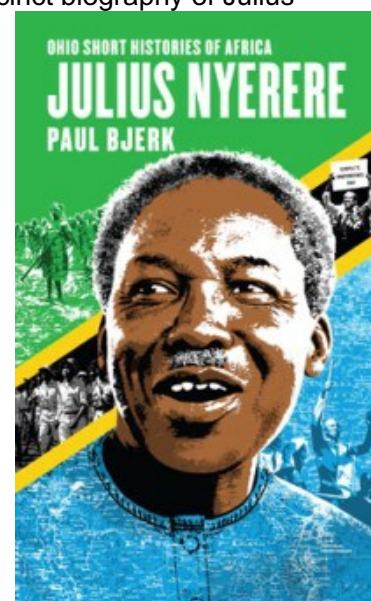


Book Review: Julius Nyerere by Paul Bjerk

In a short and precise volume, Paul Bjerk succeeds in debating the legacy of Nyerere in six short chapters. The book deals with the highs and lows of Nyerere's illustrious political career and balances this in a manner befitting a great African statesman, says Nicodemus Minde.

Paul Bjerk has taken keen interest in the study of Tanzania's postcolonial history and in particular he has written about the country's foreign policy and national building agenda with an emphasis on the leadership of Tanzania's founding president Julius Nyerere. He is the author of [Building a Peaceful Nation: Julius Nyerere and the Establishment of Sovereignty in Tanzania](#), (1960-1964) – which captures the very essence of national building in the formative years of Tanzania's independence. Having been a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Iringa in Tanzania, Bjerk builds on his previous studies of the country by writing a short, succinct biography of Julius Nyerere.

The book generally highlights the personal life of Nyerere, who was fondly known as *Mwalimu* – Swahili for teacher. The political story of Mwalimu has been told in many platforms including books, articles, monographs and documentaries. Bjerk, through conversations with Nyerere's childhood friends tells of Mwalimu's early life, growing up as a chief's son. Nyerere's mother was the fifth wife of Chief Nyerere Burito and as such educating the child of a fifth wife was not always a priority. However, after been convinced by another chief, Nyerere's father sent his son to school. The author points to the early political socialisation in primary school, secondary school and the Catholic Church which influenced Nyerere's thinking. Nyerere's egalitarian principles were shaped by his mentor, Father Richard Walsh, who was the headmaster of St. Mary's Secondary School in Tabora. His university education at Makerere College in Uganda and at Edinburgh, Scotland further shaped his philosophy of socialism. Upon his return home after completing a master's degree at Edinburgh, Nyerere planned to venture into active politics where he became a member of the Tanganyika African Association (TAA).



The book situates Nyerere's role in Tanzania's political trajectory from the 1950s up until the independence in 1961. The Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) succeeded TAA and became the official political organisation that worked towards Tanganyika's independence. Away from the lionisation often associated with Nyerere, Bjerk highlights Nyerere's political suppression of dissenting voices such as those of Zuberi Mtemvu (pp.54-55). Nyerere's decision to suppress his critics was justified on grounds of inclusivity and equality – a foundation of his philosophical underpinnings. Mtemvu was a proponent of the Africanist ideology which was pushing for a more aggressive policy of Africanisation (p.56). Nyerere's vision was to build a united nation.

In exploring Nyerere's contribution to the Tanganyika-Zanzibar Union in 1964, the author captures the intrigues and intricacies of the union formation. The book explores the then global interests and the interplay and power struggles between Zanzibar President Sheikh Abeid Karume and Nyerere. The book also highlights Nyerere's power consolidation through overt and covert means. In particular, the author draws our attention to the way Nyerere managed to curtail voices that criticised government policy and also that questioned the workings of the Union (p.99).



A statue of Julius Nyerere in Dodoma

Photo credit: Pernille Bærendtsen via Flickr(<http://bit.ly/2kEvFtg>) CC BY-SA 2.0

Nyerere's philosophic beliefs anchored in the Arusha Declaration of 1967 that birthed Ujamaa and Self-Reliance or what Nyerere referred to as African Socialism is well addressed in the book. Bjerk situates his analysis of Ujamaa and self-reliance in Nyerere's vision for national building and through a subtle analysis of Tanzania's diplomacy and foreign policy. For example, the book looks at the break in relations between Tanzania and Britain in 1965 which was in protest of the latter's passive policy toward Southern Rhodesia. It was after this that Nyerere turned to the Chinese who helped in constructing the Tanzania-Zambia railway.

The author also looks at Nyerere's forays in Africa between 1978 and the 1990s including Tanzania's ousting of Uganda's Idi Amin, the Tanganyika – Zanzibar Union question and the frosty relations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Nyerere's voluntary retirement from the presidency in 1985 meant that he took the elder statesman mantle. Nyerere's aura as statesman and his shadow was ominous especially in the domestic political party discourse. Nyerere spoke almost prophetically on the dangers of corruption in the ruling party Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM). Mwalimu's sunset years saw him play a role in the Burundi peace mediation. The world mourned Nyerere when he died at a London hospital in October 1999 and his legacy as the author sums up was one of a man of "rare integrity, intelligence and commitment" (p.148).

In a short volume, Bjerk succeeds in debating the legacy of Nyerere through six short chapters. The book recognises the highs and lows of Nyerere's illustrious political careers and balances this in a manner befitting a great African statesman.

The book, despite being a biography of Nyerere, draws parallels to contemporary Tanzania's leadership. The leadership of President John Magufuli has often been [mirrored to that of Nyerere](#) due their ostensible nationalistic goals. This book offers that opportunity to understand Tanzania's political culture and history through the life and times of Mwalimu Nyerere.

[Julius Nyerere. Paul Bjerk. Ohio University Press. 2017.](#)

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.