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North Korea and the liberation of Southern Africa, 1960-2020

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North Korea and the Liberation of Southern Africa, 1960-2020

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PREFACE

Note on Style

There are multiple systems for the transliteration of Korean into the Latin script. Both North Korea and South Korea use different romanisation schemes and the field of Korean Studies has not settled on a single convention. For the use of Korean terms in this book, I have been inspired by Brian Myer's distinction between the 'outside track' and the 'inside track' of North Korean propaganda.¹

For Korean terms that are part and parcel of North Korea's 'outside track' of propaganda, I have decided to use the transcription into English that is preferred by the North Korean state and therefore most widely known: Kim Il Sung instead of Kim Ilŏng; Pyongyang instead of P'yŏngyang; and Juche instead of Chuch'e. However, for Korean terms that are not necessarily meant for public consumption and mainly appear within the 'inside track' of North Korean propaganda, I use the McCune-Reischauer system for romanisation. The titles of the archival sources that I found in the Diplomatic Archives of South Korea are deliberately not romanised, with the aim to aid other researchers who wish to access the same files.

In Korea, family names come before first or given names. Kim Jong Un is thus 'Chairman Kim', and not 'Chairman Un', as the American Secretary of State Mike Pompeo erroneously said in 2018.² However, when people (usually academics) express their names in English form I have adopted this order.

Recent Southern Africa history is a complex and oftentimes confusing medley of changing statehood and abbreviations. 'How does one name the past I write about?', mused the historian Luise White in relation to Zimbabwe: this country had four different names between 1898 and 1980.³ Moreover, Zimbabwe hosted multiple liberation movements that competed and cooperated in different constellations throughout time: ZAPU and ZIPRA, ZANU and ZANLA, etc. This was applicable to the entire Southern African region. In the pursuit of clarity, I use the names of independent African states even when I describe the colonial era ('Namibia' instead of 'South West Africa'). Furthermore, I choose not to expand on the abbreviations in the text ('SWAPO', instead of 'South West Africa People's Organisation'). Instead, I have supplied a separate abbreviation key.

Note on Poetry

During my undergraduate studies in history at Leiden University, I enrolled in a course on historical theory and was pleasantly surprised that the professor in charge recited a poem at the end of each lecture. Ever since, I have been sensitive to the ways that poetry can hold up a mirror to our world.

Poetry is an integral part of North Korean society, where it is one of the most common forms of state-sanctioned propaganda.⁴ North Korean leaders such as Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il wrote epic poems about the liberation of the nation. Poetry is widely distributed across the masses and sometimes turned into revolutionary films.⁵ The life trajectory of Jang Jin Sung exemplifies the importance that North Korea attaches to the literary arts. Jang was one of Kim Jong Il's favoured poets and had thus earned unparalleled protection and privilege in Pyongyang, before he defected to South Korea in the early 2020s.⁶

¹ Myers 2015.

² USA Today, 9 May 2018.

³ White 2021.

⁴ See for example [SNU] 비학렬 811.74 M929y 198, 영원히 당과 함께 : 시집.

⁵ Kim 2010.

⁶ Jang 2014.

Poetry also became an important dimension of the liberation struggles in Southern Africa. Important liberation figures, such as Agostinho Neto in Angola and Christopher Okigbo in former Biafra, were famed poets. Most exiled liberation movements published magazines to promote their organisations, and virtually all publications included poems written by their members. FRELIMO used poetry in the literacy campaigns in their military camps, and Eduardo Mondlane called this ‘the seeds of a national culture’.⁷ A book about the relationship between ‘exile poetry’ and politics is waiting to be written.

It is no coincidence that Frantz Fanon wrote about the ‘poetry of revolt’ in his book *Wretched of the Earth*.⁸ Poetry was a useful tool to question the status quo and to reimagine a new world. This made poets dangerous in the eyes of colonisers. Poetry was often repressed by colonial governments. Don Mattera, a South African poet who was banned by the apartheid state, placed under house arrest, and tortured, captured the tension between poets and oppressive regimes in the following lines:

The poet must die
His murmuring threatens their survival
His breath could start the revolution;
He must be destroyed⁹

To honour this dimension of liberation history, I have included three poems from Southern Africa in this book.¹⁰ The poems are intended to reflect the three themes of ‘Blood’, ‘Bullets’, and ‘Bronze’. The first part of this book (‘Blood’) explains how African liberation movements turned to Asia for moral and material support. Mvula ya Nangolo’s poem ‘Robben Island’ is dedicated to the Namibian activist Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, who was detained for eighteen years on the prison island. Ya Nangolo describes the distance between the Western world and the atrocities that occurred in Africa, and the hypocrisy of Western leaders.

The second part of this book (‘Bullets’) elaborates on the guerrilla warfare that marked much of Southern Africa’s recent history. Jorge Rebelo’s ‘Poem for a Militant’ is similar to many poems that I encountered in the magazines of liberation movements during my archival research. Strong and militaristic, it describes the desire to fight for freedom. The third part of this book (‘Bronze’) explores the North Korean memorials that are used to commemorate the liberation struggles. Jofre Rocha’s ‘Poem of Return’ encapsulates the complicated feelings of a post-war world. The final verse, which describes the fallen heroes ‘with a wingless stone in hand / and a thread of anger snaking from their eyes’ reminds me of the cemeteries that North Korea built in Southern Africa to commemorate the fallen heroes of the wars for independence.

⁷ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: Eduardo Mondlane, paper 27–28 February 1968.

⁸ Fanon 1961.

⁹ ‘The Poet Must Die ...’, by Don Mattera. See Mattera 2011.

¹⁰ Moore and Beier 2007.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAPSO	Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization
ANC	African National Congress
AREMA	Antoko Revolisionera Malagasy
SPUP	Seychelles People's United Party
BNP	Basotho National Party
CCM	Chama Cha Mapinduzi
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)
FLN	Front de libération nationale
FNLA	Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique
KOMID	Korea Mining Development Trading Corporation
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender
LPF	Lesotho Paramilitary Forces
MAAN	Memorial António Agostinho Neto
MCP	Malawi Congress Party
MINUSCA	Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations unies pour la stabilisation en Centrafrique
MK	Umkhonto we Sizwe
MOP	Mansudae Overseas Projects
MPLA	Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
OSINT	Open Source Intelligence
PLAN	People's Liberation Army of Namibia
RENAMO	Resistência Nacional Moçambicana
ROK	Republic of Korea (South Korea)
SACP	South African Communist Party
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SWAPO	South West Africa People's Organisation
TANU	Tanganyika African National Union
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNIP	United National Independence Party
UNITA	União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
WPK	Workers' Party of Korea
ZANLA	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union
ZIPRA	Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army