Xhosa Tribal Culture and Its Influence on the Servant-Leadership of Nelson Mandela

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> Your pain is my pain, my wealth is your wealth, your salvation is my salvation.
>> —an African expression of *ubuntu*
>> (www.simongoland.com, 2004)

In 1994, Nelson Mandela became the first democratically elected black president of South Africa. This historical event had a tremendous impact on the world. Much has been written about Mandela as a leader, but little has highlighted his cultural background, how it influenced his deep-seated cultural values and beliefs, and how his culture shaped his leadership. It is important to analyze how his cultural upbringing determined his destiny as a dignified, respected, and popular global servant-leader.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND AFRICAN TRIBAL CULTURE

There are many styles of leadership, and leadership has been studied and theorized over throughout modern history. Greenleaf (1977, 2005) challenged traditional leadership theories and practices. He believed that respect, honor, and dignity are crucially important and maintained that a great leader is seen as a servant first, and then as a leader.

Servant-leaders are committed to serving others, and the art of leading is the act of serving. One must think and act as a leader and servant at the same time: a leader who serves and a servant who leads. Leaders must bend their efforts to serve with skill, understanding, and spirit, and follow-

141

ers are responsive only to able servants who lead them. Awareness is key to develop leadership and strengthen the effectiveness of a leader (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant-leaders are leaders who put other people's needs, aspirations, and interests above their own (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).

According to Williams (2002), servant-leaders often have "a cause. . . or a crusade. . . with humanitarian, not materialistic, goals" (p. 67). The leader works "behind the scenes" or in "the trenches" (p. 68). He or she leads even in the face of danger and adversity.

A strong trust develops between the servant-leader and followers. The servant-leader is often willing to risk personal safety and is persuasive, inspiring, personable, creditable, honest, and selfless. The servant draws strength from a strong commitment to faith and spiritual beliefs (Greenleaf, Beasley, Beggs, & Spears, 2003). The servant-leader sets an example for the group through "credibility, integrity, diligence, humility, and the spirit of servant-leadership" (Covey, 2002, p. 27).

The servant-leader values and believes in the people. The servant-leader serves the needs of others before himself, encouraging and affirming others. Servant-leaders change the system not just by doing, but more fundamentally, by being (Zohar, 1997). "Servant-leadership promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the proving of leadership for the good of those who are led, and the sharing of power and status for the common good" (Laub, 1999, p. 83).

Horsman (2001) presented a thorough and compelling review of servant-leadership literature. In some cases, servant-leaders felt they had no choice when they realized that someone must solve a problem or change the attitudes of society. Horsman (2001) investigated the characteristics of servant-leaders and surmised that the servant as leader is not new to Western or Eastern cultures. Jesus Christ as a symbol of servant-leadership evokes familiarity for many Christians (p. 43). Greenleaf's cultural and religious background of westernized Judeo-Christianity helped form his ideas on

leadership. He saw churches as one of the most influential forces for developing servant-leadership.

Greenleaf (1977) argued that natural leaders who arise among the disadvantaged find their way and organize the effort themselves, explaining that "they will lead their people to secure a better life for many" (p. 164). This is a long and arduous journey of being disciplined, learning to listen, and being patient.

Servant-leadership has very old roots in many indigenous cultures— cultures that are holistic, cooperative, communal, intuitive, and spiritual (Bordas, 2005). These cultures center on being "guardians of the future and respecting the ancestors who walked before them" (p. 42).

Although the model of servant-leadership has been formally recognized only since the publication of Greenleaf's first writings (1977), leaders who through compassion and personal sacrifice enabled and empowered others to achieve their goals (Lad & Luechauer, 1998), leaders such as Nelson Mandela, have long been practicing servant-leadership. Greenleaf discussed servant-leadership in a way that described actions that were the foundation of Mandela's role as a leader in changing the attitudes of an entire country and the world.

Mandela (1994) explained in his autobiography that to be African in South Africa means that one is politicized from the moment of birth, regardless of whether it is acknowledged. He had no "epiphany, no moment of truth, but a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousands indignities, a thousand unremembered moments" producing "anger, a rebelliousness, and a desire to fight the system" that imprisoned his people: He simply found himself taking action, and could not do otherwise (p. 95).

One can debate whether Mandela was influenced more by his tribal culture or by his religious upbringing. Perhaps the two belief systems were intertwined and integrated, reinforcing the notion that a true leader is a servant to his people. Mandela did what he did for his people—for future generations. He dreamed of making his own humble contributions to the

struggle for freedom and the opportunity to serve his people (Mandela, 1994). Although Mandela was raised with a Christian morality in school, he was also raised in a tribal collective society in which the group is most important. In this regard, Mandela's tribal cultural background and upbringing laid the foundation for the type of leader he would become.

NELSON MANDELA AND XHOSA TRIBAL CULTURE

Although he was born and grew up at a time when South Africa was plagued by cultural genocide, racial aggression and separation, and political oppression by an all-white Nationalist government, Nelson Mandela's leadership was very much a product of his Xhosa tribal culture and heritage. Clearly Mandela's cultural beliefs and background strongly dictated his commitment to his people as their leader. In his autobiography, he points out key cultural values that formed his philosophy of leadership. One does what is best for the tribe, not what is best for himself as a self-serving individual. In a tribal society, the group, the collectivist value as opposed to the individualist value, is the foundation of leadership. Obligations and responsibilities to the people take precedence over loyalty to an individual.

Mandela was born in 1918 in a small rural village near Umtata in the Xhosa Transkei of South Africa. He is a member of the Xhosa tribe, the Tembu people, and part of the Bantu-speaking group who are thought to be the original South Africans. Xhosa tribal culture was governed by loosely connected autonomous chiefdoms until the Bantu people were conquered by white Europeans (Africana.com, 2003; Hammond-Tooke, 1974). Xhosa village communities were based on grain farming and pastoralism. Xhosa society was structured around vast cattle herds that were moved from one grazing place to another, moving freely over the open pastureland. According to Mostert (1992), cattle were the focal point of Xhosa existence. Cattle bound the material and the sacred (Alberti, 1811) and formed the tribal and family bank (Soga, 1930; Soga, 1983). Xhosa life consisted of daily council meetings between the chief and his counselors, held in the *kraal* (a corral in which cattle were held), in which all aspects of people's affairs were

144

examined (Mostert, 1992). The *kraal* was surrounded by gardens and situated in the center of the village. Xhosa people occupied the land, forests, and rivers. They operated their own government, controlled their own armies, and organized their own trade and commerce.

According to Mostert (1992), African life was an outdoors life. The huts were considered simply places to sleep. Xhosa people were generally hospitable and lived a peaceful existence in which violence between individuals was suppressed. The *kraal* was the man's domain and the place where the chief generally conducted meetings and deliberations (Alberti, 1811). There was a powerful tradition of democratic debate, and the Xhosa were acknowledged for their gift for logic. They were reported to be astute diplomats (Cape of Good Hope Commission on Native Laws and Customs, 1883; Molema, 1963). They examined all facets of people's affairs, dealing with complaints brought and misdemeanors committed. Each individual case was handled thoroughly (Cape of Good Hope Commission on Native Laws and Customs, 1883; Molema, 1963). When judging cases, the chief and counselors drew on a body of law based on a long accumulation of past experiences (Maclean, 1866).

The Xhosa lived peacefully under the democratic rule of the chiefs and counselors. In principle, everything and everyone belonged to the chief; however, the relationship between Xhosa chiefs and their subjects was finely balanced (Mostert, 1992). If a chief constantly put himself above traditional laws and customs, he was abandoned by his people, who would ally themselves with another chief (Cape of Good Hope Commission on Native Laws and Customs, 1883). The Xhosa people were extremely loyal to their chiefs, and the chief was vested with much authority based on reverence, not coercion (Kay, 1834). The chief's authority was inherited by patrilineal descent. Chiefs were considered priests of ancestral heritage (Richards, 1940) and were believed to have mystic power over the land. The main safeguard against the abuse of power by the chief was through his group of counselors, known as the *amapakati*, or the "middle ones" (Mostert, 1992). They were the chief's "Parliament and Supreme Court" (p.

200). The chief of a tribe combined executive, ritual, and judicial functions of leadership (Native Laws and Customs, 1883). Chiefs presided over democratic decision-making and judicial verdicts (Alberti, 1811).

According to Mostert (1992), prior to the 1700s, Xhosa societies probably did not change much in basic principles of customs and culture for over 300 years. However, Xhosa culture was forever changed when their land was settled by white Europeans in the 18th and 19th centuries.

In the early 1900s, many Xhosa migrated in search of wage work in gold and diamond mines scattered throughout South Africa (ANC, 2003). They were converted to Christianity by missionaries. Some were wealthy and fortunate enough to send their children to attend missionary schools, the only schools available to black South Africans at the time.

Mandela was born of a lineage of royalty and chiefdom. He defined himself through his father, Chief Henry Mgadla Mandela, principal counselor to the Acting Paramount Chief of Thembuland, Jongintaba David Dalindyebo (Mandela, 1994). His birth name was Rolihlahla, which literally means "pulling the branch of a tree." However, the colloquial meaning is "one who brings trouble on himself" or "stirs up trouble" (Mandela, 1994). Later in his life, it became obvious that this name fit him well.

Growing up, Mandela was captivated by the tribal elders' stories about Xhosa ancestors and their valor during the Frontier wars of resistance. He was profoundly impressed by cases he heard before the Chief's court in the cattle *kraal* in his village. Later in his youth, he became determined to be a lawyer, partly because of having witnessed these tribal deliberations (Mandela, 1994), and ultimately practiced the art of sophisticated argumentation in a court of law.

In 1930 his father died and young Rolihlaha became the Paramount Chief's ward. He was carefully groomed to assume a high tribal office. According to Sampson (1999), Rolihlaha's model for "benign authority and chiefly leadership style" was instilled in him by this chief (p. 69). Mandela was reminded of his responsibility to his tribe and expected to serve as a leader to his people. This extensive training and constant modeling as a

man fated to become a chief, and his predisposition to be a "troublemaker," later helped carve and determine his destiny as a committed servant-leader.

In his autobiography, Mandela (1994) clearly expresses his strong religious, moral, and cultural convictions. He was a devoted Christian. No doubt the morality of Christianity was a backdrop for some of Mandela's leadership. Mandela (1994) related that during his schooling as a child and a young man, he was haunted by historical references alluding to his *Kaffir* people as savages, barbarians, and cattle thieves. He was appalled that black Africans were constantly being humiliated and considered less than human by whites, even though many of his people were Christians too, just like the white Afrikaners who oppressed them.

In 1985, while imprisoned, he was interviewed by reporters from the *Washington Times* who asked him about his attempts to commit bloodless acts of sabotage for his cause. Mandela (1994) responded by referring to the Bible, explaining, "I am a Christian and have always been a Christian. Even Christ, when he was left with no alternatives, used force to expel the moneylenders from the temple. I am not a man of violence, but had no choice. I had to use force against evil" (p. 520).

MANDELA'S PATH TO GLOBAL SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

The beginning of the 20th century in South Africa was marked by a system of segregation that allowed the Afrikaners (whites of Dutch descent) to dominate and control the majority of the wealth created by exporting and manufacturing the nation's natural resources. The Afrikaners controlled the nation's agriculture, leaving the black South Africans entirely out of the nation's quest for economic development (Thompson, 2001).

In 1948 the Afrikaner National Party established the policy and laws of apartheid as a means to cement Afrikaner control over the economic, political, and social system (Thompson, 2001). Apartheid literally means "of being on one part, aside." From the start, the theory of apartheid was laden with contradictions. The supposition of apartheid was that whites were superior to Africans, Coloureds, and Indians, and its function was to

entrench white supremacy. The attitude at the time was, "Die wit man moet altyd baas wees"—the Dutch belief that the white man must always remain boss. Thompson (2001) explains that the apartheid system was based on four premises (a formula which made the white nation the largest in the country):

1) The population of South Africa is comprised of four racial groups: white, coloured, Indian, and African, each with its own inherent culture.
2) Whites were entitled to absolute control over the state.
3) White interests should prevail over black interests; therefore the state was not obliged to provide equal facilities for the subordinate races.
4) The white racial groups formed a single nation, with Afrikaans and English-speaking components, while Africans belonged to several distinct nations.

According to "The History of Apartheid in South Africa" (2003), with the enactment of apartheid laws, racial discrimination was institutionalized. Race laws included every aspect of social life, including a prohibition of marriage between non-whites and whites, and the sanctioning of white-only jobs. Afterward, the National Party won the national election, and then conveniently removed all the government representatives of the black and coloured voters. It consolidated its political power by placing its Afrikaner members, or the British who supported apartheid policies, in most influential government and important non-government positions.

For the majority of South Africans, apartheid was seen as a philosophical and political system that would insure a parallel development of white and black interests and an ultimate economic, political, social, cultural, biological, and territorial separation (Giniewski, 1961). Apartheid excluded blacks from free competition in the economy and from the white world, while whites maintained their political position and efforts to preserve their advantageous economic status. Apartheid was a selfish instinct that placed great restrictions on black Africans and Coloured people (South African Institute of Race Relations, 1957). It was highly effective in achieving its

goal of obtaining preferential treatment for whites (*The History of Apartheid in South Africa,* 2003).

Exacerbating the matter was the 1950 Population Registration Act, which required that all South Africans be racially classified into one of three categories: white, black (African), or coloured (mixed descent). The coloured category included major subgroups of East Indians and Asians. Classification into these categories was based on physical appearance, social acceptance, and descent (Neame, 1962). Non-compliance with race laws was dealt with harshly.

Earlier in South African history, black Africans founded a nationwide organization that became known as the African National Congress (ANC). The group survived official obstruction and was destined to become a formidable instrument of resistance in the struggle of black African liberation, especially in the second half of the 20th century (Thompson, 2001).

In 1941 Mandela (1994) was introduced to Walter Sisulu, who was regarded as a "trouble maker and rabble-rouser" (p. 73). Sisulu was engaged in African politics. Although Mandela was counseled by confidants to avoid Sisulu and politics in general, he nevertheless got deeply involved in the ANC.

Sisulu was to become Mandela's closest friend; he even referred to Sisulu as his "spiritual father" (Mandela, 1994). They were ultimately imprisoned together at Robben Island and Pretoria. The connection between the two men provides a beautiful image of servant-leadership. From the start, Mandela regarded Sisulu as "strong, reasonable, practical, and dedicated" (p. 95). Sisulu was Mandela's mentor. He was a "brother," and his "friendship and support never faltered" (p. 208). Sisulu was an "uncle" to Mandela's children. They were co-leaders in the political movement to organize against the "harsh realities of the African struggle" (Tambo, 1965, p. 2).

In 1944 Mandela joined the ANC and helped found the ANC Youth League. In 1952, he was elected volunteer-in-chief of the Defiance Campaign and the President of the Transvaal Branch of the ANC (Mandela,

1994). He was persuaded to become the Deputy National President of the ANC. Unfortunately, within a year he was ordered to resign from the ANC by the Afrikaner-dominated Nationalist Government. The government prohibited him from attending ANC meetings and assemblies, and from engaging in any strikes or protests. For the next decade Mandela was an unfortunate victim of various forms of repression, bans, arrests, and charges. To remain active in the anti-apartheid movement, eventually he went underground in the early 1960s (Mandela, 1994). Despite the government's ban, he continued his anti-apartheid activity by traveling around the country organizing resistance to discriminatory legislation and even organized a labor strike. His defiance and rebellious activities eventually resulted in his being arrested and charged with treason, a serious accusation in South Africa.

Originally Mandela advocated protest through non-violence, but over time found that non-violent protest did little to change the government and society, whereupon he became convinced that violent activity was justified. It was only when all else failed, when all channels of peaceful protest were barred, that he decided to embark on violent forms of political struggle (Mandela, 1994).

According to the African National Congress (2003), despite a ban on leaving the country, in January 1962 Mandela toured Africa, visiting Tanganyika, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mail, Senegal, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, and Nigeria, meeting the Heads of State of those countries. Shortly after his return to South Africa, he was arrested and charged for leaving the country illegally and inciting a strike. To these charges he pleaded guilty, and, as an experienced lawyer, conducted his own defense. He was convicted and jailed for five years for defying the laws of apartheid. While serving this sentence, he was charged with sabotage and conspiracy. A guilty verdict meant a sentence of death by hanging.

What followed was what became known as the famous Rivonia trial: the State versus Nelson Mandela (Britannica Online, 2005). He and many

of his ANC comrades were found guilty and sentenced to life in prison rather than receiving the death sentence, mainly because the judge in the case knew the rest of the world would be appalled if the death sentence were to be carried out (Mandela, 1994). Mandela's sentence ended after 27 years of imprisonment, when apartheid fell.

According to Benson (1986), Mandela's imprisonment did not hamper his spirit and leadership. At Robben Island prison, a bleak, cold, island prison off South Africa's Cape Hope, Mandela continued his fight against oppression by focusing on reforming the prison system. He protested against the poor conditions in which the prisoners were forced to work. He became a symbol of resistance and hope to fellow prisoners and to the world at large. He became a martyr to his people and to the world. He protested in prison by leading hunger strikes and engaging in other forms of resistance, attracting worldwide attention. Mandela became even more powerful in changing the political and social system in South Africa after he was imprisoned (Benson, 1986).

The Robben Island prison became a center for learning. Mandela was the central figure in organizing political and academic education classes for the inmates. He was a source of strength for the prisoners. His resistance held steady despite his tribulations in dealing with prison life. After completing 20 years of his imprisonment sentence, he continued to refuse offers to have his sentence remitted. This meant that he would receive special treatment and the rest of his comrades who were in prison would not be released. He explained that he could not sell his birthright as one being entitled to all human rights that any white African enjoyed (Mandela, 1994). He would not compromise his moral, political, and cultural principles.

In the 1980s, the dominant culture of South Africa was changing along with the rest of the world, albeit later than in many westernized countries. The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, the original seedbed of apartheid, was changing due to the leadership, persuasion, and the courage to defy conformity (Thompson & Prior, 1982).

Starting in 1986, Mandela engaged in secret meetings between senior National Party government officials. What followed was the decision of the Afrikaner Broederbond, or brotherhood, to abandon apartheid and initiate clandestine negotiations with the ANC (de Klerk, 1998).

AFRICAN TRIBAL VALUES

Mandela was brought up with the cultural concept of *ubuntu*, the worldview of most African societies that influence social conduct. According to Broodryk (1997), *ubuntu* is a way of life that is fundamental to one's personhood, humanity, humanness, and morality. Integral to *ubuntu* is the idea of group solidarity and the survival of communities (www.simongland.com, 2004). An individual's existence is based on and expressed through relationships with others and on the principle of caring for each other's well being (Louw, 2005). Conformity, compassion, respect, human dignity, collective unity, and the spirit of mutual support are key to the social values of *ubuntu*.

Mandela demonstrated the *ubuntu* cultural attitude when he entered the court during the 1964 Rivonia trial wearing a traditional Xhosa leopard-skin *kaross* (cloak) instead of a suit and tie (Mandela, 1994). The sight of the *kaross* and its cultural symbolism electrified the spectators. He chose the traditional dress to emphasize that a black African was walking into a white man's court. He was literally carrying the history, culture, and heritage of his people on his back. He felt like the embodiment of African nationalism, the inheritor of Africa's difficult but noble past and her uncertain future. He knew the authorities would feel threatened by the *kaross*, as so many whites felt threatened by the true culture of Africa. This was the day on which he gave a most memorable speech about apartheid laws being immoral, unjust, and intolerable. Mandela (1994) expressed his determination to bring apartheid to an end by declaring, "We must attempt to alter it, we must protest it, we must oppose it" (p. 324).

Ubuntu was the spiritual and social foundation in the development of the ANC. The importance of the value of group solidarity was pivotal to

the survival of African communities and served to undergird the moral purpose of the strategies devised and the action taken by the ANC (Liwane, 2005). These same values were held and provided the impetus to continue the struggle undertaken by the ANC while Mandela, Sisulu, and other ANC leaders were in prison.

Greenleaf's (1977) premise of servant-leadership closely matches the principles of *ubuntu*. Servant-leaders affirm the value of others while building their strength, making them more autonomous and healthier. By their stewardship, they exhibit creative insight, a strong sense of foresight, and innate intuition. Servant-leaders use persistent persuasion and trust others. They are empathic and understanding. They truly listen without judging. Servant-leaders are deeply aware of and perceive that which surrounds them. They are committed to their communities and to the idea of the healing and growth of community members.

The principles and ideals of *ubuntu* include interconnectedness and harmony while building, maintaining, and strengthening communities—communal responsiveness. *Ubuntu* stresses humility, humanness, human dignity, compassion, respect, justice, fairness, mutual affirmation, reciprocity, group solidarity, and collective unity. *Ubuntu* is imbedded with the spirit of service to others (www.simongoland.com, 2004).

Like the many Xhosa chiefs before him, Mandela acknowledged that experience is the foundation of leadership (Mandela, 1994). He knew himself and he knew his enemy's shortcomings. One cannot know another completely until he or she starts ruling people and making laws. Leaders are luminaries, noteworthy, and most influential (Mindell, 1995). They wait and watch others. They follow environmental and human signals. They see beyond the moment while studying the moment. They are prudent, judicious, wise, and solemn. Vision is the essence of leadership. Leaders see ways to accomplish their goals and ideas without compromising their own values and principles. They lead by giving power and guidance to others, so that they too may lead. Leaders have a balanced view of the world and community. They are global thinkers. They think about the

long-term consequences of action and inaction. They put heavy emphasis on the intangibles of vision.

As a leader, Mandela worked outside the legislative process before and during his imprisonment. He wielded considerable power and influence, motivated by feeling compelled to improve conditions for his people in South Africa. He handled setbacks and difficulties by sticking with his mission and lived to struggle for the liberation of his people. He was a freedom fighter, defying laws on the grounds that they were unjust.

Nelson Mandela knew who he was. He used persistent persuasion to change attitudes worldwide. His leadership was inspired by other leaders of freedom movements at the time and in the past, like Gandhi in British, colonial India, and the civil rights movement in the United States led by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Events and sentiments across the world all contributed to these fights.

CONCLUSION

Great leaders and their ways of leading others depend on many factors. The legacy they leave behind is very much dependent on the environment and world surrounding them. Leadership never happens in a vacuum. Leadership theorist John Gardner (1990) points out that leaders always live with conflict, especially in a multicultural world. Gardner believes that leaders' inherent attributes and power to lead enables them to motivate others, develop organizations, renew lost hopes, and build communities.

Mandela exhibited many of the attributes that a great leader must possess: loyalty to a cause, capacity to motivate, willingness to stand alone, great courage, intelligence, adaptability, and enduring physical stamina (Gardner, 1990). Nelson Mandela was a keen networker, a logical problem solver; he was able to envision the future; he believed in human rights and prosperity for all people. As a strong leader of his people, he maintained deep, moral convictions and was proficient in political strategy and diplomatic legal debate. He was not afraid to rebel and demand political and

social reform. Mandela (1994) was motivated by circumstances created by apartheid and the constant struggles of humanity surrounding him.

Mandela possessed the courage, conviction, and beliefs that many Xhosa tribal chiefs possessed before him in a long line of royal ancestry. Mandela had more than the need to serve his people. From the time he was a small child listening to the men of his tribe argue cases in the cattle *kraal*, he was destined to be a chief. This vocation surpassed the responsibility of merely being a leader to his people. His success meant the cultural survival of this tribe in modern times, and gave to the world a sacred gift of healing.

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