

# A Critique of Julius Nyerere's Education for Self-Reliance Proposal

by

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## Abstract

This paper questions the motive behind Julius Nyerere's proposal for a socialist-based system of education, and therefore interrogates socialism and argues that his proposed socialist-based system of education is no different from the capitalist-based system of education in terms of economic goals. This paper also submits that his proposed socialist-based system of education cannot withstand the existential, economic and technological challenges in modern day Africa

**Keywords:** education, self-reliance, capitalism, socialism, colonialism, knowledge.

## Introduction

Nyerere's aims in "Education for Self-Reliance", a chapter in his classic, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*, are to interrogate the purpose of education for the mental development of the average Tanzanian, assess the method of education taught by the colonialists, examine the impact of the colonial form of education on the Tanzanian populace and economy and also suggest the form of education that would suit the socialist basis of socio-economic policy upon which Tanzania is to be governed.

Given the increase in the demand for education in Tanzania and the economic reality of the country at the time, Nyerere argues that it is pertinent to examine the form of educational system that would aid both individual and economic growth of Tanzania. He argues that every society has its own peculiar form of education geared towards transmitting "from one generation to the next the accumulated wisdom and knowledge of the society, and prepare the young people for their future membership of the society and their active participation in its maintenance or development".<sup>1</sup> Thus, it is important that the educational system inherited from the colonialist be reviewed into a form that aligns with the socio-economic need of Tanzania.

## **Characteristics of the Colonial System of Education**

Nyerere holds that education in the colonial era was modelled on a system that suits the imperialist agenda of the colonialists. This education system was not designed to prepare young people of Tanganyika and Zanzibar to serve their society but to develop them towards servicing the colonialists' goals.<sup>2</sup> These goals are capitalist in nature and were aimed to replace the traditional value of the Tanzanians with that of the colonialists. Some of the characteristics of the colonialist system of education include class stratification propelled by the attitude of human inequality and the economic division of the society into the dominant and the dominated. It was also racist-oriented.

This form of education inculcated into the Tanzanian people, Nyerere argues, proves inadequate and inappropriate for the economic and social development of the post-colonial state of Tanzania. The colonial education system was at variance with the traditional value of the Tanzania.

In a bid to correct some of the demerits of the inherited colonial system of education, Nyerere states three steps that were taken, namely:

- **Abolition of Racial Distinctions:** There was the abolition of racial and also religious discrimination in the admission of school-age children into schools. Education was made open to all.
- **Expansion in Educational Facilities:** Provisions were made for the growing number of school-age children at all levels. This translates to having more schools and educational facilities to cater to the increased number of education-seeking young people.
- **Traditional Value Oriented Form of Education:** The third step taken to correct the anomalies of the colonial-inherited education, according to Nyerere, was to make the education content more Tanzanian in orientation. This is a departure from the Western value orientation of pre-colonial education system.

Nyerere argues that these steps are modifications of the inherited form of education and have not been yielding results. It takes time to see the effects of the steps taken and modifications made to the inherited Western form of education. This, however, calls for the need to question the purpose for which education in Tanzania is to be pursued thereby warranting the examination of the existing structure and content of education in Tanzania which in turn warrants the consideration of further modification in the education system or a total change in approach.

## **The Desired Society: A Socialist Society**

Since the success of educational pursuits, if correctly and relevantly pursued, have impacts on the progress of the society at large, the structure of education to be built must be relevant to the kind of society a people want to build for themselves. For Nyerere, the Tanzanian state is to be built on the socialist principles of equality and respect for human dignity; communal distribution of the community resources and the attitude of mass work and zero exploitation. These principles are the basic grounds upon which other values of the society are to be built.

To achieve these socialist goals and principles, Nyerere maintains that Tanzanians must accept the socio-economic reality of their society and work within this reality to attain their socialist goals. The reality is that the economy is poor, undeveloped and agriculture-based. It does not have the capacity to maintain large industrial amenities. Thus, the economy is to focus on the available resources which are land and human resources. This points to the fact that more focus must be directed towards the improvement of the rural life. The aforesaid, for Nyerere, is what the educational system of Tanzania has to encourage. In his words, “the educational system of Tanzania must emphasize co-operative endeavour, not individual advancement: it must stress concepts of equality and the responsibility to give service which goes with any special ability...”<sup>3</sup> The educational system of Tanzania must, therefore, be designed to develop people to adhere to the principles of equality, prepare them for the task of developing the society and enable them reason, interpret and implement decision made in the society within the framework of democratic socialism. This form of education will integrate both the vocational and social aspects of education.

## **Features of the Existing Form of Post-Colonial Education**

To achieve the above-mentioned form of educational structure which will be relevant and purposeful to the proposed and desired socialist society, Nkrumah identifies four features of the existing educational structure of post-colonial Tanzania which all must be corrected. These features include:

- **Elitist Form of Education:** The existing educational structure of post-colonial is elitist in nature, that is, it is designed to meet the interest of the privileged few. Spaces for admission in schools reduce as school children progress in their pursuit of education thereby limiting the chances of a great number of them to further their education. This has a far-reaching effect on the psyche of the under-privileged ones and creates a sense of failure in them. It also creates a form of stratification between those who had the opportunity of proceeding and those who did not.
- **Separation from the Reality of the Society:** Nyerere argues that the existing structure of education in Tanzania is designed such that it makes people lose touch with the reality of the society. The system of boarding schools or schooling several miles away from home separates young people from the struggles of their peasant parents and rural community. It thus makes them “insensitive” to the reality of the society.
- **Stereotypical Form of Education:** Nyerere also argues that the existing structure of education imbues in school children the attitude that only formal, Western-styled education is the worthy form of acquiring knowledge thereby making them look down on other forms of informal education and those who do not have formal education. This will further the ground the ills of human inequality in the society which is at variance with the socialist goal the society is aimed to achieve. There must be a synergy of both formal education and traditional knowledge and wisdom accompanied by the correct discharge and implementation of each to serve a fruitful purpose.
- **Consumer-Oriented Form of Education:** The existing structure of education builds young people to be consumers rather than producers. The society also encourages that young school-age people be exempted from the peasant struggles of the uneducated masses. This has a huge adverse effect on the economy and also entrenches the principles of human inequality.

### **Rectifying the Anomalies of the Existing Structure of Education in Tanzania**

Nyerere suggests three major aspects which require attention in order to correct the anomalies created by the existing structure of education in Tanzania. In the first place, the content of the curriculum is to be re-evaluated. Secondly, the existing schools and their structures need to be reorganised and lastly, the entry age into primary schools needs to be revised. Underlining each of these aspects is the realisation of the economic fact which must be taken into consideration with regards to the extent at which changes and restructuring can be taken.<sup>4</sup>

For the curriculum, the type of education to be given to young Tanzanians should be that which would prepare them for the task of developing Tanzania. Nyerere posits that schools “must prepare people for life and service in the villages and rural areas of this country”.<sup>5</sup> To achieve this, there must also be a radical change in the attitude of the society towards education system. Examinations should not be book-learning oriented but must also incorporate the practical and vocational aspects of education. Curriculum should be designed alongside the economic reality that not all persons can end up being medical doctors, engineer or administrators. Curriculum should include the teaching of the skills and values that will make individuals live happily and function well in a socialist society.

The re-evaluation of the curriculum also relates to the reorganisation of the school structure. Nyerere argues that schools and school children are to be productive. Schools structures must be built such that they serve as contributors to the growth of the economy. Farming is to be encouraged in schools such that the involvement of school children in it will build them for the greater task of developing the society. Also, the entry age of children into schools is to be revised, for children who pass out of primary school too early may not have the mental capacity to live up to the task they will be faced with after school.

Given the foregoing, Nyerere thus concludes that:

The education provided by Tanzania for the student of Tanzania must serve the purpose of Tanzania. It must encourage the growth of the socialist values we aspire to...it must ensure that the educated know themselves to be an integral part of the nation and recognize the responsibility to give greater service the greater opportunity they have had.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, the kind of education to be pursued must be socialist-oriented and as well build the people to see themselves as an integral part of the struggle to achieve the socialist goals. This will make them independent as political individuals, free as economic agents and self-reliant as metaphysical beings.

## **The Need for Education in Societal Development**

Given Nyerere’s position on the proposal for a system of education that will be geared towards empowering the people in the discovery of their essence with a view to building a better society, it becomes necessary to ask the question; is education worth having for individual empowerment or self-reliance and societal development? In other words, why must one be concerned with education?

To start with, a loose definition of education states that education involves the imparting and acquiring of knowledge of any form through teaching and learning respectively. The impartation of education comes in different forms and it can be formal or informal. One focal point in the loose definition of education is knowledge. What is knowledge and why is its acquisition essential to human beings? Bearing in mind the strict definition of knowledge in the traditional conception of epistemology, as justified true belief<sup>7</sup> which has also been critiqued by Edmund Gettier as faulty,<sup>8</sup> I will adopt a less strict definition of knowledge that I consider useful for the aim of this paper. This is that knowledge is the general awareness and firm possession of information, facts, ideas, truths and principles that are related to a person's existence, a person's inter-personal relationship with other people and a person's relationship with his/her immediate society, and the world at large.

With this idea of what knowledge stands for and how education serves as a medium through which it can be imparted, it is then clear that education is an essential medium of human's existence. Education is worth imparting, worth having and worth developing for the sake of human's peaceful living as a result of an understanding of the world we live in through education. This informs human's concern in education. In Nana Adu-Pipim Boadou's words:

The implicit theory of education is to bring about change and manage that change constrictively. The indication is that when people receive constructive education they are able to deal with its various manifestations in a manner which is generally acceptable by members of that society.<sup>9</sup>

The idea of change informs the socialist-based system of education proposed by Nyerere. It would be recalled that at the time that Nyerere made the proposal, most African nations were freshly independent and were aiming to change the order of things socially, economically and politically. For another reason, Nyerere's proposed socialist-based system of education conforms with the then trending nationalist-ideological position that was widespread in most newly independent African countries. As Joseph Nasongo and Lydia Musungu hold, what is "characteristic of this position (i.e. the nationalist-ideological position) is the view that education has to reflect and sustain national priorities, aims and aspirations."<sup>10</sup> All of these indicate the importance of education, which by Nyerere's reckoning, must be targeted at making individuals self-reliant. It is upon the ability of self-reliance that other forms of development, both at individual and societal levels will be built. The idea of education for self-reliance is an implicit rejection of the colonialist hegemony or neo-colonial tendency.

The proposal of education for self-reliance does not only imply the rejection of a Western system of education, it also implies the rejection of the socio-economic order that forms the foundation of the Western system of education, that is, capitalism. This is the economic system characteristic of the Western colonialists which allows for the private ownership of the means of production.

It is also characterised by competition, a free market and is profit-driven. All of these features of capitalism, Nyerere argues, are alien to the African societies. They are not only alien, they are antithetical to the system of life that is characteristic of African people. The characteristic socio-political system of the African ethos can be termed socialism. Although there are various forms of socialism and there is a difference between its understanding in the African context and the Western social and political context, the way of life that characterises the social, economic, cultural and political worldview of the traditional African people, as held by Nyerere can only be adorned in a socialist garb.

## **Socialism as a Basis for Education**

Olufemi Taiwo argues that one fundamental question that social and political scholars and nationalists in the early years of post-independence in Africa were confronted with is: “How ought we to organise society for purposes of governance and social living?” and that an aspect of this question concerns fundamental societal issues of production, distribution, exchange and consumption.<sup>11</sup> In an attempt to answer this question, early post-independent African scholars and leaders (among whom Nyerere was one) “produced political philosophies that reflected their understanding of their own cultural heritage in combination sometimes with their appreciation of certain elements of the political thoughts of the West...This combination was known as African socialism.”<sup>12</sup> The fact that socialism was taken to be “the form of social organization best suited to the circumstances of African was taken to be proven by its supposed moral merits.”<sup>13</sup>

Most of the African scholars who attempt to develop political theories in order to deal with the question of how the society (in this case, newly-independent African country of their origin) was to be organised attested to the communalistic nature of pre-colonial African societies and the familyhood mentality that held the fabric of these pre-colonial African societies together. Socialism provides the socio-political framework to revive the Western-relegated communalistic ideals of the African people. Socialism provides the socio-political platform to do away with the Western-imposed capitalist ideals. Thus, socialism was adopted (although not by all). It is important to state that there are different variants of socialism adopted by African scholars, but the concern here shall be Nyerere’s variant of socialism. For him:

Socialism—like democracy—is an attitude of mind. In a socialist society it is the socialist attitude of mind, and not the rigid adherence to a standard political pattern, which is needed to ensure that the people care for each other’s welfare.<sup>14</sup>

The variant of socialism advocated by Nyerere is not couched in the dictate of a Western-patterned political theory, it is an attitude of the mind which defines not only the personality of the individuals in a society but also the interpersonal relationship among individuals in a society. Nyerere calls his variant of socialism, “ujamaa” which he describes as follows:

‘Ujamaa’, then, or ‘Familyhood’, describes our socialism. It is opposed to capitalism, which seeks to build a happy society on the basis of the exploitation of man by man; and it is equally opposed to doctrinaire socialism which seeks to build its happy society on a philosophy of inevitable conflict between man and man.<sup>15</sup>

Given the aforesaid about the need for a political theory in a bid to organise the society and the choice of socialism by some African post-independent leaders as well as the specific variant advocated by Nyerere, it is then clear why Nyerere formulates a system of education based on a socialist system. The relationship between socialism will help inculcate in the people the ideals of socialism such as communalism, egalitarianism, familyhood mentality and detestation for exploitation. On the other hand, a socialist based system of education would be imparted along the line of the socialist ideals of egalitarianism where every individual will have equal opportunity is acquiring education regardless of their social status.

## **An Evaluation of Nyerere’s Socialist-Based Education for Self-Reliance**

All the resulting varieties of socialist experiments, however, brought little salvation for Africa.<sup>16</sup>

The above is Kwasi Wiredu’s view concerning the failure of the socialist system of government in most post-independent African nations where it was adopted. Nyerere’s socialist government in Tanzania is not an exception. Thus, if socialism fails, a system of education built on it, logical implication, will fail too. This raises the question as to what the real motive behind the adoption of a socialist system of government is. In Nyerere’s case, it is argued that the warrant for a socialist system of government is the communalistic nature characteristic of the traditional African people. However, the mistake of Nyerere lies in his failure to come to terms with the realities of the changes that colonial experiences have brought upon the people of Africa. A workable attempt to forge on a progressive African society must take into consideration, the experiences of the post-independent African people which involve multicultural influence of Arab-Islamic culture, Western culture and the traditional African culture.

Another factor to consider is the gap between theory and practice. Socialism, in most African countries, only enjoyed theoretical formulation but suffered practical failure and this can be traceable, still, to a flawed motive and ill-planned execution formula. This is as a result of the fact that socialist formula developed by African leaders, Nyerere especially has elitist colouration.

Furthermore, regardless of Nyerere's view that the variant of socialism – ujamaa – that he advocates is an attitudinal state of mind, it is clear that the ideologies of a socialist-based system of education is not totally different from a capitalist-based system of education in terms of economic goals. The ultimate goal of either a capitalist or socialist system of government is the control of economic means. If it is claimed that a capitalist based system of education inculcates capitalist ideals such as privatization and individualism, then there is no difference between it and Nyerere's acclaimed socialist-based education for self-reliance which develops individualistic tendencies in the people.

In addition, the ideals of a socialist-based system of education such as rurality, communalism and close-knitted familyhood relationship cannot withstand modern day challenges that African societies are confronted with. The direction of education in the technologically advancing world of today has gone beyond those ideals inherent in the system of education founded on the socialist ideals advocated by Nyerere.

## **Conclusion**

How plausible is Julius Nyerere's position on a socialist-based education for self-reliance? The focus of this paper, so far, has been to address this question. The philosophical approach adopted in the paper involved an analytic examination of key terms such as education and socialism which informs the criticism of Nyerere's position on education for self-reliance through a critical examination of his variant of socialism since his idea of a system of education for self-reliance is grounded in his variant of socialism.

In this paper, it has been argued that the theory-practice gap which leads to the failure of socialism in Tanzania, and by implication the system of education built on it, is not unconnected with implicit elitist motive behind it. Secondly, both socialism and capitalism are targeted to achieve economic goals. Thus, a socialist-based system of education is not totally different from a capitalist-based system of education in terms of economic goals. More so, the idea of self-reliance has developed more individualistic tendencies in the people. And third, Nyerere's system of education cannot withstand modern-day challenges in a fast changing world of science and technology.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Nyerere, J. 1968. *Ujamaa – Essays on Socialism*. New York: Oxford University Press, p.45.

<sup>2</sup> It is imperative to state that the pre-colonial states of Tanganyika and Zanzibar formed the modern day Tanzania. Thus, there was no state of Tanzania in the colonial era.

<sup>3</sup> Nyerere, J. *Ujamaa – Essays on Socialism*, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> Nyerere, J. *Ujamaa – Essays on Socialism*, pp. 60-63.

<sup>5</sup> Nyerere, J. *Ujamaa – Essays on Socialism*, p.62.

<sup>6</sup> Nyerere, J. *Ujamaa – Essays on Socialism*, p. 74.

<sup>7</sup> Ayer, A. J. 1940. *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*. New York: Macmillan.

<sup>8</sup> Gettier, E. L. 1970 “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” in Roth, M. D. and Galis, L. (eds.) *Knowing: Essays in the Analysis of Knowledge*. New York: Random House.

<sup>9</sup> Boadou, N. A. 2012. “Philosophical Analysis of Education for the Enhancement of Development, Social Justice and Good Governance in South Africa”. *Educational Research*, 3(13), p. 956.

<sup>10</sup> Nasongo, J. W. and Musungu, L. L. 2009. “The Implications of Nyerere’s Theory of Education to Contemporary Education in Kenya”. *Education Research and Review*, 4(4), p, 111.

<sup>11</sup> Taiwo, O. 2004. “Post-Independence African Political Philosophy” in Wiredu, K. (ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., p. 254.

<sup>12</sup> Wiredu, K. 2004 “African Philosophy in our Time” in Wiredu, K. (ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Wiredu, K. “African Philosophy in our Time”, p. 19

<sup>14</sup> Nyerere, J. K. 1987. “Ujamaa – The Basis of African Socialism” in *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 1(1), 1987:4.

<sup>15</sup> Nyerere, J. K. 1987. “Ujamaa – The Basis of African Socialism” in *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 1(1), 1987:10.

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<sup>16</sup> Wiredu, K. “African Philosophy in our Time”, p. 19.

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