

Winne Mandela, Mother of the Nation: Freedom Fighter of Fire and Water

guest editorial by

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She stepped on the turbulent stage of African and human history with a concentrated and consuming fire against the oppressor and life-giving water for the people. No, she was not one to ask permission to live free in her own land, or to exercise freely the rights she had by birth and by just being human. Nor did she engage the enemies of African and human freedom as a summer soldier, but came to the battlefield with a deep-rooted defiance and determination and vowed not to walk away until the war of liberation was won. A freedom fighter of fire and water and an all-seasons soldier, she laid down in life and rose up in radiance in the heavens, April 2, 2018 and now sits in the sacred circle of the ancestors.

We speak here of Nomzamo Winnie Zanyiwe Madikizela Mandela (September 26, 1936), daughter of Columbus Madikizela and Nomathasanga Gertrude Mzaidume Madikizela; mother of Zenani Mandela-Dlamini and Zindziwe Mandela; former wife and continuing companion in love and struggle of Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela; Mother of the Nation; and freedom fighter of the liberation movement that called her into being and created the context and challenges to make her into what she would become.

It is the beauty and boldness of her name that predicts and promises what she would become and be, defiantly do and audaciously dare. Her name, as she lived it, is Nomzamo, she who strives and struggles, she who goes through trials and comes forth triumphant; resilient and ever-resisting one. It is she who stood up in the apartheid caves called courts and refused to be referred to as a number. "My name is Nomzamo Winnie Madizikela Mandela I would like to be addressed as such", she defiantly demanded.

Let us remember her well with Izibongo, praise songs, reflection and righteous and relentless resistance; she who left us an uplifting abundance of inspiring and instructive lessons of life and struggle. We speak of one who refused to be defeated by the savagery of apartheid and White supremacy masquerading as civilization.

They burned down her house and she built countless others in the hearts and minds of the people that they could not burn or bulldoze down. They arrested her repeatedly, tortured and brutalized her, but she was not frightened or defeated by the winter wolves that surrounded her, tearing at her will and flesh with torture, beatings and threats of a horrible death. She said, “There is nothing the government has not done to me. There isn’t any pain I haven’t known”. And “there is no longer anything I can fear”. Indeed, she endured the pain, survived the worst, stood up and walked out, and went boldly back to the battlefield, standing tall and towering over the small-minded, short sighted and low-life men that savaged her.

It is the overwhelming love of her people that lifts her up in history and in the heavens, raising and praising her name for the awesome work she has done on earth and the ever-burning light she has left in the sky. The signs held high at her memorial read in the record the love and honor for her and call her forth forever, defining her as “faithful servant”, “fearless spirit” and “comrade forever”—indeed, comrade and co-combatant in every battle fought, every struggle waged and every act and work to uphold and advance freedom, justice and other good in the world.

She campaigned tirelessly for 27 years for Mandela’s release from captivity in the context of her fierce and exacting fight for the freedom, rights and dignity of her people. She was his voice and victory over captivity, his message and messenger to the people, his witness and window to the world. And she was the major face and moving force for the Movement when so many others were in captivity, in exile or underground. It is she who called the people to continue and intensify the struggle, demanded more of both the leaders and the masses, inspired and mentored the youth in struggle and opened a way for women to advance forward and understand and assert themselves in valued, valuable and expansive ways. Reaffirming that her relationship with her world-renowned companion in struggle was an equal and mutually respecting one, she states, “I have a good relationship with Mandela. But I’m not Mandela’s product. I am the product of the masses of my country and the product of my enemy”.

To say that she is a product of the masses of her people is to reaffirm her people’s role in calling her into being, nurturing and supporting her, and urging her to wage struggle, endure and dare to win. And to say she is a product of the enemy, is to say the enemy forced her to fight for the freedom he took, the rights and dignity he denied, and the kind of family life he refused to allow for herself and her people. But it is she who chose to fight rather than concede, and thus in the final analysis, it is not the enemy or oppressor who really produces her, but she, herself, who in the context of community makes herself, becomes the all-seasons soldier the Movement and historical moment demanded. Thus, she is in reality a product and producer of the Movement in which she learned to be fearless, defiant, determined, self-sacrificing and committed to victory regardless of the costs.



Nomzamo, the ever striving and struggling one, is the Mother of the Nation, but she is also a daughter of her people and the liberation movement that brought her into being and made her mother. And the people are the makers of the Movement, indeed, its mothers and fathers. In the tradition of our ancestors, we have many mothers and fathers, for we know and hold firm to the principle and practice that it takes a whole community to raise a child, free a people or bring a nation into being.

And in the midst of all the mothers and the fathers of our nations whom we raise up and rightly revere: Nomzamo; Nelson Mandela; Aminata Harriet Tubman; Kwame Nkrumah, Yaa Asantewa; Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer and all the others too numerous to name here, we must not forget the very people who made and make them and us possible, our people, African people ever engaged in righteous and relentless struggle to be ourselves, free ourselves and bring a deep and broad-reaching good in the world. Indeed, Nomzamo asked us to remember all the other heroes and heroines of the Liberation Movement in and out of ANC, singling out Steve Biko, and stressing praise for the heroic efforts and sacrifices of everyday people.

And how better can we honor our rightly raised up and revered ancestors, mothers and fathers of us all than to continue this awesome world-encompassing struggle, rightfully attending to ourselves and reaching out to others, and giving constant due consideration to the well-being of the world.

Indeed, we must finish the fight and achieve the truly free society and good world we all deserve and to which Nomzamo and our ancestors and our people have sacrificed so much. The word at the memorial was that Nomzamo did not die, she multiplied. May each and all of us be counted among these who continue to struggle, keep the faith, and hold the line till victory. And then we can truly say, as an achieved reality rather than an aspiration in process: Ekugcineni sikhululekile! Amandla ngabantu; Amandla ngawethu! We are free at last! Power to the people! Power to us! Kwa kweli, tumeshinda! Truly, we have won!

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