

Nyerere's socialism and its limits

By DR ANDREW COULSON

SENIOR LECTURER IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT, INSTITUTE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM



ANDREW COULSON is a specialist in Local Government. He has worked as an economic development officer for a British metropolitan council and for the Tanzanian Civil Service.

The greatest influence on Nyerere's political thought undoubtedly came from his own, little-known Zanaki tribe, where the chief, in this case, his father, has ultimate responsibility for the future of his people. The next greatest influence was the progressive Roman Catholic theology he encountered at St Mary's Tabora, which stressed the obligations of all to work for the greater good, especially those who are privileged or who have special wealth or talent. After that, Nyerere was influenced by the debates about democratic socialism in the British Labour Party of the 1950s which he encountered at Edinburgh University, and then, back in Tanganyika, in his discussions with intellectuals such as Colin Legum and Joan Wicken. These external influences were anti-communist and non-revolutionary, and centred on the provision of a welfare state, with nationalisation as a measure of last resort. It is interesting and probably significant that some of Nyerere's most serious early writing was on the status of women in the writings of John Stuart Mill (written at Tabora) and on the racial situation in Africa (written during his stay at Edinburgh).

Nyerere brought these influences together in the 1967 Arusha Declaration, which in the first instance was about reducing the privileges and extra earning opportunities of the "bureaucratic bourgeoisie" (this is the term used by Issa Shivji, one of Africa's leading experts on law and development issues, and others – though never by Nyerere himself – to describe the educated elite in Tanzania who inherited opportunities to make decisions and sign contracts and so became the class that could accumulate capital). This was at once followed by nationalisation of the banks, sisal estates and key industries, and then a few months on by two key policy papers, *Education for Self-Reliance* and *Socialism and Rural Development*.

But economics was not Nyerere's strongest discipline. Despite his Edinburgh University education, there are few references to Adam Smith, David Ricardo, J.M. Keynes or even Arthur Lewis in Nyerere's writings. Had he looked at problems more in economic terms, perhaps the nationalisation programme would have focused more on generating surpluses for investment, and rural policies would have emphasised crop and livestock production and less to living in villages. As it turned out, the real benefits of moving people to

villages was that they could be given better education, health services, and water, although the structural adjustment policies imposed on Tanzania in the 1980s made it impossible to build on the gains in primary education and health that were achieved in the 1970s.

As a result some of the terrible mistakes made in other countries were avoided. Tanzania did not create collective farms on the Soviet model. There was no Great Leap Forward with village and enterprises given a production target. Nor did it involve the elimination of a kulak class, nor a cultural revolution in which rural cadres turned against bureaucrats and administrators. Conversely, many villages were laid out by outsiders, who failed to draw on the vast pool of local knowledge about farming practices and rural life. Agricultural production, the key to survival and prosperity in most villages, was kept to the locals.

Many large factories failed, some because it was cheaper to import what they produced. Relatively high prices for foods enabled the country to more or less feed itself, despite its population more than doubling.

So how far does Nyerere's 'moral socialism', as Canadian academic and development expert Cranford Pratt called it, provide the basis for a modern African state? In one sense clearly not: the basis of Tanzania's recent growth is capitalist. But there are important legacies: an independent judiciary; a willingness to tackle corruption; commitments to primary health care; and affordable education; along with better roads and transport. This has taken place alongside exploitation of minerals and the development of tourism.

If Tanzania is to continue growing amid a world recession, it will have to invest its limited resources carefully. It will need productive factories, exporting surpluses to neighbouring countries. It will need to reward food production and ensure that improved seeds and chemicals are available, especially if global warming leads to even more unpredictable rainfalls and threats of desertification. It will need to find niche export markets for agricultural products, such as flowers, as well as to save energy and invest in renewable sources of energy, and continue to develop the infrastructure of roads, power supplies, telecommunications, and water. Of all Nyerere's ideas, self-reliance remains the most important; after all, a country that can demonstrate self-reliance will also be very attractive to aid donors and investors. **F**