

Celebrating progress

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As the United Republic of Tanzania celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the Union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, 2014 marks a milestone in my own relationship with the country. In February of this year I returned to Tanzania for the first time since 1972. That was the year when I spent one of most exciting, challenging and formative years of my life in this great country.

Today the United Republic of Tanzania hosts hundreds of young Britons. Many go to seek new experiences and excitements, often in the gap year between school and university, and to volunteer to help local communities. When I made my own journey however, it was rather more unusual. Stranger still – at least to the ears of today's young people – I made the journey inspired not by Tanzania's imposing natural beauty or its astonishingly rich wildlife, but by its politics. More specifically, by Julius Kambarage Nyerere's Ujamaa Socialism (meaning "unity" or "oneness").

Despite my enthusiasm and willingness to take just about any job going, getting to Tanzania proved difficult. After months of writing letters seeking a placement, it was the unstinting generosity of Bishop Trevor Huddleston, formerly Bishop of Masasi in the Mtwara region, which finally saw me take up placements at Anglican missions across the north of the country. Over the course of eleven months I worked at a rural aid centre in Behemba, in the north-west of the country, a hospital in Ngara near the Rwanda and Burundi border and Isamilo primary school in Mwanza, in the very north of the country, on the shores of Lake Victoria.

The work was not easy, and for a young man who had been born and raised in north London, there was plenty of food for thought. As I had hoped, my experiences gave me plenty of opportunity to experience Ujamaa first-hand, and I was enthused by much of what I saw. In particular Mwalimu Nyerere's ability to unify diverse peoples in common purpose left a lasting impression on me, and informed much of my own politics in later years.

But of course there were also challenges and frustrations. The union at this point was still very young and the country was very poor. The basics of life were hard: travelling was arduous, housing basic and education and healthcare often resting

in the hands of enthusiastic amateurs like myself. Nevertheless, there was a real sense of purpose and anticipation about Tanzania's future now that it rested in the hands of Tanzanians themselves.

More than four decades later, I was delighted to finally return to see for myself how that future had turned out. Alas among my many and wide travels, a return to Tanzania had eluded me. However, in recent years I had heard much about Tanzania's role as one of the leading lights in the 'Africa rising' story.

As the plane touched down in Dar es Salaam's busy Julius Nyerere airport, I reflected how my last visit to Tanzania's commercial capital had been at the end of a bone-rattling 48 hour bus journey from Mwanza. It quickly became apparent that times had changed. Driving through city streets heavy with traffic, it was strange to see such familiar sights – the British High Commission and of course State House – amid such changed circumstances and myriad signs of the vibrant economic growth I had been told about.

This sense of old and new, familiar yet strange, characterised much of my visit. Streets whose names I knew were made unrecognisable with busy new commercial properties, the city's old coastline now gleaming with new hotels, the roads thrumming with the old minibus taxis but also many shiny new cars. Above all, was a sense of purpose and direction, a buzz and energy which was in stark contrast to the rather sleepy old place I had remembered Dar to be all those years ago.

But perhaps I was more struck by what has not changed. The warmth, kindness and generosity of the Tanzanian people felt so familiar to me, and immediately took me back to those who had been so patient and gracious with the clumsy, if well-meaning, efforts of my nineteen year old self. Of all that I took away from my return to country, this was perhaps the most encouraging.

The 50th anniversary of the Union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar is indeed cause to celebrate and a reason to look back at the progress made, as I have done. With the economy continuing to grow rapidly and the exciting offshore gas prospects, I am delighted to note that there is also much reason to look ahead with optimism to the next 50 years. For my part, I am already planning my next trip back.

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