

Nelson Mandela's masculinities

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ABSTRACT

What constitutes a man is very relevant to post-apartheid South Africa, which experiences widespread violence, committed mainly by men. Across all sections of the population models of manhood are mainly of the rough, tough variety and resort to force is often a preferred method of resolving differences. The intricate strands of Nelson Mandela's evolving masculinity introduce a complexity that may contribute towards boys and men exploring ways of 'being men' which are not only strong but also gentle. With Mandela one is not dealing with a person whose identity as a man can be reduced to one quality that endured over time, whether in his early life or later, because of changes initiated by shifting conditions and influences, or more directly through his own agency. For much of Mandela's life he is self-conscious of what manhood entails and constantly probes whether he measures up to what he sees as its qualities, though over time he enriches his understanding of what it means. Mandela depicts his life as embracing a series of journeys, with both changes of physical environment and also in his own self-understanding. Nevertheless, there is in the unfolding of his life continuity within ruptures, and ruptures within continuities. What he becomes never entirely erases what he has been, although the meaning that is given to early masculine qualities is modified in the mature Mandela. While it would be an overstatement to describe Mandela as having become a feminist, much of his life transcends the patriarchal understanding of his early life. Indeed, unlike very many male leaders, he generally does not conform to the idea that his occupying the public space implies that his wife should be confined to the home.

Key words

Mandela, evolving masculinity, child race, boxing.

South Africa remains a violent country marred by aggression and violence, mainly perpetrated by boys and men. Across all population groups there remains a tendency to 'solve problems' through recourse to force. An enquiry into Mandela's legacies, especially what he represented as a man may have relevance in providing a role model and an alternative notion of masculinity.

In the major biographies and in other work, Mandela's masculinity is treated as 'obvious' and not requiring discussion. (See Sampson 1999, Lodge 2006, Meer 1988.) The main exception is Boehmer, (2008), though her approach is more attuned to the symbolic than this contribution. (See also Suttner, 2007, pp. 116-119, 2009, pp. 64, 74-76, 80-87, Munro, 2014.). The evidence is there not only for scholars to interpret but Mandela himself is very self-conscious of being a man and constantly makes reference to manhood, though these statements need to be unpacked. He continually refers to *being a man* or *doing what a man ought to do* or *becoming a man* or signifying that some or other item is given to him or owning something as a *sign of manhood*. (See for example, Mandela 1994, pp.24-29, 30, 40,178 and Sampson 1999, pp. 3,196). Later in life he reproaches himself for not being there to protect his family, as a (male) head of household should be. (Sampson 1999, p.410). He repeatedly refers to some or other action being required in order to be a man, or that being a man requires doing or not doing something or conducting oneself in a specific way. (Stengel 2012, p.41). He also projects his masculinity in distinct ways in the various social and political arenas in which he finds himself. (See Boehmer 2008, pp.121, 126,136ff).

But everything that is said about Mandela's masculinity must be in the plural, because he was constantly changing, as his conditions altered and he developed as a human being. While there is a great deal in Mandela's personality that was learned from the environment he frequented, there is also much that he consciously did in order to represent himself in a particular way, whether as a young, handsome, physically fit, city slicker; dramatic courtroom lawyer; defiant defender of his beliefs in court; militant leader; dignified and resolute prisoner; or, inclusive president (Boehmer 2008, pp.111, 128, Stengel 2012, pp.28-29, 34,35,87ff). Consequently, we are not dealing with a person whose identity as a man can be reduced to one quality that endured over time, whether mainly in his early life or later, because of changes initiated by shifting conditions and influences, or more directly through his own agency.

That is also not to say that any changes he underwent necessarily erased what he had been before. There is in the unfolding of Mandela's life a continuity within ruptures, and ruptures within continuities: looking back and looking forward.

In his early life what it meant to be a man had a measure of clarity. From the earliest pages of *Long Walk to Freedom* Mandela indicates how he is socialised into expectations of what manhood entails, referring for example to the gendered division of labour, what was 'women's work' and what work was reserved for men (1994, pp. 8-9). He also learns from an early age what comprised the qualities of boyhood, leading to manhood. He refers to what he derives from constantly keeping company with boys and learning behaviour expected of boys, and norms and skills acquired through relationships between boys:

From an early age, I spent most of my free time in the veld playing and fighting with the other boys of the village. A boy who remained at home tied to his mother's apron strings was regarded as a sissy. At night, I shared my food and blanket with these same boys. (1994, p.9)

Cattle amongst all Southern Nguni people are seen as having a relationship with men and women are generally not allowed to attend to them.¹ Cattle were a source of wealth, the basis for legalising a marriage and associated with rituals officiated over by men.

At the age of five Mandela entered this male world of cattle. 'I became a herd-boy looking after sheep and calves in the fields. I discovered the almost mystical attachment that the Xhosa have for cattle, not only as a source of food and wealth, but as a blessing from God and a source of happiness.' (1994, p.9).²

Together with other boys in the fields he learnt 'to knock birds out of the sky with a slingshot, to gather wild honey and fruits and edible roots' and to 'swim in the clear, cold streams, and to catch fish with twine and sharpened bits of wire'. Again, given his male gender he was able to be in sufficient proximity to cattle to learn 'to drink warm, sweet milk straight from the udder of a cow'. (1994, p.9).

The model of manhood on which Mandela grew up was mainly one that stressed courage and muscular strength. 'I learned to stick-fight-essential knowledge to any rural African boy-and became adept at its various techniques, parrying blows, feinting in one direction and striking in another, breaking away from an opponent with quick footwork. ...'(1994, p.9). Some of this description evokes the imagery of boxing, which would later become an important part of Mandela's recreation.

This model was not only reinforced through homosociality, the relations between boys, but in some cases by the way mothers socialised boys differently from girls, often referring to them in language that connoted being a man.

As with many aspects of Mandela's early life it is striking how warrior-type influences are mediated by concern for the other. At the same time as he learnt to fight, Mandela absorbed concepts of honour. 'I learned that to humiliate another person is to make him suffer an unnecessarily cruel fate. Even as a boy, I defeated my opponents without dishonouring them.' (1994, p.10).

Not all recreation was rough and tough. 'As boys, we were mostly left to our own devices. We played with toys we made ourselves. We moulded animals and birds out of clay. We made ox-drawn sledges out of tree branches.' (1994, p. 10). But the recreation appears to have been primarily of the rugged character.

That is not to say that there were no games or activities conducted with girls (Mandela 1994, p.10), but those involving only boys seemed to predominate. The favourite was *thinti* and, Mandela says

[L]ike most boys' games it was a youthful approximation of war.... The goal of the game was for each team to hurl sticks at the opposing target and knock it down. We each defended our own target and attempted to prevent the other side from retrieving the sticks that had been thrown over. ...[T]hose who distinguished themselves in these fraternal battles were greatly admired, as generals who achieved great victories in war are justly celebrated. (1994, p.10).

His father's stories of 'historic battles and heroic Xhosa warriors' strengthened the identification with warrior manhood. (1994, pp.10-11). This would later be reinforced in observing proceedings in the council of the Thembu regent. (1994, p.21) But his mother exerted an influence of a different kind. She conveyed moral lessons, deriving from custom, but also possibly influenced by her being a convert to Methodism, and using lessons similar to that of the Good Samaritan.

These tales stimulated my childish imagination, and usually contained some moral lesson. I recall one my mother told us about a traveller who was approached by an old woman with terrible cataracts on her eyes. Then another man came along and was approached by the old woman. She asked him to clean her eyes, and even though he found the task unpleasant, he did

as she asked. Then miraculously, the scales fell from the old woman's eyes and she became young and beautiful. The man married her and became wealthy and prosperous. It is a simple tale, but its message is an enduring one: virtue and generosity will be rewarded in ways that one cannot know. (1994, p.11).

In his unpublished prison memoir, Mandela credits these early experiences with preparing him for politics as a collective effort:

As I look back to those days I am inclined to believe that the type of life I led at my home, my experiences in the veld where we worked and played together in groups, introduced me at an early age to the ideas of collective effort. The little progress I made in this regard was later undermined by the type of formal education I received which tended to stress individual more than collective values. Nevertheless, in the mid-1940s when I was drawn into the political struggle, I could adjust myself to discipline without difficulty, perhaps because of my early upbringing.... (1976, p.14).³

The court of the regent Jongintaba Dalindyebo

When Mandela's father died he was still a young boy, aged nine. The regent of abaThembu, Jongintaba Dalindyebo, took him into his home at Mqhekezweni as a ward and treated him as his own son. (Treated more fully in Suttner, 2014a). After a long journey from Qunu his mother bade him farewell:

Our parting was without fuss. She offered no sermons, no words of wisdom, no kisses. I suspect she did not want me to feel bereft at her departure and so was matter-of-fact. I knew that my father had wanted me to be educated and prepared for a wide world, and I could not do that in Qunu. Her tender look was all the affection and support I needed, and as she departed she turned to me and said, 'Uqinisufokotho, Kwedini!!' ('Brace yourself, my boy!') Even as my dear mother and first friend was leaving, my head was swimming with the delights of my new home. How could I not be braced up? I was already wearing the handsome new outfit purchased for me by my guardian. (Mandela 1994, p. 16).

Mandela's mother's exhortation to 'brace up!' may be taken as signifying that he should be ready for an unknown future as she left him and all that he knew. He should summon up his strength or capacity for endurance, be courageous: qualities needed in the new situation but also expected of a boy en route to manhood.

The regent's son, Justice, four years older than Mandela, became his closest companion. From that point Mandela saw his mother irregularly, until later in life when he was a married man.⁴ At the court of the regent he observed council

proceedings and again heard accounts of wars of resistance to dispossession and conquest, and the heroes who were honoured were all male warriors or prophets.

Initiation: thwarted transition to manhood

At the age of sixteen Mandela was circumcised at the same time as Justice. It was common for a number of other boys to be circumcised/initiated at the same time as the son of a chief. (Mandela 1976, p. 20). Mandela places weight on circumcision, but recognises that there are wider processes that are entailed in transition to manhood. (1994, p. 24).⁵

In contemporary South Africa initiation has become a matter of public concern, mainly because there are hundreds of deaths through what are called 'botched circumcisions.' The remedy generally offered is that there should be a return to 'time-honoured custom', usually emphasising qualities of manhood manifested in toughness. But what is comprised in being a man is not uniformly understood, for it may vary in differing contexts, most obviously in time of peace and war.

The loss of independence amongst the Thembu may in some ways have reinforced a sense of loss of, and determination to recover a warrior tradition of manhood and to expect that their menfolk manifest the qualities of courage and strength of warriors. The moment of circumcision, insofar as it entailed withstanding pain with dignity and courage was an important test. 'Flinching or crying out was a sign of weakness and stigmatised one's manhood,' Mandela says. 'I was determined not to disgrace myself, the group or my guardian. Circumcision is *a trial of bravery and stoicism; no anaesthetic is used; a man must suffer in silence.*' (1994, p.25. Emphasis inserted). At the moment that the circumcision doctor (*ingcibi*) cuts the foreskin, the initiate must shout 'Ndiyindoda!' ('I am a man!'). Mandela reports how he fares in this test:

[The] *ingcibi* was pale, and though the day was cold, his face was shining with perspiration. His hands moved so fast they seemed to be controlled by an otherworldly force. Without a word, he took my foreskin, pulled it forward, and then, in a single motion, brought down his assegai. I felt as if fire was shooting through my veins; the pain was so intense that I buried my chin in my chest. Many seconds seemed to pass before I remembered the cry, and then I recovered and called out, '*Ndiyindoda!*'

I looked down and saw a perfect cut, clean and round like a ring. But I felt ashamed because the other boys seemed much stronger and firmer than I had been; they had called out more promptly than I had. I was distressed that I had been disabled, however briefly, by the pain, and I did my best to hide my agony. A boy may cry; a man conceals his pain. (1994, p. 26)

Mandela's introspection is important, for he need not have let readers into his interior world or said anything publicly. That Mandela, writing when he is in his mid 70s portrays himself as having been on the borderline between 'cowardice' and 'bravery' may be read as empowering others who are not able or do not believe it essential to always be or appear to be fearless and impervious to pain. It is also an implicit

statement about essentialist notions of initiation into manhood, that only stress physical courage and neglects other qualities.

At the end of the period of seclusion of the initiates, a 'great ceremony' was held to welcome them 'as men' in society. Families, friends and local chiefs gathered 'for speeches, songs and gift-giving...' (Mandela 1994, p. 27). But for Mandela, there is a second setback. The idea of his 'becoming a man' *on that day* is disrupted. This is because the main speaker of the day, Chief Meligqili, points to the ambiguity of manifesting adulthood and specifically manhood in conditions of subjugation.

While the initiation ritual promises them manhood, the Chief said, it is 'an empty, illusory promise, a promise that can never be fulfilled.' This is because they are a conquered people:

We are slaves in our own country. We are tenants on our own soil. We have no strength, no power, no control over our own destiny in the land of our birth. [The initiates] will go to cities where they will live in shacks and drink cheap alcohol, all because we have no land to give them where they could prosper and multiply. They will cough their lungs out deep in the bowels of the white man's mines, destroying their health, never seeing the sun, so that the white man can live a life of unequalled prosperity. Among these young men are chiefs who will never rule because we have no power to govern ourselves; soldiers who will never fight for we have no weapons to fight with; scholars who will never teach because we have no place for them to study. The abilities, the intelligence, the promise of these young men will be squandered in their attempt to eke out a living doing the simplest, most mindless chores for the white man. These gifts today are naught, for we cannot give them the greatest gift of all, which is freedom and independence. (Mandela 1994, p.28).

This was not what Mandela and the audience wanted to hear. He believed that the chief was ignorant and did not appreciate 'the value of the education and benefits that the white man had brought to our country.' At the time, Mandela did not see whites as oppressors but benefactors and the chief's words as lacking gratitude.

I know that I myself did not want to hear them. I was cross rather than aroused by the chief's remarks, dismissing his words as the abusive comments of an ignorant man who was unable to appreciate the value of the education and benefits that the white man had brought to our country.

But without exactly understanding why, his words soon began to work on me. He had sown a seed, and though I let that seed lie dormant for a long season, it eventually began to grow. Later I realized that the ignorant man that day was not the chief but myself. (1994, p. 28).

Mandela's recollection of his incomplete or thwarted transition to manhood is significant for Chief Meligqili's speech points to a wider discourse of African nationalist (and African American) men, which often used the imagery of a

people who had been emasculated and expressed the need to recover their virility, as a prelude to becoming a nation. It is a discourse that Mandela would again encounter at the time of his involvement in the establishment of the ANC Youth League in 1944, and when he reflects on the Defiance Campaign in 1952. (On this discourse, see contrasting evaluations of its implications for gender relations in Erlank, 2003 and Suttner, 2008, pp.106-112. For similar discourse, which she argues, tend to erase women as fighters for their freedom in African American slave writings, and also applied to later struggles, see Davis 2010, pp.23-28, 34, 36-37).

In his prison memoir, Mandela confirms that the Chief ‘dashed all our illusions and brought us back to South Africa, with earthy remarks that have been ringing through my ears for more than forty years.’ (1976, p.21). He speaks of his being one of the ‘leading thinkers of the day’ and compares him with leaders of the ANC and its allies, who would later echo the chief’s remarks, albeit in different words. (1976, p.22).

In this speech, the chief addressed what no initiation ceremony could remedy, that the African people were treated, spoken of and lived as a child race under white rulers who dominated them whether through the language of paternalism, trusteeship or baasskap (boss-ship, overlordship). The proud warriors of the past were now treated as ‘boys’ and their womenfolk referred to as ‘girls’. This had been foreshadowed in the discourse of the missionaries, what Leon de Kock refers to as the ‘infant metaphor’ later adopted by politicians, like Hertzog and Smuts. (deKock 1996, pp. 88-90).

Insofar as perpetual childhood was tied to perpetual domination, attainment of manhood was closely intertwined with the achievement of freedom and self-determination as a people. For, if the African people were not free, various qualities attributed to manhood, including providing protection and defending the home could not be realised. The infant/childhood metaphors connoted denial of rights just as manhood became a metaphor for attainment of freedom.

If this understanding of African manhood is correct, as being linked, in much nationalist discourse, to removing the yoke of white overlordship, then the complicated *rites of passage* in Mandela’s road to manhood must be seen as intimately tied to the growth of his awareness of white domination and steps he takes to remove this.

In the years that followed, until he left the Transkei in 1941, Mandela was not politically aware, only hearing of and not involving himself in the ANC while at Fort Hare. This is illustrated when he hosts Paul Mahabane, son of a former ANC president, during a holiday. In visiting Umtata, the local magistrate asked Mahabane to buy him postage stamps. It was common, then, ‘for any white person to call on any black person to perform a chore.’ Mahabane would not take the money, which offended the magistrate, who asked whether he knew who he was. Mahabane replied, ‘It is not necessary to know who you are, I know what you are.’ When the magistrate asked him what he meant by that he responded, ‘I mean that you are a rogue!’ The magistrate warned that he would ‘pay dearly for this’ and walked away.

Mandela examines his own response and admits to being ‘extremely uncomfortable with Mahabane’s behaviour.’ He respected his courage, but also ‘found it disturbing:

The magistrate knew precisely who I was and I knew that if he had asked me rather than Paul, I would have simply performed the errand and forgotten about it. But I admired Paul for what he had done, even though I was not yet ready to do the same myself. I was beginning to realise that a black man did not have to accept the dozens of petty indignities directed at him each day. (1994, p.47).

It seems unlikely that Mandela’s unwillingness to follow Mahabane’s example could be put down to simple cowardice. At that point Mandela was being schooled to become counsellor to the future Thembu King, Sabata Dalindyebo, under the guidance of the regent. It seems that his conduct was governed by his sense of duty and the need to act out patterns of behaviour and respect, which his guardian may have expected of him. This impression is confirmed in a statement found in the prison memoir. ‘*With my background* I was a bit uncomfortable....’ (1976, p. 39. Italics inserted).

When Mandela (together with the regent’s son Justice) escapes to Johannesburg in 1941, to avoid marriages arranged by the regent, the conditions are created for Mandela to realise himself in ways beyond what was contemplated in his period of tutelage in Thembuland. Until then Mandela sees his identity almost exclusively as a Thembu and insofar as he has wider links it is with other Xhosa-speakers, not yet as an African. He had also been relatively isolated from whites and it was on the Witwatersrand that he would encounter the daily racist humiliations, experienced by most black people, from which he had been relatively shielded in Thembuland.

Mandela on the Witwatersrand 1940s and 1950s

Fortunately for Mandela, when he arrived on the Witwatersrand, as something of a country hick, at the age of 23, physically powerful but also vulnerable, he met Walter Sisulu, then an estate agent and already active in the ANC. On hearing Mandela’s interest in studying law, Sisulu secured a position for him in a law firm, which ultimately enabled him to become an attorney.⁶ Sisulu’s wife, Albertina felt protective towards the handsome country boy. ‘You could see from the way he dressed that he was from the country.’ She worried that gangsters in Alexandra, ‘the Spoilers,’ would recruit him and exploit his aggression. (Sampson 1999, p. 36).

Sisulu immediately appreciated Mandela’s potential leadership capabilities and involved him in ANC activities. It was not long after his arrival, despite being a political novice, that he became one of the founders of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL), in 1944. The imagery surrounding the ANC from its inception was that of a masculine organisation, despite there having been very powerful women leaders

engaging with the ANC or playing de facto roles within the organisation throughout its history. (Limb 2010, pp. 120-122, 241-244).

Even though the ANCYL criticised the previous leadership, and ridiculed their unwillingness to ‘get their hands dirty’, they were also a male grouping dressed in formal suits. The ANCYL simultaneously embodied and contested the male leadership tradition and imagery that had been dominant within the ANC.

In Mandela’s case, he took great care of his appearance, often remarked on by those who were politically active in this period, wearing tailor-made suits and fashionably matching ties. (See fuller discussion on dress in Suttner, 2009). In this respect his image was very different from that of his close comrades, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo. Mandela followed a strict exercise regime, running everyday and working out in a boxing gym, sports he had taken to while at school.





Mandela with Moses Kotane during a break in the Treason Trial. Note Mandela's fashionable suit and tie, compared with Kotane.

In the period that followed, Mandela gradually acquired a measure of economic security, especially when he qualified as an attorney⁷ and established a legal firm with Oliver Tambo in 1952.

Mandela's masculinity, heroism and the home

As Mandela emerged as a leader in the ANC in the 1950s he was made volunteer-in- chief in the Defiance Campaign and coordinator of the M-Plan, preparing for the possibility of underground, both bearing elements of military character.

We have seen that Mandela has referred to his initiation experience hovering in his consciousness long after the moment of circumcision, as a process that was unresolved both because he does not show the required fortitude and because Chief Meligqili had referred to a

contradiction between being a man or we may say adult and being part of a conquered people. Eighteen years after the initiation ceremony, having successfully led the Defiance campaign of 1952 he speaks, as if in dialogue with his earlier experience. He sees the campaign entailing his staring the enemy in the face, and using the imagery of a boxer, understands the encounter as demonstrating manhood:

I had been engaged in a just cause and had the strength to fight for it and win. The campaign freed me from any lingering sense of doubt or inferiority I might still have felt; it liberated me from the feeling of being overwhelmed by the power and seeming invincibility of the white man and his institutions. But now the white man had felt the power of my punches and I could walk upright like a man, and look everyone in the eye with the dignity that comes from not having succumbed to oppression and fear. I had come of age as a freedom fighter.' (1994, p.130).

Mandela was gradually emerging as a heroic figure, a freedom fighter willing to devote everything to the struggle. Masculine heroism is generally depicted as manifesting itself in the public domain, with the assumption that the wife or female partner is confined to the private sphere as caregiver and homemaker.

The notion of a 'heroic masculine project' derives from both mythological and real phenomena in the history of many countries. The notion of man, the hunter, going out into the wild and danger in order to provide for his family, has evoked a substantial literature.

Men exercise agency and realise their potential capabilities outside of the home and return there primarily for succour before the next day's work or before embarking on the next adventure. But, it has been suggested that this heroic activity was also conceived of as work or in fact the heroic man's primary work. (Unterhalter 2000, pp.135ff). Women, according to this notion, are there to see their menfolk off on their journey and are ready to provide homely comfort when they return (Whitehead 2002, pp.114-115).

Many of those who embarked on heroic projects had such imagery in their minds, that they were doing the dangerous work and their wives had other tasks, (Turok 2003, pp.130, 139) or that by embarking on this heroic work one forsook the comforts of home, provided by the wife/homemaker. (Suttner 2008, pp. 116-121).

Marriage and the public/private dichotomy

Through the Sisulus Mandela met Evelyn Mase who became his first wife in 1944. In both of Mandela's first marriages, without suggesting a developed gender consciousness, his conduct appears to disrupt

conventional notions of the public/private divide. Confidence in being a man, did not play itself out through patriarchal domination in the household, according to Evelyn Mandela's own account, as quoted in interviews in Meer (1988). Munro's throwaway assessment that Mandela was 'hardly an egalitarian husband', particularly in the early years', hardly does justice to the evidence in Meer (1988), which is not cited as a source. (Munro, 2014, p.93). In most of the accounts of Mandela's life, including his own we have seen that he depicts his involvement in the struggle as having been at the expense of his family, a choice which he believes he had to make and for which he reproaches himself insofar as the family was neglected and protected by the 'male head'. (Sampson 1999, p. 410).

One may read too much or too little from such statements, for Mandela was both absent and very present in both of his first marriages, although his physical presence with Winnie Madikizela-Mandela was limited by being on trial or on the run for the entire four-year period of marriage before his arrest.

Mandela inhabited the public domain and while both of his wives were mothers, they also inhabited that space. In Meer's account of Mandela's marriage to Evelyn one sees that the tough boxer, Mandela, was also a gentle man who performed household chores and was emotionally and practically involved in the lives of his children. Evelyn remarks:

Within a year I was expecting our first child. We were very excited, and Nelson's joy was there for all to see when Thembi was born. He had arranged for me to be confined at the Bertrams Nursing Home, and he came there loaded with nighties for myself and baby clothes for our son. When I returned home, there was this beautiful cot he had bought.

...

In 1948 we had our second child, a girl. We named her Makaziwe. Although Nelson was very busy, particularly on account of his political work which was taking more and more of his time, he helped with the children and enjoyed doing so. Makaziwe was frail at birth and required a lot of nursing. Nelson was very tender with her. She became very ill at nine months and died within days. We were heart-broken.' (1988, p.32).

Evelyn seemed very comfortable about Mandela's extended family joining them. When they acquired a house in 1946, she says 'the house was not just for us. It meant that we could now have our family to live with us, just as we had lived with my sister.' (1988, p.32).

When Mandela's mother joined them this appears to have pleased Evelyn. 'We got on very well together and Makhulu [literally grandmother, referring to Mandela's mother] was a great help both with housework and the children.' (1988, p.32).

Evelyn relates how the presence of Makhulu gave her the opportunity to take a more active role in the Nursing Union, having been recruited by Adelaide Tambo. 'We held meetings at the General Hospital and at Darragh Hall. Nelson was pleased with my involvement and very supportive.' (Meer 1988, p.33).

Despite Mandela's daily exercise regime and work and political responsibilities, he was involved in household duties:

We settled into a happy, crowded family. Nelson was a highly organised person and very regular in his habits. He was up at the crack of dawn, jogged a few miles, had a light breakfast and was off for the day. He liked doing the family shopping and I was more than happy for him to do so. He enjoyed bathing the babies in the evening and there were occasions when he took over the cooking from us women. (Meer 1988, p. 33).

Adelaide Tambo remarks that 'many wives envied Evelyn for her man who was dedicated to the family and bought food in town to take home,' (Sampson 1999, p.37, citing his 1997 interview). This is not to deny that Evelyn was the primary homemaker creating a measure of stability that enabled Mandela to prioritise his political life. (Sampson 1999, p.76, citing letter of Phyllis Ntantala).

Over this period, still only five or six years after his arrival in Johannesburg, Mandela was becoming more and more involved in politics and often away for political work or engaged in his studies. But the home was apparently a happy one. Meer writes that the family was growing, and appeared to be attaining a degree of stability. Mandela travelled widely, but he remained attuned to his family and was 'constantly aware of Evelyn's pregnancy, and when the time came, was at her side to welcome his second son Makgatho into the world.' (1988, p. 39).

It was nevertheless a home run by women, Evelyn, Makhulu and Mandela's sisters. Meer writes:

Nelson spent heady, brief periods, at home and a great deal of it was devoted to playing with the boys. He and Thembi were the best of friends; they jogged together and boxed together, and played on the floor and on the bed, Nelson roughing him up until he screamed with laughter, and Makhulu scolding Nelson that he would give the boy a stomach-ache from all the excitement. (1988, p.43)

But it was precisely when Mandela's public life was very demanding that Evelyn had the opportunity to enhance her own capacity to play a public role:

In 1952 Nelson was away from home more than ever. Thembi had started school and Makgatho was toddling. Evelyn had always wanted to do midwifery, but marriage and the pregnancies, and most of all financial stringency had prevented her from studying further. The Mandelas decided that it was as good a time as any

for her to fulfil her ambition. Nelson had started earning and the family was no longer dependent on Evelyn's wages, but the most important fact was that Makhulu was there, strong and caring, to look after the children. So Evelyn set off for Durban and enrolled for midwifery at King Edward VII hospital. (Meer 1988, p. 44)

Evelyn recalls this period:

I lived in the nurses' quarters. Nelson visited me whenever his political work brought him to Durban. He would come to fetch me at the nurses' quarters, usually with Ismail Meer, who was then married to Fatima.... We would spend the night there.... (Meer 1988, p. 44)

Likewise, in the marriage to Winnie, she was already in the public domain as a qualified social worker when Mandela met her and he encouraged her to become involved politically and she did, sometimes causing him anxiety, notably when arrested while pregnant. (Gilbey 1993, p. 33).

Thus, in neither of his early marriages did Mandela conceive of himself as a 'heroic warrior' who went to perform courageous deeds, presuming that his wife would be at home waiting for his return. Certainly there was a support system in his first marriage, primarily comprising his mother, but he definitely did not conform to the patriarchal notion that his wives should be consigned to the private domain. Also, the tough heroic image that Mandela had acquired even prior to founding Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK, the spear of the nation, that would become the ANC's armed wing), coexisted, as is evident from the imagery just quoted, with considerable tenderness.

There are suggestions that Mandela engaged in extra-marital affairs, but whatever truth there may have been does not bear on how he related to his wives in his marriages.⁸ Evelyn believed that their living apart during her training as a midwife was responsible for the break up in their marriage (Meer 1988, p. 61), although she heard rumours and also suspected that he was having affairs. Even in this period when she suspects the marriage was slipping away one has the impression of a close bond:

In 1952 I was again pregnant. At the end of the year I passed my exam. I was overjoyed, more so because I would be reunited with the family. I returned home to a warm welcome and subdued celebration for Nelson was under a banning order. The banning gave him more time with us and secretly we welcomed it. (Meer 1988, p. 61)

In Mandela's marriage to Winnie, there was a considerable difference in their ages and Mandela did make decisions, which he more or less imposed on Winnie related to their wedding and Winnie feared losing her independence. (Gilbey 1993, pp. 41-47). But before their marriage and in the short period before Mandela disappeared from physical presence with Winnie, she seems, despite being in awe of him to have carved out an independent space for herself both professionally and politically.

As is well-known, after Mandela's arrest Winnie was subjected to continued police harassment and was involved in underground and also public political activities, partly in her own right and partly depicting herself and being seen as deputising for Mandela. There is no doubt that Winnie Mandela never saw herself or was expected to sit at home and simply wait for the return of her husband.

Mandela and MK

The Mandela of the 1950s was finding his feet in a quite different world from that of his youth, yet he retained some of the habits or tendencies from his days at school and boyhood stick fighting. He had learnt boxing and had also taken to long distance running while at school. These now became part of his busy daily routine. In the photographs of Mandela as boxer and discourse derived from boxing imagery, we see an aggressive masculinity, different from the gentle parent that has been described.

If one studies what is involved in becoming a serious boxer, even an amateur one it entails a range of privations and a level of discipline akin to becoming a professional soldier. It is said to entail a 'monastic' type discipline, manifested in an arduous regime of daily training. It may be fair to suggest that insofar as Mandela was a boxer, it prepared him, in creating a particular mind-set and discipline, prefiguring his becoming an armed freedom fighter.

Long before MK was established his politics was often understood within the discourse of boxing (then the most popular sport amongst Africans) or fighting. Letsau Nelson Diale expresses this imagery:

I read the newspapers but I only read the political section.... I never looked at sports and other things. I read about Mandela, [Albert] Luthuli, Bram Fischer, [Joe] Slovo, Moses Kotane, J.B. Marks and told myself: 'I must follow these people.' The people I worked with said: 'This young man is very clever.' They asked me: 'What is in the Rand Daily Mail?' I told them: 'Mandela is coming to court.' They said: 'He will beat the hell out of the boers. He is going to beat them.' (Interview, SADET 2008, p. 92).

Mandela's period as a soldier was relatively short-lived and he faced trial, in 1962 and again in the Rivonia Trial of 1964. In both cases he defended his beliefs, with dignity and without apology. In facing the possibility of the death penalty, Mandela directly relates willingness to die to his continued reflection on what is entailed in being a man. In notes echoing his initiation he wrote: 'If I must die, let me declare for all to know that I will meet my fate like a man.' (Sampson 1999, p.196). As before, 'man' should not be read in a univocal, literal sense, but in the overall context of apartheid subjugation, which made boys of men.

Mandela in prison

Most writers see Mandela's prison years as decisive in his personal development. (Stengel 2012, pp.14-17, Boehmer 2008, Sampson 1999, Part II). Before Mandela was imprisoned he was a passionate and sometimes impetuous person. He had been reprimanded by the ANC leadership for militant statements that were out of line with policy. (Bonner 2014, pp. 40-45). One of the reasons for his heroic stature was that there was no meeting ground between Mandela and the apartheid regime. He had done the impermissible in crossing boundaries of apartheid legality and also chosen to meet state violence with a counter-force. That was the imagery that surrounded him and endured amongst his supporters.

Drawing on the steadiness of his long-time mentor Walter Sisulu, the prison environment provided the opportunity for Mandela to consolidate what he had been but also become a different type of leader from that which he had been before. He had to be both courageous and patient, ready to fight, but cautious about when to fight. The stakes were high in prison, where rights were few and the authorities were intent on denying or whittling down even those, to which prisoners were entitled.

There were moments of high drama and danger, as when Mandela faced up to threats of assault immediately on the arrival of the prisoners on Robben Island, warning the officer that he would sue if he so much as touched him. In this, Mandela led from the front and signalled how he believed they should confront prison repression.

At the same time, however, it was not possible to engage in conflict on a daily basis and face the enemy down on every issue. While hoping that there would be some end to their confinement, Mandela and his comrades had to prepare for the long term and find spaces where they could develop activities that recovered elements of agency and creativity, which they did. Mandela engaged fully in recreational activities. The calmness that he developed, that he could contain his impulses is evident in the way he played chess, sometimes taking days to make a move and breaking the spirit of his opponents who could not bear the tension (Sampson, 1999, p.235).

Mandela while often alone, was not aloof. He participated in all activities but also took a great interest in hearing about the background of prisoners he had not previously met. He sought out people, from all political movements and listened to their views, often winning them over after carefully explaining his own understanding.

Much of his time was filled engaging with the personal and legal problems of his fellow prisoners and also warders. He also constantly enquired about the plans of other organisations. In consequence, his days were crammed with appointments. (Sampson, 1999, p. 230).

Over the years Mandela became a calm but resolute figure, an anchor around which other prisoners could draw strength. The tender side of Mandela is evident in relation to Eddie Daniels, the only Liberal Party person on Robben Island, who remarks how whenever he felt in low spirits, Mandela (and Sisulu) would hug him and he would feel enveloped and reinvigorated by their strength. When Daniels was sick, Mandela without a word came into his cell collected his toilet bowl, and emptied it. (Sampson, 1999, p. 214).

The Mandela that emerges in his letters to Winnie and his children is a man who is sometimes passionate and emotional, who was very much in love with Winnie, recalling their moments of intimacy, tortured by their separation. He is also pained by the harassment she experienced and the abuses in which she later became involved. (Meer 1988, Sampson 1999).

The tranquillity of Mandela was rocked by bereavements, especially the death of his mother and his son Thembi. On such occasions or when he suffered a personal loss he would sometimes wrap himself tightly in a blanket in his cell. When Thembi died he simply retreated into his cell. Then Walter Sisulu sat with him and held his hand.

Grasping the opportunity for peace.

Mandela was imprisoned as a soldier who had started a war of self-defence, the first commander in chief of MK. Over the years his self-reflection did not entail renunciation of that decision. There was no process of 'revelation' suggesting that dialogue (that had never been open), should always have been pursued. But prison was a period for self-reflection and no longer governed by the intense passion of the years before he was imprisoned. He was open to different approaches, *where these became viable*. He speaks of coming out of prison 'mature'. (Stengel 2010, pp. 14-17).

Mandela interpreted the apparent stalemate between the apartheid regime and forces of resistance in the 1980s as offering the opportunity for a negotiated settlement. The ANC had always expressed a preference for peaceful methods, where it was possible to pursue them. Mandela grasped the possibility of achieving democracy through peaceful means. The fighter, the 'man of war', became a man who bent his efforts towards making peace work.

When Mandela embarked on talks with 'the other side' he did more than act without consultation, breaking with the collective, to which he repeatedly declared his adherence. (Sampson 1999, p. 49, Bonner, 2014, pp. 45-47). Indeed, even more seriously, he said that he took the initiative precisely because he would have been stopped had he sought permission. He wished to present his colleagues with a *fait accompli*. (Stengel 2012, pp. 69-70, Mandela 1994, p. 519). He also understood that it would not be possible to successfully start such an enterprise without secrecy.

He risked his reputation; he risked and was prepared to be called an 'individualist' for acting outside of the collective. Many writers refer to the metaphor of the shepherd, of Mandela's early days. (Sampson 1999, p. 346, Lodge 2006, p. 157. See critique of the shepherd metaphor different from that presented here in Suttner, 2007, pp. 114-116). It may have been that he had this in mind insofar as sometimes when a herds boy had to bring back cattle and some were missing in fog or other difficult conditions. There was an anxiety to find the missing sheep or cow and be able to account for what steps, indeed that all steps had been taken to do this. This sometimes meant looking in unfamiliar places, taking routes not previously explored. In this respect, there was something akin to Mandela embarking on the lonely path, reaching out to the enemy. Personally he had nothing to gain and much to lose from this course of action. In many ways this was a continuation of a journey into the unknown and towards an ever-maturing masculinity.

In fact, he was criticised and people did suspect his motives and in fact still do. But his strength lay in being prepared to risk his standing in order to achieve goals that would ultimately lead to peace.

In embarking on this route Mandela took steps to ensure that he was ready to play the part. In preparing himself Mandela made efforts to understand the 'enemy', learning to speak Afrikaans and carefully studying Afrikaner history.

Mandela was no longer filled with anger but ready to be a peacemaker. Sisulu suggests that the government misunderstood Mandela's sober tone

When [they] 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'. (Sampson 1999, p. 386).

Mandela was very clear that the ANC should determine what the outcome of negotiations would be, albeit needing to make concessions in order to reassure whites that democracy did not entail threats to their existence. That he saw himself preparing the ground for the ANC leadership to engage, was made clear when communications were established with the ANC in exile.

Symbolism, embodying freedom and the nation to be.

When Mandela was released from prison, it was a time where many ANC cadres were geared for war and felt disappointment at the onset of negotiations. Many had not been adequately briefed on this changed direction, for they had been instructed to prepare for insurrection. One of the manifestations of the militaristic orientation then prevailing was the toyi toyi, a mainly masculine dance emanating out of war. The dance was accompanied by aggressive chants with words exhorting to hit and shoot the enemy. Mandela entered the groups who were dancing with his distinctive 'shuffle dance', smiling to all South Africans, affirming and evoking inclusivity.



Mandela's gestures were never random and ad hoc. He knew that how he represented himself and how he was understood by others were important, bearing symbolic importance. He did not want a civil war. Whites had to be reassured, while simultaneously having his base constituency amongst oppressed black people understand that what he wanted to do would lead to political freedom. Graca Machel, his third wife remarks:

He symbolizes a much broader forgiveness and understanding and reaching out. If he had come out of prison and sent a different message, I can tell you this country could be in flames....He knew exactly the way he wanted to come out, but also the way he addressed the people from the beginning, sending the message of what he thought was the best way to save lives in the country, to bring reconciliation....(Sampson 1999, p. 533).

Many people have remarked on the stolid, sometimes tedious way in which Mandela delivered his speeches. This he says was deliberate in that he wanted to impress upon people that he was serious and could be relied upon and did not resort to rhetoric in order to please. (Stengel 2012, p. 51)

At the same time, in this period some of what had been part of Mandela's private self became part of his public persona. Reference has been made to his tenderness towards his children. One of the features of Mandela as president and retired president has been his obviously unaffected love and gentleness towards children. What we see here is how aspects of his masculinity that had been submerged under the tough image of guerrilla leader and uncompromising trialist, have been foregrounded, in the context of his changed life conditions.



The Mandela who was released from prison was remembered as a dignified, yet angry man. The Mandela who emerged had become sober and evoked gravitas. He would often smile, yet the angry Mandela had not disappeared and could re-emerge where conditions made that necessary. On occasions where he felt betrayed by the last apartheid president, FW de Klerk, Mandela's anger would rise to the surface.

In general, however, when we review the development of Mandela 'the man', we see a series of journeys, where he constantly changes, but without abandoning everything

that he has been before. Even in his last days he remained attached to his Thembu identity and was buried near his place of birth. The Mandela who found peace for the country also found peace with himself as a man.

¹ This is not to say that girls were never shepherds, but this was in exceptional circumstances when sons were away at schools and for other reasons.

² It should be noted that Mandela uses the term Xhosa loosely. Strictly speaking the Xhosa people refers to amaGcaleka and amaRharhabe and not to abaThembu, of which people Mandela was a part. There is a tendency in Mandela's statements and in common parlance to equate speaking the language isiXhosa and being Xhosa. AmaMpondo, amaMpondomise and many other Xhosa speakers are not Xhosa people. (Peires 1981, p. 3)

³ In fact, Mandela's relationship to collective leadership was always ambiguous, notably in relation to his crowning achievement, paving the way for the establishment of talks between the apartheid regime and the ANC. See Bonner, (2014, pp. 45-47) and Suttner, (2014)

⁴ According to Mandela, the regent was not keen for him to visit Qunu, 'lest I should fall into bad company and run away from school.... He would allow me only a few days to go home. On other occasions he would arrange for my mother to be fetched so that she could see me at the royal residence.' (Mandela 1976, p.18).

⁵ While Mandela's account of circumcision involves only men, there are in fact repeated moments of intervention by women, in the past and today, especially in seeking assurance of their son's health through enquiring about the qualities of the ingcibi, often taking injured initiates to doctors and other involvement. See Suttner, (2010, pp.519-520).

⁶ Mandela's ambitions had earlier been more modest, to become an interpreter in the Department of Native Affairs. For a very insightful discussion of Mandela and the law, see Sitze (2014).

⁷ It is often said that Mandela and Tambo was the first firm of African attorneys, but Anton Lembede was made a partner in Pixley ka Isaka Seme's firm and some of the founders of the ANC were practicing attorneys. These included Seme himself, Alfred Mangena and RW Msimang in the first decade of the 20th century.

⁸ Sampson (1999, p. 110) reports that Evelyn at one point suggested that Mandela had tried to throttle her, which he strongly denied and it has never been substantiated.

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