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A CONTEST OF THOUGHTS

13

JUNE
16 2013



NDLETYANA

New values of the black middle class inspire education/15



LUKHELE

Artists who undermine Swaziland must feel the pain

SUNDAY DEBATE: SWAZI CULTURAL BOYCOTT/17

SITHOLE

Selective action only serves to entrench Mswati



NGOBENI

Time to save the universities – from themselves/14



We can't let go of our Mandela

MAC MAHARAJ, the presidential spokesperson is right when he says “we want Madiba to live forever but we know he is a human being and we have to adjust our expectations”. But we won't accept it. In a vehement defiance of Mandela's close friend and former Robben Island inmate Andrew Mlangeni's call, we won't let go. It is just not right to expect us to adjust our expectations.

No Mac. We won't. After years of silence, we can't let go of February 10, 1985, when young Zindzi brought Mandela's message from Pollsmoor Prison to the people at Jabulani Stadium that he will not accept a conditional release because “your freedom and mine cannot be separated”.

We can't let go of February 11, 1990 when Mandela walked hand-in-hand with Winnie and punched his fist into freedom's air – released unconditionally from prison after 27 years with a promise of a better life for all – and beckoning many of us in other shores to come back home to rebuild South Africa.

We can't let go of April 27, 1994 when 19 726 579 stood in line to cast their first vote and install Mandela as South Africa's first black president after more than three centuries of white rule and his ANC won 252 of the 400 seats in the first democratic elections of South Africa's history and promised us and the world that “never again will this beautiful land experience the oppression of one by another”.

We can't let go of Ellis Park on June 24, 1995, when the Springboks defeated New Zealand 15-12 on a Joel Stransky drop goal – and Mandela proudly hoisting the William Webb Ellis trophy to an example of a united nation – even if for a moment.

We can't let go of February 3, 1996 when Bafana Bafana beat Tunisia 2-0 and a nation celebrated with Madiba and our captain Lucas Radebe in a triumph that erased years of isolation from the global stage of the beautiful game.

We can't let go of December 10, 1996 when the new constitution was adopted to Thabo Mbeki's “I am an African” – and made good on the promise of the Freedom Charter made in Kliptown, June 25 – 26, 1955.

We can't let go of him reaching out to Colonel Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, Robert Gabriel Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, often sternly dismissing US and other Western nations' objections.

To him these were brothers who helped the South African Struggle. In all these moments, we stood tall. Proud. Principled. Respected. Winners.

Enviably by the world. Everybody wanted our Mandela magic. They still do.

His story is our history. It is far deeper than the Disneyfication of his legacy under the pretext of “brand Mandela”: the 46664 concerts or clothing range, the Mandela wines, or even *Being Mandela* reality shows.

Or the unending battle between his family and advisers over rights to his legacy. His is a resilient and priceless brand far greater than these sideshows.

He is no Che Guevara, Coca-Cola – or Chicken Licken.

It didn't matter how often he got married – to Evelyn Mase, Winnie Madikizela or Graça Machel. If we had it our way, we'd marry him off to all our mothers. In our Africa culture it's just fine.

Everybody wants a ride on the Mandela brandwagon and to profit from his good name. But to us – to the world – “brand” Mandela is a universally agreed embodiment of a good (South) Africa founded on democracy, peace and equity.

There are far too many other good reasons we won't let go.

Like all fathers – heck, most humans – he hasn't been all perfect.

His brand is far deeper than the commercialisation of his legacy under the pretext of 46664 concerts and clothing range. His cult is likely to outlive the mortal subject, writes **Thebe Ikalafeng**



FREE AT LAST: Nelson and Winnie Mandela greet the masses after he was released from prison on 11 February 1990. According to the writer Mandela's re-appearance in 1990 restored confidence, discipline and respect, and represented the hope for the normalisation of South Africa.

He is, like Augusten Burroughs put it: “made entirely of flaws, but stitched together with good intentions”.

We expected him to be angry after 27 years of isolation from his family; to be vengeful; to seek restitution at all costs; to chase out the whites to the sea that brought the Dutch and English settlers to our shores in 1652 aboard the Goede hoop, Die Rieger and the Dromedaris. We expected him, like Shaka, to make the rivers run red with the blood of the oppressor and return our beloved South Africa to the way it was: authentic, organic, adaptive and resilient.

We expected him to meet each and every one of us to thank us for keeping the Struggle alive rather than be more available to Bono and other international celebrities and sports stars, heads of states and his beloved ANC's inner circle.

We expected him to make up for time lost with Winnie and Makazi-

we, Zindzi, Makgatho and Zenani and to mourn Thembi – and his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

We were disappointed. British author Nadira Naipaul alleges that Winnie too felt Mandela betrayed the expectant masses; “Mandela let us down. He agreed to a bad deal for the blacks. Economically, we are still on the outside. The economy is very much ‘white’. It has a few token blacks, but so many who gave their life in the Struggle have died unrewarded”.

Even his old friend, Robert Mugabe, too recently accused him of being “too soft on whites”.

But we were also rewarded – with a peaceful transition and a model to the world.

There's never been more interest in our once pariah state that attracted 9.2 million tourists last year compared to 3 million in 1994, GDP that's grown from a mere \$112 billion in 1990 to about \$400bn last year,

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HE IS PRICELESS. HE IS NO CHE GUEVARA, COCA-COLA OR CHICKEN LICKEN

and the nation of reference for Africa.

When we stumble – as can be expected of any teenage (democracy) – whether in implementing an e-toll or Secrecy Bill seemingly against some citizens' will, which can be perceived to challenge the very freedoms we fought for, or

struggling to eliminate billions in public sector corruption – money that could have delivered houses and jobs promised to millions, or allowing millions more to die because of a flawed HIV/Aids (now rectified) policy, or failing our children's future by condoning a 30 percent pass mark as excellence (in education), or when we allow a young rebellious Julius Malema to lose his way, that is when we need and miss his steady hand and peerless vision the most.

We often wondered out quietly – and sometimes loudly, how Mandela would have dealt with these challenges. How, had he been around on June 16, 1976, when the police shot and killed Hector Pieterson on the corner of Moema and Vilakazi Street in Soweto, we think he would have taken the bullet instead.

He has been a father for us all – not just Zindzi, Zenani, Makaziwe, Makgato and Thembi. For (South) African children like

me raised by their mothers and grandmothers because the fathers were absent as they were either migrant labourers, forced to die in exile like Tsietshi Mashinini in 1976 or spend their good years in exile like OR Tambo and Thabo Mbeki and the likes, or die without trace in exile like my childhood friend Kgotsi Demontfort Flatela, or be incarcerated for many years as our Mandela, Andrew Mlangeni, Walter Sisulu, Jacob Zuma, and many more for standing for what should be good for South Africa – or sometimes simply because they were plain truants and irresponsible fathers.

His reappearance in 1990 restored confidence, discipline and respect.

It represented the hope for the normalisation of our home – South Africa, with our father back in our midst.

A long and overdue moment for us all – his children.

We already reluctantly adjusted

our expectations in 1999 when he retired. But only on a condition he clearly understood – and articulated: “Though I shall not be seen as much as I have been, I shall be amongst you and with you as we enter the African century.”

But we cannot adjust to an image of a propped-up, frail and blank Nelson Mandela flanked by Zuma, Baleka Mbete and Cyril Ramaphosa.

Ingrained in our memories is an active Madiba doing the awkward two-left feet shuffle – but looking elegant in his African-inspired dashiki – the Madiba shirt as we adopted it to replace Western formal wear – to the objection of remnant parliamentarians of old age and tradition.

Our Mandela always had a broad smile and a warm soft yet firm touch.

I will always remember fondly from the Presidential Education Awards of more than 15 years ago when I reached out to greet him. Our Mandela is an immortal that transcends race, gender, geography, religion and politics.

Our Mandela will never die. He is the father of our nation.

Although last year's Ipsos “Pulse of the People” survey may have indicated that only 80 percent of South African citizens are proud to be South African compared to 95 percent in 2007, that is miles ahead of how we felt about ourselves in 1964 when Mandela pledged his life to our freedom.

As an old Negro slave preacher once said, “we ain't what we want to be; we ain't what we ought to be; we ain't what we gonna be; but thank God we ain't what we was”.

No Mac. No.

We refuse to adjust our expectations. Mandela is not an expectation to us. He is a moral symbol of what's good in us and can be in the world. He is not a public property. He is us – within and with us. That is a reality and legacy that cannot be adjusted.

As Professor Tom Lodge of Limerick University put it in *Mandela – A Critical Life*, “Mandela's cult is likely to outlive its subject... and remain the most powerful source of ideological legitimisation at their (black South Africans) disposal”.

The founder of Scientology, L Ron Hubbard, once said, at the end of our lives we'll be asked two questions: Did we do the things we were meant to do, and did the people who knew us think our lives were worth living?

In concurrence with Hubbard, Mandela once said “death is something inevitable. When a man has done what he considers to be his duty to his people and his country, he can rest in peace. I believe I have made that effort”.

Indeed you have.

As you approach the inevitability of this world, and move on to account to Pixley ka Seme, Albert Luthuli, OR Tambo, and Walter Sisulu what you did with the baton they passed on to you, like Erma Bombeck, you can proudly look at them and God and proclaim, “I used everything you gave me”.

And we are eternally grateful. Happy Father's Day Madiba.

■ *Ikalafeng is advisor and author on branding and reputation leadership. He has led consumer and political branding campaigns across the continent.*