



South Africa 'rugby unity': Fact and fiction

By Pumza Fihlani
BBC News, Johannesburg



Fourteen years ago Nelson Mandela used the 1995 Rugby World Cup to unite black and white South Africans. A film based on the historic event, *Invictus*, opens on Friday and has raised the question: Has the dream of transformation lived on?

Both the film and the book on which it is based - John Carlin's *Playing the Enemy* - have a fairytale ending, but this is not necessarily the case for South Africa today.

Today's racial tensions are a lot more subtle.

Most black and white South Africans have embraced each other's differences but every once in a while the country's apartheid past rears its ugly head.

When political leaders fail to agree, they often accuse each other of being racists.

“ You knew that white is right and black is wrong, and then all of a sudden white is wrong and black is right

Marguerite Wheatley

Elusive dream

But jobs previously reserved for white people are now accessible to blacks. White and black South Africans can socialise without fear of victimisation. There are no "whites only" or "blacks only" signs hanging in restaurants, on buses, on beaches or airports.

But in some areas, the dream of ending racial divisions among South Africans has not completely come true. While the new black middle-class has moved into areas of Johannesburg previously reserved for whites, black faces are still rarely seen in some towns in Free State. And few white people venture into rough townships such as Alexandra.

Mr Mandela used rugby to preach transformation and reconciliation to South Africans - it was one of the first fruits of his "rainbow nation". But still rugby remains a predominantly white man's sport. And equally football remains a predominately black sport. So have South Africans forgotten Mr Mandela's message?



Morgan Freeman says he was blessed to work with Mandela

Work in progress

South African actress Marguerite Wheatley, who plays the wife of former national rugby captain Francios Pienaar (played by Matt Damon), was 14 years old when South Africa played New Zealand in the momentous final.

She says she was "oblivious" to apartheid South Africa and what the rugby match meant to the dream of a "new South Africa".

"Then you knew that white is right and black is wrong, and then all of a sudden white is wrong and black is right... so it was very confusing for me as a teenager," she says.

"For us young people it was easier to accept each other. I can't remember much about apartheid [but] I know that when apartheid fell, they were saying 'Our country has gone to the dogs'."

Wheatley says although South Africa was brought together "forcefully" most South Africans are looking at working together to continue building the nation.

"We're figuring out, we're sorting it out," she says.

Hollywood star Morgan Freeman, who has visited the country a number of times, says there is still "energy" in South Africa reminiscent of the 1995 World Cup victory.

“ You feel that there is still this sense of promise [in South Africa]

Morgan Freeman

"I made two visits here, one during the transition when it was so volatile and at Madiba's 80th birthday I came back and the place was absolutely electric with promise," says Freeman.

"You don't feel this electricity right now but you feel the energy, this feeling, sense of promise. You feel that there is still this sense of promise that now we can get moving."

Playing Mandela

Film critics are already predicting that the movie will earn Freeman an Oscar.

The actor, who is also one of the film's executive producers, plays Mr Mandela - a role with the potential to catapult any actor's career to world acclaim.

Freeman says he was "blessed" to have access to Mr Mandela.

"I studied him; I had close access to him," he says speaking about the man he describes "a friend".

"Not only was I able to look at tapes and get mannerisms and the walk, I was able to sit and hold his hand and talk to him."

Freeman says one of the challenges of accurately portraying Mr Mandela was learning how to speak like him.

"Nobody else sounds like him it's a very distinctive voice, so I had to work on that," he says.

The film is directed by veteran actor Clint Eastwood and includes a local and international film crew.

In recent weeks, local actors' unions have complained about Hollywood actors playing lead roles in films portraying South African icons and say South Africans should play more prominent roles in big productions.

But producers argue that using well-known names draw in crowds and go a long way to ensure the film's success.

Invictus has a strong presence of local actors, although they are not playing lead roles.

The name of the film is derived from a poem by William Ernest Henley which Mr Mandela is said to have memorised during his years imprisoned on Robben Island.