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

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EPILOGUE

A LIBERATION LENS

Southern Africa is governed by the past. The nationalist heritage that is explored in the final part of this book is an outcome of the dominant political culture in Southern Africa, which is guided by the experience of struggle. After all, the majority of states in Southern Africa are ruled by former liberation movements. I argue that the past revolution is the prism through which they understand present-day politics – I coin this the ‘liberation lens’. It is a lens that is strongly coloured by North Korean visual aesthetics.

As a result of the liberation lens, contemporary political discourse is pervaded by revolutionary rhetoric. In a debate about LGBT rights in June 2023, the SWAPO official and member of parliament Jerry Ekandjo invoked his experience as a political prisoner on Robben Island, in the 1970s: ‘We cannot be a republic of homosexuals ... I went to Robben Island at the age of 26 not to promote homosexuality here. People died, and disappeared’. Ekandjo also referred to Sam Nujoma’s viewpoints, even though the leader had left office in 2005: ‘The founding father said no’.¹¹¹⁴ The manner in which Ekandjo connects contemporary political issues to his struggle credentials is commonplace across Southern Africa.¹¹¹⁵ Whether it is gender, economic woes, land redistribution, or the Russian invasion of Ukraine – some of the most sensitive issues in Southern Africa today are debated through the liberation lens.

This book has emphasised the transnational dimension of liberation politics, military, and heritage. During the decades of decolonisation, the operations of liberation movements across the Southern African region were marked by a high degree of interaction. ‘We consult with each other ... and teach what we have learned from our own particular struggles’, said Shipanga about the relationship between SWAPO and the MPLA.¹¹¹⁶ ZANU said that CCM ‘fathered our struggle’.¹¹¹⁷ FRELIMO paid tribute to TANU and UNIP, their ‘comrades and friends ... [who] accepted any sacrifice to make our victory possible’.¹¹¹⁸ The ANC and ZAPU issued a ‘historical declaration of their alliance’ against apartheid.¹¹¹⁹ The ANC and FRELIMO signed a cooperation agreement to stimulate meetings and exchange of information.¹¹²⁰ ‘FRELIMO equals ANC’, declared the South African party, which also commemorated the ‘indissoluble bonds of fraternity’ with the MPLA, CCM, and UNIP.¹¹²¹ In the run-up to the total liberation of Southern Africa, the political bureaus of the leading nationalist movements attended each other’s conferences and discussed areas of cooperation.¹¹²² The result is a shared political culture that transcends national boundaries.

Nostalgia is a powerful drug. The history of liberation weighs heavily on the shoulders of today’s African political elites. Richard Werbner describes how, in Southern Africa, ‘the state has itself become the agent of nostalgia, for the sake of nation-building’. He adds that ‘heritage is a state cultural policy, often in an anti-colonial appeal inventing tradition for an authentic past’.¹¹²³ Today, it is widely believed that the future lies ahead of us – we move

¹¹¹⁴ The Namibian, 8 June 2023.

¹¹¹⁵ Ekandjo’s proposal subverts the Namibian constitution and a recent ruling of the Namibian Supreme Court. The Namibian, 10 July 2023.

¹¹¹⁶ [NAI] PC Namibia NLM SWAPO: LSM Information Center, 1973.

¹¹¹⁷ [NAI] PC Zimbabwe NLM ZANU: speech Robert Mugabe, 1979.

¹¹¹⁸ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: speech Samora Machel, 8 January 1975.

¹¹¹⁹ [NAI] PC South Africa NLM ANC: Guerrilla Warfare, August 1970; [MA] Sechaba: Vol. 4, No. 4, April 1970.

¹¹²⁰ [MA] ANC Lusaka Box 66: Ngcobo to Nzo, February 1990.

¹¹²¹ [MA] Sechaba: Vol. 4, No. 4, April 1970; ANC Lusaka Box 62: Tambo to Dos Santos, undated; Tambo to Mwinyi, undated; Tambo to Kaunda, undated.

¹¹²² [MA] ANC London Box 44: MPLA Partido do Trabalho, undated; [MA] ANC Lusaka Box 71: meeting between ANC and SWAPO, 27 January 1989; ANC Lusaka Box 62: Mabizela to Kawawa, 9 October 1987.

¹¹²³ Werbner 1998a, p. 1.

towards the future, with our backs to the past. However, ancient Greek and Hebrew traditions envisaged temporality the other way around. They argued that history is right in front of us, as it is evidently the only thing we can see, while the future remains invisible, behind our backs.¹¹²⁴ Perhaps Southern African elites govern in a similar fashion, with a firm focus on the recent past.

It is important to note that the ‘authentic past’ encapsulated in North Korean heritage must serve the incumbent African elites, who wish to remain in power. In these origin myths, the party takes centre stage. It is a past that portrays the nation as a harmonious family but conceals the brutal repression of dissidents; a past that glorifies violence but omits diplomacy; a past that memorialises elites and ignores the people. To this end, liberation governments adopt a heritage blueprint derived from North Korea – which means that Pyongyang is not only generating goodwill, but also generating cash.

North Korea does not have a monopoly on the construction of large-scale monuments. In fact, African states can theoretically choose from a large number of global competitors. Nevertheless, in Southern Africa, the critical infrastructure of nationalist heritage is not created by Africans, and not even by outsiders like China, Russia, Cuba, or Western countries. The honour goes to North Korea, widely assumed to be an isolated pariah state. North Korean art studios produce the tangible outcome of Southern Africa’s obsession with the past. Liberation heritage is a growth industry – the SADC’s Southern African Liberation Struggles project, the African Liberation Project in Tanzania, and the Museum of African Liberation in Zimbabwe are just a few, government-sanctioned examples from recent years.¹¹²⁵

There is a tension between the ‘one size fits all’ model of North Korean nationalism and the idiosyncrasies of African histories. Werbner describes how postcolonial monuments in Southern Africa combine precolonial symbolism and colonial stereotyping with North Korean aesthetics, ‘a national imagery which is at once divisive and unifying’.¹¹²⁶ A recurring critique is that African governments surpass local architects in favour of North Korea.¹¹²⁷ As a result, the monuments look detached from their African contexts. The statue of Laurent-Désiré Kabila in Congo is said to have the head of Kabila but the body of Kim Jong Il.¹¹²⁸ The construction of the African Renaissance Monument in Senegal was delayed because the faces on the statue were deemed too Korean. President Abdoulaye Wade ordered a redesign to make them more African.¹¹²⁹

The liberation movements that fought for democracy have been transformed into liberation governments that are guided by a desire for political survival and display anti-democratic behaviour. Henning Melber calls this ‘the limits to liberation’.¹¹³⁰ While the nationalist monuments highlighted in this book are designed as symbols that celebrate independence, they inadvertently turn into places of mourning for the reduction of political space. The National Heroes’ Acre in Zimbabwe is, after all, a cemetery – a resting place for party veterans, a graveyard for democracy. The conclusion of this book discusses the influence of North Korea on the authoritarian tendencies of Southern African political culture.

¹¹²⁴ Knox 1994; Borman 1960, p. 51; Steiner 1975, p. 157.

¹¹²⁵ Temu and Tembe 2014; Saunders 2017; Limb 2018; see also Jopela 2017, p. 195-258; [UNESDOC] 0000154025; African Liberation Museum, available at: <https://www.africanliberation.museum/>. The Hashim Mbita Project contains a section on North Korea, written by Alicia Altorfer-Ong (see Temu and Tembe 2014, vol. 8, p. 342-367).

¹¹²⁶ Werbner 1998a, p. 8.

¹¹²⁷ [NAN] AACRLS.023; Werbner 1998b.

¹¹²⁸ Atlas Obscura, 25 August 2014.

¹¹²⁹ BBC News, 16 February 2016.

¹¹³⁰ Melber 2004.