

Nyerere, the talker

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was for many years editor of the BBC's *Focus on Africa* and *Network Africa*. Known for his hard-hitting interviews, he has talked to Charles Taylor, Foday Sankoh, Milton Obote, Olusegun Obasanjo, Yoweri Museveni, Sam Nujoma, Kenneth Kaunda, and Thabo Mbeki. Under his guidance *Focus on Africa* and *Network Africa* established a reputation for unbiased news about Africa. He was awarded the MBE in 2000.

Nyerere had a silver tongue. He could talk for hours without hesitation and with very little repetition. His vocabulary was vast. His knowledge of grammar, huge. He could move from clause to sub clause, from verb to adverbs, from gerunds to infinitives like a fish in water. He loved language, and knew how to use it to amuse his friends, manipulate the media and destroy his enemies.

Journalists tend not to be taken in by smooth-talking politicians (at least not for long) but Nyerere somehow had the capacity to get inside your brain and force you to believe his arguments. He made you feel intelligent and you ended up being ensnared in his web of words. Listen to Nyerere talking about socialism and you might end up being a socialist.

One thing I've not forgiven him for is that recorded interviews with him were incredibly hard to edit. Interviews with most politicians can be easily reduced to a few minutes. Not so Nyerere. His sentences went on for ages. You could not cut them without destroying their sense. So inevitably interviews with him on any subject often had to fill well over ten minutes of air time.

Not that he gave that many interviews. He knew how to ration journalists. He only spoke to us when he had something to say, and when we really wanted to hear from him. He picked his moments and he picked the journalists. He also understood the kind of events that might capture the imagination of news hounds. Like his marathon walks around miles of rural Tanzania. He always had been a walker (he walked 26 miles to go to school when he was a child). Then, when he was trying to sell Ujamaa to the Tanzanian people, he marched the length and breadth of the country to prove that he wasn't just the president of the urban elite but the champion of the rural poor. Tanzanian villagers resettled in distant parts of the country with inadequate facilities might not have been impressed by the passing president. But we laughed as overweight civil servants and ministers struggled to keep up with their thin, lithe president. It made good copy.

I would guess that Nyerere had a certain amount of contempt for the 'imperialist' press and perhaps for the BBC too. But in the late 1970s he suddenly needed us. After Uganda's Idi Amin occupied the Kagera triangle in Northern Tanzania in 1978, Nyerere decided that enough was enough. Tanzanian troops moved to repel Ugandan forces from Tanzanian soil. It was important for Nyerere to be heard by Ugandans and the quickest and

best way was to appear on the BBC African Service: we had a huge and loyal listenership in Uganda. In the talking stakes, the buffoon Amin was no match for the eloquent Nyerere and he won the propaganda battle easily (in spite of breaking OAU rules of non-interference in the affairs of other African countries). Nyerere also had the sense to allow our reporters to travel with the Tanzanian army as it moved towards the Ugandan capital. The war was short lived. Amin fled and our reporters were given hero's welcomes when they arrived in Kampala.

Nyerere had judged how to deal with Amin well. He had been prepared to act while others dragged their feet, but his choice of a replacement for Amin was probably a mistake. Former President Milton Obote had been in exile in Tanzania and clearly had Nyerere's ear. With Nyerere's support he returned to Uganda and scraped home to victory in disputed presidential elections. Obote was not a success, just as he had not been first time round. Ugandans might have loved Nyerere for getting rid of Amin, but they were far from happy to be lumbered with Obote yet again.

That was perhaps Nyerere's weakness. He made up his mind what was right and what was wrong and he thought he had the intellectual and moral right to impose his will on others. I remember him telling us one day that he was happy to detain people without trial who he judged were guilty of some offence. He said, "I will not let criminals go free just because some clever dick lawyer gets them off the hook". So would he take responsibility for their treatment in jail? "Certainly", he said.

A year or so later a young man (made nearly blind by the sun glinting off the white walls of his cell) dropped by our office in London. He had been hitch-hiking in Tanzania and had the misfortune to be picked up by a known currency trafficker. He landed up in prison on suspicion of being the trafficker's collaborator. He was never officially charged, or tried. Eventually without explanation he was set free. He was not impressed by Nyerere's ability to judge a man's guilt or innocence.

My other problem with Nyerere was the state of the Tanzanian press. He may have been a brilliant performer on the world stage. He may have been a genius at dealing with foreign journalists but the Tanzanian media, when he was in power, was awful. It was uninformative, dreary and dull. There was little real news and absolutely nothing to make you smile. I often wonder why that was. Were journalists afraid of him, or just just cowed by his brilliance? **E**