

# Mwalimu Nyerere and African unity

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**SALIM AHMED SALIM** is Chairman of the The Mwalimu Nyerere Foundation and the Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy, and a member of the African Union's Panel of the Wise. In the 1960s he was ambassador to Egypt, India, and China, and was then Permanent Representative to the UN (1970-80) where he was President of the 34th Session of the General Assembly. He also served for three successive terms (1989-2001) as Secretary General of the Organisation of African Unity, now the African Union.

**A**frica must travel together as one, or no part of it will arrive at its destination. (Nyerere: 1967)

The words above remain as powerful today as when they were uttered over 40 years ago, capturing Julius Nyerere's vision and achievements, as well as the goals he urged fellow Africans to strive for. Scholars and journalists have written volumes about his thinking on African unity and what he achieved in that quest. They reveal a citizen of his nation, a leader of his people, and a neighbour of the African continent for whom the wellbeing and destiny of each society was organically linked to that of the continent itself.

To those of us who were privileged to work closely with him, Mwalimu, our teacher, was the model for our approach, and provided us with direction. For close to sixty years, from his early days at Makerere University to the memorable evening I spent with him a few weeks before his passing away, Mwalimu remained the embodiment of our determination to achieve African unity. He spoke with clarity and conviction and he wrote with deep insight. At gatherings of the highest level, he took positions that have since been vindicated by history. In practice, he initiated actions

that have made a distant dream – the vision of unity – more tangible.

It is now ten years since he departed. As we celebrate his remarkable life and commemorate his passing away, it is befitting to acknowledge the enduring legacy to the cause of African unity that Mwalimu has left us. His words continue to resonate in our ears despite his physical absence. The unfolding reality on the continent reaffirms the choices, options, and challenges that he advocated. They vindicate the key moves that he made to foster integration and unity, and which remain among our proudest accomplishments on the continent.

Mwalimu embodied the African spirit. He was characterised by his ability to transcend ethnicity, religion, region, or colour. He left behind a people from every station in life – peasants or workers, rich or poor, highly educated or semi-literate – with the potential to cross physical boundaries and to identify and empathise with those of other countries. He made a profound contribution to nurturing champions of African unity in different parts of our continent.

For Mwalimu, unity was not simply a policy, or even a means to an end. For him, the essence of Africa is the



Mwalimu beams with pleasure alongside the late Mozambican President Samora Moisés Machel

collective, whether at the level of the neighbourhood or the nation; and it attains its optimum level at the continental scale. The full realisation of that essence, and the harnessing of its maximum potential, offers the chance to carve a shared destiny that enhances and consolidates the African way of being. No African can achieve their potential outside this dynamic. Unity develops a common identity, enhances collective sovereignty, engenders viability, and provides a momentum for change and transformation. It is for this reason that unity needs to be people-based and not simply reflected in structures and organs.

The African Union, set up amid the process of independence, incorporates the above tenets. It strives to trigger a movement rooted in the people. It is a holistic endeavour encompassing politics, economics, and culture. As Mwalimu perceived it, the project can only succeed when it fosters a people-to-people connection. For him, unity was not simply about legislation. It also entailed a strong element of collective responsibility and sacrifice. The concerns of one group – be it through disaster, conflict, economic crisis, or insecurity – were those of the whole. This has since been enshrined as a cardinal principle of the African Union.

Nyerere's legacy extends beyond the realm of ideas and support. His active engagement in the discussion and consultations preceding the formation of the Organisation of African Unity provided guidance in forging a new architecture of African Unity. His stance, warnings, and the way he faced up to challenges are a reference point to us today, and offer the best way forward. He understood that African unity could not be imposed, but rather forged only according to the free will of its constituent parts.

He held a position that today, with the benefit of hindsight, has been vindicated by history. He advocated a gradual, evolutionary approach to creating the regional associations that would ultimately become the building blocks of the African Union. Out of this approach emerged Africa's first attempt at regional integration, the East African Community. In fact, Nyerere had been willing to delay his country's independence in order to wait for his neighbours to become free so that they could together forge a political union.

Nyerere's foresight regarding Africa's unity is testified in the union consummated by Tanganyika and Zanzibar in 1964. After more than four decades, the union remains an important example of resilience and viability in uniting African people. The political foundations ingrained in its conception have further strengthened the successes it has achieved during its existence, and the dynamism it has acquired through that process. The union has faced obstacles, and there will continue to be obstacles, but the strong foundations built on the imperative need for the unity of Tanzanian

people will always prevail.

It was thus very moving for me to enjoy his characteristic sharpness and astute mind despite obvious pain four weeks before he passed away. I went to see him in London on my way from Sirte, Libya, where we had just adopted the declaration establishing the African Union. I gave him a copy of the declaration. He was pleased with the developments and he encouraged us to pursue that path of our continent's progress.

Looking back over Mwalimu's life and leadership, we can only be inspired and strengthened by his resolve to pursue the unity of the peoples of Africa. His insights, discourses, practices, and leadership in this endeavour constitute an invaluable resource that Africa needs to harness as it embarks on a new journey to realise the aspirations of generations of Pan-Africanists and the founding fathers of the OAU. His efforts and those of his fellow founding fathers were not in vain. They sowed the seeds, and though they have taken a long time to germinate they are finally sprouting. The establishment of the African Union and the consolidation of its institutions signify a reaffirmation of the vision for African unity and underscore the urgent need to accelerate the steps towards its attainment.

Ten years after he passed away at St. Thomas' Hospital in London, Julius Nyerere is still, and will always be remembered as, a great Pan-Africanist who dedicated his entire life to pursuing unity and solidarity among Africans. He was undeniably one of the greatest and most respected African statesmen whose quest for freedom, peace, and solidarity will always be a source of inspiration.

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President Nyerere enjoying a friendly conversation with President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana

