

12-14-2013

Madiba, Our Ancestor

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator

Marquette University, agbonkhianmeghe.orobator@marquette.edu

Madiba, our ancestor

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator

As well as the secular and religious rituals marking the death of Nelson Mandela, a third group of African symbols emphasise the continuity of life rather than the finality of death and will induct Madiba into a category of "ancestorship" revered and venerated as founders of the nation

The passing of Africa's greatest contemporary global icon, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (1918-2013), has spawned torrents of tributes, accolades and encomiums, the likes of which seem rare and odd for a deceased African political leader. Yet viewed through the lens of African religious traditions, there is nothing extraordinary about that.

Put simply, this is how Africans south of the Sahara celebrate the transition from one phase of life to another, especially when a figure of this magnitude dies. These are not accolades for a saint, but outpourings of gratitude for the gift of a true hero who has recently joined the exalted ranks of African ancestors.

Madiba, to call him by his clan name and by which he was affectionately known across the globe, will be interred tomorrow in his ancestral land of Qunu in the Eastern Cape. His choice of Qunu over South Africa's capital city, Pretoria, as his final resting place is replete with meaning and symbolism. Pretoria evokes the trappings of political power and statehood, while Qunu delineates a landscape of humble nobility, magnanimity and dignity that Africans revere and celebrate in the demise of one who has left a lasting imprint on history.

Several symbols will be in prominent relief at the burial of this African legend, starting with the secular and familiar, such as gun carriages, parades of guards, cannon salutes, lying in state and hoisting of flags — routine features and predictable rituals of a state funeral befitting South Africa's first black president and father of the Rainbow Nation, but militaristic symbolism, nonetheless, visibly

antithetical to the Christian scriptural and Advent message of beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks.

Also on display will be Christian symbols, like the well-observed national day of prayer last Sunday decreed by the South African state. For Mandela, there will be nothing unusual about this. He believed in God and, during his incarceration on Robben Island, registered as a Methodist and benefited from the services of a Methodist chaplain. I have reliable information that he also received regular visits from a Jesuit chaplain. According to my source, Mandela used to come to Mass and receive Communion, which act of intercommunion, given his situation, would be licit under canon law.

Notwithstanding these observances, he could hardly be considered a devotee of organised religion, perhaps in part because he saw through the duplicity of a kind of institutional religion that bred and propped up apartheid. He preferred instead to devote his entire being to the task of transforming and reconciling a country severely damaged by racial injustice.

Like any astute politician, he knew the place of religion in politics and was not averse to using it as much as was necessary. He counted notable religious figures among his friends and relied on the support of a confluence of religious traditions in his spirited and long-drawn struggle to dismantle the apartheid system.

A third set of symbols, more significant and more powerful, I would argue, will be the traditional funerary rites and rituals accorded a personality of his stature. Most of the traditional African funeral rituals are appropriately conducted in the intimacy of the family, in the privacy of the home, and will be shielded from public gaze or scrutiny. In Qunu, Madiba will be buried as an ancestor. The Xhosa concept of family and respect for ancestor are as strong there as anywhere in Africa, if not stronger. It is predicated on the seamless rhythms of existence between the living and the departed. This belief inspires and empowers Africans to celebrate death as a passage from one realm of life to another.

It is perhaps an anomaly to speak of funeral or burial for a leader such as Mandela. To be sure, he will be committed to Mother Earth, to rousing cadences of dirges and eulogies, as is customary of most African practices. But the symbolism that guides African funeral

rites evokes continuity of life rather than finality of death. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, the belief is strong that death opens a pathway to a new form of existence rendered under the title orancestorship':

Mandela qualifies as an ancestor par excellence and his funeral will confirm his membership of a unique category of ancestors who are revered and venerated as founders of the nation. No one takes this honour upon himself or herself. There are clear criteria for acquiring and conferring this status, including the quality of the departed person's life, the impact on the family or clan and the influence of his or her legacy for humanity.

Besides, Mandela lived a long and remarkable life, touched and inspired countless lives, contributed to the collective life of the community with abundant progeny, lived as an agent of harmony, strove for reconciliation, defended and fended for the poor, weak and vulnerable, died a happy death, surrounded by friends and family, and reconciled himself with his former "enemies':

This is a daunting inventory of ancestor membership conditions. Only a figure of Madiba's calibre could claim full compliance. Thus he will have a fitting funeral that recognises his credentials and confirms his pedigree as an African ancestor. Recognised as such, Mandela will be venerated, remembered frequently, called upon to continue to protect his people (the nation) and his legacy will remain an inspiration to those who follow him.

Contemplating the life, passing and afterlife of Mandela evokes striking resonances of the preface for the Catholic Mass of Christian burial: "In him, who rose from the dead, our hope of resurrection dawned. The sadness of death gives way to the bright promise of immortality. Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death we gain an everlasting dwelling place in Heaven". African obsequies embody this belief in the existence of ancestors. Unsurprisingly, in death as in life, Madiba epitomises a vital bridge between Christian beliefs and fundamental tenets of African religious traditions.

Fr. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator SJ is the provincial of the Jesuits in East Africa.