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Africa's Struggles for Decolonization: From Achebe to Mandela

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ABSTRACT

This essay commemorates the large historical lives of Chinua Achebe and Nelson Mandela, both of whom died in 2013. It is noted that the nature of African and world reactions to the deaths of the two men undoubtedly reflected their different biographies, the relative valuations of the political and the artistic in the popular imagination, the oscillation of ideas and action in the praxis and political economy of social struggle, and the assorted demands and terms of literary and political combat. It is argued that underlying the different remembrances were the thick braids of the twists and turns of modern African history, of the continent's struggles for the triple dreams of African nationalism—decolonization, democracy, and development—that intersected the lives of the two men. Achebe's and Mandela's significance arises out of the manner in which their stories embodied and bore witness to Africa's protracted drama for historical and humanistic agency, for the reclamation, reconstitution, reaffirmation, and self-representation of Africa and its peoples from the existential, economic, and epistemic violence of Europe that began with the depravities of the Atlantic slave trade and intensified with the depredations of colonialism. Also, their lifetimes reflected the profound complexities, contradictions, and changes of colonial and postcolonial Africa, the development of African worlds—its cultures, arts, polities, economies, societies, and ecologies—out of the interconnections, intersectionalities, and intertextualities of Africa and Europe, as well as Africa and the world mediated by the diaspora and globalization. The essay explores the historical journeys and meanings of Achebe's and Mandela's lives placed in the expansive context of African nationalism. In this intriguing story, their two countries bookend each other.

The deaths of Chinua Achebe and Nelson Mandela in 2013 marked the passing of two large historical lives that embodied Africa's long twentieth century in all its complexities and contradictions, tragedies, and triumphs, its enduring struggles and endearing dreams, perils, and possibilities. There was an outpouring of mourning, celebration, and commentary around Africa and the world that was unprecedented for an African writer and an African leader.

When Achebe died on March 21, 2013, at the age of 82, he was remembered as an African literary titan, a towering man of letters (Kandell), the father of modern African literature (Frederick), a beacon of moral clarity and intellectual integrity (Bayeza), Africa's greatest storyteller ("Chinua Achebe"), a champion of Africa and its creative pulse, Africa's voice and Nigeria's conscience (Ehikhamenor), and an exemplary writer, activist, teacher, and critic who mentored generations of African writers and gave young writers permission to dream (Ulin). The funeral of the revered writer was a national event, attended by the presidents of Nigeria and Ghana and other political dignitaries with all the pompous grandeur beloved by the Nigerian elite that he so sternly despised and denounced (Mark; Gambrell; "Writer Chinua Achebe Honored").

Mandela's death on December 5, 2013, at the age of 95, elicited even greater global attention. It was greeted with glowing tributes from world leaders and major magazines and newspapers carried special features on his extraordinary life and legacy.¹ He was showered with lavish praise as a great man, a colossus and conscience of his nation and the world for his magnanimity, moral courage, and dignity; for his resilience, patience, and passion; for his charisma, charm, regal countenance, and common touch; for his humility, visionary, and political brilliance; and, above all, for his spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation, believed to be the driving force behind the South African "miracle" that steered that beloved country from the abyss of a racial bloodbath. Dozens of countries declared days of mourning. His memorial service was one of the largest in history, attended by fifty-two current presidents and sixteen prime ministers, scores of former leaders, and a who's who of world power and celebrity.²

The nature of African and world reactions to the deaths of the two men undoubtedly reflected their different biographies, the relative valuations of the political and the artistic in the popular imagination, the oscillation of ideas and action in the praxis and political economy of social struggle, and the assorted demands and terms of literary and political combat. One was a Nigerian writer and literary icon, the other a South African politician and an iconic statesman; one died in the diaspora where he spent long stretches of his adult life, the other in his homeland from which he was isolated for decades; one spent twenty-three years in partial physical paralysis from an automobile accident, the other twenty-seven years in the imposed incarceration of apartheid jails.

But the thick braids of the twists and turns of modern African history, of the continent's struggles for the triple dreams of African nationalism—decolonization, democracy, and development—also intersected their lives. Achebe's and Mandela's significance arises out of the manner in which their stories embodied and bore witness to Africa's protracted drama for historical and humanistic agency, for the reclamation, reconstitution, reaffirmation, and self-representation of Africa and its peoples from the existential, economic, and epistemic violence of Europe that began with the depravities of the Atlantic slave trade and intensified

with the depredations of colonialism. Also, their lifetimes reflected the profound complexities, contradictions, and changes of colonial and postcolonial Africa, the development of African worlds—its cultures, arts, politics, economies, societies, and ecologies—out of the interconnections, intersectionalities, and intertextualities of Africa and Europe, as well as Africa and the world mediated by the diaspora and globalization.

This is what this essay explores, the historical journeys and meanings of Achebe's and Mandela's lives placed in the expansive context of African nationalism. In this intriguing story, their two countries bookend each other. If Achebe's Nigeria and literary imagination witnessed the early flowering of African nationalism, Mandela's South Africa and political activism marked the consummation of Africa's struggle for decolonization. But at the time of their deaths, it was clear that decolonization, the most momentous event of the 20th century, was an incomplete project, that the other objectives of African nationalism remained unfulfilled. This is another thread that interweaves their lives and legacies, their acute sense of the unfinished business of African liberation.

The essay begins with brief notes on the African intelligentsia and nationalism, which define the lives and legacies of the two men. Second, it focuses on Achebe's monumental contributions to African cultural nationalism and literature. Finally, it tries to place Mandela's long walk to freedom in the context of other founders of modern African states.

THE IMAGINATIONS OF THE NATIONALIST INTELLIGENTSIA

Ever since the continent's tragic encounter with Europe from the onset of the Atlantic slave trade through colonialism to these postcolonial times of neo-liberal globalization, African peoples and phenomena have always been measured according to Euroamerican master references—from humanity to history, civilization to culture, ethics to economics, temporalities to technologies, sociality to sexuality—and constantly found lacking, lagging behind Euroamerica.³

This is the burden that has faced the African intelligentsia: how to effectively defend and promote the historicity of Africa and the humanity of Africans; how to empower Africans and emancipate their beloved continent from, on the one hand, centuries of Euroamerican material violence and Eurocentric cognitive conceits and, on the other, Africa's own traditions of disorder and unproductive power and complications with global marginalization. In short, how to address the three fundamental quests for parity, purity, and personhood—equality with Europe, difference from Europe, and humanism denied by Europe, in short, how to realize the perennial pursuits of African nationalism.

Achebe, the writer, exhibited the literary and artistic sensibilities of African nationalism, while Mandela, the revolutionary, expressed its political dimensions. Both represented the discourses of the colonial intelligentsia. Much has been written about the double consciousness of this intelligentsia, which was apparently rooted in the alienation and ambivalence of its loyalties and ambitions as a class that straddled, often uneasily, coloniality and its modernist claims and nativity and its timeless traditions. It is often argued that they felt comfortable neither with Africa, which bred them, nor with Europe and America, which they were socialized to admire. They learned to talk and dream in both indigenous and imported languages.

In reality, this was more than a bilingual intelligentsia. Rather, it spoke in many registers. Its collective memories and imaginations transcended the binary constructions of the colonized and colonizer, the fictions of a homogenized Africa and Europe, for they engaged and embodied the imagined communities of race, colony, ethnicity, and culture, all of which created their own complex transnational and diasporic identities. Slavery and colonialism had invented Africa as well as Europe, generating new global racial and cultural configurations, while within Africa itself new constellations of ethnic and social identities appeared.

This was most evident in the development of Pan-Africanism, a movement that not only antedated territorial colonial nationalisms, but also gave the latter a universal language as it pitched the struggles in the colonies and the diaspora as a collective one for racial redemption, for freedom, for human rights. The connections and reverberations between the territorial nationalisms and Pan-Africanism were complex and contradictory. This reflected the overdetermination of race in the colonial world and the diaspora, as well as the development of intricate institutional and ideological networks buttressed by political movements and cultural, demographic, and economic flows within the continent and with the diaspora. The imperatives of nation-building and regional integration were often seen as complimentary if independent African states were to overcome internal fragmentation and external balkanization. Needless to say, Pan-African movements were often complimented and constrained by other transnational movements from international communism to Pan-Islamism to Third-Worldism.

The African intelligentsia was caught up in the tensions between territorial and transnational nationalisms, between local and Pan-African identities, injunctions, and ideologies. Each form of nationalism had its own distinctive demands and dangers, possibilities and pitfalls rooted in specific political and cultural economies. The same nationalists who wrote eloquently about the subjugation and redemption of “mother” Africa produced the foundational texts of their colonial nations and ethnic groups, giving them primordial charters through heroic narratives of African agency. This is why Achebe’s tales of Ibo society in its grueling confrontation with colonialism became powerful parables of the Nigerian and African conditions and Mandela’s protracted struggles against apartheid captivated Pan-African imaginations and solidarities.

Contemporary Africa is simply incomprehensible without understanding the role and impact played by nationalism in all its bewildering complexities and contradictions, imperatives and impediments, victories and failures. Achebe and Mandela cannot be fully appreciated outside its capacious ideological bosom. Once valorized for its emancipatory possibilities, nationalism is now often vilified for its alleged mystifications, primordial pathologies, mimetism, and elitism; that it was not revolutionary or transformative enough because it was a mimic and elitist project derived from the discredited master-narratives of European nationalism. Unrepentant radicals, disenchanting nationalists, condescending Afro-pessimists, zealous postcolonial anti-foundationalists, and trendy Afropolitans often mount the critiques with equal fervor.

However, there is need to distinguish the projects of nationalism, between the repressive nationalism of imperialism and the progressive nationalism of anticolonial resistance, between the nationalisms that led to colonial conquest and genocide and those that sought liberation for oppressed nations and communities,

between struggles for domination and struggles for freedom, between the reactionary, reformist, and revolutionary goals of various nationalisms. Socially, African nationalism had diverse ethnic and civic dynamics, spatially territorial and transnational dimensions. Its ideological and intellectual referents and representations were also quite diverse and expansive. Nationalism was, indeed, and remains a house of many mansions.

This is what accounts for the divergences and convergences of Achebe's and Mandela's nationalisms. The two men's nationalisms differed not only because of their disparate personal, professional, and political biographies, but also because of the different historical geographies and political economies of colonialism and anticolonial struggle in their respective countries. Their nationalisms encompassed struggles over ideas and representations, material conditions, and political power. Further, there were salient moral and psychic dimensions, the striving for a sense of collective well being and dignity so cruelly ruptured by colonialism. Thus, there were political, economic, social, cultural, artistic, and intellectual articulations of nationalism.

Anticolonial nationalism was expressed through political and civic organizations, as well as cultural and religious organizations, such as independent churches and peasant movements. It was also manifest in the realms of the performing, visual, and literary arts and an assortment of intellectual movements from Senghor's Negritude to Nkrumah's consciencism to Nasser's "three circles" to Nyerere's "African socialism." Each of these exhibited complex spatio-temporal articulations, organizational modes, social inscriptions, and discursive strategies. In short, African nationalisms, like other nationalisms, were not only invariably complex, often contradictory, and always changing, but also multiple and multivocal in their expression.

Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that amid all its internal complexities and diversities, African nationalism was a project that sought to achieve five historic and humanistic tasks: decolonization, nation-building, development, democracy, and regional integration. In spatial terms, it was a territorial, regional, and transnational nationalism; in social terms a democratic and developmentalist nationalism. From its inception, it had a dual face: it was a struggle *against* European rule and hegemony and a struggle *for* African autonomy and reconstruction, a revolt against Europe and a reaffirmation of Africa. It was woven out of many strands. Ignited and refueled by local and specific grievances against colonial oppression and exploitation, it drew ideological inspiration from diverse sources, including those from Africa itself, the African diaspora, Europe, and the colonial and ex-colonial worlds of Asia and Latin America.

ACHEBE'S REINVENTION OF AFRICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Achebe's historic importance in the annals of African literature is derived from the centrality of his work in framing such a powerful charter of literary and intellectual decolonization. The publication of Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in 1958 was a landmark literary and cultural event not because it was the first novel published by a Nigerian, let alone a West African or an African writer, but because it came in the tumultuous throes of decolonization.

The novel derives its preeminence as a referent in the African literary tradition, argues Simon Gikandi, a leading critic of Achebe, “for the marking and making of that exciting first decade of decolonization” (5). Its irruption at this monumental moment made it a foundational cultural text that provided a counterpoint to the colonial library. It helped establish and reconfigure an African literary tradition by interrupting and recreating the institutions of critical interpretation and education and setting “the terms by which African literature was produced, circulated, and interpreted” (Gikandi 5).

Building on Gikandi’s discernment, Kwaku Larbi Korang argues Achebe derives his status as Africa’s literary father, because of “the founding authority” he exerts on both his literary African successors and European precursors, endowing the former “Africanist authorization” and the latter with what can be called Africanist delegitimization (“Homage” ix). Achebe’s paternity of modern African literature arises out of the fact that he makes humanist “room for Africa in the (wordly) house of modern literature; and in doing so he makes an Africanist contribution to this literature as a datum of its proper worlding” (Ibid. x).

Also, critical was the thematic focus and force of *Things Fall Apart* in its bold, uncompromising, compelling, and profound interrogation of the colonial encounter and its recovery, reaffirmation, and reimagining of Ibo society, which rewrote and reformulated, forever, that encounter once scripted and dominated by European writers. Obi Okonkwo’s tragic fate in this archetypal novel became emblematic of the destructiveness, degradations, and disjunctive impact of colonialism; it offers a categorical argument against colonialism’s civilizational conceits.

In a particularly insightful reading, Korang argues that through the novel’s tragic realism Achebe writes back to Hegel’s offspring, the Eurocentric writers, both past and present, in a relentless assault against their aesthetic, humanistic, and ethical negations of Africa.⁴ The novel’s tragic realism is a literary rebuke against Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* in their denial of the translatability of the African condition as a commensurate, human, historical, and worldly experience. In his depiction of Okonkwo as a tragic hero and Umuofia as a normal society in all its complexities, contradictions, sociality, and transformations, Achebe rescues tragic realism from an exclusive and eternal Eurocentric monologue and monoculturalism. The novel offers an intertextual, intercultural, interpositional, and intersubjective humanistic restitution of an African normativity. In short, Achebe reclaims the cohabitation of Africa and Europe in the normativity of the real and the tragic, the sociohistorical and the modern, of the human and its existential contradictions, and their mutual transparency and translatability.

In *Arrow of God*, a sequel to *Things Fall Apart*, regarded by some critics as Achebe’s finest and most complex novel, “as the richest and most suggestive of Achebe’s novels, which is to say one of the richest and most suggestive novels of the twentieth century;” to quote Nicholas Brown for its revolutionary politics of form (87); for “its multitude of narrative voices” (630), to quote Ambreena Manji; and for its masterly depiction of what Mark Mathuray calls the antagonisms and oppositions of continuity and change, colonial power and traditional power, political power and sacred power, desacralization and retaining the sacred, conversion and fidelity in the Ibo world under colonialism (51). Achebe writes with such assured intimacy, empathy, and insight that the novel’s characters like Ezeulu

become, to quote Abiola Irele, one of Achebe's most incisive readers, "nothing less than a world historical figure, taking his place alongside those epic victims of historical events who have embodied, in their fullest dramatic manifestations, the most stringent dilemmas of human experience" (1–2).

Achebe's crusading cultural nationalism best represented in the two novels became an enduring characteristic of African literature—the excavation of African cultural traditions and agency from the debris of colonial disorder. This literary retrieval and reaffirmation of Africa's history and humanity paralleled nationalist historiography that was simultaneously mounting a vigorous ideological and methodological revolt against imperialist historiography and its Eurocentric narratives of eternal European superiority and African primitivity. Nationalist historians such as Nigeria's Kenneth Dike and Ade Ajayi were painstakingly recovering African activity, adaptations, choices, and initiatives before and during the colonial encounter.

The power of Achebe's assault against the racist tales and monstrous caricatures of African cultures by colonial ideologues that inspired him to write and his unapologetic defense of the normality of these cultures in what Adebayo Williams calls his "epic project of revalidating the epistemic logic of his people" underscores "that the origins of African literature were anthropological and sociological in impetus" (19, 15). This contributed to the ethnographic rather than aesthetic readings of Achebe's work and the anthropologization and politicization of African literary criticism. In the first instance, African texts are valorized for their cultural authenticity, intimacy, and insiderness and in the second for their political messages and gestures.

Not only do such readings, argues Carey Snyder, "give short shrift to the literary dimensions of this fiction, but in reading fiction like ethnography, some critics operate from the false assumption that ethnographic texts themselves are transparent" (157). In reality, Achebe's narrative voice reveals the ambivalences, fluctuations, fluidity, and slipperiness of aesthetic mediation and translation as much as the complexities, contradictions, fragmentation, continuities, and discontinuities of the society, times, and characters he is describing at a moment of great political and cultural transition.

Achebe's superb literary skills were no less evident in his indigenization of English to carry the weight of the culture and moments he was imaginatively recreating. This became another key register of the African literary tradition. Many of Achebe's followers sought to reclaim cultural authenticity and aesthetic originality by peppering their work with the riddles and proverbs of local languages and invoking the enchanting, haunting, and enigmatic myths, folktales, poetry, drama, and epics of oral tradition. But this gave rise to another misconception in the reading of African literature, a tendency to see the appropriation of oral narrative as a return to authenticity based on the historically inaccurate supposition that Africa is ontologically oral, while writing is European. Writing has a long history in many parts of Africa. The Ethiopians, for example, were writing before the English had learned the Roman alphabet.

Achebe also sanctified the shift from the literature of protest against the colonial order to the literature of protest against the postcolonial order. The literature of post-independence disillusionment did not start with him. In 1956, the South African writer Peter Abrahams had warned in *A Wreath for Udomo* against

exaggerated expectations, indeed, predicting that disillusionment would follow independence. In 1960, the year of Nigeria's independence and of sixteen other countries, Achebe published *No Longer at Ease*. The protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of the Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*, is caught in the confluence of the debilitating demands of tradition and modernity and trips between the stubborn legacies of colonialism and the heady dreams of independence, fueled by the class pressures of accumulation and corruption.

Achebe's treatment of corruption in *No Longer At Ease* by the new elite proved prescient. So did the ending of his fourth novel, *A Man of the People*, which is dominated by the conflict between Odili Samalu, an idealistic young teacher, and his former teacher, Chief Nanga, a corrupt Cabinet minister, who is forced from office following a military coup. When Nigeria's first military coup happened in 1966 some even wondered whether Achebe had advance warning! *A Man of the People* signaled the new thematic wave that was to dominate African literature for the next three to four decades in which potential disillusionment turned into actual disenchantment.

In his last novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, published twenty-one years later, Achebe sought both to portray the decadence and authoritarianism of the post-colonial state, as well as explore the alternatives to that order and the role of enlightened intellectuals. The narrative delicately weaves the contestations and contradictions of what Ali Erritouni calls the dominant, residual, and emergent registers. The first refers to the dominant social order represented by General Sam, the second, traditional institutions and values represented by the Abazonian elders, and the third, the leadership possibilities of social forces marginalized by colonialism and nationalism represented by Beatrice Okoh, the first major female character in Achebe's novels, and the urban workers.⁵

Some African writers and critics became uncomfortable with what they regarded as the excessive politicization of African literature, just as others were troubled by anthropological or sociological readings, sustained by the tendency in Western universities to assign African novels in social science and humanities courses not for their literary qualities, but as windows into the African cultural, social, and political worlds. But the question is not one of whether or not African literature is political, for all literature is political, but what type of politics it expresses. Asked by an interviewer, "Would you characterize yourself as a political writer?" Achebe answered with his characteristic discernment, "Yes, provided I explain that I don't mean I'm a politician. I think politics are at the very root of what life is; but in the West, politics is downgraded thanks to the cleverness of the emperor" (Bowen 50).

Kwame Anthony Appiah went so far as to characterize the postcolonial novels in Africa as "novels of delegitimation: rejecting the Western imperium, it is true, but also rejecting the nationalist project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie" (152). While many historians and social scientists were busy celebrating the achievements of independence or devising models of nation-building and development, African writers such as Achebe had already discovered that the postcolonial Leviathan was naked, that history was making a mockery of Nkrumah's famous injunction, "Seek ye first the political kingdom, and all else shall be added unto you. . . ."

The reasons for this may have something to do with the different discursive regimes of postcolonial scholarship and creativity. Academics were more beholden than writers to what the Beninois philosopher Paulin Hountodji calls “theoretical extraversion,” dependency on external paradigms, audiences, and legitimation. Thus while academics were busy importing theoretical models from the Western and Eastern blocs, African writers were delving deeper into the African cultural and social condition. For one thing, writers could not effectively borrow European sensibility and settings, in the same way that their academic counterparts could borrow theories manufactured in Europe with faddish regularity and use African settings as empirical fodder. In short, the internal orientation of African writing in inspiration, focus, and audience contrasted markedly with the dependency of African scholarship on external discourses.

Achebe was of course both an accomplished writer and an academic and the two reinforced each other. His academic essays are animated by the acerbic wit, sharp insights, economy, clarity, beauty, and catchiness of the novelist, short-story writer, and poet that he was, while his creative works reflect the discipline, reflection, and evaluative mind of the researcher and student of culture and society that he was, too. Some of his essays attracted as much attention as his creative work and influenced the critical reception of his literary work. Who can forget the homage to the liberatory and leadership role of the writer and intellectuals in postcolonial society of “The Novelist as Teacher” published in 1965; or the searing indictment of Joseph Conrad as a “bloody racist” in his 1975 essay, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” for the latter’s dehumanization of Africans in his novel that was universally celebrated in the Western academy and literary canon before Achebe’s critical intervention.

Achebe’s excoriation was not confined to the purveyors of Western imperialist representations of Africa from Conrad to the irascible and irredeemable V. S. Naipaul. He was particularly unforgiving of Nigeria’s bankrupt postcolonial leadership and rapacious elite. Twice he refused to accept national awards from the Nigerian government. Achebe’s multi-pronged assault against all those who threatened Africa’s agency, integrity, and dignity was evident in his essay collections and monographs, such as *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, *Hopes and Impediments*, *Hope and Exile*, *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, and his last book, a memoir, *There Was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra*.

Achebe became a literary institution in part because of his institutional role as the founding editor of the African Writers Series, which was established by Heinemann Educational Books in 1962. As editor in the first ten years of the series, who discharged his role of mentoring young writers across the continent without pay, James Currey tells us, “Achebe wanted the Series to reflect all the richness and variety of an emerging independent Africa” (578). It is hard to overestimate the crucial role the AWS played in the development of African literature, in the circulation and consumption of African literary texts within and outside the continent.

To be sure, the AWS has been criticized for exoticizing Africa by privileging, especially in its early years, texts of cultural reconstitution and reclamation, ghettoizing African authors, and undermining local publishing. But such was the canonizing power of the series, Becky Clarke reminds us, that for the next forty years there was hardly any significant African writer whose work was not at one

time or another published by it.⁶ I recall the incredible exhilaration I felt when my novel, *Smoldering Charcoal*, was published in the hallowed series in 1992. It was an experience none of my publications has ever elicited, not the publication of my first book, a collection of short stories in Malawi in 1976, or another collection of short stories in Canada in 1994, let alone my academic books. For many others, and me, Achebe gave us the permission and freedom to write, to take for granted an African literary tradition. My generation and the generations after mine will always be indebted to him and his generation for that.

MANDELA'S LONG WALK TO FREEDOM

We are similarly indebted to the nationalist leaders that brought political independence, notwithstanding the limits of decolonization and the unfulfilled dreams of African nationalism. Among them, lies the towering life and legacy of Mandela. Mandela's seminal stature is evident from the way everyone sought to bask in his reflected glory, including many African leaders who compare quite unfavorably with him for their mendacity, self-aggrandizement, and dictatorial tendencies. It is hard to remember that Mandela was once widely reviled in much of Euroamerica as a terrorist as he was revered in Africa and the progressive world as a revolutionary figure. He is now everyone's venerated hero, the man sanitized into a transcendent myth; his place in African history stripped of its messy contexts and multiple meanings; his life and legacy of protracted struggle morphed into a universal redemptive tale of reconciliation. His iconic image of lofty leadership satiated a world mired in pettiness; it was a resounding reproach to the small-minded leaders most countries were cursed with. The various Mandelas commemorated after his death offered different opportunities to people, politicians, and pundits in the North and in the South—absolution from the barbarous crimes of imperialism for the former and affirmation of their humanity for the latter and a reminder of the heady dreams of independence.

As with the day he was released from prison in 1990, many will remember where they were when they heard the news of Mandela's death. I vividly remember February 11, 1990. I sat glued to the television with bated breath for the live broadcast of Mandela's release. I told my then six-year-old daughter this was one of the most memorable days for my generation and she would live to remember it, too. I choked with tears of joy, anger, sadness, pride, anticipation, and other bewildering emotions as we watched the tall, smiling, dashing, and unbowed Mandela walking out of Victor Verster Prison beside his wife, Winnie, a militant in her own right who had suffered so much and done a lot to keep his memory alive. They walked with defiant dignity, holding hands, their other arms raised with clenched fists. The announcement of his death, although long anticipated because of his age and grave illness, came more unceremoniously. It arrived as a news alert on my iPad as I was working on some memo in my office. But it was no less momentous for it marked the end of an era, of Africa's long 20th century.

Predictably, in the days and weeks after his death the traditional and social media were awash with tributes, reminiscences, and verdicts on Mandela the person, the politician, and the symbol. In the United States and Britain, politicians, pundits, and celebrities fell all over themselves to find the most laudatory words to describe Mandela as the epitome of global moral authority, of humanity

at its best, the last in the hallowed canon of 20th-century saintly liberators from Mahatma Gandhi to Martin Luther King. Such encomiums are to be expected for a world hungry for goodness, forgiveness, trust, and optimism that Mandela exuded so masterfully. Conveniently forgotten is the fact that the British and American governments upheld the apartheid regime for decades and condemned Mandela's African National Congress as a terrorist organization. We all remember Ronald Reagan's and Margaret Thatcher's resolute defense of the apartheid regime and fierce condemnation of the ANC and its leaders including Mandela. In the United States, ANC leaders were officially regarded as terrorists until 2008!

The sanctified portrait of Mandela hollows out the exceedingly complex and contradictory man and historical figure that Mandela was and the true measure of his life and legacy. It amounts to what the South African intellectual, Xolela Mancu, bemoans as "the banalization of Madiba," at once inevitable and troubling, which simultaneously inspires us to celebrate him and reduce him into a one-dimensional man, a caricature of an everyman who appeals to the mighty and lowly.⁷ Anyone who has ever read Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, and *Conversations with Myself*, Anthony Sampson's equally capacious authorized biography, and other less authoritative ones knows he was not the superficial figure of the popular media who rose from clan royalty to the South African presidency and global political celebrity, appropriately purified by twenty-seven years of imprisonment.⁸

Rather, his greatness arose from the very complexities and contradictions of his life and times and how he embodied them, experienced them, articulated them, learned from them, manipulated them, deployed them, and tried to transcend them. He was not much of a father for his children, but he became a beloved father of the nation; he had two failed marriages but the public was perpetually seduced by his warm embrace; he was a ruthless political operator as much as he was a self-effacing leader; and his deep sense of empathy cultivated out of the very texture of daily life and struggle under apartheid allowed him to effectively deal with his jailers and negotiate with his Afrikaner opponents in the transition from apartheid to democracy.

Moreover, Mandela's unflinching loyalty to his comrades in the liberation movement sometimes blinded him to their limitations with adverse consequences as exemplified by his two immediate successors and there was the loyalty he exhibited to the unsavory leaders of states that had supported the anti-apartheid struggle such as Libya's Moammar Gadhafi and Nigeria's Sani Abacha. The early Mandela was known for being impetuous and boisterous; the later Mandela could be fiercely stern, coldly calculating, and compellingly charming to seize opportunities and advance his aspirations. At age thirty-three, he declared that he would be South Africa's first black president, but when he did achieve this goal at seventy-six he forsook the grandiosity of office so beloved by many leaders in Africa and elsewhere. However, there were constants in his life, too. He remained supremely proud and confident of himself and his African heritage and his commitment to South Africa's liberation struggle was steadfast.

Many have remarked on Mandela's remarkable understanding of the nature of politics and the performance of power that enabled him to embody the nation better than many of his fellow founding fathers of African nations and his two successors. Above all, he is praised for his lack of bitterness after spending

twenty-seven years in jail and his embrace of forgiveness and reconciliation. The manner in which this issue is discussed often serves to advance the redemptive narrative of Mandela's road to political sainthood. Only he and his closest confidants of course know how he truly felt.

Post-apartheid reconciliation may or may not have been a romantic attribute of Mandela the man; it was certainly a pragmatic imperative for Mandela the nationalist leader. Mandela's life and legacy need to be stripped of the psychologizing and symbolic discourses preferred in the popular media and hagiographies. It could be argued that he and his comrades were able to sublimate their personal anger and bitterness because the liberation struggle was too complex, too costly, too demanding, too protracted, and too important to do otherwise. Reconciliation was both a tactic and a necessity because of the dynamics of the liberation struggle in South Africa.

This is to suggest that like all great historical figures, Mandela can best be understood through the prism of his times and the political, economic, social, and cultural dynamics and conditions that structured it. Mandela changed much in his long life but it was a life defined by the vicissitudes of African nationalism. For those who don't know much about African history, or are wedded to exceptionalist notions of South African history, they would be surprised to learn the parallels Mandela shares with the founding fathers of many other independent African nations, in whose rarefied company he belongs. In fact, his historic significance, and the eruption of grief over his death and gratitude for his life in the Pan-African world and elsewhere, can partly be explained by the fact that he is Africa's last founding father.

The decolonization drama started in Egypt in 1922 with the restoration of the monarchy and limited internal self-government and finally ended in 1994 with the demise of apartheid in South Africa. In the long interregnum, decolonization unfolded across the continent, reaching a crescendo in the 1950s and 1960s; in 1960 alone, often dubbed the year of African independence, seventeen countries achieved their independence. The colonial dominoes began falling from North Africa (Libya 1951) to West Africa (Ghana 1957) to East Africa (Tanzania 1961) before reaching southern Africa (Zambia and Malawi 1964). The settler laagers of southern Africa were the last to fall starting with the Portuguese settler colonies of Angola and Mozambique in 1974, followed by Rhodesia in 1980, and Namibia in 1990. South Africa, the largest and mightiest of them all, finally met its rendezvous with African history in 1994. Mandela is cherished because of his and his country's long walk with African history.

Mandela embodied all the key phases, dynamics, and ideologies of African nationalism from the period of elite nationalism before the Second World War, when the nationalists made reformist appeals to the colonial regimes, to the era of militant mass nationalism after the war when they demanded independence, to the phase of armed liberation struggle. Many countries achieved independence during the second phase through peaceful struggle. Others were forced to wage protracted armed struggle. The variations in the development and trajectories of nationalism were marked by the way each individual colony was acquired and administered, the traditions of resistance in each colony, the presence or absence of European settlers, the social composition of the nationalist movement, and the nature and ideologies of the leadership. Similarly,

there were different ideological orientations and emphases. Some nationalists espoused secular or religious ideologies; among the former there were competing liberal, socialist, and Marxist ideologies that would later frame postcolonial development agendas.

All along, African nationalism unfolded in a rapidly changing world. Most critical were the effects of the Great Depression and the Second World War, the emergence of the Superpowers and the Third World, and the growth of Pan-Africanism and civil rights struggles in the diaspora. In so much as contemporary Africa is largely a product of struggles for independence and their complex, changing, and contradictory intersections with colonialism, imperialism, and globalization, Mandela's life and legacy as a historic figure are conditioned by the contexts and imperatives of nationalism. Like many of Africa's founding fathers, Mandela's life spanned much of South Africa's existence as a nation, traversed the various phases of the country's nationalist movement, and embodied the trajectories of postcolonial Africa.

Mandela was born in 1918, a mere eight years after the founding of South Africa out of four separate settler colonies and an assortment of conquered African states and societies and six years after the formation of the African National Congress. He was thirty when the country's racist settler regime gave way to the uncompromising racial barbarity of apartheid in 1948. In the early 1940s he was one of the founders of the ANC Youth League that sought to radicalize and rescue the ANC from its reformist politics. When the ANC adopted the Program of Action in response to the establishment of apartheid, he became the leader of the Defiance Campaign in the early 1950s. In 1955 he was among 156 activists who were tried in one of the largest political trials in South African history that lasted from 1956 to 1961. Following the Sharpeville Massacre in March 1960, the liberation movement decided to shift to armed struggle and Mandela was charged with the formation of the ANC's *Unkotho we Swize* (Spear of the Nation).

In 1963 Mandela and nine other leaders, including Walter Sisulu, his mentor, and Govan Mbeki, the father of future President Thabo Mbeki, were charged with sabotage at the infamous Rivonia Trial. During the trial, on April 20, 1964, Mandela uttered his immortal words from the dock: "During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

Thus Mandela was not an advocate of Gandhi's or King's non-violent resistance not because he was not a man of peace, but because he correctly understood that in the South African context, fighting against an obdurate racist minority settler regime required all available tactics from mass protest to armed resistance. For him multiple tactics had to serve the overall strategy of achieving national liberation. In short, as a freedom fighter he was simultaneously a political leader and a guerrilla leader. Under the ANC's broad and tolerant political umbrella he worked with traditionalists, liberals, socialists, communists, and Black Consciousness activists, both before and after his long incarceration.

Mandela outlived apartheid by nearly twenty years. His story can be told of other African nationalists. Some progressed from peaceful protest to armed

liberation struggle. They included the nationalists of Algeria, Kenya, Mozambique, Angola, Guinea Bissau, and Zimbabwe. Many of those who led their countries to independence were also born either just before or after their countries were colonized. Examples include Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president, born at least six years before Kenya became a British colony in 1895, outlived colonialism by fifteen years by the time he died in 1978; Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, born in 1909, outlived colonialism by fifteen years; Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Cote d'Ivoire was born in 1905 and died in 1993, thirty-three years after the end of French colonial rule; Léopold Sédar Senghor, who ruled Senegal for twenty years, was born in 1906 and died in 2001, outliving colonialism by forty-one years; and in my own homeland, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who was reportedly born in 1898, a few years after the country was colonized, lived to rule Malawi thirty-one years between 1964 and 1994 and died in 1997.

The long and large lives of many of Africa's founding fathers including Mandela represent a historic rebuke to the destructive conceits of European colonialism. In the notorious words of Ian Smith, the Prime Minister of the settler colony of Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, the European colonists believed colonialism would last at least a thousand years. Set against many of his fellow founding fathers, Mandela stands out for his singular contribution to democratic politics. He relinquished power after only one five-year term in office. Many others were overthrown in coups like Nkrumah or died in office like Kenyatta and Houphuet-Boigny. Before Mandela, the only other African leaders to voluntarily leave office were Senghor and Julius Nyerere, the founding President of Tanzania.

Mandela's example shines all the brighter when compared to his nemesis in Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, once a widely admired liberation hero who remains president thirty-four years after independence. Mugabe together with the likes of President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, in power for twenty-eight years, and still going, represent the dinosaurs of African politics in a continent that has been undergoing various forms of democratic renewal since the turn of the 1990s, in part influenced by the demonstration effect of South Africa's transition to democracy and Mandela's enlightened exit from office.

The lateness of South Africa's decolonization, it can be argued, helped compress the sequentiality, as it turned out for the early independent states, of the five objectives of African nationalism. While the latter achieved decolonization, they struggled hard to build unified nations out of the territorial contraptions of colonialism, which enjoyed statehood without nationhood. They came to independence in an era when development, democracy, and regional integration were compromised by weak national bourgeoisies, relatively small middle classes, and the Cold War machinations of the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union.

Mandela's South Africa benefited from both the positive and negative experiences of postcolonial Africa, the existence of a highly organized and vociferous civil society, and the end of the Cold War, which gave ample space for the growth of democratic governance and the rule of law. But the new post-apartheid state was held hostage to the dictates of the negotiated settlement between the ANC and the apartheid regime arising out of the strategic stalemate between the two sides—by 1990 South Africa had become ungovernable, but the apartheid state was not vanquished as happened in Angola and Mozambique.

This, combined with the global triumph of neo-liberalism in the post-Cold War era, guaranteed the powerful interests of capital in general and the white bourgeoisie in particular against any serious economic restructuring despite the great expectations of the masses and the ambitions of successive development plans by the new government from the *Reconstruction and Development Program* to *Growth Employment and Redistribution* to the *Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative*. Many in South Africa and among the African left accuse Mandela of having failed to dismantle the South African apartheid economy that has left millions of black people, especially the unemployed youth, in grinding poverty. Reconciliation, they argue, rescued whites from seriously reckoning with apartheid's past and its legacies and deprived blacks of restitution. Such critical assessments of Mandela's legacy can only be expected to grow. Mandela's death forces South Africans to reflect on the post-apartheid state he helped create. Deprived of Mandela's aura, some believe, the ANC's monopoly of power will continue to erode.

Nevertheless, the post-apartheid state achieved much faster growth than the apartheid regime ever did. The country witnessed massive expansion of the black middle class and the ANC government fostered the growth of a black bourgeoisie through the black economic empowerment program much as the apartheid regime before it had cultivated the Afrikaner bourgeoisie through apartheid affirmative action. There was also some reduction in poverty, although huge challenges remain in terms of high levels of unemployment and deepening inequality. Interestingly, South Africa now lags behind much of the continent in terms of rates of economic growth, in part because of the lingering structural deformities of the apartheid economy in which the peasantry was virtual destroyed, the labor absorptive capacity of the economy is limited by its high cost structures, and South Africa suffers from relatively low levels of skill formation for an economy of its size because of the apartheid legacy of poor black education. In 2014 South Africa was overtaken by Nigeria as Africa's largest economy. The continent's rapid growth, reminiscent of the immediate post-independence years, which has been dubbed by the world's financial press with the moniker of a "rising Africa," has given rekindled hopes for the establishment of democratic developmental states that might realize the remaining goals of African nationalism.

Thus, Mandela's political life and legacy resemble in significant ways that of other African founding fathers and South Africa's trajectory mirrors that of other African countries, notwithstanding the differences of national historical and geopolitical contexts. It is worth remembering Mandela's rhetoric of reconciliation was a staple among many African founding presidents in the immediate post-independence years. Kenyatta used to preach reconciliation, urging Kenyans to forgive but not forget the ills of the past as a way of keeping the European settlers and building his nation fractured by the racial and ethnic divisions of colonialism. Even Mugabe in the euphoric days after independence urged reconciliation between white and black Zimbabweans before domestic political challenges forced him to refurbish his revolutionary credentials by adopting radical land reform and rhetoric.

Reconciliation was such a powerful motif in the political discourses of transition to independence among some African leaders because of the imperatives of nation building, the second goal of African nationalism. It was also a rhetorical response to the irrational and self-serving fears of imperial racism that since

Africans were supposedly eternal wards of whites and incapable of ruling themselves, independence would unleash the atavistic violence of “inter-tribal warfare” from which colonialism had saved the benighted continent and, in the post-settler colonies, the retributive cataclysm of anti-white massacres. Instead of comprehensive accountability for apartheid and its normative institutional violence, which engendered “crimes against humanity,” post-apartheid South Africa pursued “truth and reconciliation” that individualized both the victims and perpetrators and shifted the logic of crime and punishment of the Nuremberg Trials for the logic of crime and confession, justified tendentiously in the name of “Ubuntu.”

In Africa’s independence struggles Mandela bookends Nkrumah. Nkrumah fired the Pan-African imagination; Mandela gave it one of its most memorable consummations. The former was a key architect of Pan-Africanism, a cosmopolitan intellectual activist whose diaspora associates included W. E. B. Du Bois, George Padmore, and C. L. R. James, while the latter was largely a home-grown pragmatic revolutionary whose long incarceration and struggles revitalized the intricate Pan-African connections between the continent and its diaspora.

In the United States, the anti-apartheid struggle offered the civil rights movement its most powerful and successful intervention in American foreign policy. The Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) that emerged in the mid-1970s out of growing black political representation, together with TransAfrica, spearheaded the anti-apartheid sanctions campaign, which galvanized the country from churches to college campuses. Over the past two centuries, African American mobilization over Africa has been greatest where the intersection of imperialism and whiteness as concrete and symbolic constructs, national and international projects and policies have been most pronounced, and where Africa advocacy is likely to yield significant domestic dividends.

For the CBC, passing anti-apartheid legislation was imperative not only because this was a popular cause in the Black community, and increasingly throughout the country, but because it offered them an opportunity to demonstrate and raise their power and profile in the halls of Congress, which would enable them to advance their domestic agenda. So widespread and powerful did the movement become that Democratic and even Republican politicians scurried to prove their anti-apartheid credentials. In 1986, after nearly two decades of Black Congressional representatives sponsoring sanctions bills, the CBC registered a historic victory when it succeeded in getting the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act passed over President Ronald Reagan’s veto. That marked the apotheosis of African American influence on US policy toward Africa, which was not to be repeated any time soon. Mandela’s release in 1990 and subsequent visits to the United States were widely celebrated as the return of a native son. This was true in other parts of the diaspora from the Caribbean to Latin America, Europe to Asia.

It is therefore easy to understand the iconic status of Mandela and the overflow of emotion his death provoked in the Pan-African world. The fact that President Obama started his politics as a student at an anti-apartheid rally, and his acknowledged indebtedness to Mandela’s exemplary life and struggle, offers a poignant thread in the thick ties that bind Africa and the diaspora in the struggle for emancipation from racial tyranny and dehumanization. For the rest of the world Mandela’s life and legacy resonate deeply because his progressive nationalism was fundamentally a struggle for human freedom and dignity, for social justice

and equality. It is not hard to see why that would be universally appealing to a world rocked by the horrendous devastations of the twentieth century, a century of emancipatory, ambiguous, and destructive mass movements, of mass culture, mass consumption, mass education, and mass media, as well as mass war and mass murder.

The genocidal regimes of Hitler and Stalin and the overlords of imperial Europe dominated the first part of this long century, while during the second half the long arc of history swung toward the liberators from the South, such as Gandhi and Mandela, and from the imperial heartlands themselves, such as Martin Luther King. That, I would submit, is Mandela's global historical significance—he was a major player in the most important political movement of the 20th century, decolonization. And for that his place in history is assured.

But this is not simply a pantheon of political revolutionaries. Chinua Achebe, the most pivotal figure in the establishment of modern African literature, belongs there. Like Mandela, he dedicated his life to the liberation of his society, continent, and the world through the enduring regenerative and imaginative power of literature, ideas, and commitment to the humanity and historicity of Africans, the ordinariness and extraordinariness of the African experience. Both have now joined the hallowed abode of the ancestors. Africa, its diasporas, and the world owe them eternal gratitude for having lived so meaningfully, honorably, profoundly, and productively.

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NOTES

1. Major magazines that published cover stories on Mandela's life and death include the *Economist* ("A Giant Passes," "Nelson Mandela: Invictus"), as well as commemorative issues by *Time* (19 Dec. 2013), *The New Yorker* (16 Dec. 2013), and *New African* (Jan. 2014). Every major newspaper in the United States, Britain, South Africa, and elsewhere across Africa and around the world carried lengthy tributes. The eulogies mentioned below are culled from such newspapers, *Guardian*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*, to mention a few, published in the days immediately following his death. For the African press coverage, a good source is *allafrica.com*, one of the leading aggregators of newspapers from across the continent.

2. The funeral was also given blanket coverage from the world media. The *South African Mail & Guardian* published some of the most poignant tributes. See especially "Hamba Kahle: Nelson Mandela," Special Tribute Edition (December 13–19), and "The Full Nelson" (December 13–19).

3. This section draws heavily from Zeleza, "Imagining and Inventing," "Historic and Humanistic Agendas," "Pan-Africanism."

4. See Korang, "Making a Post-Eurocentric Humanity."

5. See Erritouni

6. See Clarke.

7. See Mancu.

8. See Martin; Limb.

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