Julius Nyerere

By Derek Gideon | August 17, 2017

Julius Kambarage Nyerere (1922-1999) was Tanganyika's–later Tanzania–charismatic president from 1961 to 1985, a major theorist of African Socialism, and a Pan-Africanist supporter of African liberation struggles throughout the African continent. As chair of the South Commission, Nyerere stands as a major link between Global South discourse and earlier internationalist formations, namely Pan-Africanism and the Third World.

Nyerere is perhaps best known for his politics of *Ujamaa* ("familyhood" in Swahili), a vision of socialist development rooted in traditional forms of extended family and collective property. According to Nyerere's 1962 pamphlet "Ujamaa—the Basis of African Socialism," "Africans have no more need of being 'converted' to socialism than we have of being 'taught' democracy. Both are rooted in our past—in the traditional society which produced us" (Nyerere 1967, 170). Rejecting a Marxist vision of class struggle, Nyerere writes that *Ujamaa* is different from both "capitalism, which seeks to build a happy society on the basis of the exploitation of man by man" and "doctrinaire socialism which seeks to build its happy society on a philosophy of inevitable conflict between man and man" (Nyerere 1967, 170). In contrast, *Ujamaa* would extend the traditional family unit outward towards a project for building the nation. Tensions between *Ujamaa* as a vision of traditional village life and its implementation at the level of a modern nation-state and international politics would remain an ongoing issue throughout Nyerere's presidency.



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Historian Priya Lal argues that while *Ujamaa* is often remembered only as a set of domestic policies, it was deeply enmeshed in the global politics and internationalist discourses of its day (Lal 2015, 37). *Ujamaa* linked Tanzania to a continent-wide discourse of "African

Socialism" found in the political thought of Leopold Senghor in Senegal, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Tom Mboya in Kenya, and Sekou Toure in Guinea. Some proponents of *Ujamaa*, including activist historian Walter Rodney and deposed Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, distinguished it from other such visions of African socialism, emphasizing its greater attention to the discrepancies between earlier, traditional formations and current realties. (Rodney 2017, par. 2; Nkrumah 2017, par. 13).

Nyerere's pan-Africanist politics extended beyond mere rhetoric. Under his leadership, Tanzania hosted many anti-colonial and anti-apartheid activists from across Africa (Lal 2015, 40), and the University of Dar es Salaam became a home to many radical students and academics from around the world. Tanzania hosted the 1974 Sixth Pan-African Congress in Dar es Salaam which, Nyerere stressed in his opening remarks, was the first of its kind on the African continent in an independent African nation (Nyerere 1974, 18).

According to Marxist legal scholar Issa Shivji, himself a participant in University of Dar es Salaam radical student politics at the time, the 1967 Arusha Declaration marked the beginning of a transformative era in Tanzanian politics. If, in his earlier writings, Nyerere could refer to socialism as "an attitude of mind" (Nyerere 1967, 162), an idea Shivji calls "Owenite, if not utopian" (Shivji 2012, 107), the Arusha Declaration was "a call to arms" (Shivji 2012, 107) that resulted in a wave of nationalizations of industry and restrictions on the ability of civil servants and party leaders to accumulate private wealth. Shivji locates the radicalism of the Arusha Declaration in its being written in Kiswahili, making it far more a tool of mass-mobilization than the English-language "Ujamaa—the Basis of African Socialism" (Shivji 2012, 107).

Questions concerning the relationship between language, politics, and identity were central to government policy under Nyerere. Deemed crucial to the formation of an African identity that was not connected to any one ethnic group, Swahili became the official language of Tanzania and the language of primary and secondary education (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995, 117 and 151). The state actively promoted Swahili writers (Askew 2002, 171). Nyerere himself translated Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar* from English to Swahili.

"*Ujamaa* villages" based around collective agriculture came to occupy a central place in the *Ujamaa* vision of development. Originally intended to be voluntary, villagization eventually came to be enforced as a matter of government policy, sparking controversy. The national trauma associated with this event has been widely depicted in Tanzanian literature of the time, especially in the works of Euphrase Kezilahabi, such as his play *Kaptula la Marx* ("Marx's Trousers") and his novels *Gamba la Nyoka* (A Snake's Skin) and *Dunia Uwanja wa Fujo* ("The World A Field of Chaos"). Tanzania eventually began to reverse course in the 1980s, facing pressure from IMF and World Bank structural adjustment policies. In his later years, Nyerere would become a vociferous critic these policies, resisting them at first, then resigning when it was no longer possible to do so.

In his post-presidential life, Nyerere chaired the South Commission, editing its 1990 report, *The Challenge to the South*. Shivji notes both the continuities and the dramatic changes between Nyerere's earlier internationalist commitments and the South Commission:

> Coming at a time when neoliberalism was in its triumphal stage, it did not have much of an impact. In fact, some of the prominent members of his commission (Manhoman Singh of India, for example), were to become uncompromising neoliberal reformers in their own countries […] The South of the 1990s was not the same South that Mwalimu spearheaded in the non-alignment movement and the new international economic order of the 1960s and 1970s. (2012, 112)

However, while the report does not strike the same notes of militancy found in Nyerere's earlier writings, it nonetheless contains one of Nyerere's consistent themes: the need to center the human element in discussions of development. "In our view," write the report's authors, "development is a process which enables human beings to realize their potential, build self-confidence, and lead lives of dignity and fulfillment. It is a process which frees people from the fear of want and exploitation. It is a movement away from political, economic, and social oppression" (South Commission 1990, 10). The report also carries echoes of the Arusha Declaration's emphasis on "self-reliance, both individual and collective" (South Commission 1990, 10). The persistence of this political imaginary in a far less radical political document speaks to the continuities and disjunctions between the Global South and its revolutionary antecedents.

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