



By Dauti Kahura



*Nairobi, Kenya* - Three months before the end of the last millennium, Africa's arguably greatest leader-president breathed his last in a big city hospital, far away from the peasants who held him in awe and whom he loved to banter with so much.

On October 14, 1999, Africa woke to the sad news of the demise of Julius Kambarage Nyerere. He was 77, a tender age considering that his beloved mother died at the ripe old age of 100-plus years. His elder brother Wanzagi had died at the age of 86 and his maternal uncle died at the age of 96 years.

The founder-president of the Republic of Tanzania died at St Thomas Hospital in central London. He had been diagnosed with a rare terminal illness — lymphatic leukaemia — a disease that is primarily caused by persistent multiplication of the white blood cells in the blood.

The course of the disease is very slow, but towards the end, is one of extreme discomfort. It is probable Nyerere suffered great pain as he lay in his bed. To date, the ailment has no cure.

Even the magnanimously forgiving first president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, would not have kept silent in the face of the swamp of corruption his party, the ANC, which prides itself as a liberation movement, now finds itself deeply mired

Given his stature as a revered retired president that when he died, Nyerere -who is fondly

remembered as Mwalimu, the Teacher, a name he carried with “aristocratic dignity”- evoked difficult and mixed reactions from friend and foe. Those who loved Nyerere praised him unconditionally, those who disdained him were less than effusive in their eulogies and assessments of his life and career. “Nyerere was the soul of Tanzania,” a Tanzanian journalist once told me, “in life and in death.”

But one thing is unanimously agreed upon even among his harshest critics and most ardent admirers: He was an ordinary man who was not a kleptomaniac.

Kleptomania seems to have become the byword for current African presidents. South Africa’s President Jacob Zuma is reeling from exhaustively documented exposure of corruption by him and his cronies, so much so that the ruling ANC party veterans recently told him to his face: “You have brought shame to our organisation and to our country for (your) own indiscretions and blatant actions of corruption and collusion with forces who do not care about our people and our country.”

Suffice it to say, even the magnanimously forgiving first president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, would not have kept silent in the face of the swamp of corruption his party, the ANC, which prides itself as a liberation movement, now finds itself deeply mired in.

#### CORRUPTION: A RUNAWAY SUCCESS

In South Africa, much like our own country Kenya, state corruption has paradoxically been a runaway success, to the consternation the citizenry. A couple of weeks ago, President Uhuru Kenyatta gathered a motley group of senior state aficionados at State House to tackle the destructive institutional corruption that threatens to tear apart his Jubilee coalition government. Fulminating about state corruption, Uhuru cast himself as a helpless victim, a man more sinned against than sinning, blamed everyone but himself and his office. Never in the political history of post-independent Kenya has corruption posed so real a threat to the very existence of the nation-state, 50-plus years after gaining Independence from the British colonialists.

The great function of history is to help us understand the present. More than ever before, what historical lessons can we draw from Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere’s 23 years at the helm of Tanzania’s political leadership and 15 years as a ‘president-at-large’?

Indeed, the spectre of Nyerere still haunts a continent in dire need of a political role model. Nyerere’s sometimes contradictory political life offers a glimpse of man who deftly avoided being sucked into the vortex of corruption into which political establishments across the continent were already being drawn.

What made Nyerere famous? What was it about him that set him apart from other African presidents of his time? Above everything else, what was his contribution to the development of leadership in Africa?

Try as we might, almost two decades since his demise, Africa is yet to get a political leader who can match the moral probity and rectitude of Nyerere (barring, of course, the Black Pimpernel Nelson Mandela).

The spectre of Nyerere still haunts a continent in dire need of a political role model. Nyerere’s sometimes contradictory political life offers a glimpse of man who deftly avoided being sucked into the vortex of corruption into which political establishments across the continent were already being drawn

Nyerere encapsulated a moral leadership and political morality that eschewed all forms of corruption: Institutional corruption, moral corruption, state corruption, private corruption, public corruption. Throughout his presidency and post-presidency, Nyerere argued against all forms of corruption, saying corruption erodes a society's social mores and unravels the ties that hold a nation together.

As early as 1967, the year he formulated the controversial Arusha Declaration, Nyerere was quoted by the then ruling party TANU newspaper *Uhuru* as saying: "In the running of the nation, the people should not look at their leaders as saints and prophets." Already wary of the sway the political elite held over the citizens, he cautioned them against sycophancy, warning that it would derail the development of the young country.

Thomas Molony, the Edinburgh academic and author of *Nyerere: The Early Years*, published by James Curreyin 2014, recounts the heady days when the young and idealistic Nyerere was consumed with the enterprise of nation-building. An austere Nyerere had set himself the task of moulding and steering Tanganyika (later to be united with the Spice Islands of Pemba and Zanzibar into the united Republic of Tanzania) into a country of self-respecting and conscientious people.

Writes Molony: "Nyerere would speak to intellectuals in their language, but more significantly, he could articulate the frustrations of the Africans in their own language that they understood. He once told the British Labour Party and the British Left that Africans were natural socialists."

At Edinburgh University in the late 1940s, Nyerere distinguished himself as a great thinker and baffled his white tutors and fellow students with his formidable intellect. As an MA student, he voraciously consumed Jean Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, T.H Green's *Principles of Political Organisation*, among other moral and political philosophical writings. It was also at Edinburgh that Nyerere came into contact with the Fabian Society, under whose influence he later developed his Ujamaa philosophy, based on Fabian socialism.

## 120 COMMUNITIES STILL KNIT TOGETHER AS A NATION

Back at home and after becoming the first Tanganyika president, Nyerere was quick to remind the great powers (the USA, former colonial powers Germany and the British and the former USSR) that while they were busy racing to get to the moon, the African was trying to get to the village. Thanks to his great charisma and unceasing efforts, Tanzania's 120 ethnic communities are till today still knit together as one people on a continent riven with ethnic hatred that has routinely led to internecine warfare.

Thanks to Nyerere's great charisma and unceasing efforts, Tanzania's 120 ethnic communities are till today still knit together as one people on a continent riven with ethnic hatred that has routinely led to internecine warfare.

A devout Catholic, Nyerere once proclaimed he carried two bibles, wherever he went: The Christian Bible and the 'Ujamaa Bible' — the Arusha Declaration document (Azimio la Arusha) that nationalised everything from bakeries to banks save for Catholic Church institutions. It is to his everlasting credit too that during his presidency, religious tensions were unheard of.

In a nostalgic moment, Nyerere in 1994 recounted how even after the country had officially done away with the Azimio la Arusha manifesto in 1990, he still kept his Ujamaa Bible. 'I can tell you with all sincerity that I have re-read it again and again and I have not found anything wrong with it,' said

a sombre Nyerere.

Like his contemporary Leopold Sedar Senghor, the founder-president of Senegal who was also a Catholic, Nyerere oversaw the emergence of an independent country whose population was slightly more Islamic than Christian. And so Tanzania, like Senegal, has not been threatened by the religious schisms that are wreaking havoc in many African states.

Once, addressing an episcopal conference of Tanzanian Catholic bishops, Nyerere admonished them when he said: "Hakuna dini Tanzania, Hakuna. (There is no Tanzanian religion, none.)" Then, he travelled to Zanzibar and repeated the same to the imams. He kept reminding religious leaders that they had the onerous task of respecting each other's faiths and keeping peace among their followers. "Nyerere is a Catholic, but he cannot force his religion on others," he reminded the bishops and imams alike.

A decade after he had left office in 1984, Nyerere was so upset by the creeping corruption under his successor president Ali Hassan Mwinyi that in 1995 he thundered in despair: 'Ikulu inanuka rushwa. (State House is reeking of corruption.)' Apparently taking a pot-shot at Mwinyi, he said in exasperation: 'Ikulu nimahala patakatifu...siyo mahala pa biashara. (State House is a sacrosanct precinct...not a place of commerce.)'

Nyerere went further to remark, in public: 'State House has been turned into a bazaar where Indian businessmen broker deals.'

Trevor Grundy, a British journalist who worked in Dar es Salaam in the early years of the Nyerere administration, reminisces about an ascetic and strict Nyerere who was yet decent and humble. A father of five sons and two daughters, it was inconceivable to hear of Nyerere's children being involved in state malpractices. Nyerere himself once stated how he had read the riot act to his children and family and friends, warning them that state affairs and filial relations were two distinct and separate dominions.

A great man who attracted many 'haters' (Ian Smith, leader of Rhodesia before it became modern Zimbabwe, once described him as an 'evil genius'), Nyerere, like any other mortal being, was not without his foibles. The veteran East African journalist Ahmed Rajab opined after the death of Nyerere, 'He was a great leader who made great mistakes.'

Those mistakes included the monumental failure of the much touted Ujamaa policy. Still, it was a fiasco that the late Prof Ali Mazrui affectionately described as an 'heroic failure.'

Still, Nyerere had the humility to at least concede failure and before abdicating power, he offered an apology and regretted the impoverishment and suffering that the policy had caused his people.

I met Nyerere the philosopher-king twice in Tanzania. On both occasions, I observed at first hand as the master and 'servant politician' did what he knew best: Enchanting the wananchi with his magic wand. Ever the sharp-witted conversationalist, I also saw him hold his own among university lecturers, laughing easily and heartily and mingling easily with the literati.

## **WHO IS THE GREATEST PRESIDENT OF THEM ALL?**

Today, many people are wont to compare Nelson Mandela and Julius Nyerere — and rightly so. Between them they ask: Who was the greater hero? There is no doubt in my mind that Mandela is the best leader-president Africa has ever produced (and will produce perhaps in the next 100 years). Nyerere, on the other hand, is the greatest thinker-president (partly because of making great mistakes) that Africa produced in the last millennium.

Mandela will forever be remembered for spending a third of his life in Boer jails and surviving to assume the presidency of the Rainbow Nation. He will also be politically canonised by an adoring global community, for respecting power and quitting it for good once his first five-year term ended.

Nyerere will go down in history as a great man, who like Mandela was incorruptible, yet whose noble ideas oftentimes were frustrated by forces beyond his control. The Catholics may want to canonise him, but unless they have not re-read his premonition of 1967 in which he talked of creating saints out of ordinary mortals, the Catholics are warned that this is not the best way to honour the pithy short man from Butiama.

As the people of Africa grapple with tin pot dictators and insatiable presidents who plunder state coffers with the help of their children, family members and robber baron friends, let us remind them that Nyerere, for all his shortcomings, did not steal from his people

Three years ago in Nairobi, I engaged Fr Carole Houle, one of Nyerere's confessors, about the whole debate on canonisation of Nyerere. He laughed and dismissed my views. Once the superior general of the New York-based Maryknoll Fathers in East Africa, Fr Houle spent 20 years in Musoma, where his congregation oversaw the Musoma diocese, one of whose more famous parishes was Butiama, the rural home of Nyerere.

As a pan Africanist, Nyerere like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, Kenneth Kaunda and Jamal Abdel Nasser was ahead of his times. He dreamed of East Africa as a federation and hoped that the three countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda would form one country, because as he correctly observed, the three countries were colonial constructs.

Ever the busy scholar, Nyerere had completed translating Plato's *Republic* into the Kiswahili language and even edited it on his sick bed (sadly, the manuscript is yet to be published.) It was the same Nyerere who, in his spare time as president, translated two of Shakespeare's plays: *Julius Caesar* and *Merchants of Venice* into Kiswahili.

As the people of Africa grapple with tin pot dictators and insatiable presidents who plunder state coffers with the help of their children, family members and robber baron friends, let us remind them that Nyerere, for all his shortcomings, did not steal from his people.

On a continent suffering from a dearth of politics of integrity, Nyerere continues to shine on us as a beacon of rationality and princely leadership.

---

*Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).*

*The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.*

*Follow us on [Twitter](#).*