Review article:

Contested Histories and Entangled Memories: Cuba and Africa Relations

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1. Introduction

The publication of *Cuba and Africa 1959–1994: Writing an Alternative Atlantic History* is not just timely. The study is also a critical resource to assist modern society, particularly Africans, to grapple with the legacy of Cuba/Africa relations in a manner different from the traditional and dominant Cold War paradigm characterising much of this historiography. As the volume demonstrates, Cuba's involvement in Africa is controversial far less as a matter of monetary quantum and fact but more due to Cuba suffering an unresolved duality in Africa arising from its entanglement in the Cold War, the struggle against colonialism and apartheid on the continent, and its historical connection to Africa dating back to the era of slavery (Ferrer 2021, 3–6). Consequently, Sebastian Conrad's (2003, 85) notion of "entangled memories" and Marouf Hasian's (2007, 394) "contested histories" best illuminate the complex relationships (Miller 2003, 149) between Africans and the making of independent Africa in partnership with Cuba.

Though the title of the study suggests it is focused on Cuba's relationship with Africa, the book does not claim to be comprehensive about the history of Cuba's relationship with Africa. It is, instead, the beginning of reclaiming and reconstituting an

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alternative history of Cuba's Atlantic experience from slavery to African independence. Born from discussions and papers first presented at a conference in 2016 at the Institute for Humanities in Africa (HUMA) at the University of Cape Town, the book ends with the controversy of Cuban exiles in Florida and their dreadful treatment of Nelson Mandela's first visit to Miami in 1993. Concluding the volume in this manner is prescient. While there is not a single chapter on South Africa or by a South African scholar in the book, the publication locates South Africa's experience with Cuba as a critical and integral part of the history of Cuba and Africa.

2. Traditional Narrative

Cuba has defied and humiliated the US from 1959 onwards (Gleijeses 2006, 98). Consequently, the US's hostility and hatred towards Cuba has its own history and life, which many scholars have addressed over time. The most recent and insightful addition to that scholarship is award-winning Cuban-American historian Ada Ferrer's (2021) *Cuba: An American History*. Though Ferrer (2021, 3) correctly notes that "the history of Cuba lends itself to monumental and epic tellings", in South Africa, however, Cuba suffers an unresolved duality of being both a friend and a foe—a friend to the liberation struggle and an enemy to many South Africans involved in the border war in Angola.

The dominant traditional narrative about Cuba's relationship with Africa often casts this relationship within the Cold War paradigm, casting Cuba as the foot soldier of communist expansion in independent Africa, which led to the "Moscow proxy" thesis globally and the "rooi gevaar" (Red danger) thesis in South Africa. Cuba's Africa policy exacerbated its already strained relations with Washington, DC. Under the Carter administration, US–Cuba relations improved in 1977 with the opening of mutual interests sections in Washington and Havana and the signing of fishing, health, and maritime agreements. Cuba had even begun discussing the possibility of withdrawing troops from Luanda, Angola's capital. However, when Cuba sent 12 000 soldiers to Ethiopia in 1977, its relations with the US took another downward plunge, adding to its economic woes (Falk 1987, 1079).

Further complicating this thesis, Falk cautions that we should not underestimate Africa's political and economic strategic importance to Cuba. With a population two times greater than that of the United States, the nations of Africa constitute the second largest continent in the world. And because of Angola's strategic importance in southern Africa, it is, in geopolitical terms, "a bull's eye" and a key attraction to Cuba

(Falk 1987, 1079). Falk continues that "Cuba's interest in Africa is not only geopolitical because the value of southern and central Africa's minerals (which are vital to industry, energy programs, and modern weaponry) is of nearly equal importance" (Falk 1987, 1080). For Falk, "[i]t is not difficult to understand, therefore, why Cuba chose to involve itself in the strategic southern cone of Africa", at whatever cost (Falk 1987, 1081).

3. The Alternative Story

Piero Gleijeses argues that "[a]ny fair assessment of Cuba's policy in Africa must recognise its impressive successes, and particularly its role in changing the course of southern Africa's history, despite Washington's best efforts to stop it" (Gleijeses 2006, 146). Moreover, such an assessment must also grapple with Cuba's unapologetic and fierce commitment to its sense of international solidarity with Africa (Gleijeses 2006, 146). Consequently, the editors of *Cuba and Africa 1959–1994* acknowledge that the history of Cuba's involvement in Africa is traditionally located around Cuba's military assistance to African nations' struggles against colonial domination, as well as the alleged co-opting of African countries for geopolitical support of communism as per the Cold War dichotomy. However, what is less well known is that "Cuba's engagement in Africa was conducted in the name of 'principles, convictions, and blood'", as Fidel Castro, its principal instigator, pronounced in 1975, and took so many forms—political, military, social, educational, economic, medical, humanitarian, cultural, linguistic, and so on" (Argyriadis, Bonacci, and Delmas 2021, 1).

Cuba and Africa 1959–1994 acknowledges that Cuba's significant intervention in Africa began in earnest in the mid-1970s when Cuba provided extensive military and technical support to the newly independent government of Angola led by the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). The MPLA stood against the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) rebels. Both the US and South Africa backed these factions, which sought to overthrow the newly independent Angolan government and install a government sympathetic to the US and South Africa's strategic interests in the region. Cuba's involvement in this region of the continent enjoys extensive consideration in *Cuba and Africa 1959–1994* because of the scale and extent of Cuba's involvement in Angola, which is staggering by any measure.

However, Cuba's African journey did not just begin in 1975. For all intents and purposes, Angola was simply "a way station along a road that had begun in 1959 and

had led to Algeria, Congo Leopoldville (later called Zaïre), Congo Brazzaville, and Guinea-Bissau. Almost two thousand Cuban soldiers and aid workers had gone to Africa before the intervention in Angola" (Gleijeses 2006, 99). Furthermore, Cuba's role in international politics during the Cold War was unique. No other Third World country projected its military power beyond its immediate neighbourhood, making Cuba only second to the United States in this regard (Gleijeses 2006, 98). The final chapter in *Cuba and Africa 1959–1994* attends to yet another lesser-known fault line in these relations by way of Cuba's involvement in Brazzaville and Angola, which had Cubans exiled in Miami, Florida, fighting against their compatriots as a proxy to fighting Castro and his influence on the continent (Gonçalves 2021, 238). Gonçalves likens this to the "mirror-making" metaphor utilised when dealing with the contestations between West and East Germany in the Cold War context (Gonçalves 2021, 240).

Cuba and Africa 1959–1994 puts context, texture, and nuance to these interpretations with details and inputs from the African nations involved in these skirmishes and transactions. The publication also extends the historiography to address the relationship as far back as slavery and the first uprisings in Cuba emanating from the regions with the most significant slave populations. Viewed in this light, Cuba's sense of connection to Africa precedes the Cold War and the African independence movements after World War II—the "War of Ten Years" (1868–1879), the massive participation of enslaved people and "free people of colour" in the pro-independence forces marks the whole history of the Cuban independence struggle (Argyriadis, Bonacci, and Delmas 2021, 7).

4. Cuba's International Solidarity

Apart from its military interventions, Cuba's spirit and record of international solidarity has a long history and is best illustrated by its volunteer corps of expertise, particularly in the field of medicine that it has made available to nations across the globe and across time. *Cuba and Africa 1959–1994* shows that a massive technical assistance programme accompanied Cuba's military presence in Africa. Tens of thousands of Cuban experts, mainly in healthcare, education, and construction, worked in Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Ethiopia, Sao Tome and Principe, Tanzania, Congo Brazzaville, Benin, Burkino Faso, and Algeria. In addition, more than 40 000 Africans studied in Cuba on full scholarships funded by the Cuban government (Gleijeses 2006, 98).

Cuba did all this because, on the medical front, the Cuban government expanded

the number of doctors on the island from 3 000 in the immediate post-revolution years to 2 567 in 1986 (one per 399 inhabitants) and 60 248 in 1995 (one per 196 inhabitants). With this rapid increase, Cuba has been able to pursue a policy of providing medical practitioners to other developing nations, including 2 000 sent to countries hit by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and 2 173 doctors placed under Cuba's Comprehensive Health Programme for Central America, the Caribbean and Africa since 2001 (Hammett 2007, 67).

The Henry Reeve Emergency Medical Contingent "was founded in 2005 to respond to the increasing threat of natural disasters" (Gorry 2019, 87). Made up of over 700 medical practitioner volunteers, the Henry Reeve Emergency Medical Contingent is a specialised team trained and equipped to provide emergency medical services in post-disaster scenarios and epidemics like the current global COVID-19 pandemic (Gorry 2019, 87). All this suggests that Cuba's involvement in Africa was more than merely playing Cold War politics, which is the alternative history *Cuba and Africa 1959–1994* tells.

5. Cuba/South Africa Relations

The absence of a specific chapter on Cuba/South Africa relations notwithstanding, the book references South Africa continuously. "Until 1994, Cuba had been a staunch supporter of the ANC-in-exile and had come into direct conflict with the apartheid government in Angola during the 1970s to 1980s, when its forces clashed with South African troops and UNITA rebels" (Hammett 2007, 65). UNITA was supported, directly and indirectly, by the US and South Africa. US military and political support for Jonas Savimbi, the founder and leader of UNITA, was demonstrated by Savimbi's 1986 visit to the United States during negotiations (Tyler and Ottaway 1986). It was also evident in the joint US/Zaïrean military manoeuvres that equipped UNITA's northern bases if Namibian independence would force it to give up Jamba in the south of Angola (Brittain 1988, 122).

As such, Cuba helped South Africans gain their freedom from apartheid. Cuba also fought South African Defence Force (SADF) members during the Angolan war until a settlement was reached, which, among other things, led to Namibia's independence from South Africa in March 1990 (Williams 2013, 157). This role cast Cuba as both a friend and an enemy of South Africans, depending on where you stand concerning the struggle against apartheid and the defence of the country's borders with the so-called

"frontline states" as servicemen conscripted by the apartheid government.

Furthermore, Cuba's involvement with healthcare provision in South Africa commenced with supporting the ANC-aligned South African exile communities in settlements such as those at Mazimbu in Morogoro, Tanzania, where SOMAFCO, the ANC school, was located and the ANC had built the ANC-Holland Solidarity hospital with the support of a Netherlands-based donor (Armstrong 2020, 51). Support also extended to the military camps in Angola, where Cuban medical personnel and army instructors assisted ANC cadres in the camps. During this time, Cuba's support also included providing medical training for South Africans in exile.

When South Africa achieved democracy in 1994, Nelson Mandela declared that South Africa would not turn its back on those who supported it during the struggle against apartheid (Hammett 2007, 64). The new South African government was committed to positively affecting global relations and promoting further and sustainable South-South development cooperation as an alternative to traditional North-South relationships (Hammett 2007, 64). Through the new South-South relationships, developing countries sought to "demonstrate how developing states can work together to promote development strategies under their ownership to mutual advantage" (Hammett 2007, 64).

After the historical events of 1994, "South Africa has pursued several cooperation agreements with Cuba, covering trade, health, and sport". Furthermore, "the South Africa-Cuba Joint Bilateral Commission (JBC), established in February 2001, served as coordinating forum for the periodic review of bilateral cooperation projects in identified areas of economic, scientific, technical and commercial cooperation and the extension of cooperation into new areas" (Magama 2013). As part of these agreements, "South Africa benefitted from Cuba's surplus of medical doctors—a result of the drive to train medical practitioners in the 1960s and Castro's desire for Cuba to become a world medical power—to support its health service" (Hammett 2007, 67). Accordingly, the bilateral agreement between South Africa and Cuba has been operating since 1995, and by 2001, 353 Cuban doctors and 22 medical lecturers were already working in South Africa. By 2002 the number had increased to 450 (Hammett 2007, 67).

The controversy over South African medical doctors trained in Cuba led scholars to explore "the experiences of Cuban- and South African-trained students, recent graduates and medical school faculty to better understand and hopefully resolve the current controversy" (Sui et al. 2019, 1). In South Africa, affirmative action policies in the eight medical schools allowed black and women students from disadvantaged

populations to enter medical school, which increased the proportion of black students. In 2014, of 9 170 students in medical schools, 39 per cent were black, 33 per cent white, 14 per cent coloured, and 14 per cent Indian/Asian. Despite increasing output from medical schools, the low ratio of doctors to population has not changed over the last decade due to population growth and migration of doctors (Sui et al. 2019, 1).

Because "[i]ndependent evidence on the effectiveness of the Cuban training programme [was] unavailable for their study, the researchers used questions that were drawn from the United States medical student survey questionnaires, which were validated by comparisons with medical education and medical care, and modified to cover specific topics relevant to South Africa" (Sui et al. 2019, 2). They conclude that their "qualitative findings go some way to dispelling the overall negative narrative that has arisen around these Cuba-trained doctors" (Sui et al. 2019, 9). Furthermore, for each cohort of Cuban doctors, the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and the Medical and Dental Professions Board (MDPB) send a delegation to Cuba to interview the applicants who have been pre-selected by the Cuban Ministry of Health. The HPCSA assesses the applicants' skills, knowledge, and linguistic ability before deciding whether they meet the required standards to comply with the South African Medical Council (Hammett 2007, 79).

6. Conclusion

Cuba and Africa 1959–1994 is a timely publication. Given the extensive involvement of Cuba with South Africa during the struggle against apartheid and in the post-apartheid context, the study invites and challenges South African scholars, established and new, to add their contribution to the alternative Atlantic history. Though a relatively small Caribbean country of a little over 11 million inhabitants, Cuba has been punching above its weight and making headlines on both sides of the Atlantic since even before that fateful day of 1 January 1959 when the late Fidel Castro and his comrades' revolution, led by the 26 July Movement, triumphed over the US-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista (Mandela and Castro 2016, 15; Miller 2003, 147). *Cuba and Africa 1959–1994* tells this story from a new perspective that should be emulated.

Dealing with contested histories and entangled memories opens the door for other African nations implicated in the Cuba/Africa relationship to contribute their voices and views to this alternative history because "neither the presence of Che Guevara in the Congo in 1965 nor the participation of thirty thousand Cuban soldiers in the

Angolan conflict allows for an appreciation of the depth, complexity, and richness of the links created [between Cuba and Africa]" (Argyriadis, Bonacci, and Delmas 2021, 11). This signals a real need to "contribute to a historiography of Africa that can account for the multiplicity of relations with Cuba" (Argyriadis, Bonacci, and Delmas 2021, 11).

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