

NELSON MANDELA, BEYOND THE MYTH

A 52' film by François-Xavier Destors



As South Africa seeks fresh impetus – the country is preparing for decisive presidential elections in 2019 – **this film will demonstrate how far South African society today lives in the shadow of “Madiba” and what he embodied.** But how was the myth built? What relationship did the man himself maintain with a myth that was shaped in his absence, and which then served him throughout his political career? Has the myth finally obscured the mirage of the “rainbow nation”?

A POLITICAL ISSUE, A CULTURAL BATTLE

The Mandela myth is above all a product of its age. Its roots lie in South Africa's spiral towards Apartheid, and in the wider civil rights movements that were sweeping the world in the early 1960s. When he was sentenced to life imprisonment at the age of 46, Nelson Mandela was one of the major figures in this. Whereas the Apartheid regime hoped to consign him to oblivion, Mandela showed the stuff of martyrs. The members of his party, the African National Congress (ANC), knew this. Their strategy was clear: To hold up the name of the "terrorist" Mandela as a symbol of the anti-racist struggle. The situation in South Africa forced the rest of the world to examine its conscience: Oppression was now embodied in the fate of a single man.

The Mandela myth has the particularity of coming into being in his absence. The fact that it spread so quickly was because in popular culture, the prisoner was raised to the status of an icon.



A MYTH DESPITE MANDELA?

In his memoirs, Nelson Mandela did not hide his puzzlement and concern faced with the image he saw being formed almost despite himself, the result, he said, of "naïve and romantic expectations". The former lawyer, who never missed a chance to break into dance during his political rallies, was convinced that this image of "demi-god marching resolutely forward" was just a passing illusion that would dissipate with the passage of time. If he sometimes felt his image was beyond his control, Mandela nonetheless did whatever he could to keep the myth intact.

THE MANDELA BRAND: A QUESTION OF LEGACY

Nelson Mandela skillfully got the most out of the intense publicity around his name. **The hero was well aware that his image represented a lucrative market, and that it could easily escape his control.** In Soweto, where he lived for a time, tourists snap up coasters, T-shirts, clocks, teaspoons and jewelry bearing his effigy, despite the efforts of the Foundation

to avoid tarnishing the iconic figure. It is no accident that Mandela himself asked for his face to be removed from the foundation's publicity materials.



During his five years in power, the almost religious aura of this exceptional man was hailed by the media around the world. This was underscored by the absence of any successor of equivalent stature to consolidate the emergent democracy and reduce the glaring inequalities that still split South African society.

The extraordinary funeral of Nelson Mandela in 2013 reaffirmed his worldwide status. The myth, fueled by numerous tributes, once again loomed large to reconcile the ordinary citizen with the politician. Behind the myth, Mandela revealed himself in his memoirs as a man fraught with contradictions and doubts. A man who reflected South African society, where, more than 20 years after the first multi-racial elections which brought him to power, **there is a gulf between the myth and reality.**

The narrative will be broken down into four major stages:

- 1) The 1960s: The emergence of a hero
- 2) The 1980s: Orchestrating the myth
- 3) The 1990s: The myth in the exercise of power
- 4) The 2000s: The apogee of the myth

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