

Remembering Nyerere

Charles Cobb Jr.

Toward the end of the 1960s, many of us who had been involved in the Southern civil rights movement were looking for ideas. New ideas seemed scarce in America just at the moment we needed them most. The political establishment here—integrating rapidly—was saying, enough of this talk of poor people taking control of their own destiny, making decisions about their lives. Instead, they said, “learn to think like us and act right and we’ll make a place for you.”

I wish I had time to talk about the rejection of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964, or the way the federal government injected itself into Mississippi in the late 1960s.

We were thinking “black,” I say unapologetically and without elaboration, and Africa seemed to be the direction to point ourselves toward to find the ideas we needed—just Africa. Down there, struggling on Mississippi back roads and plantations, we knew very little about the continent. For some of us, Kwame Nkrumah was the president of all of Africa. There were words that meant Africa to us: Lumumba. Mau Mau. Sharpeville. Freedom fighters. Liberation struggle. Fanon. We didn’t know very much, in truth.

Ujamaa and *uhuru*—those two words meant Africa to us also. It was Julius Nyerere’s Tanzania that reached out to my generation, demanding that we think about this Africa that Africans were trying to fashion. Although necessarily there were ideas and processes specific to Tanzania underway in that then-new East African nation, the Africanness reached through to us. Something larger seemed to surround local Tanzanian efforts. *Kujitegemea*, or self-reliance, was a term that reached many of us via President Nyerere’s important writings on education for self-reliance. The concept seemed bigger than Tanzania, and relevant to my neighborhood too. *Ujamaa* seemed to be more than a Swahili phrase defining rural cooperative efforts in Tanzania.

And think about it. These two terms, *ujamaa* and self-reliance, are now part of our political lexicon. They are still ideas we can work with—Tanzania’s contribution to our idea of struggle.

And no, I am not going to get into the question of who “our” refers to. Or who “we” are. I do not know that President Nyerere thought of himself as a Pan-Africanist. But he certainly saw himself as an African contributing to, if I may use an old phrase that I still like, “the redemption and vindication of the race.”

Tanzania’s streets and roads housed much political opinion: Southern African liberation movements, opponents of neocolonial African regimes, and, yes, political refugees from Afro-America. And there certainly is a

Julius Nyerere, often called Mwalimu or Teacher, led Tanganyika to independence. He retired as president of the Republic of Tanzania in 1985 and died on October 14, 1999. Charles Cobb Jr., one of the editors of this book, spoke at a memorial gathering for Nyerere in Boston, Massachusetts, on November 21, 1999.

straight line connecting today's liberated nations of Southern Africa and President Nyerere's commitment to their liberation. And, if I may speak personally, there are few conversations in Africa I consider more important than those that many of us held with Tanzanians. They were patient with what surely must have seemed a strange and confused lot of distant cousins from America who washed up on their shores. Benjamin Mkapa, the current president of Tanzania, then a newspaper editor, was one of those Tanzanians. We owe Mwalimu Nyerere some thanks for opening instead of locking the doors to his house, and I am here to publicly acknowledge the debt.

It was in Tanzania, a crossroads of Africa and Africans, that a lot of us learned that political struggle was necessarily about more than color. And that political struggle was about more than being against something. The essential discussion in Tanzania centered on how human resources could be mobilized and organized. For me, anyway, it was the first time seeing what it meant for a state, a government, and a nation to commit to all of its people.

And let me say quickly that judging Tanzania now in terms of its successes and failures in this regard is less important than applauding Tanzania, the Tanzania of Nyerere's vision, for its commitment. For Africans in America like myself, the value of seeing an African effort like this was sustaining. And the final chapter on the effort has not yet been written.



Bill Sutherland, right, meets with President Julius Nyerere, left, and the deputy foreign minister of Tanzania, Dar es Salaam, 1977. Photo by Harry Amana. Courtesy of American Friends Service Committee.