

# Africa is a Country

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## The photographer who showed Nelson Mandela to the world

BY

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In 1994, the ANC commissioned South African photographer George Hallett to document the electoral process and first democratic government. During the year in which Hallett covered the electoral process, his images of Mandela were published in newspapers around the world. In 1995, Hallett's photographs were later published in a book, titled *Images of Change*, under the auspices of the African National Congress' Department of Information and Publicity; the little known-publisher was Nolwazi Educational Publishers, located in Braamfontein, South Africa. The book appeared in landscape-format, with 140 pages of captioned, black and white photographs, and an introduction by Pallo Jordan. On the cover of the book is a photograph of Mandela, deep in conversation on a mobile phone—his face turned away from the camera—as an aproned woman, instantly recognisable in the landscape of domestic labour in South Africa, walks past him nonchalantly on her way to one of her many daily tasks: to put a full toilet roll in a bathroom.

The photograph is clearly not posed: although the woman faces the camera, her gaze is not directed for the shot; she is simply walking by, on her way to her duties. And although she is

as present in the frame as Mandela, it is he to whom we direct our attention: his face is partially in profile and bent into the phone and his eyes are cast downward, but his tall, slim figure, impeccably attired in a dark suit, striped tie, and white shirt commands our eye.

Hallett's photographs helped produce the iconic image of Nelson Mandela in the global imaginary; they also helped re-fashion global—and internal—reflections about the “new” nation, moulding how we continue to see South Africa via Mandela's, his adoring subjects', and his adversaries' performances for the camera. While much of the iconography around Mandela reduce his visual biography to hagiography—manufacturing Mandela into a smiling, unidimensional commodity in the global marketplace, “beguil[ing] the outside world into trumpeting the ‘miracle’ of the South African transition,” as Adam Habib contends (in [‘Myth of the Rainbow Nation’](#))—Hallett's body of work during this period hints at a multifaceted figure, a complex nation, and a fluid, amorphous political process that had unclear outcomes.

Part of the success of Hallett's images depends on the fact that he does not resort to using classical tropes of iconography; instead, his photographs move beyond being simply two-dimensional “indexes” of the “real” person or recorded event. They not only provide a material connection to a complex person who appears to be at once alone with the responsibility for the future of his nation and gregariously sociable with a global audience, but invite an alchemical communion—a being there, a being with—outside the linearity and materiality of history contained by the two-dimensions of an ordinary news photograph. Many of Hallett's photographs depict Mandela as a multifaceted character—a beloved, loving, and unguarded “madala” to the adoring public, but also a politically disciplined, sartorially aware, and psychically ambiguous figure. We see physical movement, emotional and intellectual movement, and a more elusive hope for movement to some other, metaphysical space outside of history—something not available in didactic visual narratives intended to create Mandela the Icon. These photographs *move* us.

For instance, in “First encounter, Johannesburg, 1994,” three women—two of them wearing the iconic uniforms of “tea ladies,” and thusly, figures as iconic as Mandela in apartheid history—run open armed towards a receptive, welcoming Mandela. His face is not visible to the photograph's audience: we only recognise him from his height, slim physique, the greying hair, the impeccable if loose fitting dark suit. The women, their joy so nakedly

expressed, are the public who waited decades for the promise of liberation—an impossible/possible dichotomy embodied by the suited, stately man now in front of them.



‘First Encounter,’ Johannesburg, 1994. *Photo © George Hallett*

Hallett’s memory of this moment characterises his deft hand at describing the ridiculous and the sublime:

**That picture with the women running towards Mandela, which I call ‘First Encounter’—this was the first time they had actually seen him close up. And it was an incredible experience, because for the first time I saw the whole country, and the joy and the hope that people had. My God, I thought—it’s finally about to end, this crappy system of apartheid.**

Mandela—and the fantasies of national and personal liberation he represents—are reflected in the faces of women who laboured daily for a state that reduced their persons to instrumentalised labour; in him, they see the possibility of being liberated from the indignities of being thusly reduced, of realising a fuller humanity, of being recognised and seen. He becomes a cipher onto whose person we—the audience viewing and re-viewing this photograph—can project unfulfilled desires.

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Hallett, who was born in District Six to a “Coloured” family under apartheid, was living in exile in Paris at the time he received the call from Pallyo Jordan (Jordan was a key advisor to

Mandela; he was elected Member of Parliament in the National Assembly of South Africa and the Minister of Posts, Telecommunications, and Broadcasting in 1994). Hallett had initially left South Africa for London, where he got a break photographing the covers for Heineman's [African Writers Series](#), and lived for periods of time in Amsterdam, Zimbabwe, and the US before moving to Paris. He already had a remarkable body of work, including his photographs documenting [District Six in Cape Town](#) before it was demolished by the apartheid government, which had ruled, under the auspices of the Group Areas Act, to make District Six a "Whites only" area. Among Hallett's most recognisable photographs of Mandela and the 1994 electoral process were those that were included in the World Press Photo Contest in 1995, the year after the first democratic elections in South Africa. He recounts how he was called to take on the mantle of the official image-maker:

**I had a dream in Paris in early 1994 that I was going to meet Mandela and have lunch with him. The strange thing about the dream was that we were all sitting on chairs that were balanced precariously on the hind legs. When I consulted a dream interpreter in Paris at the time, she told me that I will be meeting Madiba and the reason that the chairs were so precariously balanced on their hind legs was because of the unsteady state of the nation caused by third force violence. Three weeks later Pallo Jordan called me to [ask me] to come and photograph the election process for the ANC. [He said] that I must make my way to JHB.**

Hallett left for Johannesburg soon thereafter, to take his position as the official photographer. He mentions that he got to have that predestined lunch with Mandela, just as his dream had foretold; but in addition, just as his dream interpreter had announced, there were shadowy forces conspiring to use violence to roadblock Mandela from fulfilling his destiny.

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Despite Mandela's own misgivings surrounding the cultural production of his messianic status, he realised that he had to push his "special" status in order to force change at home, and make allies abroad: Rob Nixon (in [Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond](#), 1994) surmises that Mandela had to play along with the "demiurgic powers" granted him by the local and global public, and, wrote Nixon, "preserve enough prominence to keep South Africa in the media's eye and to maintain pressure on de Klerk, who clearly hoped," in releasing the world's most famous prisoner well before

negotiations for free elections had taken place, that Mandela's "mystique would tarnish in the open air" and that the advantage Mandela undoubtedly had as a symbol of perseverance against oppression would dissipate by the time polling day finally rolled around. Mandela also had to "campaign for funds, to raise the profile of the ANC, and to enhance the organization's leverage"; and in order to do that, he had to "engage with the Messianic tradition" (Nixon 1994).

Hallett's images—under the auspices of the ANC's direction—capture some of that contradiction. His photographs helped fill the empty image spaces created by a twenty-seven year ban on Mandela's image. They became an intrinsic part of the reconstruction of Mandela, communicating a transformative process that challenged the world to embrace a new vision of Mandela, the ANC, and the nation.

Omar Badsha, founder of the NGO South African History Online, and the photographer who co-founded Afrapix in the late 1980s, cautioned me to read Hallett's photographs of Mandela in context of the 1980s and early 1990s; in particular, he stressed the significance of paying attention to how the ANC was portrayed by other photographers—from the time the political organisation was "unbanned by the South African authorities to the first elections"—as well as how photographers were picturing and narrating "what was happening in the country on the ground—the violence in which more people died than in the entire apartheid period." Part of what was "key to Mandela's image as the saviour was his trips around the country the mass rallies the TV," wearing the world-leader's uniform—a dark suit and tie—helping cement his role as a peacemaker. Badsha notes, with characteristic humour, "What if Mandela wore the uniform of the volunteer and armed combatant?" Or decided on the rough-hewn khaki worker's gear that Samora Machel and Kenneth Kaunda favoured? Mandela's new sartorial incarnation helped calm white South Africans' fears about Mandela being a fiery communist, freed from prison with an agenda of vengeance. His appearances and speeches also helped reduce what the press routinely dubbed "black on black" violence—this without investigating or reporting on how much de Klerk and the National Party had a hand in instigating those clashes. Badsha noted that "unless you include that in the narrative...[you may] reinforce the problematic notion that the ANC and F.W. de Klerk were punting: that Mandela "is the man we can do business with."

At the time, the narrative disseminated around the world about South Africa was one of spectacular violence. The grim images captured what was then believed to be clashes

between rival political groups in townships. In his introductory remarks in [The Bang Bang Club: Snapshots from a Hidden War](#), Desmond Tutu links those clashes between factions of the resistance as conflicts fuelled by the apartheid government, intended to create insecurity in the nation and abroad about the viability of a black government. Although “conventional wisdom declared that most of this bloodletting was due to the bloody rivalry between” the ANC and Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi’s Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) as they vied for political turf, there was clear evidence that these clashes were more orchestrated from the outside:

**a sinister third force [...was] linked to the apartheid government and its security forces, which was intent on fomenting so-called black-on-black violence, enabling the apartheid government and many whites to crow about how these blacks were clearly not ready for democracy and political power. (Tutu, “Forward” x)**

The picture was that of an ungovernable and uncivilised mass of South Africans, unmoored by the strictures of apartheid. In this way, apartheid appeared to be “good,” when compared to the destruction and grief meted out on the weak and innocent by apparently bloodthirsty, out-of-control mobs.

Despite whatever political machinations were going on, Hallett’s work “remains a record about the hope, celebratory feeling of the members of the new members of the first parliament,” confirms Badsha. His photographs presented a powerful alternative, taking on the challenge of presenting a different vision. So much of what I see in these photographs refer to that last heady moment in South African history, when *Drum magazine* rolled out dazzling images of a be-suited, sparring Mandela, playing a visual game that undermined the ever-tightening noose of apartheid. Here, too, I can see Hallett’s sly wink of mockery at the colonial archive and the architects of apartheid, evident also in [Jürgen Schadeberg](#), [Bob Gosani](#), [Peter Magubane](#), [Ranjith Kally](#), and [Eli Weinberg’s](#) photographs.



Nelson Mandela going over the text of his inauguration speech. *Photo © George Hallett*

What is remarkable about Hallett's photographs is that though they present Mandela as a concerned, moral presence, they do not necessarily make him exceptional. In fact, Hallett's photographs subvert, and sometimes actually work against iconography. In these images, Mandela is never in full-frontal pose; he is usually looking to the side, or down to the ground. His eyes are never really visible, in fact—mostly because aging has caused the pockets of fat around his eyes to droop more; even as a young man, his smile was characterised by the slim line of his eye, which closed as his cheeks rose up. In a few of Hallett's photographs, Mandela's face is actually not visible—instead, it is the reactions of the adoring public we see. And because signs of Mandela's aging person are also visible—the wrinkling around his eyes, his greying hair, and his tired, be-spectacled face at the end of a long day, taking in more bad news from a television—his mortality is also quite apparent, and in opposition to the typical tropes of forever-youth employed in iconography. Hallett's images thus redirect us from resorting to notions of Mandela's messianic status, showing us instead, that he is a product of ordinary historical, social and temporal processes, moulded by a set of particular circumstances and personal decisions, rather than the result of a predestined journey.



Outside Parliament on the 9th of May 1994. The official opening of the first Democratic Parliament with three Nobel Peace Prize Laureates: Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk. Vice President Thabo Mbeki left of Mandela. *Photo © George Hallett*

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### About the Author

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