
BJERK Paul. — *Julius Nyerere*

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BJERK Paul. – *Julius Nyerere*. Athens, Ohio University Press, 2017, 167 p., index, ill.

- 1 In the mid-1970s, at the zenith of his power, the president of Tanzania warned against the habit of electing the same person repeatedly for office. “I frequently meditate upon whether it would not be a service to my country if I stood down from national leadership while still in full possession of my senses and strength, in order that I, together with my fellow citizens, could set an example of support and loyalty to my successor. These are not idle or stupid thoughts, especially in a country like ours where the people have known only one man as their President” (p. 109).
- 2 Ten years later he did step down from power, allowing his party to select his successor for president in 1985 and yielding his chairmanship of that ruling party in 1990. “This began a tradition of the outgoing president continuing as party chairman for a period (now less than a year) after stepping down from office” (p. 125). In so doing, Julius Nyerere joined that small pantheon of African founding fathers who, in renouncing power, passed down a lasting legacy of institutional legitimacy to the republics over which they presided.
- 3 Yet in his study of Julius Nyerere, published in Ohio Short Histories of Africa series, Paul Bjerk opens with a warning against those, like the Vatican, who have worked for his beatification, as well as those who criticize him as having been nothing more than a socialist dictator: “While the Vatican may eventually find its own grounds for honoring Nyerere, such veneration is highly politicized and robs history of its human reality” (p. 11). By the same token, those who consider him nothing more than a Third World strongman, fail to acknowledge how he stepped down from power “of his own accord,” then from his retirement to his death in 1999, “used his prestige to urge for ethnical political choices at home and abroad” (p. 10).

- 4 “His life and leadership encompassed the contradictions of his age,” writes Bjerk, “and those contradictions beguile us long after his death” (p. 11).
- 5 A balanced approach to biography may risk pleasing no one and displeasing everyone. This is nevertheless how Bjerk, professor of history at Texas Tech University, and author of a 2015 historical study of Tanzania, has written his concise yet well-documented portrait. No full-length, exhaustively researched biography of Nyerere has been written yet, Bjerk observes, referring to his own book as a mere “sketch,” and dismissing portraits by William Edgett Smith (1971)—published three decades before Nyerere died, and thus, incomplete—by Thomas Molony (2014)—which focuses only on Nyerere’s early years—and by Godfrey Mwakikagile (2006) and Ludovick Mwijage (2010) as just not exhaustive. He is right. I look forward to Bjerk completing the documentary, archival, and field research he has already started for what he calls a “case study of an African country confronting the challenge of independence as seen through the life of one of the era’s most creative and thoughtful politicians” (p. 10).
- 6 Kambarage Nyerere—whose name was only changed to “Julius” when he was baptized in 1943—was born in 1922 in the green hills overlooking the eastern shore of Lake Victoria, in the underdeveloped backcountry of Tanganyika, a former German colony only recently acquired by the British. The son of a minor village chief, educated at Catholic mission schools, he studied science at Makerere College in Uganda, then returned to Tanganyika to become a teacher at St. Mary Secondary School in Tabora, where the headmaster successfully lobbied for the colonial government to offer him a scholarship to study biology at Edinburgh University in Scotland. Upon arriving in the United Kingdom in 1949, he changed his course of study to political science, became involved in the socialist Fabian Society, and graduating with a masters’ degree in 1952, “fixed his mind on getting involved in politics when he got home” (p. 38). Professor Bjerk consecrates sufficient pages in his slim volume to historically contextualize Nyerere’s coming of age in an East African colony, life as a teacher in Dar es Salaam, his founding of Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), and leadership for independence in 1961.
- 7 Hero or villain? One of his signature achievements was the union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar in 1964, giving birth to Tanzania, still in existence 55 years later. Compared to the failed federations of Senegal and Gambia (“Senegambia”), or Ghana and British Togoland, or Italian and British Somaliland, or the Mali Federation, Nyerere’s achievement of bringing two new African nations into a lasting union was heroically Panafrican. But the awkward union treaty, Bjerk admits, “seeded the legacy of continued resentment among many Zanzibaris who blamed their postcolonial travails on what seemed like a crass attempt by Nyerere’s government to annex the islands” (p. 70).
- 8 Bjerk heralds Nyerere’s 1967 Arusha Declaration calling for a socialist revolution to end poverty and Western neocolonialism “a turning point in Tanzanian history and a widely influential speech in Africa” (p. 82) but acknowledges it “set Tanzania on an economic path that eventually proved disastrous” (p. 85). He tells the story of how, after a visit to Mao’s China, Nyerere returned to Tanzania inspired by communal agriculture, intending to experiment with large, cooperative farms. “Government lorries and Field Force police arrived to transport people at gunpoint and dump them unceremoniously on empty sites of new villages” and this policy “so disrupted rural farm production that many villages depended on famine relief for years” (p. 91).

- 9 He suppressed “Africanist” opposition, in the name of multiracial “national” unity. Fusing his mainland TANU with the insular Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP) of Zanzibar, Nyerere created Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM), a single-party machine which, even after the introduction of a multiparty system in 1995, continues to rule Tanzania today. He declared Swahili as an official language of Tanzania, personally translating Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice* to demonstrate Swahili’s suitability for state affairs. While most other African countries had retained their colonial languages, Swahili “gave people the sense that the independence government was theirs, and not just a continuation of colonial imposition” (p. 60). But the Zanzibari Revolution of 1964 which left thousands of Arab Zanzibaris dead or in exile, and an army mutiny in Dar es Salaam, pushed him to strengthen his state and one-party regime to such an extent, “Few would deny that Nyerere also became a dictator during this period” (p. 99).
- 10 An entire chapter is dedicated to *ujamaa*, a Swahili word for “familyhood” that Nyerere developed into his comprehensive political ideology. *Ujamaa* combined romantic notions of African nationalism with his own unorthodox theory of harmonious socialism. He rejected Marxist theory of class conflict, in place of which he lyrically eulogized social solidarity of family life in Africa, a new rhetorical strategy that provided TANU with its ideological core foundation of an invented Tanzanian community. Bjerk highlights both the darkness and illumination of Nyerere’s emblematic concept, which allowed him to strike an independent path through Cold War battles between capitalism and communism. “It was the ideological equivalent of his nonaligned foreign policy, and its notion of familyhood demanded that Tanzania come to the aid of its neighbors rebelling against minority governments” (p. 74). Nyerere’s foreign policy regionally made him a military ally of all the successful revolutionary movements in southern Africa fighting white settler regimes of South Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Mozambique and Angola.
- 11 By the end of the Cold War, the failure of industrial nationalization, agricultural collectivization, and one-party idiosyncratic rule by an aged founding father assisted by corrupt cronies and increasingly violent police, began to seriously undermine Nyerere’s “one major asset, people’s belief in him as a leader” (p.118). Bjerk convincingly narrates the historical chain of events that led from Nyerere’s 1979 war against Idi Amin of Uganda, which “cost Tanzania 500 million US dollars and dealt a death blow to the Tanzanian economy” (p. 117), to an IMF austerity plan in the 1980s that “undermined the socialist model of a state-controlled economy” and hastened his resolve to choose his successor and step down from power in 1990: “People remember this period as a time when adults wore burlap sacks and village children had no clothing at all” (p. 118).
- 12 Nyerere’s successors eagerly adopted liberalization of Tanzania’s economy. Witnessing these changes toward competitive private businesses turning profits, he “watched the rejection and abandonment of his socialist vision” (p. 126). Voter support for his CCM slowly eroded from 97.78 % in 1990, to 61.82 % in 1995—when multiparty politics was introduced—to 58.46 % in 2015. He did not live to see the fall of CCM, nor did he suffer the fate of those contemporaries who clung to power until their last dying breaths. “As time passed, his reputation was reconstructed and he became a national symbol whose portrait still appears in public establishments next to that of the current president” (p.

127). His greatest lesson in leadership was his wisdom to step down from power, meriting his Swahili epithet *Mwalimu*, or “teacher.”

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