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

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HEROISM
THE FOUNDING FATHERS

In the centre of Maputo, the capital city of Mozambique, stands an imposing statue of one of the most famous revolutionaries in Africa: Samora Machel. Over nine metres tall, the monument shows Machel in his military attire, raising a finger in the air.¹⁰²² The statue was unveiled in 2011, on the exact spot where a statue of a colonial governor-general used to stand. This location carries symbolic weight, just as the Nujoma statue in Namibia – former colonial spaces now occupied by the new heroes of the nation. Coincidentally, the statue of Machel is also a stone's throw away from the *Avenida Kim Il Sung*. Designed by Mansudae Overseas Projects, the monument signifies the heroic leadership of Machel in the march towards freedom.

Machel's monument symbolises how African leaders are immortalised as the founding fathers of nations, following a North Korean model. Through North Korean visual aesthetics, the founding fathers display a distinct sense of heroism that must inspire the nation and legitimises the enduring rule of liberation governments in Southern Africa. They become larger than life – their legacies are now a key part of the mythology of the African liberation struggles that serve ruling elites.

North Korea excels in producing personal statues of African leaders. The Tanzanian political giant Julius Nyerere, the Congolese leaders Patrice Lumumba, Joseph Kasavubu, and Laurent-Désiré Kabila, and the Zimbabwean leader Joshua Nkomo were all cast in bronze by North Korean artists, in a similar way as Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il are presented in Pyongyang.¹⁰²³ It has been rumoured that, in 2009, Robert Mugabe hired Mansudae Art Studios to design two giant personal statues for a total sum of \$5 million, although the monuments have not been revealed.¹⁰²⁴

Taking the Samora Machel statue as a case study, this chapter complicates the heroic role of individual leaders in liberation mythology in Southern Africa. The first section analyses the personal statues as a form of what Richard Werbner called 'elite memorialism'.¹⁰²⁵ Rather than celebrating the people, North Korean heritage prioritises the individual. As such, we can observe the development of a certain cult of personality around the legacies of liberation leaders. The second section explores the 'heroic masculinity' that is a common feature of North Korean statues.¹⁰²⁶ These monuments display a strong sense of masculinity and this is not a coincidence. In Southern Africa, the nation is gendered and notions of heroism have a definitively male interpretation. The third section analyses how the memorialisation of past leaders can be a tool for incumbent leaders to strengthen their own position.

Cult of Personality

The North Korean monument in honour of Machel, the former FRELIMO leader and first president of Mozambique, was erected in 2011. Marked by the government as the 'Year of Samora Machel', it was precisely 25 years since he died in a mysterious plane crash (widely thought to have been caused by South Africa). The year formally started on Heroes Day and included the construction of Machel statues in every provincial capital and the establishment of the Samora Machel Centre for Knowledge and Development. The Mozambican president Armando Guebuza announced that Machel 'is a hero in our history because of all the qualities

¹⁰²² Jopela 2017.

¹⁰²³ UN PoE S/2017/150.

¹⁰²⁴ AsiaNews, 25 March 2014; Bloomberg, 27 March 2014.

¹⁰²⁵ Werbner 1998a, p. 8.

¹⁰²⁶ Suttner 2008, p. 121.

and virtues that we would like to see emulated by all Mozambicans, who are now engaged in the fight against poverty'.¹⁰²⁷

The Mozambican approach resonates with analyses of North Korean art. Kwon and Chung argue that North Korean art excels in communicating the 'charismatic authority' of its leaders.¹⁰²⁸ Through North Korean monuments, the Southern African presidents of the past are glorified as fathers of the nation whose heroic leadership guides the people. Werbner's concept of 'elite memorialism' was coined for North Korean heritage in Zimbabwe, but can also be applied to Mozambique, Namibia, Angola, Zambia, and other states in Southern Africa.¹⁰²⁹ Elite memorialism is essentially liberation hagiography.

The memorialisation of Sam Nujoma is another compelling illustration of an emerging personality cult in Africa. Nujoma's North Korean-made statue portrays him as the 'political father figure' of Namibian liberation, and, indeed, the Namibian parliament honoured Nujoma with the title 'Founding Father of the Republic of Namibia' following his retirement as president. The loyalty demanded by liberation movements 'leaves no space for retirement', notes Henning Melber. 'One can leave office, but still remain a leader with responsibilities'. SWAPO prefers to portray Nujoma in a military fashion rather than emphasising his (much more evident) diplomatic qualities – again a reflection of the violent overtones of liberation heritage, as discussed in Chapter 13.¹⁰³⁰

Agostinho Neto was immortalised as the father of the Angolan nation.¹⁰³¹ According to the MPLA, the Neto memorial in Luanda was constructed to perpetuate the image of him as the 'Immortal Guide of the Angolan Revolution' and the 'Founder of the Nation'. Intended as 'the central piece in the daily homage Angolan society was to pay Neto', the North Korean mausoleum (discussed in Chapter 12) portrays him as 'a solitary figure'. The adjacent museum covers four dimensions of his life – Neto as a poet, a healer, a liberator, and a statesman. A key element is the sarcophagus room that holds his remains. Foreign dignitaries are required to pay homage to Neto by visiting the monument and depositing flowers at his tomb.¹⁰³² The same is applicable to North Korea, where Kim Il Sung's body is embalmed and preserved in a mausoleum. The result is called 'legacy politics' (*yuhun chǒngch'i*), a central concept in North Korean politics.¹⁰³³ The National Heroes' Acre in Namibia also accommodates tombs for the embalmed bodies of presidents.¹⁰³⁴

'UNIP has performed miracles', said Mainza Chona, the vice president of Zambia, in 1972. He declared Kenneth Kaunda 'Zambia's number one hero' and expressed the hope that 'the president will rule this country for many, many years to come – even forty more years, God willing'. Chona wanted Kaunda to become 'life-president of the republic ... A country without a strong political party is in chaos. We, his apostles should always solidly support him'. Indeed, Kaunda went on to serve almost thirty years before he relinquished power. 'The only legitimate criticism against UNIP and Kaunda', Chona went on, 'is the inability to teach the Zambian people to look back and see the terrible life before independence'.¹⁰³⁵ This is precisely where North Korean heritage comes in.

The hero is a lone figure. Werbner called the National Heroes' Acre in Zimbabwe 'a cemetery for the elite ... glorying above all the individuality of great heroes of the nation'. The solitary statues of African leaders reiterate the special role assigned to elites in the

¹⁰²⁷ Jopela 2017, p. 344-349.

¹⁰²⁸ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 143.

¹⁰²⁹ Werbner 1998a, p. 8.

¹⁰³⁰ Melber 2009, p. 456-458.

¹⁰³¹ UNAM Archives, PA3/3/1/1: SWAPO Information and Publicity Department, approx. 1979.

¹⁰³² Martins and Cardina 2019; Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 72.

¹⁰³³ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 72-73.

¹⁰³⁴ [NAN] AACRLS.023: The Patriot, 2 August 2018.

¹⁰³⁵ [NAI] PC Zambia Politics Kaunda: Speech, 1-3 December 1972.

memorialisation of the struggle. Through the portrayal of individual heroes instead of communal nations, North Korean heritage unintentionally visualises the growing division between the *chefs*, the leaders, and the *povo*, the people.¹⁰³⁶ Oftentimes, this division is reinforced through locations that are difficult to access for ordinary people. The Neto memorial is located in the Political Administrative Centre of Luanda, far away from the poor Angolans who constitute the majority of Angola.¹⁰³⁷ The same is applicable to Pyongyang, where the majority of North Korean nationalist heritage is located: only the chosen North Korean elites are allowed to reside in this city, while the rest of the population is stowed away in other places and the countryside.¹⁰³⁸

Heroic Masculinity

Through North Korean heritage, the founding fathers of postcolonial Africa are elevated to the status of heroes, which is a central notion in political remembrance cultures in Southern Africa. This is perhaps best observed through the celebration of national Heroes Days, which are held annually in Botswana (27 February), Zambia (3 July), Zimbabwe (11 August), Namibia (26 August), Mozambique (3 September), and Angola (17 September). These public holidays celebrate the recent victories in anticolonial struggles. The Heroes Day in Namibia, for example, marks the day of the beginning of the war for independence, on 26 August. In Angola, the Heroes Day is the birthday of Neto, 17 September.

In many of these countries, the choreography of nationalist commemoration is intrinsically linked to North Korean heritage. In Botswana, wreaths are laid at the Three Dikgosi Monument, designed by Mansudae Overseas Projects.¹⁰³⁹ In Namibia, similar events are organised around the National Heroes' Acre. In Zimbabwe, where the National Heroes' Acre acts as a 'shrine for the unity between personal and national identity', Mugabe has used Heroes Day to publicise his patriotic poetry about the 'gallant heroes' of Zimbabwe.¹⁰⁴⁰ As Norma Kriger has shown, heroism is part of the fabric of Zimbabwean political discourse. The state adopted a ranking system for local, provincial, and national heroes, and offers burials and payments for their dependants accordingly.¹⁰⁴¹

Across Southern Africa, heroism is 'starkly gendered' as the hero is 'an essentially male figure'. There is a 'general tendency of liberation discourse to be masculinist' notes Raymond Suttner, the historian who used to be active in the ANC underground. For liberation movements, the recovery of freedom was similar to the restoration of manhood. Suttner traces the roots of this discourse to colonialism, which deliberately infantilised Africans by depicting them as 'a race of children'. African men, in particular, were called boys. As such, 'the assertion of manhood is in this context a claim for freedom'.¹⁰⁴²

The concept of the nation, writes Suttner, is therefore 'implicitly defined in terms of manhood'. The ANC originally only accepted male members – joining the struggle was associated with attaining manhood. ANC members emulated the idea of the male warrior that can be traced back to the primary uprisings against colonialism. Nelson Mandela, for example, was explicitly inspired by 'continuing a tradition of martial heroism and resistance' that was essentially male.¹⁰⁴³ In North Korea, the anticolonial resistance against Japan similarly provided Kim Il Sung's partisan fighters with 'a means to assert their manhood'. The art

¹⁰³⁶ Werbner 1998b, p. 72-73.

¹⁰³⁷ Martins and Cardina 2019, p. 61.

¹⁰³⁸ Radio Free Asia, 28 March 2022.

¹⁰³⁹ Xinhua, 28 February 2020.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Werbner 1998b, p. 86-89.

¹⁰⁴¹ Kriger 1995.

¹⁰⁴² Suttner 2008, p. 105-108; 116; 349.

¹⁰⁴³ Suttner 2008, p. 112.

historian Suk-Young Kim argues that war gave these men ‘a chance to bolster their lost masculinity’.¹⁰⁴⁴

However, the focus on masculinity distorts the representation of a factual history of the liberation struggle. As Melber has observed, females ‘are conspicuously absent’ in African nationalist discourse.¹⁰⁴⁵ Oftentimes they are deliberately erased, or simply depicted as ‘mothers in the struggle’.¹⁰⁴⁶ A fitting example is Robert Mugabe’s first wife, Sally Mugabe, buried in the National Heroes’ Acre as the Mother of Zimbabwe.¹⁰⁴⁷ North Korean society also presents itself as ‘masculine or male-centred’.¹⁰⁴⁸ A notable exception, one that mirrors the example of Sally Mugabe, is the wife of Kim Il Sung. Kim Jong Suk is buried in the Revolutionary Martyrs’ Cemetery as the Mother of *Sŏn’gun*.¹⁰⁴⁹ Virtually all other buried heroes, in both cemeteries, are male.

Suttner urges us to question the ‘monolithic view of the heroic male’ in the Southern African liberation struggles. There were important female contributions to the attainment of independence; many freedom fighters did not conform to traditional ideas of masculinity; and, unfortunately, struggle memorialisation obscures the tragic occurrences of rape and other forms of gender-related abuse during war.¹⁰⁵⁰

Political Afterlives

A striking feature of the Machel statue is not how the monument celebrates the memory of the deceased leader, but how it served the leader who commissioned the work, then-president Guebuza. The historian Albino Jopela shows how Guebuza turned FRELIMO’s political ancestors into sacralised heroes, with the aim to mobilise the Mozambican population for a ‘new struggle’, namely, Guebuza’s political agenda. In addition, Guebuza ‘claims for himself a prominent place in the pantheon of the liberators of the nation’ through the memorialisation of Machel as the father of Mozambique. As ordinary Mozambicans were voicing widespread dissatisfaction with the ‘generalised lethargy and corruption in the state apparatus’, FRELIMO attributed new values to Machel’s legacy ‘that serve the cause of the current government’.¹⁰⁵¹

Machel’s memorialisation illustrates how the development of a personality cult around political veterans of the liberation struggle benefit contemporary elites.¹⁰⁵² African liberation governments appropriate the political afterlives of their founding fathers to smooth the transition of power from one generation to the next. This process is perhaps perfected in North Korea, where Kim Jong Il, the son and successor of Kim Il Sung, devised an elaborate personality cult around his father with the aim of strengthening his own position. As the formally declared ‘eternal president’ (*yŏnggu chusŏk*), Kim Il Sung’s figure continues to loom large over North Korean mythology.¹⁰⁵³

Kim Jong Il could not claim political authority based on participation in the origin myth of anticolonial warfare. He was simply too young, as he was born in 1942. This meant that he had to find another way to gain legitimacy, which became the strategic deployment of revolutionary art (*hyŏngmyŏng yesul*). Kim Jong Il ‘began his high political career as a pioneer of an artistic revolution’ that used performative art to deify his father. As a result, Kim Jong Il

¹⁰⁴⁴ Kim 2010, p. 173.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Melber 2009, p. 457.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Suttner 2008, p. 107-118.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Werbner 1998b, p. 84.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Kim 2010, p. 6; 166; 176.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 114-115.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Suttner 2008, p. 121-129.

¹⁰⁵¹ Jopela 2017, p. 299.

¹⁰⁵² Ironically, Machel disliked a North Korean-style cult of personality during his lifetime. Albino Jopela notes how ‘Samora is celebrated in the same way that he strongly opposed during his life’. See Jopela 2017, p. 351.

¹⁰⁵³ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 71-72.

manoeuvred himself into a central position of power, as he became the one person who could continue his father's legacy – a process that resembles the state hagiography of African liberation giants.¹⁰⁵⁴

It was no coincidence that Kim led two major renovations of the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery in Pyongyang (discussed in Chapter 13), in celebration of his father's sixtieth and seventieth birthday. These decisions were a tribute to Kim Il Sung's glory and exemplified his son's respect for the memory of his leadership. As such, the monumental renovations were 'an important part of the process of political succession'.¹⁰⁵⁵ African liberation governments follow a similar pattern, where the afterlives of the founding fathers are used to enhance the legitimacy of those that follow in their footsteps.

Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung conclude that Kim Jong Il's 'artistic revolution in the 1970s was integral to the succession of power from the country's founding hero to his eldest son'.¹⁰⁵⁶ It is important to note that North Korea's personality cult was not an original feature of the state system from its inception in 1948, but an outcome of succession politics years later. The construction of monuments, as Yoon points out, started in the 1960s, while the 'deification of Kim Il Sung' only started in the 1970s, under Kim Jong Il's guidance.¹⁰⁵⁷

Kim Il Sung's death in 1994 'was akin to the death of a father for many North Koreans'. Known as the Great National Bereavement, Kwon and Chung call this event 'a family affair'. A commemorative poem of the Workers' Party of Korea described the North Korean people as wailing and crying children who have lost their father. Kwon and Chung point out that the poem mainly praises Kim Jong Il's 'heroic efforts to keep the family (of the nation) together after the founding father passed away'.¹⁰⁵⁸

The succession of Kim Il Sung further illustrates how the Western Cold War time frame 'comes up against serious conceptual problems in the context of East Asian history'. This political transition in North Korea must be situated in the 1970s, not in the 1990s. Kwon and Chung therefore argue that 'Europe-centred temporality of the Cold War' does not do justice to the Korean context, a call that is equally applicable to Southern Africa.¹⁰⁵⁹

In the process of this political succession, North Korea increasingly relied on 'symbolic and theatrical means to demonstrate the power and authority of the partisan state'.¹⁰⁶⁰ Wada Haruki and the North Korean exile Jang Jin Sung have developed the idea of North Korea as a 'theatre state', based on the work of Clifford Geertz.¹⁰⁶¹ Indeed, Keith Howard observes that 'North Korea behaves as if its whole territory is a theatre'.¹⁰⁶² The theatre is performed for both domestic and international audiences, a distinction that Brian Myers called the 'inside track' and 'outside track' of propaganda.¹⁰⁶³ The ultimate mission of the North Korean theatre state 'is to resist, via the man-made politics of art, the natural mortality of charismatic authority'.¹⁰⁶⁴

North Korean heritage imbues anticolonial heroism with new, contemporary meanings. In the 2000s, amid dire economic circumstances, North Korean literature on *ch'ongdae* began to articulate the idea that 'being a barrel of a gun', as the military-first doctrine requires of North Korean citizens, 'might involve overcoming the pain of hunger'. Rather than fighting an actual war, the current (ongoing) revolution demanded the North Korean masses to withstand stark

¹⁰⁵⁴ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 26; 183.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 114.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 4.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Yoon 2014.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 22-24.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 49.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 44.

¹⁰⁶¹ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 4-5; Breuker 2018.

¹⁰⁶² Howard 2020, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶³ Myers 2015.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 4-5.

economic pressure. Kwong and Chung explain that the military-first politics ‘provides a new formula for revolution’, one that is cloaked in the discourse of the past but befits the priorities of the current regime.¹⁰⁶⁵

A similar pattern of performative politics can be recognised across Southern Africa, where liberation governments remodel revolutionary discourse to fit contemporary policy issues. The Namibian Heroes’ Day is celebrated with a ceremony at the North Korea-built National Heroes’ Acre – once described by Nujoma as ‘sacred ground’ for the Namibian nation. In 2015, President Hage Geingob used his first Heroes’ Day speech to urge his followers to remain loyal to SWAPO despite difficult economic times. He reminded the Namibian people that ‘only half the battle is won. The second phase of the struggle will determine the same sacrifice and selflessness that the first struggle demanded’.¹⁰⁶⁶

Geingob hereby invoked the continuity thesis (as discussed in Chapter 13) by linking past and present struggles. ‘Independence was not handed to us on a silver platter’, concluded Geingob, ‘it was earned, and the currency was blood’. Now, he demanded that Namibians follow in the footsteps of anticolonial warriors by becoming ‘economic heroes’.¹⁰⁶⁷ This signifies the continuation of a tradition that is rooted in the struggle. African nationalism, argues Werbner, is ‘not a spent force’. On the contrary, it is gaining strength against ‘perceived continuities in oppression by its new elites and present global forces’.¹⁰⁶⁸ It is the same old story, but now repackaged in North Korean aesthetics.

Geingob passed away in February 2024. It was the first time that a Namibian president had died, which is a fitting example of how young the Namibian state is. The SWAPO government requested assistance from the Zambian Defence Force for Geingob’s funeral, citing a ‘lack of experience’ as the main reason. Geingob was celebrated as a ‘liberation struggle icon’ by his successor, Nangolo Mbumba, and was conferred hero status. As befits his stature, Geingob was buried in a room dedicated to him in the National Heroes’ Acre.¹⁰⁶⁹

Conclusion

All heroes need villains. In Southern Africa, the state presents its citizens with a simple dichotomy, between good and bad, which is rooted in the anticolonial experiences from the recent past. During the days of struggle, African liberation movements explained their cause by differentiating between the rightful liberators and evil oppressors, the comrades and the sell-outs, the revolutionaries and the reactionaries; in other words, the liberation movement and outside forces. It is part of the origin myths of African nations in which the incumbent regimes play a central role. Those that fall on the wrong side of the dichotomy are not part of the family that makes up the liberation movement and, by extension, the nation.

The African freedom fighters-turned-politicians practice a style of government that the historian Timothy Snyder describes as the ‘politics of eternity’. With their constant references to liberation, African elites champion a general anti-historical worldview that revolves around a distinct interpretation of the struggle. It is a mood, Snyder writes, which is defined by ‘a longing for past moments that never really happened during epochs that were, in fact, disastrous’. For the eternity politicians in Africa, the past is ‘a vast misty courtyard of illegible

¹⁰⁶⁵ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 83; 95.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Geingob 2015, speech is available on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/DrHageGeingob/posts/my-first-heroes-day-speech-as-president-of-the-republic-of-namibia-heroes-acre-n/522485504574611/>.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Geingob 2015, speech is available on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/DrHageGeingob/posts/my-first-heroes-day-speech-as-president-of-the-republic-of-namibia-heroes-acre-n/522485504574611/>.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Werbner 1998b, p. 90.

¹⁰⁶⁹ The Namibian, 16 February 2024; The Namibian, 22 February 2024.

monuments to national victimhood', which are prone to manipulation.¹⁰⁷⁰ This resembles the 'legacy politics' (*yuhun chŏngch'i*) that characterises North Korea.¹⁰⁷¹

As such, politics becomes a discussion between good and evil, defined by external enemies that threaten the purity of the nation, with a sense of crisis that is not temporary but constant. It is justified by 'a masquerade of history', but has real-life consequences. The contemporary 'seduction by a mythical past' restrains the ability to think about possible futures. Snyder describes eternity politics as a hypnosis, 'the spinning vortex of cyclical myth'.¹⁰⁷² The fact that African governments use North Korean art studios to construct the physical monuments to visualise those myths is a telling sign of the mutual trust between African and North Korean elites.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Snyder 2017, p. 121-124,

¹⁰⁷¹ Kwon and Chung 2012, p. 72-73.

¹⁰⁷² Snyder 2017, p. 121-124.