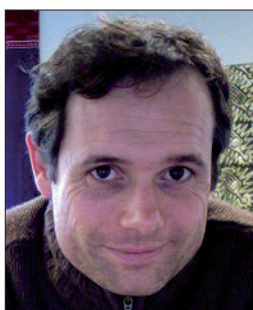


Nyerere: the formative years

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Kambarage Nyerere, as Julius Nyerere was called before he was baptised into the Catholic Church, was born on April 13, 1922 in the village of Butiama, near the east coast of Lake Victoria. In that area of north-west Tanzania the European presence was negligible, and from infancy he was used to doing small jobs around the shamba (smallholding) and tending to the animals. Nyerere later recalled how he grew up like all the other boys "in a surrounding of basic rural equality. There were no special privileges because of the office of my father." His father was Chief Nyerere Burito (1860-1942) of the Zanaki tribe. Nyerere's mother, Mugaya, was the fourth wife of 23. She married while he was sixty-one and she fifteen, and had Kambarage as the second of the four sons and four daughters she bore to him, of whom six survived. Nyerere's father seems to have had the greatest influence on him, as he himself said: "To the extent that I have some humanity, I took it from my father." Burito was slow and careful before acting and always insisted on giving his people their rights. One commentator, writing much later, attributes the Zanaki culture as the foundation on which Nyerere's moral and political sensibilities were built, long before the later influences of his formal education.

Kambarage's formal education began in 1934 when he attended Mwisenge Primary, a Native Administration School in Musoma. He was apparently bored by the lack of learning and challenges at school, but came top in the territorial examination of 1936, and the following year advanced to Tabora Government School. Nyerere said that 'Tabora Boys', as it was often called, was "as close to Eton as it could have been in Africa – fagging, sportsmanship, fair play, all that. If you went through it for six years, and succeeded, that was really something."

While at the school Nyerere decided to become a Catholic and took catechism at The White Fathers mission. He completed his secondary studies in 1942. Nyerere then obtained a bursary to Makerere College in Uganda the following year to undertake a Teacher Training Course. He was baptised in the Nyegina mission chapel outside Musoma on 23 December 1943, one of the first Zanaki to become a Roman Catholic.

In his second year he co-founded the Tanganyika African Welfare Association (TAWA), which was quickly dropped in favour of reinvigorating the campus chapter of the Tanganyika African Association (TAA).

The Makerere branch of the TAA provided Nyerere with his first experience of direct political organisation at exactly the same time as the first stirrings of a national concept of politics in Tanganyika.

Nyerere left Makerere in 1945 with a Teachers' Diploma. He spent the summer in Zanaki district building a house for his widowed mother, and received an offer to return to Tabora Government School to teach. He remained in Tabora, but chose St Mary's, a new Catholic secondary school in the town. In Tabora he became secretary of the local TAA branch and used the organisation to mobilise opinion in the district against Britain's manipulation of elections.

While teaching in Tabora, in 1946 Nyerere wrote: "The educated man is not important in himself, his importance lies in what he can do for the community of which he is a member." This is probably the first time that his philosophy of education for self-reliance was actually formulated in his mind.

Nyerere applied to the University of Edinburgh in 1948. According to one of Nyerere's childhood friends, however, his continuing interest in politics almost prevented him from the next move in his career as a student. So the account goes, a local British official wrote to the Governor in the belief that he should be prevented from studying overseas because he was 'politically minded and might pose a threat when he returned'. In October 1949 Nyerere was accepted for entry at the University of Edinburgh's Faculty of Arts to study for a Master of Arts degree. Nyerere's choice of degree subject was simple, as he put it at the time in a letter from Edinburgh: "if I can be useful to my country after my studies here, I will be more useful if I take an arts rather than a science degree."

Writing to the Colonial Office, David Carmichael, the Colonial Office Welfare Officer in Edinburgh, described Nyerere's performance while at the university as "well above average", while the report from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Government of Tanganyika was that he was "in every way a satisfactory student."

At university, a picture of Nyerere emerges as more than just a political person, but also a leader who was deeply philosophical, something that he could develop thanks to the flexibility to explore beyond his formal studies that the course options he chose allowed for: "I found that I had ample time to read many other things outside my degree ... I evolved the whole of my

political philosophy while I was there.”

A close friend of Nyerere while in Scotland, the Church of Scotland missionary Reverend Kenneth Mackenzie, felt that this period in Edinburgh “had a very direct and powerful influence upon his development as a politician. He was slowly building up his life-view, his basic orientation about things like the nature of government... [and] the rights of the individual.” Although dealing with many contemporary issues of African politics during his time in Edinburgh, there is no evidence that Nyerere ever had any meetings with those Africans who were to become prominent politicians around the same time as him, among them Hastings Banda, who would become the first president of Malawi.

Nyerere never became much of a platform politician on the university campus itself. He was certainly politically aware though, and maintained regular correspondence with the few other Tanganyikans in Britain, informing and discussing with them the situation back home. Apparently, speaking on behalf of the Tanganyikan students, in 1951 Nyerere asked the authorities for the opportunity for a number of his fellow countryfolk to meet the African chiefs from home coming to the Festival of Britain, then taking place in London, and which would last until the coronation of Queen Elizabeth the following year. Nyerere got in touch with David Makwaia, his Makerere friend who he had fallen out with in 1947 over Britain’s manipulation of the local elections, and who he was later to call “our Hamlet” because, in Nyerere’s view, Makwaia could never make up his mind whether to join the nationalists.

David Makwaia had studied philosophy and politics at Lincoln College, Oxford, during which time he and Nyerere may have resolved their differences. Their improving relationship in Britain during July 1951 appears to have been of considerable importance to the future of Tanganyika, for shortly after Nyerere had left Edinburgh for home, Makwaia facilitated his friend’s political rise by winning him British support as well as by securing the allegiance of Sukuma chiefs to TANU. At independence Nyerere repaid his friend by abolishing the role of chiefs, and temporarily banished Makwaia to a remote region.

Those who knew Nyerere in Edinburgh recall him as “quiet and unassuming”, “not the usual type”, and “a very decent fellow”. There is nothing to suggest, as Herbert Neve assumes, that as a student at Edinburgh Nyerere suffered problems of self-esteem.

Outside formal tuition he also spent time with university staff, and this sympathetic student-staff relationship may have had some part in moulding his multi-racial outlook. Among the staff with whom Nyerere spent much time with was Kenneth Little, the distinguished social anthropologist with whom he discussed the roots of colonial rule at a meeting of the ‘Cosmos’ society run by colonial students, and the historian Don Nichol who was a convert and Catholic intellectual. There is scant detail on Nyerere’s involvement in Catholicism while studying for his Master’s degree, however, although we know that in Edinburgh he used to find peace by sitting on his own in church, and that he apparently contemplated ordination while in Britain. But Nyerere already knew that his vocation lay elsewhere: “There was no moment when

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Photo courtesy of the University of Edinburgh



1962, Nyerere receiving his honorary second degree from the University of Edinburgh.

it all clicked into place. It wasn't a sudden inspiration; I didn't suddenly see the light. At Edinburgh, I was certain I was coming back [to Tanganyika] to get myself involved in full-time politics. I had made up my mind that my life would be political."

Nyerere graduated with an Ordinary Degree of Master of Arts in July 1952 and was "anxious to get back to work as soon as possible". Before returning home, however, he sought to make the most of the available opportunities to further his knowledge. He had initially applied to remain in Britain to take a diploma in Education after his degree course but was refused because, along with insufficient funds and the fact that he already held a Teacher's Diploma from Makerere, his employers at The White Fathers Mission required him to return to teaching duties. Instead he was granted a shorter British Council visitorship to study educational institutions in England and, foregoing a trip to the Continent, Nyerere's stay was lengthened so that he could see the schools operational during term time. From mid-July 1952 until at least the end of September he was based at 1 Hans Crescent in London's Kensington from where he took short visits as part of the visitorship to Oxford and Cumberland.

In contrast to the efforts of the Colonial Office in facilitating Nyerere's time in Britain – from allowing him to extend his stay for further training, to putting pressure on the Tanganyika government when his dependents' allowance payments were late – the Union Castle Shipping Company with whom he was due to return home with were far less accommodating. He was booked to sail on 3rd October 1952, with the SS Kenya Castle, but issues of race (that bore a striking similarity to race problems in East Africa that he wrote about while at Edinburgh) got in the way. While the Union Castle Shipping Company would not refuse outright to accept 'coloured' people on their boats if they could accommodate them all together, "for odd individuals, unless they have accommodation available, such as a berth in a 2 or 4 berth cabin, where they have already sat coloured persons, they will not accept". Again the Colonial Office stepped in on Nyerere's behalf and asked the company for an official declaration of their policy as regards 'coloured' students, to which they replied that they were "not prepared either to have a half empty cabin or to double up white and coloured individuals". Lt.Col. Crook, the Colonial Office's Liaison Officer for East African students, offered another African student in order to obviate the difficulty but received a flat refusal and a categorical statement that "because Nyerere was coloured, his booking had been cancelled". The matter was finally settled when Crook gained authority from the Government of Tanganyika to use air travel instead, and on October 7, 1952 Nyerere took a flight from

London to Nairobi and on to Dar es Salaam, where he arrived on 9th October.

Back in Tanganyika, Nyerere took up a post to teach history at St Francis' College in Pugu, just outside Dar es Salaam. We know little of his communication with friends in Edinburgh when he was back home, although it was a busy time that would have made much written correspondence difficult. Within three months Nyerere was elected president of the Tanganyika African Association, and when independence was attained in 1961 he insisted that only his friends the Wilsons, who had acted as a surrogate family for him during his stay in Edinburgh, would be invited to stay in his official residence during the celebrations. Mrs Wilson was also invited to the Republic celebrations in 1962, and then went on to work in his private office and in State House. Nyerere returned to Edinburgh in 1959 and again in 1962 to receive the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Law from the University. The following year he was a candidate for the post of Rector of the University, and had "given an undertaking to be in Edinburgh whenever he is required." He was defeated by James Robertson Justice, a popular Anglo-Scottish film actor.

Nyerere's final trip to his alma mater was in 1997 when he taught and conducted seminars at the Centre of African Studies and delivered the Lothian European Lecture, 'Africa: The Third Liberation', in which he appealed for African countries to be allowed to develop their own forms of democracy. On December 14, 1999, exactly two months after his death in London, the university held a Celebration and Thanksgiving for the Life of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere. **F**



Photo courtesy of the University of Edinburgh

No 2 Palmerston Road, Edinburgh, where Nyerere stayed while studying in the city.

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