



MOTHER OF THE NATION: Saint and Sinner

By Isaac Otidi Amuke



“They set up my father as the saint and set up my mother as the sinner,” Zindzi Mandela is quoted saying about her famous parents in Pascale Lamche’s film *Winnie*.

Of all front-row ANC freedom fighters – men and women – Winnie Madikizela-Mandela was singled out as the only leader to appear before South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in her personal capacity, where she was implored by Desmond Tutu to apologise to the country for whatever might have gone wrong under her watch. Tutu had argued then that her confession would be good for the country.

The ANC employed the use of violence during the anti-apartheid struggle, including deploying bombs in strategic government installations, some of which exploded and killed the wrong targets. It was widely held – and as stated by ANC stalwart Ahmed Kathrada during a BBC HardTalk interview – that some bombings were carried out by unruly ANC cadres. These crimes were pegged not on individuals but on the ANC, which sent senior representatives to the TRC to either explain and defend its position or to apologise. The same collective leniency of being represented by the ANC was not extended to Madikizela-Mandela. The liberation sins attributed to her and those around her were placed squarely at her feet, prominent among them being the 1989 killing of 14-year-old Moeketsi “Stompie” Seipei, who was suspected of being a police informer.

“The one person who kept the fire burning when everyone was petrified,” Madikizela-Mandela said

of her essential if lonely and thankless role in the anti-apartheid struggle in Lamche's film, a moment in which moment her eyes got watery. "And I didn't blame them because those dark apartheid forces were killing our people like flies. I didn't blame them. When sometimes I would shoot that fist alone, and they were too petrified... then they put me on trial before the TRC, and Desmond Tutu sat there judging me... judging me...."

Stompie had been a marked young radical activist in what was the then Orange Free State, the province where Madikizela-Mandela had been banished to in 1977. After participating in a student protest, he and his comrades were arrested and heavily tortured by the apartheid police. Upon their release, Ace Magashule - who is the current ANC Secretary General and who was himself a young ANC activist in the Free State at the time - organised for the evacuation of Stompie and his other teenage comrades. He found them a safe haven in Soweto, Johannesburg, where Madikizela-Mandela had established herself as the undisputed leader of the liberation struggle.

Not too far away from Madikizela-Mandela's Soweto home was the residence of Paul Verryn, a bishop who offered sanctuary to Stompie and his comrades. At the time, Madikizela-Mandela was surrounded by the Mandela United Football Club - a footloose group of young activists who alternated between freedom fighters and an untamed group of area boys who terrorised anyone who did not ascribe to their beliefs. It was at Madikizela-Mandela's Soweto home - where tens of young activists streamed in and out, seeking guidance and support - that Ace Magashule taught Stompie how to use an AK47 and how to deploy a grenade. Such were the precarious prevailing circumstances. They were in the middle of an armed struggle against apartheid.

On the night when Stompie's body was found not too far away from Madikizela-Mandela's Soweto home, he and three of his comrades had been picked up from Verryn's residence by members of the Mandela United Football Club after allegations that the bishop had sexually assaulted the young activists surfaced. At the end of the night, Stompie's three colleagues went back to the bishop's home. It is believed the three were allowed to return to Verryn's residence either because they had given credence to the sexual assault claims and Stompie had not substantiated the allegations, or because Stompie was suspected to have been a secret police informer planted in their midst. Stompie's death would remain an albatross around Madikizela-Mandela neck for decades, until Pascale Lamche's film seemed to decisively exonerate her.

For a long time throughout the 1990s, Madikizela-Mandela found it near impossible to exonerate herself from accusations that she had either killed Stompie herself or given orders for his killing. That she had publicly endorsed the use of "matches and necklaces" to liberate South Africa - a euphemism for placing a tyre around a person and lighting it up - played into the narrative that she was the de facto leader of a ragtag militia that embraced vigilantism.

As future investigations revealed - and as shown in Pascale Lamche's film - Jerry Richardson, the Mandela United Football Club coach who served as Madikizela-Mandela's bodyguard and who was convicted in 1990 for killing Stompie, was found to have committed the murder for personal reasons. Unlike his earlier assertions that he had received instructions from Madikizela-Mandela, Richardson later confessed to having been a police informer himself, thereby resorting to killing Stompie, who had in fact found out that Richardson was indeed a police informer. At the time - and as revealed by various apartheid security officials - there had been a well-orchestrated smear campaign against Madikizela-Mandela that was aimed at eroding her moral credibility as an ANC leader.

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Paul Erasmus, a former Security Branch official, recently spoke to a Johannesburg reporter about how Madikizela-Mandela was under complete surveillance and how the apartheid state ran a well-oiled character assassination campaign against her. This is corroborated in Lamche's film by Vic McPherson, an operative of the state's Covert Strategic Communications (Stratcom), who confessed to working in cahoots with at least 40 journalists in executing psychological warfare on Madikizela-Mandela, a campaign that was sanctioned by South Africa's then president P.W. Botha. This included the making of a vile documentary shown on 40 American TV channels, which resulted in Madikizela-Mandela being declared an international terrorist in the United States.

Erasmus spoke of how whenever Madikizela-Mandela attended a meeting where alcohol was served or consumed, state agents would quickly spread word - whether true or false - that she had overindulged and misbehaved. This misinformation would be carried strategically on both local and international media platforms for maximum effect. These distorted and embellished media reports were also targeted at creating distrust and planting seeds of discord within the ANC. Whether the courts acquitted her of whatever she was accused of or not, Madikizela-Mandela's name would continue to be dragged in the mud in what was a well laid out public perception war.

"I would get first grade intelligence from Soweto," Erasmus told the reporter. "Winnie's house was bugged. She was under continuous surveillance. The entire soccer club and literally everyone who surrounded Winnie were Security Branch informers... so everything Mama Winnie did was conveyed to me. My job was to sift and work the formula and get the stuff out."

In their pursuit to curtail the meteoric rise and moral credibility of one of the most prolific anti-apartheid forces within South Africa, the state infiltrated Madikizela-Mandela's environment by whatever means possible. As is the case in such operations, those picked as informers may or may not have known they were being used to fight the enemy's war, since part of the recruitment of informers is done through third parties with whom those around Madikizela-Mandela would innocently share information, not knowing it would get transmitted to the apartheid state.

"I am telling you this as a fact," Erasmus continued. "They were all working for the Security Branch, including Winnie's aide de camp at the time... The deaths started when one found out about the other, and Jerry (Stompie's convicted killer) went as far as admitting this in court..."

According to Erasmus, the disinformation campaign was targeted at neutralising certain radical elements within the ANC, starting with Chris Hani and Madikizela-Mandela as prime targets. Hani had been the highly popular and charismatic commander-in-chief of Umkhonto we Sizwe - the ANC's fighting unit - as well as Secretary General of the South African Communist Party (SACP), which for a long time has remained an ideological alliance partner of the ANC. He was assassinated in cold blood by a lone gunman on the morning of April 10, 1993 as he walked back to his house after picking the day's newspapers in the company of his daughter, who witnessed the assassination.

There were fears that South Africa would erupt into a civil war following Hani's death, first because his killing seemed like a means to clear the ANC of hardliners who were popular with the masses but who did not believe in making compromises with the apartheid state, and second because his troops, the Umkhonto we Sizwe, were still armed at the time. Nelson Mandela - whose on-the-ground popularity was always compared to that of the militant Hani (who was seen as a probable future president) - had to address the country that evening and call for calm. With the magnetic Hani out of

the way, Madikizela-Mandela remained the one dangerous loose cannon for the apartheid regime. They went after her hard.

“We couldn’t attribute it to the enemy completely,” Madikizela-Mandela said of Hani’s murder in Pascale Lamche’s film, suggesting that his murder might also be the work of those who objected to Hani’s overt opposition to giving too many concessions to the apartheid regime during the negotiations with the ANC following Mandela’s release from prison. “When he was killed, one of the hopes of the country was gone. Here was a man who led the military wing of the ANC. We literally worshipped Chris Hani. We dreamt of a South Africa where he would be president one day.”

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George Fivas, who was South Africa’s police commissioner between 1995 and 1999 - around the time when investigations into Stompie’s murder were reopened under the ANC government - came out recently to categorically refute the allegations that Madikizela-Mandela was complicit in Stompie’s murder. These and other claims prompted speculation that the ANC was trying to nail Madikizela-Mandela for the killing, thereby incapacitating her politically within the organisation.

Sydney Mfumadi, South Africa’s Minister for Safety and Security between 1994 and 1999, who served under Nelson Mandela and under whose ministry the police service fell, has since come out to refute claims that the ANC had anything to do with the reopening of the investigation into Stompie’s murder, a claim that Fivaz supports.

“A lot of people still say Winnie killed Stompie,” an ageing Fivas told a reporter at his Johannesburg private security consultancy office. “Somebody is still feeding the international media the story. I am telling you, after a proper investigation we never found anything to substantiate that claim... There was no evidence to implicate Winnie in Stompie’s murder.”

According to Fivaz, when Madikizela-Mandela thanked him for exonerating her of Stompie’s murder during the TRC hearings, he told her, “You must understand I was not here to do you a favour. I was here to basically tell the TRC what I know as the gospel truth.”

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There is no denying that Winnie Madikizela-Mandela - like most revolutionaries of her time - was provoked into militancy. The times demanded it, the cause required it, and the enemy necessitated it.

Nothing captures this more aptly than Madikizela-Mandela’s own words when she stated, “I am a

product of the masses of my people and the product of my enemy.” The fact that Nelson Mandela founded Umkhonto we Sizwe – the military wing of the ANC – is usually treated as an inconvenient footnote by those who seek to paint him as the patron saint of peace. Yet Mandela’s own militancy before his imprisonment was a reflection of how desperate the times were. Apartheid in all its forms and shapes was a violently dehumanising system of government that necessitated full blown warfare as its black South African subjects fought back to reclaim their humanity. Madikizela-Mandela, just like her former husband, was therefore both a war-time general and a peacetime general, adjusting accordingly with the times and circumstances.

What many forget is how violent South Africa was at the time. The April 1979 death by hanging of one of South Africa’s most celebrated liberation struggle heroes, the 22-year-old Solomon Mahlangu, is a clear indication of how volatile things were as the ANC and others like Robert Sobukwe’s Pan African Congress (PAC) fought apartheid. Mahlangu and two of his comrades got busted by a policeman in Johannesburg as they tried boarding a public transport van, each of them carrying heavy suitcases full of pamphlets, guns and explosives. As the policeman grabbed one of the suitcases, an AK47 and a hand grenade fell out. The three comrades ran in different directions, with Mahlangu and Mondy Motlounng deciding to hide in a warehouse. They got accosted and badly beaten, resulting in Motlounng suffering severe brain damage, which made it impossible for him to eventually stand trial alongside Mahlangu.

Two individuals got shot and killed in the warehouse as the policeman charged after Mahlangu and Motlounng. Their killings was blamed on the young revolutionaries during trial. Charged for murder and terrorism in 1977, Mahlangu was hanged in 1979 after his appeal was rejected. His last words – “My blood will nourish the tree that will bear the fruits of freedom. Tell my people that I love them. They must continue the fight.” – remained a liberation rallying call in South Africa. His death remains one of the bitter memories of the anti-apartheid struggle.

Apartheid was a monster that also spawned black-on-black violence. While discussing a chapter in his PhD thesis on Black Youth Politics in 2014, South African MP and spokesman of the far-left opposition party the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), Mbuyiseni Ndlozi, referred to an incident in June 1993. Ishmael Bujozi, a foot soldier in the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), was being buried at the Everton Cemetery in Johannesburg. His death had resulted from the IFP’s rivalry with the ANC, where youths from both parties took turns attacking each other. An hour after the burial – when Bujozi’s family and IFP members had left – Bujozi’s body was exhumed and burnt by local ANC youths. News got to his family and the IFP, who immediately planned for a second burial. During the second funeral, a huge crowd of ANC youths from nearby settlements gathered outside the cemetery. Later that week, Bujozi’s body was exhumed once again and hanged on the cemetery fence, where it stayed for days.

Ndlozi wondered what death a corpse dies and what the exhumation meant. Did the exhumation reflect on the one who lived in the body, the one who buried it, or the one who exhumed it? In his view, the exhumation was a violation of the sanctity of the graveyard. Nothing was sacred, nothing was safe.

It is through this lens that we must to look at members of the Mandela United Football Club who became both victims and perpetrators of the same kind of violence. It was a stormy time, and Madikizela-Mandela, with all her good intentions, found herself at the centre of a maelstrom.

On Tuesday April 10, Stompie’s mother, Joyce Seipei arrived at Madikizela-Mandela’s Soweto home to pass her condolences to the bereaved family. She was accompanied by ANC Women’s League

officials from the Free State. After meeting Madikizela-Mandela's two daughters, Zindzi and Zenani, Mrs. Seipei walked out of the home accompanied by her son's teenage-hood comrade, the ANC Secretary General Ace Magashule, who first brought Stompie from the Orange Free State to Soweto. Looking on was ANC spokesman Pule Mabe.

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On Sunday April 8, following Madikizela-Mandela's passing - Mrs. Seipei had spoken to the South African media from her Free State province home. She told the media that she didn't believe that Madikizela-Mandela was involved in the murder of her son. She remembered Stompie as a brilliant and courageous young man whose untimely death had devastated her. It all felt surreal.

"The bones of my own younger brothers are still in Tanzania," Magashule, who was present, said, referring to the tens of ANC fighters who died in training camps across Africa. "I am the one who recruited them and took them to Tanzania. I recruited my cousins. They too died in the struggle. The bones of Stompie's comrades are still exiled in Angola. We all knew it was a matter of life and death."

"A lot of comrades have died because of lies," Magashule said, recalling the turbulent times when being called an *impimpi* - meaning traitor - was equated to a death sentence. There having been allegations of tens of ANC cadres having faced firing squads inside ANC training camps on suspicion of being spies for the enemy. "The ANC was highly infiltrated. Nelson Mandela asked us not to share this information publicly because it could have crippled the organisation."

The footage of Joyce Seipei eulogising Madikizela-Mandela - the woman who was for a long time accused of killing Stompie - is the sort of image that would make sceptics wonder whether Mrs. Seipei had been subdued into partaking in an ANC self-cleansing exercise. Yet there was a sense that this was no public relations stunt - that Stompie's mother knew all along that Madikizela-Mandela was innocent of her son's murder.

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