

6-2020

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Recommended Citation

Benjamin R. Young, "Cultural Diplomacy with North Korean Characteristics: Pyongyang's Exportation of the Mass Games to the Third World, 1972–1996," *The International History Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (June 2020): 543-555.

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To cite this article: Benjamin R. Young (2020) Cultural Diplomacy with North Korean Characteristics: Pyongyang's Exportation of the Mass Games to the Third World, 1972–1996, *The International History Review*, 42:3, 543-555, DOI: [10.1080/07075332.2019.1609545](https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1609545)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1609545>



Published online: 07 May 2019.



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Cultural Diplomacy with North Korean Characteristics: Pyongyang's Exportation of the Mass Games to the Third World, 1972–1996

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ABSTRACT

During the 1970s and 1980s, the communist government in Pyongyang sent Mass Games instructors to the Third World in order to improve the image of North Korea abroad and promote its version of socialist modernity. The Mass Games, a huge choreographic gymnastics event of 100,000 performers, artistically exhibited the North Korean idea of 'ilsim-dangyeol (single-minded unity).' In the era of decolonization, postcolonial leaders in the emerging Third World turned to East Asia for developmental inspirations and some leaders, notably Idi Amin of Uganda, admired the North Korean model of collectivism and discipline. The Mass Games, epitomized the communalistic values of North Korean political culture, and Pyongyang soon spread the exercises all over Africa via the exportation of instructors. Using U.S. diplomatic reports, South Korean archival documents, and North Korean press reports, this article argues that the dissemination of the North Korean Mass Games to the Third World circulated ideas of self-reliance, national harmony, and patriotism but also introduced Pyongyang's mechanisms of social control, such as state-run cultural performances and involuntary mass participation in artistic events.

KEYWORDS

North Korea; East Asia;
Third World; Africa

Featuring a backdrop of thousands of schoolchildren holding placards with revolutionary slogans and skilled gymnasts in the foreground performing choreographed dances and acrobatic moves, Stalinist music rings throughout the stadium in North Korea's capital city of Pyongyang. This was the scene of North Korea's first Mass Games event in 1946.¹ In North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the Mass Games was and still remains a massive choreographed and rhythmic gymnastics event that is designed to promote discipline, collectivism, physical fitness, and above all, loyalty to the state. The propagandistic performance includes chapters of Korea's history from its woeful status as an oppressed Japanese colony to its glorious rise as a strong and independent nation-state led by the Great Leader, North Korea's founder Kim Il Sung. As a means to foster national pride and unity amongst the people, the Mass Games artistically tells the story of the postcolonial nation state from its inception as a pitiful exploited colony to its almost utopian ascent as an industrialized power that stands on its own sovereign feet. This future-oriented artistic style was later exported to other postcolonial nation states in the decolonizing world by the regime in Pyongyang.²

In the DPRK, Kim Il Sung used the Mass Games as a way to mobilize the youth and showcase his regime's absolute authority. The DPRK's Vice Chairman of the Mass Gymnastics Production Company Kim Jong Ho, said the Mass Games 'represents the ideological theme of the country and nation splendidly through the combination of gymnastics formations, backdrops involving tens of thousands of people, and music' and, that unlike sports where athletes compete for a prize, the Mass Games 'brings pleasure and satisfaction to the performers as well as to the audience, and instills in their hearts hope for the future.'³ As a former anti-Japanese guerilla fighter, Kim Il Sung's expertise was primarily in the realm of military affairs. The artistic authority within the Kim family regime was his son and successor Kim Jong Il who took a special interest in further developing his father's Mass Games. For example, in 1987, Kim Jong Il told a group of North Korean Mass Games experts, 'To be a fully developed communist man, one must acquire a revolutionary ideology, the knowledge of many fields, rich cultural attainments and a healthy and strong physique... Mass gymnastics play an important role in training schoolchildren to acquire these communist qualities.'⁴ Kim Jong Il emphasized that the Mass Games equipped participants with the Korean Workers' Party's concept of Juche.

Often defined as self-reliance, Juche is a North Korean value system allegedly created by Kim Il Sung that emphasizes independence, autarky, and self-sufficiency.⁵ As North Korea cleverly navigated the Sino-Soviet split of the Communist Bloc, the regime in Pyongyang developed its own policy of national autonomy under the rubric of the 'Juche Idea.'⁶ The regime later exported this concept to the decolonizing world as an international solution to the problems of neo-colonialism and foreign domination.⁷ As Kim Il Sung told a Japanese journalist in 1972, 'In a nutshell, the idea of Juche means that the masters of the revolution and the work of construction are the masses of the people.'⁸ Thus, Juche's focus on the 'masses' as a revolutionary force in world politics naturally meshed with the tenets of the Mass Games: collectivism, organization, and mobilization. In his 1987 speech, Kim Jong Il said, 'Through mass gymnastic performances, the Party members and other working people are firmly equipped with our Party's Juche idea, and the validity and great vitality of our Party's lines and policies, the embodiment of the idea, are demonstrated far and wide at home and abroad.' Kim Jong Il later added in speech, 'Only when you deal with the Juche idea and the Party's lines and policies properly in your works can you produce genuine mass gymnastics that can actively contribute to the revolution and construction.'⁹ The Mass Games in North Korea were a vehicle for disseminating Kim Il Sung's Juche idea and thus further consolidating the Kim family regime's absolute autocracy.

Despite the supposedly closed nature of the North Korean state, Pyongyang appropriated and reformulated this artistic brand of collectivist culture from other authoritarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. Stylistically, the major difference between European-style Mass Games and the North Korean ones was the use of a backdrop featuring schoolchildren holding placards and the grandiose scale of the ones in Pyongyang. The regime in Pyongyang then exported their unique style of the Mass Games, often free of charge, to Third World countries during the Cold War era via teams of North Korean instructors and gymnasts. Thus, the Mass Games presents a unique window into North Korea's soft power. As Kim Jong Il described, 'Mass gymnastics make an active contribution to the development of friendly relations with other countries. Many mass gymnastic performances are now shown to foreign visitors to our country, and our experts are sent abroad to produce and disseminate mass gymnastics.' He continued, 'In the course of this, trust between our country and other countries are deepened, and exchanges steadily strengthen ties of friendship, as they support and encourage each other.'¹⁰ In other words, the Mass Games were an important tool of Pyongyang's foreign policy and diplomatic efforts with Third World countries during the Cold War era. They expressed North Korean solidarity and articulated Pyongyang's unique Juche value system in an artistic format. With its emphasis on discipline, national unity, and communalism, the Mass Games were a creative expression of North Korea's socialist values.

Contrary to the contemporary labels placed on the DPRK as 'secretive,' 'remote,' and 'rogue,' North Korea during the Cold War era was a highly active agent on the international scene that both embraced and exported the particular mode of collectivist culture known as the Mass Games. Using documents from the U.S. National Archives and South Korean Diplomatic Archives, North Korean press reports and literature, and oral history interviews, this cultural and diplomatic history is the first comprehensive study to specifically focus on the DPRK's exportation of the Mass Games to the Third World during the Cold War era.¹¹ This article challenges the notion of the DPRK as inward looking, hermitic, and isolated and uses the exportation of the Mass Games to the Third World as a way to historicize North Korea as an internationalist state during the Cold War era.

Third Worldism in the 'Hermit Kingdom'

First coined by French demographer Alfred Sauvy in 1952, the term 'Third World' referred to non-aligned countries and was compared to the Third Estate, the common people, of the French Ancien Régime.¹² In 1955, the Bandung Conference in Indonesia brought together for the first time heads of state from the decolonizing Afro-Asian world.¹³ With this historic event, Third World started to take shape as a real political force and the term was further plunged into global revolutionary discourse with the 1961 publication of Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*.¹⁴ As Vijay Prashad explains, the Third World was not a geographic area but a global project that prioritized anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism.¹⁵ It was a reaction to Cold War bipolarity, the rise of revolutionary nationalisms, and the sudden overthrow of imperialist regimes by national liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Unlike the negative connotation associated with the term 'Third World' today, those in the decolonizing world, which sought an alternative system different from U.S.-style liberal democracy and Soviet-style socialism, used the word proudly during the Cold War era. As a postcolonial communist state, North Korea used the term, 'Third World,' in its own propaganda as it had one foot in the anti-colonial Third World and the other in the socialist Second World.¹⁶ The Third World was also an important site of inter-Korean competition for the governments in Seoul and Pyongyang as newly independent countries developed in the decolonizing world.¹⁷ Thus, Pyongyang functioned as a unique hub of socialist cooperation and Third Worldism during the Cold War era.

With the opening of former Eastern bloc archives in the 1990s, a new Cold War history emerged that reframed communist powers as rational actors and smaller nations as having agency and not acting as mere proxies of the world's superpowers.¹⁸ Recently, the Third World has received considerable attention by historians as a battleground of ideologies and developmental theories during the Cold War era.¹⁹ While North Korean archives remain closed to researchers, this article uses South Korean archival documents, U.S. diplomatic wires, and North Korean press reports to shed light on Pyongyang's dissemination of the Mass Games to the Third World. Since Pyongyang could not compete with the economically resurgent Republic of Korea (ROK, the official title of South Korea) when it came to sending financial aid to the Third World in the 1970s and 1980s, the Kim family regime exported specific niches, such as the Mass Games. This event, which promoted youth mobilization and loyalty to the state, appealed to postcolonial governments seeking quick solutions to their developmental crises of state legitimacy and fostering political support amongst the masses.

Many nascent leaders in the Third World, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, also understood the power of the Mass Games in mobilizing youth populations and fostering patriotism during the era of decolonization. Thus, they sought North Korean assistance in forming their own local versions. According to a 2002 North Korean book, the DPRK government sent Mass Games instructors to 48 different countries, most of which were located in the Third World, on ninety-four different occasions.²⁰ Beginning in the mid-1970s, North Korea exported this particular type

of collectivist culture to sub-Saharan Africa as a way to spread the virtues of the Kim family regime and promote the ideals of the proper socialist citizen, such as selflessness, patriotism, and comradeship. The Mass Games was an artistic manifestation of North Korea's authoritarian 'single-minded unity (*ilsim-dangyeol*)' concept.²¹ As article 63 of North Korea's Constitution states, 'In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea the rights and duties of citizens are based on the collectivist principle, "One for all and all for one."²²

Historical context of the mass games

The Mass Games in the DPRK were massive as they typically included over 100,000 performers and involved months of brutally intense preparation.²³ Due to their sheer size and grandiosity, North Korea's Mass Games has received considerable attention from foreign observers and have been a frequent sight of intrigue for Western tourists visiting the DPRK.²⁴ As North Korea's top Mass Games planner Hong Si Gun said to a *Wall Street Journal* reporter in 1989, 'We don't say our mass games are the first in the world, but many heads of state and tourists from other countries have seen them and says ours are the best.'²⁵ The DPRK's style of Mass Games, with its emphasis on grandiosity and precision, later acquired such an international reputation that they even taught their Chinese neighbors how to perform mass gymnastic pieces. Chen Weiya, a Chinese director famous internationally for his choreography of large events such as the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, said of a May 2001 North Korean-instructed performance in Beijing, 'This is a piece of very high quality which cannot be produced by either the United States or Australia. Such a great piece can be created only by the [North] Korean specialists.'²⁶ North Korea's Mass Games bolstered the Kim family regime's international status and prestige.

The proliferation of North Korea's Mass Games began in Somalia and then soon spread throughout sub-Saharan Africa during the 1970s, 1980s, and even into the 1990s. The most intense exposure to the North Korean-style Mass Games occurred in Idi Amin's Uganda, which sought the same social control and mass mobilization mechanisms wielded by Pyongyang. However, the Mass Games often encountered resistance from locals that disliked the foreign communist essence of these artistic demonstrations. This piece roughly follows a chronological approach and analyzes the dissemination of the Mass Games throughout the decolonizing world.

Mass games take hold in Somalia and Uganda

The first foreign leader to recognize the value of North Korea's version of the Mass Games was Somali leader Siad Barre, who visited the DPRK in 1971. However, diplomatic ties between Somalia and North Korea began 4 years earlier when a North Korean delegation visited Somalia in early 1967 and established diplomatic relations with Aden Abdulle Osman Daar's government. At a dinner party honoring the North Korean delegation, President of the Somali National Assembly Sheikh Mukhtar Mohamed Hussein said, 'The dimensions of the historical tragedy, engineered by imperialists in our countries and our peoples have suffered from its bitterness and ferocity, is manifested in dividing great Korea into two parts and peaceful Somalia into five parts.'²⁷ Two years later, Somali military general Siad Barre ousted the democratic government in a bloodless coup. Barre visited the DPRK for the first time in 1971 and met Kim Il Sung.²⁸ Shortly after returning from the DPRK and with the help of the Somali Supreme Revolutionary Council's commanding officer Abdirizak Mohamud Abubakar, the two established a pervasive personality cult based on the Kim Il Sung model. Similar to the North Korean leader, Barre assumed titles that stressed his greatness and absolute authority, such as the 'father of wisdom,' 'father of the nation,' and 'teacher of the revolution.'²⁹ In 1972, a joint communiqué was signed between North Korea and Somalia in which 'both sides expressed their firm convictions that the only way

to liberate Southern Africa and other colonially held territories is by waging an armed struggle.³⁰

In addition to adopting Kim Il Sung-style titles and a DPRK-inspired personality cult, Barre also borrowed North Korea's mass gymnastics event. According to Somalia scholar I.M Lewis, 'Wherever he went, the President was greeted by mass applause and adulation, feted and saluted by his loyal subjects who literally danced before him—to [North] Korean choreography.' Lewis recalled that the 'intriguingly oriental flavor' of this extravagant state pageantry conflicted with the traditional egalitarian ways of pastoral Somali society.³¹ Islamic influences in Somalia with its position of the Prophet Muhammad as the supreme deity clashed with the Asian communist aesthetics of the Mass Games that promoted the national leader as god-like and almost divine in his revolutionary genius. Pastoral traditions, Islamic influences, and North Korean socialism made for strange bedfellows in Barre's Somalia.

For a welcome ceremony for Ugandan dictator Idi Amin on October 22, 1972, the Somali government performed a North Korean-style Mass Games event. With placards in the back displaying revolutionary slogans, such as 'Long Live Comrade Siad' and 'Let Us Develop Industry,' and images of flourishing Somali irrigation systems, Barre's regime indigenized Kim Il Sung's Mass Games. Based on archival video footage, Amin seemed impressed by the choreographed event. The sheer visual similarity between North Korean and Somali Mass Games footage most likely indicates that North Korean specialists directly helped Barre's regime organize it.³² Somalia was the unlikely starting point for the diffusion of North Korean-style Mass Games around the Third World.

In 1973, Amin began seeking North Korean assistance in forming his own version of the Mass Games. According to a May 1973 report from the U.S. embassy in Rwanda, Amin reportedly 'talked highly of the high standard of gymnastics in North Korea.'³³ The U.S. embassy in Uganda noted that the DPRK would send four to five instructors in the summer of 1973 to train Ugandans in the art of the Mass Games. The U.S. embassy in Uganda added to their report, 'This will reportedly include the formation of [a] card-section that will be taught how to create the heroic face of General Amin.'³⁴ In late November 1973, a North Korean-directed Mass Games instruction course began in the Ugandan region of Eastern Buganda. The District Commissioner Solomon Jubilee 'said that the importance of gymnastics exercises cannot be overemphasized' and that 'the idea behind such courses is to produce strong, efficient, healthy, and courageous men and women who can sustain every situation such as the economic war.'³⁵

Beginning in late 1972, Amin's 'economic war' expelled South Asians from Uganda and confiscated businesses and property owned by South Asian and European residents. This economic policy attempted to redistribute Uganda's wealth to the indigenous population but instead created hardship and mass poverty.³⁶ The 'Ugandization' of Uganda's national economy naturally found parallels with North Korea's Juche ideology, which stressed self-reliance and self-sufficiency. The editor of the state-run newspaper, *Voice of Uganda*, noted the similarities between the two approaches in an op-ed and said 'that the great Juche idea is a phrase for economic war.'³⁷ During a May 1974 visit to Uganda, the DPRK's Foreign Minister Ho Dam stated that North Korea 'highly appreciated the progressive reforms introduced by the Second Republic of Uganda to eliminate the aftermaths of the imperialist and colonialist rule, build the national economy and culture, and Ugandanize the economy.'³⁸ In addition to finding common ground on the merits of the Mass Games, the Ugandan and North Korean leaderships also advocated for similar anti-imperialist economic policies despite their disastrous outcomes.

However, some Ugandan officials did not view the Mass Games as a worthwhile or productive use of time. Idi Amin held a briefing for district representatives in 1973 in order 'to dismiss unfounded and shallow allegations spread by some misguided elements that gymnastics was a communist oriented game.' During the meeting, Amin thanked Kim Il Sung for sending the instructors free of charge but assured the district representatives that the games were not designed to promote communism. Amin said that 'by doing gymnastics you keep your body

physically fit.' A *Voice of Uganda* article on the 'advantages of gymnastics' stated 'that gymnastics is a new feature in Uganda's history and some people deserve pardon when they sincerely ask themselves: "What is gymnastics and what is the purpose of gymnastics training?"' The article concluded that the 'Mass Games is one of the most powerful weapons in mobilizing and disciplining the people. It is a fine sport in educating the masses morally and physically.'³⁹ Despite the obvious communist North Korean connection to the Mass Games, the Ugandan government assured locals that the game merely promoted physical fitness and patriotism.

In October 1973, schoolchildren in Entebbe performed the first ever Ugandan Mass Games on Ugandan Independence Day. According to the headmaster of the school, 'Our children liked [the] gymnastics game and wanted to learn more.' The headmaster added, 'Almost every headmaster wanted his children to participate in the gymnastics game. Some even complained why their children were not invited for training. I have found from the schoolchildren that if one is involved in gymnastics, he always wants to learn more and more without rest.'⁴⁰ North Korean-style Mass Games seemed to have a degree of genuine popularity amongst Ugandan teachers and students.

A few months later, in January 1974, the second North Korean-style Mass Games performance took place in Uganda, which commemorated the second anniversary of the founding of Amin's Second Republic. According to the Ugandan state-run media, Amin watched the performance and 'was highly impressed by their [the North Korean instructors] high standard of cooperation, discipline, and love for the people of Uganda.' Amin added that the 'North Korea instructors had made many friends in Uganda and earned a good name for their country.' Amin planned to invite the North Korean instructors back to Uganda for the following year's celebrations. The head of the North Korean mission in Uganda Han Ryong Bin told Amin 'that the success of the training of Ugandans in the art of gymnastics was due to the great interest the General [Idi Amin] had taken in their work.'⁴¹ While the North Koreans struggled to export raw materials and finished products to the Third World, they succeeded in developing specific authoritarian niches, such as the Mass Games, which they exported around the world. The North Korean leadership exported these forms of soft power as a way improve their image abroad as a modern socialist state and establish closer ties with Third World governments.

The North Korean style Mass Games clearly made an impression on the Ugandan leadership as Amin continued to praise the work of the North Korean instructors in Uganda's state-run media. In May 1974, a North Korean delegation visited Uganda and met with Amin. During his meeting with the officials from the DPRK, Amin complimented the North Korean instructors who recently left as they 'helped a lot in the mass mobilization program of Uganda.' Amin stated that he wanted to have the instructors back again soon.⁴² Later, in October 1974, Amin again praised the work of the North Korean instructors and told the DPRK's ambassador to Uganda that 'North Korea is one of the best friends of Africa because the country has experienced defeating imperialists, colonialists, and neo-colonialists.'⁴³

Amin spread word in Africa that North Korean-taught Mass Games were an effective political tool. In 1974, Amin 'said the [North] Koreans had been such good instructors that very many leaders in East and Central Africa have been making inquiries about how they had managed to train Ugandans in such a short time.'⁴⁴ This newfound interest in North Korean-orchestrated mass celebrations surely encouraged the regime in Pyongyang, which sought an increased presence in Africa. Due to their initial success in training Ugandans, the DPRK's reputation for organizing mass celebrations spread throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

The diffusion of North Korean Mass Games in Africa and beyond

North Korea sent Mass Games instructors to Burundi in early October 1974 and trained students in preparation for President Michel Micombero's Revolution Day celebrations, held in late

November 1974.⁴⁵ According to the U.S. embassy in Bujumbura, the intense daily training sessions disrupted the school schedule of these students but the hard work paid off as the students held 'an impressive display for dignitaries with exercises and tableaux depicting [the] achievements of [the] Micombero era and Burundi's devotion to African causes.'⁴⁶ The organization, discipline, and flashiness of North Korean-style mass celebrations appealed to African leaders and officials who admired the collectivist aesthetics and mindset of the DPRK. Four years later, the DPRK government once again sent Mass Games instructors to Burundi. According to the *Rodong Sinmun*, the newspaper of the Korean Workers' Party, the President of Burundi Jean-Baptiste Bagaza met the North Korean Mass Games instructors in early October 1978 and said, 'The mass gymnastic display taught by our Korean friends is of high educational value and greatly encourages the people of Burundi in the struggle of building a new society free from exploitation and oppression.' He thanked Kim Il Sung 'from the bottom of his heart' for sending a Mass Gymnastics delegation to Burundi.⁴⁷

Although the North Korean instructors tried to modify the Mass Games to fit local traditions and customs, African Mass Games remained heavily influenced by DPRK-style aesthetics and political culture. In the summer of 1975, North Korean instructors trained Rwandan students for their National Day celebrations, which 'replaced Rwandan folklore presentations with North Korean-directed mass movement tableaux and flash card spectacles featuring political themes.' According to the U.S. embassy in Kigali, 'Although [the] participants were Rwandan and some effort [was] made to incorporate Rwandan scenes, [the] style and content were neo-Pyongyang.'⁴⁸

North Korea later sent Mass Games instructors to Guinea and Togo in 1976 and Madagascar in 1977. In Guinea, the North Koreans organized 'impressive' mass drills, music, and card displays for the sixth anniversary of the 1970 Portuguese-backed attack on Conakry.⁴⁹ In Togo, the North Koreans trained thousands of schoolchildren and a military unit in the art of the Mass Games for the tenth anniversary of Togolese leader Gnassingbé Eyadéma's rule.⁵⁰ In 1977, the North Koreans instructors assisted the Malagasy government in constructing a card show for their National Day celebrations. According to the U.S. embassy in Madagascar, 'The card show really turned the crowd on. North Koreans, who had been drilling all the participants for months, were very much in evidence and visibly proud of their pupils.' The North Korean-inspired card show featured images of Malagasy leader Didier Ratsiraka but also more overtly political content, such as a picture of Malagasy farmers and soldiers choking the neck of a Western capitalist. The card show also included anti-imperialist rhetoric such as signs stating, 'Death to Capitalists, Imperialists, and Racists' and 'Down with Capitalism.'⁵¹ Ratsiraka met the North Korean instructors on June 28, 1977 and 'spoke of the successes made by the [North] Korean mass gymnastics display experts sent by the great leader, Comrade Kim Il Sung and expressed satisfaction with the ever more excellent development of friendly and cooperative relations between [North] Korea and Madagascar.'⁵² North Korea used their Mass Games instructors as a cheap but effective means of spreading their anti-Western and anti-imperialist ideas in Africa.

North Korea continued to deploy Mass Games instructors as a means of spreading its influence throughout sub-Saharan Africa in the late 1970s. In 1978, the North Koreans once again assisted the Burundian government in the art of mass celebrations and organized a performance for the seventeenth anniversary of the ruling Uprona Party, which was 'flawlessly executed' and included a 'battalion sized army unit which simulated tank, recoilless rifle, and bayonet fighting to the accompaniment of explosive charges set off at one end of the field.'⁵³

In 1978 and 1979, the North Koreans once again assisted the Rwanda's ruling party, the National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development (MRND), in their National Day celebrations. According to the U.S. embassy in Kigali, the North Koreans transformed primary schoolchildren from a 'rag-tag' group to a 'regimented' unit that yelled cheers on cue and the secondary schoolchildren no longer showcased their livestock at the celebrations but rather flipped and held North Korean-painted portraits of the Rwandan leader and signs with

revolutionary slogans. In addition to giving the Rwandan government mobile loudspeakers for the celebrations, the North Koreans also taught the Rwandan army band, which was infamous for performing off-key renditions of Christmas music, their brand of revolutionary music.⁵⁴ In 1979, the U.S. embassy in Kigali concluded, 'While we ourselves would have preferred more local folklore and less [North] Korean influence, it is clear that Rwandans take great pleasure and pride in impressive coordinated Korean-taught activities of hundreds, sometimes thousands, at a time.'⁵⁵ Journalist Philip Gourevitch, who visited Rwanda after the Genocide in the mid-1990s, interviewed individuals who had a less positive recollection of the Mass Games. According to Gourevitch, 'Of course, everyone turned out, as the ubiquitous MRND-party enforcers required, to chant and dance in adulation of the President at mass pageants of political "animation," but such mandatory civic cheer could not mask the growing political discontent in much of Rwandan society.'⁵⁶ North Korean-imported Mass Games may have mobilized the youth in Rwanda but their mandatory nature and over-the-top political antics often disillusioned local peoples.

In the 1979, the North Korean government expanded their Mass Games instruction beyond Africa as they sent instructors to the South American-Caribbean nation of Guyana.⁵⁷ Professor Janis Prince, a former student participant in the Guyanese Mass Games during the 1980s, recalls the training as primarily consisting of 'baking in the sun for hours on end, with very little to do' and remembers her North Korean instructors as 'stoic and highly disciplined.' Prince said she never personally got to know her North Korean instructors and saw them as 'robotic' rather than harsh or kind.⁵⁸

Predictably, the official Guyanese government opinion on the Mass Games was more positive. In 1980, Guyana's state-run newspaper said that the North Korean-imported Mass Games 'are here to stay' and the first official event held in Georgetown's National Park was apparently 'a resounding success.' After the event, the leader of the North Korean Mass Games instructor squad, Kim Il Nam, told the local press that 'Guyanese children are really quick to grasp' the complex choreography of the event. However, after the first year, the Guyanese people increasingly took control of the content of their Mass Games. For example, in 1981, Guyana's Mass Games featured indigenous folk songs and historical spiritual hymns from African slaves. The presentation told the story of Guyana's national development and as one viewer recalled, 'It was easy to feel proud.'⁵⁹ In fact, a recent 2017 letter to the editor in the *Guyana Chronicle* fondly remembers the Mass Games of their youth. The letter said, 'All the schoolchildren would get ready for Mass Games and enjoy being proud Guyanese, but still complain about the hot sun. Yet they loved being outside in the fresh air, avoiding class and enjoyed the positive energy of people smiling all the time.'⁶⁰ North Korea's Mass Games tended to gain traction in the Third World when locals infused their own indigenous traditions and local customs into the imported event.

The Mass Games caught the eye of another figure in the Caribbean region. Shortly after a socialist movement toppled the pro-Western government and established a revolutionary government on the Caribbean island nation of Grenada in March 1979, a Grenadian envoy visited the DPRK in order to form diplomatic ties with Kim Il Sung's regime. Selwyn Strachan, Grenada's Minister of Communications and Works and Labor, was part of this 1979 delegation and said he was impressed with North Korea's Mass Games and the precision with which it was performed. He noted, 'The training was amazing.' He tried to bring back the Mass Games to Grenada for the first anniversary celebration of the Grenadian Revolution. However, North Korean Mass Games instructors were never sent to Grenada.⁶¹

North Korea's reputation for organizing mass celebrations also reached several other African countries in the 1980s and 1990s. In May 1984, Pyongyang sent seven Mass Games instructors, four men and three women, to Burkina Faso and trained students for the first anniversary of the Burkinabe Revolution. According to a government-run Burkinabe newspaper, the North Korean-inspired collective movements were 'the most beautiful spectacle of the celebration.'⁶²

Pyongyang also sent seven Mass Games instructors to Ghana in December 1984 and trained nearly five thousand five hundred Ghanaian students for a Ghanaian Revolution ceremony. A Ghanaian newspaper labeled the Mass Games 'spectacular gymnastics.'⁶³ North Korean Mass Games instructors also trained Zambian youth in 1984 for the country's independence celebrations and met with Zambia's President Kenneth Kaunda.⁶⁴

In 1980, Zimbabwe's leader Robert Mugabe visited Pyongyang and brought along his Minister of Education and Minister of Youth and Sport in order 'to see the excellent work which the North Koreans had done in organizing youth and education and to consider what lessons Zimbabwe could draw from this.' Mugabe 'said that he had been most impressed with the discipline and efficiency of the various gymnastic and other demonstrations laid on for his benefit by youth groups.'⁶⁵ According to one of his former supporters, Mugabe 'came back almost a different man' after visiting North Korea in 1980. Mugabe 'was tremendously impressed by the stadiums full of people doing mass calisthenics. He came back wanting to become president, like Kim.'⁶⁶ In the mid-1980s, the North Korean government sent Mass Games instructors to help Mugabe's regime with their own mass demonstrations. In January 1987, Mugabe met the DPRK's ambassador to Zimbabwe, Hi Chun-Ok, and 'expressed thanks to the Korean mass gymnastic display experts for their active help to Zimbabwe in gymnastic display.'⁶⁷ The social mobilization and sense of loyalty fostered by North Korea's Mass Games seemingly appealed to Mugabe's nascent autocracy.

In addition, the North Koreans dispatched instructors to Angola in 1989 for its first national cultural festival, which featured a large Mass Games event of eight thousand people, and to Namibia in 1990 for its Independence Day.⁶⁸ In 1996, North Korean instructors helped the Nigerian government coordinate Mass Games performances for its Independence Day celebrations. In honor of Nigeria's Gold Medal in soccer at the 1996 Olympics, one of the scenes featured a soccer player kicking a ball into the goal. This scene excited spectators so much that some even ran onto the field and danced with the gymnasts during the performance. Wahab Rawal, a spectator at the event, said, 'Our football team was very successful at the Olympic Games in Atlanta, creating a global sensation, but today's performance has given our people as much delight as our football team did.' Rawal enthusiastically added, 'I would like to extend my utmost thanks to Comrade Kim Jong Il, who has sent excellent mass gymnastics specialists to bring about a second ecstasy in Nigeria.'⁶⁹

The DPRK government also held international workshops in Pyongyang for foreigners eager to know 'the secret,' as a North Korean book put it, of their Mass Games. From July 18–30, 1989, the North Korean government held its first international workshop on Mass Games. According to a North Korean book on the subject, 'The participants expressed satisfaction with the workshop, saying that it helped them better understand mass gymnastics through a good combination of other programs, such as visits to places where the preparation for mass gymnastics was underway and experience-swapping sessions.' A 'member of an African mass gymnastics inspection team' suggested that the DPRK put on a workshop abroad as he had 'learned much at a special course on the subject in [North] Korea.'⁷⁰ The DPRK government also held a second Mass Games workshop event in Pyongyang in 1992. The Mass Games was one of the few areas in which Pyongyang eclipsed Seoul in international status.

North Korea's niche as an effective organizer of mass celebrations popularized the DPRK's national image in the Third World. Due to its small size and relatively weak economy, North Korea could never coerce a foreign country into accepting its political positions in regards to Korean unification. Thus, Pyongyang deployed Mass Games instructors, mostly free of charge, as a way in which to attract and persuade Third World governments to side with them vis-à-vis Seoul in international forums on Korea-related matters. The Mass Games were more popular than other forms of North Korean soft power, such as literature, in the Third World as it was not overt propaganda. Many peoples in the Third World seemingly appreciated the physical benefits,

flashy aesthetics, militaristic style, and collectivist approach of the Mass Games. The Mass Games was authoritarianism hidden under a veneer of regimentation and revolutionary spirit.

Conclusion

Joseph Nye, the Harvard political scientist who first coined the term soft power in the 1980s, states that a nation's soft power depends primarily on its resources of 'culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).'⁷¹ Kim Il Sung's regime exported the Mass Games as a way to spread the DPRK's soft power. Culturally, the Mass Games promoted North Korea's brand of socialism abroad with its emphasis on mass participation, organization, discipline, and collectivism. Politically, the Mass Games encouraged state loyalty, patriotic fervor, and obedience. In terms of foreign policy, North Korea's exportation of the Mass Games championed Third World cooperation and solidarity. Compared to other forms of North Korean soft power, the Mass Games proved to be more successful in improving the DPRK's international status as modern, revolutionary, and anti-imperialist.

One even could argue that Kim Il Sung was the originator of *Hallyu* (Korean wave), the term widely associated with the contemporary global dissemination of South Korean pop culture, as he first distributed the (North) Korean cultural phenomenon of the Mass Games to the Third World. However, as evidenced by the current popularity of South Korean pop music and dramas, the ROK was late to the soft power competition but proved to be far more successful in circulating its cultural products around the world.⁷² Nonetheless, North Korea's Mass Games garnered some degree of support amongst governments in the Third World. Perhaps due to its perceived foreignness, the Mass Games also gained the sympathy of many local participants who seemingly enjoyed participating in this exotic event taught by instructors from a faraway and little-known communist country.

During the mid to late 1990s, the DPRK's economy plummeted and North Koreans suffered a horrific famine.⁷³ As state resources dwindled, the exportation of the Mass Games predictably halted. While the DPRK's government domestically began the 'Arirang' Mass Games in 2004, instructors are no longer sent abroad to train the world's anti-colonial peoples in this distinctly North Korean event. Nonetheless, this period of North Korean knowledge circulation with the Third World should neither be forgotten nor disregarded as purely amusing, bizarre, or curious. The DPRK interacted with the Third World on a transnational level that involved the circulation of ideas, peoples, and socialist traditions across national boundaries. When it came to the exportation of the Mass Games, the 'Hermit Kingdom' was far from hermitic.

Notes

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2. Burnett, 'Let Morning Shine Over Pyongyang', 3-32.
3. Unknown author, *Mass Gymnastics in Korea* (Pyongyang, DPRK: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2002), 6. Found at the British Library, London, UK.
4. Kim Jong Il, *On Further Developing Mass Gymnastics in Korea: Speech to Mass Gymnastics Producers*. Trans. Korea Friendship Association (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, [1987] 2006), <https://www.korea-dpr.com/lib/Kim%20Jong%20Il%20-%205/ON%20FURTHER%20DEVELOPING%20MASS%20GYMNASTICS.pdf> (Accessed March 11, 2019).
5. I borrow the idea of Juche as a 'value system' from Mitchell Lerner, 'Mostly Propaganda in Nature,' *North Korea International Documentation Project*, Working Paper #3 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2010), 25-6.
6. Kim Deok, 'Sino-Soviet Dispute and North Korea', *Korea Observer* vol. 10, no. 1 (Spring 1979), 3-30.

7. Benjamin R. Young, *Guerilla Internationalism: North Korea's Relations with the Third World, 1957-1989* (Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University 2018).
8. Kim Il Sung, *For the Independent Peaceful Reunification of Korea* (New York: International Publishers Co., 1975), 173.
9. Kim Jong Il, *On Further Developing Mass Gymnastics in Korea*.
10. Kim Jong Il, *On Further Developing Mass Gymnastics in Korea*.
11. The only other scholarly accounts investigating North Korea's exportation of the Mass Games to the Third World focus specifically on the South American country of Guyana. See Moe Taylor, "Only a disciplined people can build a nation': North Korean Mass Games and Third Worldism in Guyana, 1980-1992," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol. 13, Issue 4, No.2, January 26, 2015. <http://apjif.org/2015/13/4/Moe-Taylor/4258.html> (Accessed May 28, 2018); Taylor, "'One Hand Can't Clap': Guyana and North Korea, 1974-1985," *Journal of Cold War Studies* vol. 17, no. 1 (Winter 2015), 41-63. For studies on North Korea's foreign policy during the Cold War, see Lyong Choi and Il-young Jeong, "North Korea and Zimbabwe, 1978-1982: From the Strategic Alliance to the Symbolic Comradeship Between Kim Il Sung and Robert Mugabe," *Cold War History* vol. 17, no. 4 (June 2017), 329-49. Jae Kyu Park, Byung Chul Koh, and Tae-Hwan Kwak, eds., *The Foreign Relations of North Korea: New Perspectives* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987). Balazs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953-1964* (Washington, DC: Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); Benjamin R. Young, 'Guerilla Internationalism: North Korea's Relations with the Third World, 1957-1989,' (Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, 2018).
12. Alfred Sauvy, 'Trois mondes, une planète,' *L'Observateur*, (August 14, 1952).
13. Amitav Acharya and See Seng Tan, eds., *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008); Naoko Shimazu, 'Diplomacy As Theatre: Staging the Bandung Conference of 1955,' *Modern Asian Studies* 48, no. 1 (2014), 225-52.
14. Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: François Maspero éditeur, 1961).
15. Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2008).
16. In a 1999 journal article, Bruce Cumings went so far as to state, 'I often take North Korea to be the vanguard of the Third World, anti-American rejectionist front.' See Bruce Cumings, 'American Century and the Third World,' *Diplomatic History*, 23, No. 2 (1999), 357.
17. While North Korea's Mass Games became well known around the world, South Korea once orchestrated mass choreographed celebrations of their own during Park Chung Hee's authoritarian rule. In the 1970s, the dictatorships on both sides of the 38th parallel used the Mass Games as political mobilization tools that reaffirmed loyalty to the state and upheld the image of their nation as healthy and modern. As a way to combat North Korea's growing cultural influence in Africa and gain the support of the Liberian government in international forums, the South Korean government sent three of their own Mass Games instructors to Monrovia in November 1975. See 'Han'gugüi taeraiberia masügeim kyogwandan p'agyön chiwön, 1975-76,' March 23, 1976, ROK Diplomatic Archives (2006) Roll no. M-0034, File no. 14.
18. Jian Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001); John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1998); Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006); Lorenz Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* (Washington, DC: Stanford University Press, 2009); Tony Smith, "New Bottles for New Wine: A Pericentric Framework for the Study of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* vol. 24, no. 4 (Fall 2000), 567-91.
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20. *Mass Gymnastics in Korea*, 42.
21. This concept was first promoted by Kim Il Sung in 1967 as a power consolidation measure. See Fyodor Tertitskiy, '1967: Transition to Absolute Autocracy in North Korea,' in Adam Cathcart, Robert Winstanley-

- Chesters, Christopher K. Green, eds., *Change and Continuity in North Korean Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 82-94.
22. *Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (adopted on September 5, 1998 by the first session of the Supreme People's Assembly).
 23. Personal accounts of North Korean defectors who participated in the Mass Games attest to the harsh training and treatment they endured. Some participants were beaten for minor mistakes and endured long hours of training with little to no food or bathroom breaks. See Kwak Dae Jung, 'Indite Arirang: Paying Kim Jong Il for the Blood of NK Children,' *Daily NK* (October 13, 2005). <http://english.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catald=nk00100&num=310> (Accessed May 28, 2018).
 24. For recent scholarly accounts of North Korea's 'Arirang' Mass Games, see Burnett, 'Let Morning Shine Over Pyongyang,' 3-32; Rudiger Frank, 'The Arirang Mass Games of North Korea,' *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* vol. 11, issue 46, no. 2 (December 2013), <http://japanfocus.org/>; Suk-Young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010) 260-308; David P. Terry & Andrew F. Wood, 'Presenting Juche: Audiencing North Korea's 2012 Arirang Mass Games,' *Text and Performance Quarterly* 35 (2015), 177-201. There was also a popular documentary about North Korea's Mass Games produced by Koryo Tours (a Western travel agency to the DPRK) co-founder Nicholas Bonner, entitled *A State of Mind* (2004).
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 27. Airgram, From AmEmbassy, Mogadishu to Dept. of State, Subject: GSR Recognition of DPRK, April 29, 1967. Folder POL, KOR N- S AFR, 1/1/67. Box 2263. Record Group (RG) 59 General Records of the Department of State, Central Foreign Policy Files 1967-1969, Political and Defense, Pol KOR N-AFR to POL 31-1 KOR N-US. U.S National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) II in College Park, MD.
 28. John Markakis, 'Radical Military Regimes in the Horn of Africa,' in John Markakis, Michael Waller, eds., *Military Marxist Regimes in Africa* (London: Routledge, 2013), 37.
 29. Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, *The Suicidal State in Somalia: The Rise and Fall of the Siad Barre Regime* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2016), 120, 121.
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 32. For a video of the Somali Mass Games event, see 'Siad Barre Hosts Idi Amin of Uganda in Mogadishu 23.10.1972,' *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OyoRgiSkbw> (Accessed September 21, 2017).
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 36. Alicia Decker, *In Idi Amin's Shadow: Women, Gender, and Militarism in Uganda* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014).
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 39. 'Advantages of Gymnastics,' (Date unknown) found in 'Puk'an t'm uganda kwan'gye, 1973,' ROK Diplomatic Archives (2004) Roll no. D-014, File no. 34
 40. 'Advantages of Gymnastics,' (Date unknown) found in 'Puk'an t'm uganda kwan'gye, 1973,' ROK Diplomatic Archives (2004) Roll no. D-014, File no. 34
 41. 'Gymnastic critics "ashamed,"' AY (February 8, 1974) found in 'Puk'an t'm uganda kwan'gye, 1974,' ROK Diplomatic Archives (2005) Roll no. D-017, File no. 34.
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 44. 'Gymnastic critics "ashamed,"' AY (February 8, 1974) found in 'Puk'an t'm uganda kwan'gye, 1974,' ROK Diplomatic Archives (2005) Roll no. D-017, File no. 34.
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60. Letter to the Editor, 'Not Too Busy to Have a Good Time,' *Guyana Chronicle* (January 29, 2017).
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