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

Hoog, T.A. van der

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MYTH
PATRIOTIC HISTORY FROM PYONGYANG

A short walk through downtown Windhoek, up the hill towards the Namibian Parliament, brings you right into the political heart of the country. It is a highly evocative intersection of the past and the present. On the right, visitors encounter a 130-year-old German fort. On the left, just beyond the *Alte Feste*, visitors can spot the German *Christuskirche*, a quaint gingerbread church. Wedged between these two pillars of colonisation stands a North Korean history museum that is entirely devoted to the indigenous uprisings against foreign occupation.

The tension between the Independence Memorial Museum and its colonial surroundings is evident. It is a landmark building that stands out for its unusual North Korean design and meaningful location – the site of a former concentration camp during the Namibian genocide of 1904–08, when German *Schutztruppe* decimated large parts of the local population.⁸⁸⁵ So, within a short walk through downtown Windhoek, visitors will experience a wide-ranging view of more than a century of the politics of memory. And it is a sight not to be forgotten.

Why would Namibia, a country that became independent in 1990 after a hundred years of foreign rule, celebrate its victory of independence with a North Korean museum? Museums are ‘politically charged’ institutions that present ‘state-sponsored presentations of history’.⁸⁸⁶ Renzo Baas describes them as ‘sites of power where a governing system symbolically reproduces itself’ and are thus a revealing window onto the myths that underpin African governments.⁸⁸⁷ In the case of Southern Africa, these myths put liberation governments centre stage in the glorious revolutions that led to independence.

The Independence Memorial Museum symbolises the influence of North Korea in African mythmaking, in which the liberation movement becomes central. North Korea’s role is significant because its help extends beyond providing the builders that lay bricks and shovel mortar – it can also design the narrative. North Korean artists not only created the exterior of the Independence Memorial Museum, but they also designed the exhibitions and were therefore responsible for the state-sanctioned narrative of Namibia’s liberation history.⁸⁸⁸ SWAPO’s decision to put their national heroes into the hands of Mansudae Overseas Projects speaks volumes about the trust between the ruling party and North Korea. It signifies that, in large parts of the world, North Korea is viewed differently than in the West. For SWAPO, Pyongyang’s pariah status is largely irrelevant – the Independence Memorial Museum opened its doors in 2014, years after the first sanctions were implemented by the international community.⁸⁸⁹

With the Independence Memorial Museum as a case study, this chapter illustrates how North Korea’s heritage expertise met the demand for African patriotic history. The first section describes how, during the struggle, African liberation movements forged narratives that advanced their cause. Over time, these narratives turned into myths – and are now eternalised through North Korean heritage. The second section highlights the mythical role ascribed to SWAPO in the Independence Memorial Museum. The third section discusses the role of patriotic history in Southern Africa.

Narratives

⁸⁸⁵ Pohamba 2014; Wallace 2011.

⁸⁸⁶ Ang 2017, p. 1-2; Williams and Mazarire 2019, p. 1809.

⁸⁸⁷ Baas 2022, p. 51.

⁸⁸⁸ Van der Hoog 2019b.

⁸⁸⁹ Indeed, one could argue that it is precisely the pariah status that makes North Korea so attractive to SWAPO.

Truth is the first casualty of war, and history – to paraphrase the Namibian historian Jeremy Silvester – is often its first conscript.⁸⁹⁰ This is particularly true for wars of liberation, as history is a potent tool for the rejection or legitimisation of political regimes. In Southern Africa, the liberation wars were as much wars over information as they were wars on the battlefield. All actors in the Southern African liberation struggles tried to take control of the narrative. This resulted in, for example, the use of forgeries that discredited opponents by spreading false information – in particular, the South African government was known for its ‘dirty tricks’.⁸⁹¹ More relevant for the focus of this book, however, are the labour-intensive efforts of liberation movements to produce propaganda in which they were portrayed as operating on the right side of history.

Even though many African liberation movements were forced to operate from exile, they nevertheless framed themselves as nationally rooted movements. Part One of this book discussed how the recognition of the United Nations and other actors was of paramount importance for the legitimacy of their organisations and, by extension, their wider cause. Similar to the North Korean campaign for statehood, it was essential to forge a narrative of a just revolution against oppression. For this reason, the departments of information within what were effectively militarily weak African liberation movements became institutions of central importance. These departments produced magazines, books, radio programmes, posters, poetry, and songs, often from exile, which drove the dissemination of nationalist narratives.

It is no coincidence that many exiled African nationalists who took up scholarships in Europe and the United States decided to study history. Several key leaders in Southern Africa used their historical training to generate the narratives of liberation movements that prevail today. At the dawn of independence, many of them ended up in influential political positions.⁸⁹² Zimbabwe is but one example. ‘There were so many historians in the cabinet and in charge of public institutions’, joked University of Zimbabwe lecturer Terrence Ranger in 1980, ‘that the new Zimbabwe was an experiment in rule by historiography’. Twenty years later, with the benefit of hindsight, he added that ‘it is not so funny now’.⁸⁹³

With SWAPO’s rise to power in 1990 came ‘the duty of recording and preserving our nation’s history’, said Namibian president Hifikepunye Pohamba. The Independence Memorial Museum fulfilled the ‘sacred task to tell, record and preserve our own history, as we perceive it, as we experience it, and as we see it with our own eyes’.⁸⁹⁴

Myths

The construction of national museums is a conventional method for governments to showcase their own interpretations of history. In Southern Africa, liberation governments produce historical myths about the struggle that legitimise their enduring rule. Naturally, their own organisations are central to these myths, and obscure other actors and factors. This pattern can be observed in the Independence Memorial Museum in Windhoek, the first post-apartheid national history museum in Namibia and therefore the most prominent display of public history in the country.

The Independence Memorial Museum is funded by the SWAPO government and built by Mansudae Overseas Projects. Construction work began in 2009 and the opening was originally planned for 2010, but ultimately delayed for four more years. The building has been

⁸⁹⁰ Silvester 2015.

⁸⁹¹ [UNAM] PA1/16/8/15; [NAN] A.0570, 4/1, A04.4C.003: Windhoek Advertiser, 12 July 1974; Potgieter 2007.

⁸⁹² Van der Hoog 2019a, p. 22-24. In Namibia, Peter Katjavivi is a fitting example.

⁸⁹³ Ranger 2004, p. 224.

⁸⁹⁴ Pohamba 2014.

described by academics as ‘a futuristic design that celebrates and asserts the power of the modern post-colonial state’, and by locals as ‘the coffee pot’, due to its peculiar shape.⁸⁹⁵

The collection of the museum is divided over three floors, each representing a chapter in Namibian history. The museum experience culminates in a large North Korean-style panorama that can be viewed from a special balcony. Access is free of charge and the collection mainly consists of historical images, statues, firearms, pieces of clothing, and other objects. Most strikingly, the museum is adorned by multiple life-sized painted murals that display coloured collages of starving and fighting Namibians. The museum makes ‘no attempt to contextualise images with text beyond the use of brief labels’, causing the historians Christian Williams and Tichaona Mazarire to conclude that ‘history here works primarily at a symbolic level, supported by a simple underlying narrative of colonialism, resistance, and liberation’.⁸⁹⁶

The first floor is titled ‘Colonial Repression’ and displays a supposedly harmonious and peaceful Namibian society prior to the arrival of European oppressors. The exhibition visualises the resistance by Namibian leaders against the German occupation, with special reference to the 1904–08 genocide. The terror of this event is captured in a ‘Chamber of Horrors’: a dark space, closed off by thick curtains, furnished with terrifying sculptures of starving people in chains. The room aims to mimic the concentration camps used by the German *Schutztruppe*.

The second floor is titled ‘Liberation’ and narrates the struggle against the South African occupation. The floor pays attention to life under apartheid rule and national opposition against the Nasionale Party. Much attention is given to the Kassinga Massacre of 1978 (also known as the Battle of Cassinga) when South African airborne forces bombed and overran a SWAPO base in Angola killing hundreds of exiled Namibians. The prominent role of SWAPO becomes clear in this part of the museum, with a focus on the military dimension of the struggle. In addition to murals and photographs, visitors can observe weapon displays and a fake tank.

The third floor is titled ‘Road to Independence’ and details how SWAPO liberated Namibia. The importance of SWAPO’s leader and first Namibian president Sam Nujoma is emphasised. Several national symbols are highlighted and explained via special displays, including: the national constitution; the flag; the coat of arms; and the president’s flag. The walls display nationalist slogans, such as ‘Long Live Namibian Independence!’ This floor leads to the Panoramic Hall, the centrepiece of the museum. A viewing platform affords visitors an unrestricted view of an extensive North Korean-style painting that illustrates the struggle for Namibian freedom through emotional depictions of starving, fighting, and, ultimately, cooperating Namibian citizens.

Soon after construction started, the museum became the subject of severe local criticism. From the outset, Namibians questioned the high costs (an estimated 60 million Namibian dollars; around 2010, this amounted to \$8.5 million dollars but the exchange rate is volatile) and the peculiar decision to hire a North Korean art studio.⁸⁹⁷ When the museum became accessible to the public, visitors complained about obvious historical mistakes and grammatical errors in the exhibition.⁸⁹⁸ Williams and Mazarire noted that ‘some portions of the exhibition even appear to fabricate historical events’.⁸⁹⁹

In former colonies in Africa, museums are an opportunity for independent governments to instil a new sense of nationalism among their populations.⁹⁰⁰ ‘Nation-building’, writes Enid Schildkrout, ‘involves a certain amount of amnesia and continual rewriting of history’.⁹⁰¹ The

⁸⁹⁵ Elago 2015, p. 289.

⁸⁹⁶ Williams and Mazarire 2019, p. 1810.

⁸⁹⁷ Allgemeine Zeitung, 8 December 2011.

⁸⁹⁸ Allgemeine Zeitung, 10 October 2013; Die Republikein, 31 March 2014.

⁸⁹⁹ Williams and Mazarire 2019, p. 1811.

⁹⁰⁰ Adedze 1995, p. 58.

⁹⁰¹ Schildkrout 1995, p. 67.

Independence Memorial Museum, for example, has been described by historians as presenting ‘a narrow history of Namibia’ with an ‘exceptionally decontextualised and melodramatic presentation’.⁹⁰²

Critics’ main concern was the overriding narrative focus of SWAPO as the main liberator of Namibia. Elke Zuern observes that memorial sites offer specific interpretations of the past, ‘highlighting and glorifying certain actors and actions while purposely forgetting others’.⁹⁰³ The focus on SWAPO naturally diminished the roles of other actors that fought and suffered during the decades-long liberation struggle. Examples of marginalised but important groups are women in general, traditional leaders, churches, and trade unions, while the histories of the Herero, Nama, and Damara peoples were allegedly diminished in favour of a narrative that privileged the Owambo people in the northern part of Namibia, which is the political base of SWAPO.⁹⁰⁴ Christopher Steiner argues that, in museums, ethnic groups that are merged together into ‘new’ states are usually overrepresented or under-represented, ‘but always misrepresented’.⁹⁰⁵

Furthermore, the exhibition displays an evident ‘cult of personality’ of Sam Nujoma and a ‘glorification of the military struggle’ that is not recognised by large parts of the population.⁹⁰⁶ The decision to narrate highly localised, indigenous African history in general North Korean terms causes friction. Heike Becker notes that it ‘may come across as astounding’ that Genocide Memorial emphasises a form of ‘martial, masculinist heroism’ while it is meant to commemorate the victims of a brutal genocidal campaign.⁹⁰⁷

Patriotic History

Upon independence, SWAPO inherited a society that, like all African nations, could be characterised by its ethnic and linguistic diversity. The new government suppressed a secessionist uprising in the first years of its tenure.⁹⁰⁸ SWAPO’s main concern did not differ from neighbouring states, as it desired a sense of national unity and cohesion.⁹⁰⁹ Today, half of the Namibian population is under the age of 25 and has no active recollection of the days of colonialism and foreign rule. This group increasingly relies on the consumption of public history in order to understand the recent past.⁹¹⁰ This history is often reframed as ‘national heritage’, and it takes on a deeply nationalist framing from public school textbooks to the physical monuments that dot the landscape.

The Independence Memorial Museum is a fitting example of the widespread propagation of patriotic history in Southern Africa. In the early 2000s, the historian Terrence Ranger – who was deported by the white Rhodesian government in 1963 for his African nationalist views – identified the emergence of patriotic history in Zimbabwe. While traditional nationalist historiography ‘celebrated aspiration and modernisation’, patriotic history is ‘narrower’. It explicitly lifts the revolutionary spirits by referring to a glorious past, which, in turn, legitimises the ruling party and discards everything else.⁹¹¹

Ranger’s analysis was confined to Zimbabwe but can be *mutatis mutandis* applied to other liberation governments in Southern Africa. Patriotic history simplifies the past and deliberately divides the nation between revolutionaries and sell-outs, between those on the right

⁹⁰² Williams and Mazarire 2019, p. 1809-1810.

⁹⁰³ Zuern 2012, p. 494.

⁹⁰⁴ Allgemeine Zeitung, 23 October 2009; Die Republikein, 18 October 2013; Die Republikein 23 April 2014.

⁹⁰⁵ Steiner 1995, p. 3-6.

⁹⁰⁶ The Namibian, 4 April 2014; The Namibian, 1 October 2014.

⁹⁰⁷ Becker 2020, p. 368.

⁹⁰⁸ Kangumu 2011.

⁹⁰⁹ Schildkrout 1995, p. 65.

⁹¹⁰ Silvester 2015.

⁹¹¹ Ranger 2004, p. 218.

or on the wrong side of history. Political opponents of the liberation governments are mocked for not taking part in the liberation struggle and thus failing to understand history.⁹¹² One's political power is partly determined by one's struggle credentials.⁹¹³

Patriotic history is 'explicitly antagonistic to academic historiography' and 'confronts Western "bogus universalism"'. Ranger described how, in Zimbabwe, hundreds of thousands of UNESCO textbooks on *Education for Human Rights and Democracy in Zimbabwe* remained stuck in warehouses while the government distributed patriotic history books to schools instead.⁹¹⁴ Most prominent, however, is the propagation of patriotic history through the discourse of African political and intellectual elites, as shown by Blessing-Miles Tendi.⁹¹⁵ A similar refusal to accept a Western-liberal framework of history characterises the North Korean education system, argues Jiyoung Song.⁹¹⁶

Ranger was criticised by the historian Ian Phimister, who believes that the historiographical roots of patriotic history 'merit closer scrutiny'. According to Phimister, much of the historiography of nationalism was determined by nationalism's 'praise singers', such as Ranger. The latter's 'fanciful extrapolations and factual misrepresentations' benefited the nationalist projects in the 1970s and 1980s. Ranger's ground-breaking studies of Zimbabwean history strengthened the idea of a united struggle against colonialism, which was 'perfectly attuned to the needs of new Jacobins'. In his account of Matabeleland, Ranger overlooked the atrocities of the Fifth Brigade and praised Robert Mugabe instead.⁹¹⁷

Nevertheless, Phimister's critique of nationalist historiography does not disqualify the analytical strength of patriotic history as a concept. During times of crisis, the ZANU government in Zimbabwe has repeatedly emphasised heritage while ignoring economic problems. 'Whenever people sense danger they are reminded of some historical achievement', writes Erikana Haurovi. 'People are forced to remember the harshness of the historical colonial past whenever some crisis emerges'.⁹¹⁸ This is a powerful mechanism that occurs across the Southern African region when liberation governments are threatened by international or external pressures. Ranger's work has inspired a plethora of studies on patriotic history in Southern Africa, especially in Namibia, Mozambique, and Angola.⁹¹⁹

For the transformation of history into heritage, and the transformation of patriotic narratives into nationalist monuments, African liberation governments continue to turn to North Korea. North Korea is perhaps the best example of a 'partisan state', argued the historian Wada Haruki. Its post-war development is characterised by the sublimation of Kim Il Sung's anticolonial guerrilla warfare 'into the single most important, most sacred, and all-encompassing saga of the nation's modern history'. Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung call North Korea a 'radical example of the use and abuse of postcolonial rhetoric', a discourse infused with 'the powerful drama of commemoration and longing'. This 'landscape of longing' is manifested through heritage, the 'material culture of commemoration'.⁹²⁰

Conclusion

Monuments signify the changing of the guards. African liberation governments want to announce to the world that they are now in charge – and want to remain in charge. The site of the Independence Memorial Museum in Namibia used to be the location of the *Reiterdenkmal*,

⁹¹² Ranger 2004.

⁹¹³ Kriger 2006.

⁹¹⁴ Ranger 2004.

⁹¹⁵ Tendi 2010.

⁹¹⁶ Song 2011, p. 176.

⁹¹⁷ Phimister 2012.

⁹¹⁸ Ranger 2004.

⁹¹⁹ Schubert 2015, p. 839-840.

⁹²⁰ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 15-18; 30.

a statue of a soldier on horseback that was erected in 1912 by the German authorities in commemoration of the Namibian genocide. According to the German governor, the statue symbolised ‘that we are and shall remain masters here’.⁹²¹

Roughly a century later, at the same spot, the Namibian president Pohamba announced that ‘we became masters of this place, now and forever. Not the colonialists. Never again will our Motherland be colonised’. In a highly symbolic decision, the *Reiterdenkmal* was removed to make room for a large statue of Sam Nujoma, which was placed in front of entrance to the Independence Memorial Museum.⁹²² According to Renzo Baas, the statue occupies ‘a position within a historic space [that] emphasises its connection to both the past and the future’.⁹²³

The Independence Memorial Museum in Namibia demonstrates that African liberation governments hire North Korea to design and construct their own historical myths. The Independence Memorial Museum in Windhoek has a similar function as the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum in Pyongyang, which narrates North Korea’s war experience through the heritage of anticolonial struggle.⁹²⁴ The adoption of North Korea’s heritage model occurs across Southern Africa. In these myths, the liberation governments become the sole actors in the revolutionary struggle, and consequently marginalise all other actors. The party reigns supreme. What this means for the conceptualisation of the nation, violence, and heroism, is explored in the next three chapters.

⁹²¹ Zeller 2008, p. 231

⁹²² Pohamba 2014.

⁹²³ Baas 2022, p. 57.

⁹²⁴ Kwong and Chung 2012, p. 112.