

The ideals of Julius Nyerere embattled,  
but not yet defeated

# Tanzania's Noble Experiment Imperiled

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The painful realization that much is not right with Tanzania is the cause of growing despair both inside and outside that East African country. Tanzania has been the favorite of Social Democrats, Marxists, the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization, Scandinavian governments, and of a host of Africa observers.

Other African states, classified along with Tanzania in the so-called Fourth World of the poorest of the poor countries, have not rated the attention lavished on Tanzania. Indeed, who but the specialist knows the precise geographic location, economic and political orientation of, for examples, Upper Volta, Niger, or Chad? Who can name the leaders of these deprived lands? And who, even within the United Nations or bilateral-aid agencies, feels special affinity with their problems?

Tanzania, on the other hand, has captured the energies, optimism, and increasing anxiety of observers around the world. Whether they are socialist in orientation or merely sympathetic to the need for creative solutions to deep economic and political problems in Africa, Tanzania became for many the test case. Yet Tanzania's problems are hardly unique: They are symptomatic of sub-Saharan African dilemmas. Unlike most African countries, Tanzania has a reputation for imaginative and honorable efforts in facing its problems.

Prior to independence President Julius Nyerere set the tone. He is scholarly, self-effacing, imaginative, and devoted to the notion of African self-reliance. His writings and speeches on the problems facing his country and how they might be solved number several volumes. This small shelf of writings constitutes a major part of what is available in postindependence African social, political, and economic thought. The collected works of Julius Nyerere are a major African contribution to twentieth-century thought on issues confronting two-thirds of humankind.

Nyerere started, as did Mao, with the notion that one

must build upon indigenous circumstances and redesign them to meet current and future needs. Faced with Tanzania's largely subsistence agricultural society with few known extractive resources, Nyerere decided on a strategy of communal organization in the rural sector and of structural changes aimed at modernizing agriculture.

Nyerere envisioned bringing together in villages the frequently scattered populations in order to make the most of the limited resources available for education, health, and technological improvements. The villages would be the nucleus for societal restructuring and development and would be fostered through a centrally structured party organization that would provide political, bureaucratic, and technocratic cadres.

A society like Tanzania's, which began with a fairly homogeneous poor population, needed to preserve its equitable sharing of wealth. Nyerere looked with alarm at his more capitalistic neighbors and tried to make sure that in Tanzania development would mean something more than consumerism on the part of a small government and business élite. A commendable set of laws and regulations was laid down to reduce the potential for self-aggrandizement. Nyerere set a personal example by living with minimal pomp in the capital, by sustaining his rural ties through tending his own farm, and by regularly walking the length and width of Tanzania. Political education about Nyerere's aims and the blueprint for villagization and self-reliance were and are diffused throughout all levels of the school, military, and party structure.

Thus in Tanzania we have witnessed more than ten years of sustained leadership with a comparatively coherent philosophy and program of action containing a refreshing emphasis on a value-system. No wonder that midst the disarray of so many other states—the blatantly visible neocolonialist scramble, the opulent living styles of leaders and growing urban élites—the ideas and comportment of Julius Nyerere attracted sympathetic attention from all but the most paranoid antisocialists.

Tanzania's present economic decline is, of course, in

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part externally produced and beyond internal control. Increased oil prices and their secondary effect on industrial goods make inelastic imports more expensive and force the government to reduce elastic imports, thus slowing down both development and the quality of life of Tanzanians. The declining and fluctuating world prices for such commodities as sisal further increase Tanzania's balance-of-trade deficit, create new debts, and slow down development plans. The current low liquidity of the United Nations Development Program is reducing the number of U.N. projects and advisors and is thus cutting a statistically small but important component of Tanzania's development program.

On top of all this, Tanzania has been economically cramped by its geographical and ideological location in the turbulent affairs of Southern Africa. The war and ultimate independence in Mozambique and Angola constituted a long-standing drain on Tanzania. The escalating conflicts over Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), South West Africa (Namibia), and South Africa itself will continue to engage the time and resources of Tanzanian leadership and people. Part of Tanzania's identity has been cultivated by Nyerere's leadership role outside Tanzania. It would no doubt harm both his national and international positions at this juncture were he to abandon Tanzania's role in Southern African affairs.

Some of Tanzania's internal economic difficulties were caused by a recent serious drought, alleviated by international food aid, and finally arrested by subsequent rainfall. Yet Tanzania, which was self-sufficient in food until 1972, continues to fall short of its requirements. Even a cursory survey of Tanzania's agriculture shows why Tanzanian well-wishers are alarmed and dismayed. The decline in productivity no doubt has many causes, but one cause appears to be the very villagization process intended to foster agricultural output. The traditional farming method in Tanzania was to plant a given plot for some time and then to shift to another plot, allowing the land to recuperate. By reducing the mobility of the farmer and locating him in sedentary villages, which require constant use of the same land, a reduction in soil quality begins to take its toll. Agricultural output is reduced even before serious and more permanent soil erosion sets in. In addition, farmers in Tanzania, just as in other parts of the world, are not readily given to changing their practices; encouragement to give up their hut, land, and mobility in order to settle in communal village complexes has often met with limited enthusiasm. Indeed, there have been recent instances of force—including the burning of homes—in an effort to move people into villages. All this has probably affected the morale of farmers and has not been conducive to sustained or increased agricultural productivity. In addition, the promised infrastructure for the villages has frequently been mishandled through bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption: promised fertilizer does not reach its appointed location at the appropriate time, or equipment is in disrepair or not available when needed.

In general, the transition from sedentary agricultural life, land use, and work habits appears to be far more complex than the original scheme had assumed. The short-range effect, whatever its long-range promise, has

been to reduce agricultural productivity.

The Tanzanian Government, as well as international aid agencies, are seeking to overcome the obstacles described above. One component of the governmental effort is assumed to lie in political education. It is very hard to sell something, however, when the benefits are far from apparent. Even were it possible to overcome the bureaucratic, psychological, and social obstacles affecting agricultural decline, there is also a major knowledge gap.

During the colonial period most agricultural research on land and climate conditions in Tanzania focused on cash crops such as sisal, cotton, and tea. Very little research was done by the colonizers on food crops. The result is that knowledge about food crops that might increase productivity simply does not exist. Even that much-advertised cure-all—fertilizer—is said to affect production so marginally in several regions of Tanzania that farmers quite sensibly neglect its application. Aid programs will continue to be, for the most part, futile and wasteful until a great deal more is known about the elementary ingredients of productivity in Tanzania. It is hardly surprising that in the face of so many obstacles and declining productivity a credibility gap between ideology and reality, between leaders and led, should be on the increase.

One also senses, despite high-minded public pronouncements and general public enthusiasm for the country's ideology, other destructive tendencies at work. Nyerere's disposition against the use of violence and force is imperiled in both action and theory. The burning down of farmers' houses to force them to move is one example. Now one increasingly hears it said that the goal of a productive socialist state may not be achievable in Tanzania without resorting to force. Amid growing difficulties, loyalty to President Nyerere and his approach seems to be decreasing. He is now engaged in a careful balancing act between various interest groups and factions. Under such circumstances deviations from planned programs may have to be overlooked, and Nyerere's capacity to enforce his will may have become somewhat eroded.

Signs of this erosion are visible to the observer. For example, a higher level of corruption appears to be tolerated now. Low salaries and strict rules about importing automobiles and about property ownership still make Tanzanian officialdom almost unique in Africa. Yet there appears to be a good deal of pilfering of monies from government corporations. Given salary scales, the flow of funds into some pockets is difficult to explain other than by corruption of one kind or another. The point here is not the alarming magnitude of corruption, but its importance as a symptom of Nyerere's declining control and as a signal of disaffection among relevant segments of the population. Belief in the stated aims and ideals of the new Tanzania no longer seems quite so firmly established.

Another hallmark of Tanzanian ideology is self-reliance. Yet all signs indicate that economic and other reverses are increasing rather than decreasing Tanzania's reliance on external goods, financial resources,

and manpower. The reliance on external manpower is related to an apparently increasing number of Tanzanians who see no personal advantage, financial or otherwise, in seeking advanced education and specialized training. Despite forward-looking ideals about the equality of women in Tanzanian society, the number of female students at the University has sharply declined. The cause of this decline appears to be the unanticipated consequence of adopting a work interval between secondary school and university entrance. During this interim women unable to find employment choose marriage as a socially and economically accepted alternative. Something may soon be done to change the work interval requirement. But what has happened again illustrates the unintended ways in which human factors deter and delay national goals. And of course all this has an adverse psychological effect upon the people's enthusiasm for deprivation in the name of self-reliance and long-range development.

In the face of growing pessimism there is still evidence of the idealism and good sense that Nyerere and an apparently decreasing number of his countrymen stand for. Sitting in the comfortable surroundings of one of Dar es Salaam's modern hotels, I asked my Tanzanian companion, himself a technocrat, about the state of his country. How could so many of his fairly young compatriots afford to be sitting there drinking the rather expensive beer? After all, several beers costing 75 or 80 U.S. cents each are a large investment for a Tanzanian on a rather low salary. My companion answered that in a country where there are few luxuries available for purchase a beer or two was one of the few items on which to spend luxury or entertainment funds. I then asked about reduced efficiency in many sectors of Tanzanian life; that very week the East African tourist association had registered a complaint against Tanzania, threatening to withdraw the Tanzanian portion of some East African tours because Tanzanian hotels and lodges were said to be ill-kept, inefficient, and generally declining in presentability. Yes, he said, many Tanzanians were only too aware of a decline in motivation and discipline, and no one was more disturbed by it than Nyerere, who has publicly admitted his disappointment in his countrymen on this and other scores.

My companion's face grew serious as he spoke of these matters. He fervently believes that the answer is to be found in political education. His countrymen need to understand what is at stake and must acknowledge that their own contribution is essential for a better future. He became grim when asked whether there was enough time to bring people to a new level of political consciousness. There was no doubt about his devotion to the ideals and policies of Nyerere. He was also proud of his country's leadership role in efforts to liberate Southern Africa. He did not hesitate to call attention to his own preference for the more deprived life in Tanzania as compared to the more affluent but socially less defensible life that he might have, for example, in Kenya. My companion works for an existing component of the steadily disintegrating East African Community, and I wondered what he would do if his job was wiped out. Would he move to Kenya or some other place where his skills would be in



Photo by Colin Davey  
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demand and well remunerated? The response was instant and unequivocal. His identity and sympathy were with Tanzania; he would rather become a villager engaged in agriculture than abandon Tanzania. My companion's sophistication, thoughtfulness, and intelligence were unusual only in degree. Many Tanzanians express similar sentiments.

**H**ard economic and political realities will force difficult decisions upon Tanzanians in the near future. Those who have been cynical about the Tanzanian experiment will likely find new converts. But as long as a substantial number of Tanzanians share the quiet thoughtfulness, devotion, and sensitivity expressed by my companion in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania will deserve its unique place in the world's attention and support.

In today's sub-Saharan Africa the historical injustices visited upon the continent are both the cause and the rationalization for a new set of injustices imposed by the misguided and selfish leadership of a new élite. Nyerere's Tanzania may not survive the hostile international economic environment, the hostile economic and political environment of Africa, and the burden of a population so close to the margins of survival that there is little leeway for experimentation. Nevertheless...Tanzania and Julius Nyerere still stand almost alone in trying to do battle against these forces in a way that could result in a relatively just society. Tanzania continues to warrant our special attention, concrete support, and lively hope.