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

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PROLOGUE

A MONUMENTAL RELATIONSHIP

In recent years, several striking monuments have been erected across the African continent that assert a confident vision of African identity. In 2010, Senegal unveiled the African Renaissance Monument, at fifty metres the largest statue on the continent.⁸⁶⁴ At the launch ceremony, the Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade announced that ‘Africa has arrived in the 21st century standing tall and more ready than ever to take its destiny in its hands’.⁸⁶⁵ Decades earlier, Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop coined the term African Renaissance to describe the continent’s right to determine its own future (a concept later used by the South African president Thabo Mbeki and other leaders).⁸⁶⁶ In 2022, Benin inaugurated a thirty-metres-tall statue of an Amazon warrior – a legend recently featured in the Hollywood blockbuster *The Woman King*.⁸⁶⁷ Despite the indigenous African message, these monuments have a surprising background: they are constructed by Mansudae Overseas Projects, a North Korean art studio.⁸⁶⁸

‘Bronze’ symbolises the African heritage that is designed and built by North Korea. Construction work is the most important form of African–North Korean cooperation today. African governments use North Korean monuments to legitimise their enduring rule, while the North Korean regime is dependent on hard foreign currency from Africa to survive. Contrary to scholarship that situates the African–North Korean alliance within the Cold War time frame, this book consciously includes the trade relations of recent years in its analysis.⁸⁶⁹ The Cold War time frame of existing scholarship is a largely Eurocentric device that distorts a proper understanding of African–North Korean relations – the events of the 1990s did not stop these interactions; they merely altered them.

In Southern Africa, North Korean monuments justify the ongoing rule of liberation governments by celebrating their victories in the liberation struggles. Richard Werbner highlighted the ‘postwars of the dead’ in Southern Africa, ‘the intense peacetime struggles over the appropriation of the heroism, martyrdom or even last remains’ of those that participated in the struggle.⁸⁷⁰ The choice of African elites for a North Korean heritage model is significant: they have put their national history, acclaimed heroes, and origin myths in North Korean hands. As such, this final part of the book is framed around heritage. Incontrovertibly, heritage presents a narrow interpretation of history. The art historian Min-Kyung Yoon shows that North Korean monuments ‘mould and cast the past along a fixed revolutionary trajectory ... By solidifying the past, there is no more doubt about the revolution’.⁸⁷¹ Therefore, this final part of the book reviews how North Korean monuments reveal or conceal the past in Africa.

Miloš Todorović argues that heritage is an important tool in cultivating soft power. Nevertheless, ‘little attention has been paid to studying and understanding its role in diplomacy’.⁸⁷² The popularity of North Korea’s monumental diplomacy is an overlooked aspect of North Korean soft power in the twenty-first century. The proliferation of North Korean aesthetics in Africa raises questions about the space that North Korea occupies in the Global South. Today, North Korean soft power is primarily manifested in tangible forms of architecture

⁸⁶⁴ Van der Hoog 2018.

⁸⁶⁵ The Guardian, 4 April 2010.

⁸⁶⁶ Chan 2021, p. 160-161; Diop 2000; Bongmba 2004.

⁸⁶⁷ VOA, 12 January 2023; see also Un PoE S2020/840 for information about a statue of Akhosu Behanzin.

⁸⁶⁸ The subtitle of this prologue, ‘A Monumental Relationship’, is borrowed from Van der Hoog 2023.

⁸⁶⁹ Bechtol 2018; Young 2021a.

⁸⁷⁰ Werbner 1998a, p. 7.

⁸⁷¹ Yoon 2014.

⁸⁷² Todorović 2022.

– the museums, statues, presidential palaces, cemeteries, parks, and stadiums built by Mansudae Overseas Projects.⁸⁷³

Mansudae Overseas Projects is the international division of Mansudae Art Studio, a large art studio based in Pyongyang. Founded in 1959, Mansudae Art Studio has become a pillar of the state-sanctioned visual culture that supports the North Korean regime. It is responsible for the design and production of major heritage sites in Pyongyang, as well as the production of paintings, sculpture, woodcuts, ceramics, and various other art forms. Mansudae Art Studio is estimated to employ nearly 4000 people and is well-known for its high quality and craftsmanship.⁸⁷⁴ Mansudae Overseas Projects, its international division, operates in countries around the world – including Europe, Asia, and Africa. Due to the scale of constructions and the resulting large revenue streams, MOP's activities in Africa are increasingly receiving scholarly attention.⁸⁷⁵

The key to North Korea's success in the global heritage industry is its 'one size fits all' model. MOP's catalogue consists of designs that are inspired by – and sometimes direct copies of – monuments in North Korea. As this part will explore in further detail, North Korean visual aesthetics suit a variety of postcolonial governments in Africa.⁸⁷⁶ As such, MOP operates transnationally. The Namibian office of MOP performed a regional role in Southern Africa and was also involved in operations in Angola, Botswana, and Mozambique.⁸⁷⁷ MOP employees operate as transnational artists and work on different projects in different countries, where they apply a similar artistic model.⁸⁷⁸

African governments have plenty of options for the construction of heritage, both local and international, but they deliberately choose the services of North Korea. This is a fascinating and overlooked aspect of South–South cooperation that wilfully bypasses the West. As South Korea is ramping up its investments in Africa, the historical competition between both sides of the peninsula is being continued by other means.⁸⁷⁹ In recent years, North Korea constructed a national history museum in Namibia – at the same time, South Korea built a national history museum in the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁸⁸⁰

The previous two parts of this book focused on the twentieth century. Divided between blood and bullets, diplomacy and war, they reflected the two paths for African liberation movements towards independence as laid out by Julius Nyerere. In contrast, the current part ('Bronze') is situated in the twenty-first century and examines the outcome of the struggle through an analysis of heritage.⁸⁸¹ 'When I return from the land of exile', wrote Jofre Rocha in a poem that captures the ambiguous memories from the struggle era.⁸⁸² In the 1960s, Rocha (a pseudonym of Roberto Francisco de Almeida) was imprisoned in Lisbon for his anticolonial activities and, in later years, became a successful MPLA politician.⁸⁸³ His poem raises the question of how liberation movements look back at the recent past, upon their return from the land of exile.

⁸⁷³ PoE S/2017/150; Che 2022.

⁸⁷⁴ Kirkwood 2013.

⁸⁷⁵ Kirkwood 2013; Van der Hoog 2018; Komes 2019; Che 2022.

⁸⁷⁶ In recent years, several texts have emerged that illuminate the relationship between North Korean art and political indoctrination. See Portal 2005; Kim 2010; Myers 2010; Kwon and Chung 2012; Frank 2012; Meuser 2012; Ryang 2012; Yoon 2014.

⁸⁷⁷ UN PoE S/2017/150; S/2018/171; S/2019/171.

⁸⁷⁸ One of the artists who worked on the mausoleum of Agostinho Neto in Angola also worked at the Angkor Panorama Museum in Cambodia. *El Periódico*, 22 December 2015.

⁸⁷⁹ Kim 2014; Cho 2018; Chang 2020.

⁸⁸⁰ Cho 2018.

⁸⁸¹ This final part of the book builds on Van der Hoog 2019a.

⁸⁸² 'Poem of Return', by Jofre Rocha. See Moore and Beier 2007.

⁸⁸³ Costa 2013, p. 141.

The legacy of the liberation struggle pervades almost every aspect of political life in Southern Africa. The chapters in the final part of this book dissect how African liberation governments use North Korean heritage to legitimise their enduring rule. Chapter 11 sets the stage by explaining how the narratives that propelled liberation governments into power have become myths that are now remembered through North Korean art. Chapters 12–14 each review an overarching theme of African memorial culture (nations, violence, and heroism) with reference to North Korean visual aesthetics.⁸⁸⁴ Chapter 15 considers the advantage that North Korea derives from this business, namely, foreign currency. The conclusion examines how contemporary political issues in Southern Africa are viewed through the prism of the struggle, a ‘liberation lens’ that is strongly coloured by North Korean aesthetics.

⁸⁸⁴ This comparison derives much inspiration from Kwon and Chung 2012.