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VIRTUS ET HONORIS

TANZANIA:
ERADICATING ETHNIC POLITICS TO UNITE A NATION

T anzania is a lower-middle income country with a GDP per capita of slightly over USD$1,000, and a rank of 160 out of 191 countries in the UNDP's Human Development Index. Notwithstanding its poor economic conditions and close proximity to countries where violent conflict over ethnicity and resources is commonplace, Tanzania has not experienced ethnic conflict or war since its independence, despite housing over 120 ethnic groups, diverse religions, languages. Peaceful coexistence between diverse cultures has become such an integral part of what it means to be Tanzanian, that Tanzanians often identify themselves first as Tanzanians before any other identity marker. A recent Afrobarometer survey found that 71% of Tanzania respondents strongly liked having people of different religions and/or ethnic groups as their neighbours, and over 90% said that they had never felt discriminated against, or treated unfairly by the government because of their ethnicity.[1] Why and how has Tanzania avoided the trend of many countries where ethnic diversity has been manipulated by politicians for selfish gains, and often to violent ends?

Not an accident of history, Tanzania's peace is founded on policies implemented under the astute leadership of Julius Nyerere, Tanzania's first post-independence leader, who prioritised distributing the positive outcomes of development amongst all Tanzanians. Nyerere strategically prioritised the dismantling of ethnic politics by ensuring the central government was powerful and able to respond to local concerns. He also moved quickly to establish a new culture in the country that reinforced national pride, and built a values-based society through reforms to the Tanzanian national service and education system.


Julius Nyerere, Tanzania's first President post-independence
(Source: Encyclopædia Britannica)

Tanzania: A Brief History

Tanazania gained independence in 1964 – a time of violent conflict in the region, as neighbouring countries broke with their colonial pasts, and struggled to reconcile their early nation-building efforts with the long-lasting effects of colonial policies that had intentionally divided and pitted ethnic groups against each other. During Tanzania's struggle for independence, Nyerere was conscious to design policies that guarded against any potential descent into ethnic polarisation and conflict, especially given its origins as a merger of two distinctly different regions: the larger mainland territory of Tanganyika, and the coastal archipelago of Zanzibar.
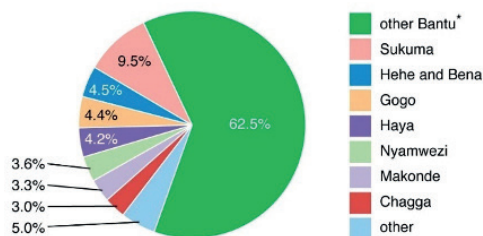
Nearly 40 years after independence, Tanzania remains a diverse society where no group enjoys a distinct majority.
(Source: Encyclopædia Britannica)

In 1957, Tanganyika was a multi-racial and multi-ethnic society. The indigenous African population were from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and no one ethnic or linguistic group had a majority – politically nor economically. The largest ethnic group – the Sukuma-Nyamwezi – accounted for just 20% of the population, but were based a distance from the capital and were not particularly well-off.

While some of the Africans were government employees, most earned an income through menial labour jobs and subsistence farming. The colonial government had incentivised some areas to grow cash crops, and ethnic groups living in these areas became richer – namely the Haya, Nyakusa and Chaya from the Kilimanjaro, Mbeya and Kagera regions.

There was also a small but critical population of Arabs and Indians numbering around 100,000, who were largely middle-class and dominated the retail and commerce industry. The white colonial population, numbering around 20,000 people, were landowners, business owners, professionals and government officials.[2] The country's two main religious groups were Christians and Muslims, which accounted for about 60% and 30% of the population respectively.

Julius Nyerere emerged as an early independence fighter, and created a political party, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), that gradually grew in popularity amongst the indigenous population. Despite great efforts on the part of the British to curb his activities, he successfully led Tanganyika to independence in 1961.

But there was still the challenge of the neighbouring island of Zanzibar, which had been ruled by the British as a separate territory through a Sultan, and gained independence as a constitutional monarchy under the Sultan until 1963. In 1964, led by Abeid Karume, the African majority revolted against the Sultan in Zanzibar. Violence ensued mainly against Arabs and Indians, and most of the island's non-Africans subsequently fled. At this critical juncture, Julius Nyerere visited Zanzibar, and came to an agreement with Karume on the importance of unity. The two territories subsequently merged into what is known today as Tanzania. [3]

President Julius Nyerere of Tanganyika and President Abeid Karume of Zanzibar signing articles of union, 27 April, 1964
(Source: Getty Images)

Creating Stakeholdership: Addressing Local Concerns through National Solutions

One of the greatest challenges faced by many post-colonial African governments was addressing local concerns over land and resources, because of the uneven development wrought by colonial rule. In many countries, these concerns were often politicised along ethnic lines by local leaders in an effort to gain more power, and often resulted in conflict. A similar situation began emerging in 1950s Tanzania, when local civil society organisations in underdeveloped regions began organising and promoting ethnic-based development projects to increase access to land for farming and education for young people.

Nyerere recognised the important of building tangible stakes for all citizens as a foundation for social harmony. Through TANU's local networks, he heard of these growing concerns and worrying developments, and moved swiftly to prevent the rise of ethnic-based politics. Where there was no arable land, Nyerere encouraged youths to move to other parts of the country, and promised that the state would provide them with loans to start their own farming practices. The state also demonstrated their commitment to developing rural areas by quickly building educational facilities and funding scholarships – a role traditionally played by local institutions like churches or clans. The success of this was two-fold: first, people of various ethnicities relocated across the country, thus preventing enclaves from forming in specific regions. Second, it demonstrated to swathes of unemployed youth that the central government could and would provide the opportunities needed for their advancement, and that they did not have to rely on local ethnic networks. [4]

CREATING STAKEHOLDERSHIP: *UJAMAA* – THE FOUNDATIONS OF COMMUNITY-BUILDING

Julius Nyerere's leadership was underpinned by a comprehensive ideology known as *Ujamaa*, a Swahili term which roughly translates to 'fraternity' or 'familyhood'. The ideology formed the basis of Nyerere's political, social and economic development policies that guided Tanzania post-independence. At the cusp of independence, Tanzania was a deeply unequal society and Nyerere's main concern was to ensure that the benefits of development would be shared by all Tanzanians, such that all Tanzanians would be independent, self-reliant and committed to the nation. *Ujamaa* was encapsulated in the 1967 Arusha Declaration, the first development blueprint for Tanzania, and emphasis was placed on universal values and principles and economic advancement that would benefit all citizens – and not any particular race or ethnicity.

Nyerere believed that to overcome colonial imbalances, resource allocation and economic opportunity had to be given to all in the country. He nationalised all industry and limited foreign investment in an attempt to eliminate class differences, as he believed the state would be the great equaliser ensuring the equitable distribution of resources.

Hondogo, an example of a Ujamaa village in Tanzania (Source: Collection of the National Museum of World Cultures, Netherlands)

One of the earliest manifestations of this was the design and implementation of *Ujamaa* villages, which were deliberately designed to emphasise equality in communal living and economic self-reliance. These villages were organised with residences at their core, arranged in rows, and featured a central complex comprising a school and a town hall. Encircling these villages were expansive shared agricultural lands. Each household received approximately an acre of land for cultivating personal crops, while adjacent farmlands were jointly managed to grow crops for economic purposes.

TANU played a pivotal role in supporting these localised *Ujamaa* villages. They provided significant resources, including access to clean water, construction materials, and financial aid for necessary supplies. They also assisted local communities by instituting electoral processes and methods of representation within the broader political party framework. Rural dwellers who were living in scattered areas were moved to these villages and given access to health, education and communal farming. This also enabled the government to ensure that historically less accessible and poorer areas were receiving baseline healthcare and education. All areas of Tanzania and all ethnic groups and religions were given relatively similar resources and access to opportunities. Millions gained access to piped water, and half of the villages had dispensaries and access to primary healthcare, establishing Tanzania as a global leader in public health.

Though Tanzania gradually transitioned away from some of these policies to remain competitive in the global economy, they were particularly successful in their context and time for establishing social harmony. The policies signalled to all Tanzanians that their development was of equal priority, and allowed the central government to consolidate its power over vast rural areas while abolishing ethnic-based development. [5]

Creating Stakeholdership: Equal Access and Opportunity

As a legacy of colonial rule, educational access was very uneven across Tanzania because the colonial government did not build schools. Schools had been built mainly by Christian missionaries which meant that Christian areas tended to be better served than Muslim ones. The Christian Chagga, Haya and Nyakusa had better access to schools, especially secondary schools, and there were also private schools for non-African Tanzanians such as Asians and Europeans who had settled in Tanzania. However, for the most part, the majority of Tanzanians were not educated and illiteracy stood at an estimated 85%, with only 15% admitted to secondary school each year.

Nyerere understood the importance of providing all Tanzanians with equal access to things like basic education and healthcare. Building these tangible stakes would provide citizens with a sense of security, stability, and belonging, and ultimately encourage them to become active and involved contributors to the nation. Under *Ujamaa*, education reforms were thus targeted at improving the quality of public education, reducing inequality, and improving self-reliance.

> "For the majority of our people the thing which matters is that they should be able to read and write fluently in Swahili, that they should have an ability to do arithmetic, and they should learn something of the history, values, and working of their country and government, and that they should acquire the skills necessary to earn a living."
>
> *- Julius Nyerere at his inauguration, 9 December 1961.* [6]

Nyerere's government focused on addressing key systemic challenges: limited and differentiated access to quality basic education, poor teaching quality and standards, and the lack of a comprehensive national curriculum. Without a proper national education system, the government knew that citizens would be left learning in ethnic and religious silos, further entrenching inequality.

The government began by passing the Education Act in 1962, which called for a single education system in the country. No child could be barred from entering a school based on religion or race, and all schools were to be secular in nature. In tandem with ensuring access to all, the legislation recognised three different languages of instruction – Swahili, English, and Asian vernaculars – which facilitated the integration of private Indian and European schools into the national school system. All schools were to adopt the same curriculum and students would sit for the same examinations at the end of primary school. The Act also gave the government stronger control over all schools – local communities and authorities were made responsible for the construction and provision of all primary schools, with strong oversight from the national government.

A teacher and her students at Gangilonga Primary School, 2018. (Source: USAID Tanzania)

The government then prioritised improvements to the quantity and quality of primary and secondary schools, so as to ensure that all school leavers were equipped with the necessary skills for basic employment. A dedicated teachers' training college was established at the University of Dar Es Salaam with a streamlined teacher training programme. The programme attracted teachers who had not attained formal education degrees to earn post-high school professional certificates, and these trained teachers were subsequently be deployed in droves to primary and secondary schools.

Yet, even with increased access to schools, large numbers of Tanzanians were still dropping out after primary school. The government then focused on mitigating unequal access to secondary school by varying entry requirements into school by geographic area. Entry requirements were lowered in areas with historically less access to secondary schools. At the same time, the government focused on reforming the curriculum, to ensure that anyone leaving primary or secondary school would still be equipped with basic skills for employment and thus be economically self-reliant.

Students in Hai, Tanzania, receiving agricultural training whilst tending to school crops.
(Source: Wikimedia Commons, Ron Rieckenberg)

Safeguarding against Tensions: Defending against Political and Civil Divisions along Ethnic Lines

Newly independent Tanzania also faced threats to social cohesion on the political front. Nyerere strove to separate ethnicity from politics to avoid tensions and conflicts arising from a politically charged and ethnically divided society – a situation commonly observed in neighbouring countries. Operating as a one-party system at the time, TANU membership was made open to all races and ethnicities, and Tanzania's constitution emphasised racial, ethnic and religious unity while denouncing tribalism and isolationism. In 1992, even as Tanzania evolved into a multi-party democracy, parties remained prohibited from forming along religious, ethnic or regional lines, and all registered parties had to have members from all regions including Zanzibar. [7]

To further guard against potential rifts based on ethnic divisions at the local level, Nyerere abolished the system of Chiefship and replaced them with District Councils. Chiefships had a history of promoting tribalism, and colonial rule had made Chiefs very powerful. Not all Chiefs had supported the independence movement (though many did), and Nyerere knew it was important to channel their considerable influence over their tribes and clans towards wider nation-building efforts, rather than towards the promotion of ethnic group interests. To assuage the concerns of some of the more powerful Chiefs over their sudden loss of power, and to prevent them from establishing a powerful base outside the control of the government, these Chiefs were given positions in the national government and civil service.

	Chiefship during the Colonial Era	District Councils (133 across Tanzania)
Leadership Structure	Chiefs inherited the right to rule over a tribe or clan, as 'kings' of particular lands	Councils are led by an elected chairperson who appoints a secretary and three other members
Decision-making Structure	Landowner who organises cultivation across the territory, and extracts tributes from peasants working the land. In return, they maintain order in the region over the distribution of resources, protect the most vulnerable members of a community, and mediate conflicts between families.	Local decision-making structure that represents the central government at the local level, under the Ministry for Regional Administration and Local Government. Post-independence, local TANU activists were often integrated into these grassroots organisations.
Authority and Powers	Powers over all major decisions affecting the development of any of the lands they owned.	District councils coordinate activities of township authorities and village councils. As a lower level local government body, they formulate plans for their smaller, local villages in three main areas: • Finance, administration and planning • Education, health and water • Economic affairs, works and environment

Table 1: Key differences between Chiefships and District Councils for local governance

Within the civil service, Nyerere also ensured that civil servants were posted across the country and not to areas they were from, so that they would stay informed of national concerns and not just those of their local region. This was also important in quashing concerns that the government promoted the development of one group over another. Collectively, these institutional reforms guarded against potential local discontent about being marginalised by the central government along ethnic lines, while simultaneously integrating local leaders into wider nation-building efforts. [8]

Promoting Integration – Building Patriotic Zeal through Formal and Informal Education

Schools were an important place for Tanzanians of different ethnicities to interact and deepen their understanding and appreciation of different cultures. Much emphasis in the curriculum was also placed on civics education, which described good citizens as those who put their country first. Beyond school, the government also implemented National Service programmes for youths. Targeted at secondary school leavers, these programmes varied from three months to a year. Participants were assigned nation-building development projects such as assisting the government during natural disasters. The main goal was to facilitate the development of friendships between youths from different ethnic groups, while gaining important skills to support them in future employment. Many youths who did not attend higher education were able to find work in the government, or joined the military, because of the training they received. [9]

Promoting Integration – the Adoption of Swahili as the National Language

Swahili was historically a language more commonly spoken along the coast of Zanzibar, but by the 1950s, its use was widespread across Tanzania (then Tanganyika) as the language of commerce across the country. The language was not native to any particular ethnic group or any geographic area, and was thus TANU's language of choice in its campaigning. When TANU came to power, it quickly banned the use of ethnic vernaculars in public media, and Swahili became the default language used in government, education and the media.

The power of Swahili lay in the fact that it was not a colonial language. It had symbolic value as the carrier of African and socialist values, and it was easily accepted as it belonged to nobody in particular and thus belonged to all. Established as a symbol of national unity, Swahili was a modern language that was quickly and naturally used by all Tanzanians from all walks of life. [10] To formalise the adoption of Swahili as Tanzania's national language, the government mandated the teaching of Swahili in formal education. Swahili became the main language of instruction and teacher training colleges were set up to ensure quality instruction in Swahili. The Institute of Swahili Research also became part of the University College of Dar es Salaam in 1964. The academic support further formalised the language with dictionaries, word lists, journals, linguistics and literature. The government also established a National Swahili Council to promote the country's adoption of Swahili. All of these steps cemented Tanzania's position as one of the few African countries where the lingua franca is also the national language.

Even as the country transitioned into a more liberal and democratic state in the 1990s, the importance of national unity over ethnicity, religion or race has remained. As subsequent governments have modernised the country by diversifying the economy and opening it up to foreign investment, inclusive growth has remained a central focus. When Tanzania moved towards a multiparty democracy in 1992, a main concern was that ethnicity would become a dividing force. The foundations laid in those early years, however, were so transformative that all successive governments have continued to preserve Tanzania's national unity as a unique national resource. [11]
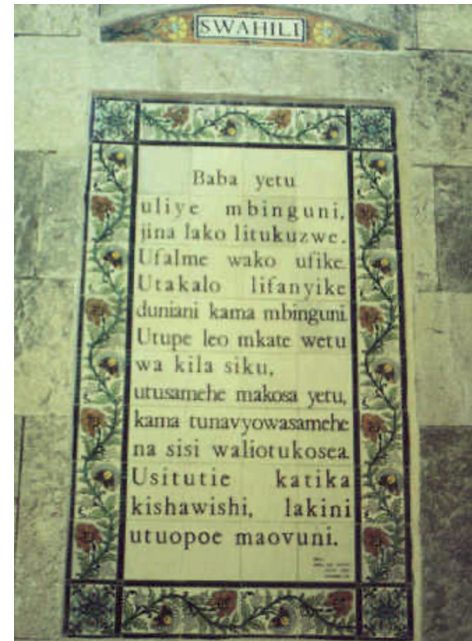
(Above) The Lord's Prayer in Swahili, Latin Alphabet
(Sources: Wikimedia Commons)

(Above) Swahili in Arabic script, memorial plate at the Askari Monument, Dar es Salaam
(Sources: Wikimedia Commons)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Tanzania succeeded in developing national unity?
2. What lessons from the Tanzanian case do you think can be applied to your country's unique context?

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