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Leiden
The Netherlands

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

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Citation

Hoog, T. A. van der. (2024, May 7). *North Korea and the liberation of Southern Africa, 1960-2020*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3753571>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

SUMMARY

This thesis explores North Korea's influential role in the liberation of Southern Africa and describes how African states repay this historical aid today. Specifically, it examines the question of how political elites in Southern Africa benefitted from North Korean support, from 1960 until 2020. The main argument of this book is that liberation (and not the Cold War) is the leitmotif for African–North Korean relations, as the transition from anticolonial struggles to postcolonial politics is characterised by continuity not change. My approach is based on three assumptions. First, political culture in Southern Africa transcends national boundaries, which is a legacy of the exile dimension of the struggle for liberation. Second, we must shift our lens from states to regimes. Third, the standard periodisation of African history and the Cold War distorts a proper understanding of African–North Korean interactions.

This thesis is organized through a thematic, three-pronged approach. The first part, organised around the theme of 'Blood', considers the diplomatic ties between African and North Korean elites that emerged at the nexus of African decolonisation and the Cold War. Part Two, organised around the theme of 'Bullets', highlights how African elites benefitted from North Korean military support before, during, and after the victory of independence. The third part, organised around the theme of 'Bronze', explores the cultural heritage of the liberation struggle by discussing the North Korean monuments that have emerged in Southern Africa in recent years.

The first part of the thesis, Chapters 1 through 5, examines how African freedom fighters forged intimate connections with a hereditary regime in the northern half of the Korean peninsula. The first two chapters introduce the main characters of this thesis. Chapter 1 sets the scene in Southern Africa, the last part of the continent to be liberated from colonialism and white settler-rule. African liberation movements were often pushed into exile and became dependent on the solidarity of foreign sponsors. Chapter 2 pivots to the Korean peninsula and considers the competition between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea for international recognition as the true Korea. Both Koreas launched elaborate diplomatic campaigns in Africa to garner support among newly independent nations.

Chapters 3 through 5 cover the practical outcomes of the African–North Korean diplomatic ties that were forged in the 1960s. Chapter 3 is centred around the successful invitation diplomacy of North Korea and analyses the journeys of several first-generation Southern African presidents to Pyongyang. A significant number of African elites flocked to Pyongyang in search of support, education, and training. Chapter 4 describes the establishment of North Korean ideological centres in Africa. The state ideology of North Korea, Juche, made the country distinct from the major communist powers and therefore appealing to non-aligned African nations. Juche Study Centres allowed ordinary Africans to learn about the wonders of North Korea through books, films, exhibitions, and discussions. Chapter 5 explores the largely unknown history of North Korean development aid in Africa. In the spirit of South–South cooperation, North Korean experts established experimental Juche farms in Africa; in return, African leaders praised North Korea's plans for reunification of the peninsula.

The main impact of North Korea's activities in Africa was not the establishment of farms, but the proliferation of arms. The second part of this thesis, Chapters 6 through 10, therefore revolves around military cooperation. Chapter 6 describes the liberation wars that defined Southern Africa in the twentieth century. When peaceful campaigns for independence were repressed by minority governments, some African liberation movements turned to violent revolution. As most Western countries refused to offer them weapons and training, many organisations looked East for support. Chapter 7 describes how North Korea, with its colonial history and anti-imperialist credentials, positioned itself as a natural ally for African freedom

fighters. Military exports became a key component of North Korea's foreign policy, and the country became a major player in the global arms market.

Chapters 8 to 10 narrate the story of how Africans benefitted from North Korean military support. Chapter 8 examines how exiled liberation movements received support in the years leading up to independence. African guerrilla fighters underwent basic training in North Korean camps in the Frontline States, while advanced training was offered to talented cadres in North Korea. Chapter 9 subsequently describes what happened after the victory of independence, when North Korea offered internal regime support for newly established governments. The best documented example is the notorious Fifth Brigade in Zimbabwe, but this chapter uncovers how virtually all neighbouring states were trained in the dark arts of presidential security. Chapter 10 brings us to the present, at a time when the governments of Southern African states and North Korea are desperately clinging to power. Despite United Nations sanctions prohibiting military cooperation, trade is ongoing and African armies continue to depend on North Korean services.

The third part of this thesis, Chapters 11 through 15, is centred around heritage. Despite its current isolated position in global affairs, North Korea is hired by African governments to design and construct some of the most eye-catching public buildings in Africa, including a 120-metre-tall memorial, a cemetery in the shape of two AK-47s, and a history museum. Chapter 11 describes how African liberation governments turned the narratives of liberation into myths that glorify their status as revolutionaries. It is a model of African patriotic history that is well suited to North Korean visual aesthetics.

The next three chapters explore what the import of North Korean aesthetics means for the display of African history. What stories are revealed or concealed through these monuments? Chapter 12 analyses how nations are defined in party-centric terms that are organised around the notion of family: the leaders are the fathers of the nation; the citizens are their children; and counter-voices become outcasts. Chapter 13 considers the role of violence in the memorialisation of the struggle. North Korean monuments emphasise the need for continuous revolution that protects the gains from early colonial and late colonial warfare. Chapter 14 is centred around heroism and scrutinises the gendered dimensions of African–North Korean memorial culture. Chapter 15 discusses the economic dimension of African–North Korean relations. Similar to military trade, African heritage is a profitable business model for North Korea. Monuments justify the enduring rule of African liberation governments, but also signify the importance of foreign currency for North Korea's government. Economic activities in Africa are a lifeline for the increasingly isolated elites in Pyongyang. The monuments therefore symbolise the strategies of survival for both African and North Korean regimes.