



The concept of Ujamaa and its impact on postcolonial Tanzania

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This article aims at promoting an understanding of the concept of Ujamaa in its key ideas and of its relevance as a policy that still has an impact on postcolonial Tanzania. Using Julius Nyerere's essay „Ujamaa - the Basis for African Socialism“ (1962) as a starting point, this article seeks to explore Ujamaa's multifaceted meanings and realities, addressing the Arusha Declaration (1967) and the beginnings of a villagization program. It furthermore aims at critically reflecting on the role and portrayal of Julius Nyerere concerning Ujamaa.

The Beginnings

After the Independence of Tanganyika in 1961 and the unification with Zanzibar in 1964, many eyes lay on the country's new President, Julius Nyerere, or *Mwalimu* (the Teacher) as he was called. It was with him, that *Ujamaa* became a word known by the world and a reality for the people. *Ujamaa* has been the subject of discussion when debating Tanzania's postcolonial past ever since. *Ujamaa, a Swahili word that can be translated with „familyhood“, which mainly refers to a set of values, was introduced by Julius Nyerere in the late 1950s and first defined in his essay “Ujamaa – the Basis for African Socialism”* (Nyerere 1962). With the Arusha Declaration in 1967, *Ujamaa* became the government policy of the single-ruling-party TANU (Tanganyika African National Union) and the official development strategy which ended only in the late 1970s due to its economic failure. However, as many scholars (Fouéré 2014; Karume & Kilimwiko 2020; Pratt 1999) argue, *Ujamaa* is not only a matter of the past, but its legacy affects the present. To further understand the impact of *Ujamaa* on the present, this article will first examine the past, starting with the key ideas of *Ujamaa* itself, while taking its relation to African socialism into account.

African Socialism and Ujamaa

Even though Julius Nyerere describes *Ujamaa* as “the Basis of African Socialism” the term *Ujamaa* is often used as an equivalent to African Socialism in public discourse, however in Tanzanian peculiarity (Nyerere 1962, emphasis mine). African Socialism refers to a socialist doctrine that spread around many African countries and its leaders such as Senegal (Leopold Senghor), Ghana (Kwame Nkrumah), Kenya (Tom Mboya), and lastly Tanzania (Julius Nyerere) at the end of French and British colonial rule in the 1950s and 1960s (Drew 2017). The country's leaders identified what can be described as the main ideas of African socialism such as economic development, social control, and African identity to achieve the envisioned development and establishment of a precolonial communal idea. It is notable, however, that there is no clear definition of the term and that African socialism is interpreted differently in each country.

Nyerere's interpretation of African Socialism is reflected in the idea of *Ujamaa* whose key features he outlines in his essay (1962). To begin with, he highlights the importance of communitarian values whose existence he links to a precolonial past of individuals living, working, and supporting each other within a community (Nyerere 1962; Jennings 2017). This communitarian set of values thus also includes the idea of communal ownership, extending to the communal ownership of land. Secondly, the essay highlights *the value of egalitarianism and equality, referring to the past when differences in wealth did not matter since wealth was acquired, possessed, and distributed within the whole community equally*. Thirdly the idea of

participation, hence in contributing to building the nation is emphasized as Nyerere writes that “if every man and woman in the country takes up the challenge and works to the limit of his or her ability for the good of the whole society, Tanganyika will prosper; and that prosperity will be shared by all her people.” (Nyerere 1962: 8). *Communitarianism, egalitarianism, and participation thus are key elements of the ideology of Ujamaa. Considering these elements in Nyerere's own words allows us to better understand the ideas behind Ujamaa and with it his very understanding of Socialism.* The translation of *Ujamaa* as “familyhood” then reveals its meaning which transcends the idea of the nuclear family, as Nyerere writes in his concluding remarks: “Our recognition of the family to which we all belong must be extended yet further—beyond the tribe, the community, the nation, or even the continent—to embrace the whole society of mankind. This is the only logical conclusion for true socialism.” (ibid.: 11).

According to Nyerere Socialism refers to an “attitude of mind” (ibid.: 4). When mentioning true socialism, however, it is important to differentiate *Ujamaa* as Nyerere’s understanding of socialism from European socialism. The latter is based upon the idea that socialism develops through a proletarian revolution within a capitalist state, having a major focus on the class struggle (Rodney 1972). *Ujamaa however, does not seek to establish socialism through class struggle and revolution but instead aims at re-establishing precolonial communal values of the „traditional” African society with the community at its core,* focusing on egalitarianism and socialist equality (Bjierk 2010; Jennings 2017). Despite this, both ideologies share the common goal of development, though exercised differently in reality.

The Arusha Declaration (1967) – Development and Self-reliance

Ujamaa was declared the official economic development strategy with the Arusha Declaration in February 1967. This policy document evolved around the idea that development can be achieved only through self-reliance (*kujitegemea*), thus autonomy from foreign support and investment should be achieved (Fouéré 2014). The Arusha Declaration generally defined socialism as the “absence of exploitation”, the “people’s ownership of means of production“, and the “existence of democracy within a one-party state” (Karume & Kilimwiko 2020: 43). The latter had been subject to *Nyerere’s thoughts on democracy and the party system, arguing that one party would be more democratic than a multiparty system when there is a general agreement over the principles of equality, freedom, and unity* (Boesen et. al 1977). With a single-party TANU in control of the country, the nationalization of major parts of the economy and private enterprises was initiated. To achieve the aspired economic equality, a cooperative organization of production and distribution, especially within the rural sector, was key (ibid.). This path of development toward a self-reliant nation, therefore, depended on its peasants.

Before introducing the rural socialism that entailed the movement of many people into communal villages, it is important to explore the meanings of “development” and “self-reliance”, since the terms are often used very broadly. Scholars have therefore raised awareness, that developmentalism can be neither regarded as a neutral nor universal category and that its historical and ideological context should always be taken into consideration (Lal 2012). It has been criticized that a static approach to developmentalism using euro-american parameters as well as the centrality of the state as starting points, would fail to acknowledge the dynamic, heterogeneous, and often dialectic processes of state building and development itself (ibid.). With all that in mind, the term self-reliance has a connotation of its own in the context of *Ujamaa* and its meanings are equally heterogeneous depending on the interlocutor. In the local context, self-reliance has been described as the ability to provide for oneself and the family – meaning the nuclear family - by depending on agriculture and own labor (ibid.). This shows that understandings of terms differ depending on the context and are not necessarily linked to the national policy of *Ujamaa*, promoting the vision of the extended family and using the term self-reliance when speaking about national autonomy and economic development. What differentiated *Ujamaa*, however, from other countries' paths of “development” was its agrarian focus.

Ujamaa in the Villages

After the publication of the Arusha Declaration, a paper on “Ujamaa vijijini”, literally meaning “Ujamaa in the villages” and conventionally translated as “rural socialism” marked the beginning of a phase of villagization and was again based upon the idea of development through “working and living together” (Schneider 2004: 349). According to Nyerere (1962), the land was a gift from God entrusted to the whole community. Consequently, in his understanding and ideology of *Ujamaa*, the individual had neither the right of ownership of land nor the right to exploit the labor of others (Tetzlaff 2018). The villagization program, therefore, aspired to the collective organization of production and economic equality as well as the participation of its members in decision-making processes regarding village life. Hence, the aims of villagization were following the key principles of *Ujamaa*, which was now becoming a concrete reality.

Nyerere himself had pleaded for voluntarism in participation in the program, believing that people could not be developed, but had to develop themselves and that development would be more effective if people were persuaded. Despite this, *the villagization program initially was announced to be voluntary, but soon became coercive after the expected success failed to appear. James Scott (1998) describes the program thus as the state’s attempt to reorganize communities to obtain control.*



Image 1

Starting in 1968, the movement of people into so-called *Ujamaa* Villages advanced in 1973, when it became compulsory (Schneider 2004). **By 1979 almost 90% of the country's population lived in Ujamaa villages (Karume & Kilimwiko 2020).** There were two types of *Ujamaa* villages. Some were created near or instead of established villages (*vijiji vya zamani*) others required the movement of people to new villages and often unfertile soil (*vijiji vidogo vidogo*). **Intimidation was used frequently and people's old homes were burnt to prevent them from returning, which made the cruel character of the villagization program visible (ibid.).** Given the violence, the unsuitable sites for settlements, and the deficient planning process, the implementation of *Ujamaa* was widely resented by the rural population (ibid.). Considering the economic decline regarding the low and regressive production of all crops and the high expenses for the villagization program itself, *Ujamaa* failed, leaving the rural population poorer than before (ibid.). However, other factors such as the collapse of World commodity prices, the rising oil prices, and the heavy drought may also have influenced Tanzania's economic decline in the mid and late 1970s (Pratt 1999).

Julius Nyerere (1922-1999)

When discussing the failure of *Ujamaa* and its coercive reality of villagization, one important figure often remains hidden. Julius Nyerere, representing the ideology and policy of *Ujamaa*, "typically recedes into the background taken over by anonymous 'officials,' 'campaigns' without authors or initiators. **The effect is the tendency for Nyerere to emerge from these narratives as a tragically failing hero, whose attractive and hopeful visions were derailed or subverted (Schneider 2004: 346).**



Image 2

Before becoming a known political figure, Nyerere studied in Edinburgh, Scotland, where his readings about classical liberalism, British socialism, and pan-African anti-colonialism shaped his fundamental beliefs grounded on human dignity and equality (Pratt 1999). During his presidency (1964-1985) the former schoolteacher had thus focused on building a just society and an independent nation, aspiring to unite the different powers after the long period of colonial rule. This vision became interwoven with the creation of an ideology of *Ujamaa* with its key ideas of community, participation, and equality. After the failure of *Ujamaa* and Nyerere's voluntary resignation as president in 1985, he continued to remain an important political figure as Leader of TANU until 1990 (Fouéré 2014). While his active role in the implementation of *Ujamaa* as a policy is unquestionable, given the evidence of his initiatives and writings, the portrayal of his persona seems more complex and often contradictory (ibid.).

Nyerere himself has often been described as a humble, idealistic, honest, wise, and charismatic leader, who came from a poor rural area and modestly lived his life until he died. Upon his death in 1999, World leaders like Bill Clinton described him as “a pioneering leader for freedom and self-government in Africa” (Clinton as cited in Brennan 2014: 459). How this freedom looked under his government is yet to be contested. *Being respected as an Intellectual, African leader and actor in the international sphere, though to be treated with caution, critics have not only addressed the cruel reality of the villagization program, but also the authoritarian character of his rule and dealings with the opposition* (Brennan 2014). While Nyerere stressed

the importance of consensus and political debate, it has been stated that he “in practice served as Tanzania’s lone authorized critic” (ibid.: 460). Hence, the other side of the coin of humility appears when being used as a “political weapon to control debate, court international support, and silence opposition.” (ibid.: 459).

Over the past twenty years, Nyerere’s memory has been kept alive, changing with the historical landscape (Fouéré 2014). In Tanzania, he is remembered not only as *Mwalimu* (the Teacher) but more importantly as *Baba wa taifa* (Father of the Nation). This portrayal places him next to other important African leaders like Nelson Mandela, who played an important role in the process of nation-building in South Africa. ***Despite Ujamaa's failure, Nyerere's achievement of creating a common sense of national belonging and unity, which has led Tanzania to be a country of stability and peace in a wider region of instability, is yet to be acknowledged (Ibhawoh & Dibua 2003).*** Nevertheless, it also has led to a glorification of his person (Fouéré 2014). The process of remembering Nyerere and his ideology *Ujamaa* is, however, not a matter of the past, but one of the present.

Ujamaa in the present age

In the present, *Ujamaa* is sometimes connected with the golden days by older people and those having experienced the negative impacts of the neoliberal reforms and idealizing the past (ibid.). Younger generations can hardly remember this past but are the ones affected by it. This leads to the question about the legacy of *Ujamaa* in Tanzania today. Based on a “national silence on socialism” the term seems to have been erased (Askew 2006 as cited in Fouéré 2014: 10). Despite this, ***when observing China's relationship with Africa it appears, for example, that socialist values and terms like self-reliance and hard work are reintroduced to emphasize continuity and solidarity in China-Africa Relations*** (Lee 2009; Lal 2012). Those moral values and principles are often disconnected from their historical context, creating a sense of continuity from socialism to post-socialism (Fouéré 2014). In Tanzania the decontextualization of socialist values of *Ujamaa* allows political parties to “capitalize on the past to build political legitimacy, renew national consciousness, and strive to impose the state’s hegemony on common citizens” (ibid.:10). The construction of the positive memory of Nyerere is part of this ongoing process of claiming legitimacy and imagining the nation, used to “produce alternative representations of good leadership and good governance in a demoralized political space” (ibid.: 13). The values associated with Nyerere and *Ujamaa* are thus part of the political language and discourse in Tanzania today, as a development strategy however, *Ujamaa*, clearly belongs to the past.

Tanzania has in fact never officially abandoned Socialism, de facto only *Ujamaa*. **According to the Constitution: “The United Republic is a democratic, secular and socialist state which adheres to multi-party democracy.”** (1977: 11) (Chapter 1, Part I: 3.1., emphasis mine). Though the single-party element which Nyerere had implemented has been abolished on paper, the Opposition Party CHADEMA (*Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo – Party of Democracy and Progress*) was politically banned under former President Magufuli (2016). During his presidency (2015-2021), nationalist economic policies have furthermore stifled the private sector and foreign direct investment (FDI) (Harris 2021). With Magufuli's intolerance towards the opposition, nationalist policies and focus on self-reliance, socialist ideas, and policies seem to persist in Tanzania. It is yet to be seen if the lifting of the ban on political parties in January 2023 by current President Hassan will be followed by decisions creating the necessary political and economic space which is needed for the country to successfully compete in a global economy.

Conclusion

This article has aimed at giving an insight into Tanzania's postcolonial past and present by further exploring the key ideas of *Ujamaa*, its implementation, and coercive realities, especially in the years of villagization in the 1970's. It sought to highlight the complex yet contradicting portrayal of Tanzania's first President Julius Nyerere and his importance in the nation-building process. In doing so, it has shown, that Nyerere and the principles associated with him and his policy of *Ujamaa* are often idealized and abstracted from their historical context, used in the political space to claim political legitimacy, create continuity, and contribute to national consciousness (Fouéré 2014). Although abandoned as official economic policy, certain values of *Ujamaa*, thus, still seem to play a role in the country's current political discourse and in Tanzania's interpretation of socialism. The article has furthermore drawn attention to the fact, that Socialism is a matter of the present, especially when considering it is an integral part of Tanzania's constitution. Despite this, Tanzania has changed as a country in a globalized world, having pragmatically developed free-market and capitalist tendencies as well. On its path, it is yet to be awaited, in which direction the East African country is heading. To move forward, it is necessary, however, to understand the concept of *Ujamaa* better and its legacy - which is still affecting the present.

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Image references

- Image 1: Julius Nyerere Ujamaa – Ideologies, Practices, Infrastructure, Villages and More. <https://unitedrepublicoftanzania.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Ujamaa-Ideologies-Practices-Infrastructure-Villages-and-More.jpg>. Accessed 13 March 2023.
- Image 2: "Julius Nyerere". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julius-Nyerere>. Accessed 15 March 2023.

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