The Mwalimu in Nyerere

by

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[*Author's note (*16/10/99*): Nyerere is no more with us. The fulsome tribute paid to him almost universally shows the giant of a man that Nyerere was. On his 75th birthday two years ago, I wrote a piece which was published in the local newspaper* ***Observer****. Rereading it today, I feel the best tribute one can pay is to be able to say behind his back what we said in front of him. I cannot do any better than reproduce it. I would not even want to change the tense because although Nyerere is no more, the Mwalimu in him - his ideas and the struggle for equality, humanity, justice and dignity that he stood for - lives on.* ***Mwalimu*** *did not die. His struggle and ideas in defence of the Oppressed live on.]*

When Mwalimu mounted the podium and announced The Arusha Declaration he moved the masses. The old and the young, men and women, workers in factories and peasants in the fields, we all marched. The nation was aflame. And the torch, the vision, the goal was to build a better world; a more humane, rational and just social order. In a word, to make a revolution. In the clarion call of the *Azimio* we proclaimed to the world and to ourselves:

> We have been oppressed a great deal, we have been exploited a great deal and we have been disregarded a great deal. It is our weakness that has led to our being oppressed, exploited and disregarded. Now we want a revolution ...

In these simple but earth-shaking words of the Declaration we, as a people, were reclaiming our humanity, the right to make a revolution. If *Uhuru* was the claim and a demand to have the right to think for ourselves, *Azimio* was the exercise of that right. Nothing is more precious than independence, just as nothing is more human than the right to think for oneself. In this Mwalimu inspired us and provided the leadership.

Humanity and equality are the cornerstone of the intellectual in Mwalimu. The commitment to build a better world without asking 'what is there in it for me, my family, my clan' is indeed the distinctive mark of an intellectual. To be able to inspire, persuade and convince others of the same is the mark of a civil leader. Mwalimu, therefore, may be described as a leader-intellectual of civil society.

But he was also a state leader. As the top state leader Mwalimu sat at the pinnacle of the society's most coercive apparatus for quarter of a century which made a few hostile critics describe him as a dictator. The best and complete answer to such labelling was given by none other than Mwalimu himself. It is said that once in a meeting of the central committee of the party, in justification of the detention of a student, a committee member in charge of the youth portfolio said that the student had been detained because he had described 'the Chairman' (Nyerere) as a 'dictator'. Mwalimu swiftly retorted: 'What will he say when he sees a real one?'

Even as a commander of the state apparatus Nyerere's qualities as a leader-intellectual often manifested themselves in his persistence to persuade, to convince and to create consensus rather than resort to coercion. He did not always succeed, though. The leader-intellectual and the philosopher-king sat together uncomfortably. Forced villagisation of the early seventies is a glaring example. Yet Mwalimu's great skills as an articulate philosopher and an intellectual showed their brilliance even at times when he was forced to exercise ultimate powers of coercion as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Before repelling the invading Amin, Nyerere gave one of his most inspiring and witty speeches which ended with a legendary punch line: *uwezo tunao, nia tunayo na sababu zipo*.' [We have the ability, will and reason (to hit Amin]

The combination of an intellectual and a politician in Nyerere revealed in all its sharpness, wit and brilliance at times of worst political crisis and intrigues. 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 a parliamentary resolution only in name; that the secret 'pilots' were the existing top leadership of the party; the driving force, (*msukumo*) 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.

Tanzania yetu ina	*This Tanzania of ours*
Watu aina aina:	*has a variety of people:*
Iano hao Wapemba	*We've these* Wapemba
Watachomewa majumba,	*Their homes'll be burnt*
Sera hii ikipita	*If this policy passes muster*
bila ya kupigwa vita.	*Without being challenged.*
Lakini ina Wahaya,	*And there're* Wahaya,
Na Wasumbwa na Wakwaya,	Wasumbwa *and* Wakwaya,
Ina Waha na Wamwera,	*She has* Waha *and* Wamwera,
Na Wakwavi, na Wakara.	*And* Wakwavi, *and* Wakara.
Ina Anna ina Juma,	*She'as Anna and Juma,*
Ina Asha ina Toma,	*And Asha and Thomas,*
Kadhaka ina Pateli,	*And so she has Patels,*
Na wengine mbali mbali.	*And many more.*
Uhasama ukipamba	*Should antagonism spread*
Mkafukuza Wapemba,	*And you expel* Wapemba,
Anojua ni Manani	*Only God can tell*
Mbele kuna mwisho gani.	*Where the whole thing'll end.*

Squarely condemning the then top leadership of CCM as being the force behind the resolution for their own personal ambitions, Mwalimu described their argument and motives as perverse, prejudicial and dangerous.

Humo humo behewani	*In this very wagon*
Wamo na wenye udini:	*There're the religious bigots:*
Kwa hao Ali Hassani	*For them Ali Hassan*

Si rais wa Tanzani,	*Is not a Tanzanian President,*
Ila ni Mzanzibari.	*Rather he'is a Zanzibari.*
Na kama ana dosari,	*And if he's faults,*
Ni Ali Muislamu	*It's the Muslim Ali*
Ndiye wanomshutumu.	*Who's condemned.*
Wasilimu wa Tanzani	*Tanzania's Muslims*
Ni themani milioni,	*A dozen million,*
Na pengine kuzidia,	*Probably more,*
Maana ni kukisia.	'*Cause it's only an guess.*
Wasilimu wa Unguja,	*Zanzibari Muslims,*
Na wa Pemba kwa pamoja,	*Including those from Pemba,*
Jumla yao malaki,	*Total only in hundred thousands,*
Milioni hawafiki.	*A million they don't make.*
Mkivunja Tanzania,	*Break Tanzania,*
Na udini kuingia,	*And (religious) bigotry prevails,*
Waislamu wa bara	*Do you think,*
Wao watakuwa bora?	*Mainland Muslims'll fare well?*
Mumo humo behewani	*In this very wagon*
Wamo wadini wangini:	*There're the other type (of bigots):*
kwa hao Ali Hassani,	*For these, Ali Hassan,*
rais wa Watanzani,	*the President of Tanzania,*
kikosa kakoselewa,	(*on being criticised,)*
Husema kaonelewa,	*They say,*
Ati wanamshutumu	*It's,*
Kwa kuwa ni Mwislamu.	*'Cause he's a Muslim.*
Wamo n'akina Borisi	*And, in it, are these Boris Yeltsins,*
Yeltisini wa Urusi,	*Of Russia,*
Hawa ndio marubani	*These're the (real) pilots,*
Waloshika usukani.	*In the driving seat.*

Hizi pilika pilika	*The intrigues*
Za kutenga Tanganyika,	*to secede Tanganyika,*
Ni kutafuta nafasi	*Nothin' but, a means*
Za kupata Uraisi.	*to presidency.*

The force of these arguments (or attack), or, some would say, manipulation (?), destroyed the then Prime Minister and the Secretary General of the Party who were strong contenders for the presidency. Whether manipulation or not, the art form, the logic and the social content imbedded in the *shairi* could hardly be faulted. It showed Mwalimu at his best as an intellectual-leader. (Remember by this time he occupied no state or party position.) It was embarrassing to read some comments of my fellow intellectuals from the Hill (University of Dar es Salaam) criticising Nyerere's position on the G55 resolution on petty personal grounds such as that Nyerere could not tolerate Tanganyika because the Union was his 'baby' or, worse, justifying Tanganyika on narrow chauvinistic (anti-Zanzibari = anti-Muslim!?) lines which is not very far from what Mwalimu condemned as tribal or religious chauvinism.

Regardless of the intellectual content and, on many occasions, principled commitment of Mwalimu, it would be sheer sycophancy to take the position that there wasn't the pragmatic prince-politician in Nyerere. As does happen with leaders of such stature, the self-righteous, even if humble, mortal occasionally overshadowed the self-effacing intellectual. He had little faith in his own people. Instead of the 'faith' of a revolutionary that 'masses can move mountains', Nyerere seemed to believe, or, at the least, he acted, as if he believed, that state bulldozers could mow down mountains. (The problem, of course, was that bureaucratic bulldozers don't distinguish between mountains and masses and, now that the 'red flag' is down, they may even be poised against the masses.)

In the same vein, Nyerere had little regard for his 'own' intellectuals at the Hill and rarely entered into a debate with them beyond dismissive rhetoric, let alone seeing them as potential allies. It is interesting that as the chairman of the South Commission, Nyerere held sessions with intellectuals in many countries of the South except Tanzania until some one reminded him that his own country had such a caste!

Nor, as far as one can infer from piecing together events and piece-meal information, could he withstand an intellectual challenge within his cabinet. A bright spark on Campus once remarked that the average IQ of the president's men was probably below the national average; the only way it was made respectable was by throwing in Mwalimu's! With the benefit of hindsight and the performance of his two successors in this regard, maybe the comment was a little exaggerated and harsh, but, not altogether inaccurate. Yet, Mwalimu had an interesting, if contradictory, relationship with the academic community at the Hill.

The University of Dar es Salaam had a special place in Mwalimu's heart. As the President, Chancellor and party chairman he took pride in the Hill. As an intellectual-chancellor, he allowed it reasonable academic freedom so long as the intellectual remained an academic. Once the academic took to activism he came down decisively on him/her while, in the same breath, imploring the university community to be the social critique and conscience of society. Unlike his successors, Nyerere often came to the Campus. He particularly enjoyed bringing his visiting heads of state to face the kind of critique from students and lecturers which he would have liked to make himself but couldn't for reasons of diplomatic propriety.

In the sixties and seventies the Hill was a site of important debates and many prominent intellectuals from foreign countries were based there. On this, Mwalimu took an internationalist position contrary to some of the, then, young militant leftists. I remember a group of University Students African Revolutionary Front (USARF) and TANU Youth League (TYL) visiting Mwalimu at his Msasani residence. In the course of the conversations, a couple of our comrades raised a concern in relation to 'expatriate lecturers.'

'Who was Che Guevara?', Mwalimu asked.
'Argentinean', one of us replied enthusiastically exhibiting knowledge and acquaintance.
'Where did he fight?' Mwalimu queried.
'In Cuba', another of us militantly interjected even before Mwalimu had finished his sentence.
'Where did he die?' Mwalimu continued interrogating.

By this time the message was sinking in as one of us timidly said ‘In Bolivia’.

‘You, see, an internationalist!’ the teacher-intellectual closed the debate decisively. Never again did we raise the issue of ‘expatriate lecturers’ in a public forum. Mwalimu had this uncanny genius with young militants to disarm them by being on their left! At one of the teach-ins on the Arusha Declaration at the Hill, one of the participants condemned the Declaration as unscientific, utopian etc. As if anticipating such an intervention, Mwalimu, quoting Lenin on ‘the concrete analysis of a concrete situation’, retorted in his usual decisive manner: ‘If Marx had been born in Sumbawanga, he would have probably come out with the Arusha Declaration rather than *Das Kapital*.!’ We applauded!!

Mwalimu is a rare combination of a pragmatic, yet principled, politician, and a leader-intellectual. On his 75th birthday, while taking pride in having produced a giant of an intellectual and a leader, we, Tanzanians, should ask ourselves whether we are living up to ***his*** vision and ***our*** capabilities. As a revolutionary politician, like Ho Chi Minh, he was, and continues to be, steadfast in his stand that ‘Nothing is more precious than Independence’. As a leader-intellectual, he refused to surrender his right to think for himself and detested servile submission to any dogma, however powerful the source which propagated it. In his retort to “scientific socialists” that if Marx had been born in Sumbawanga, he would have written the Arusha Declaration, Mwalimu was subtly manifesting his consistent, and many a time, an instinctive disgust of ‘big power’ imperialism, in this case the, then. imperialist manipulations of the Soviet Union under the guise of ‘scientific socialism’. Yet, as an independent thinker, he was paying fulsome tribute to a great, independent social thinker, Karl Marx.

Today, as we face the impending threat to our independence and our right as a people to think for ourselves as the dogmas of the free marketeers and globalisers are being forced down our throats, we need to re-call the principled politician and the leader-intellectual in Mwalimu. ‘**The Mwalimu’** will not be with us for too long but the society which gave us ‘the Mwalimu’ should be able to rise to the occasion with a critical mass of mwalimus to defend our Independence and the Right to Think.

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