

Mwalimu Nyerere as I knew him

By ALI HASSAN MWINYI

SECOND PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA



ALI HASSAN MWINYI began his career as a primary school teacher rising to become Chief Inspector of Primary Schools in Zanzibar. He served as Minister for Health and Social Welfare (1972-74) and Minister of Home Affairs (1975-76) in the Union Government of Tanzania. Following service as Ambassador to Egypt he returned to Tanzania becoming Minister for Natural Resources and Tourism (1982-83) and was elected President of Zanzibar in 1984. He was subsequently elected President of the United Republic of Tanzania serving two terms between 1985-95. He currently serves as Chancellor of Muhimbili University and as Chairman of the National HIV/AIDS Advisory Committee.

Nyerere mixing the soil of Zanzibar and Tanganyika, 26th April, 1964

I came to know the late President Nyerere, or Mwalimu, the teacher, as he was popularly known, just after the elections of November 1970, when he appointed me Minister of State in his new cabinet.

I was summoned to the Zanzibar State House by His Excellency the late Abeid Amani Karume, the President of Zanzibar and Vice-President of the United Republic of Tanzania. To be honest, I have to say that when I reached the foot of the stairs leading to his sitting room I could not help a mild chill running down my spine. President Abeid Amani Karume was not only highly respected and loved, he was also feared. He was known to be a man who tolerated no nonsense.

He allowed me to sit down and told me that he had received a telephone call from Nyerere asking him to nominate two Zanzibaris suitable for a ministerial post. Nyerere would choose one of the two. He finished by telling me jokingly to keep my fingers crossed and that I should listen to the 8 o'clock news bulletin broadcast over Radio Tanzania that evening. I heard my name over the radio. I was the luckier one: Nyerere had preferred me.

From the moment I landed in Dar es Salaam I worked closely with Nyerere. He appointed me to head various ministries in his administration – from Minister

of State, Health and Social Welfare; Home Affairs, Natural Resources and Tourism – to Minister of State in the Vice President's Office in Zanzibar. Thereafter I served for four years as Ambassador to Egypt.

In the course of my long service in his administration, I found Nyerere to be a man of many facets, many talents and many achievements. Commending his achievements is like stating the obvious. History is full of individuals who have made a difference in other people's lives. Surely Nyerere is one of the breed of such individuals.

He was an accomplished teacher who taught by example. He was a Commander-in Chief who literally had President Idi Amin of Uganda thrown out of Uganda when he dared invade and occupy the northern part of Tanzania in 1979.

Nyerere was a true Pan-Africanist who fervently believed that Tanzanians' independence was meaningless as long as there were other countries still suffering from the yoke of colonialism and apartheid. He was an outspoken supporter of anti-apartheid movements and strongly opposed Ian Smith's white minority rule in Rhodesia – now Zimbabwe.

The intensifying liberation struggle in the former Rhodesia, South Africa, Mozambique, Angola,



and Namibia placed a huge economic burden on neighbouring Zambia. The aim was to resolve the landlocked country's access to the sea. Until then, her exports of copper had to be exported through what was then Rhodesia. In response, Nyerere and Zambia's President Kenneth Kaunda sought the assistance of the Chinese Government to build a railway line, the Tazara Railway, linking Kapri Mposhi on the Zambian side with Tanzania's port of Dar es Salaam.

Nyerere also took an active and instrumental role in peace and reconciliation efforts in our region. He firmly believed that peace and stability was a necessary condition for African leadership. In the evolving world situation, without peace and stability nothing much could be accomplished in other areas. He showed the way in working for peace and stability in the region and on the continent as a whole. Like many other African leaders of his time, at independence Mwalimu Nyerere also faced the complex problem of tribalism. It is a tribute to his leadership that he succeeded in moulding more than 120 ethnic groups in Tanzania into a single, cohesive peaceful and strong nation.

Religious tolerance was the hallmark of Nyerere's Administration. Mwalimu handled the potentially explosive situation of a multi-religious society superbly. From the very outset he warned strongly against mixing religion with politics while allowing complete freedom of worship. Despite being a Catholic, his respect for other religions, like Islam, for example, was exemplary. He proved this on several occasions. I recall one day when he addressed a big audience at a rally in Handeni, in the Tanga region, which was predominantly Muslim. He instructed me to join him on the platform to recite

to the audience some verses of the Quran emphasising the importance of working hard for one's living.

On another occasion, at a rally to promote the use of the ox-drawn plough for farming instead of the traditional hand hoe, it was brought to his notice that there were a few diehards who loved their animals so much that they would never contemplate seeing their animals work in the fields. On hearing that, Mwalimu Nyerere wondered if there could be some sort of a directive in the Quran regarding the proper use of domestic animals. He asked me to recite to the audience appropriate verses or passages for them to hear. I quoted from chapter IX where it says:

*"And cattle He has created for you (men):
from them Ye derive warmth,
and numerous benefits, And their (meat) ye eat
And they carry your heavy loads to
lands that ye could not (otherwise) reach except
with souls distressed: for your Lord is indeed
Most Kind, Most Merciful
And (He) has created horses, mules and
Donkeys, for you to ride..."*

I read these verses in Arabic and then translated them to the audience in Swahili. The silence was so great that one could almost hear a pin drop. This was a clear demonstration of how Mwalimu Nyerere not only tolerated, but respected other people's beliefs.

In conclusion we must highlight Mwalimu Nyerere's foresight, vision, bravery, leadership, and statesmanship, thanks to which the whole of Southern Africa is independent today, while Tanzania remains an island of peace and tranquillity. We miss Mwalimu. We miss him very much. E

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Nyerere (far left)
with some leaders of
the frontline states