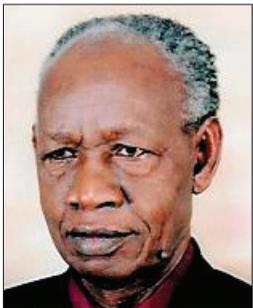


# Nyerere: with a light touch

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I saw Julius Kimbarage Nyerere for the first time in November 1952 when I was a primary school pupil at Nyamuswa primary school in what was then the Musoma District.

Mwalimu had just returned from his studies at Edinburgh University and was staying in his home village of Butiama. His brother, Chief Edward Wanzagi Nyerere, was a close friend of our Chief, Mohamed Makongoro Matutu. Chief Makongoro had invited the young Nyerere to spend part of his holiday in nearby Ikizu. During his stay he was asked to give a speech to a gathering of children from three primary schools to instil in them the importance of education.

We marched to the meeting place enthusiastically, excited at the opportunity to see someone who had been to Europe. In our minds we had already conjured up an impressive personage, and we were very disappointed when we saw him. He arrived at our village meeting place, which was a huge tree in an open space, accompanied by the impressive Chief Makongoro. In contrast Nyerere looked small, and was dressed simply, in khaki shorts and a white short-sleeved shirt. He was less impressive even than our head teacher, who was similarly dressed. His simplicity stuck in the young minds of many of us, and gave us hope that our own simplicity would be no bar to academic achievement.

My first impression of Nyerere the politician was in 1958, when I was a student at Bwiru Secondary School in Mwanza. Nyerere's political party, the Tanganyika African National Union, (TANU) had been banned in Mwanza in 1956, but by 1958 it was operating freely again, and Mwalimu, the teacher, had come to inaugurate the Mwanza branch. At a rally in Pasiansi, on the outskirts of Mwanza town, Nyerere made a rousing speech that inspired us. At that time we were extremely fearful of the colonial authorities and we were struck by his courage in attacking the administration. His speech gave us tremendous courage, and soon after he left a group of us formed the first territorial students' association, the Pan African Students' Association of Tanganyika (PASAT). After the simplicity I had witnessed as a child at Nyamuswa, on this second meeting, I was struck by his courage.

My first close encounter with Mwalimu would come in 1965 when I was attending Dar es Salaam University College. I was then president of the National Union of Tanzania Students. Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe) had declared unilateral independence and we decided

to demonstrate on the streets of Dar es Salaam without a permit. Mwalimu had us arrested and many of us were locked up for a time at Central Police Station. Later we were taken to State House to meet him.

At the meeting he gently explained that we had not been arrested for protesting against Rhodesian unilateral independence, but because we had broken the law by demonstrating without a permit, and that we had caused some damage. He said no further action would be taken against us, but asked that we apologise on his behalf to the British government for the damage we had caused to British property. He said the apology was a formality that should be made by the foreign minister, but since at that time he held that portfolio, he said that if he made the apology people would interpret it as an apology on behalf of the president, not the foreign minister. So he asked us to apologise on his behalf. Then he asked if any of us had any objections. One student indicated that he did, at which point Mwalimu immediately ordered the Commissioner of Police to take him away and administer six strokes of the cane. It was at that point that we realised he was furious with us. All that gentle talk was simply a way of masking his anger at what we had done.

Mwalimu later called the student at State House and explained to him that he had acted on impulse in a moment of anger. He said he had acted on the instincts of a teacher. Eighteen years later, in 1983, when I was Attorney General I experienced Mwalimu's anger again. There were constitutional obstacles to the person he wanted to assign as a regional commissioner, so I advised him to rescind the appointment. He glared at me and told me I was the obstacle, and that most of the time when I went to see him it was to tell him not to do something, since it was against the law. He said some harsh things, but I persisted, explaining that he was the guardian of the Constitution and it could be disastrous if a Constitutional crisis ensued as a result of his action. He did not relent and I left feeling miserable.

I went to Prime Minister Sokoine and sought his help. Early the next day I accompanied the Prime Minister to Mwalimu and when he saw us he burst out laughing. He told the Prime Minister that the day before he had sent me packing in a furious mood. He had however reflected on what I had advised him and had come to the conclusion that it was good advice, and that he had already rescinded the appointment. He then did something extraordinary. He apologised to me for his

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anger, explaining that he was human. I did not know how to respond to an apology from my boss in front of my Prime Minister. He then did something else: he told me to maintain my stubborn persistence when I believed I was absolutely right; and that this was the best way to assist him. Like all of us, Mwalimu could lose his temper and make mistakes, but one of his qualities was that he was not ashamed to admit his errors.

Mwalimu also loved to argue: to convince and be convinced. In 1967 young TANU members formed the TANU Study Group. Mwalimu inaugurated the study group and in one of our early meetings we invited him to participate in our discussion. We thought Mwalimu was too liberal and the nationalisations following the 1967 Arusha Declaration were only half measures towards socialism. We argued passionately, quoting Marx, Lenin and Mao, for example.

He listened patiently to us and then began his counter argument. He told us to read more widely on development issues and that we should not confine ourselves to known socialist revolutionaries. He said we might benefit more by reading critics of socialism rather than concentrating on books such as Marx's *Capital*, which was not easy to understand, or Mao's *Red Book*. He suggested to us as a start that we should all read René Dumont's *False Start in Africa*, which he said was closer to our development problems. We should then hold a session to discuss what Dumont had written. When we later read *False Start in Africa* we retained our radical thinking, but we became more moderate in our approach.

An avid reader, Mwalimu would read in the office, at home, and on safari. He read serious books, but when he wanted to take a break he turned to crossword puzzles. At one time I found him reading a book on law by Lord Chalfont, who had been Lord Chancellor of the United Kingdom. Although a member of the Labour Party, Lord Chalfont was considered a conservative, and I wondered why Mwalimu was reading him. His response was firstly that good ideas can come from people you don't agree with, and secondly that it is stupid to oppose somebody until you understand their arguments. His belief in the need to continuously improve oneself was reflected by his constant urging of those around him to read.

Mwalimu believed in people and he drew inspiration from them. He was at ease with all types of people and blended in easily. He could talk the language of politicians, academics, and intellectuals. And when he was with ordinary people he talked their language. One time when I was on leave at Nyamuswa I went to visit him at Butiama. I found him playing the highly popular board game *bao* with a crowd of old people. I sat there for close to two hours watching the game and listening to the talk. It was ordinary talk about life in the village, about farming, grazing, the primary school, the dispensary, the behaviour of the village officials, etc.

Months later when I was listening to him talk about the problems of the country I could hear echoes of what had been said at the *bao* game. They had inspired him.

Discrimination and favouritism were anathema to Mwalimu, although periodically, rumours would surface that he had favoured this or that group. He was always surprised whenever he was accused of bias or nepotism.

I remember his reaction to one of these rumours. One day, relaxing for a few moments from his work schedule, he asked me: "so what's new in town?" I replied that a rumour was going around that he favoured Kilimanjaro Region at the expense of other regions, because almost a quarter of his cabinet (six) came from that area. Other regions, some of them bigger, had no ministers in the government. He wanted to know whom they were talking about. I began to recite the names: Mtei, Kisumo, Mgonja, Elinawinga... Before I could finish he said he did not know "that all these blessed fellows" came from Kilimanjaro. He said he was the one elected to serve the country and in choosing his assistants he looked for able and capable Tanzanians, not regional representatives. That was Mwalimu. Though he was later obliged to take into account regional interests and considerations in his political appointments, he abhorred tribal, racial or any kind of favouritism. In fact, one of his closest long-time political collaborators and close friend was a Tanzanian of Indian origin, Amir Jamal.

Throughout his life Mwalimu remained an ordinary human being, believing no task was below his dignity. If peasants worked hard in their fields, he would ask, why shouldn't leaders do the same? He took his annual leave in December and while in his village, Butiama, he worked on his *shamba*, or smallholding. Visitors would find him, hoe, panga or rake in hand. Some ministers dreaded making the trip to Butiama because if they found him at the *shamba* they were morally forced to participate in what he was doing and for some, tilling with a hoe was hell.

At close quarters Mwalimu was a simple human being. His dwelling was simple and his meals were simple. One Sunday while on leave in our village my wife, who is Catholic, decided to go to church at Butiama. I accompanied her. After the church service Mwalimu invited us in for breakfast. He had also invited his grandchildren. The breakfast was simple, and the children were noisy and messy, spilling tea and milk and calling out loudly to *babu* (grandfather) wanting this or that. One could see how immensely Mwalimu enjoyed the company of his grandchildren, like any African elder.

Nyerere was also a very religious man. Under normal circumstances he would attend church early every day. He was honest and ethical. He was a human being with great qualities. To me, as one who had the opportunity to get to know him well, his greatest quality lay in his simplicity. Regardless of the high office he attained, he remained a simple man who believed in God and the people. **F**