

Working paper

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# Nyerere on Education: A Commentary

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# Nyerere on Education: A Commentary<sup>1</sup>

Jenerali Ulimwengu <sup>2</sup>

## 1. Introduction

*Nyerere on Education* is essentially an effort to present, in one mid-size document, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's thoughts on education. With selected speeches and writings, it traces Nyerere's basic educational philosophy, from the young anti-colonial campaigner leading Tanganyika's independence movement in the 1950s, through his years in power, to his time in retirement.

Throughout this long period, in which he played varied roles, we are afforded a glimpse of his unwavering conviction about the crucial importance of education in national development and the need to make the content of the education offered to young men and women relevant to the needs of their society.

Recognising education as a potent tool of human emancipation, he posits the need to do away with colonial education, which was tailored to service the colonial machine by producing colonial props, and which was imbued with fragments of the master's values system, and to erect, in its place, a cultural edifice more in tune with the needs and aspirations of a young nation in a hurry to eradicate poverty, disease and hunger.

## 2. Educational Inequalities and Inequities

Very early in his political career he saw the inequity inherent in the racially differentiated education, in which race and colour determined the type of school Tanganyika's children attended, with its destructive potential for the creation of a racially polarised nation.

In a statement made in 1956, he brought up the issue of the glaring inequality in the amount of resources allocated for the education of the different racial groups. All the three major racial groups – Europeans, Asians and Africans – were allocated the same amount of money from the colonial Treasury -- Pounds 800,000 each, regardless of the fact that there were only 25,000 Europeans and 70,000 Asians, compared to 8 million Africans. To quote Nyerere, whose bitter irony cannot be missed:

“All European children and Asian children receive primary education... Only 40% of the African children go to school. We are told that this is because there is not enough money in the country to give education to every child; and that unless Europeans can be sure that their children will receive education they will not come to Tanganyika, and the African will suffer. So, this apparent injustice to the African, like so many others, is done for the good of the African.”

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a commentary on *Nyerere on Education* (edited by Elieshi Lema, Marjorie Mbilinyi and Rakesh Rajani) for the book launch at the National Museum in December 2004. Copies of this book can be obtained at low costs from E&D Ltd, PO Box 4460, Dar es Salaam. Public schools and libraries may obtain free copies from HakiElimu.

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After independence, he was soon talking about a reverse type of racial discrimination, one in which it was too easy for Africans to pick their scapegoats from some racial group, distinguished by its skin colour, and blame all the country's difficulties on them.

On the occasion of the inauguration of the University of East Africa in 1963, he spoke strongly against any kind of prejudice based on race:

“It is the easiest to give way to, and it would be wrong to deny that some of our people have already done so. I refer to the most prevalent social disease of the twentieth century – discrimination on grounds of race, colour or caste.”

Nyerere was obviously seeing the big picture on the African continent and the sharpening fight against the Apartheid regime in South Africa. He saw the hypocrisy of opposing the racial discrimination practised in that country while, at the same time, accepting racial discrimination in reverse in Tanganyika.

He said “...we have to guard against the prejudice which would simply reverse the racial positions existing in South Africa.” This is a position he maintained to the end of his life.

Although he recognised the need to correct the historical imbalances and inequities inherited from our colonial past, he was keenly aware of the pitfalls of corrective action that gets out of hand:

“The situation is further complicated by the fact that it is necessary for us to take actions which counteract the effect of past discrimination against the majority. So questions arise such as ‘When does corrective action itself become discriminatory?’, and ‘When does a child stop paying for the sins of its fathers?’”

### **3. The Relevance of Education**

Another subject on which Mwalimu is unwavering is the question of the relevance to our national conditions of the education given to our children and young people. He constantly reminds us that modern education is expensive and that investment in this area can only be effected if the poor majority of the people, the workers and peasants, consent to it as an investment in their own future.

In his speech at the opening of the Dar es Salaam University College Campus in 1964, he gives the following graphic illustration:

“The annual per capita income in Tanganyika is Pounds 19.6. The cost of keeping a student at this college will be about Pounds 1,000 a year. That is to say that it takes the annual per capita income of more than 50 of our people to maintain a single student at this college for one year. It should not be necessary to say more. It is obvious that this disparity can only be justified, morally or politically, if it can be looked upon as an investment by the poor in their own future”.

Six years later, at the inauguration of the University of Dar es Salaam in 1970, he revisits the issue of the cost that the nation incurs in establishing and maintaining a university, advising his listeners not to shy away from recognising the fact that the people of this country have made sacrifices, diverting resources from other priorities, in order for the university to exist:

“It [university education] is provided at the expense of the community as a whole. I know that we who have received education do not like being reminded of this fact: but it is better to remind ourselves than to be reminded by others. The peasants and workers of a nation feed, clothe and house both the students and their teachers; they also provide all the educational facilities used – books, test-tubes, machines, and so on. The community provided these things because it expects to benefit – it is making an investment in people. It believes that after their educational opportunity the students will be able to make a much greater contribution to the society; they will be able to help in the implementation of the plans and policies of the people.”

For the university to be of service to the society it must apply itself to the task of finding ways to add value to the lives of the people by helping them pull themselves from the mire of poverty and backwardness. To do that, students, lecturers and researchers need to be informed by the socio-cultural realities surrounding them, even as they pursue knowledge that is valid universally.

Relevance to our surroundings does not go counter to the universality of scientific principles. Although the laws of chemistry, for instance, are applicable anywhere, it would be folly for our researchers to expend all their time and intellectual energies studying the chemistry of ice formation or volcanic eruptions.

In an intricate discourse, from which the following quote is taken, Nyerere is seen to be trying to establish a delicate balance between the desire to access universal knowledge and the imperative to make that knowledge of use in our situation. It is foolish to seek to isolate ourselves from currents of ideas emanating from the rest of the world – it may even be impossible – but neither is it prudent to ignore our specific realities, which place us in a particular socio-economic and historical context.

“University ‘relevance’ is not a question of drawing up syllabuses which talk about “Tanzania” all the time. It is a question of intelligent and knowledgeable tutors relating their discipline to the student’s and the society’s past, present and anticipated future experience. It is a question of the teaching being oriented towards solving the problems of Tanzania – as they are, and as they can reasonably be expected to be in the future”.

In the same speech, Mwalimu places special emphasis on the university as a centre of ideas, critical thinking, analysis and the unrelenting search for that perpetually elusive thing – the truth.

“It is certainly true that university education must encourage the students to think for themselves. But the ethos of the university and the surrounding society does have an automatic and unavoidable influence on the students.

“Are students encouraged to debate, or simply to listen? Is it obviously assumed that in the absence of an imposed discipline they would completely disregard the interests of their fellow members of the university, or does the university structure support an expectation that students will work in cooperation with each other and with the wider community?”

But more poignantly:

“The University must be allowed to experiment, to try new courses and new methods. The staff must be encouraged to challenge the students and the society with arguments, and to put forward new suggestions about how to deal with the problems of building a socialist Tanzania based on human equality and dignity.

“Further, they must be allowed, and indeed expected, to challenge orthodox thinking on scientific and other aspects of knowledge – it is worth remembering that Galileo was very unpopular when he first argued that the world went round the sun!...the University of Dar es Salaam will be able to serve our socialist purposes only if we accept that those whom we are paying to teach students to think, must themselves be allowed to think and speak their thoughts freely”.

## 4. The Importance of Teachers

On the importance of teachers generally, Mwalimu decries the fact that teachers are usually underestimated and accorded less social recognition than they deserve. In light of the current debate about the declining quality of education and the teachers who provide it, it is instructive to note what Nyerere was saying as far back as 1966. It is generally assumed that the educational crisis we are going through now is a recent phenomenon and that “in the good old days” things were much better.

Mwalimu’s remarks at the Morogoro Teachers’ College should serve as a reminder that this problem has been with us for much longer than we care to remember. He points to the tendency to ignore teachers and explains that this is so because teachers, unlike civil servants, do not wield obvious power. He says this has meant that very few young people opt for the teaching profession and, those that do, join it only for want of “better” opportunities.

He then goes on to make one of the most fundamental statements on the importance of the teaching profession:

“Our nation – any nation – is as great, as good, as fine a place to live in, and as progressive as its citizens make it. Its leadership may be good, bad or indifferent, but if the people are awake and aware of themselves it will not for long be completely unrepresentative of the attitudes in the society. And the truth is that it is teachers, more than any other single group of people, who determine these attitudes, and who shape the ideas and aspirations of the nation.”

Nyerere is at pains to dispel the popular perception of teachers as a powerless group, a notion he calls “one of the biggest fallacies of our society. For teachers can make or ruin our society. As a group they have a power which is second to none. It is not the power of a man with a gun; it is not a power which can be seen by a fool. But it is the power to decide whether Service or Self shall be the dominant motive in the Tanzania of 1990 and thereafter.”

The double heritage of African culture – which bequeaths onto us values of equality and socialism, but also economic backwardness – and Western civilisation, with its hallmarks of “arrogant individualism and competition” but also material progress, requires the mediation of competent teachers:

“...who have the real power to determine whether Tanzania will succeed in modernising the economy without losing the attitudes which allow every human being to maintain his self-respect and earn the respect of his fellows while

working in harmony with them. It is they, the teachers... who are shaping what Tanzania will become, much more than we who pass laws, make rules and make speeches!"

## 5. The Purpose of Education

One of the central planks in Nyerere's thinking on education is undoubtedly the concept of Education for Self Reliance, which also provided an essential input into the implementation of the policy of Socialism and Self-reliance, as promulgated in the Arusha Declaration.

For him, the education given to the young must be geared to making them an integral, and more useful, part of the society in which they live and which they must serve. It is the kind of education that seeks to free the minds of Tanzanians from the fetters of a colonial education which aimed at producing local clerks to service the administrative machine of the imperial power.

For him, education is to be made an instrument of liberation, and for it to have that quality it must strive to integrate the school system, indeed the whole learning process, within the society, so that the village school is part of the village and the village part of the school.

Young people must be helped to acquire knowledge that enables them to understand the society's problems and how to solve them, to learn to think for themselves and make rational choices, based on that understanding. He calls for the inculcation in the citizen of three fundamental attributes:

"an enquiring mind; an ability to learn from what others do, and reject or adapt it to [a citizen's] needs and a basic confidence in his own position as a free and equal member of the society, who values others and is valued by them for what he does and not what he obtains".

In 'Education for Self-Reliance', Nyerere delivers a stinging critique of traditional, or colonial, education, with its emphasis on passing set examinations and the collection of certificates and degrees, with little concern for the attitudes, character and serviceability of those who go through it. It is an education which sets too much store on good paper qualifications which, in turn, ensure big incomes and personal prestige.

This kind of education tends to produce arrogant and alienated young people, who despise their parents and their parents' occupations, and who think nothing much can be learned from their elders.

"The typical child "absorbs beliefs about witchcraft before he goes to school, but does not learn the properties of local grasses; he absorbs the taboos from his family but does not learn the methods of making nutritious traditional foods. And from school he learns knowledge unrelated to agricultural life. He gets the worst of both systems!"

Mwalimu questions the relevance of a primary school curriculum that is heavily skewed in favour of the academic when, in fact, a very small percentage of primary school leavers access secondary education. In a situation where only 13% of those who complete primary school go to secondary school, the remaining 87% leave school "with a sense of failure, of a legitimate aspiration having been denied them."

“... the education now provided is designed for the few who are intellectually stronger than their fellows; induces among those who succeed a feeling of superiority, and leaves the majority of the others hankering after something they will never obtain. It induces a feeling of inferiority among the majority, and can thus not produce either the egalitarian society we should build, nor the attitudes of mind which are conducive to an egalitarian society. On the contrary, it induces the growth of a class structure in our country.”

Mwalimu gives a lengthy, prescriptive presentation of the kind of education he would like to see given to the country's children; the type of relationship that should exist between the school and the village; the balance between academic learning and vocational training; how to organise school farms; how to share farm produce; how teachers, students and local communities can cooperate in the construction of new school buildings; etc. He clearly had a model school thought out in his mind, so detailed is this part of the paper.

A couple of times in the paper he criticises the practice, no doubt extinct today, whereby, in some schools, students had their quarters cleaned and their clothes washed by employed staff.

“There is no reason why students should continue to have all their washing up and cleaning done for them. Nor is there any reason why students (at university, medical school or other post-secondary institution) should not be required, as part of their degree or professional training, to spend at least part of their vacations contributing to the society in a manner related to their studies.”

Throughout the book, we encounter a statesman grappling with the urgent issues of development and aware of the crucial importance of the kind of education that is relevant to a young, backward nation eager to shake off the multi-faceted yoke of underdevelopment.

Mwalimu teaches us that education is not about good, imposing buildings and other physical structures but, rather, the imparting of knowledge and the inculcation of those values and attributes that make members of the society useful to themselves and their fellows. Education must be so designed that it frees the mind of the recipient, making him capable of questioning phenomena surrounding him, with a view to influencing them and using them for the betterment of his lot and that of the society.

## **6. Problems Encountered**

We are, nevertheless, required to appreciate Nyerere's writings on education against an understanding of some major pitfalls that this country experienced during the implementation of those policies he promulgated, but which were distorted in their application. For instance, it has become clear that while “free education” for all was a positive policy in itself, it had its obvious downside: it was principally predicated on foreign assistance, with some friendly countries, such as the Scandinavian countries, contributing generously.

This translated into a heavy dependence on outside help, so much so that, when, for example, there was a change of heart in Sweden, following the ousting of Olof Palme's first government in 1976, funds began to dry up, and Tanzania had no fall-back solution for its many development needs, including education. It became clear that those earlier ambitions were sorely unsustainable, and the response to this new challenge turned out to be weak and disorderly.



Universal Primary Education (UPE) was introduced at about this time, when it should have been clear that there was a critical dearth of teachers. It was thus decided to recruit young men and women who had completed primary school but who had not done well enough to qualify for secondary school entry, to put them through a training regime of sorts, and to send them to teach those they had left behind a year ago or so! Needless to say, this produced mediocre “teachers,” with predictable consequences.

Equally, the policy of Education for Self Reliance (ESR), though essentially a noble concept, did not see the practical implementation it deserved, because each school and each teacher responsible for its application went about it as they saw fit, with the result that there was no consistency of principle or adequate safeguards. Some teachers and schools seemed to think that the policy meant free hard labour and they made the children spend back-breaking hours tilling the land with hand hoes. No wonder many pupils equated ESR with physical torture and wished to have nothing to do with it.

In a development that has left an indelible mark on many of our schools, playing fields were also ploughed and children were left with no grounds on which to play and recreate, an essential component of any child’s growing up process. In most cases, these playing fields have never been reinstated.

These, and many other shortcomings, could have been put right had there been a climate of open debate on such matters at the time. But this was a period characterised by a monolithic political climate in which the ruling party and its government alone provided guidance and, in most cases, on such matters as education it was Nyerere’s voice that was heard.

The reader shall, in going through the book, discover that Nyerere was, at every juncture, looking back to assess past policy decisions and their outcomes, before proposing new measures. Quite often, he critiqued policies and practices that he himself and his government and party had been party to, in order to show the way forward. How much better it would have been if more voices, including critical ones, had been added onto his!

This is the spirit that should animate us in our debate, for, however successful we may be in our endeavours, there is always room for improvement, and every opinion should count, especially in this fast changing world.

## **7. Conclusion**

Emerging from the dark, colonial night, and desirous of fast economic development, Tanganyika, and later Tanzania, had to devise the most effective ways of bringing about development, and obviously education was crucial to the task. The challenge was to define what kind of education was relevant for the task, and this is where Mwalimu’s contribution is most evident.

In his career, as reflected in the book, he harped on about these issues time and again. Colonial education would not do, because it was designed to serve the colonial master and alienated the recipient from his community. Technical education alone would not do, because it lacked that spiritual bond that must bind us to our roots, even as we reach out for the most advanced scientific frontiers of the world.

The book, with its useful notations, should provide us with the opportunity to continue interrogating the content of the education given to young Tanzanians, and I suspect this must

have been the motive of the editors. Unfortunately, we do not hear too many people talking about the *content* or *methods* of education. Instead we seem to be satisfied to talk endlessly about the number of classrooms built and desks made, bricks and mortar, and pieces of wood with nails in them, all things that can also be found in a cemetery.

The writings presented within the book cover a variety of subjects including: primary, secondary and tertiary education; vocational training; education for self-reliance; the power of teachers; adult education; education for the disabled; education as an agent of liberation, and so on. It is my hope that the publication of the book shall stimulate us afresh to discuss issues such as curriculum content, the quality of teachers, participatory processes in teaching and learning, which is what HakiElimu is urging all of us to do. I recommend this book to every educator and every man and woman interested in this country's education, which is all of us.