

The Parliamentary Millennium Programme & Encounters presents

CUBA

An African Odyssey
A FILM BY JIHAN EL-TAHRI



"This remarkable documentary examines the historical and political links between Fidel Castro and the nations of Africa." - ET VOUS





Notes on

Cuba: An African Odyssey Part 2

directed by Jihan El-Tahri (2007)

This film provides valuable insights into the way the Cold War affected various regional conflicts that involved much more than the disputes between the USA and the USSR. These conflicts were based on ideology, religion, race, culture, language, colonial history, nationalism and aspirations for such vague ideals as “internationalism.”

In previous classes, some students said this film was difficult to understand because the narrator and some of the persons interviewed speak English with an accent. It was difficult also because other persons speak quickly in other languages and it is hard to follow the English subtitles. Nonetheless, this variety of points of view is the strong point of the film. It is a film about internationalism, and the director succeeded in giving it a very international perspective through interviews with many people involved in all sides of the conflict. The documentary shows the many complexities and ironies of the superpower struggle. All of the groups involved had to balance and compromise commitments to their own values. They had to accept help from stronger allies. The anti-communist forces in Namibia, consisting of black Africans, accepted help from the South African government, in spite of the racist policy of South African apartheid. It seems unimaginable that they could form such an alliance, but they did. The anti-communist group was Christian, and since the communists were atheists, they were willing to accept help from any source. They decided it was more important to fight communism than to fight racism.

Another interesting aspect of the story is that it is a perfect illustration of the saying “sometimes the tail wags the dog.” Fidel Castro knew that the Soviet Union would never give up its commitment to Cuba. It was geographically close to America, so it was too strategically important for the Soviets to lose. This is why Castro was able to push his luck with the Soviet Union. Without asking for permission from the Soviet leaders, he decided to help Angola by sending Soviet weapons and 450,000 Cuban soldiers. It was a decisive amount of help which eventually forced the South African government to negotiate an end to the war, and it was probably influential ending apartheid as well. Cuba’s decision to act independently in this matter threw US-Soviet relations into confusion. The Soviets denied involvement, and it took the US a long time to understand that the Cubans really had acted independently.

The end of the conflict also revealed some interesting lessons in how such significant changes in history can come about just by the arbitrary actions of individuals. Jorge Risquet (representing Cuba) and Roelof Botha (representing South Africa) at first had many angry and bitter exchanges at the negotiating table, but when they spoke casually over drinks in a bar, they decided that they could both appear to be winners if they emphasized to their own people two different positive messages that would come out of an agreement. Cuban troops could leave Angola with Cuban leaders saying that they had won independence for Namibia. Mr. Botha could say to people in his country that he had forced Cuban troops to leave Africa.

One final point that the Cubans insisted on was that South Africa should show goodwill by releasing political prisoner Nelson Mandela. There was tremendous international pressure on South Africa at this time to release Mandela and end apartheid. Mandela was released from prison on February 11, 1990, and the last Cuban troops left Africa on May 25, 1991. It would be impossible to say one factor was the reason for the tremendous changes that occurred in South Africa in those days, but Cuban leaders always proudly claimed that their involvement in Africa had been instrumental in ending colonialism and apartheid, and it was a view that Mandela agreed with when he met Castro in the early 1990s.

“Why are they so annoyed? Because they’d planned to seize control in Angola before November 11th. Angola is rich in natural resources. Cabinda has large oil reserves. Some imperialists ask why we’re helping the Angolans, what our interest is. They assume that countries only act out of a desire for petrol, copper, diamonds or some other resource. No. We have no material interest. Of course, the imperialists don’t understand this. They would only do it for jingoistic, selfish reasons. We are fulfilling an elementary internationalist duty in helping the people of Angola.”

Fidel Castro, 1974

(in *Cuba: An African Odyssey, Part 2, 37:40~*)

Timeline of events

1. On April 25, 1974, the “carnation revolution” brought down the dictatorship in Portugal. It started as a military coup but was quickly overtaken by popular resistance. This led to the end of Portuguese colonialism in Africa, after many years of anti-colonial warfare.
2. During the previous years, Angola, a Portuguese colony, had three anti-colonial movements:
 - i. MPLA, socialist, aligned with “Eastern bloc”, led by Agostinho Neto.
 - ii. FNLA, in the north, US-supported, via Mbuto in Zaire, led by Holden Roberto
 - iii. UNITA, in the south, US and South African support, Christian, led by Jonas Savimbi.
3. These three parties mistrusted each other and the Portuguese, but the new government in Portugal was serious about letting Portuguese colonies become independent.
4. America and South Africa saw the power struggle in Angola as a strategic threat—it could be the first foothold for the USSR in Africa.
5. The FNLA rationalized its cooperation with apartheid. It preferred to be allied with a racist government that shared its religious and anti-communist convictions.
6. The showdown was to come on Nov. 11, 1974, the date when Portugal would officially end its colonial rule. The three warring factions knew that whoever controlled the capital city, Luanda, would form the government.
7. The MPLA needed Soviet and Cuban help, which turned out to be the crucial factor in its success in holding onto the capital.
8. The involvement of Cubans led Americans to end détente, even though the Soviets had not authorized Cuba to go to Angola.
9. The MPLA won, but immediately the new government was not recognized by the US.
10. At this time the Vietnam war was about to end badly for the US, so it had no interest in becoming involved in another foreign war. The US didn’t send troops, and it maintained lower levels of material support than it could have.
11. South Africa retreated but it supported UNITA rebels in the ongoing civil war.
12. In the late 1970s the civil war still lingered on. It was the time of “guns and money.” “No money, no guns, no politics,” as one veteran in the film said.
13. Cuba stayed through these years. Neto died and José Eduardo dos Santos became the next leader of Angola. He has been in power continuously since 1979.
14. In the 1980s, Reagan stepped up efforts in Africa. He let UNITA use stinger missiles which dealt a serious blow to Angolan and Cuban airplanes.
15. The Americans learned that Namibia was the key to the Soviet and Cuban presence in Africa. This was the place to fight the battle.

16. SWAPO was the leftist independence force in Namibia. It was opposed to South African presence in Namibia, and it was supported by UN resolutions. The US and South Africa ignored UN resolutions when it suited their purposes to do so.
17. SWAPO fought from Angola, while UNITA was used as the main fighting force in Namibia, supported by South Africa and the USA, to fight SWAPO and Angola.
18. Savimbi, leader of UNITA, became the focus of American support. As a Christian, he was effective in gaining support in America. He asked for stingers (anti-aircraft weapons) and he got them.
19. The obvious solution to the stalemate was for both Cuba and South Africa to agree to depart, but they didn't trust each other enough. Who would be the first to go?
20. The Soviets took control of the battlefield in Angola, but made serious errors, so Cubans took the lead in planning. Strategies that had worked for the Soviets in WWII weren't working in Angola. It turned out that Cuba had better strategies.
21. Soviet priorities changed under Gorbachev. The USSR pulled out of the 3rd World, and warmed up to the USA. As a result, the Cubans doubled the number of forces they had in Angola. American spy planes and satellites could see that the number of baseball fields, a sport that Cubans loved, had doubled.
22. The final confrontation came in a town called Cuito Canavale. It was just a small town, but it was a strategic point on the road north into Angola. The commanding officer was Castro, and he led by telephone from Havana.
23. The battle lasted six months and became a standoff, so a negotiated settlement was the only way out. This meant that the negotiating parties could only be governments. UNITA was out of it, but Cuba got itself into the process.
24. South Africa and Cuba came to an agreement when they admitted to each other that they would both lose if the war continued. They could each claim a victory if they managed to look at the situation in the way that was most favorable. South Africa could claim they got the Cubans out of Africa, and the Cubans could claim they won independence for Namibia and ended the war in Angola.
25. September 22, 1988. Peace accords were signed. Namibian independence was guaranteed.

Extra Notes (information not in the film)

Cuba later claimed that their presence in Africa was a significant factor that ended apartheid. It was a claim that Nelson Mandela agreed with, and he personally thanked Castro after he was released from prison.

Within a few years, apartheid was over and Nelson Mandela was the president of South Africa. The Soviet Union was gone, and Cuba was in the worst economic crisis since the revolution of 1959. For the first time it had to live without Soviet aid while still under American economic sanctions.

José Eduardo dos Santos has remained in power since the end of the war, but his reign has been controversial. Some claim that he has stabilized the nation and managed the nation's natural resources effectively, but Angola is still a country with a very low standard of living. GDP \$139.059 billion, per capita income is \$6,484. Life expectancy at birth is ranked very low according to the [World Fact Book](#) published by the United States Central Intelligence Agency in 2014—206th place (age 55) on a list of 224 nations.

What price are you willing to pay for someone else's freedom? In answer to this, tens of thousands of young men and women from the small Caribbean Island of Cuba answered "Whatever is required!" For more than twenty years, during a time when most African countries were still under the yoke of colonialism, Cuban revolutionaries were actively involved in liberation wars across Africa.

These descendants of former African slaves died in their thousands on African soil to ensure freedom from apartheid-style oppression of ordinary Africans across the Continent. In answering the call for global solidarity and justice these sons and daughters of Cuba not only changed the world as they knew it, but became living proof of the positive power of internationalism.



In "Cuba: An African Odyssey" an Egyptian filmmaker, Jihan El-Tahri, explores how Cuba, under the leadership of Fidel Castro, gave critical support to Africa's liberation movements. Cuban influence was instrumental in advancing the decolonization process, which brought independence to much of the continent.

Ms. El-Tahri is able to convey a strong sense of what it was like to be part of these incredible events by presenting the viewer with rarely-seen archival footage and in-depth interviews with those who set the course of Africa's recent history.

Her tale begins in the Congo where a young prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, is frustrated by the slowness with which Belgium's rulers are relinquishing control of the country. Matters become worse when, four days after independence and the Belgian withdrawal, Congolese soldiers mutiny. They forcibly take control of the country and proceed to exact revenge upon their former masters. The Belgians hastily send their own troops back into the Congo in order to safeguard their citizens and their economic interests in the country.





With his country re-occupied Prime Minister Lumumba needs to find help from somewhere. At this time, The Cold War is at its peak. The United States and The Soviet Union are vying for control and influence in the world. The Congo is of interest to the super-powers, particularly the United States, because it has mineral resources that the U.S. desperately needs.

In dire straights, Lumumba turns to the United States for aid. He asks them to send troops to free the Congo from the Belgians, but he is refused. The Russians, however, are willing to help and Lumumba accepts their aid. In so doing he becomes an enemy of the West. The United States, is not prepared to allow the Soviets to gain control in Africa.

From that point, the political carnage begins as the world powers seek to stamp their will on the African country. Lumumba is assassinated and a revolt is launched against his American-backed successor.

At this point Fidel Castro has only recently secured the liberation of Cuba, but he sees the struggle in Africa as an extension of his own. He decides that Cuba must do what it can to aid the forces of liberation on the African continent.

The Congo is the first recipient of Cuban military aid. The documentary reveals the incredible story of how Castro's co-commander and friend, Che Guevara, leads a small band of Cuban troops into Congo to help the rebels. The film tracks their efforts and the reasons for their ultimate failure in Congo and reveals how this setback leads Castro to adopt new tactics in Africa.

It then moves to the fascinating case of Guinea-Bissau, where Cuba's aid is finally vindicated by helping Amilcar Cabral bring the Portuguese to the negotiating table, an event that would lead to the collapse of Portuguese rule in Africa.



A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE?





BROTHERS IN ARMS

Chief among Portuguese possessions was Angola, a country that contained massively valuable natural resources. Ms. El-Tahri devotes the second part of her film to the road to independence there, a road covered in blood.

Three different liberation movements had arisen against Portuguese rule in Angola. Two of those, the National Union for the

Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA) were backed by the United States. The third was the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), a socialist movement that enjoyed the support of Russia and Cuba. Once the Portuguese agreed to leave the country, each rebel leader wanted to seize power for himself. A Civil War erupted.

The war escalated massively as foreign powers became involved. The United States and the Apartheid regime in South Africa did not want the MPLA to assume power in Angola. They feared that if one African country became communist, others would follow. Russia, on the other hand, did not want to see a government sympathetic to the US in control of Angola. They sent advisers and weapons and other indirect aid but they did not send troops to the country.

QUE É DETERMINANTE P... A UNIDADE
É A IDEOLOGIA E NAQ A GEOFRAFIA



Outmatched, the MPLA was being crushed when it appealed for help from Cuba. Castro immediately sent aid. In addition to weapons and money, Castro sent his special forces and 35 000 foot soldiers to support the MPLA in Angola.

With the help of the Cubans, the MPLA was able to seize the Capital, Luanda, and assume control of the country at the time independence came into effect on 11 November 1975. Nevertheless, the civil war continued.

The documentary proceeds to show how, as stalemate on the battlefield sets in, peace talks commenced between the international disputants. The complicated diplomatic process is based on linking South African withdrawal from Namibia to the departure of Cuban troops from Angola. The formula finally results in ending both the South African occupation of Namibia and the protracted war in Angola. The departure of Cuban troops opened a new era of freedom in Southern Africa.

Ms El-Tahri presents us with the question of why Nelson Mandela has respect for Fidel Castro, a man who has been demonized by the West. Her documentary reveals that behind the layers of propaganda there lies a Castro whose battle was that of national independence and ridding nations of colonialism. Internationalism, or the solidarity of the weak, was a strategy he used in the fight against colonialism.



CHE GUEVARA -
SITTING ON TOP OF THE WORLD

We must always remember that a film is an edited story. The filmmaker has to present the information in a way that guides the viewer's perception and understanding of events. This is also true of all historical sources. Each has its own strengths and each presents its own version of events. Film however, is a uniquely persuasive medium and it is important to remember, when watching this film, that Ms El-Tahri's viewpoint is being presented. Her viewpoint is certainly well-researched and valid, but it is our hope that the film will spark enough interest in these amazing events that our viewers will investigate them further and arrive at a viewpoint they can call their own.

**THE PARLIAMENTARY MILLENNIUM PROGRAMME –
COMMEMORATION OF THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF
CUITO CUANAVALÉ**

The Parliamentary Millennium Programme (PMP) is the South African Parliament's primary nation-building and heritage programme. Through the PMP, Parliament seeks to explore various initiatives aimed at getting South Africans talking about important issues, both historical and contemporary, that give expression to South Africa's quest to ensure unity in diversity.

The role, values such as internationalism played in shaping the path that we, as a nation, traversed to national liberation was identified as a critical imperative for debate.

The Battle of Cuito Cuanavale (1987) was accordingly identified as a prime example of how the commitment to the values of internationalism, global solidarity and social justice contributed to the liberation of South Africa and our neighbouring countries.

This Battle took place during 1987 and 1988 in a remote corner of Angola, shielded from the international media and therefore largely went unreported.



The town of Cuito Cuanavale suffered under siege from the apartheid Defence Force and its Angolan allies for over ten months in one of the biggest, and what turned out to be the last battles of the Cold War.

The outcome of the Battle irreversibly changed the history and political landscape of the Southern African region. At this previously insignificant Angolan village Angolan, Namibian and Cuban forces managed to bring the military aggression of the South African apartheid forces to a halt.

At the same time, South African liberation soldiers of Umkhonto we Sizwe fighting in Northern Angola, managed to contain the Angolan rebels, allied to the apartheid regime, preventing them from reinforcing the apartheid forces in the south. The peace negotiations that followed the Battle led to the withdrawal of the South African military forces from Angola and Namibia, resulting in the independence of Namibia, and spurring on South Africa's negotiated settlement.

Throughout this year the South African Parliament, in partnership with the Parliaments of Angola, Namibia and Cuba, as well as, civil society organizations, military veterans' organizations and academic institutions will run various initiatives to commemorate the 20th Anniversary of the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale.

The PMP's partnership with the producers of Cuba: an African Odyssey is one such initiative. This documentary provides an in-depth analysis of the role that Cuba played in African liberation struggles. The various interviews with individuals on both sides of the erstwhile Cold War divide, coupled with unique archival footage, are seen as critical resources that the public may use to explore and understand significant events in our liberation history.

It is hoped that by screening this documentary debate and dialogue will be encouraged on the importance of internationalism, both then and now.



Encounters: The South African International Documentary Film Festival is the foremost documentary film festival in Africa, promoting documentaries through distribution and special screenings.

To buy dvds or arrange for screenings contact: Nazeer Ahmed
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