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

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VIOLENCE

ROMANTICIZING THE REVOLUTION

Sequestered in the hills near Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city, lies a sacred burial ground. Not an ancient site where the traditional ancestors are remembered, but its modern equivalent: a cemetery for the freedom fighters of ZANU. The National Heroes' Acre of Zimbabwe is a copy of a revolutionary cemetery in Pyongyang and is created by a North Korean art studio. Built in the shape of two AK-47s lying back-to-back, each grave represents a bullet in the magazines of the two revolutionary guns.⁹⁷⁶

Weapons and armed struggle feature prominently in the African memorial landscapes that are designed by North Korea. Zimbabwe is not an exception, in fact, the National Heroes' Acre is 'a model' for memorial culture across Southern Africa.⁹⁷⁷ The National Heroes' Acre of Namibia features the Statue of the Unknown Soldier in Namibia, who carries a Kalashnikov rifle in one hand and swings a grenade with the other (though he is unknown, the soldier bears a remarkable likeness to Sam Nujoma).⁹⁷⁸ Similar examples can be found across the continent. In Egypt, the Battle of Ismailia Monument is shaped as a vertical AK-47 with a bayonet, pointing towards the sky.⁹⁷⁹

The National Heroes' Acre in Zimbabwe symbolises the importance of violence in the commemoration of the liberation struggles in Africa. Nations that were 'born from the barrel of the gun', to borrow Richard Werbner's phrase, place a high premium on romanticising the revolution.⁹⁸⁰ North Korean visual aesthetics aptly value the military dimensions of the liberation struggle over the diplomatic dimensions. This reflects the experiences of African freedom fighters, many of whom believed that negotiations were insufficient to liberate their peoples. Freedom could only be achieved on the battlefield. Hence, North Korean heritage in Africa excels in glorying violent resistance.

With the National Heroes' Acre in Zimbabwe as a case study, this chapter explores how North Korean heritage sites utilise the revolutionary past to suit incumbent liberation governments in Southern Africa. The first section discusses the continuity thesis, a process by which African nationalists connected their campaigns for self-governance to earlier historical uprisings. The second section considers how African governments use North Korean monuments to shrewdly appropriate early colonial resistance for their own benefit. The third section makes a comparison with North Korean political culture, which is infused with a militaristic ideology that resembles African statehood.

Continuity Thesis

Modern liberation movements in Africa have legitimised their cause by referring to historical uprisings that far preceded the founding of their own organisations. African nationalists successfully conceptualised early resistance against colonial interference as 'a simple pre-history of mass nationalism'.⁹⁸¹ In other words, they developed a direct line between localised uprisings against foreign intervention in previous centuries to the campaigns for self-governance in modern times. In the mythology of liberation movements, the connection between 'primary resistance' of early colonialism and the 'secondary resistance' of recent times

⁹⁷⁶ Van der Hoog 2019a, p. 33.

⁹⁷⁷ Martins and Cardina 2019, p. 48.

⁹⁷⁸ Van der Hoog 2019a, p. 28-29; Becker 2011, p. 523-527; Park 2021.

⁹⁷⁹ The Battle of Ismailia Monument is a gift from North Korea to Egypt. During the Yom Kippur War of 1973, North Korean pilots aided Egyptian armed forces. New York Times, 3 March 2018.

⁹⁸⁰ Werbner 1988, p. 77.

⁹⁸¹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2007, p. 173.

is key. This, in short, is the continuity thesis that forms the backbone of liberation heritage in Southern Africa.⁹⁸²

However, the continuity thesis is essentially a teleological view of the past. The ‘primary resistance movements’ indeed opposed foreign powers, but occasionally collaborated with them and were not motivated by nationalist ideas as we recognise them today.⁹⁸³ Often, definitions of the nation state as ‘Namibia’ or ‘Zimbabwe’ did not yet exist. Applying them to the distant past is anachronistic, but academic complications matter little to African liberation movements. Appropriating historical events proved to be an effective way to rally support for their cause and inspire their followers.

As the oldest liberation movement on the continent, the ANC in South Africa provided the model of revisionist history that other nationalist groups in Africa followed. The ANC traces the roots of its armed resistance back to 1652 and the arrival of the Dutch. Its own official history of resistance conceptualises precolonial warfare between European settlers and indigenous groups as wars of resistance that had a direct connection to the twentieth century campaign for self-governance.⁹⁸⁴ ‘For centuries the African people shed their blood in armed combat in defence of their birth right’, proclaimed the SACP in 1971.⁹⁸⁵

In 1980, ANC president Oliver Tambo used the Battle of Blood River of 1838 to justify the armed struggle against apartheid.⁹⁸⁶ At the banks of the Ncome River, thousands of Voortrekkers defeated the army of the Zulu king Dingane. Even though the Zulu warriors ‘heroically defended themselves with spears against the endless volley of cannon and guns’, many were massacred, hence the name Blood River.⁹⁸⁷ From a historical perspective, it is difficult to see this tragedy as a sign of nationalism, but the ANC mythologised the event as an act of national resistance, omitting details about the Zulu context: ‘African people courageously defended their motherland’, was the message.⁹⁸⁸ Many years later, Tambo connected the battle of 1838 to 1961, when militants from ANC’s armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, started the armed struggle. MK ‘once again started the process of washing out the blood from [the] Ncome River’, said Tambo. ‘Our people’s heritage, which was stolen and held by the gun, would have to be repossessed by the gun’. Although both events are 123 years apart, they ‘symbolise the drama and passion’ of the South African struggle, according to Tambo.⁹⁸⁹

Another source of inspiration was the Battle of Isandlwana, a conflict between the Zulu Kingdom and the British Empire that occurred in 1879, long before the idea of a national South African identity existed. A hundred years later, the ANC nevertheless celebrated the battle as a victory in the pursuit of independence. It was ‘one of the most glorious and spectacular achievements in the world struggle for racist foreign domination’, said Tambo, ‘they shed rivers of blood to remain a free people in the land which was theirs’.⁹⁹⁰ ANC propaganda obscures the existence of the Zulu kingdom, but emphasised ‘the thousands of spears’ that ‘wiped out’ the British Army. The ANC proclaimed 1979 as Year of the Spear and cultivated Isandlwana as a courageous battle against foreign invasion, a fight for ‘freedom, independence and peace’. For more than 200 years, the ANC reported, its people have fought against colonial aggression and national oppression ‘with spears in hand’.⁹⁹¹ It is no coincidence that Umkhonto we Sizwe,

⁹⁸² Van der Hoog 2019a, p. 67-68.

⁹⁸³ Ranger 1968.

⁹⁸⁴ [MA] ANC London Box 7: Unity in Action.

⁹⁸⁵ [MA] ANC London Box 4: SACP, Inkululeko – Freedom, No. 1, July 1971.

⁹⁸⁶ Just as the ANC mythologises Blood River, so did the Nasionale Party through the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria.

⁹⁸⁷ [MA] ANC London Box 15, speech Oliver Tambo, 16 December 1980.

⁹⁸⁸ [NAI] PC South Africa NLM ANC: press statement, Josiah Jele.

⁹⁸⁹ [MA] ANC London Box 15, speech Oliver Tambo, 16 December 1980.

⁹⁹⁰ [MA] ANC Lusaka Box 8, speech Oliver Tambo, January 1979.

⁹⁹¹ [MA] ANC Lusaka Box 8, NEC directive.

the armed wing of the ANC, means ‘Spear of the Nation’ in Xhosa. Although MK was founded in 1961, under entirely different circumstances, it is deliberately connected to earlier uprisings.⁹⁹²

‘We recall with pride the heroes of the centuries’, announced Tambo in 1980. ‘The ANC dips its banner in respectful memory of all those who have laid down their lives in the course of our struggle’.⁹⁹³ ANC literature depicted local kings such as Shaka Zulu and Moshoeshoe I, who operated in the nineteenth century, as ‘South African generals and freedom fighters’, even though South Africa did not yet exist and these leaders were not motivated by nationalist ideas. Nevertheless, the ANC believed that contemporary militants from the 1960s ‘travelled this silent road carved by those great commanders’, a struggle ‘in the name of Africa for the national independence of future generations’.⁹⁹⁴

Similar patterns can be observed with other victorious liberation movements in Southern Africa. In Namibia, SWAPO traced the roots of its resistance back to 1670.⁹⁹⁵ The party claimed to be ‘the sons and daughters, the soldiers, the worthy heirs’ of heroes such as Hendrik Witbooi, who opposed the Germans at the end of the nineteenth century.⁹⁹⁶ Many SWAPO songs that were sung in the 1970s were, in fact, derived from songs composed during the Herero and Nama resistance against German colonialism in the early 1900s, several decades before SWAPO was established.⁹⁹⁷ The Youth League of TANU in Tanzania called its magazine *Maji Maji*, after the armed rebellion against German colonial rule between 1905–07.⁹⁹⁸ The deliberate connection between a primary and secondary resistance is perhaps best pronounced in Zimbabwe, where the ideology of *Chimurenga* serves the political goals of ZANU.⁹⁹⁹

Revolutionary Heritage

The National Heroes’ Acre of Zimbabwe was inaugurated in 1982, two years after Zimbabwean independence. For ZANU, it was one of the first and largest heritage projects it decided to undertake. The cemetery was designed by North Korea to honour the heroes of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle and is a surprisingly large site. The main attraction of the Heroes’ Acre are the burial grounds: approximately 170 graves are arranged as bullets in two AK-47 rifles. Other features include a museum, the Tomb and Statue for the Unknown Soldier (featuring an AK-47), the forty-metre Freedom Tower (which recalls ‘the military might of victory in the liberation war’), the Eternal Flame, national flags, and the national coat of arms (again featuring the AK-47).¹⁰⁰⁰ The site is regularly used for national commemorations and therefore includes a grandstand with 5000 seats for visitors.¹⁰⁰¹

The historical narrative presented by the National Heroes’ Acre is centred around the ideology of *Chimurenga*. This is the ‘rallying cry’ of ZANU and underpins the belief that party’s legitimacy is not derived ‘from elections but from active participation in the epic anti-colonial struggle’. The First *Chimurenga* dates back to the primary resistance from the 1890s, while the Second *Chimurenga* is the secondary resistance led by ZANU during the 1970s.¹⁰⁰² In this way, the history of Zimbabwe ‘is reduced to a succession of *Chimurengas*’, in which

⁹⁹² Ellis 2011.

⁹⁹³ [MA] ANC London Box 15, speech Oliver Tambo, 16 December 1980.

⁹⁹⁴ [NAI] PC South Africa NLM ANC: ANC statement, 26 June 1969.

⁹⁹⁵ SWAPO 1981, p. 151-176.

⁹⁹⁶ [NAI] PC Namibia NLM SWAPO: SWAPO Educational Political Calendar, 1988.

⁹⁹⁷ SWAPO 1981, p. 231.

⁹⁹⁸ [NAI] Tanzania NLM TANU.

⁹⁹⁹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Van der Hoog 2019a, p. 32-35; Werbner 1998b, p. 84-85.

¹⁰⁰¹ Van der Hoog 2019a, p. 32.

¹⁰⁰² Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012.

ZANU becomes ‘the alpha and omega of Zimbabwe’s past, present and future’.¹⁰⁰³ It is no coincidence that ZAPU veterans subsequently boycotted Heroes’ Acre commemorations and burials.¹⁰⁰⁴

Of particular interest in the National Heroes’ Acre are two murals on the eastern and western flanks of the burial site, which depict the continuity between the primary and secondary resistance in Zimbabwe. The visual story starts with indigenous uprisings against British troops and seamlessly connects these events with the guerrilla fighting of the twentieth century against the Rhodesian regime. The final part of the murals depicts the independence celebrations of 1980, where a larger-than-life Mugabe leads his people to a liberated future.¹⁰⁰⁵

The continuity thesis can extend into the present, as a third resistance becomes necessary to ensure the relevance of liberation governments in this day and age. Because ZANU considered universities ‘anti-Government mentality factories’, the Zimbabwean government established youth militia camps in 2001. The primary aim of these camps was to teach patriotic history and to recruit the youth as ‘warriors into the third *Chimurenga*’.¹⁰⁰⁶ Also in Namibia, South Africa, and other countries the ruling classes propagate the necessity of a continuing revolution.

Even though the National Heroes’ Acre in Zimbabwe is presented as quintessential *Zimbabwean* history, it is, in fact, one of the best examples of the ‘one size fits all’ model of North Korean heritage. In 2002, twenty years after the inauguration of the Zimbabwean Heroes’ Acre, the National Heroes’ Acre of Namibia was consecrated in Windhoek. Both cemeteries were constructed by Mansudae Overseas Projects and bear a striking resemblance to each other. Both are copies of the Revolutionary Martyrs’ Cemetery of North Korea.¹⁰⁰⁷

Located on the outskirts of Pyongyang, the Revolutionary Martyrs’ Cemetery commemorates the guerrillas that lost their lives for North Korea.¹⁰⁰⁸ It has a similar physical layout as its African counterparts, including a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (representing ‘the soul of the nation’) and graves that seem to be primarily reserved for the comrades of Kim Il Sung and the other ‘founding heroes’ of the North Korean state. According to Kwon and Chung, the cemetery is ‘an important site in the political order’ of North Korea, as it ‘embodies the principles of the partisan state’. Like its African counterparts, its narrative is grounded in the anticolonial struggle.¹⁰⁰⁹

The decision by Zimbabwean authorities to imitate North Korean heritage is an outcome of the fraternal diplomatic and military ties that were forged during the liberation struggles. Moreover, the cemeteries in Zimbabwe and Namibia are tangible evidence of the argument that North Korean visual aesthetics inspire African elites.

Military First

Just as the African continuity thesis, North Korean art is organised around a teleological idea of ‘a mythic historic destiny’ that creates a direct link between anticolonial struggle and modern politics.¹⁰¹⁰ Kim Il Sung claimed that his grandfather led the resistance against American invaders in 1866, a courageous feat that was connected to the guerrilla fight against Japanese colonisation in the 1930s and the ‘Victorious Fatherland Liberation War’ against American imperialism in the 1950s.¹⁰¹¹ These heroic exploits provide the script for new chapters of state-

¹⁰⁰³ Phimister 2012, p. 2; Tendi 2010, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Werbner 1998b, p. 91.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Van der Hoog 2019a, p. 33.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Ranger 2004, p. 219.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Van der Hoog 2019a, p. 28-37; see also [NAN] AACRLS.023.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Kim 2010, p. 183.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 103-121.

¹⁰¹⁰ Yoon 2014.

¹⁰¹¹ Song 2011, p. 159; Wada 2013.

sanctioned revolutionary heritage, a narrative encapsulated in physical monuments. Kim Il Sung's grandfather is buried in the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery in Pyongyang.

During Kim Jong Il's reign, North Korea introduced the 'military first' (*sŏn'gun*) policy that privileges the role of the army, and military power more generally, in times of crisis.¹⁰¹² This policy is guided by an ideology called 'the philosophy of the barrel of a gun' (*ch'ongdae*), which seeks to create 'a moral and practical unity between the army and the society'. *Ch'ongdae* obviously refers to the glorious heritage of the anticolonial armed struggle, led by Kim Il Sung and sustained by the 'hereditary politics' of Kim Jong Il.¹⁰¹³ The practical outcome of unity between the army and the people is reminiscent of the party-military complex in Southern African states, as discussed in the second part of this book.

Kwon and Chung argue that the military-first politics dominates political culture in North Korea. It is a deliberate instrument for the Kims' political succession process: the military-first ideology (*sŏn'gun*) distinguished Kim Jong Il's tenure from Kim Il Sung (described in Chapter 14), while the 'barrel of the gun' philosophy (*ch'ongdae*) emphasises continuity between the old and new regimes. North Korean literature stresses the 'moral imperative' to continue the revolution and maintain revolutionary heritage, 'privileging this imperative over questions of economic welfare'.¹⁰¹⁴ This approach is emulated by Southern African liberation governments, who urge their citizenry to believe in an ongoing revolution. There are compelling similarities between *sŏn'gun* in North Korea and *Chimurenga* in Zimbabwe.

In North Korea, the 'military first' idea is also an extension of the 'family state', as all key members of the Kim dynasty perform a role: Kim Il Sung as the leader of the armed struggle, his father Kim Hyung Jik as his teacher, his wife Kim Jong Suk as the Mother of *Sŏn'gun*, and his son Kim Jong Il (and now *his* son, Kim Jong Un), as his successors. In North Korean lingo, this is called 'the barrel-of-a-gun family genealogy' (*ch'ongdae kamun*).¹⁰¹⁵

North Korea's political culture celebrates the 'moral purity of revolutionary violence', an idea that is preserved in its militant architecture and is subsequently echoed in African heritage.¹⁰¹⁶ War is not necessarily a tragedy; victory is all that matters. While museums that commemorate the genocide in Europe, such as Dachau, present a subdued account of warfare, the Independence Memorial Museum commemorates the terrors of the Namibian genocide in an almost exuberant manner.¹⁰¹⁷

North Korea's 'determination to defend its revolutionary heritage', write Kwon and Chung, is 'nothing short of a political revolution'. Usually, charismatic authority is an unsustainable form of political power, for it is inherently temporary due to its impermanent nature. However, North Korea has succeeded in sustaining its hereditary ruling system through its memorial culture. No other socialist states of the Cold War were capable of achieving the same.¹⁰¹⁸

Conclusion

In the relatively young political states in Africa, the nation is defined in terms of decolonisation. Especially in Southern Africa, 'political origin myths go back to a birth at the barrel of an anti-colonial gun'. Richard Werbner describes how African national elites envision a

¹⁰¹² Denney et al. 2016.

¹⁰¹³ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 88-90.

¹⁰¹⁴ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 75-87.

¹⁰¹⁵ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 85.

¹⁰¹⁶ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 91.

¹⁰¹⁷ Becker 2020, p. 368.

¹⁰¹⁸ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 189.

‘monumentally centred, heroic nationhood’ that is not only won by freedom fighters, but should also be defended by them.¹⁰¹⁹

North Korean monuments remind African populations that they are part of a centuries-old tradition of resistance, one that extends into the present. ‘We are saying, as a nation, that we emerged victorious’, said Hifikepunye Pohamba at the opening of the North Korean museum in Namibia. ‘We are fortified by the knowledge that the current and future generations will continue to carry the flame of the revolution forward’.¹⁰²⁰ Carrying the flame forward is indeed the main message of African liberation movements. They are the flag bearers of resistance. Not for idealistic purposes, but simply because a continuing revolution ensures their continuing relevance. *A luta continua*.

African monuments reflect the military mindsets that were developed by political elites in exile (see Chapter 8). Military and political veterans have been dominant voices in debates about the past.¹⁰²¹ Importantly, this approach is congruent with historical commemorations within North Korea, where the violent uprisings against Japanese colonisation and American imperialism are the cornerstones of the prevailing regime. Whether in Africa or in Korea, referring to a glorious revolution is an effective strategy in the competition for power.

¹⁰¹⁹ Werbner 1998b, p. 75.

¹⁰²⁰ Pohamba 2014.

¹⁰²¹ For a Zimbabwean case study, see Kriger 2006, p. 1154.