

# Bound Together in Invisible Ways: Eulogising a Giant of History

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## Summary

This article examines Barack Obama's eulogy on the occasion of Nelson Mandela's memorial on 10 December, 2013. Using a critical discourse analysis framework, the article demonstrates that Obama's eulogy is an act of memorialising Mandela that captures the life story of this statesman and also generates conversations about identity, participation and agency in both local and the global spaces. The eulogy privileges three qualities: making emotional connections with the audience through the use of adjectives, enhancing the ethos of Mandela by strengthening the pathos of the occasion and finally, interpolating Obama's own identity-formation by calling for action that perpetuates Mandela's magnanimous contributions. Although the word Ubuntu is only used twice in the eulogy, this article contends that it is this experience of being bound together in ways invisible to the eye that Obama focuses upon in order to make connections between apartheid and Jim Crow, the South African nationalist struggle and the Black American civil rights movement. In 1 945 words, Obama captures the complex selves of Mandela as politician, prisoner, husband, father, divorcee and sage statesman.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek Barack Obama se lofrede ter geleentheid van Nelson Mandela se gedenkdiens op 10 Desember 2013. Die artikel gebruik 'n raamwerk van kritiese diskoersanalise om te demonstreer dat Obama se lofrede 'n herdenking van Mandela is wat die lewensverhaal van hierdie staatsman saamvat en ook gesprekke oor identiteit, deelname en agentskap in sowel plaaslike as globale ruimtes genereer. Die lofrede sonder drie eienskappe uit: emosionele aanklank by die gehoor deur die gebruik van adjektiewe, verhoging van Mandela se etos deur versterking van die patos van die gebeurtenis, en laastens, interpolering van Obama se eie identiteitsvorming deur 'n oproep tot aksie wat Mandela se groothartige bydraes verewig. Hoewel die woord *ubuntu* slegs tweemaal in die lofrede gebruik word, voer hierdie artikel aan dat dit hierdie ervaring van saamgebondenheid op maniere wat onsigbaar is vir die oog, is waarop Obama fokus om die verband tussen apartheid en Jim Crow, die Suid-Afrikaanse nasionalistiese *struggle* en die Swart Amerikaanse burgerregtebeweging daar te stel. In 1 945 woorde vat Obama die komplekse self van Mandela as onderskeidelik politikus, gevangene, eggenoot, vader, geskeide man en wyse staatsman saam.

## Introduction

I argue in this article that Barack Obama demonstrates how cultures and selves operate by summoning the eulogising self at the sombre occasion of Nelson Mandela's death. Eulogia, the Greek root of eulogising, is derived from *eu* (well) and *logos* (spoken word), implying the performative act of speaking concisely and logically about the deceased. On this occasion, Obama amplifies that Nelson Mandela was a good-hearted statesman who deserves to be remembered in special words. This rendition honours the memory of Madiba, uniquely reminiscing the way Mandela lived. The question that frames this article is: What constitutes Ubuntu, and how is this understanding matrixed into the eulogy? I argue that Ubuntu, though used only twice in this eulogy, tells us the right person to be; it tells us the person we should strive to be. This is cogently captured in Obama's eulogy at the point he offers his understanding of Ubuntu:

Mandela understood the ties that bind the human spirit. There is a word in South Africa – Ubuntu – (applause) – a word that captures Mandela's greatest gift: his recognition that we are all bound together in ways that are invisible to the eye; that there is a oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others, and caring for those around us.

Some lives, and some deaths, have a profound effect on the self; Mandela's death was a momentous ripple. The influence that Mandela's life and death had on South Africa and the world is not only determined by the size of those that paid tribute to him; context and history also contributed to the multiple ways in which his demise connected many-a-citizen in invisible ways.

Psychologists contend that the self is never in a state of equilibrium; our interaction with the world is dynamic. As our environment changes, we adapt. Mandela, as reflected in Obama's eulogy, was one monumental figure whose signature was constant reflecting and acting. This Mandela self is greatly

influenced by its history. The histories and contexts of Mandela as political activist, husband, father, prisoner and president co-determined his identity. Obama's eulogy reveals that the Mandela-self is a co-adapted meme-complex, a memeplex whose function is to selectively imitate, to protect and propagate its constituent memes:

We can never know how much of this sense was innate in him, or how much was shaped in a dark and solitary cell. But we remember the gestures, large and small - introducing his jailers as honored guests at his inauguration; taking a pitch in a Springbok uniform; turning his family's heartbreak into a call to confront HIV/AIDS – that revealed the depth of his empathy and his understanding. He not only embodied Ubuntu, he taught millions to find that truth within themselves.

It took a man like Madiba to free not just the prisoner, but the jailer as well – (applause) – to show that you must trust others so that they may trust you; to teach that reconciliation is not a matter of ignoring a cruel past, but a means of confronting it with inclusion and generosity and truth. He changed laws, but he also changed hearts.

I perceive a structural and semantic pattern in this eulogy where Obama specifies the contours of Mandela's life. The eulogy honours the special skills of the deceased (introducing his jailers as guests at his inauguration), honours his merits (turning his family's heartbreak into a call to confront HIV/AIDS), honours his virtues (he taught millions to find ... truth within themselves) and honours his character (Madiba [taught us to] free not just the prisoner, but the jailer as well). The last feature I identify is the manner in which Obama uses this occasion to chastise aberrant governments and inimitably advises them to re-consider their styles of governance; in essence he tells the errant dictatorships to "go to the ant, thou sluggard" a la Ecclesiastes.

## **Stylising Rituals of Public Memory**

Stuart Hall (2003) conceives of identity as a construct; an ideation constructed out of difference. For Hall this construct is finite and complete, but for Frantz Fanon (1967) and Paul Gilroy (1999), identity is fluid and contested, a function of heritage and context, an interplay of avowal and disavowal. It is principally these contestations that Obama integrates into the projection of Mandela as the epitome of modalities of being and belonging, citizenship engagement and remembering, articulation and perpetuation. Obama insists, persuasively, that Mandela's histories must be used for contemporary nationalist projects of fashioning identities (Barnabas 2016), values and qualitative improvements in the lived experiences of all. Indeed, Mandela spoke incessantly about how the new South Africa was affirmed and

strengthened by diversity; he celebrated the myriad ethnicities as exemplars of inclusivity and therefore the hybridity immanent in the rainbow.

Rituals of public memory, spectacle and dissemi/nation demand an accoutrement of stylisations that include memorability and ingratiating. Obama achieves both through repetition. The sense of over/wording is achieved through emphasis in the refrain and recurrent phrase that privilege the enormity of loss and the gravitas of the lost Mandela. One recalls the loss of Joao in Noemia de Souza's eponymous poem: who can take Joao from us? Mandela, like Joao, is not only South Africa's illustrious son: his Ubuntu transcends national frontiers.

*Wafa wanaka* literally translates into the dead are without blemish. On this august occasion, the erring memes of Mandela are unmentionable. He towers in grace as the audacious and the venerable. The endless songs and poems and eulogies from charlatans and statesmen give an aura of magnified munificence to Mandela. Obama generously accords him the most apt accolades in active verbs and pared adjectives. In total, there are 67 adjectives ranging from "distinguished", "singular", "icon", "serene", "inestimable", to "giant of history". Mandela attains an otherworldly status that connects to the four spaces he magnanimously belonged to: home, prison, state house and the international arena. Obama perceptively subtitles a segment of the eulogy "from prisoner to president"; a pointer to Mandela's meteoric career. In leading the democratic state for only a term, Mandela embodies both the selfless and self-effacing together with the mortal that is prone to err:

It was precisely because he could admit to imperfection – because he could be so full of good humor, even mischief, despite the heavy burdens he carried - that we loved him so. He was not a bust made of marble; he was a man of flesh and blood – a son and a husband, a father and a friend.

Obama's eulogy attains poetic cadences here through the dash, dieresis, onomatopoeia and the semi-colon. The inserted phrase beginning "because he could be so full of humour, even mischief" generates essential pauses that accrue rhythm and therefore adequately pace the eulogy. Obama also uses nominal ellipsis masterfully to build up to the climax that closes Obama's adieu to Mandela's soul: "What a magnificent soul it was." The word "because" achieves cohesion through coordination, serving to provide reason and purpose for Nelson Mandela's actions.

Repetition is also an especial and poetic device that Obama incorporates into his eulogy. The following excerpt is illustrative:

*His* struggle was your struggle. *His* triumph was your triumph. Your dignity and your hope found expression in *his* life. And your freedom, your democracy, is *his* cherished legacy (my emphasis).

Because Mandela is the subject of previous constructions, Obama deploys anaphora by substituting the agent with 'his' to generate the sense of being bound to the visionary and legendary feats that the late president accomplished. Such faultless parallelism achieves inter-sentential balance and equality in Obama's subsequent lines where Nelson Mandela, the unassuming herd boy, rises in stature to become comparable to sages of history:

Madiba would emerge as the last great liberator of the 20th century. Like Gandhi, he would lead a resistance movement .... Like Dr. King, he would give potent voice to the claims of the oppressed and the moral necessity of racial justice .... He would endure a brutal imprisonment that began in the time of Kennedy and Khrushchev, and reached the final days of the Cold War. Emerging from prison, without the force of arms, he would – like Abraham Lincoln – hold his country together when it threatened to break apart ... like America's Founding Fathers, he would erect a constitutional order to preserve freedom for future generations – a commitment to democracy and rule of law ratified not only by his election, but by his willingness to step down from power after only one term.

Gandhi and Lincoln and Martin Luther King were political actors with fierce convictions that the universe is built on justice and morality. That is captured in Martin Luther King's enduring statement: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" (1967). These were men compelled by a staunch realism and whose pangs were stamped on a conscience that affirmed the connectedness in humanity, hence Madiba's Ubuntu. Mandela, like his predecessors mentioned here, did not seek to appease, placate and conform to the expectations of maverick politicians; rather he zealously promoted and enkindled the imagination of South Africans and the world to ardently search for truth, justice and peace.

It is also quite significant that Obama addresses the deceased as Madiba, the totemic and familial name popularised by South Africans as a gesture of their endearment to Mandela. The audience at Mandela's funeral have multiple selves, but on this occasion, they conscientiously suppress the other selves in order to conform to the sobriety and sombreness of this moment. Because of the levels of discontent with the fissures in the African National Congress (ANC) at this point in 2013, some members of the audience were later to boo at President Jacob Zuma, a manifestation of public glee that sharply contrasted with the teleological reception given to Barack Obama.

Mandela is projected as an enduring agent, even in death, who magnanimously acted on the racially polarised apartheid space. Mandela perceived, learnt, strove, imagined, remembered, decided and acted – and at each moment he displayed an abiding sense of continuity in the political, social and individual selves across place, time and context. I recognise in the 1 945 words of Obama the independent and interdependent selves of Nelson Mandela. The independent self of Nelson Mandela is unique, free and

influential. The interdependent self of Nelson Mandela is relational, adjusting and rooted. In both selves, the values and ideological beliefs resonate with brutal honesty, innovative conversations and a quest for enduring solutions to the challenges of apartheid and the novel tapestries of governance in the new state imagined as the rainbow nation. Obama also takes the occasion of the eulogy to indict leaders in the audience to re-direct their energies towards both retrospection and introspection in the manner of Mandela:

And so we, too, must act on behalf of justice. We, too, must act on behalf of peace. There are too many people who happily embrace Madiba's legacy of racial reconciliation, but passionately resist even modest reforms that would challenge chronic poverty and growing inequality. *There are too many leaders who claim solidarity with Madiba's struggle for freedom, but do not tolerate dissent from their own people.* (Applause.) *And there are too many of us on the sidelines, comfortable in complacency or cynicism when our voices must be heard* (my italics).

Obama deploys the technique of parallelism: "there are too many leaders ... there are too many of us" and in each parallel construction he inveighs against the intolerance, hypocrisy, complacency and cynicism that are "governance toolkits" in many an African leader. The exemplarity of Mandela, and his largeness of spirit become hallmarks of humanity and good governance par excellence, illustrated also in the iconic achievements of Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King. Mandela is therefore aptly labelled 'the last great liberator of the 20th century.'

## **Interactions, Institutions and Ideas**

Iterative and recursive stylistic renditions of Obama's speech evoke the race contestations that have characterised America and South Africa. These are summoned by the speaker in order to inscribe the inviolable agency of Nelson Mandela. The speech appropriates these basic tactics that Mandela pre-eminently selected in participating in his world as husband, divorcee and politician: being the right person at the right time, leveraging interactions with both the *hoi poloi* and international politicians; and leveraging institutions such as the courthouses and the media. Mandela spoke up against oppression (the productive skill) and he also listened (the receptive skill).

In the assertive tactic, Mandela was not selfish; in the interdependent domain, adjustment and accommodation did not equate to compromise and weakness. Whereas each of his actions was a choice, Mandela was stubbornly aware of how such choices affected others. Recognising diversity did not imply emasculation in South Africa – and by extension, the world; perseverance in the agitation for the new rainbow nation legitimised the strengths of hybridity that sought to promote creative co-operation, peace and

prosperity. Obama captures this quintessence of Mandela in the following terms:

Mandela demonstrated that action and ideas are not enough. No matter how right, they must be chiselled into law and institutions. He was practical, testing his beliefs against the hard surface of circumstance and history. On core principles he was unyielding, which is why he could rebuff offers of unconditional release, reminding the Apartheid regime that “prisoners cannot enter into contracts.”

But as he showed in painstaking negotiations to transfer power and draft new laws, he was not afraid to compromise for the sake of a larger goal. And because he was not only a leader of a movement but a skilful politician, the Constitution that emerged was worthy of this multiracial democracy, true to his vision of laws that protect minority as well as majority rights, and the precious freedoms of every South African.

Mandela becomes the person he is because multiple aspects of the self – multiple role identities that are potentially relevant to the situation – are perceptively summoned and activated by Robben Island (Mandela’s prison for twenty-seven years), the Union Buildings (the seat of government where Mandela served a single term) and Mvezo (Mandela’s birthplace and his final place of interment). In the image of the mason and the carpenter, Mandela chiselled his ideas into laws and the most enduring constitution: he was practical, unyielding, skilful and visionary. Indeed, it seems appropriate here to submit that Mandela was keenly aware of the adage that we know who we are, in a sociological sense, through seeing ourselves in the eyes of other people.

## **In closing**

This article has sharply projected the intricacies involved in eulogising a giant of history, where the imperative lies in a desire to mediate Mandela’s long walk for and towards social and economic justice with the memorialising of his memplex. Eulogy in this instance becomes testimony and testifying; an occasion that provides reflexive capacity not only to recuperate the vision of Mandela, but to validate the enduring sense of Ubuntu that is the foundation of an enduring national and juridical consciousness. Obama summons the whetted exemplarity of Mandela in his penultimate paragraph:

After this great liberator is laid to rest, and when we have returned to our cities and villages and re-joined our daily routines, let us search for his strength. Let us search for his largeness of spirit somewhere inside of ourselves. And when the night grows dark, when injustice weighs heavy on our hearts, when our best-laid plans seem beyond our reach, let us think of Madiba ...

Here is an enduring tribute where the private joys and sorrows, the quiet moments and unique qualities of Mandela suggest inestimable exemplarity. Obama has captured the life story of Nelson Mandela and established emotional connections with the audience in their grief and celebration of an impeccable statesman. He thanks South Africa for sharing Mandela with the world and has demonstrated that their struggles are also America's struggles, their triumphs are equally his triumphs. Obama has spoken, convincingly, making emotional connections with the audience through the use of adjectives, enhancing the ethos of Mandela by strengthening the pathos of the occasion and finally, interpolating his own identity-formation by calling for action that perpetuates Mandela's magnanimous contributions. In a nutshell, Obama speaks of himself as lesser than Mandela, a mere mortal who is not invulnerable, not invincible, and not inviolate. It is this experience of being bound together in ways invisible to the eye that marks this eulogy as a befitting testimony and tribute.

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