

Short and Not Too Sweet: Rethinking Mwalimu through Paul Bjerck's *Julius Nyerere*

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Writing academically, and particularly historically, about Julius Nyerere, Tanzania's first president, is a fraught endeavor. He is one of a few figures whose impact is generally understood as foundational to modern post-independence African history, and the explicitly intellectual approach he took in justifying Tanzania's heterodox socialist politics helped ingratiate him to the Western academy. However, the coercive impact of his resettlement projects and Tanzania's economic collapse have undermined his previously sterling reputation. As a result, most modern scholarship attempts to decenter Nyerere from Tanzania's history. This shift has helped to create a deeper body of scholarship around postcolonial Tanzania that is better able to understand the experiences of marginalized communities, such as women and urban populations (Callaci 2017; Geiger 1996). Historian Paul Bjerck seems to have missed this trend, and wrote his first book, *Building a Peaceful Nation: Julius Nyerere and the Establishment of Sovereignty in Tanzania, 1960-1964*, on Nyerere's role in guiding Tanzania during early independence. He has continued that project in a brief biography titled *Julius Nyerere*, which came out in 2017. Fortunately, Bjerck is not interested in hagiography or condemnation, and he creates a compelling narrative by leaning in to the apparent contradictions of Nyerere's legacy. As both a quick read and a nuanced portrait of a sometimes divisive figure, this is a good introduction or reintroduction to Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, despite sagging in places under the weight of its subject matter.

Bjerck's attempt to reframe Nyerere starts slowly with his interrogation of Nyerere's pre-presidential career. It is not uncommon for scholars to mention Nyerere as a young college student representing Tanzania's best and brightest in Edinburgh or as an independence leader on the cusp of success, and on the way to the presidency. However, Bjerck's analysis does a good job of using the confines of these now almost mythological settings to describe the impact that an early exposure to socialism and egalitarian theology, both in Tanzania and Scotland, had on Nyerere's later ideologies (2017, 24–30). This expands into a well-executed interpretation of Nyerere's early life, but Bjerck's transition to focus on Nyerere's early political work happens, if anything, too slowly. Waiting until almost one-third of the way through a 163-page book to address Nyerere as a political figure is an overestimation of the importance of his youth. This is especially true here, as it is not until discussing the early independence process that Bjerck truly begins to interrogate Julius Nyerere's central contradictions. Beginning with Nyerere's early leadership and activism, Bjerck acknowledges that Nyerere was both honestly committed to egalitarian values and occasionally reliant on heavy handed, top down governance (2017, 55). In creating this balanced portrait, Bjerck equally avoids both boilerplate critiques that frame Nyerere as a naïve authoritarian lacking in economic sophistication and exultant celebrations of Nyerere as the quasi-omnipotent Father of Tanzania. Instead, Tanzania's first president is described as a leader whose idealistic vision of a new pluralist African socialism was tempered by his deep pragmatism and dedication to ideological dominance.

Part of the charm of this biography, beyond its evenhandedness, is its directness in addressing this balance. Bjerck's candor enables him to explicitly complicate the implications of oft-cited facts, like Nyerere's status as one of the few early African presidents to step down voluntarily. This is often used as a justification for describing Nyerere as almost a benevolent ingénue among the power hungry. Bjerck points out that such a narrative is incomplete given the political savvy required to navigate the dangerous terrain of early independent African states, and the repeated failure of Nyerere's historical peers to serve similar terms as presidents or prime ministers (2017, 14). Instead, Nyerere's early displays of strength were clearly effective in consolidating power that fed into his larger popularity. When Bjerck discusses the early structure of Tanzanian democracy, he makes clear that Nyerere's choice to espouse majoritarian rule was not necessarily predicated on an interest in dissent. This acknowledgement includes direct quotes from Nyerere about elected officials being allowed to use "supreme authority" to control any attempts by minorities to organize around matters of race, religion, or tribe (54). This initial repressive behavior is described by Bjerck as that of a "socialist dictator" – but this is only part of a man who Bjerck describes as neither "saint nor tyrant" (2017, 1, 8). As Bjerck summarizes him in the final chapters, Nyerere appears as a thoughtful and savvy leader with a singular vision for one of the poorer countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Unfortunately, while creating this complicated narrative, Bjerck often unsuccessfully tries to balance personal insights into Nyerere with a much larger discussion of the entire post-colonial history of Tanzania. In one such instance, Bjerck highlights coercive inclinations in Nyerere's acceptance of British help in 1964 with crushing the mutineering Tanzanian Army (2017, 67). To his credit, he effectively demonstrates the way in which Nyerere's most repressive tactics were often a direct response to internal crisis. However, at the same time, he also attempts to explain the extremely complicated international politics of Tanzania being created during the Cold War, an issue which needs much more than the two pages of explanation he provides (67–69). This maximalist inclination is understandable given the importance Nyerere held as president, but Bjerck continues to make the same mistake in describing events that occurred after Nyerere's retirement. In one instance, Bjerck attempts to describe the entirety of neocolonialism in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, map the Hutu and Tutsi divisions in Rwanda, and summarize Nyerere's involvement in the Burundi peace process in only four pages (2017, 139–44). *Julius Nyerere* already carries the difficult task of succinctly summarizing its namesake, and there is no room in its pages for a simultaneous summary of Tanzania's entire history.

Luckily, the value of Bjerck's project is not limited to its disenchantment with a mythically angelic version of Nyerere, or even to its acknowledgment of the sincerity of Nyerere's commitment to creating a socialist state. Its value is also derived from Bjerck's consistent interest in acknowledging the tenuous balancing act of personal interest and nationalist ambition that faced the leaders of Tanzania as they tried to create a prosperous and just future for their nation. In truth, the difficulty of understanding Nyerere's legacy does not solely stem from the complexity involved in adjudicating the mixed quantitative results of his ambitious policies. It stems from the difficulty in creating any single narrative of this complicated man who sat at the center of so many historically important debates. Bjerck's embrace of contradiction and complexity allows him to address this amorphous question of legacy, and he draws deeply on the full range of existing scholarship about Tanzania. Given that Bjerck accomplishes all of this in a book about the length of a novella, it is worth reading his biography of Nyerere.

References

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