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

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DIPLOMACY

AFRICAN PRESIDENTS IN PYONGYANG

Contemporary visitors to North Korea are usually taken on a guided tour to admire the highlights of Pyongyang. Government minders will gently escort them to the Kim Il Sung Square, the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum, the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun and more mundane destinations such as the Pyongyang Metro. A standard item on any itinerary is a visit to the International Friendship Exhibition House, a massive structure built within Mount Myohyang.²⁶⁶ The enormous exhibition spreads across 150 rooms and contains over 40,000 gifts from over 170 countries and organisations that were, at one time, presented to the Kim family.²⁶⁷

A significant part of the International Friendship Exhibition House is dedicated to Africa.²⁶⁸ A wooden elephant from Zimbabwe, ivory carvings from Angola, a crystal owl from Gabon, a silver ostrich from Ethiopia, a table lamp made from a stuffed porcupine fish from Mauritius, spears from Burundi, a ceramic vase decorated with gemstones from Nigeria – and much, much more.²⁶⁹ These unique items were gifted by African leaders upon visiting Pyongyang and are tangible reminders of a key part of African–North Korean diplomacy during the Cold War. Julius Nyerere, the Tanzanian leader, presented Kim Il Sung with ivory walking sticks.²⁷⁰ Robert Mugabe, the leader of Zimbabwe, presented Kim with a stuffed buck.²⁷¹

As the previous chapter emphasised, the two Koreas developed different strategies towards Africa. The scholar Park Sang-Seek observed in 1978 that North Korea practised an ‘invitation diplomacy’ with a focus on cultural engagements, whereas South Korea utilised a ‘visitation diplomacy’ centred on trade.²⁷² When the president of the Seychelles, Albert-France René, decided that his first official trip abroad would be to North Korea, he was asked by the press why he would travel to a communist country. ‘Because they invited me’, he responded curtly. North Korea subsequently became a ‘loyal ally and important aid donor’ to René’s country. Ten years later, the Seychelles would be one of a mere handful of countries in the world to boycott the Olympic Games in South Korea.²⁷³

‘African visitors kept on pouring into Pyongyang’, wrote the scholar Byung Chul Koh in 1969. ‘North Korea’s well-calculated campaign to woo the Third World has been both successful and productive’.²⁷⁴ During the Cold War, a few hundred to a 1000 foreign delegations visited Pyongyang every year. North Korean watchers were astounded by the ‘extraordinarily high level of effort and resources’ that Kim Il Sung spent on diplomacy.²⁷⁵ North Korea targeted a wide range of leading figures in Africa and went a long way to deliver personal invitations: when North Korean diplomats visited Kinshasa in 1973 and realised that Mobutu Sese Seko was on holiday in Belgium, they travelled all the way to his holiday address to disturb the president for a mere two hour audience. Mobutu subsequently accepted their invitation to come to Pyongyang.²⁷⁶

²⁶⁶ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 131-135.

²⁶⁷ Kim and Rim 2022.

²⁶⁸ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 131-134.

²⁶⁹ Kim and Rim 2022.

²⁷⁰ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 134.

²⁷¹ [IISH] ZH 67293: 9 October 1985. I want to thank Brooks Marmon for sharing this file with me.

²⁷² Park 1978.

²⁷³ Shillington 2014, p. 224.

²⁷⁴ Koh 1969, p. 178-184.

²⁷⁵ Kim 1986, p. 327.

²⁷⁶ [NARA] RG 59, SNF Entry# 1613-D, Box# 2420, POL 32-4 KOR -- POL 16 KOR N: Kinshasa to Washington DC, 5 March 1973.

How did invitation diplomacy work in practice? Park's quantitative approach focused on tabulating UN General Assembly votes and glossed over the question of what exactly invitation diplomacy entailed.

Benefitting from novel archival sources and knowledge of the events that occurred after 1978, this chapter offers the first comprehensive assessment of North Korea's invitation diplomacy in the context of Southern Africa. Who was invited to Pyongyang, and why? What did these visits look like and what were their lasting effects? This chapter examines the significance of Pyongyang as a meeting space and Kim Il Sung's personal travel policy. At the heart of this chapter are five case studies of African presidents in Pyongyang. The conclusion reflects upon the question of what both sides gained from the invitation diplomacy and offers three additional remarks.

Welcome to Pyongyang

The capital city was the pride of North Korea, a socialist paradise on earth, a city like no other. This illustrious status was a result of the devastating Korean War (1950–53), when the American army bombed Pyongyang to utter ruin. During North Korea's post-war development, its urban planners had a *tabula rasa* to create a new city appropriate for a people destined for socialist greatness. The traumatic experience of the war allowed the DPRK to create a version of socialist realism that was distinctly different from that of China or the Soviet Union.²⁷⁷

Personal invitations to Pyongyang were a powerful tool in the goodwill campaign that North Korea utilised to impress African countries. In the first two decades after the Korean War, North Korea's economy performed better than South Korea. Pyongyang showcased the impressive post-war reconstruction and Juche ideals of the North Korean regime, which had risen from the ashes of war like a socialist phoenix. The scholar Cheehyung Harrison Kim described Pyongyang's rebuilding as an 'extraordinary undertaking', with striking utopian and utilitarian features.²⁷⁸ For the sake of the argument, picture Pyongyang in the 1970s: the splendour of its monuments; the strong militarisation; the cosmopolitan feel from international visitors; the energy of the place. Pyongyang, its architecture and people, harboured a promise to the oppressed or recently liberated peoples across the globe. This experience greatly added to the anti-imperialist credentials of North Korea.

Over the years, Pyongyang became a hub of the non-aligned world.²⁷⁹ To this end, North Korea hosted several multilateral summits that were often attended by African delegations. The Pyongyang Conference of 1987, as discussed in the previous chapter, was not the only NAM event organised by North Korea. The DPRK also hosted more specialised events such as the 2nd Meeting of the Non-Aligned Sports Ministers in Pyongyang, in 1986, and the Non-Aligned Movement Film Festival, in 1987.²⁸⁰ The latter event was opened by the Zimbabwean Nathan Shamuyarira, a high-ranking ZANU official.²⁸¹

North Korea was able to organise large-scale conventions. The 1983 'Task of World Journalists against Imperialist and Friendship and Peace' conference was a five-day event in Pyongyang attended by nearly 3000 delegates (including members of SWAPO, the Namibian liberation movement).²⁸² In 1989, Pyongyang hosted the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students, a seven-day gathering of 15,000 delegates from 180 countries.²⁸³ A Swedish colonel who attended the events entrusted to a British diplomat that it 'was every bit as impressive in

²⁷⁷ Kirkwood 2013, p. 551.

²⁷⁸ Kim 2021, p. 272-274.

²⁷⁹ Van der Hoog 2024.

²⁸⁰ [NAUK] FCO 21/3602.

²⁸¹ [UNAM] PA3/6/89.

²⁸² [UNAM] PA1/14/1/1.

²⁸³ Kim 1997, p. 54-57.

terms of numbers, organisation and facilities as the Seoul Olympics last year'. Mugabe was one of the honoured guests who addressed the festival.²⁸⁴ Nyerere was another high-profile visitor.²⁸⁵ Among the visiting students were exiled South Africans from the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College, an ANC school in Tanzania.²⁸⁶

North Korea's skill in organising mass events was best visible in domestic celebrations. A prime example is the annual Day of the Sun (15 April), Kim Il Sung's birthday, which was regularly attended by African dignitaries.²⁸⁷ Military parades, spectacular mass gymnastics, and events such as the Arirang Mass Games and the April Spring Friendship Art Festival were designed to reaffirm the power of the North Korean state and impress both domestic and international audiences.²⁸⁸

Another reason why invitations to Pyongyang were important was because Kim Il Sung seldom left North Korea. Kim was presented as the architect of the new Korea, a man who physically and ideologically embodied the promise of postcolonial development that attracted visitors from all over Africa. Yet, he only travelled to the continent once. In 1975, Kim Il Sung undertook a 'world tour' that covered a few countries in Europe and Africa. Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia were honoured with a visit, as well as Algeria and Mauritania.²⁸⁹ Both African countries were one-party states with charismatic authoritarian and socialist leaders, not unlike North Korea. Furthermore, both were among the first non-communist nations to establish relations with Pyongyang.²⁹⁰

A defected diplomat of the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained to me that the tour destinations were selected on the basis of comfort and security. The North Korean government was concerned about Kim's health and therefore favoured countries with an amenable climate and predictable political situation. At the time, Southern Africa was embroiled in numerous low-intensity guerrilla wars. Despite Kim's desire to visit sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa was deemed a better option.²⁹¹

A propaganda video that was aired on North Korean television shows Kim being welcomed in Algeria by Chairman Houari Boumédiène and a roaring crowd of allegedly 600,000 citizens. Kim was received by a military guard at the airport and driven through Algiers by motorcade, while rows of spectators cheered him on. He received an honorary doctorate from the University of Algiers and honorary citizenship from the city of Algiers.²⁹² In his acceptance speech, Kim said that 'their exchange of valuable experience and mutual support' was important for 'strengthening the anti-imperialist revolutionary forces'.²⁹³

Mauritania was not in the original tour itinerary. The country was added last-minute at the request of the Mauritanian government, which was very keen to host Kim.²⁹⁴ His visit was no less of a spectacle. Banners in French, Arabic, and Korean welcomed 'Comrade Kim Il Sung, the Great Leader'. Kim was driven through the streets of Nouakchott in an open car, and the propaganda video shows thousands of people cheering and dancing. President Moktar Ould

²⁸⁴ [NAUK] FCO 21/4436.

²⁸⁵ [UDSM] Daily News, 23 July 1989. I wish to thank Yasmina Martin for sharing this file with me.

²⁸⁶ Temu and Tembe 2014, p. 366 [Vol. 8]; [MA] ANC Lusaka Box 4 Correspondence: ANC (SOMAFCO, Mazimbu) in Tanzania 1979-1981; 190-1981 [files 4.3 and 4.4].

²⁸⁷ North Korea partly used its membership of the Non-Aligned Movement to invite as many foreign delegations to Kim's birthday parties as possible. [WCDA] MOL, XIX-J-1-j Korea, 1982, 80.

²⁸⁸ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 46-48.

²⁸⁹ Suh 1988, p. 262-263.

²⁹⁰ [SRA] MfS – HA II. Nr. 29133. Algeria established diplomatic relations with North Korea in 1958, Mauritania in 1964.

²⁹¹ Interview with an anonymous North Korean diplomat, Seoul, 19 July 2021.

²⁹² Parts of this video can be watched on YouTube, both in English and Korean: see <https://youtu.be/MgX8Je-BRrE> or <https://youtu.be/Tda0e-M76a8>.

²⁹³ Kim 1987, p. 297.

²⁹⁴ Interview with an anonymous North Korean diplomat, Seoul, 19 July 2021.

Daddah bestowed the ‘Supreme National Declaration of the Grand State Order of Merit’ on Kim, in recognition of his ‘tremendous services to the building of an independent state’ in Mauritania.²⁹⁵

In the 1980s, the British Foreign Office recorded rumours of a follow-up visit to Africa.²⁹⁶ Indeed, the former North Korean diplomat confirmed that, in 1988, Kim planned to visit his long-time friend and ally Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. This plan went into the preparation phase but Kim’s health eventually prevented him from following through. Kim Jong Il, his son and successor, only visited two countries in his tenure as leader (China and Russia), because he did not feel secure.²⁹⁷ This meant, in general terms, that if African leaders wanted to meet the Kim family, they needed to book a flight to Pyongyang.

Case Studies

While the multilateral conferences in Pyongyang were special occasions that caught the public eye, the more common bilateral visits of African leaders were arguably better suited to fostering strong African–North Korean relations. The entire first generation of Southern African presidents visited Pyongyang and maintained friendly, personal ties to the Kim regime throughout their tenure in government.

Across the region, interactions with North Korea share a number of similar characteristics. Importantly, North Korea received African delegations with the highest honours. Liberation movements in particular were welcomed as statesmen in waiting, at a time when they were regarded with suspicion by large parts of the Western world.²⁹⁸ Moreover, bilateral ties were personal ties. Kim Il Sung was seen as a charismatic leader who fostered strong personal relations to African leaders. Finally, there appears to be a clear return on investment. Invitation diplomacy was the basis of African–North Korean interactions and, as this book shows, ultimately resulted in stronger diplomatic relations, military cooperation, and the sale of North Korean monuments.

A focus on African visits to Pyongyang allows us to draw open the curtains of Cold War era statecraft and to showcase the choreography of Afro-Asian diplomacy, the effects of which still linger on today. ‘Kim had the citizenry of the North line the streets of Pyongyang monthly to welcome some African chief or illustrious president of an obscure island they had never heard of’, wrote his biographer Dae-Sook Suh.²⁹⁹ To an important extent, these visits were performances, in which Kim and African heads of state were the protagonists.

Just as contemporary tourists today, the bilateral visits from African elites followed a fixed routine. Foreign delegations participated in a photo op with their Korean hosts at the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, laid a wreath at the Revolutionary Martyrs’ Cemetery, and visited other heritage sites. Occasionally, field visits to schools and factories were part of the programme. The traditional highlight of any journey was a lavish banquet, with speeches, gifts, and other ceremonial fuss.

The role of North Korean heritage in these visits deserves a special mention. Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung assert that these constructions were more than national monuments – they articulated global prestige.³⁰⁰ For Kim Il Sung’s birthday party in 1982 (where Kaunda sang *Tiyende Pamodzi*) ‘two of the most iconic North Korean monuments’ were unveiled, which coincidentally symbolise North Korea’s appeal for African revolutionaries.³⁰¹ The Juche

²⁹⁵ See <https://youtu.be/MgX8Je-BRrE> or <https://youtu.be/Tda0e-M76a8>.

²⁹⁶ [NAUK] FCO 21/2319.

²⁹⁷ See <https://youtu.be/MgX8Je-BRrE> or <https://youtu.be/Tda0e-M76a8>.

²⁹⁸ [WCDA] BStU, MfS, HA II/10.

²⁹⁹ Suh 1988, p. 262.

³⁰⁰ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 131.

³⁰¹ Yoon 2014.

Tower (claimed to be the tallest stone monument in the world) represented North Korea's diplomatic strength, an anti-imperialist worldview. The Arc of Triumph (claimed to be larger than the victory gate in Paris) represented North Korea's military strength, as evidenced in the successful resistance against Japanese colonialism. Together, they displayed 'the global fame of the country's founding revolutionary leader', Kim Il Sung.³⁰² African leaders visited and admired these monuments. As the final part of this book will show, they later hired North Korean art studios to replicate similar structures at home.

By way of analysing the choreography of Afro-Asian diplomacy, the sections below present five historical vignettes of first-generation African leaders to North Korea: Kenneth Kaunda (president of Zambia); Seretse Khama (president of Botswana); Samora Machel (president of Mozambique); Robert Mugabe (president of Zimbabwe); and Sam Nujoma (president of Namibia). This selection covers the diversity of Southern Africa, but could have included virtually every first-generation president in the region. Each case study briefly lifts the veil on how their visits elapsed and what this meant for the development of bilateral ties between their own country and the DPRK.

The introduction to this book began with Kenneth Kaunda's attendance at Kim Il Sung's birthday party in 1982. In addition to his eloquent rendition of *Tiyende Pamodzi*, his liberation song, Kaunda gifted Kim a bronze map of Zambia, supported by two elephant tusks. This is one of the many African gifts that ended up in the International Friendship Exhibition House.³⁰³ Kim also received a Zambian honorary medal.³⁰⁴ Kaunda was accompanied by his wife, Betty Kaunda, and she was so impressed with the hospitality of the North Koreans that she decided to stay on for an extra week, and was flown back to Lusaka by special plane.³⁰⁵

Kaunda visited Pyongyang numerous times throughout the Cold War, including twice in 1980 and in 1987.³⁰⁶ The British Foreign Office noted that 'Kaunda appears to be an admirer of the North Korean system'. While Zambia became disillusioned with the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic, they were 'genuinely impressed' with North Korea, as Kaunda's philosophy of Zambian humanism 'may after all be compatible on the North Korean model'. This ideological attraction resulted in cultural exchanges of radio and television material, the outsourcing of ten North Korean instructors for paramilitary training, and agricultural assistance.³⁰⁷

Botswana is in some ways an outlier in Southern Africa. Although it was a founding member of the Frontline States, it did not allow African liberation movements to use its territory as a launch base for military excursions. Botswana was a strong United States ally and has been described as 'mainland Africa's most notable outlier' in terms of democratic governance and economic growth.³⁰⁸ Nevertheless, Gaborone followed regional trends with regard to its ties to North Korea.

³⁰² Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 131.

³⁰³ See <https://youtu.be/Tda0e-M76a8>.

³⁰⁴ Scott 2018, p. 215.

³⁰⁵ [NAUK] FCO 106/850.

³⁰⁶ [NAUK] FCO 45/536; [NAUK] FCO 106/850; [NAUK] FCO 21/2527.

³⁰⁷ [NAUK] FCO 106/850.

³⁰⁸ Rotberg 2012, p. 66.

Seretse Khama, the first president of Botswana, undertook a four-day visit to North Korea in 1976, much to the dismay of the United States.³⁰⁹ He was accompanied by a large entourage, which included his wife, Lady Ruth Khama, and two future presidents: Festus Mogae (president between 1998–2008), and Khama's son, Ian Khama (president between 2008–18).³¹⁰

The Batswana delegation was picked up by a private Korean jet from Beijing. Upon arrival, the streets of Pyongyang were lined with the national flags of both countries and people holding the portraits of Kim and Khama. The visitors were impressed by a mass performance of school children in the national stadium of Pyongyang, as they sang a Setswana song (*Dintlenyane tsa Botswana*, or 'The Beauty of Botswana').³¹¹

Khama, in turn, addressed a mass rally, where he publicly praised North Korean Juche Thought, which he believed to be compatible with indigenous Batswana development philosophy. Photos of the visit show Khama dancing, carefree, alongside a Korean music group during a visit to a cooperative farm.³¹² When Khama returned home, he reflected in a private letter to Kim on the impressive sights he had witnessed. 'Not only have you rebuilt your cities out of the rubbles ... but you have also turned the whole country-side into an oasis'. The Korean people, Khama concluded, 'have gone a long way in proving what a determined nation can do to improve its lot'.³¹³

Despite the friendly atmosphere, Khama's visit was a bit of a culture shock for both parties. Some Batswana regarded the North Koreans as 'stiff and humourless'. The North Koreans, on the other hand, were surprised by the 'free and easy relations' among their guests, especially when a Korean interpreter visited the small basement room of the Batswana guest house in Pyongyang. When the interpreter entered the room, the Batswana were playing a game of billiards and he was 'horrified when Khama was allowed to lose the game to his juniors'.³¹⁴ This was unthinkable in North Korea.

Cultural differences notwithstanding, the invitation diplomacy had its intended effect. During the 1970s, Botswana sided with North Korea in the United Nations.³¹⁵ In the next decade, North Korea trained Batswana police officers in unarmed combat and gifted military weapons to the young nation.³¹⁶ In 2005, a North Korean art studio constructed the Three Dikgosi Monument in the capital city of Gaborone. The monument is a bronze sculpture of three historical figures that are considered the 'Founders of the Nation', including Khama's grandfather, Khama III. The monument was inaugurated by Festus Mogae, who accompanied Seretse Khama to Pyongyang all those years ago.³¹⁷

Samora Machel, the charismatic leader of FRELIMO, visited North Korea in 1971, four years before Mozambique became independent. According to his biographer, Iain Christie, this visit 'was very important in establishing lasting links of solidarity between FRELIMO and the North

³⁰⁹ Kirby 2020, p. 12-16.

³¹⁰ Including Daniel Kwelagobe (Minister for Public Broadcasting and Information) and Simon Hirschfield. Manatsha 2018, p. 143.

³¹¹ Manatsha 2018.

³¹² Manatsha 2018.

³¹³ [BNARS] OP.1375: Khama to Kim, 26 August 1976. I wish to thank Given Matopote for his assistance in retrieving this file.

³¹⁴ Parsons et al. 1995, p. 334.

³¹⁵ Kirby 2020, p. 15.

³¹⁶ Manatsha 2018.

³¹⁷ Parsons 2006, p. 679-680.

Korean leadership'.³¹⁸ In 1973, Machel thanked North Korea for 'performing their internationalist duty towards us in an exemplary manner'. He stressed that 'the political, moral, diplomatic and material support they give us is constantly increasing'.³¹⁹

Kim Il Sung supported Machel's liberation movement during the Mozambican struggle for independence and provided, among other things, medical aid.³²⁰ FRELIMO officials had been travelling to Pyongyang since 1964.³²¹ Mozambican guerrillas were sent to North Korea for military training as early as 1968, to learn 'new tactics and strategies' in warfare.³²² Machel visited Pyongyang again in his capacity as the first president of Mozambique, directly after his country obtained independence in 1975. During a banquet in Pyongyang, he endorsed Kim Il Sung's plan for the reunification of the Korean peninsula.³²³ Kim replied by stating that he was indebted to Machel and other African revolutionaries, and that he intends 'to repay this debt at some time in the future'.³²⁴

When Machel visited again in 1978, he brought along his wife Graça Machel.³²⁵ Thousands of spectators cheered on the motorcade that brought them to the heart of Pyongyang. They received the most extensive tour: the inspection of a military guard; visits to factories and farms; impressive displays of mass gymnastics and traditional dances.³²⁶ Samora, standing on a balcony, addressed a crowd of hundreds of thousands of people holding gigantic portraits of him and Kim (though some banners contained slogans in Spanish, rather than Portuguese). The two leaders were photographed holding hands, both smiling warmly.³²⁷

Machel would continue to visit North Korea fairly regularly during his tenure as president, including in 1982, 1984, and July 1986 – up until his untimely death in a plane crash on South African soil, in October 1986 (widely thought to be orchestrated by the apartheid regime).³²⁸ Cooperation between Mozambique and North Korea continued without him. Throughout the 1980s, high-ranking Mozambicans continued to travel to Pyongyang, including the president's special adviser and a number of army officers for 'special military training'.³²⁹ As Chapter 10 describes in more detail, North Korea trained elite Mozambican forces in Maputo and provided weapons and repair services for tanks until recently.³³⁰

The friendship between Kim and Machel remains an important symbol of this bilateral relationship. One of the central streets in Maputo, Mozambique's capital city, is named after Kim Il Sung. It is a short walk from a bronze statue of Machel, which was erected by a North Korean art studio in 2011.

Robert Mugabe visited North Korea for the first time in 1978 as leader of ZANU, two years before Zimbabwe became independent. The DPRK supported ZANU in exiled bases in Tanzania and Mozambique and provided weapons and military training in Pyongyang. When

³¹⁸ Christie 1989, p. 74.

³¹⁹ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: message from Machel, 25 September 1973.

³²⁰ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: message from Machel, 25 September 1973.

³²¹ Temu and Temba 2014, p. 357. [Vol. 8]

³²² Temu and Tembe 2014, p. 249. [Vol. 2]

³²³ Machel 1985, p. 57.

³²⁴ Kim 1987, p. 145.

³²⁵ [UWC] *Você da Revolução*, July 1978.

³²⁶ [WCDA] TELEGRAM 066.712

³²⁷ Tempo Magazine, available at: <http://www.mozambiquehistory.net/moz-dprk.php>.

³²⁸ Temu and Temba 2014, p. 358. [Vol. 8]

³²⁹ [NAUK] FCO 21/2527.

³³⁰ UN PoE S/2014/147; S/2018/171; S/2019/171.

Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, Mugabe became the prime minister and later president, until he was ousted in a coup d'état in 2017.³³¹

Shortly after the independence festivities, in October 1980, Mugabe again travelled to Pyongyang to attend the 35th anniversary of the Korean Workers' Party. During his speech at the customary banquet, Mugabe hailed Kim Il Sung's support during the difficult years of ZANU's operations against white minority rule: 'we defied our geographic apartness ... and successfully blended our revolutions into one'. The result was a 'binding alliance' between the two nations. And now, Mugabe said, came the time for the consolidation of Zimbabwe as an independent state. 'A few acts of violence are unavoidable', he proclaimed to the North Korean delegates in the room, 'as the negative but insignificant features of an otherwise successful process'.³³² In a subsequent private meeting with Kim, Mugabe requested his assistance in forging a new army brigade.³³³ As Chapter 9 explains in more detail, Kim Il Sung dispatched over a hundred military advisors to Harare to train and arm the Zimbabwean Fifth Brigade. In the early 1980s, Mugabe used this private army to wipe out his opposition in Matabeleland.³³⁴

During the first years of his rule, Mugabe frequently met with Kim and addressed multilateral gatherings in Pyongyang, such as the Non-Aligned Movement conference or the World Youth Festival. Relations between the two men were cordial, and Mugabe considered Kim 'a great close friend and indispensable ally'.³³⁵ As a token of friendship, Mugabe gifted Kim two rhinos for the zoo in Pyongyang, named Zimbo and Zimba.³³⁶ North Korean artists were also commissioned to construct a national cemetery and a statue in Harare.³³⁷ Today, Zimbabwe is one of the few countries in the world whose citizens do not require a visa to North Korea.³³⁸

During the Namibian liberation struggle, Sam Nujoma visited North Korea multiple times in his capacity as president of SWAPO. His first visit to Pyongyang was in 1965.³³⁹ Guerrillas of SWAPO's armed wing, the People's Liberation Army (PLAN), were trained by North Korea as early as 1967.³⁴⁰ In 1983, 1986, and 1989, Nujoma and other SWAPO officials travelled to Pyongyang to strengthen diplomatic ties with Kim Il Sung. Photographs show Nujoma attending military displays and visiting the Kumsusan Palace. When Namibia finally became independent in 1990, Nujoma naturally ascended to the highest office of his country and became the first president of Namibia.³⁴¹

In recognition of their mutual affection, Kim Il Sung awarded Nujoma the Korean Order of Freedom and Independence in 1986. During an ensuing banquet, Kim Il Sung thanked Nujoma for being 'an intimate friend of our people', and said that his visit 'will be important in consolidating the friendship and solidarity between our Party and SWAPO'. Nujoma, in turn,

³³¹ Choi and Jeong 2017, p. 345. Zimbabwe's first president, Canaan Banana, visited Pyongyang in 1982 and 1983. Banana fulfilled a largely ceremonial position, while the true executive power was consolidated within Mugabe's premiership. In 1987 Mugabe took over the formal presidency. See also [IISH] ZH 67293: 25 January 1984. I wish to thank Brooks Marmon for sharing this file with me.

³³² [BAB] Speech Mugabe, 9 October 1980.

³³³ [NAUK] FCO 36/2764.

³³⁴ Choi and Jeong 2017.

³³⁵ [BAB] Speech Mugabe, 9 October 1980.

³³⁶ Van der Hoog 2018, p. 76.

³³⁷ Van der Hoog 2019a.

³³⁸ Pyongyang Sunan International Airport, available at: https://www.pyongyang-airport.com/en/visa_on_arrival_korea.php.

³³⁹ Temu and Tembe 2014, p. 363 [Vol. 8].

³⁴⁰ Kornes 2016; Temu and Tembe 2014, p. 47 [Vol. 3]; Temu and Tembe 2014, p. 93 [Vol. 9].

³⁴¹ Van der Hoog 2019a, p. 47-49.

thanked his host for ‘the practical material assistance, political and diplomatic support’ of the Koreans during the liberation struggle. Kim assured Nujoma that ‘our Party and people will firmly stand by you in the future too’.³⁴²

Kim kept his word. Namibia became independent in 1990, SWAPO won the general elections, and Nujoma ascended to the presidency. In 1991, Nujoma travelled to Pyongyang and signed a ‘General Agreement’ with North Korea to enhance cooperation between the two nations. The SWAPO government found that the North Koreans were, for example, ‘keenly interested in erecting monuments in our country’.³⁴³ In the next couple of years, North Korean art studios designed and constructed a range of public buildings and monuments, including a bronze statue of Nujoma.³⁴⁴

The Namibian government asked North Korea to train its Presidential Guard. The British Foreign Office privately lamented the ‘embarrassment’ of this decision, but explained that it was no surprise that the ‘Neanderthal ex-PLAN element’ in the Namibian government sought the help of their North Korean comrades: ‘they place a high value on old friendships, and have little if any understanding of the world beyond SWAPO’.³⁴⁵ While the British analysis is rather rude, it hit the nail on the head: the North Korean investments in solidarity with SWAPO paid off once independence was secured. Nujoma remained president for the first 15 years of Namibian independence and SWAPO still holds power as the largest political party.³⁴⁶

Conclusion

North Korea’s invitation diplomacy was a catalyst for the development of more intimate relations between Kim’s regime and African liberation movements. It was a crucial first step in establishing trust and building personal relations that remain relevant today, since the majority of Southern Africa continues to be ruled by the political elites that were invited to Pyongyang. Kim Il Sung was one of the OGs (original guerrilla’s), who combined his charismatic personality with impeccable struggle credentials of partisan fighting and imprisonment.³⁴⁷

Kaunda’s singing and Khama’s dancing showed how at ease African visitors felt in the DPRK. The convivial atmosphere worked to their advantage. Travel to North Korea gave them a decisive edge over rival national liberation movements and they used this opportunity to ask for political support, development aid, and military cooperation, as the next chapters illustrate.

For North Korea, the African connection was important for boosting its image at home and abroad. African visits were extensively covered in North Korean newspapers and propaganda videos. Some visits, such as those by Mugabe in 1981 and France-Albert René (the president of the Seychelles) in 1983, were captured in full-length documentaries.³⁴⁸ Domestic audiences were thus reminded of Kim Il Sung’s glorious position on the world stage. The warm embraces between Kim and African leaders also contributed to North Korea’s ‘export track’ of propaganda, which cultivated North Korea’s position as a non-aligned power house.³⁴⁹

The previous case studies focused on Cold War-era visits of Africans to North Korea. In conclusion, let me offer three additional remarks. Firstly, Kim Il Sung’s reluctance to travel to Africa does not mean that North Koreans in general seldom travelled to Africa. On the contrary, over the past decades lower-status North Korean officials and diplomats have regularly visited African countries. In archival sources, these officials mostly remain anonymous and, unfortunately, little is known about their experiences. The African visits,

³⁴² [NSS] SWAPO Information Bulletin, June 1986.

³⁴³ [NAN] MFA PE/083.

³⁴⁴ Van der Hoog 2019a.

³⁴⁵ [NAUK] FCO 21/2527.

³⁴⁶ Wallace 2011.

³⁴⁷ Suh 1988, p. 30-31; Buzo 1991, p 1.

³⁴⁸ [DARK] 18677.

³⁴⁹ Myers 2015.

however, were highly effective in fostering personal ties and concluding business. Important decisions, generally speaking, were taken in Pyongyang.

Secondly, these diplomatic exchanges continue to this day. North Korea's disastrous decade in the 1990s, with an economic collapse following the end of the Cold War and the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, did not spell the end of African visits to North Korea. Kim Il Sung was an important factor in forging the early connections with African regimes, but the continuation of the relationship was not entirely dependent on him. Chapter 14 describes in further detail how the succession of Kim Il Sung had already started in the 1970s.

In 2008, for example, the SWAPO government and North Korea again exchanged delegations. The North Koreans visited Windhoek in March with a 23-person delegation. The itinerary included a stay at the luxurious Safari Hotel, a lion feeding exercise, visits to the State House and the National Heroes' Acre (a presidential palace and cemetery built by North Korea), and a courtesy call to Nujoma, the retired president who was at the basis of Namibian–North Korean friendship. In turn, a Namibian delegation travelled to Pyongyang in October of the same year and visited, among other places, the International Friendship Exhibition. As always, local North Korean newspapers covered this and other visits extensively.³⁵⁰

Essentially, Kim Il Sung's successors benefited from the goodwill he had amassed in Africa. Interestingly, this also worked the other way around. In 2013, the vice president of Zambia, Guy Scott, travelled to Pyongyang for a diplomatic visit. In his autobiography, Scott recalls the customary banquet, during which he was asked by a North Korean official: 'is your former president still alive and waving his handkerchief and dancing?' Kaunda was clearly remembered fondly in Pyongyang. 'I didn't know he was so famous in that neck of the woods', concluded Scott.³⁵¹

Thirdly, there is a bias in the archival sources towards elite histories and a question remains about how we can write African–North Korean histories from below. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, a wide array of African intellectuals, guerrilla fighters, journalists, and students travelled to Pyongyang.³⁵² Their experiences remain mostly undocumented, with the exception of the Guinean student Aliou Niane and the Equatorial Guinean Mónica Macías. Niane studied at the Wonsan Agricultural College between 1982–87, his scholarship a direct result of Sékou Touré's attendance at one of Kim Il Sung's birthday parties. In North Korea, Niane encountered students from Madagascar, Mali, Tanzania, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Zambia, and Togo.³⁵³

Macías was the daughter of Francisco Macías Nguema, the first president of Equatorial Guinea. Before he was executed in a coup, he sent his three children to North Korea for study. Monica lived for 15 years in Pyongyang under the protection of the Kim family, where she met other African students (including the sons of Mathieu Kérékou, the president of Benin). She published her memoirs first in Korean in 2013 and then in English in 2023.³⁵⁴ While the accounts of Niane and Macías fall outside the geographical focus of this study, they nonetheless offer fascinating insights. Unfortunately, to date, there are no accounts from the North Korean military advisors, cultural instructors, and artists who travelled to Africa.³⁵⁵

³⁵⁰ [BAB] AA1.

³⁵¹ Scott 2018, p. 216.

³⁵² Some examples can be found in [UNAM] PA4/5/421.

³⁵³ Free Korea 2009. See for a full interview <https://freekorea.us/2009/05/memories-of-an-african-student-forced-to-study-in-north-korea-during-the-1980s/>.

³⁵⁴ Macías 2013; Macías 2023.

³⁵⁵ Che 2015; Choi and Jeong 2017; Young 2019.