

Mwalimu Nyerere: the artist

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There are many matters in Africa and beyond for which Mwalimu Julius Nyerere can be acknowledged for his contribution and participation. These range from social and political issues to international affairs. The aim of this chapter is not only to demonstrate Nyerere's intellectualism and his artistic skills, but also to show how he used the arts to express his philosophy and ideas. Employing his artistic creativity, he managed to identify the potential of the arts in building an independent nation soon after independence. This chapter discusses Nyerere as an artist and his initiatives to protect art. It also analyses how the shift of ideology from socialism to neoliberalism has affected the arts.

Historically, both the German and the British colonial governments were keen to destroy theatre and other cultural activities because for them they were 'demonic' and 'barbaric'. Germans, for example, neither established a theatre institution nor impressed their aesthetics upon the local population. 'Because of ignorance and because for the most part it suited them, they denigrated local performances as "uncivilised" activities' (Lihamba 2004, p. 236). Mollel (1985) and Lihamba (1985a) explain how the British occupation resulted in the introduction of colonial theatre in Tanganyika in the 1920s. Lihamba (2004, pp. 236–7) regards British colonialism as the beginning of 'a period of aggressive introduction of western theatre' which was 'facilitated through two major channels; schools and expatriate drama clubs'. Western theatre performed in racially segregated schools, used proscenium arch stages, and expensive costumes (Mollel 1985, p. 23).

The period between 1945 and 1952 was marked by the aggressive return of colonial theatre after a lull in the years from 1922 to 1940s, when Britain was economically 'strangled' as Chachage

(1986) elaborates. There was the re-introduction of the performance of western dramas such as those by William Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw, Gilbert and Sullivan (Lihamba 2004, p. 237). Although such western performances could not trace any roots in Africa, they were considered to be a 'universal' model of theatre, as Mollel (1985) argues. The Little Theatres were established by the British in Dar es Salaam and Arusha in 1947 and 1953 respectively. They were used as a model to show 'elite' Africans or 'black Europeans' (as Nyerere referred to them) the quality and value of western theatre (Mlama 1991, p. 100).

Missionaries and the church had a similar perception of African performing arts. Apart from their moral plays, traditional African theatre was seen as demonic and repugnant. There have been two schools of thought on why colonialists and missionaries were keen to suppress traditional African theatre in favour of western theatre. There were those scholars such as Plastow who believed that missionaries did not fully understand African performing arts and theatre. Theatre, along with other performing arts, was associated with witchcraft and was thus classified as demonic. She argues:

> Traditional performance was often related to indigenous religion, to sexuality and to alcohol – all things which the Church strove to deny the African people. Moreover, traditional African culture must have been extremely frightening to many imperialists. They generally understood neither its language nor its form, and had been so indoctrinated in the 'savage' nature of 'primitive' Africa that a firelight *ngoma* may well have been transmuted in their eyes into a pagan ritual of frightening barbarity.
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> (Plastow 1996, p. 45)

Scholars like Bakari and Materego (2008), Kerr (1995), Mlama (1985) and Nsekela (1984) offered an alternative view. They argued that the banning was not 'an accident'. Colonialists knew that theatre was a simulacrum of culture, and the Christians suppressed African performing arts when 'they realised culture held the symbolic key to the religious and moral bases of indigenous societies' (Kerr 1995, p. 18). Nsekela (1984, p. 58) explained in detail how the colonial education provided by the missionaries

was used to encourage people to accept 'human inequality and domination of the weak by the strong' as one of the fundamental elements of being civilised. Even the process of introducing missionaries to an area before establishing a colonial administration was for a specific purpose. Mlama (1985, p. 9) argued that 'in capitalist systems, the mind of the exploited was turned to accept exploitation', and religious 'songs for example, especially those of Christianity, have been extensively used by capitalists to make people accept worldly material poverty in the hope of receiving heavenly spiritual salvation'.

Before the end of World War II, cultural activities including traditional dances – *ngoma* – were seen as obscene, barbaric and one of the activities which propagated tribalism (Plastow 1996). Later in 1948, the British colonial government changed its cultural policy to allow and encourage cultural activities including *ngoma* (Rubin and Diakante 2001, p. 302). The British provided a list of 20 *ngoma* which were acceptable (Lange 1995, p. 46). This could be seen as a difference between the Germans and the British, but in actual fact the point in time when the British government decided to allow certain *ngoma* was a time when nationalism and liberation movements had begun and the colonial administration was in no position to say otherwise (Askew 2002, p. 168). This freedom was to satirically 'distract them from the mounting opposition to colonial domination in the empire' (Mlama 1991, p. 58).

Despite this attack, it was clear that the colonialists could not manage to wipe out African traditional performing arts (Lihamba 2004, p. 236). As the colonial government banned various traditional performances due to their 'barbaric' nature, certain theatre groups resisted this 'cultural invasion' and fought for their cultural freedom. *Beni ngoma* was one example of how they did this. This type of dance was developed primarily by taking various elements from existing social, political and colonial organisations. The dancers wore imitations of colonial military costumes. The music (brass band) and even the dancing itself (parade) imitated military drill practices. *Beni ngoma* performances were done under various associations. These associations were always in opposition to each other or in a 'joke partnership'. The best-known ones were Marini against Arinoti and Kingi against Scotchi (Askew 2002; Chachage 2002; Ranger 1975; Lange 2002; Edmondson 2007).

Surprisingly, the colonialists were attracted to *beni ngoma* because they saw it as evidence that Africans understood the kind of performances that the colonialists wanted them to put on. 'The imitation of European dress and drills, especially by the African civil servants, teachers and soldiers, was seen as a civilising process for the local people' (Lihamba 2004, p. 238). Thus, the notion that *ngoma* and other traditional performances were 'barbaric' was fully understood by the *beni* artists. However, *beni*, as any other theatrical form, was a result of the oppressive administrative structure imposed by the rulers, with the ruled struggling to find their own space within the administrative systems that had been created. As Ngugi (1997, p. 127) clearly shows, the consequences of any submissive domination is the birth of a culture of resistance.

Later, the colonial government decided to regulate *beni* because they thought it stimulated political consciousness as it contained elements that were abusive and which questioned the legitimacy of the colonial administration (Chachage 1986). For the colonialists, *beni* became a communist society (Lihamba 2004, p. 238). As a result, the colonial government started to charge a tax for each performance so as to discourage people from dancing. As you would expect, some members of the *beni* associations were part of the nationalist movement which gave birth to the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), the party which fought for independence (Lihamba 1985a, pp. 29–30).

To mark the attainment of 'pseudo' independence on the eve of 9 December 1961, the Mwenge wa Uhuru (freedom/uhuru torch) was placed on the top of Mount Kilimanjaro by Alexander Nyirenda as a symbol of freedom. I would argue that the ritual of placing the torch and the annual uhuru torch race (Mbio za Mwenge wa Uhuru) represent Nyerere's appreciation of the performing arts and its role in shaping people's consciousness towards a common goal.

The establishment of the Ministry of Culture and Youth can be traced to the president's 1962 inaugural address. In this speech, Nyerere outlined the roles of the ministry, which included facilitating the process of enabling Tanzanians to regain their cultural pride (Nyerere 1966, p. 187). In the same speech to parliament, Nyerere indicated his concern about how colonialism had dehumanised African arts. His speech became the blueprint for Tanzania's cultural

policy and led to various art reforms. These included the 'institutionalisation' of national art groups (NAGs). The aim of institutionalising NAGs was to fulfil Nyerere's quest for the renaissance of Africanness in the arts and culture (Bakari and Materego 2008).

The institutionalised groups included the National Ngoma Troupe (1963), the National Acrobatic Group (1969) and the National Drama Group (1972). These groups were designed to act as a model of performing arts in Tanzania. For example, the National Ngoma Troupe had 30 artists recruited from the various regions in Tanzania, both musicians and dancers (Lange 2002, p. 55). It should be noted that the process of building a national culture through theatre groups dates back to the birth of TANU in 1954 when a theatre group based on Nyamwezi dance known as Hiari ya Moyo under Suleiman Mwinamila participated effectively in creating a national theatre (Semzaba 1983). The decolonisation movement started with the beginning of TANU's formation, and Hiari ya Moyo was forced to include the concepts of nationalism and liberation in its work, in other words to fight against colonialism and (cultural) imperialism. *Amka Msilale* (Wake up, don't sleep) was their first recorded performance in 1954.

Amka Msilale	Wake up don't sleep
Msiwe wajinga mu Tanganyika	Don't be stupid, you are in Tanganyika [territory]
Tanganyika ni mali yetu	Tanganyika is our property
Tukidai tutapewa	If we demand it, we'll be given

(Semzaba 1983, p. 22)

The multiplication of NAGs trickled down to the village level. The process did not end with their establishment; their existence was facilitated because they were seen as the foundation of national artistic pride. These groups performed in political rallies, state banquets and meetings at all levels. Members of the NAGs were state employees. Since the state subsidised most of the costs and paid for their monthly salaries, the groups were not allowed to charge or receive extra payment for their performances. The focus was on the promotion of national unity and on echoing the state's Ujamaa policies. One of the positive outcomes of such initiatives was to make active involvement in theatre possible at various levels of society (Mlama 1985, p.103).

The 'ritual' surrounding the union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar on 26 April 1964 can be seen as another artistic performance. In addition to the usual practice of signing the treaty and exchanging the Articles of Union, Nyerere mixed the soil of the two countries. Nyerere wore a shirt made of leopard skin. He used two gourds filled with soil from Tanganyika and Zanzibar. Then the mixing was done by pouring the soil in the pot. The two men who held the pot were were both kneeling and dressed in *kitenge* (cotton fabric) tailored uniforms. The costumes, props and the mixing of the soil symbolised how Nyerere valued and treasured arts and his belief in the content of traditional theatre.

Mwalimu, as Nyerere was commonly known, also produced a variety of theatre works. As part of his mission to decolonise theatre, Mwalimu translated some famous Shakespeare plays into Kiswahili. According to Rubin and Diakante (2001, p. 301) these were *Julius Caesar* as *Julius Kaizari* (1968), *Macbeth* as *Makbeth* (1968) and *The Merchant of Venice* as *Mabepari wa Venisi* (1969).

One explanation for why Nyerere translated those works could be that by unfolding what was within the famous Shakespeare's English-based theatre, he could add value to people's theatre and help them 'regain their pride'. He believed that Kiswahili readers could better understand the content and context of the Shakespeare's plays and have an opportunity to compare African/Tanzanian and foreign/western theatre in the process of regaining their pride. Secondly, for Mwalimu, it was important to promote Kiswahili as the language of theatre and nation building (Rubin and Diakante 2001, p. 302). Mazrui and Mazrui (1995, p.82) also elaborated on how Nyerere developed Kiswahili as a language for 'cultural self-reliance' and 'self development'. 'The country's first president Julius Nyerere, himself set an impressive example of competence and versatility in that language, ranging from dazzling oratory to the tough self-imposed assignments of translating Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Merchant of Venice*.' Thirdly, perhaps it was a way of proving to the world that what the majority were glorifying as 'holy' literature, a simple person – a proletarian, as he preferred to call himself – could read, understand and even translate. In fact in his 1962 speech to parliament, Nyerere lamented how European education dwelled more on teaching people how to dance the foxtrot, waltz and

rock 'n' roll. He asserted that this made educated people unable to dance traditional dances such as *gombe sugu*, the *mangala*, *kiduo* or *lele mama*, and that some had not even heard of them (Nyerere 1966, p. 187).

One has to read between the lines to get a sense of Mwalimu's inner motive for translating the works. For example *The Merchant of Venice* could literally be translated as *Mfanyabiashara* (or *Wafanyabiashara* in the plural) *wa Venice*. But Nyerere chooses the word *mabepari* (*bepari* in the singular), which means capitalist(s). Mwangi (2009, pp. 170–1) regards this as a 'socialist twist' where Nyerere emphasised 'competitive and capitalistic tendencies' which were not in the original Shakespeare play. Perhaps after reading the book, Nyerere realised that the merchant's behaviour could not be differentiated from those of the capitalists. In addition, it might be that he wanted to concisely deliver the point home since, being a self-proclaimed African socialist (*mjamaa*), he was anti-capitalist. As noted, he purposely used the plural form of the title as opposed to its singular 'merchant'. It has also been observed that the years when he translated the works, between 1967 and 1969, reflect the promotion of the then dominant Ujamaa ideology, which he wanted to trickle down to people. All these translations and initiatives indicated, arguably, his stance against imperialism and its various manifestations. He saw imperialism as the cause of misconceived African history and arts. Nyerere's mission to translate philosophical pieces so as to deliver their message to the people continued up to late 1990: 'Mwalimu Nyerere's last intellectual work was the translation into Kiswahili of Plato's *The Republic*. As he was lying in bed at London's St Thomas Hospital, he went through the manuscript, made the necessary corrections and completed them before he died. Unfortunately the work has not yet been published' (Othman 2007, p. 79-80).

Mwalimu was also able to link his Ujamaa philosophy with the fine arts. The famous Makonde sculpture known as *Dimoongo* by Robert Yakobo Sangwani was renamed *Ujamaa* in the 1960s after the Arusha Declaration of 1967. *Dimoongo* demonstrated a Makonde strength or power. Looking at the way the sculptor had been able to construct one person at the bottom supporting others and how those who have been supported, support themselves

as a group, translated itself to Mwalimu's idea of Ujamaa (Erick 2009). It is said that it was Mwalimu who renamed it *Ujamaa* after seeing its structure.

Besides his thought-provoking speeches, Nyerere also employed poetic creativity to address some contentious national issues. For instance, in 1993 he wrote a poem on the union debate when a parliamentary resolution was adopted on Tanganyikan government.

> The most recent example is the G55 (1993) resolution demanding a separate government for Tanganyika. Mwalimu wrote a poem (*shairi*) of over 200 verses whose thrust was simultaneously to argue that it was parliamentary resolution only in name; that the secret pilots were the existing top leadership of the party. The driving force (*msukumo*) was tribalism (*ukabila*) and religious bigotry (*udini*) and that the whole argument of parliamentary resolution as a demand of the people was a thin masquerade for the presidential ambitions of the then two top leaders. This very driving force he warned, would not only disintegrate the Union but Tanganyika itself (Shivji 2007, p. 59).

From the poem it is evident that Mwalimu had been consistently advocating equality and national unity and was against the leaders who wanted to use the opportunity for their own political ends.

Nyerere's artistic skills date back to when he was young and wrote an essay to express his ideas on the issues that affect the daily lives of women. At the age of 22, Nyerere had already read and was influenced by the works of scholars such as John Stuart Mill. According to an interview with Ikaweba Bunting, Nyerere explains:

> I wrote an essay in 1944 called 'The Freedom of Women'. I must be honest and say I was influenced by John Stuart Mill, who had written about the subjugation of women. My father had 22 wives and I knew how hard they had to work and what they went through as women. Here in this essay I was moving towards the idea of freedom theoretically. But I was still in the mindset of improving the lives and welfare of Africans: I went to Tabora to start teaching.
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> (Bunting 2007, p. 66)

The Tanzanian coat of arms, a national symbol, represents the artistic creativity contained in other symbols such as the flag, the national anthem and the uhuru torch. It is moulded to embrace the warrior's shield in the midst of elephant tusks mounted on top of Mount Kilimanjaro. One can also see the man on the left and the woman on the right, standing in balanced postures on the sides of the warrior's shield with cloves and cotton on their feet respectively. The warrior's shield has the uhuru torch, Tanzanian flag, crossed axe and hoe, spear and water sign. All these symbolise the motto below: *Uhuru na Umoja* (Freedom and Unity) – the title of Nyerere's (1966) book. It is important to notice that the warrior's shield depicts various historical battles for freedom. The man and woman reflect respect for human equality regardless of gender, colour or any other social element.

As pointed out earlier, the establishment of the Ministry of Culture was the earliest post-independence initiative to fight against cultural imperialism. According to Ngugi:

> Cultural imperialism in the era of neocolonialism can be a dangerous cancer because it can take new, subtle forms. It can hide under cloaks of militant nationalism, calls for dead authenticity, performances of cultural symbolism, and even under native racist self-assertive banners that are often a substitute for national self-criticism and collective pride in the culture and history of resistance.
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> (Ngugi 1997, p. 18)

As Ngugi explained, Nyerere evidently knew the consequences and magnitude of cultural imperialism and he took measures to overcome it. He believed that a people's language was an important factor in this struggle. He devised subtle modalities to absorb imperialist influences in the theatre. The immediate approach was to provide artists with the theme of their performances – Ujamaa. Since artists looked at Nyerere as a national and international role model, they could easily transform his actions and decisions into theatrical works. The philosophical speeches and arguments which Nyerere preferred to deliver were probably among those which influenced artists.

The other theatrical landmark was the birth of Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM) in 1977. This political party was the result

of the merger of TANU and the Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP). After the birth of CCM, Hiari ya Moyo composed a song titled *Leo Sio Sherehe Tunaanza Chama* (Today is not a ceremony, we are inaugurating a party).

Kufa kwa TANU na Afro	The death of TANU and Afro [ASP]
Sio kufikiwa kwa Ujamaa kamili	Is not the attainment of Ujamaa
Wametimiza yao waliyoyaweza	They have fulfilled what they could
CCM lake ni kuendeleza	CCM has the responsibility to take over
Kwenye Ujamaa kutufikisha	So as to reach Ujamaa

(Semzaba 1983, p. 26)

This was the time when we were told *chama kimeshika hatamu* (party supremacy) had to come first. Therefore even artistic works, especially songs and performances, by the NAGs, were geared towards party supremacy and the promotion of Ujamaa. Mlama (1991, p. 103) adds, 'the ideological intention behind the promotion of these groups [NAGs] resulted in the development of a theatre for propaganda which … is an attempt to domesticate the theatre to serve the interest of the ruling ideology'.

Despite all these efforts by Nyerere, there was no defined socialist cultural policy (Mlama 1985). The 1962 and subsequent speeches were taken as part of the art/cultural policy. The so-called policy was based on the state officials' statements. It thus was taken for granted that the growth of culture would go hand in hand with the success of Ujamaa:

> This argument ignores the fact that the economic base and the cultural superstructure determine and influence each other and cannot therefore be separated. It also ignores the fact that while the country is waiting for socialist culture to come it is under constant exposure to the influences of capitalist and imperialist culture which is part and parcel of the imperialist struggle against socialism. There is a tendency to think that the war against imperialism is only an economic one, and a failure to realise that imperialism is fighting the war against socialism both economically and culturally.
>
> (Mlama 1985, p. 5)

Unfortunately, the ministry or department which was designed for arts and culture has been shunted around several places since 1962. By 1995, the ministry, or its culture component, had been shifted into about 11 ministries and offices (Askew 2002, p. 186). This frequent change has been taken to mean a lack of seriousness about matters to do with culture, especially the arts (Askew 2002, Lange 2002, Lihamba 1985b, Mlama 1985). Instead of working on a clear cultural policy that could comply with Ujamaa, the ministry responsible for culture was busy sending groups to perform at party-state meetings and functions. This was partly due to the influence of Ujamaa ideology and party supremacy as during that time all directives from the state/party top leaders were geared towards cultivating the ruling party and its ideology. Giving several examples, Mlama confirmed that 'this tendency has given rise to puppet art which largely parrots what the leaders are saying' (Mlama 1985, p. 14).

To protect the supremacy of the party, Radio Tanzania-Dar es Salaam (RTD) and the National Music Council (BAMUTA) ended up exercising direct censorship, which was carried out by cultural officers at all levels (Mlama 1985, pp. 14–15). Mlama (1985, p. 15) noted that 'such control betrays a misguided view of the role of art in ideology. Art can be critical and yet contribute positively to ideological development. Parrot art does not contribute to the socialist construction because it does not analyse problems and point out solutions.'

Although Mwalimu was an artist, fond of art and a good teacher, he was not lucky enough to persuade his fellow politicians, especially in his party, to appreciate making art out of political propaganda. Nyerere's speeches were misinterpreted to mean sending a group of *ngoma* dancers to the airport or to the national stadium to dance in the harsh sun and show themselves to the guests of 'honour' while security officers were busy strangling their movements and tempering their emotions even before they started to perform. This was happening at the same time that Nyerere's ideas were being implemented with political slogans like *kazi si lele mama* (work is not a dance of *lele mama*) which directly abuse arts (Mlama 1985 p.17).

Mwalimu's love for art was not spared by imperialism either. The proposal to restructure the economy through the International

Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank's structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) necessitated the downsizing of state expenditure. In addition to the NAGs' other artistic and political challenges, by the end of the 1970s the government could no longer subsidise them. The government's focus was on repaying debts through the withdrawal of budget allocations to social services such as theatre and 'ploughing' towards development, modernity and universalism, in other words complying with neoliberal policies.

It is therefore important to emphasise that the project to build national culture through theatre was dismantled when the state had to downsize its expenditure in order to comply with the IMF and World Bank neoliberal conditions. 'Throughout the country, government-owned institutions were either scrapped, had to curtail their activities or were later privatised. Cultural troupes owned by such organisations ceased to function' (Lihamba 2004, p. 243). At the end, 'liberalisation policies pursued from the early 1980s made theatre a commodity for sale like any other' (Rubin and Diakante 2001, p. 304).

The state dissolved the NAGs and instead, formed a national art institute in 1980. This institute was situated in Ilala Sharif-Shamba in Dar es Salaam, in the current National Art Council (BASATA) premises. In 1981, the institute was transformed and shifted to Bagamoyo and became Bagamoyo College of Arts (BCA); currently it is known as the Institute of Arts and Culture, Bagamoyo or TaSUBa (Makoye 1998, p. 95).

To ensure sustainability of the arts, Nyerere created opportunities for artists to produce and survive on their own. Despite the fact that there was no clear policy, his speeches were mostly translated as policy directives. From his speeches one could sense his ideas, creativity and passion for art. He established Nyumba ya Sanaa (a house for artists) in 1974, positioning it in the middle of Dar es Salaam. He believed that if it could be efficiently utilised, it would reduce the syndrome of artists needing to beg to donors and the state, which enslaves them. It is surprising to note that even Nyumba ya Sanaa has been one of the places the state wants to privatise while at the same time struggling to secure funds to build other places of the same nature in Bagamoyo (Naluyaga 2009).

The Zanzibar Declaration of 1991, which replaced the Arusha

Declaration (1967), could be regarded as the 'marketisation of arts' like any other product (Rubin and Diakante 2001). Artists, who are supposed to compete in this market, were not well equipped to cope with the changes in terms of competition and producing quality works. Art education could be one way in which the state assists them. The 1997 Cultural Policy's (*Sera ya Utamaduni*) clauses 2.1.2 (p. 4) and 6.2.5 (p. 19) stated the necessity of introducing arts (music, fine art, sculpture and the performing arts) as examinable subjects in both primary and secondary schools (Wizara ya Elimu na Utamaduni 1997). It was not until 2008 that the government implemented such provisions.

Although the outcomes of the 1997 Cultural Policy are yet to be realised, a number of challenges can be identified. Students are being oriented in the English language, which prevents them from understanding arts as a simulacrum of their culture which is mainly reflected in the Kiswahili language. Insufficient teachers, teaching and learning materials are some of the other challenges (Mmasy 2009). One might ask what the responsible ministry was preparing for.

While artistic works, as in any other sector, are expected to be market driven, piracy has remained a major setback for the artists and the national economy. Perhaps if Tanzania strengthened its tax collection and protection of artistic works, they could have contributed to the national economy. In Nigeria, the video industry is the third contributor to GDP preceded only by the oil and telecommunications industries (Palmberg 2008). This implies that if Mwalimu's ideas could have been properly implemented, there would be no need for artists to wait on the mercy of donors or depend on the state. Instead, artists could be supporting themselves and the collected taxes could be contributing to other developmental projects. This illustrates that Mwalimu's ideas could have coped with the challenges brought about by market-driven forces.

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