

**Is a Catholic Saint Concealed Within the Ranks of African Head of States?  
A Positive Answer from Tanzania as the Beatification Process of Servant of God  
Julius Nyerere has opened!**

This file contains some images, a prayer and an article related to the person of Julius Nyerere, first president of the United Republic of Tanzania. The article signed by Laurent Magesa, a Tanzanian Catholic priest and theologian explains at length the extraordinary stature of the Mwalimu's personality. It is an article which was first published in the review "Service" (Saint Augustine University of Tanzania) Number 9 (2009). As I got permission of using this article, I am most happy to be able to share it with you. A translation into French of this text is available on [www.pascalbcd.over-blog.com](http://www.pascalbcd.over-blog.com)

In a time when a certain part of the African population attempts to get rid of some of its leaders (sometimes successfully so), it is most appropriate to remember the fact that there is another story about a population which is most grateful for the leadership qualities attached to some other leaders. May Nyerere continue to inspire some sincere vocations of leaders selflessly dedicated to the service of its population! It could be that the salvation of a whole continent depends upon these.



**The Hidden Face of Mwalimu Nyerere**  
**Laurenti Magesa**

**Purpose of Presentation**

My intention in this presentation is modest. I wish in a very brief way to offer a few points about Servant of God Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere, former president of Tanzania, as a person. My hope is to start some kind of conversation among us and anyone interested, especially in view of the decision by the Catholic Church of Tanzania of starting the – usually long – process of finally declaring him a saint, technically known also as *canonization*.

Canonization or sainthood in the Catholic tradition is the Church's official recognition that the person so declared is without doubt with God in heaven. Pastorally, it has an even greater significance: it means that the Church puts forward the life of the person

in question as an example for all Catholic faithful to follow in this world, during their pilgrimage towards the final vision of God at death, the *beatific vision*. If therefore Nyerere is declared as saint, he will be numbered publicly by the Church all over the world whose lives would have been lived in accordance to the will of God. The Church refers to this kind of life as “*heroic*.”

### **Nyerere and Steps to Canonization**

Many of us are probably aware that Nyerere has passed one of the three major steps on the road towards sainthood. He has already been given the title “*Servant of God*.” This means that the Catholic faithful are officially permitted – are in fact encouraged – asking for favors from God through his intercession. Catholics can now ask Nyerere to pray to God on their behalf for whatever needs they have. The other two steps remaining are for him to be declared “blessed,” also known technically as beatification, and then finally as saint, or canonization.

There are many legal or, in church terminology, canonical requirements in the whole of this process which have to be fulfilled step by step. Like anyone else’s Nyerere’s cause will have to go through these steps. One is the reception by anybody of what the Church refers to as an “extraordinary grace.” This is usually a happening or “miracle” (of some significance) which can only be understood in terms of divine or supernatural intervention, where human agency cannot be imagined, through the prayers of the Servant of God in question, in this case Nyerere. Any such grace has to be thoroughly investigated and proven by independent scrutinizers and adjudicators. The Church in Tanzania is asking for reports of such divine interventions and has started the process of compiling dossiers of them for presentation to the relevant authorities in Rome, where causes for sainthood are examined and the outcome decided.

But all this is not the central point of this presentation, so I will not pursue it here. My main point is rather to ask and in some sort of way answer the question why the Church has decided to initiate this process concerning Mwalimu Nyerere.

The reasons, as I see them, are of two kinds: they are public as well as not so public ones. The process of declaring Mwalimu Nyerere a saint has been initiated because of the way he conducted his public life as a politician, thinker and writer. This is what quickly comes into focus when the subject of his having lived heroically is mentioned. But it is also because, and for me chiefly on account of, his inner (ethical) convictions and principles which motivated these public actions that the Church has found it necessary to initiate this process. In my opinion, not too many are aware of this aspect of the process and the intention of the Church to probe it, taking it into as serious consideration as Mwalimu’s public life.

### **The Public Face of Nyerere – Nationally**

That Nyerere was a great man is in no doubt. It is a statement that can be made with full confidence, without fear of too much contradiction. Like all great persons his public life was and is well known. To enumerate his achievements would take too long. We can, however, pinpoint a few milestones in his life as illustrations. He was the first chairman of TANU (Tanganyika African National Union), the political party that brought independence to Tanganyika (now mainland Tanzania). He became Chief Minister prior to independence, and then at independence in 1961 he became the first Prime Minister of the country,

resigning soon afterwards to consolidate the party. In 1962 he became the first President of the Republic of Tanganyika.

With Abeid A. Karume Nyerere initiated and signed the articles of the union between Tanganyika and the offshore islands of Zanzibar and Pemba in 1964. In 1967, he was instrumental in drafting the “Arusha Declaration,” the seminal statement that identified Tanzania officially as a socialist or *Ujamaa* country. He himself marched for miles in support of this Declaration, inspiring many others around the country, especially the youth, to do the same.

Mwalimu Nyerere also initiated the “villagization” policy, a countrywide exercise of moving the population into *Ujamaa* villages. This was a direct result of the Arusha Declaration and was intended as a means to structure the country the easier to supply people with essential social services such as schools and health centers, an impossible goal with people living far away from one another, as was the case before. This, at least, was the declared purpose of what become known as the *Ujamaa* policies. “Villagization,” as the move came to be known, peaked for about a decade or so and then rapidly and drastically subsided. It all but died with Nyerere’s retirement from political leadership in the mid-1980s.

Another noteworthy idea of Mwalimu Myerere was the national torch, a symbol aimed at fostering consciousness of national unity and development. The torch is lit every year at a different location with some historical significance for the nation and raced by young people throughout the country. It is a reminder of the values the Tanzanian nation holds dear: unity, peace and reconciliation. As Nyerere said in an address in 1959, excerpted in his book *Freedom and Unity*, he intended the torch as a visible symbol of these inspirations.

[W]e, the people of Tanganyika, would like to light a candle and put it on the top of Mount Kilimandjaro which would shine beyond our borders giving hope where there was despair, love where there was hate and dignity where before there was only humiliation...

We cannot, unlike other countries, send rockets to the moon, but we can send rockets of love and hope to all our fellow men wherever they may be...

Many development projects drawing inspiration from these aspirations are initiated every year when the torch goes around the country.



*The fire of peace coming from Tanzania is contaminating the whole of Africa, dispelling the forces of darkness. You will notice a White Father contributing to care of the fire. The dear wish from the father of the nation is here depicted on a fresco from the artist Charles Ndege, within the walls of the archive building of the Sukuma cultural centre, Bujora within the area of Mwanza (Tanzania).*

## Internationally

Internationally, Mwalimu wore many hats. He was Chairman of the Frontline States (1977 – 1985), of the South-south Commission (1988 – 1990), and was Chief International Mediator in the Burundi conflict virtually until the last days of his life. During his long tenure as President of Tanzania, he played a crucial role in the development and activities of the Organization of African Unity (OAU, now the African Union or AU), the Non-Aligned movement (NAM), the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), the Preferential Trade Area (PTA), and early on in 1960, the Pan-African Freedom Movement of East and Central Africa (PAFMECA).

Nyerere relentlessly waged diplomatic war against the South African apartheid regime. He was totally committed to the liberation of Africa, for which end he put Tanzania in the frontline of the liberation movements of Zambia, Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia. Nicolai Kosukhin in a tribute to Nyerere titled “Julius Nyerere: Statesman, Thinker, Humanist,” notes that everybody knows or ought to:

Dar es Salaam hosted the headquarters of many national liberation movements. The fighters of the national liberation armies: FRELIMO (Mozambique), MPLA (Angola), ANC (South Africa), and the troops of the national liberation forces of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) were trained in camps located in Tanzania.

Nyerere’s longtime friend and colleague, former President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, reminds us also in a personal tribute, that it should not be forgotten that Nyerere “was the moving spirit behind the expulsion of the Republic of South Africa from the Commonwealth of Nations because of Apartheid,” the racist policy that separated and marginalized the black population in their own country, a move that helped in no small way to promote the democratic process leading to the eventual demise of that system.

Nyerere was also an insatiable pan-Africanist. During his life he often made no secret of what he said in 1961 at a pan-African Conference in Addis-Ababa, that he was ready to delay the independence of Tanganyika so that Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika could become independent together as one federal state. Earlier, in a paper written for PAFMECA in 1960, Nyerere had put it to his emergent fellow African leaders of East and Central Africa:

I have no doubt in my own mind that history has given to us East Africans a unique opportunity. Let us use it now and earn the gratitude of future generations. If we really mean business, here’s the challenge: LET US MAKE 1961 EAST AFRICA’S YEAR OF INDEPENDENCE IN UNITY.

This was an idea that his fellow founding fathers in Kenya and Uganda never bought. He for ever regretted that “failure.” Once one has tasted power, he argued subsequently, it becomes very difficult to relinquish it voluntarily, even for a better public goal. How right he was! But characteristically, he was a realist. He warned with reference to the goal of African unity which his friend and political mentor President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana wanted immediately, that, to be realistic and viable, African unity must be a gradual achievement:

It is only by agreement that a United Africa can be achieved. The twentieth century is littered with the wrecks of Federations which have failed because they were not based on the will of the people involved, or because they were not strong enough to stand against the prevailing winds of international politics and economics. And it must be quite clear to everyone that the achievement of unity will not of itself solve the problems of Africa. It will merely enable them to be solved by Africa... Despite all the difficulties, move forward as swiftly as is consistent with safety on this rocky mountain path. The people of Africa today, and particularly its leaders, have a duty to their ancestors and to their descendants, which they must not fail to carry out. The man whose contribution merits a footnote in the history of United Africa will deserve more of the future than he whose obstinacy, fear or pride prevents or delays the day when that history can be written.

Nyerere was aware of criticism that might be leveled against him on account of this, what people like Nkrumah would label as unwarranted gradualism. Anticipating the objections, he retorted at the first OAU Summit in 1963:

There will be some who will say that this Charter [for African Unity] does not go far enough, or that it is not revolutionary enough. This may be so. But what is going far enough? No good mason would complain that his first brick did not go far enough. He knows that that a first brick will go as far as it can go and no farther. He will go on laying brick after brick until the edifice is complete.

Significantly also, Nyerere was unreservedly against the principle of “non-interference” in other countries’ “internal affairs,” if this was interpreted to mean that [African] leaders could commit crimes against their own people with impunity. He warned in 1975 when Idi Amin, according to OAU protocol, would become chairman of the organization since the summit would be held in Uganda, that to grant Amin such recognition and honour was not only ridiculous but immoral. Nyerere argued, according to Colin Legum that

Africa was in danger of becoming unique in its refusal to protest about crimes committed against Africans ‘provided such actions are done by African Leaders and African Governments.’ ...Tanzania [he declared] cannot accept the responsibility of participating in the mockery of condemning colonialism, apartheid and fascism in the headquarters of a murderer, an oppressor, a black fascist and a self-confessed admirer of fascism [Idi Amin.]

### **Not Psychoanalysis**

I would like to caution that I am here not presenting a precise historical account or a scientific analysis of Nyerere’s life of personality. For history there are Nyerere’s own works to be studied as well as numerous dissertations in universities about his life and thought. I myself wrote my doctoral theses about the ethical significance of his thought for the Catholic Church in view of, and in conjunction with, the social thought of the Church.

With regard to his psychological profile, I have not seen anything significant published as yet. If there is any such, it should be brought to the attention of the Postulator of Mwalimu’s cause in the Diocese of Musoma, the person charged by the Church with the responsibility of pushing the process forward in favour of beatification and eventual

canonization. It would also be of help to what used to be called the “Devil’s Advocate,” the person who, in the past, the relevant Dicastery of Congregation in Rome entrusted with the task of finding serious loopholes and faults in any positive assessment and recommendations about the would be saint. The Postulator, almost by definition tends to be one-sided. The Devil’s Advocate’s task was to balance the picture, to make us all aware that no human being, even a would-be saint is perfect.

### **Popular History**

What I am presenting here may, if you wish, be called “popular history.” “popular” does not imply that pejorative sense of the word as “meaningless” or “cheap” talk, but rather the literal sense of it as the people’s perception or view. In other words, how does the Catholic population see Mwalimu Nyerere? Here we must keep in mind that basically, it is people who make saints by their devotion (according to the time honoured ecclesial principle of *vox populi vox Dei*, the people’s voice is God’s own voice). The Church ratifies this popular voice as indeed divine. It accepts and makes this voice official.



This was the traditional procedure of “making saints” in the Church, and in a way it remains the same. The official Church cannot force saints down the faithful’s throats. It accepts the Holy Spirit’s inspiration among them, thus making real the claim, foundational in Christian belief, that “we are church,” that all baptized together make up the Christian community which is guaranteed freedom from errors in matters such as this (of faith and morals). By virtue of baptism alone every Christian is a priest, a prophet, and a ruler. Each one of them participates in these tripartite roles of Christ himself thus, together, guaranteeing this assurance.

### **Nyerere the Man**

One biographer of Mwalimu Nyerere, Godfrey Mwakikagile, in his book *Nyerere and Africa: End of an Era* has written of Mwalimu Nyerere in the following way:

He was of peasant origin, but from a ruling family. He was the son of a chief of the Zanaki tribe, one of the smallest in Tanzania and in Africa with a total population of about 40,000. An excellent student, he was also known for his

extraordinary brilliance and as an original thinker throughout his life and came to be acknowledged as a philosopher-king. Yet he also won accolades for his humility and simplicity and as one of the most humble leaders the world has ever produced. He was Julius Nyerere.

This is part of the hidden or private face of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, which many may not know. It is the aspect of his life I would like us to reflect upon briefly. To my mind it is a very important aspect, because we are what people perceive us to be, often on account of the values we live by. These values are often not so public, but they have a direct impact on our lives. In Mwalimu Nyerere's case, as I have already mentioned, they very much influenced his public career.

Before I take up a more detailed discussion on some aspect of Nyerere's hidden face, let me mention three points, picked rather randomly among several others, as a way of situating the portrait I wish to paint of Mwalimu Nyerere, the private man, into context.

### **Nyerere the African and Lover of the Land**

First of all, we take for granted the fact that Nyerere was an African, born and raised in a very rural part of Tanzania. This is why we frequently overlook the implications on Nyerere of this fact. But these are extremely important to understand his character.

Nyerere loved the land and was neither ashamed nor afraid of working on it at time when few Africans of his education and stature would. The mentality up to then among many schooled Africans was that working the land is a "low-class" kind of employment, to be avoided by all means by anyone who seen the inside of a classroom. To his last day, Nyerere refused to share this mentality. Most of his holidays he spent at Butiama, his rural home village, not in the city of Dar es Salaam or overseas such as London or Washington DC, working in his fields with his own hands, raising cattle or planting trees.

People, whether dignitaries or ordinary folk, who visited him in Butiama when he was there for any length of time can testify to this. He would invite them to join him in his fields until it was time to go home, sometimes after several hours of planting, weeding, or harvesting (incidentally, a deterrent to some to pay such visits during cultivation time). Some of the forests he planted are there for all to see. We might call him an environmentalist; he was certainly not one to needlessly destroy the ecosystem in any way but was conscious about its preservation. Did he have anything to say about how his residences were constructed keeping in mind the surrounding natural environment at Mwitongo, the old homestead of his father's, one wonders?

### **Respect for Peasants**

Consequent on this Nyerere respected, even esteemed, peasants. While encouraging them to modernize their farming methods he never looked down upon them, as most people of what we can call "highbrow culture" do. Due to his upbringing in the rural area, he deep down counted himself as one of them. This is evident by the kind of people he socialized with at Butiama, peasants he obviously loved and enjoyed. Academician as he was by training and inclination, he did not disdain ordinary, down-to-earth conversation about the weather, soil, and crops, being careful for them and worrying when things failed to go according to expectations.

He recognized agriculture as the backbone of the Tanzanian economy and wished to promote it at all levels, in schools and everywhere. He saw farming as one of the most respectable callings a person can opt for. Foundational of the whole *Ujamaa* system, is the promotion of agriculture as the centerpiece of the Tanzanian nation's development.

### **Concern for the Marginalized and Displaced**

Because most peasants are poor around Butiama, as in much of Tanzania and Africa, Mwalimu Nyerere was full of empathy for the poor, marginalized, and excluded in general. If there is anything at all that dominated Nyerere public policy, it was his concern for this social category of people.

One testimony of this spirit can be found in the number of refugees to whom his government gave shelter and helped in various ways, even when Tanzania itself was going through very difficult economic times. Citizens of neighbouring countries – Mozambique, Rwanda, Burundi, Congo as examples – who found themselves in trouble because of violence and strife at home in their own countries knew they were always welcome in Tanzania, and they came in huge numbers. Some strayed for so long that they acquired citizenship if they so desired. Nyerere never complained about their stay in Tanzania or initiated any move for them to go back.

Again, the whole *Ujamaa* policy was motivated by the desire to bring about some sort of egalitarianism in the social structures and situation of the Tanzanian people. He refused to conceive the validity of huge economic differentials among people, where a few were filthy rich while the majority of the population was dirty poor. As he put it in a speech to the Maryknoll Sisters in New York in 1971, he could not conceive of a God who was ignorant, poor, hungry and ill. How was it then, that this is the “fate” of the majority of people Christians claim were created in his image? Poverty, ignorance, and disease must therefore be, according to Nyerere, not an act of God but of man. As such it has to be combated.

### **Love and Respect for African Culture**

Nyerere's identity as an African also led him – unlike many of his African schooled contemporaries as well as many today – to a profound and sincere respect for African culture and traditions. While clearly critical of some dehumanizing aspects of these cultures and traditions and vocally advocating change where necessary, he never entertained any thought whatsoever of abandoning wholesale Africa culture, languages and traditions as “primitive” or unable to convey modern thought.

For instance, it was nothing but deep and genuine respect for African culture that led him to base his entire political thought and system of socialism on the African concept of *Ujamaa*, the traditional African cooperative spirit and system which he translated as “familyhood.” He never wavered in his belief that this system was capable of expressing economic and social complexities of the modern state. Most of his published work is an explanation and justification of this conviction.

Furthermore, Mwalimu Nyerere's efforts at promoting the Kiswahili language as a vehicle of expression and education in Tanzania, East Africa, and universally are well known. He published poetry in Kiswahili conveying complex political and social ideas and ideals. As if to underline the beauty and capability of the language to express ideas, Nyerere translated two of one of the major English playwrights, William Shakespeare's works with a social and moral message into Kiswahili. He also rendered a considerable part of the New Testament

into Kiswahili verse. What was he trying to say by all this? Simply, again, that Kiswahili as a language is as capable as any other of expressing ideas, however complex.

I must underline, once more, that Nyerere was neither an uncritical admirer of African traditions nor an uncritical enemy of modernity. We might say that *the* project of his life was to integrate Africa into the modern world and vice versa – not an easy task by any means, but one which he firmly believed was capable of achievement. He wished and advised everyone to play their proper role in this enterprise on which he believed the very survival of the continent depended.

### **Nyerere the Christian**

Secondly, Nyerere was a Catholic Christian. Joining the faith in his early youth he was committed to its inner significance in a “heroic” way, and remained a faithful Catholic, without apology or embarrassment, until his last breath.

Although Mwalimu’s commitment to Catholicism showed strong faith, it did not involve naïveté or bias. Nyerere was not afraid to criticize even the clergy and hierarchy of his own Catholic Church when he thought that criticism was warranted, but always in a very respectful and often humorous manner. Those who were alert enough to get the point – those, as the Gospels put it “with eyes to see” and “ears to hear” – often did.

Nyerere’s untiring attempts to educate the Catholic hierarchy, as well as the whole religious population, that *Ujamaa* was not the same thing as atheistic communism, with which the Catholic Church, especially, was prone to equate it, were frequent and sincere. Not that he convinced or converted many, given the heat of the Cold War. But he cannot be accused for not trying, eloquently and articulately. At all times, he held tenaciously on to the principle of religious freedom, saying that this right was sacrosanct as long as the rights of other people to the same freedom were respected.

That Mwalimu was not religiously bigoted is a point that must be underlined. He could genuinely worship with people of other religious convictions, and often did. His level-headedness in religious matters was such that even in his last years he was looking for funds to complete the construction of a mosque, a prayer house for Muslims, at his home village in Butiama. The Catholics had a church there; why not the Muslims? His widow, Mama Maria Waningo Nyerere, reportedly saw the project to completion after his death.

Again, Mwalimu Nyerere believed that there were many strong positive moral values in African Religion as in other religious traditions. Very well versed in both, he never compared Christianity and African Religion in view of proving which of the two was “better” than the other. By refusing to downgrade any legitimate religion for whatever reason Nyerere showed the spirit of tolerance necessary to genuine inter-religious encounter and dialogue.

### **Some Illustrative Anecdotes**

There are many anecdotes circulating with reference to Nyerere’s personal commitment to Catholic principles in his own life. Some of these cannot be quoted because it is difficult to authenticate them, yet considering the whole trend of his life, there must be some truth in most of them. Two, however, can be mentioned without fear of contradiction, namely his consciousness of divine authority over him and therefore his faithfulness to prayer on the one hand, and his impartiality on the other.

Nyerere had a chapel built in Butiama near his house so he could attend mass and receive communion frequently. We have mentioned that this is probably why he was motivated to help the Muslim community of the village to construct a mosque there as well. As for impartiality, he is known to have insisted that his children be accorded no special privileges or honour just because they were his children. They had to live and prove themselves just as everyone else. Nyerere had no time or patience for anything different. He said at one time in reference to this that he was not one to make presidency of Tanzania something like a hereditary chiefship.

### **Nyerere the Intellectual**

The third general observation we wish to make here concerns Nyerere's intelligence, which an observer has characterized as "sparkling." Father Arthur Wille, an American Catholic priest and a life-time friend of Nyerere and his family has remarked about it, citing Nyerere's own story about how he got to school whereas his elder brother Wanzagi did not. At home, Nyerere reminisced to Father Wille, he used to play "Bao," an African chess-like game, with the elders, his father's friends, while the elder Nyerere was attending to official business of the Chiefdom. He was so good at it that he often beat many of them.

Noticing his intellectual acuity, a neighboring chief and friend of his father's by the name of Chief Mohamedi Makongoro of Ikizu Chiefdom recommended to his colleague, the elder Nyerere, that the boy should be sent to school at Mwisenge in Musoma, which the British colonial administration had just started there. Nyerere's father agreed to this suggestion and Nyerere was sent to school, as can be imagined a rare opportunity in those days. The beginning of Nyerere's school education can therefore be described as an accident, in the sense that it was not deliberately planned for him.

At school Nyerere excelled. This is a matter of public record. As his biographer Godfrey Mwakikagile again writes:

Nyerere was at Mwisenge Primary School from 1934 to 1936. His Roman Catholic teachers quickly noticed him as an extraordinary intelligent student. He also demonstrated remarkable ability in learning languages and quickly learned Kiswahili and English. In 1936, he excelled in the final examinations and earned academic distinction by topping the list of all the students throughout Tanganyika who took the examination to qualify for further education at Tabora St. Mary's Secondary School in western Tanganyika, an elite school run by Catholics. The school was patterned after private schools in Britain and had an excellent reputation for rigorous intellectual discipline, maintaining high academic standards. Nyerere proved to be a perfect match for this, and was again easily noticed by his teachers as he stood out among other students, excelling in class and in extracurricular activities. He completed his secondary school education at Tabora in 1943 with distinction.

### **Distinction at University**

From Tabora he went to Makerere University College in Uganda in 1943 and then to Edinburgh University in Scotland in 1949 after teaching in the meantime at his Alma Mater, Tabora St. Mary's. At both universities, Nyerere demonstrated the same high intellectual ability. He earned his Master's degree in History and Economics from Edinburgh University at 30 years of age in 1952.

At only 21 years old, while still at Makerere, Nyerere's deep concern for the wellbeing of the African people become evident when he formed already in 1943 the Tanganyika African Welfare Association. By his own admission, it was not a political party but a sort of social welfare organization, to improve the lot of the African people whom he saw as very badly underprivileged by the colonial administrations. As I have pointed out, this was of course born out of his African identity and sense of justice and equality.

Nyerere's sense of gender equality, for instance – a clear critique of one negative aspect in African social structures, among other things – showed in 1944, when he authored an essay about the freedom of women. The significance of this attempt can only be appreciated by the fact that this was long before any serious movement towards women's liberation was born anywhere in the world, even in the western world, let alone Africa. One may mention also the fact that the essay was written several years before the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations Organization.

### **Not Arrogance**

Many have remarked that Nyerere's intelligence did not translate into arrogance or superciliousness, as can so easily happen with some people. He socialized with people of all classes and ages. He was able to explain complicated and complex political and economic issues in a language that almost everyone could understand.

Examples relevant to this claim are many. One was his explanation of the reasons leading Tanganyika leaving the Commonwealth over Britain's attitude towards southern Rhodesia's Ian Smith's unilateral Declaration of independence in November 1965; another was his justification of the economic crisis in Tanzania in the decade of the 70s; and yet a third was his decision to go to war against Idi Amin's Uganda in 1978/79. These were complex and complicated issues. Yet Nyerere made it a point to explain them to the population, as if asking its permission and blessing to act – which he received.

Nyerere's lack of arrogance is reflected in his interest “in everything and everybody,” as Vyacheslav Ustinov puts it in his “Nyerere's Time: In Memory of the First President of the United Republic of Tanzania.” He was capable of laughing, even in the midst of the most serious of discussions. Most of all, he was capable of laughing at his own humanity as well as that of his acolytes. The story he once told in a public meeting about one of his senior Cabinet Ministers by name calling on his mother in his mother tongue as the plane they both were traveling in dangerously dipped in turbulence is very funny. But the point he was making couldn't be more serious: it is difficult to forego one's roots however “educated” one may be.

Mwalimu Nyerere's African identity, his religious, and specifically Christian faith and commitment, and his perceptive mind are therefore some of the major formative elements of his character. But I must mention that there is no evidence that he consciously allowed these elements to bias him in his decisions about affairs whose consequences on human beings transcend these realities. In other words, Nyerere was:

- an Africanist but not a racist;
- a Catholic-Christian but not a religious fanatic or bigot;
- an intellectual but not a snob.

## Important Formative Characteristics

After painting this contextual framework, let me now try to fill it in with some details which indicate Nyerere's private face. I have identified eight characterizes which I wish to call virtues on the basis of both my and Nyerere's Catholic background. But it is also to because I wish to explain them briefly form a theological perspective. To enumerate them, they include Nyerere's Honesty, Humility and Simplicity, Selflessness, Sincerity, Sensitivity, Commitment, Farsightedness or vision, and Loyalty. Let me discuss them in summary form.

First of all, about Nyerere's sense of honesty and transparency. The popular perception about politics (as as "dirty game") does not usually include honesty as one of its pillars. Rather politics is often seen as a school in suavity and double-speak. You don't have to be honest; you don't have to tell the truth in certain matters. You just need to be persuasive, to convince people that what you are saying is true, whether or not it is!

In his political career Nyerere does not seem to have shared this view of politics. He was honest and transparent, admitting mistaken political decisions when he realized they were mistakes. Human beings are not angels, he would say. They do make mistakes. But it is incumbent upon them to correct their mistakes and move on. As he said in an interview in 1973, "If we state that some New Jerusalem is where we're going and then we begin the journey, our friends should not be disappointed when they find that we are still in the desert."

The "desert" here is for Nyerere a symbol of imperfection and mistake making which accompanies the pilgrimage of life and of many essential aspects thereof. In the implementation of the Arusha Declaration, Nyerere publicly admitted subsequently, as Kaunda notes, that "he and his colleagues failed to realize the importance of developing a dependable leadership cadre in the management of ... [the] enterprises [that had been nationalized] – an ongoing process in any given human situation." In another interview, asked what he considered to be the greatest achievement Tanzania had had until then, he did not claim much for himself. Instead he replied simply, "that we have survived."

## Against Personality Cult

Nyerere shunned mystification tactics as a way of cultivating a personality cult around himself. A great deal of mystification depends on keeping people in ignorance, in elevating someone beyond the humanity that belongs to all of us, including its beauty and messiness, its successes and failures. On the contrary, Nyerere was transparently human. Perhaps, in political terms – in terms, that is, of his relationship with his fellow politicians this may have cost him. Some of his colleagues may have exploited his openness to subvert his *Ujamaa* policies. Some observers of Nyerere and *Ujamaa* much have claimed at least that during the two decades of the "experiment" from the late 60s to the early 80s.

And quite a few people did not approve of this characteristic in Nyerere either, his honesty, which they felt to be embarrassing, to say the least. Once, a high-ranking Roman Catholic cleric remarked that a leader should never publicly apologize for, let alone admit any mistakes. He was saying this in criticism of Nyerere openness and honesty.

This is surprising because in Christian theology truth telling or honesty (*parrhesia*) is a cherished virtue. The very meaning of temptation, in any and all of its forms, is an invitation to dishonesty. As a matter of fact, the Devil, also known as the Tempter is described in Christian tradition as the "Father of Lies." In contrast, Jesus described himself as Truth, Way

and Light, and distinguished himself from the religious and political leaders of his day by his honesty about himself as a person, his mission, and relationship to contemporary society.

### **Awareness of Human Fallibility**

Shortly after independence, in May 1962, Nyerere published an essay in Kiswahili in the form of a booklet called *Tujisabihishe*, Let Us Correct Ourselves. In the essay, he enumerated several mistaken tendencies that were by then already creeping into the Tanganyika Africa National Union (TANU), the only major political movement at the time. He mentioned, among others, the tendency of imagining oneself as a party or as an individual to be infallible, unable to make a mistake! In the ultimate paragraph of the essay he confessed that he was himself not entirely free from the mistakes he was describing.

Nimejaribu kueleza makosa machache ambayo yafaa tuyaondoe na kuyaepuka katika chama chetu. Sitaki mtu yeyote afikiri kuwa mimi niliyeandika maneno haya sinayo makosa hayo. Hiyo si kweli kosa moja kubwa sana ambalo pia linatokana na unafsi ni kutaja makosa ambayo sisi wenyewe tunayo. Hili ni kosa lile lile linalotufanya tulaumu tusiwapenda, na kutolaumu tunaowapenda, bila kujali ukweli. Nimetaja makosa haya ili yatusaidie, siyo katika kuwahukumu wenzetu tu, ambalo ni jambo rahisi lakini katika kujihukumu sisi wenyewe, ambalo ni jambo gumu na la maana zaidi.

(This booklet was never officially translated into English, but an unofficial translation is available in a booklet called *Honest to My Country* by a person who wrote under the nom de plume Candid Scope:

I have tried to explain some mistakes which we must avoid and remove from our Party. I do not want anybody to think that I do not have those mistakes because I have written about them. This is not true. One very big mistake which arises from selfishness is mentioning mistakes which we ourselves commit. This is the same fault which makes us blame those we do not like, and not blame those we like without caring what is true. I mention the mistakes not merely for the purpose of passing judgment on others only, which is an easy thing to do, but in order to help us assessing our own rightness or wrongness, which is a more difficult thing and indeed important).

Admission of human fallibility avoids excessive rigidity, what we might call dogmatism or doctrinaire mentality; it calls rather for a spirit of constant reform, of oneself and of institutions. No wonder Pope John XXIII, at the convocation of the Second Vatican Council at the beginning of the second half of the last century – a Council which not everyone favoured because of the potential changes and “disruption” it would make – coined the apt phrase, *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, the Church must always reform or refound itself. Nyerere’s vision led him in the same direction. We should recall that he resigned the premiership soon after independence to reform TANU and bring it closer to the masses as it was developing what he read as dangerous elitism among its ranks. Also, and very significantly, after years of advocating a one-party system in Tanzania, he issued a clarion call for a multi-party system when he thought it was time for change.

## Humility and Simplicity

Nyerere's humility has also been widely noted, which, like honesty, draws from a sense of profound self-knowledge and acceptance of personal fallibility.

When Christians speak about examination of conscience and confession of sin they are referring to this fact. One of the major ingredients of confession is the moral attitude not only for honesty, but certainly of humility, the recognition that fallibility affects all human beings regardless of status. In his booklet *Tujisabihishe* Nyerere mentions this point. But in its practical expression humility appears in the form of respect for human equality. This in turn demands simplicity of life and a refusal for any reason to be pompous or ostentatious.

Just over a year after publishing *Tujisabihishe*, Nyerere in a letter on July 13, 1963, instructed all government and party officials against pomposity which he thought was now being confused with dignity. He singled out the singing of the national anthem at almost any occasion where any government dignitary of whatever rank was around, even on private business. This was unnecessary pomposity, Nyerere argued. Pompous too, he thought, were police escorts for himself and other officials of government. These, he pointed out, were becoming excessive and inconvenient, not to say rude to ordinary road users, just in order to impress! And why, he asked, should interested citizens not be allowed into State House grounds to view public functions there? Nyerere's directive was clear: this must stop.

Nyerere viewed pomposity as something to be derided and shunned rather than proud of. Moreover, it was in his mind something wrong. Against the claim that it was to the people's liking, he said: "Even if it were proved that people really did enjoy it – which I very much doubt – it would still be a wrong; and as such it would still be our duty to put a stop to it, and to tell the people that what they had learnt to enjoy was wrong."

Nyerere's sense of humility has biblical parallels. At this stage of biblical scholarship, however, no one should be interested in merely quoting lines of Scripture to "prove" a point. We have moved beyond proof-texting as a method of theological argument. When, therefore, we relate Nyerere's attitude to Scripture, we are talking about the spirit of both. The spirit motivating the life and work of Jesus from beginning to end, from birth to death, is one of humility, which for him translated into service. Jesus summarizes it elsewhere in his Sermon on the Mount (according to Matthew's version), or Valley (in Luke's account) in these words: "Happy are those who are humble, they will receive what God has promised." But he is quoted as saying specifically in the Gospels: "If one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be the first, he must be your slave – like the Son of Man, who did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life to redeem many people."

Whatever else may be said about him, Nyerere was a happy man. He was not overly concerned about his own personal security, counting himself as secure or insecure as the next person.

This was a consequence of his honesty and humility. I know that comparisons are often odious, but anyone with eyes open enough to observe the prevailing attitudes of the general leadership style in Africa will fail not to note the contrast between Nyerere and a great many others. What have other African leaders done for their home villages? And what has Nyerere, using his influence as President, done for Butiama? The contrast is so striking it cannot be hidden. It is a matter of public record, for instance, that Nyerere did not entertain the idea of the government building a new house for him at Butiama, believing the old one he was living in to be sufficient. He was "coerced" into acquiescing to this project, but did not live long in the house before he died. Also it is said that during his life he would not

allow the construction of a tarmac road to Butiama, asking why other villages did not enjoy a similar privilege.

Of course, we now have a Mwalimu J. K. Nyerere International Airport in Dar es Salaam, as well as many other facilities named in his honour. It is unlikely, however, if Nyerere would have allowed this in his lifetime. Which show relations be explained, particularly even when the that, when he spoke against pomposity and other such excesses in leadership, he could be taken at his word. This means that his major decisions, as far as an observer can tell, were not taken for mere political advantage or convenience, but in the belief that they were morally correct and that they would benefit the people of Tanzania, Africa and humanity in general.

### **Unpopular Decisions**

How else can some extremely unpopular decisions he took, not only so in Tanzania itself but also in international stakes seemed so obviously stacked against him? One has to mention the policy of *Ujamaa* itself, the centerpiece of Nyerere's political thought, a policy he embarked on knowing full well the pressures of the then two superpowers that would be brought to bear against it? To the West *Ujamaa* was unabated "godless" communism (a view toward which the Catholic Church leaned). To the then eastern bloc it was not scientific or communist enough. In the international political atmosphere then, you could not a better example that this of being between a rock and a hard place.

Through socialist in basic orientation and conviction, Nyerere did not hesitate to disagree with either capitalist or communist bloc for the sake of principle and integrity. In 1965 the West German government threatened Nyerere not to allow East German to open a consulate in Dar es Salaam. If he did West Germany would reconsider its commitment to train Tanzania's air force. Not to be intimidated, Nyerere sent the West German ambassador packing and sought the Canadians to help out.

But he was equally even-handed with regard to the East. In 1968 soviet troops entered Czechoslovakia to contain reforms initiated by Alexander Dubcek. Nyerere was angry at the Soviet Union for this action, which he saw as unjustifiable and inexcusable. Czechoslovakia like Tanzania, was a sovereign state, and no other state, however powerful, had the mandated to act such as the Soviet Union had done. It is important to remember that at this time, Tanzania and the Soviet Union were enjoying perhaps the closest diplomatic relations and cooperation ever. For the sake of the principle of the equality of nations, however, this did not deter him.

Within *Ujamaa* the villagization more was particularly controversial, and it is undeniable that it caused considerable hardship for many people. Again, Nyerere's vision in this was not innate cruelty, misuse of power, or desire for self-aggrandizement; it was sincere concern for the people he led. Nyerere believed – and he did not tire of explaining this – that the Tanzanian people would develop their identity only based on their own traditions, and that their economic and social wellbeing would only be guaranteed if they lived together in villages. As one observes from the Sudan, George Were, noted in a expression of condolence at Mwalimu Nyerere's death, "If he erred, that was only because he was human – not because he meant any harm to humanity."

On Thursday October 21, 1999, at Mwalimu's state funeral in Dar es Salaam, then President Benjamin Mkapa paid him sincere tribute, noting among other things his sensitivity to the poor and the otherwise disadvantaged, a point I have already touched upon.

On this, President Mkapa was in substantial agreement with many other people who knew Nyerere well that his mistakes were never malicious but honest. According to Mkapa:

Mwalimu was extremely sensitive to the downtrodden, the weak, the disabled, and the powerless. He was acutely sensitive to the plight of refugees and displaced persons. Under his leadership Tanzania was not only peaceful, thereby not generating refugees, but he made Tanzania home to everyone seeking political and personal refuge.

### **Respect for Life**

Perhaps this is as good a place as any to mention one other fact related to Nyerere's sensitivity and respect for life. Throughout his terms as President, capital punishment was legal in Tanzania, but he is not famous for having authorized many executions. But whatever the facts on this point may be – and these can be easily ascertained – there is no question about Nyerere's reluctance and deep anguish at taking any decision intentionally harmful to anyone's life and integrity.

Early on after independence, Nyerere detained various people without trial for the purpose of ensuring "national security." There is no question that the notion can easily be misused for silencing different ideas and political positions, thus working in favour of practical dictatorship. It is an open question whether, during the one-party regime in Tanzania the nation was living under a dictatorial system. Different people take different positions on this. Still, there is no evidence that Nyerere cherished putting people under detention but that he did so with extreme reluctance.

The same thing is true concerning his decision in 1966 to close Tanzania's only university at that time in Dar es Salaam. He took this decision when he thought the students, as George Ivan Smith, the first personal Representative in East and Central Africa of UN Secretary General in the early 1960s wrote, began to develop "dreams of grandeur."

What made Nyerere furious was what he judged to be their lack of consideration for the masses of the people who worked to contribute to their education. They thought, Nyerere believed, that they were part of a "privileged class," above everyone else. For them, as he read the situation, education was not for service but for personal status gain. Demonstrating his instinctive identification and sympathy for the poor, Nyerere could not tolerate attitudes such as this in future leaders, and so he sent the students packing, until their families and local leaders judged they had become responsible enough to return to school.

### **Measure of Humanity**

We often speak about love as being the central virtue in Christian spirituality. In this we simply follow the instruction of the New Testament as a whole. Saint Paul lists Faith and Hope among the cardinal virtues of Christian living but specifies Love or Charity as the greatest of them. But love or charity is born of empathy, implying the ability to "feel with" the other person. But this cannot happen without sensitivity, the ability to see, hear, enjoy, or suffer as the other person does. Empathy therefore goes beyond sympathy, for sympathy implies mere understanding of and being sorry for the situation of the other person. It does not imply necessarily holistic participation in it, which empathy does.

On account of this intense empathy with the underprivileged, Nyerere demonstrated in his personality a truly profound humanity. As then President Mkapa noted in the remarks he made at the funeral:

... The true measure of humanity is the care one has for the weaker members of society. On this score, on account of his intense spirituality, Mwalimu distinguished himself as a veritable human being. His concern, perhaps even obsession, with removing inequalities in society, and in the world is legendary.

His disdain for affluence amid poverty had a spiritual aura and was deeply imbedded in his heart and mind. Mwalimu saw himself as a man with a mission, and refused the distraction that the accumulation of earthly riches would bring in his life.

In a world now steeped in corruption, also in the political sphere, many have remarked about Nyerere's detachment from wealth and personal Spartan live, calling him "Mr. Clean Hands". As Y.N. Vinokurov, S.M. Shlyonskaya and Y.V. Dyachkova mention in their editorial prefacing the collection of essays celebrating Mwalimu Nyerere as "Humanist, Politician and Thinker," this is because of his "reputation as a transparent, honest man who served his people with selfless devotion." He never amassed wealth for himself or his family. In service Nyerere was committed, never allowing flattery or threats to distract him from the course of action he had decided upon.

### **Sense of Loyalty**

Nyerere was extremely loyal to his friends; until they proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were unworthy of his trust. And then he could become, as some have said, almost "ruthless" in his response. This is what happened in his relationship with Oscar Kambona, previously one of his most trusted early lieutenants. But it is perhaps the stronger argument that overall he trusted too much, that some individuals took advantage of his trust even to sabotage the implementation of his policies with the grassroots away from his gaze. Some commentators have remarked that the practice of shifting "failed officials from one position to another during his presidency (on account of his commitment to them) contributed to this.

Nyerere's commitment is apparent in other areas of his life in theoretical and practical ways. We may mention his commitment to justice, peace and reconciliation (in his *Ujamaa* policy), to his faith (as a Catholic Christian), to his country (in long term selfless service), and to his family in marriage.

Loyalty and commitment are very good images of God's relationship of friendship with human beings and the whole of creation. In biblical language it is described in terms of "Covenant." God makes an unbreakable agreement with people, a Covenant relationship, to which God is faithful forever, despite human indiscretions and aberrations. Humans cannot, of course, be loyal and committed as God is, but a good person must be expected not to break faith at every turn of the head. Faithfulness in friendship and other human commitments and relationships is a mark of human decency. To a remarkable degree Nyerere demonstrated it.

## Prophetic Vision

Now it is time for a final word about a characteristic of Nyerere's personality which perhaps includes and contextualizes all the above – the man's gift of vision. A person of great faith Nyerere nevertheless foresaw the danger of religious bigotry and fought against it in Tanzania. A person of great hope in the development of Africa, he nevertheless foresaw the dangers of globalization in this field of Africa. A person of great trust, he foresaw and articulated many of Africa's political, economic, and social pitfalls. He seems to have been a prophet in both sense of the word; in the sense of foretelling the future, and in the more profound and biblical sense of being God's mouthpiece to humanity.

According to Vinokurov Shlyonskaya and Dyachkova, "Julius Nyerere belonged to those few statesmen and political leaders of Africa whose names are becoming mightier with time, and whose meaningful contribution to the continent's history is still waiting for appropriate recognition."

And as George Ivan Smith a one-time UN official for East and Central Africa declares:

Nyerere is one of the most distinguished and remarkable international figures whom it has been my privilege to meet during some forty years of international work in which I had unique chances to recognize their qualities. In my judgment Nyerere is among the greatest, whose devoted work will reap benefits for generations to come, both in his own country and world-wide; a world leader of prophetic stature.

## Conclusion

Let me end with a story told by Paul Merchant. Merchant served as a District Officer in Musoma and also temporarily as Acting Chief of Zanaki, Nyerere's home area. The story serves to illustrate Nyerere's character. It happened in 1952, soon after he had returned home after obtaining his M.A. degree from Edinburgh University in Scotland. Mr. Merchant recalls:

"I remembered one day in particular. I had sent out in different directions all the chieftom personnel with whom I was working and I then found that I had no one left to clean out the outside latrine at the disused goldmine in which I had taken up my residence. So I set about it myself. Who should arrive on one of his not infrequent visits but Julius?

'What on earth are you doing here?'

'Cleaning out the choo, as you can see.'

'I can't believe that there isn't something better a chief could be doing than cleaning a choo. You get on with your proper work. I'll do this.'  
So we did it together."

That is humility at a time when education in Africa was understood to remove you from doing things like that. As Nyerere himself once ironically observed concerning his personality and career, politics was perhaps the wrong path for him. "You know, if I were an ordinary voter," he said, "I would say: Nyerere for the pulpit, not for the presidency." "No wonder," Colin Legum comments, "that people began referring to him, mostly sympathetically, as St. Julius."

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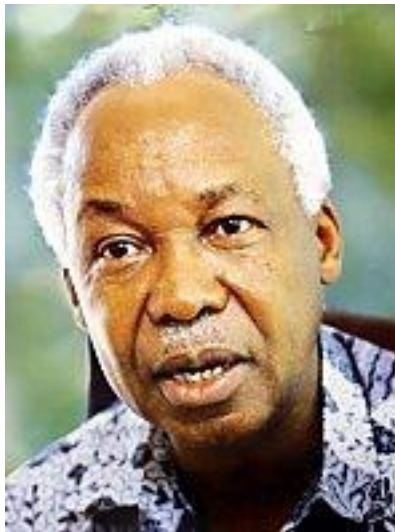
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### **Prayer for Asking Graces Through the Intercession of the Servant of God Julius Kambarage Nyerere**



O God our Father, you have created us so that we may know, serve, and love you and love our fellow sisters and brothers.

We thank you, O God our Creator, for the gift of your servant, Julius Kambarage Nyerere – a faithful layman and a father of a family – who led your people of Tanzania as true father and teacher.

Our Father, your servant gave himself up completely for your people with love that knew no boundaries, building tirelessly unity and solidarity among all Children of God. He

cared for the poor. He uplifted the downtrodden. He consoled orphans. He welcomed and fed refugees.

O God, your servant, being faithful to you and to your Church – has become for us a true example of deep faith and genuine piety. He cherished a great love and respect for the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Your Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ. He dedicated the People of Tanzania to Our Lady so that they may live peacefully under her maternal protection.

O God, your servant Julius Kambarage Nyerere showed great zeal in teaching everyone to know and honour you. He defended justice and fought relentlessly against oppression and discrimination of any kind.

His humble service for all people remains for all generations an example to imitate on their way to you. Almighty Father, grant us by his intercession and according to your will, the grace we implore. May his holiness become evident to all the people of God so that he may soon be numbered among your Saints.

Amen

Our Father...

Hail Mary...

Glory be...

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**by Laurent Magesa, Original Version in English sent by Pascal Durand M.Afr. who translated it in French  
February 2011**

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