



# Performing and narrating the Tanzanian nation

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## PERFORMING AND NARRATING THE TANZANIAN NATION

Marie-Aude Fouéré

(Photos and figures: Olivier Provini)

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*In Tanzania, the Ujamaa-bashing of the 1980s was prejudicial to the iconic image of the wise Mwalimu that enthusiastic leftist intellectuals propagated abroad and the Tanzanian state diffused in the country. Yet, since his death on October, 14 1999, the relegation of Julius Nyerere from the political landscape has been suddenly inverted. Nyerere is now constituted as a trope through which the Tanzanian nation is constantly remembered, narrated and revived.*

### Introduction

Every 14th October, now a public holiday (Nyerere Day), official ceremonies are held nationally to commemorate the death of the first President of Tanzania, Julius Kambarage Nyerere. In the main cities of the country, local, regional and national politicians from across the political spectrum pay tribute to Nyerere in hagiographic speeches praising his personal qualities and highlighting the moral values upon which he built his political vision and the nation's destiny. That same day, the media is instrumental in propagating a laudatory official memory of Nyerere as special TV and radio programmes as well as extensive supplements in the national newspapers recall his personal trajectory, moral convictions and political choices; broadcast or reprint archives of his speeches and interviews; discuss his political philosophy and legacy; and applaud his role and influence in nation-building to better brandish him as an acclaimed symbol of humility, integrity and incorruptibility in the face of today's corrupt economic and political elite<sup>1</sup>.

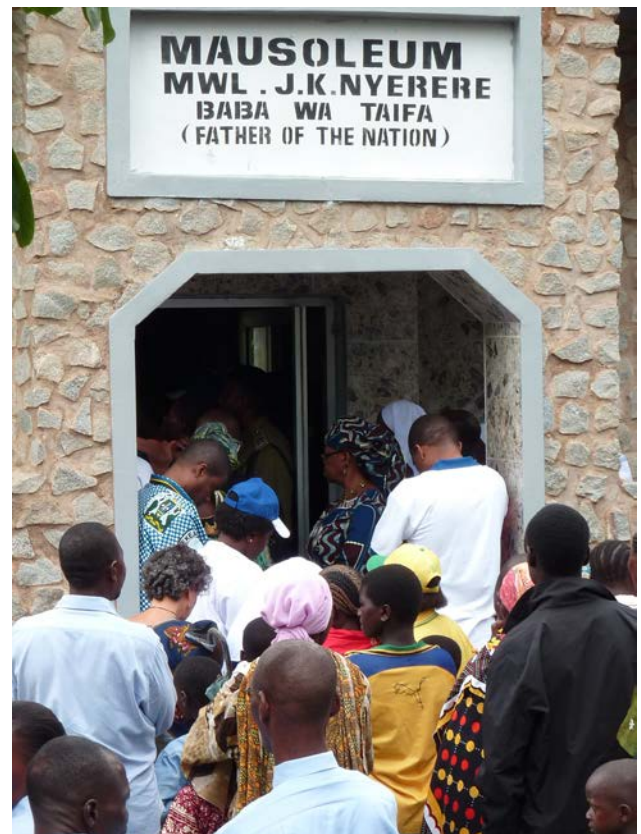
In Butiama and in the neighbouring hamlet of Mwitongo, Nyerere's birthplace and resting place, the anniversary of Nyerere's death is devoted to a series of commemorative ceremonies imbued with religious and nationalist overtones. Since he died of leukaemia in London on October, 14 1999 at the age of 77, Nyerere's family, especially his widow Maria Nyerere and one of his sons, Madaraka Nyerere, both settled in Mwitongo, have organized yearly memorial celebrations. Starting with a special mass gathering Nyerere's family members, government or administrative officials and ordinary citizens; followed by deferential prayers at his grave, situated in the mausoleum built in the family property at a walking distance from the church; punctuated by visits to the nearby Mwalimu Nyerere Museum which displays portraits of Nyerere such as sculptures, photos, printed fabric or paintings, as well as exhibiting official presents bestowed upon him together with personal objects, notably his favourite radio, pair of shoes and tea set; and finally closing with a late lunch graciously provided to the crowd assembled in the family gardens, the day-long commemoration celebrates both the man and the politician, merging Nyerere's religious convictions with his personal qualities and his political vision and commitment.

<sup>1</sup> Fouéré, Marie-Aude. "Tanzanie, la nation à l'épreuve du postsocialisme". *Politique africaine* 121 (2011): 69–86; "Julius Nyerere, Ujamaa and Political Morality in Contemporary Tanzania." *African Studies Review* (forthcoming in 2012).

This year, the anniversary of Nyerere's death coincided with the commemorations of the Fifty Years of Independence of Tanganyika and associated with the Uhuru Torch Race. For two weeks, in Musoma district, the Ministry of Information, Youth, Culture and Sports organized staff workshops and public events, such as fairs and exhibitions, to commemorate, in advance of the official ceremonies planned for the month of December in Dar es Salaam, the fiftieth anniversary of the Independence of Tanganyika, declared on December, 9 1961. The closing ceremony of the Ministry's two-week celebration took place in Butiama's public grounds on Nyerere Day. Gathering a huge crowd of villagers, the ceremony was also attended by some of the people who had gathered at the church and at Nyerere's mausoleum earlier that day. It started only after the guest of honour, the Vice-President of Tanzania Gharib Mohamed Bilal, arrived from Nyerere's family property where he attended the special mass and paid tribute to Nyerere at his grave. It closed after Bilal lit the Uhuru Torch, one of Tanzania's national emblems, introduced by Nyerere and first lit on top of Mt Kilimanjaro on December 9, 1961 as a symbol of freedom, hope and development. Every year, the Uhuru Torch is carried around the country to remind common citizens of its symbolical significance in the history of the nation.

### I. The Celebration of October 14, 2011

It is 7:00 in the morning on October 14, 2011 in Butiama. People arrive quietly in small groups of 3-4 at the Catholic Church of Virgin Mary of the Holy Blood of Jesus, located on Mwitongo grounds. While common people find their way into the church, journalists, local patricians, state officials and a few bystanders wait under the porch to greet or catch sight of the personalities of the day: Maria Nyerere who, as usual, goes and sits right in front of the altar, facing the clergy; local political figures, such as the Regional Commissioner of Mara region, John Tupa, and the Member of Parliament, Nimrod Mkono; and the Vice-President of Tanzania, the Zanzibari Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) stalwart Mohamed Gharib Bilal, who is expected to attend this special mass, being the guest of honour of the celebration of the Fifty Years of Independence. This year, members of the clergy attend in great number (35), many of them being of European origin. As last year, the Tanzanian Bishop of the diocese of Musoma since



2008, Michael Msonganzila, celebrates the mess. After the celebration, a procession led by the clergy heads towards Nyerere's mausoleum situated on the family property. The clergy, in the presence of Maria Nyerere, Mohamed Gharib Bilal, a few other family members and officials, holds the prayers at Nyerere's grave, before leaving the ground to the crowd.



While these commemorative celebrations in honour of Nyerere were taking place in Mwitongo, thousands of villagers were gathering just a mile away at the Butiama public ground to attend the official celebrations of the Fifty Years of Independence, waiting for the guest of honour to arrive. Some officials even rushed from Nyerere's mausoleum before the end of the prayers for fear of having to stand in the sun. This closing ceremony mainly consisted of parades and synchronized choreographies performed by 600 children and teenagers from the local primary and secondary schools, trained for 2 months by 6 professional instructors. The last general rehearsal of October 13 performed between noon and 2 pm, in hot sun, with the pupils' mothers complaining that their children were hungry, thirsty and exhausted, did not bode well for the 14-October ceremony; yet, the cool and cloudy weather of October 14 and a lightened programme of group performances allowed for a more relaxed atmosphere. The ceremony was announced as an occasion to celebrate Independence and Nyerere at the same time: as the emcee, a ministry official, declared: "This is the proper occasion to remember all the good things the father of our nation did for us and that we should respect in order to perpetuate the cohesion, unity and peace of our nation"\*.

The large crowd dispersed around 2.30 pm when, shortly before it suddenly started to pour with, the Uhuru Torch was lit by Vice-President Bilal and carried to Nyerere's property to be temporarily put on a high rock kopje overlooking the family gardens and, in the far distance, a vast plain of wild bush and fields, symbolically re-performing Nyerere's desire that the torch "would shine beyond our border, giving hope where there was despair, love where there was fate, and dignity where there was before only humiliation"<sup>2</sup>.

## II. Performance and Nationhood in Butiama

In spite of the fact that nationalism worked in Tanzania, creating a deep-seated loyalty and sense of nationhood that has ensured stability and cohesion since 1964<sup>3</sup>, nation-building is still at the top of the state agenda in Tanzania. This concern appeared clearly on the occasion of the 2011 commemorations of Nyerere's anniversary of death and the fiftieth anniversary of Independence held in Butiama. Indeed,

the special mass held at the church was not merely presented as an occasion to praise Nyerere but also to remind the large assembly (about 600 people) of his contribution to nation-building ("we have come today to this church where the father of the nation used to come every day (...) to thank God for his exemplary life"; "We have to remember the principles he liked of peace, love and cohesion"). More interestingly, the mass was the occasion to reassert the church's intention to canonize Nyerere and to request people's contribution: "The Catholic Church is busy with the process to declare him a saint, and we know this is a long process (...) but many can help us know all that we do not yet know of him; I ask you: 'what do you know of the father of the nation in the political sphere; in terms of faith; in his social life; in his relationship with common people'. Politically speaking, we wish to call him a saint, but we also need to declare him a saint from the church perspective" (Bishop Msonganzila). Indeed, the canonization process of Nyerere was launched in January 2006 by the Church of Tanzania<sup>4</sup>. Cardinal Polycarp Pengo, who had celebrated the national mass for Nyerere's death at St. Joseph Church in Dar es Salaam on October, 20 1999, announced



2 Julius Nyerere, speech at the Tanganyika Legislative Assembly, October 22, 1959.

3 Mercer, Claire; Jennings Mike "Réhabiliter les nationalismes: convivialité et conscience nationale en Tanzanie post-coloniale", *Politique Africaine* 121 (2001):87-106

4 Fouéré, Marie-Aude. "La fabrique d'un saint en Tanzanie postsocialiste. L'Etat, l'Eglise et Julius Nyerere." *Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est* 39 (2008) : 101-151; Mesaki, Simeon and Mrisho Malipula. 2011. "Julius Nyerere's influence and Legacy: From a Proponent of Familyhood to a Candidate for Sainthood." *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 3-3 (2011): 93-100.

that Nyerere had been declared a “Servant of God” – the first step towards sainthood – by the Vatican, and insisted that the decision of the Church to present the cause for the canonization of Nyerere was based on two criteria: Nyerere lived his life “as a Christian” and “his faith influenced his entire career”. The cause for canonization undeniably contributes to the rehabilitation of Nyerere and his production as a depoliticized and de-historicized figure, to be used as a symbol of nationhood.

Moreover, the presence of the Mwalimu Nyerere Museum in the premises of Mwitongo is no coincidence. As the custodian of Nyerere’s heritage, the *raison d’être* of this publicly-funded national museum is to conserve and protect Nyerere’s personal objects as well as maintain if not enhance his collective memory; but the museum clearly ensures the promotion of nationhood and patriotism, the exhibit displaying a narrative of nation-building in which Nyerere is the central figure. For example, the recently acquired 1961 Uhuru Torch is exhibited with, fixed on its base, a black-and-white photograph of Nyerere holding the torch during the 1961 celebration of Independence. Thus, not only is Nyerere’s trajectory intertwined with national history, but national history is reduced to his commitment and actions. Consequently, the museum is a mnemonic device that plays a crucial role in forcing the past into the present, and shaping contemporary feelings of Tanzania-ness. The museum’s staff are key actors in foregrounding the memory of Nyerere, notably its Director, an enthusiast of Nyerere’s philosophy who, being an academic, intends to publish a paper on the roots of Nyerere’s thoughts and organize debates and discussions on Nyerere’s



philosophy with professors and university students in Butiama next year. Visitors’ comments jotted down on the Museum Visitors Book reflect the museum’s purpose of honouring Nyerere and revering the Tanzanian nation at the same time: “The contribution of Mwalimu to this nation is incommensurable, he really gave himself to the nation” (02/09/2009); “I am glad to have seen the origin of Tanzanians and our Independence. Thanks for everything, father of the nation” (15/10/2010); “Tanzania is united and it should stay united” (16/05/2011); “He worked a lot for his nation and his people for the benefit of the nation” (28/07/2011).

The parades and festive performances organized for the Fifty Years of Independence were also strongly imbued with nationalist and patriotic meanings. Since independence, culture has always been promoted as a vehicle for nation-building. From 1967 on, when Tanzania embarked in the Ujamaa experiment, Tanzanian cultural production was clearly articulated as a political project, the ruling party’s asserting that “in a socialist society all art is seen as a servant of society”; in other words, as a tool for nationalist development<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, not only were cultural troupes due to spearhead nationhood and citizenship, but culture and artistry were redefined and reshaped to reflect egalitarian principles, order, conformity, discipline and patriotism. Cultural training marches and parades; synchronized movements and neatly arranged linear formations; group performances rather than individual artistry; and recurring praises to the nation, its father and the ruling party embodied the artistic aesthetic of the modern socialist nation-state. A similar political performativity was observed at the official celebrations of the Fifty Years of Independence in Butiama this year. As usual in such occasions, the ceremony displayed the pomp of state officialdom: a white tented-dais overlooked the football ground where the parades and performances took place; high-ranking officials arrived one by one in their Pajero cars; the prestigious guest of honour was to be much applauded at his late arrival; and the national anthem as well as the “Nakupenda Tanzania” (Tanzania, I love you) hackneyed patriotic refrain

5 Askew, Kelly. “Jacks-of-all-Arts or Ustadhi? The Poetics of Cultural Production in Tanzania.” In *In Search of a Nation. Histories of Authority & Dissidence in Tanzania*, ed. Gregory H. Maddox and James L. Giblin, 304–327. Oxford: James Currey Ltd, 2005.

in praise of Tanzania were sung to open the celebration. Traditional ngoma groups started the celebration, singing lyrics in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of independence. However, the most striking episode of the day was the “theatrical nationhood”<sup>6</sup> performed by trained pupils. After the usual disciplined parades, collective choreographies took place, pupil’s formations performing remakes of significant episodes which official history fixed as memorable events and upon which the state narrative of the nation is built: Alex Nyirenda planting the Tanzanian flag and waving the Uhuru Torch on top of Mount Kilimanjaro; Nyerere mixing soils from Tanganyika and Zanzibar to symbolically celebrate the 1964 Union; the Ujamaa agricultural turn which pupils mimicking by ploughing their fields with hoes, sewing seeds and harvesting; or the Tanzanian military operations to Comoros represented by determined and fearless soldiers fighting for freedom.

## Conclusion

As stated by the emcee, the parades and choreographies exceeded the boundaries of mere entertainment, reminding citizens of “where we are, where we are coming from, and where we are heading to”. The pupils were therefore performing and

narrating the nation, while the emcee’s statements purported to remove any confusion or misinterpretation. For example, the sensitive issue of the Union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar, at the top of the agenda in today’s Zanzibar since the adoption of a government of national unity, was clearly reframed in the national rhetoric of cohesion and unity against divisiveness (“The Union is flourishing; today we are remembered this Union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar through the re-performing of how the father of the nation mixed the soils [of the two countries], a Union that we believe cannot be split”). The commitment of common citizens to the development of the nation’s productive capacities, notably through farming, was foregrounded (“Tanzanians, go to the field and farm!”; “[Pupils] motivate us to valorise farming; it is not correct to hear the youth says, ‘well, there is no job, no employment’ whereas fields are thriving; demonstrations are not a solution to bring development; development comes from work, let’s stop wasting time organizing demonstrations instead of going to work”) and, in passing, advertisement made for the recently introduced policy of Kilimo Kwanza (Agriculture First). Obviously, as in any “bio-power” regimes, the national ceremonies replayed the coincidence between discipline and productivity<sup>7</sup>. More generally, the performances of the day were both a ritual of citizenship and sovereignty: parades and choreographies worked as techniques of discipline, inculcating physical obedience to better instil good citizenship and conformity, but they also displayed the state’s omnipotent power over its subjects. In other words, though framed in the words of capitalist modernity rather than in the past Ujamaa rhetoric, the Tanzanian national script is still much embedded in nationalist concerns, aiming at encouraging and propagating a sense of national belonging and commitment to the nation’s development through discipline and hard work.

6 Kruger, Loren. *The National Stage. Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

\* The author is responsible for all the translations from Kiswahili to English.

7 Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1977; Mbembé, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

**Marie-Aude Fouéré** is IFRA’s Deputy Director and Scientific Researcher. An anthropologist, she currently conducts research on collective memories, belonging and nationalism in Tanzania. This short text follows from her long term research on the memories of Julius Nyerere for which she went to Butiama (Nyere birthplace and resting place) in 2010 and 2011. **Olivier Provini** is a PhD student from the University of Pau. Trained in political sciences, he works on higher education reforms and their harmonisation in the East African region.

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