The Reading Habits of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela

By Auscar Odhiambo Wambiya

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, who lived between 18th July 1918 and 5th December 2013, was a South African anti-apartheid revolutionary, political leader and philanthropist who served as the first president of South Africa from 1994 to 1999. He was the country's first black head of state and the first elected in a fully representative democratic election. His government focused on dismantling the legacy of apartheid by tackling institutionalized racism and fostering racial reconciliation. Ideologically an African nationalist and socialist, he served as the president of the African National Congress (ANC) party from 1991 to 1997.

A new book, "The Relationship Between Books and Power" by yours truly explores the reading habits of Nelson Mandela from his early days through to his 27 years in prison with a view to establishing whether his often praised oratorical skills and clarity of mind can be traced to his reading habits. Drawn from his autobiography, "Long Walk to Freedom" and other biographical works by different authors, this body of evidence prove that Nelson Mandela became powerful largely because he read voraciously, tenaciously, insightfully and omnivorously. Some excerpts are shared herein.

Martin Meredith writes in his book on Nelson Mandela that Mr. Sidelsky, a Mandela acquaintance, had agreed to employ Mandela as a clerk in his law firm while Mandela completed his university degree by correspondence course with the University of South Africa. During this period, Mr. Sidelsky confided in Meredith that Mandela intensely studied at night. Meredith narrates this and other stories in his biography of the South Africa's liberation icon.

When Sidelsky, gave him an increase in salary *in his law firm*, Mandela was pleased to hear, after asking Nelson Mandela what he would do with the extra money, Mandela's reply that he would spend it on more candles to help his studies at night.

Nelson Mandela's life at No. 8115 Orlando West in Soweto was nevertheless relatively comfortable according to Martin Meredith. The house possessed electricity, hot water, an indoor bathroom and a telephone. His study space, partitioned off from the front room and furnished with three cane chairs, a couch, a book shelf, a display cabinet and a huge picture of Lenin, provided a retreat into which he enjoyed settling.

As the prosecution case of Nelson Mandela and others dragged on *at The Rivonia Trial for over three years*, many of the accused began to lose interest. Some took to reading newspapers, tackling crossword puzzles or playing chess; others just dozed. 'The heat beats down in waves, heads nod, eyelids struggle to keep open, ears strain to listen', wrote Alex La Guma, one of the accused. To break the tedium, Nelson Mandela often brought a book or a legal brief to work on according to Meredith, 2001.

At the Rivonia Trial, Nelson Mandela was also questioned about his views on communism, capitalism and imperialism, about speeches he had given, articles he had written and books found in his possession. 'I have read some books, pro and against socialism, communism, capitalism and imperialism', Mandela replied to Sydney Kentridge, the presiding judge."

According to Rusty Bernstein, Nelson Mandela's routine at Lilliesleaf, his hiding place before his escape outside the country, was much the same as before his escape. He stayed at home during the

day and left for meetings at night. Mandela had time to read, to think and study at Lilliesleaf, Rivonia most of the day time. It was a quiet and peaceful existence. A committee attended to his needs at that time.

Nelson Mandela was implicated in a police raid at Lilliesleaf though he was not present. More than ten documents were in his handwriting. They included his notes on basic and advanced military training and warfare; his diary covering the period from January to June 1962, containing details of his tour of Africa, his discussions with Algeria officials and his military training course in Ethiopia; and monographs he had copied out on such subjects as 'How to be a Good Communist' and 'Dialectical Materialism'. Other items found belonging to Mandela were copies of his press releases and statements, his library of books on warfare, his passport in the name of David Motsamayi and correspondence and photos according to Meredith.

Meredith Martin further records that Nelson Mandela turned to his own political allegiances at the Rivonia Trial. He described himself as an 'Africa Patriot', a socialist influenced by Marxist thought, but not a communist. He was attracted by the idea of a classless society, partly as a result of his reading of Marxist literature, partly as a result of his admiration for early African societies in which the land, then the main means of production, belonged to the tribe.

To make up for his own lack of knowledge, having been appointed to head the military wing of African National Congress (Umkhonto We Sizwe), Nelson Mandela read everything he could lay his hands on about guerilla warfare and war history: authors like Che Guevara, Mao Tse-Tung, Fidel Castro and Clausewitz Carl; books on Algeria, Cuba, Israel, Kenya and the Anglo-Boer war. He was particularly impressed by a study of the communist insurrectionary movement in the Philippines. He spent much of the day studying texts, leaving the nights for the meetings.

Soon after entering prison in 1962, Mandela had gained permission to complete his law degree with London University and Martin Meredith records that he had pursued his studies intermittently ever since. While many people cite their difficult circumstances as the reason for their failure to read, Mandela quickly adapted to the prison conditions and voraciously delved into his studies even then.

Feeling the need to be able to counter other people's arguments over doctrinal issues, Nelson Mandela started to study Marxist literature, finding some of the ideas it contained appealing according to Martin Meredith. "I found myself strongly drawn to the idea of a classless society which to my mind was similar to traditional African culture where life was shared and communal," Mandela says. Mandela also confesses to finding aspects of Marxist economic analysis relevant to him. Above all, he says, there was the communist call for revolutionary action, together with the practical example that the Soviet Union set in supporting liberation movements among colonial peoples. Evidently, Mandela was wide in his reading material and broad in his scope of coverage indeed. His often-deep analysis of issues could be traced to this period of internal growth.

Martin Meredith alludes to Nelson Mandela embarking on his first case in court *as South Africa's attorney at law*, armed with a battery of legal books and brimming with confidence. The magistrates duly and frequently found his clients not guilty, courtesy of his depth in researching on the legal aspects of each and every case.

In prison, Nelson Mandela became the spokesman of fellow political prisoners and engaged in a constant struggle for improvements. When he first asked for a separate room so that the accused

could read and study trial documents in quiet, a senior prison officer retorted, 'Government regulations don't require you prisoners to read books.' But slowly, he gained concessions. The cells were painted and fumigated, new blankets and toilet buckets were issued, exercise periods were allowed and a large cell was provided for consultations and legal books all of which provided him with the opportunity to read voraciously and tenaciously.

In the early 1970s, the prison authorities granted permission to South African political prisoners to study. They were allowed to register with the University of South Africa for a degree or with the Rapid Results College for secondary school education. Those who had yet to reach secondary-level education were helped by inmate teachers like Nevile Alexander. Most prisoners took to the task with enthusiasm, even though it came at the end of a hard day's work at the lime quarry according to Martin Meredith. 'At night, our cell block seemed more like a study hall than a prison,' says Mandela Nelson.

In 1977, the authorities ended hard labor in the quarries, which had been Mandela's principal occupation for thirteen years. From 1978, Mandela's days were now spent largely at leisure. Most of the time, he occupied himself by reading. 'He would read for hour after hour in unbroken concentration', recalled Ahmed Kathrada, a fellow prisoner. Because of an earlier four-year ban on his studies, the books he read were mainly novels obtained from the prison library. He subscribed to a wide range of newspapers and periodicals, including Afrikaans publications according to Meredith.

Martin Meredith records that, returning to the prison at 4pm from the lime quarry for shower and supper, Nelson Mandela was locked up in his cell for the rest of the night by 5pm. He used the time for study and writing letters.

Nelson Mandela spent his days, in the 1980s, listening avidly to radio news broadcasts, devouring newspapers, exercising hard and continuing his studies, waiting for some signal from the outside world.

In his new abode in Pollsmoor Prison from 1983, Nelson Mandela was allowed to receive a wide range of newspapers and magazines, including Time Magazine and The Guardian Weekly from London reading every edition from cover to cover. He was provided with two rooms for use as a library and for study purposes and a wide variety of books and films.

Largely self-taught, with little formal education, Moses Kotane, later Secretary General of The South African Communist Party, became an insatiable reader and often could be found in the back room of Mabuza's butchery on Market Street, where he could read in relative peace and quiet. In prison, they shared this voracious reading habit with Nelson Mandela.

When he was interviewed after Prison, Mandela confessed to missing those moments in prison when he had all the time to just think and read. He noted that, as a free citizen, "I would do all the things that I've missed while in retirement; to be with my children and grandchildren and with my family; the ability to sit down and read what I would like to read. You know, in prison—one of the advantages was the ability to sit down and think. This is one of the things I miss most."

In the absence of any real family life, immediately after prison in the early 1990s, all Nelson Mandela's efforts were concentrated on political work. His daily schedule, for a man of seventy-four, was punishing. He still arose at about 5am for his exercises. When he first arrived in Houghton, he enjoyed an early-morning jog through its leafy streets, but after the assassination of

Chris Hani, he confined himself to exercising at home. By 7am, he was at work in his tenth-floor office in the African National Congress headquarters at Shell House in central Johannesburg. The rest of the day was filled with meetings, interviews, speeches, negotiations, conferences, working lunches, fundraising appearances and banquets. Martin Meredith records that Mandela then liked to be back home by 9.30am to catch up on his reading after every other busy day.

The writer is the author of "The Relationship Between Books and Power," a book that seeks to establish the reading habits of the world's most powerful people.