

Reclaiming the Ancestral Memory of Rolihlahla Dalibhunga Nelson Mandela

Keynote: Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu

In his article on 'Liberating Mandela's Memory' published in the *New African* magazine of March 2011, Ayi Kwei Armah, the Ghanaian intellectual and literary scholar, locates Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela within African epistemologies and highlights epistemicide committed through Eurocentric scholarship which dominates publications on Mandela. Ayi Kwei Armah argues convincingly that most publications on Mandela regard him as part of the western world's globalising mission. He contends that the decision to integrate Mandela's memory into the narrative of European social thought seems based on the assumption that with the achievement of the democratic right to vote in South Africa, the struggle for the emancipation of Africans from the ravages of cultural and economic imperialism is over.¹ If we, as scholars of Africa, make a systematic study of Mandela's work we realise that throughout his life – and this still holds true in the present – Mandela believed implicitly that African derived epistemologies predicated on humanist values were underpinned by Ubuntu, human solidarity, communalism and collectivism as a way of life in African societies. This is because, as part of his legacy, Mandela dug deeply and consistently into the emancipatory spiritual world of his African ancestors to discover and consolidate his engaging humanity. When one analyses Mandela's narration of his family history dating back to ancient times, his narrative is influenced by ancestor worship and the concept of hereditary kingship which prevailed in early pre-colonial and pre-capitalist state societies. This strongly suggests that the principle of agnatic descent has a long history in south-east Africa (now part of the country called South Africa). Ayi Kwei Armah observes that when foreigners describe Africa's old cultures as predicated on ancestor worship, what they infer is that the management of memory was for a very long time an indispensable part of the African way of life and culture. The meaning of this statement is that different generations knew how much they could benefit from the experience of their predecessors. If they lived well according to culturally useful norms, these generations would in turn add to the common pool of ancestral memory. It is therefore essential to note that ancient African societies preserved their ancestral and social memories in a wide variety of ways including media, architecture, medicine, sculpture, paintings, hieroglyphics/alphabet, written text, religion, beliefs, music, myths, legends, fables, nursery rhymes, *izinganekwane/insomi*, proverbs, drama, performance, dance and, above all, in language.

¹ Ayi Kwei Armah, 'Liberating Mandela's Memory', *New African*, March 2011, 72–76.