
Review

Development as rebellion: A biography of Julius Nyerere

Issa G. Shivji,
Saida Yahya-Othman, and Ng'wanza Kamata.
Mkuki na Nyota, Dar es Salaam, 2020, xxiii+1208pp.,
ISBN: 9789987084111

Contemporary Political Theory (2022) **21**, S38–S44. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-021-00468-y>; published online 9 February 2021

In Book II of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates seeks out the 'justice of one man' by examining the role of justice in the city (1968, 368e). The members of the just city, he posits, would live moderate and peaceful lives, evading both poverty and war. He is soon interrupted, of course, by Glaucon's retort that, without luxuries, the people will inhabit a city fit only for pigs (369a–372d). The remaining books find Socrates seeking out justice in the 'feverish city' or, rather, trying to produce justice despite inhabiting the feverish city (372e). It is no wonder that, when Julius Nyerere died in 1999, he was translating *The Republic* into Swahili. As the first President of Tanzania, a Pan-Africanist leader, and a theorist of African socialism, Nyerere spent his long political career consciously occupied by the age-old struggles Socrates posed between the individual and community, rulers and ruled, and development and decadence. Moreover, he undertook these challenges in a colonial, capitalist world system defined by its disordered partitions between classes, races, sexes, religions, and ideologies. Referred to by the Swahili honorific 'Mwalimu', meaning 'teacher', Nyerere sought to cultivate a just society characterized by the interlocking principles of political independence (*uhuru*), unity (*umoja*), development (*maendeleo*), socialism (*ujamaa*), and self-reliance (*kujitegemea*).

The work under review here, *Development as Rebellion: Julius Nyerere, a Biography*, leaves no question as to why Nyerere has been called independent Africa's philosopher-king. It provides an intimate look into the soul of a man and the republic he sought to build, and it offers invaluable lessons for diagnosing and combating colonial capitalist domination today. The book is a welcome and distinctive addition in the recent surge of political theoretical work focused on African anti-colonial struggles (e.g., Getachew 2019; el-Malik 2016; Shilliam 2015). It is welcome, because this three-volume work offers by far the most comprehensive biography of Nyerere to date, providing unprecedented detail into



the life, thought, and career of an elder statesman whose theorizing was explicitly influenced by the weight of his political responsibility. Among texts of political theory, it is distinctive because it does not, in its more than 1200 pages, formally seek to defend a theoretical argument but instead focuses on the origins, application, and limits of Nyerere's ideas. His thought emerged from, and was tested constantly by, colonial legacies, Cold War politics, material constraints, internal rivalries, and his own human limitations. Diverging from other recent examinations of Tanzania's socialist experiment (Hunter 2015; Lal 2015), the biographical form enables the authors to detail how his philosophy and practice were inextricably linked. Moreover, as a Tanzanian publication written by three Tanzanian scholars, this project enriches the African anti-colonial library in its own right by reconstructing Nyerere's career a generation later and, for many potential readers, an ocean away, so that Mwalimu Nyerere might teach us once again through both his merits and faults.

The project is meticulously researched and organized in a way that brings out key themes of interest to political theorists. The authors conducted multiple interviews with Nyerere's family, friends, and political associates, and they combined these with substantial English and Swahili-language materials from British and East African archives, including newspaper publications, government documents, and Nyerere's own writings and speeches. The thematic rather than strictly chronological organization can pose some difficulties for readers who are not already familiar with African political history or Nyerere's political thought, but it also helps to signal for readers how different political struggles intertwined. Similarly, the book's thematic organization can occasionally feel disjointed, since the chapters will often cover the same period multiple times. Thus, some events are referenced very briefly earlier in the book before getting their own featured section, like the Tanganyika Rifles mutiny, the passage of the Arusha Declaration, the shift to multipartyism, or the war with Uganda. The authors assume some prior knowledge by the reader about these major points in Tanzanian history. That said, it is also a testament to the authors' ability that they provide enough detail at each interval for the reader to proceed until revisiting that item in greater detail.

Volume one, appropriately entitled *The Making of a Philosopher Ruler* and written primarily by Saida Yahya-Othman, introduces Nyerere's pre-political and extra-political history. The first two chapters highlight his upbringing, education, family life, friendships, and interests in order to provide the reader with a foundation for thinking about Nyerere's subsequent political development. They likewise highlight the extent to which Nyerere himself is a cosmopolitan product of, and response to, the colonial project, as he explicitly traced his ideas to his Zanaki village upbringing as the son of a (colonially appointed) chief and to his formal English education in the UK. For example, when explaining his brand of socialism, Nyerere regularly invoked the ideas of the Fabian socialists who greatly inspired him in Britain (V1, p. 86), the values of the Christian gospels as a devout



Catholic (V1, p. 142; V3, p. 57), and the communal character that he attributed to traditional African society (V1, pp. 9–18, 39–40; V3, pp. 72–75). His cosmopolitan thinking also appears in his writings criticizing women's inequality in 'traditional' African society and his effort to involve women in Tanzanian political and social life, commitments he attributed to reading J.S. Mill's 'On the Subjection of Women' while seeing first-hand the status of Zanaki women (V1, pp. 25–28). The subsequent volumes attest to how this wide range of intellectual resources enabled him to appeal to various audiences, even though his thinking was often too idealistic to effectively respond to material constraints and struggles (V2, p. 82; V3, pp. 118–165).

The next two chapters highlight the holistic character of Nyerere's nation-building and development initiatives and show how fragile he believed both these efforts were. Chapter three primarily discusses how Nyerere used language, and Swahili in particular, as a charismatic political leader with a sharp tongue and pen. The authors' engagement with Nyerere's relationship to Swahili helps illustrate the key role that language plays in nation-building and decolonization. Not only did he seek to unite the different populations in Tanzania under an African rather than a European language, but he also made a concerted effort to demonstrate that Swahili was versatile enough to cultivate the whole person through poetic expression, political theorizing, scientific inquiry, and translations of Western classics like *Julius Caesar* (*Juliasi Kaizari*) and, as noted above, Plato's *Republic* (*Jamhuri ya Plato*). Chapter four traces the intellectual atmosphere in Tanzania across Nyerere's career, including his support for founding the University of Dar es Salaam in 1961, his debates with Marxist students and instructors there in its early years, and his increased control over the media as his career continued. Nyerere's respect for Marx and his disdain for dogmatic Marxism illustrates particularly well his focus on the specificity of Tanzania's material reality, which, he believed, would ultimately require its own homegrown theory of socialism (V1, pp. 274–279).

In volume two, *Becoming Nationalist*, Ng'wanza Kamata shifts the focus of the project from Nyerere the man to the political institutions into which he would insert himself. The two chapters in this short volume remind readers that, even though Nyerere is virtually synonymous with the history of Tanzania and African socialism, they emerged from movements and debates that came before him. Chapter five traces the history of Nyerere's party, Tanganyika African National Union (TANU, later called *Chama Cha Mapinduzi*, CMM) from its origins in trade and professional associations around Tanganyika since the 1930s. While expanding TANU, Nyerere labored intently toward independence but also tried delicately to navigate the escalating tensions between the colonial government, on one side, and the African membership and more radical leaders, on the other. Chapter six recounts the handful of early crises that defined Nyerere's first months in office. It narrates his efforts to respond to the mutiny of the colonially inherited army, the



Tanganyika Rifles; to unite Tanganyika and Zanzibar into the united government of Tanzania; and to exclude from TANU leadership members who were militant Marxists or who advocated wholesale ‘Africanization’ of government posts.

These chapters, in particular, illuminate the challenges of transitioning from rebellion to governance. Nyerere had to shift focus promptly from overthrowing colonial rulers to preventing neo-colonialism, disunity, and poverty. The reader sees his moderation and pragmatism, which helped him secure a peaceful transition to full independence by 1961. These traits compelled him to push away the ideologues, often for pragmatic or personal reasons, while cobbling together more idealistic rationales after the fact. After attaining ‘the political kingdom’, to use Kwame Nkrumah’s phrase, Nyerere found himself reacting to crises or fending off rivals while having to build the united nation of Tanzania from two multi-ethnic, multi-racial, economically underdeveloped, and colonially created states. The next necessary step, he realized, would be to create a coherent agenda and set of ideals to fill the hegemonic space that he had so carefully secured but which was always threatened by neo-colonialism.

Volume three, entitled *Rebellion without Rebels* and written by Tanzanian legal theorist Issa Shivji, will likely be of greatest interest to theorists, because it engages with Nyerere’s mature thought and elaborates most clearly the distinctiveness of the postcolonial setting as a site from which to think about the nation-state, socialism, and democracy. Chapter seven opens the volume by identifying many of the tensions between Nyerere’s thought and practice, and it leaves open whether he used his theoretical claims to inspire some of his more autocratic or idiosyncratic choices or simply justify them afterward. For example, it outlines briefly how he conceptualized indigenous democracy primarily as discussion among equals toward united goals—an account that he institutionalized by developing what he considered to be a successful one-party rather than multiparty democracy (V3, pp. 28–42). It also explains his embrace of secularism and the nation-state, both of which he considered useful Euro-American inheritances. His secularism aimed to reconcile religious factions in Tanzania while opposing the Soviet and Chinese atheistic models (V3, pp. 50–57). His defense of the nation-state served to justify notoriously autocratic measures like curbing free speech, imprisoning dissidents, and banning unions and non-TANU civil society organizations (V3, pp. 34–41, 62–63). The chapter closes by narrating his definitive shift from pursuing a nation-building project overburdened by the imperatives of his circumstances to theorizing his own brand of non-aligned socialism. For Nyerere, *ujamaa* represented a political commitment to human equality and dignity that combined individual belief with local African communal traditions to respond to local material needs (V3, pp. 72–93). The rest of the volume recounts his fight for socialism in practice.

In December 1966, Nyerere returned from vacation to descend into the proverbial cave in order to inform the public that Tanzania would begin following the path toward socialism (V3, p. 112). In his populist spirit, Nyerere spent the next



six weeks on a nation-wide speaking tour, after which he and TANU promptly passed the Arusha Declaration to articulate the principles of *ujamaa* and guide its implementation (V3, p. 158). Chapter eight discusses the creation, passage, and inspiring ideals of Arusha, whereas chapter nine recounts the extent to which the Tanzanian state often failed to fulfill Arusha's high ideals in practice. Aiming to create a socialist country where 'people's sweat is not exploited', Nyerere marked out paths for self-reliant economic development based on peasant agriculture, for comprehensive education adapted to this peasant society, and for a leadership code that would strictly prevent politicians from accumulating additional wealth and privileges (V3, p. 116). Though Arusha put forth ambitious goals appropriate to its time and place, it remained limited by the tools and leaders meant to enact it. Nyerere's plans created their own repressive consequences: forced mass movements of people through villagization, production reminiscent of colonial state expropriation, an education policy that sought to respond to but ultimately reproduced rural poverty, and a bloated state bureaucracy that sucked up wealth and produced a new bourgeois class of wealthy government workers. The text shows further that his efforts embodied a conflict among his desires to build a populist democracy, to maintain personal control, and to ignore the rising bureaucratic class rather than try to build a vanguard that could guide the socialist cause. On balance, Nyerere sustained his regime while having to watch many other African leftist leaders be assassinated or overthrown, but he was bound to the profound limitations of using the state to guide development and failed to acknowledge how his strategy intensified rather than mended Tanzania's nascent class struggle.

Chapters ten through twelve narrate the gradual decline of the socialist project in Tanzania, attributing it largely to infighting within Tanzania's ruling class and to external neo-colonial influence. Chapter ten recounts Nyerere's last term and Tanzania's war with Uganda that helped rally patriotic fervor in the midst of economic decline at home but ultimately hastened the country's economic turmoil and revealed fractures among African countries during the Cold War. Chapter eleven discusses Nyerere's final term from 1981 to 1985, during which he sought to revive the socialist cause by finally endorsing an account of class struggle in the 1981 party guidelines and recounting the errors since Arusha. However, as the chapter indicates, this effort at course correction came too late, as the bureaucratic bourgeoisie was now fully entrenched, and Tanzania moved rapidly toward economic liberalization under external pressure from the IMF and internal pressure by officials seeking to increase their wealth. Finally, chapter twelve closes the book with a whimper, as the coalitions that Nyerere sustained had proved to be wide but shallow—socialism without socialists in government, the Tanganyika/Zanzibar union without a united constituency, and class struggle without a cohesive worker-peasant class identity (V3, p. 398). After 1985, Nyerere stepped down from the presidency to support the transition to multiparty politics. He spent the next



fifteen years advocating the values of *ujamaa*, while also recognizing that those who had inherited the reins of power did not share his commitments. As the volume recounts, the 1990s saw the wholesale privatization of state assets, increased corruption, and ultimately the reduction of Arusha and *ujamaa* into platitudes.

The arc of this plot leans toward tragedy. However, as the authors remind the reader in both the preface and final chapter, Nyerere remained optimistic and steadfast in his defense of African liberation, socialism, and the gradual ‘progress of mankind [which] ebbs and flows like the tides’ (p. xx). In that spirit, I want to highlight two dimensions of this text’s account that provoke further research into Nyerere’s approach to socialism and should motivate us to revisit it today.

First, *Development as Rebellion* shows that socialism must be locally rooted, experimental, and embodied both in personal commitments and institutional programs. Nyerere was adamant about this, and it underpinned his vision of a distinct school of socialism that was tied specifically to the material conditions and traditions of his population. As a biography rather than a manifesto, the book compellingly demonstrates that *ujamaa* itself was not a systematic philosophical proposal but rather began as a pragmatic ‘ideology to unite the nation, to reign in centrifugal forces, and much less to liberate and emancipate the working people’ (p. xvii). The space between independence in 1961 and the Arusha Declaration in 1967 attests to that lack of philosophical coherence; Nyerere’s reflections on *ujamaa*’s implementation over the next two decades illustrate how he adapted over time in response to material changes. Even when unsuccessful, however, we see that *ujamaa* represented both a steadfast belief and a living set of governmental programs that aimed to address local manifestations of broader problems of living in political community. The text presents the reader with a set of political puzzles that confronted Nyerere and remain with us today as members of nation-states in a neo-liberal world. In particular, the text will enable readers to start thinking about the challenges of building socialist values among higher levels in government, developing non-authoritarian approaches to preserving national unity and providing for large-scale material needs, and generating coalitions among diverse dominated classes that can sustain a mass movement against cooptation by a bureaucratic bourgeoisie.

Second, the theoretical insights of Nyerere’s story are matched by the practical urgency of revisiting his project. Though some of the institutions and actors have changed, colonial and capitalist domination remain into the present. They continue to generate multiple crises—like climbing economic inequality, sustained racial division, stark political polarization, and the deterioration of state capacity—that their advocates seem unable or unwilling to address. Much of the Euro-American left, meanwhile, has also struggled since the fall of the USSR to produce institutional responses to these crises or effectively disentangle itself from its own colonialist roots. In the face of these limitations, we would be wise to reconsider Nyerere’s contributions that were theorized and enacted in order to address those



ongoing oppressive systems. As a resource for understanding the contours of Nyerere's fruitful thought and career, *Development as Rebellion* will help readers reflect on the enduring question of how to build a just political community, and to respond to that question in the feverish colonial capitalist present through socialist strategy.

References

- El-Malik, S. S. (2016). *African Political thought of the twentieth century: A re-engagement*. New York: Routledge.
- Getachew, A. (2019). *Worldmaking after empire: The rise and fall of self-determination*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hunter, E. (2015). *Political thought and the public sphere in Tanzania: Freedom, democracy and citizenship in the era of decolonization*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lal, P. (2015). *African socialism in postcolonial Tanzania: Between the village and the world*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bloom, A. (1968). *The republic of Plato*. New York: Basic Books.
- Shilliam, R. (2015). *The black Pacific: Anti-colonial struggles and oceanic connections*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

David Thomas Suell
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48105, USA
dtsuell@umich.edu