



MOTHER OF THE NATION: The spear has fallen

By Isaac Otidu Amuke



April 2018

“She talked about forgiveness, and it’s one of those things that whenever she spoke about, she would have tears in her eyes but the tears wouldn’t roll down her face,” Zodwa Zwane, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s personal assistant, stated in her eulogy on April 11, 2018, during an ANC memorial service at Orlando Stadium in Soweto, Johannesburg. ‘And she would say Zodwa, I don’t have tears anymore. I have felt pain up to the highest threshold.’”

Seth Mazibuko, who was the youngest member of the Student Action Committee that led the Soweto students’ uprising starting in June 1976 – which resulted in the killing of hundreds of students by apartheid police (estimates range between 176 and 700 deaths, with over 1,000 injured) – said that Madikizela-Mandela was an eternal source of strength to his generation. He recalled that fateful 16th of June 1976 when school children were shot by apartheid police for participating in a protest against the introduction of Afrikaans as the official language of instruction in schools. Madikizela-Mandela – driving a maroon Volkswagen Beetle – and journalist Sophie Tema – driving a white Volkswagen Beetle – rushed to the scene and ferried the dead bodies of the massacred children away. Among those killed was 12-year-old Hector Pieterse who became the face of the uprising when the photo of 18-year-old Mbuyisa Makhubu carrying a fatally shot Pieterse was widely

circulated across the world.

Mazibuko credits Madikizela-Mandela with admitting him into a proper psychiatric hospital after he was released from prison at the time when he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He says that decision alone - of getting him proper medical care - could only be taken by someone who truly cared for him. Madikizela-Mandela taught him how to cook, as well as reprimanded Mazibuko whenever he transgressed.

“The saddest part of the news of her passing is that it has happened at a time when we needed the energy and gallant spirit of a mother of the nature and stature of Mama Winnie,” Mazibuko stated. “Some of us in the struggle are still hurting. We needed the motherly side of Mama Winnie that would urge us to keep going. We needed a voice as strong as that of Mama at this time when the ANC is talking of renewal and unity.”

People like Mazibuko had not just lost a leader, but a mother-figure as well. When he was sent to prison at Robben Island aged 16, it was Madikizela-Mandela who went out of her way to look after his own mother. There were many more instances where Madikizela-Mandela went above and beyond the call of duty to assist. That being said, it wasn't lost on Mazibuko that there were sustained onslaughts to isolate and discredit Madikizela-Mandela as she fought apartheid and even after the ANC assumed power in 1994.

“There is no struggle that is clean,” Mazibuko said. “The struggle was conducted on the dirty streets of Soweto, and here was someone willing to fold her sleeves and get her hands dirty. When other people were in exile, it was Mama who kept us together. When freedom came, she never enjoyed it. She was pushed away. We owe her an apology before we say ashes to ashes.”

Tokyo Sexwale, the former Premier for Gauteng province, the Minister for Human Settlements and an ANC liberation stalwart, was the only person who had lived in the same house with Madikizela-Mandela before being jailed at Robben Island in 1977, where he served 13 years after being convicted for terrorism and conspiracy to overthrow the apartheid government. Sexwale had taken shelter at Madikizela-Mandela's Soweto residence as a 17-year-old ANC activist, a home where he stayed in for three years before embarking on Ukhonto we Sizwe activities, which landed him in jail. On arriving at Robben Island, Sexwale said that the prison's most famous detainee, Nelson Mandela, wanted to know every little detail about life in his Soweto home, asking about his wife and two children - how they dressed, how each of the kids performed at school, how they coped with his absence - information Sexwale readily volunteered.

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“I saw with my own eyes the torture, the humiliation by the police who came in to break things, to take clothes off the laundry line and throw them into the rubbish dump... and she would go and pick them up and wash them all over again with tears in her eyes,” Sexwale recalled. “I saw the tears of joy whenever it was time to visit Mandela at Robben Island and the tears of sadness whenever she returned from Robben Island. I saw the police slapping her. I saw them calling her bitch in her own house.”

“When they slapped her she fought back,” Sexwale continued. “They would hit her with fists and

whenever I tried getting up to intervene they would kick me. And the children, Zenani and Zindzi, would be there from time to time whenever they were back from school in Swaziland. Then on the night they came to take her away for detention, she was kicking and screaming, telling the men that the things they were doing to her wouldn't stop her people's liberation."

"No person should go through the life of Winnie. Let alone a woman, a mother," Sexwale said of Madikizela-Mandela on April 2. "We have lost one of our best. Winnie was like a candle caught in the crosswinds. She was an indefatigable person, a fighter and a defiant resistor to the end. She even refused - when I spoke to her last week - to have a wheelchair. She would not succumb. She was defying gravity. The nation has lost a heroine... one of our best... a mother not only to her two daughters but a mother to the nation of our unwashed masses...."

ANC Deputy Secretary General Jesse Duarte - who is the only woman serving as a member of the party's "top six" officials - remembers Madikizela-Mandela as nothing but a nurturer, a mother to whoever needed one. No child who needed a place to stay was ever turned away from Madikizela-Mandela's home, and whenever anyone was arrested, Madikizela-Mandela made sure their families were taken care of and lawyers were hired for them. When Duarte was released from prison in 1988, where she was detained without trial for close to a year, she first stopped to see Albertina Sisulu, the struggle stalwart and wife of Walter Sisulu, who had recruited her into the ANC back in 1979 when she was 26. Her next stop was the Soweto home of Madikizela-Mandela, who told her that now that she was back from prison it was time to recommit to the liberation struggle because the difficult work they had started was not yet complete.

"Comrade Winnie Mandela is the Winnie Mandela of the people of Ivory Park, the Winnie Mandela of the people of Slovo Park," Duarte eulogised Madikizela-Mandela on April 11. "She is the Winnie Mandela of the poor, the Winnie Mandela of the working classes of this country. She gave everything she had. She kept very little for herself and her family. She gave us her life, her commitment. She never betrayed our struggle. She did not betray the revolution...."

Speaking at the United Nations headquarters in New York on April 4, former South African Vice President (to Thabo Mbeki), UN Under Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN-Women, Dr. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, elaborated on how and when Madikizela-Mandela was christened Mother of the Nation, and why she was enormously deserving of the reputable title.

"She believed she was a rock, and therefore she had to be there for people to lean on her," Dr. Mlambo-Ngcuka said. "She fought a system that was brutal, and the fact that she was defiant at every turn gave many of us the courage to fight back in our own small ways because we had this larger-than-life personality who was leading from the front. She was not the wife of an icon. She was an icon in her own right, standing next to another icon."

"For decades when we couldn't relate to the leaders," Dr. Mlambo-Ngcuka continued, referring to top ANC leaders who were either in jail, underground or exiled, "she was the go-to person who helped glue the different groupings in the country together. That is why she was called Mother of the Nation...She will be solely remembered as a gallant fighter against apartheid who fought for women, fought for her community and fought for the oppressed people. Period."

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another icon.”

One group which understood what Madikizela-Mandela’s motherhood and nurturing side felt like was the then expelled leadership of the ANC Youth League, among them Julius Malema and Floyd Shivambu, the duo which went on to become president and deputy president of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). On learning of their expulsion from the party for supposed ill discipline in their push for a radical economic transformation agenda, the expellees’ first stop was the Soweto home of Madikizela-Mandela, who embraced and comforted them. Much as the group went ahead to form a political party that became a sharp thorn in the ANC’s flesh, Madikizela-Mandela maintained a very public, uninhibited motherly attitude towards them.

During the 2017 doctorate graduation ceremony of MP and EFF spokesperson Mbuyiseni Ndlozi, Madikizela-Mandela, who was in attendance, congratulated “her boys” in her usual joking manner, telling them that ever since they went to parliament they had been doing exactly what she had asked them to go and do. Madikizela-Mandela spoke of how she had told the EFF to go and wake the ANC up, since the liberation movement was sleeping. “You have done a better job because no parliamentarian sleeps anymore,” a jovial Madikizela-Mandela said to enormous applause. “Everyday you insult us, you are doing exactly what I sent you to do in parliament.”

In their condolence message to the Mandela and Madikizela families - typed in their characteristic red ink - the EFF castigated the ANC for denying South Africa its first woman president. This was in reference to the December 1997 ANC Mafikeng elective conference, where Madikizela-Mandela intended to offer herself for election as the party’s deputy president to Thabo Mbeki, a move which could have seen her rise to the country’s presidency post-Mbeki.

The bottleneck was that Madikizela-Mandela had not been nominated by ANC branches before the conference, as was procedure, meaning she needed a nomination from the floor of the conference backed by 25% of delegates. Madikizela-Mandela requested Mbeki, who was chairing the session - flanked by Jacob Zuma on his right and Nelson Mandela on his left - to briefly adjourn the conference so that she could speak to delegates and get her nomination on course, something Mbeki called canvassing. Mbeki declined to adjourn, leaving Madikizela-Mandela with no choice but to quash her ambition. Jacob Zuma was elected ANC deputy president unopposed, setting on course his future disastrous presidency.

Yet when Mbeki and his friend-turned-foe Jacob Zuma were threatening to tear the ANC apart during the party’s 2007 Polokwane elective conference - which they eventually did following Mbeki’s defeat and subsequent recall as president of South Africa - it was Madikizela-Mandela who summoned the moral courage before the conference and confronted the two men, asking them to shelve their ambition for the ANC presidency and instead settle for a compromise candidate, an initiative which bore no fruit, seeing that the livid duo was keen on going all the way. As she spoke to the two men, Madikizela-Mandela reported that they both used one phrase in reference to each other - “Mama, you don’t know that man.” It took a decade after Jacob Zuma’s 2007 election as ANC president in Polokwane for the party to regain a semblance of unity following the December 2017 Nasrec elective conference where Cyril Ramaphosa was elected ANC president, leading to the recall of a stubborn Jacob Zuma, who had hugely dented the party.

Asked how Madikizela-Mandela should to be remembered during an April 6 interview, Thabo Mbeki ardently pushed the argument that it was ill-advised to single out personalities and celebrate them as individuals, when in fact they had been part of a collective. Mbeki insisted that Madikizela-Mandela was part of the liberation effort, and that she should therefore be remembered in that context - as one in the midst of many. He seemed to be making the argument that even if individual

members of the movement - like Nelson Mandela - had previously been celebrated as icons in their own right on the occasion of their passing, then it was time to change that culture. It appeared the former president feared that Madikizela-Mandela was about to be lionised. Unfortunately for Mbeki, there was never going to be moderation in the remembrance of the Mother of the Nation, a nation extending beyond South Africa's borders.

Mbeki's perception of Madikizela-Mandela as an attention-seeker is best illustrated by an incident during the 25th anniversary of the 1976 Soweto students uprising in 2001. Mbeki, at the time South Africa's president, had already arrived at the anniversary celebrations when Madikizela-Mandela made her late entry. Amid cheers from the crowd, Madikizela-Mandela walked up to the high table where she went to hug Mbeki, who while declining the hug, knocked Madikizela-Mandela's cap off her head, an act Mbeki says was accidental.

"She did something wrong... she liked arriving at meetings late, deliberately... in order to get applause," Mbeki said of the incident. "She comes in alone, and people's attention is drawn away from the person speaking... she did that systemically. So when she came on stage and wanted to embrace me I told her you can't do wrong things like that repetitively." His remarks attracted the wrath of Madikizela-Mandela's supporters, coming as they did just days after her passing.

The irony of the whole situation is that during the anti-apartheid struggle, when the ANC leadership was either exiled in Zambia or imprisoned, it was Mbeki and other ANC intellectuals who made a conscious decision to settle on Nelson Mandela as the face of the movement, a choice hugely influenced by the fact that Mandela's wife had built her own larger-than-life profile as a revolutionary who was constantly targeted by the apartheid regime. For Mbeki and his comrades, pairing the profiles of Nelson Mandela and that of Madikizela-Mandela was an act of genius, Mandela having served 27 years in prison and Madikizela-Mandela having become the globally renowned liberation stalwart and persecuted wife of the long-serving prisoner. While it suited the ANC to exploit Madikizela-Mandela's "Mother of the Nation" stature, she was also isolated and labelled as an ill-disciplined disruptor when it was convenient, especially when she posed a direct political threat to the powers-that-be within the organisation.

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Mbeki may or may not have an axe to grind with Madikizela-Mandela or her legacy - and he recently stated that he and Madikizela-Mandela had a cordial relationship despite the mishaps - but what remains clear is that theirs could be a manifestation of the divide between forces on the ground, as represented by Madikizela-Mandela and Chris Hani, and the top exiled ANC leadership, as represented by Mbeki - two groups who hugely contributed to the struggle but who seemed to look at the frontline from different prisms.

The ANC has always refuted the perception that its ranks are split into three: the Robben Islanders, constituting Nelson Mandela and his Rivonia trial comrades; the external exiles, consisting of the likes of Mbeki; and the *in-xiles* (internal exiles) consisting of the likes of Madikizela-Mandela. The jury is still out on these divisions.

Mbeki had wanted to join the Umkhonto we Sizwe fighting force after his undergraduate studies, but ANC president O.R. Tambo declined his request, insisting that Mbeki needed to return to Sussex University to pursue his Masters degree. Much as Mbeki would later undergo military training in Moscow, where he and Chris Hani marked their 28th birthdays together, he would remain an intellectual and ideologue within the ANC, never a gun-carrying fighting cadre. On the other hand Chris Hani and Madikizela-Mandela commanded ground forces. This in turn set the stage for the grouping of perceived militants like Hani and Madikizela-Mandela on one side, and supposed moderates like Mbeki on the other, which affected how they related with each other within the organisation.

“I am not used to hearing such nice things being said about me,” Madikizela-Mandela said on the occasion of her 80th birthday in September 2017 as she entered the Johannesburg venue of the gala. “I am one of the lucky few to be told such heartwarming things when I am still alive.”

Historically, the African liberation struggle - in all its forms and shapes - has been a highly patriarchal affair, both by design and by default that seeks to quarantine and limit women. The rise of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela from Nelson Mandela’s wife to a tour de force within the ANC and beyond should be viewed in the context of an African woman beating not only her cultural and societal inhibitions, but going ahead to challenge - head on - the oppressive white occupational state which even the men in her midst who had all the privileges patriarchy afforded them found hard to confront. Madikizela-Mandela first defied patriarchy, before proceeding to defy apartheid. According to South African feminist writer and journalist Gail Smith, in the final analysis, Madikizela-Mandela won the battle against apartheid but she lost the fight against patriarchy, which reared its ugly head even in her death.

Young women across the world have pushed back on Madikizela-Mandela’s demonisation and retold her story - warts and all. Standing outside Madikizela-Mandela’s Soweto home, Cape Town’s executive mayor Patricia de Lille was overcome by emotion as she spoke to a reporter after viewing Madikizela-Mandela’s body, which was brought back to the residence that April 13 evening, where it spent the night before burial the following day.

“It’s really hit me now... because the whole week, two weeks, you know you still hope... and you know we prayed for her... she’s our mother...” de Lille said, unable to weave words together, teary eyed, her voice shaking with palpable grief. “You know she’s no more and her memory will live with us,” de Lille continued after regaining composure. “But we must continue to put up the fight for the poor, the landless, the homeless, because that’s what Mama lived and died for. When I saw her tonight for the last time I recommitted myself to that path of making sure that there are more people in our country who must taste the fruits of freedom and not just a few. That has always been the dream of Mama.”

De Lille, who was reportedly in trouble with her party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), for choosing to attend a memorial service for Madikizela-Mandela organised by her party’s rival, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), next to the Brandfort house where Madikizela-Mandela was banished in 1977, had retorted that in African culture, when a mother died, it was mandatory for one to go and pay one’s respects. She referred to Madikizela-Mandela as her sister, mother and comrade. She didn’t need to ask anyone for permission to mourn, De Lille said.

“The violence and the torture just made her more resolute,” de Lille continued. “Later she was saying there’s no more pain left and there’s no more fear left but at the same time she was a very soft person, with a heart of gold. We could come to her at anytime. If I just wanted to let off

whenever I questioned myself whether it's worth it to carry on with the struggle, I used to come here and spend hours with Mama and by the time I left I just knew I couldn't give up. I had to continue. Now that she is no longer there we all have to commit ourselves to work even harder to make sure we look after the poor of this country... tonight I can feel that I have seen her for the last time, but she taught us to never give up... to press on... press on... press on... and that is what I will continue to do."

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Barely an hour after Madikizela-Mandela's body returned to Soweto, a high-level memorial event attended by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres was held at the United Nations in New York. The words of Cuba's Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Anayansi Rodriguez Camejo, possibly captured best the collective mood and sentiment of the evening:

"The Apostle of our independence Jose Marti said, 'Death is not true when the work of life has been fulfilled.' Winnie was and is living history. She was Nelson's voice on the streets of her country and around the world when he was imprisoned by the apartheid regime... Her spirit of resistance earned her admiration from honourable people but also the fear of her enemies who could never bring her to her knees. She has been rightly called the Mother of the South African Nation, but she was more than that. Her motherly embrace transcended the borders of her homeland because with the victory of the South African people over apartheid Africa was reborn... Winnie is the expression of the rebellious and fearless spirit of all African women."

Asked why it was imperative for her to be present to witness Madikizela-Mandela's casket - draped in the ANC's green, yellow and black flag - being carried off the hearse and up the hill leading to her home, a woman wearing a red doek said, "It was important for me to be here. Mama Winnie was the Mother of the Nation. She fought for us through thick and thin," she said. "No woman can stand the pain that Winnie withstood. She was strong in jail. She never had time to stay with her family or her kids but she remained strong. I wish I could be like Winnie. I wish every woman can be as strong as her."

Asked what she felt at that emotional moment, a younger woman standing next to the woman in a red doek quoted Madikizela-Mandela. "You strike a woman you strike a rock," she said, "She was the embodiment of the strength of the African woman." A young man standing behind the two women - dressed in a yellow ANC T-shirt and a black marvin and carrying a black backpack, said, "I felt like crying because uMama Winnie fought for us... today I am literally still here because of people like her... go well uMama."

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"The sad news that has led us to this moment, this moment when you see the casket of uMama Winnie Madikizela Mandela draped in the ANC flag," South Africa Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC) Aldrin Sampear reported, standing on a partly deserted street corner outside Madikizela-Mandela's home. "Inside this house is the body of uMama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. The body that was bruised and battered. The body that said there's no type of pain that I have never

experienced. The body that spent 491 days in prison. The body that after seven days (of non-stop interrogation) was urinating blood. The body that was electrocuted. The body that made sure that body would overcome and fight for the freedom of South Africa.”

At the poignant moment when Madikizela-Mandela’s body was being carried past her gate and into her Soweto home - with the gathered crowd ululating and shouting *Amandla!* once the casket entered the compound - a somber-looking American civil rights leader, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, and members of the Umkhonto we Sizwe veterans association sang in unison the liberation dirge *Hamba Kahle* over and over again in line with the tradition of honouring struggle stalwarts. *Hamba kahle mkhonto/Wemkhonto/Mkhonto we sizwe* - safe journey spear, yes spear, spear of the nation. The spear of the nation had indeed fallen.

The ANC logo has a hand holding a spear. On the logo of the opposition party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a hand-held spear sits across the map of Africa. When Nelson Mandela and his comrades Walter Sisulu and Joe Slovo decided to launch an armed struggle against apartheid and formed a military wing of the ANC, they named it Umkhonto we Sizwe (Xhosa for spear of the nation).

It goes without saying that nothing symbolises the anti-apartheid struggle more than the spear. It increasingly appears that that spear is a woman, and that woman is Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, the Mother of the Nation.

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