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

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PROLOGUE

FREEDOM FIGHTERS

As Namibia's colourful national flag was hoisted for the first time on Independence Day, 21 March 1990, thousands of elated Namibians celebrated the victory of liberation by singing their new anthem. 'Freedom's fight we have won', the spectators roared, 'glory to their bravery, whose blood waters our freedom'.⁴⁷ The sentiments of the new anthem echo those of SWAPO's 'freedom songs', sung during the struggle, such as 'Many rivers of blood will flow', which asserted that the Namibian people must continue to suffer for the just cause of freedom.⁴⁸

The combination of freedom and blood is a recurring theme in the discourse of Southern African liberation movements. For SWAPO, the history of resistance in Namibia is 'written in blood'.⁴⁹ The Revolutionary Government of Angola in Exile similarly proclaimed that its people were 'writing history with their blood so that one day Angola can be free and independent'.⁵⁰ A Zambian official observed in 1975 that 'our oppressed brothers' in Namibia, Angola, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique 'have written the history of their independence struggle in blood'. He announced that 'Zambian blood is part of the ink with which that history is being written'.⁵¹

Blood became a symbol of sacrifice during the era of liberation. Robert Mugabe, the leader of ZANU and later president of Zimbabwe, mourned the death of his comrades by proclaiming that 'their blood shall forever water the seed of our revolution'.⁵² One of ZANU's most prominent struggle songs is named *Zimbabwe Ndeye Ropa*, meaning 'Zimbabwe is born of blood'.⁵³ The MPLA of Angola celebrated the 'irrigation of our battlefields with the blood of the best sons of our peoples'.⁵⁴ The SACP, a fundamental ally of the ANC, asserted that they would 'continue to water the tree of freedom in our land, if necessary, with our own blood'.⁵⁵ The ANC called the people 'the lifeblood of our revolution'.⁵⁶ The SWAPO leadership declared that they were 'prepared to cross many rivers of blood in our march to freedom, independence and national liberation'.⁵⁷ Samora Machel, the leader of FRELIMO and later president of Mozambique, said that 'the blood of our people was not shed only to free the land from foreign domination', but also to 'reconquer our Mozambican personality ... to create a new society'.⁵⁸ Machel believed that Africa offered 'her blood and sacrifices ... for the general cause of humanity': as Africa was liberating herself, she was simultaneously liberating the world.⁵⁹

Blood also symbolises the comradeship that freedom fighters found on the path to liberation. The term comrade, Machel explained, is a word 'bathed in blood and sacrifices'.⁶⁰ At the Non-Aligned Summit in Zimbabwe, in 1986, Machel introduced Mugabe as 'an outstanding personality, a comrade and friend ... Mugabe stands for us Mozambicans as a symbol of solidarity forged by the struggles of our peoples and sealed in blood'.⁶¹ When the MPLA leader, José Eduardo dos Santos, visited his Zambian UNIP comrades, he stressed that

⁴⁷ Kernes 2010.

⁴⁸ Tsoubaloko 2016.

⁴⁹ [NAI] PC Namibia NLM SWAPO: SWAPO Statement.

⁵⁰ [NAI] PC Angola NLM FNLA: G.R.A.E. Actualities N 3, Angola 10th Year.

⁵¹ [NAN] CCO, 39/12/1/3/1.

⁵² [NAI] PC Zimbabwe NLM ZANU: Press Release, 30 November 1977.

⁵³ Chitando and Tarusarira, 2017, p. 11.

⁵⁴ [NAI] PC Angola NLM MPLA: speech by Neto, December 1972.

⁵⁵ [MA] ANC London Box 4, SACP: draft radio broadcast, undated.

⁵⁶ [MA] ANC London Box 15: speech by Tambo, 16 December 1986.

⁵⁷ [NAI] PC Namibia NLM SWAPO: statement by Hishongwa.

⁵⁸ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: message from Machel, 20 September 1974.

⁵⁹ [NAI] PC Southern Africa NLM: Shamuyarira and Leonard.

⁶⁰ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: message from Machel, 20 September 1974.

⁶¹ [MA] ANC Lusaka Box 63: speech by Machel, September 1986.

their ties were not just based on friendship – ‘they are also blood ties’.⁶² Comrades are people that fight and suffer for freedom, together.

Blood is an equally significant theme in North Korean propaganda. Kim Il Sung credited himself with writing the opera *Sea of Blood*, a story of indigenous defiance against the colonial Japanese occupation of Korea.⁶³ *Sea of Blood*, which premiered in 1971, became a cornerstone of North Korean nationalism and is regarded as one of the Five Great Revolutionary Operas. The story exemplifies the virtues of Juche and was later adapted into a novel and a film.⁶⁴ Every North Korean has been exposed to its revolutionary contents – and so have a number of African leaders. When Agostinho Neto visited Pyongyang in the 1970s (before Angolan independence), he was not only welcomed with a rendition of the MPLA anthem, but he was also treated by Kim to a private screening of *Sea of Blood*.⁶⁵

Sacrifice and comradeship are noble values in the pursuit of freedom and therefore have positive connotations. On the other hand, the word blood is associated with ethnic nationalisms that are based on exclusionary definitions of race. North Korea is a society founded on the idea of a pure Korean race, and Brian Myers, a renowned expert on ideology and propaganda, argues that North Korea’s political ideology is closer to fascism than to communism.⁶⁶ This is different from Southern Africa. Although race is key to understanding Southern African history, and recent years have seen an increase in xenophobic politics, the rule of African liberation governments cannot be defined as *Blut und Boden*.

For the conceptualisation of this book, blood, ultimately, stands for solidarity. Not just between anticolonial movements within Southern Africa, but especially between African and North Korean freedom fighters, who, despite vastly different backgrounds, came to regard each other as blood brothers. This explains why African leaders were comfortable in Pyongyang, so much so that the Zambian president sang his liberation song and the president of Botswana danced in front of an exuberant crowd. As a result, North Korean books were translated into Swahili and Afrikaans and distributed across the continent. In time, experimental North Korean farms in Africa were established to showcase the benefits of practical collaboration between the oppressed peoples of the world.

The following five chapters describe how Africans and North Koreans were brought together by the powerful force of solidarity, how they navigated internal and external power struggles, exchanged ideas, and eventually became allies in search of freedom.

⁶² [NAI] PC Angola NLM MPLA: speech by Dos Santos, 27 July 1983.

⁶³ Kim 2010, p. 190; Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 56-58.

⁶⁴ David-West 2006, p. 77.

⁶⁵ [NAI] PC Angola NLM MPLA: Angola in Arms, 15 April 1970; MPLA Informations, no. 2.

⁶⁶ Myers 2011.