sycophancy. He could take pity on them, seeing young, poorly educated Afrikaners also as victims of apartheid.<sup>81</sup> Such a disposition towards others was, for Mandela, in his own interest. Wilmot James has remarked that one of Mandela's rules of behaviour was "never to diminish your own dignity by diminishing that of others, and never to humiliate your adversary or do things to make them bitter beyond the reach of a future reciprocal embrace."<sup>82</sup> Bill Clinton recalls some important advice he received from Mandela at a time when he was feeling enormously bitter towards his Republican opponents who had launched impeachment proceedings against him. Mandela recounted to Clinton how he had felt towards his former oppressors after his release from prison: "Yes, I was angry ... But when I felt that anger well up inside of me I realised that if I hated them after I got outside that gate then they would still have me ... I wanted to be free so I let it go." For Clinton this was "an astonishing moment" in his life – "It changed me."<sup>83</sup>

---

78 Sampson, *Mandela*, p 517; Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, pp 540-541

79 Asmal, Chidester & James (eds), *Nelson Mandela*, p 141

80 Nixon, "Mandela, Messianism, and the Media", p 45

81 Sampson, *Mandela*, pp 216-217, 225; Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, p 288

82 Asmal, Chidester & James (eds), *Nelson Mandela*, pp 5-6

83 Maharaj, Kathrada & Parkin (eds), *Mandela*, p 248

All this is not to say that Mandela is a flawless person without blemish. As some observers have noted, he has been a paradoxical figure in some respects. He can display deep humility, but also an aristocratic air, derived perhaps from his chiefly family background. As a political leader and as president, he regularly proclaimed the need for consensus decision-making, and yet he could display an authoritarian streak. At two ANC conferences, in 1990 and 1991, he was criticised from the floor for trying to impose his will on the party and not consulting more widely. As President, he occasionally came across as being authoritarian.<sup>84</sup> Ahmed Kathrada, long time a fellow prisoner with Mandela, captures well this paradoxical character, describing

... an uncommon amalgam of the peasant and the aristocrat; the quintessential democrat who nonetheless possesses something of the autocrat; the traditionalist who is also an innovator; a man who is at once proud but also simple; soft and tenacious; determinedly obstinate and flexible; vain and shy; cool and impatient<sup>85</sup>

Such characterisations serve to humanise Mandela, to demythologise him. It demeans Mandela to view him essentially as an archetypal hero, as a semi-mythical figure. Although the trajectory of his life lends itself to a heroic narrative, such a narrative can all too easily place him on a celestial perch outside the real world. He is more human, humble and humane than heroic. As Sampson has remarked, “His biography in the end converged with his mythology; and it was his essential integrity more than his superhuman myth which gave his story its appeal across the world.”<sup>86</sup>

The heroic narrative represents Mandela as the saviour who “returns” to the world after years spent in seclusion and “darkness”, removed from the public eye. Upon his return he rescues his country from civil war and leads it into a new era. This narrative cannot simply be dismissed as mythical, as it bears relation to reality. There is some convergence between the two, as Sampson states. Mandela did play a key role in the 1990-1994 transition process, and in leading the country during the first five years of democracy, but his role should not be exaggerated. Other figures were crucial to the negotiated settlement that ushered in majority rule. And, as President, Mandela was not always the chief decision-maker. He can be accorded enormous credit for his political role between 1990 and 1999. Ultimately, though, it is Mandela’s deep humanity that lies at the root of his massive, global, popular appeal – confirmed by the fact that this appeal has not waned at all in the ten years since he has ceased to exercise any political power in South Africa.

### Abstract

This article attempts to explain, along two lines of inquiry, why Nelson Mandela has come to be so revered and venerated in recent decades. According to the first approach, Mandela can be viewed as an archetypal hero. About sixty years ago, Joseph Campbell outlined the typical course of journeys undertaken by mythical heroes such as Odysseus and Aeneas. This course followed a regular pattern of separation, initiation and return: separation from society, followed by a dangerous journey or perilous ordeal, culminating in a triumphant return to society. Mandela’s life has in many respects followed this pattern: the Rivonia Trial removed him from

---

84 Lodge, *Mandela*, pp 172-173; Sampson, *Mandela*, p 506; Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, p 413

85 Asmal, Chidester & James (eds), *Nelson Mandela*, p 443

86 Sampson, *Mandela*, p 585

the public view; he endured the severe ordeal of imprisonment; and he returned to society as a saviour-like figure. While the trajectory of Mandela's life fits into Campbell's model, and may explain in part the reverence and veneration, this approach can also diminish Mandela into a semi-mythical figure. The second line of inquiry is given greater weight, attaching special significance to Mandela's human qualities – his humility, integrity, generosity of spirit, and wisdom. He renounced grandiosity, ostentation, and personality cults, and strove to adopt an exemplary lifestyle. These qualities, it is argued, have been the main source of his popular appeal.

### **Opsomming**

#### **Argetipe held of lewende heilige? Die verering van Nelson Mandela**

Hierdie artikel poog om deur middel van twee invalshoeke te verduidelik waarom dit in die onlangse dekades gebeur het dat Nelson Mandela tot so 'n mate eerbiedig en vereer word. Volgens die eerste benadering, kan Mandela beskou word as 'n argetipe held. Ongeveer sestig jaar gelede, het Joseph Campbell die tipiese verloop van die reis wat deur mitiese helde soos Odusseus en Aeneas onderneem is, omskryf. So 'n reis het 'n vaste patroon van skeiding, inisiasie en terugkeer gevolg: skeiding van die samelewing; gevolg deur 'n gevaarlike reis of vuurproef; wat kulmineer in 'n seëvierende terugkeer na die samelewing. Mandela se lewe het in baie opsigte hierdie patroon gevolg: die Rivonia-verhoor het hom uit die openbare oog verwyder; hy het die ontbering van gevangenskap verduur; en hy het na die samelewing teruggekeer as 'n tipe messiaanse figuur. Hoewel die trajek van Mandela se lewe met Campbell se model ooreenstem, en dus die eerbied en verering wat Mandela geniet mag verklaar, kan hierdie aanslag hom ook tot 'n semi-mitiese figuur reduceer. Die tweede invalshoek dra meer gewig. Dit fokus veral op Mandela se menslike hoedanighede – sy nederigheid, integriteit, groothartigheid, en wysheid. Hy het sy grootheid, vertoon en persoonlikheidskultusse afgelê en daarna gestreef om 'n navolgenswaardige lewensstyl te handhaaf. Daar word aangevoer dat die vernaamste redes vir sy populariteit in hierdie eienskappe te vinde is.

#### **Keywords**

Archetypal heroes; imprisonment; Joseph Campbell; leadership qualities; Mandela's presidency; messianism; Nelson Mandela; political styles.

#### **Slutelwoorde**

Argetipe helde; gevangenskap; Joseph Campbell; leierskap eienskappe; Mandela se presidentskap; messianisme; Nelson Mandela; politieke style.