

Exploring African Culture and Human Values in Nelson Mandela's Autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*

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ABSTRACT

Nelson Mandela's autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) stands as one of the most significant literary and cultural works to emerge from the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. It is widely read as a political memoir, but the text is equally a sustained meditation on African cultural identity, communal philosophy, and the enduring human values that sustained Nelson Mandela through decades of oppression and imprisonment. This research article takes a close literary and cultural reading of the autobiography, examining how Nelson Mandela states and defends African cultural values — Ubuntu philosophy, traditional Xhosa and Thembu communal governance, rites of passage, ancestral memory and storytelling, human dignity, and a relational vision of freedom — in direct opposition to the dehumanizing apparatus of apartheid. This article is explored based on the following critical and theoretical frameworks such as postcolonial theory and African philosophy. The article concludes that *Long Walk to Freedom* is not only a record of political achievement but a profound act of cultural recovery, insisting on the philosophical depth and human richness of African civilization in the face of its systematic erasure.

Keywords: African culture, Ubuntu philosophy, postcolonial theory, autobiography, human dignity, Xhosa tradition, apartheid, cultural identity, oral tradition, rites of passage, freedom.

INTRODUCTION

Nelson Mandela's autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* is significantly more than a political memoir. It is a rich, detailed portrayal of one man's journey through the cultural landscapes of southern Africa, the brutalities of racial oppression, and the lasting sources of human resilience. It is written partly in secret during his years of imprisonment on Robben Island and completed after his release in 1990, the text offers a deliberate reflection on what it means to be African, to carry the weight of cultural inheritance, and to insist on the irreducible humanity of every person.

This article examines the autobiography as a literary and cultural document, exploring how Nelson Mandela describes African cultural values — Ubuntu philosophy, traditional community life, rites of passage, ancestral memory, and the cultivation of dignity, freedom, and compassion — in sustained opposition to the dehumanizing practice of apartheid.

The autobiographical form has long served in postcolonial African literature as a vehicle for recovering histories that colonialism sought to erase and for asserting cultural identities that apartheid suppressed. Frantz Fanon observed that colonialism does not simply occupy territory; it dismantles culture and identity, leaving the colonized subject alienated from their own heritage (Fanon 41). Nelson Mandela's text is a deliberate response to this violence. By contextualising his political journey within deep Xhosa and Thembu cultural roots, he refuses the colonial narrative that African peoples were without civilization, law, or philosophy before European arrival. The article employs in its analysis, the postcolonial theory, African philosophy, and close reading of key passages extracted directly from the autobiography to argue that Nelson Mandela's work constructs a vision of Africanness that is neither static nor nostalgic, but a living tradition continuously reshaped by its historical struggle and the demands of human dignity.

African Community Life and Traditional Governance

One of the most significant features of the opening sections of *Long Walk to Freedom* is the care with which Nelson Mandela reconstructs the social world of his Transkei childhood. The Thembu and Xhosa communities as he describes, possess sophisticated traditional systems of governance, law, and communal life which directly challenge the colonial narrative of African cultural desolation. Chinua Achebe reminds that people who governed themselves through consensus, maintained oral histories across generations, and organized social life through elaborate codes of kinship and custom were not a people without culture but a people whose culture was being wilfully misread (Achebe 12).

Nelson Mandela describes the village of Qunu with both affectionately and philosophically, noting that in African culture, the sons and daughters of one's aunts or uncles are considered brothers and sisters, not cousins: "My mother's sister is my mother; my uncle's son is my brother; my brother's child is my son, my daughter" (Mandela 15). This is not mere biographical detail. It encodes a fundamentally different ontology of kinship and belonging, one in which the self is constituted through a web of relationships rather than confined within the nuclear family of European modernity. The critic, Ali Mazrui identifies this communal conception of personhood as central to African social thought, arguing that the African world-view understands the individual as necessarily embedded in and responsible to a larger community (Mazrui 67).

The most memorable experience with traditional governance appears at the Great Place, Mqhekezweni, where the young Nelson Mandela witnesses the regent Jongintaba presiding over community meetings. He describes the experience in terms that are explicitly, and traditionally democratic:

Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard, chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and labourer. The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and equal in their value as citizens. (Mandela 20)

These meetings ended not by majority vote but through consensus: "Democracy meant all men were to be heard, and a decision was taken together as a people. Majority rule was a foreign notion. A minority was not to be crushed by a majority" (Mandela 24-25). Writing at the moment South Africa was transitioning to multi-racial democracy, Nelson Mandela is making a political argument: the democratic values the liberation struggle fought for had deep roots in African political tradition.

As Kwame Nkrumah argued, African communal governance offered a viable political philosophy distinct from both Western liberal capitalism and Soviet authoritarianism (Nkrumah 78). Nelson Mandela's autobiography translates this argument into personal testimony, showing that he learned democratic leadership not from books or Western but from an African chief, and cultural traditions.

Rites of Passage and the Formation of Cultural Identity

The significant to Nelson Mandela's account of his cultural identity is his description of the *circumcision* ceremony that marked his transition from boyhood to manhood at the age of sixteen. The initiation ritual, *ulwaluko*, is one of the most culturally significant episodes in the autobiography. Nelson Mandela begins by clarifying the cultural stakes:

For the Xhosa people, circumcision represents the formal incorporation of males into society. It is not just a surgical procedure, but a lengthy and elaborate ritual in preparation for manhood. As a Xhosa, I count my years as a man from the date of my circumcision. (Mandela 24)

After the ceremony, however, Chief Meligqili delivers a speech that unsettles the ritual's promise. He tells the newly initiated young men that they are "slaves in our own country" and "tenants on our own soil," and that the promise of manhood is "an empty, illusory promise" because colonialism has dismantled the structures within which adult African life could flourish (Mandela 27). He recalls dismissing the speech at the time as "the abusive comments of an ignorant man," but acknowledges with characteristic honesty: "Later, I realized that the ignorant man that day was not the chief but myself" (Mandela 28).

This retrospective self-correction is characteristic of Nelson Mandela's autobiography. He consistently returns to earlier experiences with the wisdom of reflection, showing how cultural and political consciousness develops gradually through lived experience in his life. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of *cultural ambivalence* is applicable here: Bhabha argues that postcolonial subjects occupy a "third space" between inherited cultural norms and the destabilizing pressures of colonial modernity, and that identity is always a product of negotiation between these forces rather than a stable essence (Bhabha 36-37). The circumcision scene stages this ambivalence clearly: the traditional ritual speaks in one register, the chief's political speech in another, and Nelson Mandela must negotiate between them over a lifetime.

Ubuntu Philosophy and the Ethics of Human Connection

Perhaps the most philosophically significant aspect in the autobiography is its *Ubuntu* dimension. Ubuntu — the Nguni Bantu concept commonly rendered as "I am because we are" — is the foundational ethical and cultural principle of much of southern African cultural philosophy. Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes Ubuntu as "the very essence of being human," insisting that "my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours" (Tutu 31). While Nelson Mandela does not

always use the word explicitly, the philosophy pervades every experience and layer of his narrative, from the kinship structures of Qunu to his political vision for post-apartheid South Africa.

The most prominent and implicit statement about *Ubuntu* ethics in the text appears in the closing pages of his autobiography, where Nelson Mandela reflects on the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed:

I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred; he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity. (Mandela 611)

This is a statement of radical, ethical, and mutuality. Its logical structure is precisely that of *Ubuntu*: my freedom is constituted by yours; my humanity is diminished when yours is diminished. Michael Onyebuchi Eze argues that *Ubuntu* understands the individual as "a community of relationships" — a self that is always socially constituted (Eze 190). This helps to clarify Nelson Mandela's insistence on the humanity of his oppressors. He is not forgetting the violence they have done; he is asserting that their humanity, buried under racism, remains recoverable. Liberation, therefore, is not revenge but restoration — a restoration of full humanity on all sides.

Ubuntu philosophy also shapes Nelson Mandela's approach to leadership. His observation about the regent becomes a personal model: "a leader is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind" (Mandela 21). This communal, relational conception of leadership draws directly on African philosophical and cultural aspects and distinguishes his political vision from both Western liberal individualism and the authoritarian nationalisms that marked much of post-independence African politics.

Memory, Storytelling, and Ancestral Heritage

Memory and storytelling play a pivotal role in the cultural aspects of *Long Walk to Freedom*. Nelson Mandela's father, Gadla Henry Mphakanyiswa, was "an acknowledged custodian of Xhosa history" (Mandela 5), valued as a counselor precisely because of his deep knowledge of the past and its cultural roots. His mother enchanted her children with "Xhosa legends and fables that had come down from numerous generations," tales that "stimulated my childish imagination, and usually contained some moral lesson" (Mandela 11). This emphasis on the moral and pedagogical function of storytelling reflects the broader role of oral tradition in transmitting cultural values across generations.

Walter Ong's study of *orality* argues that oral cultures embed knowledge in narrative and performance rather than text, and that memory is necessarily communal rather than individual (Ong 45-46). Nelson Mandela's autobiography depicts this understanding at every level. The praise-songs witnessed at the regent's court, the oral narratives recounted by visiting chiefs, the tales of African heroes — Sekhukhune, Moshoeshe, Dingane, Bambatha — all serve as mechanisms for binding the community across time and sustaining a sense of shared identity in the face of colonial disruption. These stories also make some political work: they teach Nelson Mandela that there was resistance before him and that the struggle he will eventually join has deep historical and cultural roots.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's analysis of colonial education as a systematic assault on African cultural memory is relevant here. He argues that colonialism's most powerful weapon was the alienation of the colonized from their language, culture, and history, producing self-contempt and psychological dependency (Ngugi 28). Nelson Mandela's autobiography functions as a counter-movement against this process. By emphasising on the depth and wisdom of his cultural inheritance — from the cosmic wholeness of Xhosa traditional religion to the sophisticated legal thought of the chiefs and counsellors at Mqhekezweni — he reclaims clearly the inheritance that colonial education tried to erase.

Human Dignity, Resistance, and the Garden Metaphor

Long Walk to Freedom is also a record of systematic dehumanization of South Africans. The *apartheid* state implemented an extraordinary array of laws designed to deny the full humanity of black South Africans: such as the pass laws, the Bantu Education Act, the displacement of communities from ancestral land. In his famous statement from the dock at the Rivonia Trial, Nelson Mandela describes the cultural values at the heart of the liberation struggle:

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal

which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.
(Mandela 352)

On Robben Island, the struggle to maintain cultural dignity became a daily practice. The apartheid authorities understood that cultural degradation was an instrument of control. Nelson Mandela's response drew directly on his cultural formation:

Prison and the authorities conspire to rob each man of his dignity. In and of itself, that assured that I would survive, for any man or institution that tries to rob me of my dignity will lose because I will not part with it at any price or under any pressure. (Mandela 374)

His dignity was not conferred by the state and therefore could not be removed by it. It was grounded in *Ubuntu* — in a web of relationships with his people, his culture, his ancestors, his comrades — that no prison could dissolve. Frantz Fanon's analysis of the "colonized mind" that internalizes inferiority (Fanon 148-49) helps illuminate what Nelson Mandela refuses: a psychic capitulation to the apartheid state's definition of his worth.

Among the most evocative metaphors for this patient *resistance* is the garden where Nelson Mandela cultivated on Robben Island. He eventually received permission to tend a small patch of earth in the prison courtyard and reflected:

A garden was one of the few things in prison that one could control. To plant a seed, watch it grow, to tend it and then harvest it, offered a simple but enduring satisfaction. In some ways, I saw the garden as a metaphor for certain aspects of my life. A leader must also tend his garden; he, too, plants seeds, and then watches, cultivates, and harvests the result. (Mandela 472)

The agricultural metaphor resonates with African cultural traditions in which the land is a living relationship to be tended and respected rather than a resource to be exploited. The patience required for gardening also reflects African philosophical attitudes toward time as cyclical — as seasons rather than an arrow pointing forward. This long-term perspective, incompatible with impatience and impulsiveness, informs Nelson Mandela's lifelong commitment to negotiation and reconciliation over violent confrontation.

Freedom as Cultural and Human Value

The final pages of *Long Walk to Freedom* offer the most concentrated statement of Nelson Mandela's vision of freedom as a cultural and human value. He traces the evolution of his understanding from a personal to a collective to a universal concept:

I was not born with a hunger to be free. I was born free — free in every way that I could know. Free to run in the fields near my mother's hut, free to swim in the clear stream that ran through my village, free to roast mealies under the stars and ride the broad backs of slow-moving bulls. As long as I obeyed my father and abided by the customs of my tribe, I was not troubled by the laws of man or God. (Mandela 610)

The freedom of childhood in Qunu is not political or legal freedom; it is the freedom of belonging — the freedom of being fully constituted as a person through one's cultural relationships. The loss of this freedom, which Nelson Mandela traces to his growing awareness of apartheid, is not just the loss of rights but the loss of a mode of being. His autobiography then narrates the slow expansion of his hunger for freedom from the personal to the political, culminating in an insight that is philosophically precise:

For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning. (Mandela 611)

This aspect expresses a positive freedom — not merely the absence of chains but the active cultivation of conditions in which others can also flourish. Edward Said's concept of *contrapuntal* reading — attending simultaneously to the perspective of the colonized and the colonizer — helps to clarify why Nelson Mandela's vision is so distinctive (Said 51). His vision of democratic South Africa is one in which the cultural values he has inherited — Ubuntu, communal governance, dignity, the patient work of cultivation — become the foundation for a genuinely inclusive national life.

CONCLUSION

Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* is an autobiography that makes culturally and philosophically even as it recounts political events. It richly textured accounts of his formation in Xhosa and Thembu traditions, his experience with African democratic governance at Mqhekezweni, and his experience of the circumcision ritual and its political disruption, his cultivation of Ubuntu ethics in the face of systematic dehumanization, and his final declaration of freedom as a relational and cultural value.

The autobiography depicts that the struggle against apartheid was a struggle for the restoration of a cultural inheritance — a set of values, practices, and philosophical orientations about personhood, community, and dignity — that colonialism had sought to erase. *Long Walk to Freedom* remains a living document: it speaks to the universal human struggle for dignity and community while remaining deeply rooted in a specific African inheritance that enriches rather than limits its universal reach. As Nelson Mandela himself wrote, freedom is not merely casting off chains, but living "in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others" (Mandela 611) — a vision that is, at its deepest level, a vision of culture.

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