

The Struggle For Legitimacy: North Korea's Relations With Africa, 1965–1992

Benjamin Young

PhD Candidate at George Washington University

Benjamin R. Young is a PhD student in East Asian history at George Washington University. He focuses his research on Modern Korea, Marxism in the Third World, and inter-Korean competition in the Third World.

Abstract

From the mid-1960s to the late 1980s, Seoul and Pyongyang sought to gain international recognition as the sole government on the Korean peninsula. Africa, the site of many newly independent nations during the Cold War, became the primary battleground for this inter-Korean competition. Focusing on North Korean-African relations, this article examines several African dictators who admired North Korea's alternative brand of socialist modernity, Pyongyang's exportation of its Juche (roughly defined as self-reliance) ideology to Africa, and African students who studied in North Korea as part of official diplomatic exchanges. Using archival sources from North Korea's former communist allies, North Korean newspapers, declassified documents from the U.S. Department of State, and interviews with African students who studied in North Korea in the 1980s, I explore an under-researched dimension of North Korea's diplomatic history and the North Korean leadership's efforts in Africa to depict the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as a model of Third World development.

Key words: Korea-Africa relations; North Korea foreign relations; racism, Juche ideology; foreign students in Pyongyang

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During the Cold War era, Africa occupied a unique place in the North Korean consciousness. The continent was a battleground with South Korea for votes in the United Nations, for followers of its peculiar brand of developmental ideology, and for support of the removal of American troops from South Korean soil. North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) since its formation in 1948, poured financial aid and military personnel into Africa during the Cold War hoping to sway newly independent countries to take their side in the struggle with Seoul for recognition as the legitimate Korean government. However, the relationship between North Korea and decolonized African states has not been investigated in-depth. Using archival sources from North Korea's former communist allies, public North Korean newspapers, declassified documents from the US Department of State, and interviews with African students who studied in North Korea in the 1980s, I will examine the DPRK's diplomatic efforts in Africa from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s and Pyongyang's attempts to depict North Korea as a model for recently decolonized nations.¹ I argue that the North Korean leadership viewed diplomacy with African nations as an extension of the inter-Korean conflict with Seoul for sole legitimacy over the Korean peninsula. Viewing Africa as a space to gain an upper hand over Seoul in the competition for diplomatic recognition, Pyongyang offered military training and guidance to many African nations while also disseminating propaganda materials throughout the continent and offering opportunities for African students to study in the DPRK. Some African governments, if only briefly, viewed North Korea's alternative brand of socialist modernity, with its militarization, pervasive cult of personality, and postcolonial development, as a model possibly worthy of emulation.²

Charles Armstrong's recent book, *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950–1992*, provides a stepping stone for scholars interested in North Korea's Third World diplomacy as he wrote a chapter on the subject.³ Armstrong argues that despite the small size of its own economy, North Korea played an important role in African development.⁴ Historian Balazs Szalontai briefly looks at North Korea's activities in Africa and concludes that nationalism, rather than internationalism, drove North Korea's foreign policy during the Cold War as Pyongyang would cooperate with any Third World leader, regardless of political ideology, who diplomatically recognized the DPRK as the legitimate Korean government in the United Nations.⁵ While Armstrong and Szalontai view North Korea's foreign policy as independent-minded and nationalistic, political scientist Bruce Bechtol argues that the Soviet Union subsidized all of the DPRK's military assistance in Africa and that Pyongyang "served as a willing proxy for

implementing the USSR's foreign policy" until 1990.⁶ This depiction of North Korea as a puppet of the Soviet Union was typical in American military intelligence circles during the Cold War. However, as a 1983 *New York Times* article on North Korean arms sales and military training in the Third World aptly explains, "Pyongyang acts on its own, and may even be a growing embarrassment to the Russians and Chinese."⁷ In this essay, I hope to restore North Korea's agency in the history of international relations and look at North Korean-African relations as part of the Cold War in the Third World.

During the Cold War, Africa was a space of ideological competition between the world's major superpowers. The United States hoped to sway newly independent African governments away from socialism while the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union extolled the applicability of socialism to the recently decolonized Third World. In the 1960s and 1970s, Beijing was especially active in spreading Maoist ideology in Africa through the dissemination of Little Red Books. David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman explain that China's African policy from the early 1950s to mid-1970s was characterized by a need to break out of international isolation, overtake the Soviet Union as leader of the world communist movement, and a desire to gain international recognition as the legitimate Chinese government.⁸ As China reformed and opened up in the late 1970s and 1980s, its relations with Africa changed as economic commerce, rather than ideology, underscored China's African policy.⁹ North Korea, by contrast, never implemented Chinese-style reforms, and its relations with Africa never took on the same shape as the PRC's. Nevertheless, as a contested entity itself, North Korea shared some similarities in its Africa policy with that of the Chinese, namely the basic desire to gain international recognition from newly independent, postcolonial states. Like Beijing's struggle with Taipei for China's UN seat, Pyongyang and Seoul were locked in a fierce struggle for recognition as the legitimate Korean government in the United Nations. After the passing of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758 in 1971 that recognized the PRC as the official representative of China at the UN and the normalization of relations between the United States and China during the following year, the détente between the West and the PRC created a new space for the two Koreas in which to operate diplomatically.¹⁰ Until the joint communiqué between the two Koreas in 1972, Pyongyang and Seoul refused to allow other countries to recognize both Korean governments.¹¹ Even after 1972, the two Koreas still raced to establish diplomatic relations with foreign governments as Pyongyang refused to join the United Nations alongside Seoul until 1992.¹² However, despite being subject to Chinese pressure, North Korea's African policy was never dictated by Beijing.

North Korea was not the only small, socialist Third World nation active in Africa during the Cold War. Most notably, Cuba sent thousands of soldiers to Angola and Namibia in the mid-1970s and 1980s to fight against white minority rule in southern Africa. Piero Gleijeses'

groundbreaking work on this subject illustrates the fraternal, anti-apartheid internationalism of Fidel Castro's regime.¹³ As the Johns Hopkins University Professor almost glibly explains, "During the Cold War, extracontinental military interventions were the preserve of the two superpowers, a few Western European countries, and Cuba."¹⁴ However as I will illustrate, North Korea also intervened militarily in African conflicts. While North Korea did not send as many troops to Africa as the Cubans, Pyongyang did send military advisors to train the armed forces (typically the elite security forces) of African leaders who were friendly with Kim Il Sung. However, the fundamental difference between Cuba's and North Korea's African policy during the Cold War was Cuba's opposition to theories of racial supremacy. While North Korean state media routinely condemned white minority rule in southern Africa, the actions of North Koreans tell a different story, which will be described throughout this paper. Self-interests, specifically the struggle to gain diplomatic recognition as the "true" Korean government, rather than notions of racial equality or Third World solidarity, dictated North Korea's African policy.

Source materials for North Korean strategy in Africa are difficult to come by, but a surprising amount of useful data arises from the US State Department's archives and from the archives of the countries formerly in the Soviet bloc. Due to issues of access and availability, I do not use sources from African archives. In lieu of African archival documents, I use interview data taken from recent journalism, including some of my own previously published work. Clearly work which is able to delve into African archival documents will ultimately present a more accurate portrayal of North Korean-African relations, and the frustrations the Africans had with their North Korean allies. In the meantime, historical relations between North Korea and African nations remain under-researched and the materials selected for analysis here will hopefully aid in stimulating more research on the topic.

As Ko Young-hwan, the former head of the Africa section in the DPRK's Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1985 to 1987 who defected to South Korea in 1991, said in a recent interview: "Kim Il Sung took Africa seriously because he wanted to use votes in the United Nations for the withdrawal of US troops from South Korea. He believed that if he could get the socialist Eastern Bloc and African countries on board, then he could make the withdrawal happen."¹⁵ Viewing the anti-imperialist struggles in the Third World as interconnected, Kim Il Sung said in a 1986 speech, "The struggles of the people to win independence and sovereignty and build a new society are linked by supporting and supplementing each other. If Africa is not free, Asia and Latin America cannot be free."¹⁶ In other words, even if archival sources concerning North Korean-African relations remain relatively scarce, greater scholarly attention devoted to the topic might aid in explaining why Africa appeared to be such an important part of Kim Il Sung's foreign policy.

The first part of this paper will explore North Korea's military operations in Africa and right-wing African dictators' hoping to replicate the personality cult and militarization of the DPRK. I will then discuss the exportation of the Juche ideology to Africa. The paper concludes with an investigation into the lives of African students living in North Korea during the Cold War and the xenophobic, isolated nature of North Korean society.

Military Assistance and the Personality Cult

North Korea offered military assistance to a wide range of African governments in the 1960s and 1970s. While North Korea did receive financial compensation for military training and arms deals with African nations, the North Korean leadership did not pursue this policy solely for economic reasons. Rather, in offering military assistance, Pyongyang sought diplomatic recognition from these African nations. During the inter-Korean competition for UN votes, Pyongyang put strategic self-interests at the forefront of its African foreign policy. Likewise, African leaders pursued relations with North Korea for their own specific goals and interests. Often times, these leaders viewed North Korea as a less-threatening alternative to the two dominant communist powers active in Africa: China and the Soviet Union. The North Korean brand of development appealed to mostly right-wing African leaders, who admired the guerrilla warfare tactics of the North Korean military and the personality cult of the Kim family.

Zairean right-wing dictator Mobutu Sese Seko's close relations with Pyongyang further indicates that self-interests, rather than financial compensation or ideology, drove North Korea's military operations in Africa. Mobutu's anticommunist stance earned him financial support from the United States. However, ideological differences did not get in the way of Pyongyang seeking close relations with Kinshasa. Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo) and the DPRK established official diplomatic relations in 1972 and a Zairean embassy soon opened in Pyongyang.¹⁷ In 1973, Mobutu swapped Israeli military advisors for North Korean ones and traveled to Pyongyang in 1974 to meet with President Kim Il Sung.¹⁸ US officials thus became increasingly concerned with North Korea's influence on Mobutu as he signed a major arms deal with Kim Il Sung in 1974.

Jean Bedel Bokassa was one of the most notable right-wing dictators in postcolonial Africa. Having nearly bankrupted his country with a ceremony making himself "emperor" of the Central African Republic (which he renamed the Central African Empire), Bokassa established close relations with Kim Il Sung.¹⁹ In 1969, the two nations established official diplomatic relations, which surprised American officials since Bokassa had initially supported South Korea in the UN.²⁰ Kim Il Sung, with his own pervasive personality cult, endorsed the "domestic politics" of Bokassa's rule in a joint communique in 1978.²¹ During his May 1978 visit to Pyongyang, Bokassa signed "a treaty of peace and friendship" with Kim Il Sung.²² It was agreed that North

Korea would provide agricultural equipment to the Central African Empire in exchange for coffee, timber, and diamonds. The North Korean government had also agreed to build Bokassa a palace in the same style as Kim Il Sung's Kumsusan Palace.²³ Perhaps looking at the Kim family as a model, Bokassa attempted to create a hereditary dictatorship in order to secure the wealth and prestige of his family.²⁴ In 1979, the French military removed Bokassa as president amidst speculation that Bokassa personally participated in the execution of 100 schoolchildren who refused to buy expensive uniforms made in a factory owned by one of his seventeen wives.²⁵

North Korea's focus on securing as many UN votes as possible from African leaders sometimes created awkward encounters on the battlefield. Erik Cornell, the head of the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang from 1975 to 1977, recalls his Zairean colleagues telling him that North Korean military instructors suddenly appeared on the Angolan side of the border during the Angolan Civil War, at which point military cooperation ended.²⁶ Due to this and similar instances, North Korea earned a reputation amongst African nations as being unreliable and duplicitous. An Algerian official who worked on the question of Korean reunification in a UN bilateral advisory group said that working with the North Koreans was "like talking to Martians."²⁷

However, Africans also manipulated the North Koreans on many occasions, repeating the tropes of Kim Il Sung's teachings to their North Korean counterparts in return for material advantages and military assistance. The American embassy in Lagos, Nigeria, reported in 1973 that two major newspapers in Ibadan, the third largest city in Nigeria, annually published the speeches of Kim Il Sung. The embassy concluded, "It is beginning to appear that the DPRK is willing to pay for this strange, unremunerative exercise as an annual event. They will find Nigerians who are only too happy to take their money."²⁸ Ko Young-hwan explains, "North Korea focused too little on the pursuit of economic development, and too much on ideological development." Ko explains, "The African nations were only interested in following him [Kim Il Sung] when he could afford to provide them with aid, why would they put the Juche claims first?"²⁹

One African dictator who reportedly fell in love with North Korea's propaganda and its cult of personality was Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe. After visiting Pyongyang in 1980, Mugabe wanted to recreate his own personality cult based on the one he saw in North Korea. According to a former member of his government, Mugabe "came back almost a different man" after his trip to North Korea.³⁰ Mugabe sought military assistance from the North Koreans in order to eliminate his rival political party, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). In 1981, Kim Il Sung obliged and sent 106 North Korean military instructors to Zimbabwe to train 3,500 members of Mugabe's elite military division, the Fifth Brigade.³¹ According to a report from the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, the North Koreans also sent \$18 million in small arms and ammunition to Zimbabwe.³² In the mid-1980s, the North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade

went on to kill 20,000 internal “dissidents” in the Zimbabwean region of Matabeleland, which was home to followers of Mugabe’s main political rival Joshua Nkomo and the Ndebele ethnic minority.³³

As representatives of a highly militarized society engaged in a conflict with its southern neighbor, North Korean officials set up guerrilla warfare training camps and military academies inside their own borders where they also trained revolutionaries from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. According to *Communist Nations’ Military Assistance*, North Korea trained approximately 2,500 Third World guerrilla fighters from 1972 to 1981.³⁴ Hungarian archival documents indicate that North Korea’s military prowess and training became well known amongst African nations. A Ugandan military delegation visited North Korea in 1975 and asked that 30–40 of its soldiers spend two to three years training in the DPRK and that Pyongyang provide arms to Uganda. Although Uganda’s dictator Idi Amin was far from a staunch communist, Pyongyang agreed to both requests.³⁵ Paradoxically, North Korea also assisted the Tanzanian military in overthrowing Amin’s regime. In 1979, 45,000 Tanzanian armed forces and 500 North Korean military advisors invaded Kampala and Amin had to flee to Libya. Milton Obote, the Uganda leader who was overthrown by Amin in 1971, regained his presidential position in 1980 and subsequently signed a defense treaty with Pyongyang. As part of this deal, Kim Il Sung supplied President Obote with 600 to 700 North Korean military advisors to train the anti-guerrilla forces of the Ugandan military.³⁶ The North Koreans earned a reputation in the Third World as opportunists that would train soldiers and sell arms to nations and non-state actors at low costs regardless of political affiliations and prior alliances.

The North Koreans clearly acted on their own accord in offering military assistance to African nations. According to a 1986 French report on “North Korea as an African power,” over 2,000 North Korean military instructors were working in Africa in the 1980s. The report surmises that “Pyongyang appeared as the provider of a ‘third communist way’ whose ‘intervention’ would be less oppressive than that of the Russian or Chinese advisors.”³⁷ The North Korean leadership could not provide large amounts of financial assistance to African leaders but they could offer small arms and guerrilla warfare training to liberation fighters. Viewing Africa as the last frontier of the inter-Korean conflict, North Korea sought to win over African leaders through military and ideological means.

Juche Evangelism in Africa

From the early 1970s to the late 1980s, the North Korean leadership actively exported the Juche ideology to Africa. Many African leaders, officials, and intellectuals briefly experimented with Juche but most became disillusioned with the ideology since it primarily consisted of humanistic bromides and was largely devoid of any practical advice for Third World development.³⁸ The

exportation of Juche to Africa was intended to raise the stature of Kim Il Sung internationally and domestically rather than offer guidelines to rapid, postcolonial development. The exportation of this vague, unhelpful ideology to Africa provided fodder for Pyongyang's propaganda apparatus and evidence that the rest of the developing world admired the "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung and his success in creating a postcolonial, socialist utopia. This section explores the ways in which Pyongyang viewed Africa as a land ripe for its propaganda.

Some African leaders, officials, and intellectuals who traveled to North Korea in the 1970s publicly praised Juche despite the hollowness of the ideology. Moges Wolde-Michael, the chairman of the Economic Committee of the Ethiopian Provisional Military Administrative Council, "praised the chuch'e idea that had enabled the DPRK to perform miracles, 'which is attributable to the genial guidance of President Kim Il Sung, the great and excellent leader, and to the diligent work of the Korean people.'"³⁹ Spotlighted in a North Korean cultural magazine, one Cameroonian professor even wrote his doctoral dissertation on Juche and its application to Africa. The professor explained that the purpose of this work "was to adopt measures to embody the Juche philosophy in Africa and thus have it disseminated widely and taught at African universities and in the African intellectual world so that intellectuals from African countries could have a deep understanding of the developed civilization of Korea in the East."⁴⁰ In 1978, the North Korean state media spotlighted Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana's trip to Pyongyang and said that similar "viewpoints" existed between the two countries based on their political ideologies of Juche and Umuganda, a Rwandan term meaning "coming together for a common purpose."⁴¹ However, most African leaders, officials, and intellectuals were far more impressed with the DPRK's rapid, postcolonial development than the Juche ideology. During a 1976 visit to Pyongyang, the Malian head of state "called the achievements and experiences of the DPRK a model for the developing countries ... [and] a section of the delegation specifically studied the structure of the Korean Workers' Party and the party's methods of operation."⁴² Given the present day view of North Korea as a rogue state with a malnourished populace, it may seem absurd that the DPRK could ever have been conceived as an admirable model of development. However, up until the late 1970s, North Korea was more prosperous than South Korea.⁴³

While the DPRK's economy appeared commendable in the 1970s, African leaders and officials would often complain about North Korea's aggressiveness in pushing Juche and the inapplicability of applying the North Korea's postcolonial experience to the unique conditions of Africa. Seen as a radical economic policy advocating self-reliance, Juche appeared vague, unsuitable, and even backwards to some African leaders and officials. Kenyan minister Tom Mboya said at a Pan-African Conference in the 1970s, "I accept the slogan of self-reliance. The man in the bush has always been self-reliant and that is the reason why he is still in the bush."⁴⁴

Clearly, North Korea's efforts to position Juche alongside Maoism and Leninism as a universal revolutionary ideology did not take place. Many African leaders and officials saw the ideology as a shallow, superficial doctrine meant to bolster North Korea's domestic propaganda.

In the 1970s, North Korea set up numerous Juche study groups and research institutes across Africa. The North Korean government also published its propaganda in African newspapers, which frustrated South Korean and American embassies. According to the American embassy in Conakry, Guinea, North Korean diplomats actively disseminated propaganda materials to the Guinean news media, which frequently "echoed" North Korean propaganda.⁴⁵ On Kim Il Sung's 56th birthday, a film on his life was shown at a Chinese-built theater in Bamako, Mali where about 70 Malians, mainly children, watched the film. After the film, the Malian Minister of Justice and Labor published an article in the state-owned newspaper, *L'Essor*, which denounced American imperialism and praised the revolutionary exploits of Kim Il Sung. In addition, a large North Korean propaganda sign appeared outside a state-owned library in Bamako, which depicted Kim Il Sung as a great statesman and anti-imperialist fighter.⁴⁶ While North Korea's propaganda offensive may have been a failure, it is worthwhile to note that Juche study groups in Africa were not simply made up by the North Korean state media in order to highlight the greatness of Kim Il Sung's ideology. These groups did, in fact, exist and Pyongyang widely disseminated its propaganda across Africa in order to gain more admirers.⁴⁷ In March 1970, the American embassy in Lusaka even complained to Zambian officials that the dissemination of North Korean propaganda in the country needed to be stopped since it contained anti-American statements.⁴⁸ In that same month, five North Korean journalists traveled to Addis Ababa to distribute North Korean propaganda and possibly make plans with Ethiopian officials to open a press office in the capital city. Notified by the South Korean embassy, the American embassy worried that the North Koreans would distribute handouts and pamphlets to "students and other dissident elements."⁴⁹ In the 1960s and 1970s, South Korean and American officials worried about North Korea's ideological appeal to young Africans eager to develop their newly independent nations.

Although Juche study groups in Africa were often quite small and marginal, Pyongyang expounded that Juche was clearly taking hold in Africa. As Andrei Lankov explains, these "entrepreneurial activists" gladly took North Korea's money but lacked political clout in their home countries; their devotion to the teachings of the "Great Leader" was suspect.⁵⁰ At a 1983 conference on education and culture in the Non-Aligned Movement, the Cuban delegation complained that the North Koreans "forcefully pressured the guests to place the adulation of the 'all-encompassing wise leadership' of Comrades Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, and the acceptance of the 'international applicability of the chuch'e [idea],' in the focus of their presentations and utterances."⁵¹ According to the Hungarian archival document, many of the

African delegations obliged and spoke about the greatness of Juche and the Kim family regime. The Cubans said that the Koreans conducted “effective bribery” with the Africans.⁵² When North Korea’s economy collapsed in the mid-1990s, the checks from Pyongyang stopped coming and many of these “converts” in Africa abandoned the Juche ideology.

The North Korean funding of supposed African Juche adherents suggests that it was not important to the North Korean propaganda apparatus if any countries were actually applying the ideas of Kim Il Sung to their situation. For domestic propaganda, what was far more important was the notion that the outside world saw Kim Il Sung as a global leader in the anti-imperialist movement. This may explain the placement of full-page advertisements touting the exploits of “the Respected and Beloved Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung,” the *Juche* ideology, and the “independent, peaceful reunification of Korea” in major Western newspapers, such as *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵³ Despite being paid for by the North Korean government, North Korean state-media reported these ads as evidence that even progressive people in the capitalist West followed the wise teachings of Kim Il Sung. Adrian Buzo explains that “an unsophisticated, isolated population may well have come to believe that Kim Il Sung had become a major international statesman—as perhaps did an unsophisticated, isolated leader who allowed such practices to continue.”⁵⁴ North Korea’s global publicity campaign was not a worthless endeavor since it supported the domestic propaganda apparatus’ depiction of Kim Il Sung as a world-renowned theorist and leader.⁵⁵

The South Korean economy eclipsed the North’s in the late 1970s and went on to become the world’s fifteenth strongest economy.⁵⁶ Thus, it comes as no surprise that the North Korean model of development never took off in Africa and Pyongyang never became an ideological center of the Third World. As Jon Halliday aptly explains in a 1981 article on world development, “The DPRK is hardly a model for other countries” and “volumes on Juche and the texts of Kim are not priority items in planning ministries or bibliographies on world development.”⁵⁷

African Students in North Korea

As part of North Korea’s Third World diplomacy campaign in the 1980s, select African students were invited to the DPRK to study for free. In exchange for diplomatic recognition, the North Korean leadership would allow African governments to send several students to the DPRK to study medicine, agronomy, and of course Juche ideology. In the 1980s, approximately 200 students from Guinea, Equatorial Guinea, Tanzania, Madagascar, Zambia, Lesotho, Mali, and Ethiopia were selected by their respective governments to study in North Korea. The students were dispersed to different schools and universities depending on their field of study. Those studying medicine went to North Korea’s second largest city, Hamhung, while many more

studied agronomy in the coastal city of Wonsan. Pyongyang also hosted a number of African students.⁵⁸ Through the experiences of three African students, this section investigates the lives of African students studying in the DPRK and the struggles these students endured while living in one of the most xenophobic and isolated societies on the planet. The racism that African students experienced while studying in the DPRK was based on individual experiences and interactions rather than official state policy. This echoes the racism that African students experienced while studying in other socialist countries, such as the Soviet Union and China.⁵⁹

According to Aliou Niane, a Guinean who studied at Wonsan agricultural university from 1982 to 1987:

I was one of the first and last 10 students to be sent to North Korea by the Guinean government in the 80s. The communist government in Guinea had a close relationship with North Korea. For one thing, North Koreans built some residential villas for the Guinean government and received the UN vote in return.⁶⁰

Niane felt that he was a pawn in the diplomatic game between the two communist governments. Andrew Holloway, a British citizen who worked in Pyongyang from 1987 to 1988 translating articles for *The Pyongyang Times*, devoted a section in his memoir to foreign students studying in the DPRK. He wrote, “I doubt if the average Soviet dissident exiled to Siberia for a few years suffers more at the hands of his government than these good-natured, fun-loving young men who had had to sacrifice some of the best years of their lives in the interests of promoting international friendship.”⁶¹

Another African student in North Korea, Monique Macias, came from Equatorial Guinea where her father, Francisco Macias Nguema, ruled the country with an iron fist from 1968 until he was overthrown and executed in 1979. Kim Il Sung developed a close relationship with Nguema who allowed Monique and her sister, Mary-Bell, to stay in his personal mansion and study in Pyongyang. He also offered medical care to Monique’s mother who suffered from gallstones. When news reached Kim Il Sung that Nguema had been overthrown, he advised the family to stay in Pyongyang. Monique’s mother refused and went back to Guinea to check on her son. Meanwhile, Monique and Mary-Bell stayed in Pyongyang and went on to study at Mangyongdae Military Boarding School. Monique would live and study in Pyongyang for the next fourteen years.⁶²

The African students struggled to make friends with the North Koreans and were not allowed to date. In fact, the “liberal ways” of female African students offended North Koreans so much that they had to be recalled back to their home countries.⁶³ Apart from Monique and her sister, most, if not all, African students in the DPRK were male. According to Holloway, “The one thing that

really got these chaps down, though, was not the monotony of life, the hard work, the lack of cash, the surveillance or the homesickness. It was the lack of sexual opportunity.”⁶⁴ North Korean society’s emphasis on maintaining pure racial lineages made sexual relations or marriage with foreigners nearly impossible. As Holloway noted, “The society is also nationalistic almost to the point of xenophobia. To have sex out of wedlock is very bad. To have sex with a foreigner is unspeakable.”⁶⁵ In fact, the North Korean government publicly discouraged “mixed marriages” between North Koreans and foreigners in the mid-1960s. North Korean men that married Eastern European women were often expelled from the showcase capital city of Pyongyang to the provinces.⁶⁶ According to Niane, one of the Guinean students asked their North Korean advisor during their first week in North Korea whether they could date a Korean girl. The guides responded, “No, we make only Koreans. We have pure blood. Koreans can only love Koreans. Not even Chinese can love Koreans.”⁶⁷ For five years, Niane was kept isolated from North Korean girls and could only talk to them under the shadow of the night. He never learned a single North Korean girl’s name. North Korean society’s emphasis on maintaining pure racial bloodlines significantly influenced the lives of African students studying in the DPRK and made it much harder for these students to live “normal” lives.

The DPRK’s wariness of foreigners extended into the medical field as well. North Korea prides itself on pure bloodlines and even reported during the international AIDS epidemic in the early 1990s that the disease did not exist in the DPRK due to the absence of “unsanitary treatment and decadent socio-moral life.” The report proclaimed that North Korean agricultural workers who had returned from the lion’s den of the AIDS epidemic, Africa, were not infected. The report added, “Our government strictly forbids the import of blood.”⁶⁸ Monique Macias recalls an incident in the 1980s when a member of the Nigerian embassy in Pyongyang got the measles and the illness soon spread to many of the foreign students. The North Korean government took extreme precautions to insure that the disease would not spread to “the cleanest race”: the North Korean people. Thus, the North Koreans quarantined the hotel where many of the students lived. Macias explains, “Kim Il Sung claimed he had made the DPRK a clean country without epidemics and that was true, at least after the war. So a widespread outbreak of an infectious disease was something new to the North Koreans.”⁶⁹

North Korean stereotypes of Africans as less intelligent, dirty, and sexually aggressive crept into the ways these students were treated on a daily basis. Niane recalls one of his North Korean professors berating the Korean students for not performing better than the African students. Niane explains, “The professor reminded the students that Kim Il Sung provided many advantages to them and that they were dishonoring him by doing worse than the Africans.”⁷⁰ Macias remembers that racism became fully apparent during her university days when North Korean students “thought all black people were poor and smelt bad, and I was treated badly by

some students as a result.”⁷¹ African and North Korean students ate at separate dining facilities.⁷² The North Korean government also worried about the perceived sexual aggressiveness of foreigners. Thus, they avoided assigning female interpreters to foreigners. As Holloway explains, “The Koreans did not like to expose their women's purity to unnecessary danger.”⁷³ Those North Korean female students who were caught having relations with African males were often expelled from university and never seen again.⁷⁴

North Korean university employees and Party members simply did not trust the African students. Yoseph Teklemariam, an Ethiopian student who lived in Pyongyang in the late 1980s while his mother worked as a UN official, recalls their maid spying on his family.⁷⁵ Niane remembers being “under supervision at all times by a party member and a person responsible for our daily activities and sometimes an administrative clerk of the university. We also see people coming from Pyongyang to observe us.”⁷⁶ Niane said that conversations with these “spies” were often quite dull as they just repeated the same mantras about the greatness of the Kim family and the Juche ideology. After growing frustrated with the lack of clean water at Wonsan agricultural university, Niane and a group of 50 African students protested and decided to march 100 miles to Pyongyang. The North Korean military stopped them soon after the march began. The North Korean state did not want the rebellious nature of the African students to appeal to the locals. The protest was a success and the Africans were given bottled water. However, the message was clear to the North Korean people: “Don’t do what the Africans did.”⁷⁷

North Korean officials clearly worried about the ideological and racial frictions represented by the African students. However, these students were also seen as a compulsory part of diplomatic relations with African governments. In other words, the African students were a necessary nuisance to the leadership in Pyongyang who saw them as part of the broader goal of acquiring international recognition as the legitimate Korean government. Many of these African students were eager to return home at the end of their studies. Holloway recalls on New Year’s Day chatting with African students who spoke about how long they had been in the DPRK and how much longer they needed to stay. Holloway said they “talked like prisoners discussing their sentences.”⁷⁸

Conclusion

In a 1993 article in the *New Left Review*, Gavan McCormack accurately sums up North Korea’s diplomatic efforts in the Third World. He says, “It is ironic that a regime which adopted Chuche (or independence) as its slogan, should have devoted so much of its diplomatic effort abroad to the promotion of sycophancy and flunkeyism.”⁷⁹ As McCormack explains, the “leader-exaltation principle” of the North Koreans certainly appealed to right-wing dictators, such as Jean Bedel Bokassa. On the other hand, North Korea’s independent industrialization and postcolonial

reconstruction were attractive to left-leaning regimes in Africa.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, North Korea's efforts to establish itself as an "African power" ultimately failed. Kim Il Sung's works were never memorized by African schoolchildren nor did Juche become the dominant doctrine of African governments. After South Korea's economy surpassed North Korea's in the late 1970s, African nations became less interested in the North Korean model of socialist modernity.

However, North Korea's presence on the African continent can still be felt today. Pouring salt on the wound, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe hired North Korean artists in 2010 to build a statue of Joshua Nkomo in Bulawayo, the largest city in Matabeleland. The statue has North Korean features, with the body oddly resembling that of Kim Il Sung.⁸¹ In true authoritarian fashion, Mugabe used North Korean sculptors to remind ZAPU supporters that he was still in charge and revive the grim memory of the Matabeleland Massacre. In addition to Zimbabwe, North Korean artists have built statues and monuments in seven other African countries.⁸² Meghan Kirkwood explains that the use of North Korean artists in Africa represents "a decisive break with architecture and memorials associated with colonial regimes, and in doing so foregrounds the authority and modernity of the postcolonial government."⁸³ In another effort to earn much needed hard currency, the North Korean government has also dabbled in illegal ivory trafficking. Since the 1980s, North Korean diplomats have been caught at least nine different times carrying large amounts of ivory and rhino horn from Africa to Asia.⁸⁴ While seen as a pariah state in much of the world, Pyongyang still maintains close relations with many African nations. Recently, the DPRK's titular head of state Kim Yong-nam visited with several East African leaders, including Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni.⁸⁵ In spite of its isolation on other fronts, North Korea will most likely continue to play a role in Africa.

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Notes

¹ This paper will use the term “Third World” in the sense used by historian Vijay Prashad. Prashad explains, that the Third World was not a place but a global project that advocated independence, anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, and an alternative model to capitalist modernity. See Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2008), 41.

² According to Suzy Kim, “socialist modernity was a direct response to the limits of capitalist modernity. It attempted to realize more fully the emancipatory potential of modernity, not by faith in the ‘invisible hand’ of capitalism but by purposeful planning in service of collective social need over individual profit.” See Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 4.

³ Charles Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2013), 168-207.

⁴ Using interviews with Ethiopians who worked closely with North Korean military advisors, engineers, and agricultural specialists, Armstrong briefly looks at North Korea’s on-the-ground efforts to help rebuild the capital of Addis Ababa into a “socialist” city via monuments, the staging of parades, the rebuilding of the sewage system, and military assistance during the Ethiopian-Somali War of 1977–1978. See Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak*, 195–197.

⁵ Balazs Szalontai, “Political and Economic Relations Between Communist States,” in Stephen Anthony Smith, ed., *Oxford Handbook in the History of Communism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 317.

⁶ Bruce Bechtol, *The Last Days of Kim Jong-il: The North Korean Threat in a Changing Era* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books 2013), 137.

⁷ Clyde Haberman, “North Korea Reported to Step Up Arms Sales and Training Abroad,” *New York Times* (November 29, 1983), A1.

⁸ David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), x–xi.

⁹ Howard W. French’s recent book on Sino-African relations specifically looks at China’s emerging economic and cultural influence on Africa and the millions of Chinese who moved there for new economic opportunities. See Howard W. French, *China’s Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

¹⁰ “Restoration of the lawful rights of the People’s Republic of China in the United Nations,” United Nations General Assembly Session 26, Resolution 2758 (October 25, 1971) [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/2758\(XXVI\)](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/2758(XXVI)).

¹¹ Charles K. Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the Modern World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 6.

¹² Ibid, 197.

¹³ Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Cuba, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976-1991* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*, 10.

¹⁵ “Interview: Meet Ko Young-hwan, the first diplomat who escaped North Korea,” *New Focus International* (August 22, 2014), <http://newfocusintl.com/ko-young-hwan-unification-preparatory-committee-member/>.

¹⁶ Kim Il Sung, *Selected Works*, vol. 40, (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1995), 117–144.

¹⁷ Byung-Chul Koh, *The Foreign Policy Systems of North and South Korea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 11; Erik Cornell, *North Korea Under Communism: Report of an Envoy to Paradise* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 25.

¹⁸ Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 187, 477 n.76.

¹⁹ The ceremony was one-quarter of the country’s annual budget. See Brian Titley, *Dark Age: The Political Odyssey of Emperor Bokassa* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 91.

²⁰ Department of State telegram from American embassy in Bangui, Central African Republic, “GOCAR and Korea,” (September 10, 1969) National Archives RG 259, Stack 150, Row 64–65, Compartment 12, General Records of the State Department, 1967–1969, Central Foreign Policy Files, Box 2263, Pol KOR N-Afr 1/1/67. I would like to thank Chuck Kraus for sharing these “Central Foreign Policy Files” with me.

²¹ “Kim-Bokassa Joint Communique of May 2, 1978,” *North Korea Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1978) cited in Jon Halliday, “The North Korean Model: Gaps and Questions,” *World Development*, vol. 9, no. 9/10 (1981), 899, n.65.

²² Titley, *Dark Age*, 102.

²³ “Telegram 066.793 from the Romanian Embassy in Pyongyang to the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs,” (July 17, 1978) *North Korea International Documentation Project*, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116497>.

²⁴ Titley, *Dark Age*, 209.

²⁵ Ibid, 105–126.

²⁶ Cornell, *North Korea Under Communism*, 44.

²⁷ Ibid, 79.

²⁸ Telegram from the American embassy in Lagos to the Department of State, “Kim Il Sung in Ibadan Press,” (May 11, 1973), National Archives RG 59, Stack 150, Row 66–67, General Records of the State Department, 1970–1973, Central Foreign Policy Files, Box 2422, Folder Pol KOR N- KUW 3/4/71.

²⁹ “Interview: Meet Ko Young-hwan, the first diplomat who escaped North Korea,” *New Focus International* (August 22, 2014), <http://newfocusintl.com/ko-young-hwan-unification-preparatory-committee-member/>.

³⁰ R.W. Johnson, "Pyongyang's man in Harare," *National Post* (August 11, 2007), <http://www.canada.com/nationalpost/news/story.html?id=038f108a-cc44-4e85-a25f-c32c16736b3e>.

³¹ The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe, *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980–1988*, (Harare Zimbabwe: Africa Synod House, 1997), 45.

³² The Country Study Series by the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, "North Korea's Relations with the Third World," *A Country Study: North Korea* (June 1993), <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-9642.html>.

³³ The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe, *Breaking the Silence*, 1–261.

³⁴ Nack An and Rose An, "North Korean Military Assistance," in John F. Cooper and Daniel S. Papp, eds., *Communist Nations' Military Assistance* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983), 172–173.

³⁵ Hungarian Embassy in the DPRK Report, "Military cooperation between Uganda and North Korea," (July 10, 1975), MOL, XIX-J-1-j Uganda, 1975, 135. doboz, 156–4, 004629/1975. Translated and obtained by Balazs Szalontai. I thank Balazs for sharing these materials with the author.

³⁶ P. Chaigneau and R. Sola, "North Korea as an African Power: A Threat to French Interests," *University of Pretoria Institute for Strategic Studies* (December 1986), 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

³⁸ Post-1972 North Korean literature on Juche is "a stodgy jumble of banalities." B.R. Myers has argued that the true ideology of North Korea is race-based, paranoid nationalism. See B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2010), 45–47.

³⁹ Hungarian Embassy in the DPRK Report, "Visit of an Ethiopian government delegation in the DPRK," (April 28, 1976) MOL, XIX-J-1-j Ethiopia, 1976, 52. doboz, 41–1, 003195/1976. Translated and obtained by Balazs Szalontai.

⁴⁰ "Thesis for a Doctor's Degree 'Revolution and Creation,'" *Korea Today* no. 11, issue 434 (Pyongyang, DPRK: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1992), 24–25.

⁴¹ "Rwanda President Speech's at Pyongyang banquet for Kim Il Sung," (June 16, 1978) Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

⁴² Hungarian Embassy in the DPRK Telegram, "Visit of the president of Mali in the DPRK," (June 2, 1976) MOL, XIX-J-1-j Mali, 1976, 94. doboz, 97–1, 003704/1976. Translated and obtained by Balazs Szalontai.

⁴³ Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (New York: The New Press, 2004), viii–ix, 134–135.

⁴⁴ Cornell, *North Korea Under Communism*, 45.

⁴⁵ Department of State telegram from American embassy in Conakry, Guinea, "Activities of North Korean embassy in Guinea," (July 24, 1967) National Archives RG 259, Stack 150, Row 64–65, Compartment 12, General Records of the State Department, 1967–1969, Central Foreign Policy Files, Box 2263, Pol KOR N-Afr 1/1/67.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ The Preparatory Committee of the Pan-African Seminar on the Juche Idea by Comrade Kim Il Sung, *Documents and Deliberations of the Seminar* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Al-Talia, 1973), 1–182.

⁴⁸ Department of State Airgram from American embassy in Lusaka, “North Korean Propaganda,” (March 2, 1970) National Archives RG 59, Stack 150, Row 66–67, General Records of the State Department, 1970–1973, Central Foreign Policy Files, Box 2423, Folder Pol KOR N- USSR 1/1/70.

⁴⁹ Department of State telegram from American embassy in Addis Ababa, “North Korean activities in Addis,” (March 5, 1970) National Archives RG 59, Stack 150, Row 66–67, General Records of the State Department, 1970–1973, Central Foreign Policy Files, Box 2420, Folder Pol 7 KOR N 1/1/70.

⁵⁰ Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 57.

⁵¹ Hungarian Embassy in the DPRK Ciphred Telegram, “Conference of the ministers of education and culture of the Non-Aligned Movement in Pyongyang,” (August 15, 1983) MOL, XIX-J-1-j Non-Aligned Movement, 1983, 130. doboz, 209–7, 005155/1983. Translated and obtained by Balazs Szalontai.

⁵² “Conference of the ministers of education and culture of the Non-Aligned Movement in Pyongyang,” (August 15, 1983). Translated and obtained by Balazs Szalontai.

⁵³ For examples of these ads, see “All Efforts to Attain The Goal of Eight Million Tons of Grain,” *New York Times* (March 2, 1975), Display Ad 778; “Korea Has Given Birth to One More Great Hero,” *New York Times* (October 8, 1985), Display Ad 11.

⁵⁴ Adrian Buzo, *The Guerilla Dynasty: Politics and Leadership in North Korea* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 265. Chang Ki-Hong, a North Korean laborer who worked at a timber camp in Russia, said, “We are taught that the whole world worships Kim Il Sung. I met Russians who made fun of this Kim worship, and then I realized that he was not in fact worshipped by the whole world.” See Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004), 406.

⁵⁵ Lankov, *The Real North Korea*, 57.

⁵⁶ “Korea’s global GDP ranking stuck in 15th place,” *Yonhap News* (September 25, 2013), <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/business/2013/09/25/47/0502000000AEN20130925001900320F.html>.

⁵⁷ Halliday, “The North Korean Model,” *World Development*, 899.

⁵⁸ Andrew Holloway, *A Year in Pyongyang* (2011), http://www.aidanfc.net/a_year_in_pyongyang_p.html.

⁵⁹ For an example of racism towards African students in the Soviet Union, see Julie Hessler, “Death of an African Student in Moscow: Race, Politics, and the Cold War,” *Cahiers Du Monde Russe*, vol. 47, no. 1–2 (January-June 2006), 33–64. For an example of racism towards African students in China, see John Emmanuel Hevi, *An African Student in China* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1966); Phillip Hsiaoping Liu, “Petty Annoyances?: Revisiting John Emmanuel Hevi’s An African Student in China after 50 years,” *China: An International Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2013), 131–145.

⁶⁰ Benjamin R. Young, “One African Man’s North Korean Juche Adventure,” *NK News* (March 7, 2013), <http://www.nknews.org/2013/03/one-african-mans-north-korean-juche-adventure/>.

⁶¹ Holloway, *A Year in Pyongyang* (2011), http://www.aidanfc.net/a_year_in_pyongyang_p.html.

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⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid..

⁶⁶ Balazs Szalontai, “‘You Have No Political Line of Your Own’: Kim Il Sung and the Soviets, 1953-1964,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* Issue 14/15 (Winter 2003/Spring 2004), 98, 131.

⁶⁷ Benjamin R. Young, “Being African in the Pure-Blooded, Juche Republic,” *NK News* (March 13, 2013), <http://www.nknews.org/2013/03/being-african-in-the-pure-blooded-juche-republic/>.

⁶⁸ “No AIDS in the DPRK,” *Korea Today* no. 5, issue 428 (Pyongyang, DPRK: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1992), 54.

⁶⁹ Monique Macias, “Hanging out with Pyongyang’s International Students,” *NK News* (August 1, 2014), <http://www.nknews.org/2014/08/hanging-out-with-pyongyangs-international-students/>.

⁷⁰ Young, “Being African in the Pure-Blooded, Juche Republic,” *NK News* (March 13, 2013), <http://www.nknews.org/2013/03/being-african-in-the-pure-blooded-juche-republic/>.

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⁷² Benjamin R. Young, “The African Student Protest for Clean Water, 1984,” *NK News* (April 22, 2013), <https://www.nknews.org/2013/04/the-african-student-protest-for-clean-water-in-north-korea-1984/>.

⁷³ Holloway, *A Year in Pyongyang* (2011), http://www.aidanfc.net/a_year_in_pyongyang_p.html.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ However, Teklemariam also remembers Pyongyang as a “safe” city which had a “small, tight knit foreigner community.” See Benjamin R. Young, “Jamaican Bobsleigh? No, Ethiopian Ski Team!” *Reuters* (February 15, 2014), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/15/us-olympics-alpineskiing-ethiopia-idUSBREA1E06T20140215>.

⁷⁶ Benjamin R. Young, “One African Man’s North Korean Juche Adventure,” *NK News* (March 7, 2013), <http://www.nknews.org/2013/03/one-african-mans-north-korean-juche-adventure/>.

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⁷⁸ Holloway, *A Year in Pyongyang* (2011), http://www.aidanfc.net/a_year_in_pyongyang_p.html.

⁷⁹ Gavan McCormack, “Kim Country: Hard Times in North Korea,” *New Left Review* I, no. 198 (March-April 1993), <http://newleftreview.org.proxygw.wrlc.org/I/198/gavan-mccormack-kim-country-hard-times-in-north-korea>.

⁸⁰ Gavan McCormack, “North Korea: KimIISungism Path to Socialism?” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 13, no. 4 (1981), 57.

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⁸³ Kirkwood, *Postcolonial Architecture Through North Korean Modes*, iii.

⁸⁴ Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *Illicit: North Korea’s Evolving Operations to Earn Hard Currency* (Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2014), 31-32.

⁸⁵ North Korean military instructors currently train Uganda’s police forces in martial arts. See “Top North Korean Leader in Uganda to Boost Security Ties,” *Times Live* (October 29, 2014), <http://www.timeslive.co.za/africa/2014/10/29/top-north-korean-leader-in-uganda-to-boost-security-ties>.