



OUR ANCESTORS' WILDEST DREAMS: Reclaiming Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's legacy

By Caroline Mose



African traditions and cultures have always held an awareness of the life cycle, from birth to death and the afterlife. The life cycle made us aware of the transitions from birth, through initiations, to child-bearing and rearing, to old age, to death, and thereafter to the journeys to the spiritual worlds of the ancestors and spirits.

In the afterlife, ancestors held sway on the day-to-day life of every community in many ways. Ancestors were consulted, honoured, and venerated, and in moments of crisis, asked to intervene (or stop intervening), so that life could return to an even keel. In many ways, the ancestor was not just an idea, but also a part of daily living, part of the eldership. Interestingly, ancestors included both female and male persons who had lived and transitioned.

Scholarship is awash with various studies on the idea of the ancestor - a continuing member of society, an elder who has a say in the day-to-day life of the community. Growing up, we learned, some of us via folklore, and some via Geography, History and Civics (GHC) classes (and some of us, through both) that ancestors are an active part of spiritual life. In a sense, ancestors are an extension of God, the creator, the primordial ancestor, the source of all life, or at the very least, an

active part of the pantheon of the spiritual life of the people, which included the Creator and the spirits.

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Of course, critical discourse on ancestors has waned over the years, in part due to what I call the *colonio-patriarchal* gaze, which introduced functionalism and structuralism as part of its anthropological and religious distortions of African culture. The “civilising” and “missionising” discourse that classified our understanding of ancestors as a pagan and primitive practice consigned the nuanced view of the afterlife to a fixed idea of worship. “Civilised” Africans stopped the practice of venerating ancestors because of an internalised conflict that pitted these ancestors with a God that was a watered-down white variation, incapable of seeing the value of honouring those from whom we came, those that walked before us and prepared the way for us.

Worse, the *colonio-patriarchal* gaze also consigned women to the margins, entrenching racist-patriarchy as the default position. While in Old Africa women held esteemed positions of honour and of power, post-colonial Africa conceptualised women on a Victorian model that needed women to be hapless and helpless before men. Nanjala Nyabola, in one of her op-eds in the Tana Forum, calls this the “patriarchal understanding of the role of women that merely exchanged European patriarchy for an invented African tradition that has all but erased the herstories of women”. This erasure was based on an invented African tradition extended to the continuum of the living and the afterlife, and worse, to the understanding of women’s being as only relevant where connected to men.

We see this in our storytelling, for example, where women are either Mama-so-and-so, or a wife/part of a harem of wives/ a saintly grandmother, full of wisdom, demure. Women’s needs must subscribe to a certain way of being, despite the many ways in which women have continued to resist from time immemorial. We only need to think of women like the late Prof. Wangari Maathai and the women who resisted the occupation of Uhuru Park alongside her to understand that women have historically resisted the proscriptions of *colonio-patriarchy*.

Which brings us to subject of the transition of Mama Winnie Madikizela As soon as news of Mama’s passing broke, the Kenyan dailies joined their international counterparts in weaving a tale deeply steeped in *colonio-patriarchy*. “*Nelson Mandela’s ex-wife Winnie dies at 81*”, the *Standard* newspaper announced, setting the tone that positioned Winnie as irreverently connected in a previous way, an ex to the great Nelson Mandela.

“*Winnie Mandela: South Africa’s flawed heroine dies*”, the *Nation* broke the news, further positioning this ex of a great man as fundamentally flawed. Three days later, the *Nation* would follow up with the headline: “*Mandela and his 3 wives: Evelyn, Winnie and Graca*”, diverting the story from Winnie’s transition from life to the afterlife to the male prowess of Mandela, who had three wives. In this article, quoted from AFP, Mandela’s first wife Evelyn, a “cousin of ANC stalwart Walter Sisulu”, was described as “a demure country girl in sharp contrast to...his feisty wife Winnie” – (of course, even the framing of Evelyn’s identity as also connected to *the* Walter Sisulu apart from being Mandela’s first wife cannot be missed).

To erase Mama Winnie’s herstory is to erase the injustices of apartheid. It is to condemn her for fighting during war. It is to ridicule her for not being a demure, village girl in the

face of violence, rape, plunder and racism. It is to reward apartheid and its adherents.

The “contrast” is made deeper when we are told that while both women came from the same village, “Winnie took to the city”. Indeed, the idea that the city as a space that “unsanitises” women from demure to troublesome is as old as colonio-patriarchy itself. The city becomes the place where women are “urbanised” into becoming ungovernable, mainly through empowerment, education being the top of the list. While Evelyn “buried herself in religion”, Winnie would deliver incendiary speeches, get jailed, and even kept a “young lover”. These qualities, decidedly non-rural and non-religious, turning Winnie into a “flawed” phenomenon. These “flaws” became the sum total of her life, the distillation of all her life’s work, including keeping the fire of revolution burning in South Africa while her husband spent 27 years in jail.

Even her imprisonment is framed differently. For Mandela, prison life only served to turn him into a monkish sage who would preach forgiveness and win the Nobel Peace Prize. For Mama Winnie, prison only served to enrage her, morph her into a beast that would kill innocents such as Stompie, take young lovers, and create the football club that she used as a personal militia. Let us also not forget that while in prison, Winnie was subjected to the most humiliating torture.

While married to Nelson Mandela for about 38 years, it would emerge that the couple only spent a total of five years together. These five years would become the lynchpin of the reading of Winnie’s life – how she spent her solitary years being unfaithful and indiscrete towards her iconic husband, how she disgraced him by using her young lovers to kill innocents, and how she dared to “maintain” her young lover even after her larger-than-life husband came back to her from a 27 year-jail term.

Those who have advocated for a more nuanced reading of Winnie’s life have been vilified and asked to consider that Mama Winnie was not perfect, that she had her flaws. While a compelling argument, the point is not lost that those pointing at her “flaws” are doing it from the position of colonio-patriarchy.

The timbre of these reports is not just disturbing; they, for me, point to a deeper narrative where women who transition from life to the afterlife are not accorded the same dignity and veneration that men are. This is one of the lasting legacies of colonialism, where women were relegated to the margins of men’s lives, both when living and in death. The invention of a picture of “African womanhood” that does not work for the majority of African women who stand up to be counted becomes problematic because it does not work, period. To erase Mama Winnie’s herstory is to erase the injustices of apartheid. It is to condemn her for fighting during war. It is to ridicule her for not being a demure, village girl in the face of violence, rape, plunder and racism. It is to reward apartheid and its adherents.

Compare, for instance, the soft, even magnanimous, approach to the death of P.W Botha, who was actively opposed to anti-apartheid activities and was found guilty of human rights violations by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Or the rewarding of F.W. de Klerk with a Nobel Peace Prize despite his support of apartheid and state-sanctioned violence against South African blacks towards the end of apartheid when he was the president of South Africa.

For both men, apartheid is contextualised so that their crimes against blacks appear less abhorrent than those committed by their predecessors. For example, history is kind to Botha for not being as “brutal” as his predecessors. This kindness and nuanced reading is missing when Mama Winnie is dubbed a “flawed” ex-wife. In fact, her crimes take on a salacious character. The brutal murder of Stompie is often connected to her supposed “flings” with younger men. The story even subtracts from the horrible death of Stompie, and becomes firmly hinged on Winnie’s supposed and imagined

sexual life.

Such salacious readings are mainly consigned to women throughout history. The great painter Frida Kahlo's story has always been centred on her tumultuous marriage to Diego Rivera, and hinged on her imagined sexual life, rather than the breathtaking beauty of her work, and her incredible life story. Many pundits seek to remind us of the ways in which the late Prof. Wangari Maathai was divorced from her husband, and led a "nude protest" at Uhuru Park. Her hard-won Nobel Peace Prize becomes a footnote, as does her life's work in education and the environment, which she began as a teenage girl.

Female ancestors, embodying the earth, were seen as giving the earth its fertility. Part of the pantheon of the spiritual, their names were evoked for blessing, fertility and the wellbeing of the earth.

So why then must we see these women who have transitioned as ancestors? Why must we honour them, and seek to vociferously end the erasure of their lives? Film-maker Ava Duvernay popularised the saying "I am my ancestors' wildest dreams" after breaking out as the first African-American woman to direct a big-budget film production. In subsequent interviews, she directly made reference to female ancestors, paying homage to them by saying that she would never have accomplished her life's work if these female ancestors had not laid the groundwork.

For us in Kenya and in Africa, this is doubly true. Our female ancestors have continued to lay the groundwork for us, propelling us to become who we are today. Our departed grandmothers and mothers have left us with nuggets of wisdom, joy, and even pain, with which we have forged ahead into *becoming*. Our female elders and ancestors, from Queen Nzinga of Angola to Mekatilili wa Menza of the Mijikenda, Queen Lozikeyi of the Ndebele, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti of Nigeria, Miriam Makeba, Wangari Maathai, and now, Winnie Mandela, have all dug on rock to ensure we find footing in soft ground. They have led revolutions, won wars, led armies, and won countless, if unappreciated and erased, victories. Paying homage to them as elders and ancestors is the least we can do. Paying forward their labours is imperative. The soil they dug up from rock cannot be desecrated with erasures, and without action. We must resist erasures, and continue with the tasks of planting where they gave us soil, so that future generations will find rock-hewn forests.

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There is also the belief that the state of the earth is commensurate with the status of women, both those that are alive and those that have transitioned. If we are to observe the state of the earth today, it is clear what the status of women is. The transition of Mama Winnie reminds us that we must resist and reclaim the spaces of our female ancestors from colonio-patriarchy. This is the urgent and imperative assignment of our generation.

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