Nyerere: Africa's Philosopher King

By Monique Bedasse



Julius Nyerere was one of the most important leaders of the twentieth century. Tanzania gained independence from Britain in 1961 and Nyerere, known as *Baba wa taifa* (father of the nation), became its first president. Under Nyerere's leadership, the state declared *ujamaa* (African socialism) as its postcolonial path forward and signaled its intention to build a society based on human equality and dignity. His commitment to nonalignment in the midst of cold war tensions and his support of African liberation movements garnered the attention of many around the world. Even after he stepped down in 1985, Nyerere continued to hold remarkable influence over Tanzanian politics. Today, twenty-one years after his death, his contested legacy continues to loom large in the nation, as his presence in the discussions surrounding the upcoming elections attests.

In early 2020, Tanzanian publishing house, Mkuki Na Nyota, released the three-part biography, *Development as Rebellion: A Biography of Julius Nyerere*. Penned by Saida Yahya-Othman, Ng'wanza Kamata and Issa Shivji, the books offer an impressively nuanced examination of a man who has been, in the words of the authors, "revered and demonized in equal measure." Yahya-Othman is a retired professor of English Linguistics who taught at the University of Dar es Salaam, Kamata is a Senior Lecturer in Political Science at the University of Dar es Salaam and Shivji is a retired Professor of Public Law and the first holder of the Julius Nyerere Professorial Chair in Pan-African Studies at the University of Dar es Salaam. A detailed exploration of Nyerere's personal and political lives, this is also a multifaceted history of Tanzania and the political context in which its first and most influential leader emerged. Monique Bedasse had a brief conversation with Issa Shivji

about his installment of the biography, *Rebellion Without Rebels*. Professor Shivji took on this biography after decades of thinking and writing about Nyerere and Tanzanian politics more broadly.

Monique Bedasse: *What motivated you and your co-authors to write this biography?*

Issa Shivji: It is a long story but I'll cut it short. Even while *Mwalimu* [Swahili for "teacher;" how Nyerere is generally referred to in Tanzania] was still alive, I used to say half-jocularly that when the philosopher-king ceases to be a king—meaning he has left power—I'd like to do his biography. It never came to pass. Meanwhile, Mwalimu passed on in 1999. Between 2008 and 2013, I was the Mwalimu Nyerere Chair in Pan-African Studies at the University of Dar es Salaam under which, together with my co-authors—Professor Saida-Yahya Othman and Dr Ng'wanza Kamata—we organized many intellectual activities around Mwalimu's ideas generally and his perspective on Pan-Africanism specifically. In the process we learnt that our younger generation knew very little about Mwalimu and his times. Unrelenting criticism, albeit subtle, of Mwalimu's policies of Ujamaa and its alleged failure during the two decades of neo-liberalism had taken its toll. Our youth had a very lop-sided view of their recent political history. A more nuanced story of Tanzania under Nyerere and his uncompromising stand on nationalism against the constant onslaught of neo-colonial forces needed to be told.

Five years of working together also brought the three of us closer. Fortunately, at the time, the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology under its Director General Dr. Hassan Mshinda was amenable to consider our application for funding. Thus was born the Nyerere biography project. After some six to seven years of extensive research and writing, the three-volume biography was finally published in March 2020 by a leading local publisher Mkuki na Nyota.

Monique Bedasse: *One of the strengths of this biography is that you force the reader to confront conflicting accounts of particular histories. An example of this is your treatment of the contested circumstances that led to Edwin Mtei's resignation after the International Monetary Fund's mission visited Dar es Salaam in 1979. Not only does this make for an engaging read, but it also ensures that we never lose sight of the fact that Nyerere and the other members of the Tanzanian government with whom he worked were fully human. Furthermore, it reminds us that the IMF's visit is connected to both the larger story of the "transition from socialism to neo-liberalism" in Tanzania within a global context, and to the local history of contestation within the government. You bring together a vast array of sources to provide us with such complexity. Tell me about the research process for this book.*

Issa Shivji: Hunh! Monique, it is like you read our minds. Yes, we wanted to tell a story which was both human and social. The widespread belief that Mwalimu always got his way was simply not true. Mwalimu's ideas were contested and there was the ubiquitous struggle, class struggle if you like, like in any other society.

As for the research process, it was rather unconventional. We did exactly what we warn our PhD's not to do. We entered the field without any pre-conceived ideas or hypothesis or even a research plan. The only guiding principle we agreed on was that in telling the man's story we must also tell the story of his country and society; that we should desist from projecting Mwalimu as *the hero* and, broadly, we should apply the method of historical materialism. I leave it to the readers to assess how far we succeeded. With the wisdom of hindsight, for me personally, I think we succeeded pretty well in our first two objectives, but I am not sure if we equally succeeded in consistently applying the method of historical materialism.

I must say our research was very extensive and intense. We spent considerable time in the United Kingdom combing the UK archives but also visiting several university libraries and conducting

interviews. We did over 100 interviews. Thankfully the retired leaders of the ruling party (CCM) and the state were very co-operative. We also were lucky to get access to the CCM archives and Mwalimu's personal State House files kept at Mwalimu Nyerere Foundation. At the end of the process we found that we had collected piles of material and it was a challenge how to synthesize and analyze without falling into the trap of not being able to separate wheat from the chaff. Having said that, I must also underscore that we did not always eschew details where we felt that they needed to be recorded for future generations. It is the details, I believe, which helped us to bring out Mwalimu as *human* rather than some abstract political actor.

Monique Bedasse: *You write that "what is specific to Nyerere's idea of equality is that it is inseparable by definition from the idea of utu—best translated as "human dignity" or "humanness." You also argue that at the end of his career, "he could rightly take pride" in having successfully made this the basis of the nation he worked to build. I have long thought about Nyerere's use of the word "dignity "and its meaning for postcolonial nations and for non-European peoples in particular. Would you please say more about that?*

Issa Shivji: I'm absolutely wedded to the idea of human dignity and Mwalimu in his splendid language clarified this idea to me—it ceased to be a cliché and became a fundamental concept around which the idea of equality is woven. We, therefore, argued that Nyerere's idea of equality which has been around for at least a thousand years is fundamentally different from the liberal (bourgeois) idea of equality. For the latter, *equality* resolves itself in *equal rights*. For Nyerere, the essence of equality is *dignity* or *humanity* which cannot be captured by the notion of rights. Excuse me but I never tire of quoting Mwalimu's beautiful poem on equality; in particular the following two stanzas. (I quote it first in Kiswahili, then in translation.)

Watu ni sawa nasema, zingatia neno "watu",
Siwapimi kwa vilema, ambavyo ni udhia tu,
Siwafanidi kwa wema, ambao ni tabia tu,
Lakini watu ni watu, mawalii na wagema.

Niseme maji ni maji, pengine utaelewa,
Ya kunywa ya mfereji, na yanayoogelewa,
Ya umande na theluji, ya mvua, mito, maziwa,
Asili yake ni hewa, hayapitani umaji.

I say people are equal, note the word "people",
I don't judge them by their disability, which is only a bother,
I don't compare them by their goodness, which is only a habit,
People are people, holy men and (palm-)wine tappers alike.

If I say water is water, you may understand,
Water to drink, water to shower,
Of dew and snow, of rain, rivers, lakes,
Its ancestry is in air; it does not deviate from its wateriness.

"Humanness" is the "wateriness" of people. In a concomitant article he wrote on human equality, he explained it thus:

> Human beings are equal in their humanity. Juma and Mwajuma do not differ in their humanity. In all other matters, Juma and Mwajuma are not equal, but in their humanity, they do not differ an iota. Neither you, nor me, not anybody else, nor God can make Juma to be more of a human being than Mwajuma or Mwajuma to be more of a human being than Juma. God can do what you

> and me and our fellow beings cannot do—God can create Juma and can make Mwajuma to be a different creature better or worse than a human being, but God cannot make Juma or Mwajuma to be better or worse human beings than other human beings; God can neither reduce nor increase their humanity.

What more can I say? Let me venture to suggest, though, that I think Nyerere's concept of equality possibly gives us an anchor to construct an alternative discourse from the liberal discourse of equality and rights which is so hegemonic and yet it is so inadequate for postcolonial peoples to locate themselves in.

Monique Bedasse: *After stepping down from the presidency, Nyerere spent the time between February 1986 and August 1987 traveling to different regions in an effort to recharge the party. In responding to complaints from the people about the failures of the party leadership, Nyerere reflected on the past and deduced that the leaders lacked the "same fire and fight" of their predecessors. As he saw it, "during the struggle for independence, the party was fighting for freedom and knew its enemy. It was united in its objective and mission." As your analysis suggests, the question of "who is the enemy?" is an important one. Are you implying that Nyerere would have avoided certain challenges had he sought to answer that question at various points as the political terrain in Tanzania evolved?*

Issa Shivji: It is a valid question but, frankly, answering it would be indulging in hypothetical history. What we can say is "what happened" rather than "what could have happened if …!" Were choices available at strategic conjunctures? Yes, they were. Why was *this* and not the *other* course of action chosen? Well, that can be explained only partly by the constraints of circumstances. The individual actor does make choices given his or her own outlook and social interests that he, consciously or otherwise, represents. The driving force for Nyerere was nation-building which demanded unity and which resulted in suppressing diversity or what he believed to be dissipating forces. So, in spite of formulating a beautiful phrase "development as rebellion", the title of the biography, he could not tolerate rebels who pointed towards a different course of action at strategic junctures. This is captured in the title of book three of the biography: *Rebellion without Rebels*.

Monique Bedasse: *You end the book with a question: "Was Julius Nyerere more of Plato's Philosopher Ruler than Machiavelli's Prince?" Many authors attempt to resolve such an analytical problem; to tell us in more pointed terms how we should remember a particular historical figure. Why did you decide to end with a query?*

Issa Shivji: We wrote this biography with utmost respect for our readers guided by the dictum, "People think." People are capable of resolving the query in their own way—we have provided sufficient material and analysis. But, more importantly, the query underlines the oft-repeated observation that great persons in history are enigmatic. Enigma is the stuff of which greatness is made. Let me end by quoting from our preface to the biography:

Our biography of Nyerere is grounded in the history of people's struggles in which Nyerere, the man, was immersed and from which his greatness emerged. Our narrative does not shy away from recounting controversies surrounding Nyerere the man, or providing a reasoned critique, occasionally severe, of Nyerere the politician. All this does not detract from his greatness. Controversies and critiques constitute the stuff of which great men and women of history are made.

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About the Interviewee

Issa Shivji is Director of the Nyerere Resource Centre at the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology in Dar es Salaam.

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