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

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12 NATIONS A FAMILY AFFAIR

The skyline of Luanda, the capital city of Angola, is dominated by an imposing obelisk. With a height of 120 metres, the *Memorial António Agostinho Neto* (MAAN) is the largest monument in Angola and one of the largest personal memorials in the world. Locals have nicknamed the building ‘the rocket’.⁹²⁵ The memorial is dedicated to Agostinho Neto – a poet, the leader of the MPLA, and the first president of Angola.⁹²⁶ Neto ruled the country from 1975 until his death in 1979, and is known as the father of the Angolan nation.⁹²⁷

The MAAN symbolises how African liberation governments imagine the nation as a family, using North Korean visual aesthetics. Unveiled in 2012, the futuristic shrine to Neto signifies the ‘edification of the MPLA regime’ and was designed by a North Korean company. The North Korean artists were inspired by Neto’s poem ‘The pathway to the stars’ and the architecture of the heritage site represents how the statesman is elevated above the sky, watching over his people. Vasco Martins and Miguel Cardina noted that the MAAN is designed as a ‘sacred ground for the birth of the Angolan nation’.⁹²⁸

The distinct form of nationalism that put most Southern African liberation movements into power is driven by the notion of family. Family became a powerful metaphor for the party organisation of liberation governments, and, by extension, for the nation as a whole. ‘Let us go forward as one Zambian family to find our destiny’, urged Kenneth Kaunda at the declaration of Zambian independence in 1964.⁹²⁹ If nations are families, leaders such as Neto and Kaunda are their fathers; the citizens are their children.⁹³⁰ There is a distinct patriarchal quality to the idea of political fatherhood – the gendered dimension of liberation heritage is discussed further in Chapter 14.

With the MAAN as a case study, this chapter explores how the party and the nation can be understood through the prism of family. The first section dissects how notions of ‘the party’ and ‘the nation’ blended with the idea of ‘family’ from the perspective of African liberation movements. The second section shows that a similar process was ongoing in North Korea and highlights the anti-democratic tendencies of this approach. The metaphor of family is useful for understanding the desire of African revolutionaries to foster unity at all costs. The third section explores how North Korean heritage is instrumental in postcolonial nation building in Africa, reproducing the same ideas of family by elevating political leaders as the patriarchs that lead nations to prosperity.

To Be Born a Nation

Years ago, my mentor gifted me a copy of *To be Born a Nation: The Liberation Struggle for Namibia*, a book that now rests in obscurity but is nevertheless central to the Namibian liberation struggle. Published by SWAPO in 1981, it narrates the history of Namibia as perceived by the liberation movement. The title of the book is derived from the Mozambican saying, ‘to die a tribe and be born a nation’, a statement that eloquently captures the main mission of liberation movements during the twentieth century. According to historian and SWAPO official Peter Katjavivi, the book’s title ‘encapsulates the drive for unity and the bonds through common endeavour and sacrifice’ that were essential during the struggle.

⁹²⁵ Martins and Cardina 2019.

⁹²⁶ Ball 2019, p. 830.

⁹²⁷ Pearce 2015, p. 111.

⁹²⁸ Martins and Cardina 2019, p. 47.

⁹²⁹ Macpherson 1974, p. 453.

⁹³⁰ Melber 2009, p. 456-458.

Coincidentally, *To be Born a Nation* also underlines the transnational dimension of African politics: a Namibian history, inspired by a Mozambican saying, published in exile in Angola.⁹³¹

Colonial and settler regimes in Africa administered a divide and rule approach, utilizing the presence of different ethnic groups to exercise control. Apartheid is an extreme example, but every colonial government in Africa utilised this approach to some extent. As such, anticolonial activists realised they needed to form *national* liberation movements and forge a sense of unity. 'Tribalism and regionalism were regarded as major nemeses of national liberation', hence the need for quarrelling tribes to die and unified nations to be born.⁹³² As such, parties became microcosms of the nation. Both were understood through the prism of the family.

'Participating in the struggle entailed a distinct notion of "family"', argues the historian and former ANC operative Raymond Suttner. During the struggle, 'family' was often a metaphor or code word for the party.⁹³³ When the journalist Lisa Distelheim visited an ANC camp in Zambia, she described it as 'an overgrown family, funded by relatives abroad'.⁹³⁴ Liberation movements were collectives that demanded personal sacrifices for the greater good. 'Single-mindedness' is one of the conditions of a successful revolution, stressed Suttner (and, coincidentally, one of the key terms of the North Korean revolution). This had far-reaching implications for the individuals that joined liberation movements, especially in exile. The collective was the most important, sacrifices and hardship were part of the deal. Personal love was supplanted by 'love for the people'. Suttner quotes a female ANC member who left her children behind in Tanzania to carry out work for the party, explaining to them that 'although I may be your mother, your real mother and father are the ANC. The ANC will look after you, feed you and clothe you'. Especially for young people in exile, who missed their family and longed for role models, the party fulfilled parental roles.⁹³⁵

The notion of family appeared in the discourse of all victorious liberation movements in Southern Africa. The ANC commemorated the death of its 'brave and gallant sons', who shed their 'precious blood ... in the cause of Africa's freedom'.⁹³⁶ SWAPO called its soldiers 'the sons and daughters of Namibia'.⁹³⁷ In a similar vein, FRELIMO celebrated how 'the sons of the Mozambican people began on their irreversible path towards independence'.⁹³⁸ The MPLA believed that 'the blood shed by this country's finest sons and daughters is the price we paid to win our independence'.⁹³⁹

At the end of the civil war, the MPLA government introduced a scheme to reunite family members who had been separated during the course of the fighting. The scheme was aptly called 'the reunion of the big Angolan family' (*o reencontro da grande família angolana*) and required people to come to Independence Square in Luanda, in the hope of encountering their sorely missed relatives. The proceedings were televised for the public under the name 'Courage, Nation' (*Nação Coragem*). The historian Justin Pearce describes how the MPLA used this programme to foster national unity, with Neto as an icon.⁹⁴⁰

The Family State

⁹³¹ SWAPO 1981.

⁹³² Becker 2015, p. 29-30.

⁹³³ Suttner 2008, p. 138-143.

⁹³⁴ [SEA] 2.5.4.3: Lisa Distelheim, 30 October 1986.

⁹³⁵ Suttner 2008, p. 138-143.

⁹³⁶ [NAI] PC South Africa NLM ANC: press statement, Josiah Jele.

⁹³⁷ [NAI] PC Namibia NLM SWAPO: SWAPO statement, 26 August 1986.

⁹³⁸ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: report by Armando Gueboza.

⁹³⁹ [NAI] PC Angola NLM MPLA: speech by Alexandre Rodrigues 'Kito', 4 February 1987.

⁹⁴⁰ Pearce 2015, 112.

The idea that North Korean society is ruled as a family has long been recognised in the field of North Korean Studies. Lee Moon-Woong calls the political system of North Korea ‘a family state’, as the relationship between the people and the leader can be defined through kinship relations. The leader ‘is akin to the role of a head of the household ... the destiny of the state resembles the fate of a family’.⁹⁴¹ Bruce Cumings stipulates that ‘family rearing principles can be extended to politics’.⁹⁴² Charles Armstrong argued that North Korea routinised family metaphors to such an extent that ‘they no longer seemed metaphorical and took on a concrete literalness’.⁹⁴³

Crucially, the anticolonial struggle provided ‘the origin myth for the patriarchal, familial-political order’ in North Korea.⁹⁴⁴ Just as Suttner described in case of the ANC, Kim Il Sung’s guerrilla unit, which led the struggle against Japanese colonisation, ‘resembled a traditional family unit’. The guerrilla army largely consisted of poor peasants who viewed Kim as a father.⁹⁴⁵ North Korean cultural propaganda views Kim’s guerrilla unit as the ideal prototype of North Korean society. ‘Family’ is thus used ‘as a synonym for the nation’. Chapter 14 discusses how the succession of power in North Korea is not a family affair in the traditional sense of genealogical continuity, but ‘a political event rooted in the modern history of political fatherhood’.⁹⁴⁶

The revolutionary family is guided by the two virtues of ‘loyalty to the sovereign or country’ (*ch’ung*) and ‘filial piety’ (*hyo*).⁹⁴⁷ Suk-Young Kim argues that North Korean propaganda art reminds people ‘of their national unity as one family’, as patriotism is understood as the filial piety of children (the people) towards their parents (the leaders).⁹⁴⁸ These displays of unity are designed against the backdrop of an ever-present struggle against external forces that aim to subdue the nation. As a result, writes the art historian Min-Kyung Yoon, the historical narrative of North Korean art is ‘one of triumph against all odds, the intense struggles of heroic individuals, the unwavering loyalty and love for the homeland that is deeply seeped with revolutionary fervour’.⁹⁴⁹ A similar message, but targeted for African audiences is exemplified through North Korean heritage in Southern Africa.

However, the virtues of ‘loyalty to the sovereign or country’ (*ch’ung*) and ‘filial piety’ (*hyo*) harbour a dangerous tendency to stifle dissent. The almost sacred responsibility to the collective, Suttner noted in the case of South Africa, ‘carries with it the possibility of abuse’.⁹⁵⁰ Maintaining unity is always difficult in families, and political organisations are no different. The leadership of African liberation movements were gripped by ‘spy fever’, an obsession with ‘the threat of spies and traitors’ in their midst.⁹⁵¹ Betraying the party, and thus becoming a traitor to the nation, was the same as betraying your family – a sin for which there was no redemption. ‘Loyalty to the liberation movement’ was paramount.⁹⁵²

Some instances of spy fever during the liberation struggles have been documented – the paranoia concerning Andreas Shipanga of SWAPO and the Quatro camps of the ANC (discussed in Chapter 8) are some examples.⁹⁵³ Crucially, liberation movements maintained this

⁹⁴¹ Lee Moon-Woong, quoted in Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 18.

⁹⁴² Cumings 1997, p. 11.

⁹⁴³ Armstrong 2004, p. 222.

⁹⁴⁴ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 26.

⁹⁴⁵ Kim 2010, p. 173.

⁹⁴⁶ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 26.

⁹⁴⁷ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 60-61.

⁹⁴⁸ Kim 2010, p. 6; 166; 176.

⁹⁴⁹ Yoon 2014.

⁹⁵⁰ Suttner 2008, p. 135.

⁹⁵¹ Douek 2020, p. 303-307.

⁹⁵² Phimister 2012, p. 1.

⁹⁵³ Leys and Saul 1994; Trehwela 2009.

mentality of repression when they came into power. ‘The unity of the party is the unity of the people’, said the Zambian president and UNIP leader Kenneth Kaunda in 1971. When UNIP appeared to lose its majority in the elections a few years prior, Kaunda warned that ‘the nation caught a cold which has been difficult to cure for a long time’. Therefore, UNIP officials ‘must act as doctors ... to cure this cold, which has threatened the very fabric of our nationhood’.⁹⁵⁴ Indeed, shortly after independence, a church rebellion threatened the authority of the ruling party – the opposition was violently crushed by UNIP and hundreds of people were massacred.⁹⁵⁵

When UNIP declared Zambia a one-party state in 1973, Kaunda argued that the ‘one-party democracy’, as he liked to call it, will ‘enable us to deal with dissenters as members of the same family’. In a speech entitled ‘The Nation Is You’, Kaunda cautioned those that disagreed with the party line. ‘It is one thing to criticise. But it is quite another to oppose’. The new era ‘must mean an end to political prostitutes’ who were ‘living on cheap tissues of lies and propaganda’. Kaunda, who was continually referred to as the ‘father’ of the Zambian nation, promised tough measures against his opponents. ‘I extend the warning to those who wish to operate underground that, if they should rear their heads above the ground, they will be crushed’.⁹⁵⁶

When a regime ‘mobilises militant postcolonial rhetoric to bolster its legitimacy’, observed Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung in the case of North Korea, ‘the rhetoric can turn into a locally hegemonic force, thereby stamping out divergent voices and interpretations’.⁹⁵⁷ Indeed, Kim Il Sung ‘was quick to draw a clear boundary between those who were part of the family and those who were not’.⁹⁵⁸ This is a key mechanism in the revolutionary state politics of former anticolonial movements. The ‘One Zambia, One Nation’ myth was cultivated by Zambian politicians, but also amplified by nationalist academics, also in the West, who ‘glossed over the considerable violence and repression that had accompanied the birth of the nation’.⁹⁵⁹

Nation Building

Nation building in postcolonial Africa is a challenging endeavour. In the first years of independent rule, victorious liberation governments navigated internal and external opposition to their authority. The governments of Angola and Mozambique fought ruthless civil wars; the Zimbabwean government executed a genocide; the governments of Namibia and Zambia repressed secessionist uprisings.⁹⁶⁰ However, with the ascension to power, liberation governments now had new tools at their disposal: state-funded heritage, designed and built by North Korea. The Neto memorial in Angola is illustrative of how North Korea provides inspiration for African nation building, as it uses North Korean aesthetics to display a narrow interpretation of the nation.

The main aim of the MAAN is to offer a narrative of the liberation struggle, the Angolan nation, and the role of Neto himself. The 18-hectare memorial site is dominated by the 120-metre-high ‘rocket’ and includes a museum, an exhibition gallery, a library, a documentation centre, shops, and the sarcophagus room containing Neto’s body. A tribune area holds 2000 seats that look out across an avenue for parades, of about 500 metres. Especially the enormous ‘rocket’, which ostentatiously resembles the barrel of an AK-47, is an awe-inspiring feature. In North Korean visual culture, the importance of grandness (*ungjangsŏng*) is a ‘vital aesthetic

⁹⁵⁴ [NAI] PC Zambia Politics Kaunda: speech, 8 May 1971.

⁹⁵⁵ Gordon 2008, p. 45-76.

⁹⁵⁶ [NAI] PC Zambia Politics Kaunda: speech, 4-6 March 1972.

⁹⁵⁷ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 15.

⁹⁵⁸ Kim 2010, p. 194.

⁹⁵⁹ Gewald et al. 2009, p. 9.

⁹⁶⁰ Zeller and Melber 2019.

quality'. Yoon argues that North Korean monuments must 'evoke a wave of emotions that engulfs and overpowers ... further dwarfing the people under the great collective'.⁹⁶¹ This is, indeed, the response solicited by the MAAN, and also by the other African monuments that are discussed in this book.

An intriguing part of the MAAN is the statue of a kneeling elephant. It represents 'the natural world paying homage' to the great leader, in the same way as in the film *The Lion King*, when the animal kingdom bows for Simba.⁹⁶² Ironically, the animal appears to be an Asian rather than an African elephant.

The contract for the MAAN was originally awarded to the Soviet Institute for Projects and construction started in 1982, on the sixtieth birthday of the already deceased Neto. The work stopped in 1988, presumably as a result of the heavy fighting during the civil war. It resumed in 2005 when Mansudae Art Projects entirely redesigned the project. Finished in 2012, the design signals the 'political alliances of post-independent Angola'.⁹⁶³

Similar to other Southern African states, Angola's liberation struggle was marked by the competition between multiple liberation movements, 'each pushing their own vision of the nation'.⁹⁶⁴ As part of its attempt to gain legitimacy, the MPLA claimed to represent the Angolan nation and designated Neto as its father. During the struggle, MPLA based its ideology on the idea that 'the MPLA is the people and the people is the MPLA'. In a eulogy printed by SWAPO, the MPLA described Neto as the 'uncontested leader of a heroic people', the 'father of all Angolan children, the son of all the mothers of Angola'.⁹⁶⁵

However, this particular vision of the Angolan nation as a family includes 'deafening silences'. The MPLA grappled with grave internal divisions throughout its history: splinter groups; defections; and leadership contestation. In 1977, for instance, the MPLA purged and massacred thousands of people in response to a (failed) coup attempt.⁹⁶⁶ The MAAN entirely avoids this complicated history, thus erasing a 'distinctive part of Neto's struggle' and excluding numerous well-known MPLA officials who do not fit in a harmonious narrative.⁹⁶⁷ These taboos are in line with the government's policy to 'silence inconvenient versions of history'.⁹⁶⁸

Moreover, the MAAN omits the many different cultures, languages, and other differences within the diverse nation(s) that make up modern Angola. Instead, the people are 'symbolically described as the ideological lever and motivator of the liberation struggle, the recipient of the gift of liberation and independence'. Vasco Martins and Miguel Cardina argued that the MAAN's marginalisation of certain parts of the population have hindered its 'ability to contribute to the new ways Angolans are imagining the nation'.⁹⁶⁹ Pearce argues that the MPLA deflects the threat of opposition 'by claiming an exclusive role as the defender of the nation'. Conflicting voices are silenced.⁹⁷⁰

Conclusion

The introduction to this book describes how Kenneth Kaunda shouted the words 'One Zambia, One Nation!' in Pyongyang. Similar slogans were adopted across Africa. SWAPO, for example,

⁹⁶¹ Yoon 2014.

⁹⁶² Martins and Cardina 2019.

⁹⁶³ Martins and Cardina 2019.

⁹⁶⁴ Martins and Cardina 2019.

⁹⁶⁵ UNAM Archives, PA3/3/1/1: SWAPO Information and Publicity Department, approx. 1979.

⁹⁶⁶ Birmingham 1978.

⁹⁶⁷ Martins and Cardina 2019; Ball 2019, p. 831.

⁹⁶⁸ Pearce 2015, p. 112.

⁹⁶⁹ Martins and Cardina 2019.

⁹⁷⁰ Pearce 2015, p. 103.

used the slogan ‘One Namibia, One Nation’.⁹⁷¹ The reasoning behind this is evident: in order to gain authority and access to resources, it was vital for anticolonial leaders in Africa to display a sense of unity against the oppressor. As such, liberation governments in Africa portray themselves as the guardians of the nation. This state-sanctioned unity doctrine is encapsulated in North Korean monuments. The National Heroes’ Acre in Zimbabwe (discussed in Chapter 13), for example, ‘arouses national consciousness, forges national unity and identity’, according to the ZANU government.⁹⁷²

For decades, liberation governments were imagined as families, before and after independence. Distinctions between the party, the nation, and the notion of family became blurred. Like so many newly installed governments in Southern Africa, ZANU was quick to ‘claim ownership of the birth of the nation’ when it came to power in 1980.⁹⁷³ North Korean monuments proved to be effective vehicles for disseminating the government’s interpretation of what the nation entails. This follows a similar pattern, as discussed in the previous chapter, where the party obtains a central role in historical mythmaking of the struggle.

North Korean heritage in Southern Africa, such as the MAAN, offers an opportunity to analyse the dominant narrative about the nation: a harmonious family, with a founding father who leads his sons and daughters towards glory. However, the definition of what the family constitutes is determined by the party. The desire to put party leaders at the centre of memorial landscapes leaves ‘large sections of society at the margins’.⁹⁷⁴ Just as North Korea created ‘a visible boundary between the legitimate members of the imagined family and the enemies of the family-nation’, so did African governments.⁹⁷⁵

A more careful inquiry divulges that narratives such as the MAAN offer only a partisan interpretation of the nation. These narratives conceal the brutal repression of dissidents, those family members who were banned from the clan, in the name of unity.

⁹⁷¹ [UNAM] PA1/14/1/1: Namibia Today.

⁹⁷² Ministry of Information, quoted in Werbner 1988, p. 77.

⁹⁷³ Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012

⁹⁷⁴ Martins and Cardina 2019, p. 63.

⁹⁷⁵ Kim 2010, p. 18.