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### (Mis)Understanding Nelson Mandela

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### (Mis)Understanding Nelson Mandela

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#### BIOGRAPHIES, BIOGRAPHERS, SOURCES AND POSITIONALITY

Since Nelson Mandela is a contemporary giant of international and South African history, he has attracted many biographers, most of whom have dwelt on his heroic and symbolic qualities.<sup>2</sup> Some of the biographies aim to sustain or augment this vision with accounts of his early life and lineage, notably Fatima Meer's early work. Tom Lodge's recent book and the earlier publications of Martin Meredith and Anthony Sampson aim at explaining rather than purely narrating the meaning of Mandela's life. In the case of Lodge, he sees the development of Mandela's life as having been 'managed' in a way that has elevated him to 'messianic' status. In all these accounts Mandela is at certain periods an active agent in achieving his stature as a leader, but at others, especially when in prison, he is largely what others make him to be, outside the prison walls. The broad international anti-apartheid movement elevated Mandela as a symbol of the liberation struggle and transformed him from being virtually forgotten to the most famous prisoner in the world.<sup>3</sup> Within prison it is now documented how he exercised agency, in a framework where the aim was to deny prisoners subjective power and have

1 I am indebted to Nomboniso Gasa and Nthabiseng Motsemme for comments and Greg Cuthbertson for careful editing that has helped improve the flow of this article. I bear responsibility for the final content.

2 Biographies and biographical collections include: F. Meer, *Higher Than Hope. Rolihlahla We Love You. Nelson Mandela's Biography on his 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (Johannesburg, Skotaville Publishers, 1988); J. Schadeberg, ed., *Nelson Mandela and the Rise of the ANC* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball and Ad. Donker, 1990); M. Benson, *Nelson Mandela: The Man and the Movement* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1994); M. Meredith, *Nelson Mandela. A Biography* (London, Penguin, 1997); A. Sampson, *Mandela. The Authorised Biography* (London, Harper Collins, 1999); T. Lodge, *Mandela. A Critical Life* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006).

3 S. Dubow, *The African National Congress* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2000), xiii.

them acted upon by a comprehensive array of regulation and management under the apartheid penal system.<sup>4</sup>

Mandela grew up in the royal house of abaThembu under the tutelage of Chief Jongintaba Dalindyebo. He was sent there by his father because the opportunities for education were better. There he was able to observe proceedings and deliberations of the elders sitting in council. He had the opportunity to acquire higher education, passing through Clarkebury, Healdtown, Fort Hare and the University of the Witwatersrand, and later completed an LLB from London University, while in Prison.<sup>5</sup>

He fell under both abaThembu and Christian influences, his mother, who was of Mfengu stock, having become a devout Christian.<sup>6</sup> In the course of his education he claims to have developed a great admiration for British institutions. This coexisted with pride in isiXhosa, the language represented most profoundly by the poetry of S.E.K. Mqhayi, which he often recited.<sup>7</sup> He also underwent rituals, such as initiation, that were and remain, with some variation, part of the rites of passage to manhood of isiXhosa-speaking boys.<sup>8</sup> There are early signs of a rebellious spirit when Mandela and Justice, son of Chief Jongintaba, fled to Johannesburg mines, in Mandela's case to avoid a forced marriage<sup>9</sup> which was legitimate in customary law, even though European influence purported to modify such practices. This was in light of a marriage being seen primarily as a relationship between two kinship groups rather than an individual man and woman – both of whom could potentially be compelled to marry.<sup>10</sup>

After a short period on the mines, Mandela settled in Johannesburg. In the early 1940s he met a small-time estate agent, Walter Sisulu.<sup>11</sup> Sisulu astounded Mandela in that he

4 See F. Buntman, *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), where this agency is shown to have been exercised by the political prisoners in general. This notion is elaborated in R. Suttner, 'Review of Fran Buntman, *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid*, H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews, Nov. 2004'. <http://www.h-net.nmsu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?parth=114401102368997>

5 An exceptional study opportunity which was not allowed to continue for political prisoners. Author's personal knowledge and experience.

6 Lodge, *Mandela*, 2; Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, 5.

7 N. Mandela, *Long Walk To Freedom. The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*. (Randburg, Macdonald Purnell, 1994), 242, mentions that his daughter, Zindziswa, was named after Mqhayi's daughter.

8 See Mandela, *Long Walk*, chapter 4. Lodge, *Mandela*, 9 is incorrect in suggesting, on the basis of Mandela discussing his initiation, that the taboo on talking about initiation has fallen away. As with other elements of custom, the extent to which and the manner in which these are observed is variable. Many men still do not talk to a woman or any other non-initiate about their initiation, while some do: Personal information of author, and research material of N.Gasa on male initiation.

9 See Mandela, *Long Walk*, chapter 8.

10 See H.J. Simons, *African Women. Their Legal Status in South Africa* (London, Hirst, 1968).

11 Mandela, *Long Walk*, chapter 9. That the business was doomed to failure, see E.Sisulu, *Walter & Albertina Sisulu. In Our Lifetime* (Cape Town, David Philip, 2002), 63.

had a white woman acting as his secretary. He also spoke English fluently, winning the immediate admiration of Mandela. Sisulu assisted Mandela to obtain articles to a firm of legal attorneys, a contact that he had established through his real estate agency.<sup>12</sup>

Tom Lodge's 'critical biography' uses previous biographies for much of his data. He has uncovered some material from the Brenthurst Papers and a limited range of other archival sources that have not previously been used. He does not however use interviews. Lodge sees the strength of his biography as providing a more persuasive and innovative interpretation than others. At the same time, being an experienced author, he is able to assemble his material in a coherent and well-reasoned manner. While Sampson used recent and older interviews and his insights from the 1950s when he edited *Drum* magazine, he was in some respects out of touch and did not appear familiar with more recent developments in the African National Congress (ANC) as an organisation.

In my own case, to adopt what some theorists refer to as 'positionality,' I am assessing these works not only in terms of their sources, but from my own location as a former active member of the ANC, including terms of office in the national leadership. I knew and worked with Mandela, Sisulu and many of the other individuals who interacted with Mandela. This has automatically provided source material and potential insights quite different from those available to any of the biographers.

This is not to suggest that only someone so positioned could obtain similar information. It means rather that this information is available through accessing it oneself or from people who were present during those times, via interviews, when they are willing to talk. It is not always easy to get people to talk when they are used to keeping matters secret. It is true that the 'mute always speak' and that one can often read something from secrecy and silence, but secrecy and silence sometimes mean that one cannot identify individuals whose silence and secrecy needs to be understood or interpreted. This is especially the case with those who operated underground and whose identity may be unknown to researchers.<sup>13</sup>

I stress this question of insight through accessing the modes of functioning of the ANC, because it is my view that it is precisely the absence of understanding of how the ANC works that is one of the weaknesses of all these biographies. Much of the literature on political party culture may be applicable to the ANC, but there are also unique cultural factors relating to the organisation. Many people are more or less 'born into' the ANC through their parents enrolling them. Many never pay membership fees but consider themselves and are widely regarded as being members. There are also norms by which members are judged. In certain periods, this related to collectivity and many documents

<sup>12</sup> Lodge, *Mandela*, 20; Mandela, *Long Walk*, 65–6.

<sup>13</sup> Responding to personal communication from N. Motsemme on this silence.

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were not written under the names of authors. A notion of revolutionary modesty led individual authors to allow their products to become collective organisational documents. They were expected to act in accordance with what the organisation required, apparently without any thought of future reward or recognition. In retrospect, it may well be that many did share these values, while some deferred to them but in fact harboured other aspirations, which they hoped to realise at some future time.

The notion of how the ANC works also relates to slow building of organisation, but that is not to say that this always happened and in fact it was a relatively late phenomenon in ANC history. But it was what youth of the 1960s onwards were taught by underground cadres or in exile – that one does not look for quick fixes; that building a movement requires careful and patient work.

Surprisingly Meredith, with apparently limited physical presence in South Africa, seems more attuned to the inner workings of the organisation than others. The focus in this article is primarily on interpretation and because this is its *raison d'être*, I concentrate mainly on Lodge and to a lesser extent, on Sampson's work.

#### UNDERSTANDING MANDELA AND THE ANC

To understand Mandela, and especially Mandela as a political figure, it is essential to locate him as a changing political and human being in a dynamic and diverse political environment. In particular, how the ANC works, how it alters its mode of operating, the extent to which even a powerful personality like Mandela is constrained by this organisation, must be understood. Likewise, one must know the extent to which the interaction between his personality and the organisational power or modes of working, result in his sometimes being able to overcome those constraints and sometimes not. Unless one also reads Mandela *in the ANC*, over time, that is, an organisation that is *both the same and different* during his political lifetime, always manifesting *continuities and ruptures*, unless one reads this interrelationship, one is not going to understand Mandela as a political being who himself changes over time.

There is no doubt that Mandela was at times after his release more popular than the organisation and that he could sometimes act without organisational authority. Despite his increasing stature in the 1950s, within prison and after his release, there were always situations in which he would not or could not do certain things, even if that was what he considered necessary. These were sometimes seen in an overt organisational context. But very often these constraints were manifested outside the meetings, in particular, in his relationship with powerful and organisationally significant individuals such as Moses Kotane or Walter Sisulu.

Tom Lodge places very limited political weight on these informal relationships, compared with constitutional positions that individuals held. While Sisulu is recognised as having been Mandela's most enduring friend, his political significance is not unpacked. Equally, like *Sawubona*, the South African Airways in-flight news magazine, a photograph of Mandela with Kotane, does not identify Kotane.<sup>14</sup> Yet Mandela would never have done anything without Kotane's approval. It appears that the same held for Chief Albert Luthuli, former ANC president, who despite not being a Communist, became very close to Kotane during the Treason Trial, to the extent that he started to read Marxist literature and requested that the underground South African Communist Party (SACP) provide him with copies of their publication, the *African Communist*, in Stanger.<sup>15</sup> Luthuli would always ask of a path of action: 'Does Moses know about this?'<sup>16</sup>

Mandela was notoriously obstinate. This could be both a strength and a problem for his comrades. Sisulu is quoted by Sampson as remarking: 'When [the government] saw a reasonable tone, they misjudged the person. It's easy to underestimate Madiba when he's nice – without knowing his stubbornness in approach ... They look at the softness of the soft line: he is not aggressive, he is not wild. Then the possibilities are imagined to be there: to get Mandela. The National Party were prepared to discuss because [they thought] the leadership would come from them, not from the ANC'.<sup>17</sup>

Sisulu recalls how when warders on Robben Island shouted at them to hurry: 'Now Nelson is a very stubborn chap. He responded to this by walking very, very slowly and of course we all walked slowly too. The warders had to beg him to cooperate and walk faster'. After that, the segregation prisoners walked to the lime quarry at their own pace.<sup>18</sup>

But this same personality trait sometimes required remedial action. Anyone who knew the late Walter Sisulu would understand that here was one individual who could be relied on to make Mandela 'see sense' where it was felt that the 'old man' was being 'totally obstinate'. The story is told of how Mandela's security advised him that it was

14 In the October 2004 issue of *Sawubona*, 73, there is a photograph of Nelson Mandela headed 'Nelson Mandela – South Africa's best-loved son'. The man standing next to Mandela – Kotane – is unidentified. The same photograph is used by Lodge in the same way. See *Mandela*, photograph no. 7 (located between 156–7) where Mandela is 'dressed for court'. Surprisingly, since he knew their relationship more intimately, the same photograph is in Sampson, *Mandela*, between 134–5, with an unidentified Kotane.

15 Interview Billy Nair, 1 February 2003, Cape Town. This tape is in the author's possession.

16 Interview with Sisulu, quoted in B. Magubane, P. Bonner, J. Sithole, P. Delius, J. Cherry, P. Gibbs and T. April, 'The turn to armed struggle', in South African Democracy Education Trust, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, vol 1 (1960–1970) (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2004), 65. See also B. Bunting, *Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary*, 3 ed. (Bellville, Mayibuye Books, 1998).

17 Quoted in Sampson, *Mandela*, 386.

18 E. Sisulu, *Walter and Albertina Sisulu*, 195.

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not safe to go into KwaZulu Natal during the period of IFP/ANC violence, prior to the 1994 elections. Mandela insisted that he would go, irrespective of what intelligence they may have gathered. The security officials were making no progress and decided to secretly phone Sisulu. Sisulu had a word with him and firmly indicated that he would not proceed. Mandela cancelled the visit and laughingly scolded them for ‘reporting’ him.<sup>19</sup>

Lodge (but to a much lesser extent Sampson and Meredith) completely underrate these influences and in fact uses ill-chosen words to describe Sisulu. When Sisulu, as has been seen, helped to promote Mandela’s career as an aspirant lawyer, Lodge uses the term ‘big man’ to refer to Sisulu.<sup>20</sup> That is a derogatory term used on the African continent to refer to powerful individuals in relationships of patronage.<sup>21</sup> In a sense Sisulu was a ‘patron’ who launched or played a substantial role in facilitating Mandela’s entry into law and politics, but he never asked anything in return.

While the ANC in 1990 was depicted on a banner at its 1990 consultative conference as embodied by the trinity of great men – Oliver Tambo, Mandela and Sisulu, Tambo was already very ill and had not been in constant contact with Mandela, as Sisulu had been in prison. At the same time, Sisulu was well aware of his objective power and significance, politically and symbolically, within the national liberation movement. That is why he could be persuaded to stand for election as a unifying deputy president in 1991, despite his advanced age, in order to avoid a divisive contest between *uMkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation, ANC military wing popularly known as MK) and Communist leader Chris Hani and then International Relations Head, Thabo Mbeki, the latter having played a key role in initiating talks outside the country. The primary relationship between Sisulu and Mandela was always one in which Sisulu would be in the background and Mandela would be in the overt leadership position. But deference to Sisulu’s understanding and judgment is a constant theme of their interaction.

What is important to understand about the ANC from the 1950s and at least prior to 1990 or 1994, is that the position someone holds, deputy president or no position, the extent to which that person appears in the public eye as an office bearer is not necessarily an indication of their actual influence and power within the organisation and indeed in relation to individuals who formally held power. This is not to argue

19 Information provided by Mandela to personal informant of author.

20 Lodge, *Mandela*, 21.

21 See, for example, G.B.N. Ayittey, *Africa Unchained. The Blueprint for Africa’s Future* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 407. But N. Motsemme (personal communication) also points out another meaning, in the South African context: “‘Grootman’ as the street term goes for someone, also called “big man”, used as a sign of respect for someone who is seen as having accomplished. It is a social and linguistic distancing between “those who have accomplished” and “those who aspire/follow”. So it has a double-edged meaning, depending on how you use it’.

that Luthuli, Mandela or Tambo were merely puppets. What it seeks to do is more than caution against a 'great man' (for they were mainly men) view of history. More than that, one has an organisation with formal arrangements as well as networks which may not have resulted in individuals occupying specific organisational positions. Someone like Sisulu would always be consulted, irrespective of the position he held and the same went for Kotane. That is why, before Mandela raised the question of formation of MK formally in the ANC National Executive Committee (NEC) he felt he had to convince Kotane and forestall his opposition. When he had first raised the matter Kotane had been opposed, considering it reckless. He spent long hours with Kotane, resulting in his not raising opposition and keeping silent when the NEC met and discussed the formation of MK.<sup>22</sup>

Lodge at one point refers to Mandela's swift rise within the ANC's organisational hierarchy, that it 'took just ten years for Mandela to emerge as its second ranking leader ...'<sup>23</sup> There is no doubt that this is an indication of the influence and respect that he commanded. But that is not to say that there were not other individuals, without such positions, who were equally, if not more respected, who had earned a degree of reverence through displaying wisdom derived from long years of experience and tactical and strategic studies, lessons from defeats and victories. This, as indicated, led to their informal influence often being greater than that of individuals holding high positions. Interestingly, Sampson remarks that Mandela regarded Sisulu as his 'intellectual superior',<sup>24</sup> at least when meeting him. But in a broad strategic sense this may have remained the case. Mandela was often tactically brilliant but also impetuous. Sisulu appears to have often been slow to come to a view but had a sense of the long term.<sup>25</sup> He was the first amongst himself, Tambo and Mandela to understand the limitations, despite its initially radical character, of the narrow Africanist position and broke rank in order to seek alliances with non-Africans. He also understood that election as secretary-general in 1949 made him the voice of the entire organisation. 'Mandela had a narrower view than Sisulu. "When I became Secretary-General my duty was to unite people", Sisulu said later, "whereas Nelson and [A.P.] Mda, then a Youth League leader were still thinking in terms of projecting the Youth League ...'<sup>26</sup> He meant thereby that Mandela and Mda remained wedded to a narrower vision of Africanism, embraced in the Youth League, while the organisation as a whole had to become a national body, reaching out beyond the African people, as it later did.

22 Mandela, *Long Walk*, 258–9; Sampson, *Mandela*, 150.

23 Lodge, *Mandela*, 190.

24 Sampson, *Mandela*, 31. See also Govan Mbeki's assessment of Sisulu's intellectual prowess in E. Sisulu, *Walter & Albertina Sisulu. In Our Lifetime* (Cape Town, David Philip, 2002), 55.

25 A remark by Ruth First in her speech on the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of Sisulu in 1982, in Maputo. Tape made available to the author by Elinor Sisulu and currently in author's possession.

26 Sampson, *Mandela*, 55.



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The Rivonia Trial attorney, Joel Joffe, remarks on the deference accorded to Sisulu's views, on the part of all the other prisoners, and claims that over time the legal team found themselves in a similar relationship, waiting to hear and deferring to his view on particular matters.<sup>27</sup>

## MANDELA'S LEADERSHIP AND THE COLLECTIVE

Ruth First remarks that it was only when Walter Sisulu became secretary-general of the ANC in 1949 that collective leadership and decision-making was introduced.<sup>28</sup> She points to the previous situation having been one where leadership entailed personality cults and that there had not been a formalised collective decision-making process. This meant strengthening organisation within which individual members related to a wider structure. It was a process whereby acting alone, no matter what one's position, was contrary to the new emphasis on subordination to and operation within a collective.

At the same time, Sampson points to an element of Mandela's personality as a political figure which ran against the overall trend of ANC leadership in the post-1950 period. The overall ethos of collectivity was transmitted to cadres. Mandela repeatedly asserts this and most aspirants for the ANC presidency in 2007 speak of no one seeking the presidency, but abiding by the desires or 'call' of the organisation. The power and weight of this collectivity was seen dramatically in 1994 when Mandela, at the height of his powers, sought to introduce what was referred to as the 'Nehru option', to supplant direct election of ANC leaders by the office bearers providing a slate of candidates who would be available to be elected.<sup>29</sup> This was decisively defeated before it could reach the Congress floor. That it did not reach the stage of debate indicates the emergence of a new generation of people who could exercise an informal influence at that time.<sup>30</sup> There were some things that Mandela could not achieve no matter what his stature may have been.

Two versions of leadership coexisted in Mandela's mode of operations. While he spoke and generally adhered to notions of collective leadership, he believed that 'leaders have to lead'. He understood this to mean that they must sometimes do some things without consultation. If they were not to do it that way, he believed certain objectives would not be achieved. In particular, he felt he should not consult before initiating talks with

<sup>27</sup> Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, 255.

<sup>28</sup> Taped speech, Ruth First.

<sup>29</sup> This was not followed in the Morogoro Conference in 1969, when direct elections were held. But according to ANC veteran Josiah Jele (telephone conversation, 3 July 2007), at the 1985 Kabwe Conference, a small group under the leadership of Oliver Tambo prepared a slate of candidates for delegates to choose from. I am unsure how widely the phrase 'Nehru option' is used, but it was current in 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Personal involvement in this process; at that time in the national leadership.

the government while in prison, because he thought he would be stopped. Now it may well be that Mandela was ultimately vindicated (in that it was one of the first steps towards achieving a negotiated settlement of the conflict). But this runs against the strong current of collectivity which Mandela himself commended to others. A parallel process was developing outside the country, with Thabo Mbeki, Jacob Zuma and others meeting with the National Intelligence Service (NIS) in Switzerland and other places, without the knowledge of almost the entire NEC.<sup>31</sup> It also endorses the perception of the settlement having been an 'elite pact' rather than a result of a range of struggles leading to ultimate agreement at leadership level. This is not necessarily a contradiction, but a notion of leadership that he may have seen as qualifying the scope of operation of collective responsibility. Sampson writes:

He believed, having once been a herd-boy, that 'there are times when a leader must move out ahead of the flock'. But dare he move without consulting his colleagues? It was his most difficult decision. 'I knew that if I asked their permission they would say "no"', as he put it to me. 'If I continued they could take action and expel me. But I was confident that the enemy itself wanted a retreat, through a silver bridge.'<sup>32</sup>

Meeting Kobie Coetsee, Minister of Justice, Sampson writes:

The Minister listened carefully and asked searching questions ... What was the next step? About that, Mandela had no doubts: he must see President Botha. Coetsee promised to pass on the request, and shook hands warmly. Mandela was driven back to his cell. He told no one about the meeting, but prepared for further talks, still confident that his colleagues would accept a *fait accompli* ...<sup>33</sup>

In other words, this mode of operation is quite incompatible with collectivity. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that one cannot initiate such talks without a high degree of confidentiality. The problem would later arise over how this process was communicated to the membership who had simultaneously been exhorted to engage in a more militant struggle.<sup>34</sup>

Regarding the 'flock' metaphor, former herd-girl, Nomboniso Gasa, suggests that the metaphor is used incorrectly:

Firstly, the mode of herding and interaction depends on the species and the conditions. While sheep have a tendency to follow one another in a group, irrespective of the dangers as in crossing the road, in cold weather or in times of drought they can be uncooperative. They will often hide under stones and rocks, as protection against the cold. Similarly, they may sometimes resist movement, scratching for grass as food, especially in times of drought. That they move as a group is generally true. But even then, a shepherd who moves ahead of his flock is a rather uncommon phenomenon and unwise.

31 See R. Suttner, 'African National Congress: Attainment of Power, Post Liberation Phases and Current Crisis', *Historia*, 52, 1(2007), 4–6; A. Sparks, *Tomorrow is Another Country* (London, Random House, 1995), 36, 40, 55, 78, 109–112, 114ff; J. Sanders, *Apartheid's Friends. The Rise and Fall of South Africa's Secret Service* (London, John Murray, 2006).

32 Sampson, *Mandela*, 346. Also cited by Lodge, *Mandela*, 157.

33 Sampson, *Mandela*, 352.

34 Suttner, 'African National Congress', 6–7.

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Herding livestock is about strategic understanding and adaptation. To do this, one has to understand the flock better. You simply cannot use the same approach for goats and sheep. Goats are independent, unruly and take initiative. Herds-people know this. Cattle on the other hand need a completely different strategy. That is partly why herds people give them names. They are placed in positions that are consistent with their personalities – when one spans them you place the quick thinking ones in strategic positions. If you take your cattle for dipping, however, you have to use a completely different approach. If those that display a nervous disposition are ahead of the rest, you are likely to have a stampede as a result of panic.

Mandela's herd boy days may have taught him a lot but in ways that are different, quite different from Sampson's interpretation.<sup>35</sup>

The 'flock' metaphor is, therefore, not even valid for herd-boys and -girls. N. Motsemme points to the frequency with which the flock metaphor is used in explaining African leadership styles.<sup>36</sup> The reason is not clear. She correctly suggests that while Lodge and Sampson may not be using it in a sustainable manner, some of the illustrations in the quotation from Gasa about being a herder may suggest analogies between herding and leading, requiring different strategies at different times.

The notion as depicted by Lodge and Sampson, Mandela periodically found, was not applicable to the ANC membership who sometimes entered the 'ungovernable' or less compliant mode. Without accepting stereotypical differentiations between those who had been in exile and those within the country, it is undoubtedly true that there was a strong participatory tradition that developed during the 1980s, with resistance to decisions at the top, transmitted downwards.<sup>37</sup>

## MANDELA AND ANC MASCULINITIES

None of the biographies considers Mandela as a gendered subject. Yet Mandela is in many ways the embodiment of versions of ANC masculinities. Whereas earlier studies of gender focused on women, recent decades have seen a flourishing of literature on masculinities, although few of these have focused on gender relations – specifically masculinities – within liberation movements.<sup>38</sup> But everything that is said here about Mandela's masculinities is in the plural, because he was constantly changing, as his

<sup>35</sup> Personal communication, 16 July 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>37</sup> See, R. Suttner, 'Legacies and Meanings of the United Democratic Front (UDF) Period for Contemporary South Africa', in C. Hendricks and L. Lushaba, eds, *From National Liberation to Democratic Renaissance in Southern Africa*, (Dakar, CODESRIA, 2005), 59–81.

<sup>38</sup> Amongst the South African work, see R. Morrell, ed., *Changing Men in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, London and New York, University of Natal Press, Zed Books, 2001); and on Inkatha masculinities, see T. Waetjen, *Workers and Warriors. Masculinity and the Struggle for Nation in South Africa* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2004).

conditions altered and he changed as a human being. Consequently we are not dealing with a person whose identity as a man can be reduced to one quality that endured over time.

Within the ANC, as in society in general, there is not one model or mode of expression of masculinity. There are multiple models of masculinity and each is contested, both by the men who may be said to comprise the model concerned, but also by women in relation to whom these masculinities sometimes collide and sometimes reinforce what women want to do with their lives or in politics.

The ANC has always been dominated at a formal political level by men and the discourse of the organisation has reflected masculine idioms, in particular, aiming to recover manhood and ending the emasculation of African men.<sup>39</sup> Within this tradition one finds the image of the ANC as a primarily masculine organisation. Even where issues of women's emancipation were enunciated by the organisation, the primary vehicle for doing so has tended, at least prior to 1990, to be via the (male) president. When 1984 was declared the 'Year of the Women', this was announced by then President Oliver Tambo.<sup>40</sup>

Photographs of ANC leadership until the period of exile generally depict only men in leadership positions, travelling on delegations to London or to the prime minister or similar ventures. This is not to suggest that women were not in fact powerful at a *de facto* level, informally even when they were not allowed to be members or outside the organisation, from the earliest days of the ANC and before.<sup>41</sup> However, Mandela, as a male leader, despite being part of the rebellious Youth League tradition, comprised part of the masculinist imagery of the ANC as an organisation. Even though the Youth League depicted the previous male leadership in particular ways, ridiculing their unwillingness to get their hands dirty, the Youth League generation was also a male grouping dressed in suits, and in Mandela's case, flashy clothing embodying imagery found in many photographs in the magazines of the time.<sup>42</sup> Sampson refers to him as 'being known as the best-dressed man in the [Treason] [T]rial ...'<sup>43</sup> Mandela and the Youth League simultaneously embodied and contested the male leadership tradition and imagery that had been dominant within the ANC. This is what was meant when earlier reference was

39 See N. Erlank, 'Gender and Masculinity in South African Nationalist Discourse, 1912–1950', *Feminist Studies*, 29, 3, (2003), 653–72; R. Suttner, 'Masculinities in the African National Congress-led Liberation Movement: The Underground Period', *Kleio*, 37 (2005), 71–106.

40 'South Africa's Year of the Women: A Call to the Peoples of The World, 1 November 1983', <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/or/or83-12.html>, accessed 9 July 2007.

41 See N. Gasa, 'Let them build more gaols', in N. Gasa, ed., *Women in South African History* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2007), 129–152.

42 See Lodge, *Mandela*, chapter 2.

43 Sampson, *Mandela*, caption to photograph, between 134–5.

made in this article to ruptures also entailing continuities within the entire history of the ANC as an organisation.

At the same time, Mandela also embodied an heroic, martial tradition found in the underground and military activities of the ANC, an image shared with people like Chris Hani. This fighting image may possibly have been foreshadowed in the notion of Mandela being a boxer, evoking an aggressive and masculinist image with wide township appeal through the magazines of the time. Reference has been made to the ANC embodying this martial tradition, found in its constant allusion to male military forbears (generally neglecting mention of female warriors like MaNthatisisi, regent of the baTlokwa).<sup>44</sup> Mandela was initially a prime example of this military tradition in its modern form as the first commander of *uMkhonto we Sizwe*.

Mandela also acts out the notion of a man embarking on an 'heroic masculine project'.<sup>45</sup> This refers to men leaving home to embark on courageous deeds, war and other activities, while leaving their womenfolk behind to care for the children and undertake domestic tasks.<sup>46</sup> As with many other women in South African political history, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela was not content to conform to the conventional image of the wife waving the husband goodbye.<sup>47</sup> Whatever the ambiguities and ambivalences attached to her activities, Winnie carved out an independent political identity, both underground and publicly. While she defied the notion of a woman merely waiting patiently for her husband to return after performing heroic deeds, her defiance was always different from other ANC women, who were organisationally linked and did not take the type of personal initiatives that Winnie embarked upon. Albertina Sisulu sensed that Winnie was not a reliable person with whom to work underground.<sup>48</sup> Later matters deteriorated and some of her activities led to a criminal trial and conviction.<sup>49</sup>

44 Mandela's own court speeches are evidence of this. See N. Mandela, *The Struggle is My Life*, (London, International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1990). Likewise, the ANC's Radio Freedom, began broadcasts during the apartheid era with references to previous male military heroes. That there were women in leadership positions in a range of aspects of precolonial societies, including warfare, is illustrated in J. Weir, 'Chiefly Women and Women's Leadership in Pre-colonial Southern Africa', in Gasa, ed. *Women*, 3–20.

45 See Sampson, *Mandela*, 213 and on the more general phenomenon amongst men, S.M. Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities* (Cambridge, Polity, 2002), 117ff; E. Unterhalter, 'The Work of the Nation: Heroic Masculinity in South African Autobiographical Writing of the Anti-Apartheid Struggle', *The European Journal of Development Research*, 12, 2 (2000), 166–7; Suttner, 'Masculinities', 90ff.

46 Whitehead, *Men*, 114, 117ff and chapter 5 generally.

47 For other examples, see Suttner, 'Masculinities', 92; and Suttner, 'Women in the ANC-led underground', in Gasa, ed., *Women*, 238–240.

48 See E. Sisulu, *Walter & Albertina*, 215.

49 See Meredith, *Mandela*, 290ff, 375ff, 434ff, 458ff. See E. Gilbey, *The Lady: The Life and Times of Winnie Mandela* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1993).

Embodying 'heroic masculinity', Mandela, in his autobiography, reveals how he was prepared to die, unlike many who could not carry out their undertakings because they were not psychologically ready or had secret reservations: 'I was prepared for the death penalty. To be truly prepared for something, one must actually expect it. One cannot be prepared for something while secretly believing it will not happen. We were all prepared, not because we were brave but because we were realistic.'<sup>50</sup>

At one of his most heroic moments, as he faces the possibility of the death sentence, Mandela directly relates the willingness to die, to his manhood. In notes, he wrote: 'If I must die, let me declare for all to know that I will meet my fate like a man.'<sup>51</sup> But we must be cautious not to take the use of the word 'man' in a literal sense here in the overall context of apartheid subjugation which made boys of men. This could also be a statement of personhood with dignity and agency.<sup>52</sup>

Mandela's masculinity is also displayed in the way he embodies the relationship between the personal and the political. On the one hand, he is extremely reticent about his personal emotions. He never actually says how he feels about most of the privations he experienced, referring to the support drawn from his comrades. In relation to Winnie and his family, he refers to his not having been there to fulfil a conventional protective role. Thus in one such passage, he told Sampson that 'it is not a nice feeling for a man to see his family struggling, without security, without the dignity of the head of the family around ...'<sup>53</sup> This gels with what John Iliffe claims are near universal concepts of honour and manliness, demanding 'capacity to sustain and defend a household, to maintain personal autonomy, to avenge insult or violence ...'.<sup>54</sup>

#### CHARACTERISING MANDELA POLITICALLY

Most of the works on, or dealing with Mandela, try to fit him into a specific political orientation. In some cases he is referred to as representing liberal democracy in his supposedly unshakable attraction to British political institutions, in others Gandhism or having a fundamental predisposition to negotiate. On Mandela as a devotee of Gandhi, Rajmohan Gandhi quotes a Jewish rabbi, Michael Lerner, as saying that Palestinians 'would be far more effective if they were to adopt the non-violent strategies of Gandhi, King, and Mandela'.<sup>55</sup>

50 Mandela, *Long Walk*, 360.

51 Sampson, *Mandela*, 196.

52 Personal communication, N. Gasa 16 July 2007; and see Suttner, 'Masculinities', 72ff.

53 Sampson, *Mandela*, 410.

54 J. Iliffe, *Honour in African Society* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3.

55 R. Gandhi, Foreword, T. Weber, *Gandhi, Gandhism and the Gandhians* (New Delhi, Roli Books, 2006), vii.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi viewed non-violence as absolutely applicable in political life.<sup>56</sup> For Mandela there was a clear preference for non-violence, as is the case with most revolutionaries. But the question whether or not one can continue to pursue non-violence is not decided in the first place by those who experience oppressive rule.<sup>57</sup> Whether or not one can continue to pursue a non-violent path and achieve political goals is determined by the character and extent of the space allowed for legal public activity. As these spaces contracted and were more or less eliminated first for the Communist Party and then the ANC in South Africa, there was a clear moment of choice for the organisations, and in both cases they opted to respond to their being declared illegal by continuing to operate. Equally, as the level of violence against the black population escalated, dramatically illustrated in Sharpeville, it was also decided to depart from non-violence and embark initially on limited acts of sabotage. From early on it was envisaged that the scale of the conflict could become more serious.

Insofar as the ANC depicts violence and armed struggle as a last resort, it is also true that Mandela, Sisulu, Raymond Mhlaba, Elias Motsoaledi, Joe Matthews, Flag Boshielo and others already saw it as a likely option in the early 1950s.<sup>58</sup> Mandela discloses in his autobiography how he and Sisulu, without organisational authorisation, decided that Sisulu should enquire about the willingness of the Chinese to supply arms when he was visiting that country in 1952, a query that met with a cool response.<sup>59</sup> Clearly in the case of Mandela, the notion of Gandhism is quite inapplicable.

It is also suggested that Mandela embraced liberal ideas.<sup>60</sup> Lodge writes that Mandela's 'especial accessibility to a transnational English-speaking following was the consequence of his own personification of the secular liberal values instilled in his "English" schooling ...'.<sup>61</sup> It is true that he did agree with representative democracy, which is not the exclusive property of liberalism. It is also true that he respected various British, North American and other institutions that are associated with liberalism. But these institutions are not associated only with liberalism. It is important to understand that when Mandela attached himself to such institutions or symbols, it was often he who

56 See some of Mahatma Gandhi's views in, for example, R. Mukherjee, ed., *The Penguin Gandhi Reader* (New Delhi, Penguin, 1993), 93–122.

57 H. Aptheker, *The Nature of Democracy, Freedom and Revolution* (New York, International Publishers, 1967). See quotations from Mandela and Sisulu in Meredith, *Nelson Mandela*, 200–1, 227–8, 264ff, 358. See also the quotation from Luthuli in Meredith, 275 along very similar lines to that of Mandela and Sisulu.

58 See Magubane et al, *Road to Democracy*, vol. 1, 54–5; P. Delius, *A Lion Amongst the Cattle*, (Portsmouth NH, Johannesburg and Oxford, Heinemann, Ravan and James Currey, 1996), 131.

59 Mandela, *Long Walk*, 148; Magubane et al, *Road to Democracy*, vol.1, 54.

60 Benyahim Neuberger, 'African Nationalism', in G. Delanty and K. Kumar, *The Sage Handbook of Nations and Nationalism* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, Sage, 2006), 516–7.

61 Lodge, *Mandela*, x.

appropriated the symbols within his own identity, rather than by his persona attaching to or being absorbed by them. Thus Anthony Sampson writes of Mandela interacting with Queen Elizabeth II:

He arrives with her, looking both more regal and more at ease than the monarch as he lopes between the guests. At the end of the lunch he gives another brief speech, reminding the Queen that he's just a country boy, thanking her for opening all the doors to British society and for letting him walk in her garden early in the morning. The Queen's relaxation in his company is obvious as they talk ...<sup>62</sup>

When Lodge makes a great deal of various statements of Mandela indicating his admiration for British institutions,<sup>63</sup> he is not contextualising these adequately and reading too much into them. Undoubtedly Mandela admired certain elements or many aspects of these institutions. But it should also be part of our understanding that Mandela made his statements as a leader of a liberation movement trying to rally support from all quarters, especially those that had been hostile or indifferent to the struggle of the ANC. It was part of his mission to win them over to support the organisation. That is why Mandela would spend time courting someone like Margaret Thatcher. This is classic broad front diplomacy, where one builds the broadest range of support behind one's organisation and narrows the base of 'the enemy'. Consequently, without nullifying their significance as political statements, these should also be read as diplomatic interventions, first as head of the ANC and later as both leader of the ANC and of the country, needing investment and diplomatic support.

Lodge places special weight on Mandela expressing this admiration of British institutions in the court room.<sup>64</sup> But, again, while not doubting that these were part of his political outlook, precisely because he spoke in a court and simultaneously to the world, the pronouncements were equally of a diplomatic character. Mandela's court speech was markedly different from that of a rank-and-file ANC member who might also have been unashamed or even defiant.<sup>65</sup> Such a person did not speak at such great length nor cover so many areas. Mandela's court statements addressed the world as a national leader. Mandela did not speak as a 'dissident', that is, a representative of a minority view, but projected a national vision to the people of South Africa and the world at large. As indicated, such self-representation required an attempt to reach many audiences and could not be sectarian or limited in its appeal.

Similarly, as part of Lodge's attempted reinterpretation of Mandela as having certain specific factors bearing a continuing influence from his youth, he quotes his

62 Sampson, *Mandela*, xxii–xxiii.

63 See for example, 6, 68, 191–2.

64 Lodge, *Mandela*, 68.

65 For excerpts from such speeches, see Mary Benson, ed., *The Sun Will Rise: Statements from the Dock by Southern African Political Prisoners* (London, International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1981).



acknowledging the role that the church had played in his life, including its spiritual values. This was at a Methodist conference in Umtata in 1994.<sup>66</sup> It would be very unusual if so astute a politician as Mandela were not to have done this on such an occasion and in such a place. Again it is not to deny that these values, which are partly of a universal, humanitarian character, bore an influence on his development. What is said, however, is that Lodge reads too much into the alleged continuity in world view and too little into *real politik* and diplomacy. What one needs to ask is whether the evidence from which Lodge purports to rely for his interpretation is the basis for such conclusions, or whether it is not a case of reading *into* rather than reading *from* Mandela's actual life experience.

None of us can disclaim what Mandela or anyone else may have seen as influences in their lives. It is important, however, for scholars to try and understand the context of the church in the African experience. Its values and impact on the lives of Africans are important, especially regarding access to education. Many people have acknowledged this, including Communists like Chris Hani.<sup>67</sup> Also, it is important to note other currents and influences on Mandela's thinking. It is mentioned by Mandela and most of the biographies that he was influenced by Marxism, and in fact taught a course on political economy on Robben Island, basically rooted in Marxist analysis.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, he attended Communist Party meetings and night schools.<sup>69</sup> At one point he met every night with Kotane, then SACP general secretary, and with the encouragement of Kotane and Michael Harmel, undertook a programme of reading Marxist classics.<sup>70</sup> He had photographs of Lenin and Stalin on his wall.<sup>71</sup> Also, Mandela has not abandoned his link with his village of origin and does not shy away from rituals of importance to his clan.<sup>72</sup> This seems to point to a more hybrid socio-political make-up than is susceptible to simple characterisation as 'liberal' or as an admirer of British institutions.

## THE 1950s GENERATION AND UNITY

Mandela represented, together with Sisulu, the 'fifties generation' returned into the 1990s. They brought with them certain ways of operating, some of which did not easily

66 Lodge, *Mandela*, 4.

67 Personal communication, N. Gasa, 16 July 2007.

68 Mandela, *Long Walk*, 455. The lectures delivered, amongst others by Mandela, as course material during the period when the M-Plan was launched, were based on Marxist analysis. See R. Suttner, 'Early History of the African National Congress (ANC) Underground: From the M-Plan to Rivonia', *South African Historical Journal*, 49 (2003), 134–5.

69 Lodge, *Mandela*, 32.

70 *Ibid.*, 45.

71 Sampson, *Mandela*, 190; Lodge, 69. For further ambiguities, see Meredith, *Mandela*, 182–3.

72 Personal communication, N. Motsemme.

coexist with the attitudes of those who derived from exile and others who had been in struggles within the country. In a sense the legalisation of the ANC forced individuals from a variety of political experiences to unite as one. They were never totally one, as can be seen in divisions that persist within the organisation nationally and in the provinces. In some senses, the ANC underestimated the tasks entailed in rebuilding or building afresh in 1990.<sup>73</sup> It is not clear whether the ANC of 1990 was a continuation of what had been banned in 1960, or something new. At the same time it must be emphasised that the complex and difficult terrain which the ANC encountered, one that is continually changing, presented difficulties that few other liberation movements have had to confront.

But what the Robben Island prisoners brought into the ANC, as did others from the 1950s generation, which was of course not monolithic, was a range of approaches to politics that contrasts in some ways with that manifested in the contestations and conflicts of the 1980s and the complex politics of exile. Mandela and Sisulu always stressed unity and willingness to compromise – while absolutely firm where required. Despite Mandela's periodic bouts of anger, he was always able to distinguish who was outside the fold, as was F.W. de Klerk, and who were his comrades. Even though he may have disagreed very strongly with some individuals in the NEC or elsewhere he was very concerned to keep close to them and ensure that no one felt that disagreement meant the organisation could not be a 'broad church', open to all.

It appears that many of the conflicts between Mandela, Sisulu and others on the island related to the formers' willingness to engage in politics, even within apartheid structures like the Bantustans.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, to the outrage of many internal activists who had fought the chiefs, Mandela and Sisulu reached out to the chiefs and tried to win them over to the ANC.<sup>75</sup> Some of these unifying approaches or attempts to broaden the base of the ANC have been continued under the presidency of Thabo Mbeki. But interestingly, it is within the ANC that Mbeki has not displayed the same determination to keep individuals 'inside the tent/church' that was a cornerstone of the Sisulu-Mandela-Tambo legacy. The 1950s generation sought inclusivity. They sought to draw on all and to find ways of including all, no matter how difficult some may have been to work with at times.

I have referred to the 'broad church' notion and this relates to the emphasis sometimes placed on consensual modes of approaching leadership, akin to that of the customary *lekgotla* or *imbizo*. While there may be elements of exaggeration attached to the notion of consensus and the extent to which any chief embodied and did not shape the final

73 See Suttner, 'African National Congress', 7ff.

74 Sampson, *Mandela*, 291.

75 This is foreshadowed by Mandela, knowing that the abaThembu chief had enrolled his whole chiefdom in the ANC. See Sampson, *Mandela*, 20.

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decision, the extent to which this was carried over into ANC presidencies is open to question. It is certainly asserted for Tambo in Callinicos's biography.<sup>76</sup> It is also attributed to Mandela by some writers.<sup>77</sup>

My view is that there may always have been an attempt to achieve inclusivity in precolonial African societies and in the ANC, but simultaneously the notion of consensus is not the same as agreement. Precolonial societies were never unanimous and the applicability of the notion of consensus or 'imaginary consensus' in Paulin Hountondji's terms needs to be probed.<sup>78</sup> And it was possible for the leader to give considerable 'spin' to a decision purported to have been reached in this way.

In the ANC there is a range of contestations over the meanings of unity and the broad church. It may also have been easier to maintain such unity in the period of struggle against apartheid oppression than it is in the period of democratic government with different centres of power.

Each president has had his own way of relating to this notion of unity. Mandela may be seen as relating symbolically as a unifying president. The predominant image of Mbeki may be that of providing a strategic vision, in a much more elaborated form, even though it may now be seriously contested.

#### MANDELA, MESSIANISM, MIRACLES AND THE MASSES

Lodge claims that Mandela acted out and was projected as a messianic figure. He 'was especially sensitive to the imperatives for acting out a messianic leadership role during his short service as a guerrilla commander, a phase in which he and his comrades deliberately set out to construct a mythological legitimacy for their political authority ...'.<sup>79</sup> The way the word mythological is used here does not appear to refer to myths that may have been drawn on and that one accepts are part of the formation and existence of most liberation movements, but inventing legitimacy for the organisation at a later period. Why should the ANC have wanted to construct a mythological legitimacy where it had already achieved legitimacy in reality, as was definitely proved when elections were ultimately held? Is Lodge suggesting that the ANC did not enjoy overwhelming

<sup>76</sup> See L. Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo: Beyond the Engeli Mountains*, (Claremont, David Philip, 2004), 34-5, though it is a recurrent theme in the book. The correct name of the mountains is Ngelengele.

<sup>77</sup> Lodge, *Mandela*, 186-7, with qualifications regarding his later adopting a different style of leadership. A. Nash, 'Mandela's Democracy', <http://www.monthlyreview.org/499nash.thm>, accessed 12 July 2007, uses the consensual notion of democracy in order to provide class-based critique.

<sup>78</sup> See P. Hountondji, *African Philosophy. Myth & Reality* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press), 62.

<sup>79</sup> Lodge, *Mandela*, ix.

popular support in the 1950s? Possibly it can be doubted because of difficulty in assessing, but he does not suggest that. If it is not argued, why should there need to be resort to developing a new mythology? Beyond this assertion and the attribution of messianic status to Mandela by others, the three chapters in which 'Mandela as messiah' is advanced by Lodge, contain no such evidence.<sup>80</sup> Reference is made to the ANC seeking a martyr, by Sampson and relied on by Lodge, when the data in the quotation from Walter Sisulu says no such thing.<sup>81</sup>

There is undoubtedly evidence, on record, of some individuals seeing Mandela in messianic terms.<sup>82</sup> To this day, periodic news reports indicate that some segments of the United States black communities see Nelson Mandela and Nomzamo Winnie Madikizela-Mandela in such terms.<sup>83</sup> It must be acknowledged that this was a factor in harnessing support for Mandela and the ANC that many people saw in him a saviour, and attributed saint-like characteristics to him. But the question which immediately arises is whether messianic imagery drove the struggle to defeat apartheid and indeed whether an individual leader was the central element of that struggle. It is my view that none of the biographies gives sufficient weight to the mass factor, on an international and national basis, together with armed and underground struggle. In some cases individuals may have been driven and inspired by visions of ANC leaders like Mandela having what they saw as messianic qualities, though messianic pronouncements cited by Lodge, some from fairly senior, but nevertheless fairly maverick leadership figures like Peter Mokaba and Aubrey Mokoena.<sup>84</sup> With regard to the mass membership and following, it was their agency as active subjects that drove the process, often symbolically associated with Mandela as well as documents like the Freedom Charter. They freed Mandela, and enabled him to act out the role that Lodge depicts as messianic and the 'coming' that some people had hoped for.

The use of some peoples' depiction of Mandela in messianic terms is evidence that there were individuals who undoubtedly attributed these qualities to him. But it is necessary to ask whether what Mandela emerged to perform and what he did and did not do, could and could not do, was explicable by such qualities or the attribution of them. Alternatively, his activity must be explained on a different basis. There is sufficient evidence in Lodge's own biography and other works to indicate that there were multiple factors that resulted in the dominance of the ANC and the periodic disjuncture between the support for Mandela and the lesser support for his organisation.

80 Ibid., chapters 4, 8, 9.

81 Sampson, *Mandela*, 143.

82 See Lodge, *Mandela*, 196.

83 Ibid., 197ff.

84 Lodge, *Mandela*, 196.

It may be that there are, however, elements of verbal ambiguity. When Mandela rejected P.W.Botha's offer of conditional release in 1985, he concluded by saying: 'I will return'.<sup>84</sup> At the time I recall considering it somewhat ill-chosen because of its association with General Douglas MacArthur of the United States, who is known to have said that.<sup>86</sup> The notion of *return* is of course associated specifically with messianism. This may perhaps be the only statement that can approximate to a claim of such a quality, though it was presumably not written by Mandela alone, but a result of collective discussion amongst his prison comrades. Interestingly, it is not used by Lodge. More decisive perhaps is a search of the ANC website for the words 'messiah', 'messianism' and 'saviour'. The only entry to be found is a statement on the organisation's anniversary in 1996, delivered by Mandela, in which it expressly disclaims any 'messianic' status for the organisation, let alone the leader.<sup>87</sup>

Unsurprisingly, those most vociferous in attributing saint-like and miraculous qualities to Mandela are those who were not millenarian or messianic devotees of the ANC and the anti-apartheid struggle. Many of these were privileged whites who expected vengeance to be wreaked and their worst nightmares to be realised with the onset of democracy, which entailed a black majority electorate. It may be recalled that many supermarkets ran short of long-life milk and similar products on the eve of the 1994 elections as many whites prepared for war-like conditions. When this did not happen and the leader of the ANC and the country in fact took extremely conciliatory steps, and no one was deprived of their swimming pool or 4-wheel drive cars, many felt relieved at experiencing the 'miraculous'.

The significance of the attribution of messianic qualities to Mandela is that it is part of a series of religious metaphors deployed by both secular and religious authors to characterise what they see as the success of the transition in South Africa.<sup>88</sup> It is inexplicable, implicitly, in purely secular terms. An explanation must be formed by factors beyond human agency. This, in my view, is in order to avert the transition being understood and therefore acted out in radical political terms.

This is also part of a process whereby Mandela as an individual is abstracted from the organisation which he leads. A construction of Mandela and the transition is created which enables individuals who do not support the ANC or many of its policies, to nevertheless applaud Mandela and the transition. This is because there is no need to

85 Statement reprinted in K. Asmal, D. Chidester, W. James, eds, *Nelson Mandela: From Freedom to the Future. Tributes and Speeches*. (Johannesburg and Cape Town, Jonathan Ball, 2003), 47.

86 See: [http://cgi.ebay.com?Genera-Douglas-MacArthur-Gregory\\_Peck-Ed-Fladers.-DVD](http://cgi.ebay.com?Genera-Douglas-MacArthur-Gregory_Peck-Ed-Fladers.-DVD), accessed 12 July 2007.

87 <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/jan8-96.html>, accessed 9 July 2007.

88 Found, for example, in Paddi Waldmeier's account of the negotiations, *Anatomy of a Miracle* (London, Penguin Books, 1997).

address what the ANC stands or stood for because the leader and the transition and why we live without vengeance wreaked against whites, is explicable in other-worldly terms, by virtue of messianic qualities and miracles. There is still wider significance in this mode of constructing Mandela and the transition, in that it removes the agency of the 'masses' and those organised within the ANC.<sup>89</sup> It explains the inauguration of democracy in South Africa as resulting from initiatives of two brave and wise men, Mandela acting in prison and former President de Klerk announcing the unbanning of organisations. The chemistry between these leaders then led to a resolution of the apartheid conflict and the establishment of democracy.

What accords more accurately with the development and resolution of the apartheid conflict, is that over the years and especially in the 1980s the resistance to white minority government built up to such a point on a number of levels, that while not capable of defeating the government militarily, there was an unstable equilibrium or what Antonio Gramsci calls a 'reciprocal siege'.<sup>90</sup> Ungovernability and popular power in the 1980s had not forced the apartheid government to their knees, suing for peace. At the same time, South Africa could no longer be made 'governable' on a long-term basis, without substantial change. The explanation which is advanced here, places varying weight on the international isolation of the government and mobilisation of social movements throughout the world, the mass struggle within the country, the activities of MK and the underground.

At the same time, these growing signs of willingness to resist whatever the price to be paid, coexisted with increasing divisions within the alliance of classes and strata which had previously formed a relatively united white ruling bloc. Divisions increased and also induced a propensity to 'talk'. Interestingly, one of the forces that advanced the idea of talking instead of armed repression was the intelligence services, the NIS.<sup>91</sup> While the police and military sought to suppress 'the enemy' and eliminate it in one way or another, the NIS under L.D. 'Niel' Barnard, departed from the previous approach of General Hendrik van den Bergh under the previous Bureau of State Security (BOSS) and sought to acquire more reliable information about the ANC. This led them to conclude that the problem was internal to the system existing within the country. It was preferable to seek resolution through talks before the apartheid regime was weakened to the point that it would have to negotiate from desperation rather than the strength it then commanded. It purported to learn this from the fate of the Smith government in

<sup>89</sup> On relating to the masses as significant factors for progress, rather than 'ignorant rabble', see R. Suttner, 'Talking to the Ancestors: National Heritage, the Freedom Charter and Nation-building in South Africa in 2005', *Development Southern Africa*, 23, 1 (Mar. 2006), 7ff; R. Williams, *Culture and society, 1780-1950* (New York, Columbia University, 1983), 298-9.

<sup>90</sup> A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 238-9.

<sup>91</sup> See Sanders, *Apartheid's Friends*.

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Rhodesia, which interestingly, faced more successful military opposition (though less developed political mobilisation and organisation).<sup>92</sup>What is argued here is that while Mandela and de Klerk had considerable historical importance as individual leaders, there were influences beyond their activities that were enabling. Had certain other factors not also been in motion the ‘messianic’ activities of Mandela would not have been possible, nor the ‘Gorbachev-type’ interventions of de Klerk.

#### MANDELA’S LIFE – FURTHER ENQUIRY NEEDED

Despite a title which indicates limitations on the understanding displayed in the existing biographies, it is not intended to suggest that they are without any merit and that I have the insight that will satisfy all that is required to unpack the meanings of Mandela’s life. Tom Lodge, as the most recent author, has attempted a very difficult task and the work does deserve attention. That is why I have tried to tease out some of the issues he raises. The object has been to indicate areas that are neglected, not discussed, or which are inadequately presented. There may well be further elements that I, too, have neglected, for we are dealing with a complex life that deserves more in-depth exploration. Most of the biographies, going beyond those discussed here, fill in part of a picture that is needed in order to provide an adequate account of Nelson Mandela’s significance. The works under discussion stimulate us to take that enquiry further.

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<sup>92</sup> See A. Astrow, *Zimbabwe: A Revolution that Lost its Way?* (London, Zed Books, 1983), G. Bauer and S.D. Taylor, *Politics in Southern Africa: State and Society in Transition* (Boulder Colo, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), chapter 7.

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