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Nyerere and the African Theory of Democracy

Conrad John Masabo

Abstract: Statecraft, under democratic principles in Tanzania in particular, is often considered as a total heritage from former colonial masters. Julius Kambarage Nyerere (1922–1999) disputed this by advancing an African theory of democracy, articulated to inform modern statecraft in Tanzania. His theory advances a form of democracy characterized by a merger of some practices from the African past and others from the western world. In this way, he articulated the centrality of democracy in organizing public affairs without compromising its African origin but also acknowledging the influence of other democratic cultures in the modern organization of a polity. This article articulates Nyerere's contribution to African democratic discourse and the extent to which his theory of democracy is relevant in the organization of contemporary politics and democratic trajectories in Tanzania and Africa in particular.

Keywords: democracy, nation-state, Nyerere, party system, theory, *Ujamaa*

> Had Karl Marx been an African, he would have written a very different book than Das Kapital. (Nyerere 1968a: 16)

This article examines Julius Kambarage Nyerere's theory of democracy and its usefulness in informing Tanzania's and Africa's contemporary politics. The motivation to focus on Nyerere's theory of democracy is prompted by limited attention paid to his philosophical contribution to democracy compared to his other best-known socio-political mantra, *Ujamaa (*"familyhood" in Swahili) (Fouéré 2014). My aim is to transcend the tendency of pairing this theory of democracy with one-party politics as some scholars do (Cheeseman 2015; Cheeseman et al. 2021) by undertaking an in-depth examination of his theory, with due attention paid to its practical implications in Tanzanian and African politics today.

Research on how Julius Kambarage Nyerere (1922–1999) – first president of Tanganyika/Tanzania – theorized democracy is limited. This lacuna is one of the reasons for undertaking this analysis of Nyerere's theory of

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democracy. Given the vastness of Nyerere's socio-political thought (e.g., Nyerere 1963, 1966, 1968a, 1968b, 1997a, 1997b), I follow Fouéré who proposed a "decentered approach" for studying Nyerere's thought, "which emphasizes how individuals and groups use the past—and within this past, the figure of one statesman in particular, Julius Kambarage Nyerere, the first President of Tanganyika [and Tanzania] to reflect upon their present and act upon it" (2015: 5).

Following Fouéré, my work here contributes to the shift in focus from "scrutinizing Nyerere the statesman and his political philosophy . . . [to considering] how 'Nyerere' becomes a political language and metaphor for debating and shaping the present, and how [such] collective memories and legacies can transform current political and social practicesd . . ." (Fouéré 2015: 5). In this way, the implications of Nyerere's theory of democracy can be articulated outside of its political imbrication.

To understand Nyerere's democratic theory we need to focus on his approaches to nation-building and *Ujamaa,* the African brand of socialism best defined as *familyhood* (see Nyerere 1968b). His articulation of these two concepts defined him and distanced him from many philosophers and theorists who have engaged with similar concepts. His understanding of equality could not, for example, be separated in "definition from the idea of *utu*—best translated as 'human dignity' or 'humanness'. [Thus for him] . . . all human beings are equal: *Binandamu wote ni sawa.* It is not that all human beings *have* equal rights or opportunities, or are *born* equal. They *are* equal, period. And they are equal in their *humanness*" (Shivji et al., 2021: 9 emphasis original; see also Nyerere 2016: 7–21). This is a transformative and critical contribution to democratic theory.

Nyerere's thought had to do with how he coped with the challenges of twin responsibilities: as a political leader and as a thinker for his country. "Once in power," Nyerere as statesman-cum-theorist, "discovered that power was not a zero-sum game; rather it was a terrain of contestation between contradictory interests, a field of political warriors, not armchair philosophers" (Shivji et al. 2021: 1). As such, "one has to fight constantly [and] to keep in a fight that is neither philosophical nor moral; [but which] . . . is political, pragmatic and Machiavellian" (ibid.). In that regard, one has to be reminded when examining his thought that, unlike most theorists who are not compelled to practice what they theorize, Nyerere's case is different; he was compelled to put his intellectual instruments, and academic beliefs, to work.

Components of Nyerere's Theory of Democracy

Statecraft in mid-twentieth century Africa, in the service of democratic principles, was at the time usually treated as a valuable heritage acquired

from former colonial masters. Africans were often, therefore, perceived as mere recipients of this public ethic. Nyerere (1963, 1966) disputed this frame and advanced a theory of democracy that embraced some indigenous African values, ones that can inform modern statecraft in Tanzania. It was a theory that married some practices from both the African past—such as free and open discussion—and western impositions—such as the nation-state and organizing public affairs in a party system (Cheeseman and Sishuwa 2021; Shivji et al. 2021). In his theory, Nyerere articulated the centrality of democracy in organizing public affairs without compromising its African originality. But he also acknowledged the instruments from other cultures in the modern organization of a polity like Tanzania, which ought to be adjusted to suit the context in which they were being used. As Kweka succinctly put it, "the development of democracy in Tanzania has been influenced by ideas and practices of democracy from the West and the East as well as [the] African past" (1995: 61). In this way, Nyerere's theory of democracy occupies an important position within African political theory.

Unlike non-party Africa's consensual democracy, propounded by Wiredu (for details see Adeyanju 2022; Wiredu 1995, 1996: 182-190) which though well-articulated was not applied in particular nation or country, Nyerere's theory of democracy is one of the few African-crafted democratic theories that was implemented to guide the organization of the postcolonial state of Tanzania.

The foundation of Nyerere's democratic theory is given in his 1963 essay "Democracy and the Party System." It is likely to have been influenced by prior political discussions held in the 1950s. For example, in favor of locally specific solutions, in 1953 two colonial scholars, Hans Cory and Donald Malcolm contested the common colonial practice of the "one size fits all" model of democratic development, but with different footing. Cory was of the view that "the way of living of one race cannot be definitely designed by another especially under [the] present circumstances where the element of freedom is the decisive factor" (Cory 1953, as quoted by Hunter 2015: 79). For Malcolm, since "democracy has many forms, thus, representative government as practiced in Great Britain is one; and it may not be audacious to suggest that Sukuma land has another" (1953: 106).

Nyerere's conceptualization of democracy, however, went beyond the confines of ethnic groups as it extended to the whole nation. For example, Nyerere once remarked: "in spite of our having one party, we were very democratic" (1963: 4). This is so because for Nyerere "democracy depends far more on the attitude of mind that respects and defends the individual than on the political forms it takes" (Nyerere 1997b: 159).

In that respect, his understanding of democracy does not conflict with scholars who are in favor of a constitutional, substantive, and procedural definition of democracy that must be continuously in motion, because for him the "three basic ingredients of democracy were discussion, equality and freedom" (Shivji et al. 2021: 41). Thus, he defined democracy as a "government by discussion as opposed to government by force, and by discussion among the people or their chosen representatives as opposed to a hereditary clique" (1997b: 156). Dialogue is, therefore, central.

From his position on dialogue, Nyerere was confident to argue that the African or Tanzanian concept of democracy was "similar to that of the Ancient Greeks, from whose language the word 'democracy' originated as to them democracy meant simply 'government by discussion among equals' [since in Africa too] elders discussed, and when they reached agreement the result was a 'people's decision'" (1997b: 156). Therefore, "democracy in Africa or anywhere else, is government by the people. Ideally, it is a form of government whereby the people – all the people – settle their affairs through free discussion" (Nyerere 1963: 1). Based on this core element of free discussion, Nyerere propounded two forms that democracy was to be exercised in Africa: the first direct and African, the second representative and western. As will come to be seen, he posited that the two forms were to be used together in an inter-cultural liquid democracy arrangement that, in theory, was to be embodied by a single party.

Direct Democracy from Africa

Nyerere's view of direct democracy draws an analogy from an observation made by Guy Clutton-Brock who had written about a typical African village experience. To him, in a typical African village, "the elders sit under the big tree, and talk until they agree . . . the appropriate setting for this [direct] democracy is a small community" (Nyerere 1963: 2). This is similar to another expression by Shutte (2009) who uses the concept of *Indaba* to describe democratic governance in indigenous African communities. The *indaba,* Shutte argues:

> [Is] the traditional meeting for discussion of important matters affecting the life of the community [and] has as underlying conviction that the community has a common mind, a common heart. The purpose of the discussion is to discover that common mind, that common heart, in relation to the specific issue being debated. So the goal of the *indaba* is consensus. A mere majority vote on the issue is not enough. Discussion must continue until unanimity is achieved, a really common mind and heart. This is the only adequate sign that the truth of the matter has been discovered. (Shutte 2009: 95)

That said though, that very consensus or common mind and heart does not mean lack of different opinions among community members. It rather mean that this precolonial political decision-making system "was based on the belief that *ultimately* the interests of all members of society are the same, although their immediate perceptions of those interests may be different" (Wiredu 1995: 57, 1996: 185, emphasis original). It is because "talking until you agree" is an essential ingredient of the traditional African concept of democracy that, according to Nyerere, "democracy, in its true sense, is as familiar to Africa as the tropical sun" (Nyerere 1997b: 156).

This affirmation challenges common assertions about African understandings of democracy, some of which go as far as saying "that Africans do not know what the concept democracy means" (Kizza 2011: 124). Nyerere refuted this assertion by grounding and locating direct democracy as a homegrown practice that is not learned from elsewhere but which has been and is being practiced in indigenous political systems (see Cheeseman and Sishuwa 2021: 707–710). To cement the point, Nyerere observed:

> To those who wonder if democracy can survive in Africa, my own answer, then, would be that, far from it being an alien idea, democracy has long been familiar to the African. There is nothing in our traditional attitude to discussion, and current dedication to human rights, to justify the claim that democracy is in danger in Africa. I see exactly the opposite: the principles of our nationalist struggles for human dignity, augmented as they are by our traditional attitude toward discussion, should predict well for democracy in Africa. (Nyerere 1997b: 161)

Representative Democracy from the West

Nyerere's theory of democracy moves beyond the confines of democracy as practiced by a clan or at the village level. For example, he recognized and acknowledged the practice of representative democracy. Within complex societies, Nyerere found it logical to have representation practiced, but it should not dislodge the directness of democracy, which for him were free discussion and consensus-based decision-making. As he posits:

> The two essentials for 'representative' democracy are: the freedom of the individual, and the regular opportunity for him or her to join with his/her fellows in replacing, or reinstating the government of his/her country by means of the ballot-box and without recourse to assassination. [With these yardsticks], an organized opposition is not an essential element of representative democracy. (Nyerere 1966: 106; also see Shivji et al. 2021: 43)

This is a recognition of the fact that, while direct democracy is as indigenous to Africa as the tropical sun, with larger and ever-growing

communities, it was not possible to practice it in its direct form. Thus, to sustain a democratic society, there was a need for modification, which in Nyerere's theory of democracy is what Africa owes the West. In his understanding, however, representative democracy comes *after* direct democracy and ought to be a modification of direct democracy in a large community.

However, his critics think differently. They argue that "in Nyerere's eyes multiparty politics was not just politically dangerous; it was unnecessary and 'un-African'" (Cheeseman 2015: 40). In Nyerere's words and, as if he were anticipating his critics, "after [direct or] pure democracy, the next best thing is government by people's representatives . . . a parliament in which a [group] of [spokespersons] or representatives, conduct[s] the discussion on their behalf, *and not on behalf of their own political parties*" (Nyerere 1963: 2, emphasis added). In a parliament, like in an *Indaba* or the elders under the tree; discussion among representatives ought to stem from the need to arrive at a consensus, common mind, or common heart and not just discussion for the sake of winning a debate or the interests of a particular political party (or parties). In addition, since these spokespersons in the parliament are people's representatives, who have been entrusted their wills, they should be faithful to the people who have sent them.

Nyerere's Party System Problem

Across Africa, the early 1960s witnessed the rapid weathering of multiparty political systems in favor of single-party political systems as the democratic norm for postcolonial states (Hunter 2015). Single-partyism was an antidote to the multiparty democratic system that was inherited at independence. This wave did not spare Tanzania, which, in spite of its vibrant postcolonial multiparty democracy, "by 1965, had followed many of its neighbors in Africa and the wider postcolonial world towards a single party system" (Hunter 2015: 187). In defense of the one-party democracy, various reasons to justify its institution were given. Of all, three stood out, namely:

> (1) the unity of the historical experience of African peoples; (2) the foreignness of two-party or multiparty models of governance in the context of African tradition; and (3) the danger that the delicate fabric of the recently cobbled together and fragile African nations might be rent by the embrace of two-party or multiparty rule. (Táíwó 2004: 253)

These reasons, however, varied from country to country and from one political leader to another since "institutions and organizations of democracy were not universal but particular to history and traditions of a

specific society could not be transplanted without regarding to African condition" (Shivji et al. 2021: 41). Thus, as Kweka (1995: 66–71) underscored, the evolution of one-party democracy in Tanzania must be understood by considering important historical landmarks that characterized its politics between the 1950s and mid-1960s. The most remarkable one was the bill passed in July 1965, which made Tanzania a *de jure* one-party democracy but a *de facto* two-party democracy with one party on each side of the union, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) and Afro-Shiraz Party (ASP) in Mainland Tanzania, and Tanzania Zanzibar, respectively, before 1977, were merged to form *Chama Cha Mapinduzi* (CCM – the Party for Revolution). Unlike most of his contemporaries, such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Sekou Toure of Guinea, and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Nyerere found justification for the institution of one-party democracy in the nature of the parties that spearheaded the struggles for independence in Tanganyika. In Tanganyika and later Tanzania, one-party democracy was rendered de facto through the history of its independence struggle. Nyerere was, because of this history of struggle, at home with one-party democracy, and largely, his theory of democracy seems to be the defense of this outcome.

Nyerere articulated the symbiotic relationship between indigenous direct democracy and one-party democracy and the incompatibility of indigenous democracy and multiparty democracy. He argues the following:

> Our own parties had a very different origin. They were not formed to challenge any ruling group of our own people; they were formed to challenge *foreigners* who ruled over us. They were not, therefore, political "parties" – i.e. factions – but nationalist movements. And from the onset they represented the interests and aspirations of the whole nation. We, in Tanganyika, for example did not build TANU to oppose the Conservative Party of England, or to support the Labour Party! The divisions of English politicians meant nothing to us. (Nyerere 1963: 15)

Based on Nyerere's arguments, the parties in Tanzania (Tanganyika) were not formed for posing an opposition agenda but rather struggling for independence. As such, the granting of independence automatically marked the end of opposition and opened-up for unity, an aspiration for the struggle for independence. To reaffirm his confidence in his view, in 1995 when asked why he supported one-party democracy, Nyerere emphasized: "I argued then, and I argue now that the one-party system as it operated in this country was the most democratic and most appropriate system in the circumstances of time" (1997a: 11).

Nyerere's rationalization of one-party democracy, what some consider as an abuse of power, is linked to the democratic debates that began

in the 1950s and 1960s after independence. As Shivji, Yahya-Othman, and Kamata have recently reminded, it was during "the late 1950s and early 1960s [that] Nyerere spent considerable time making out a philosophical and practical case for one-party democracy. [As such] his writings on democracy and party system during this period was essentially a dialogue with his potential critics in the Anglo-Saxon world, for whom multi-party system was an essential ingredient of democracy" (2021: 41).

As David Runciman put it, "the hallmark of the modern idea of democracy is its adoptability. It can accommodate forms of politics that are hierarchical as well as inclusive; it can be identified with leaders as well as citizens; [and] it can combine egalitarianism with many different forms of inequality" (2013: xxiii). Or it can be equally argued that, "this shift rested on the argument that democracy could develop in different ways in different contexts, which in turn drew on the argument that opposition was not a natural feature of all political societies and that the imperative for development justified restrictions on political liberties" (Hunter 2015: 187). As Nyerere once remarked, "I would say that we have not only have an opportunity to dispense with the disciplines of the two-party system but that we would be wrong to retain them" (1963: 23). Attacking Tanzania's liberal multiparty democracy in 1997, while addressing the Edinburgh University community, Nyerere bluntly said, "Pre-packaged, Coca-Cola democracy cannot help Africa!" (1997a: 10).

Two Obstructive Forces to Practicing Nyerere's Democratic Theory in Tanzania

Criticisms of Nyerere's democratic theory have been made particularly against his most preferred modern political norm—the one-party system of democracy (e.g., Brennan 2014; Cheeseman 2015; Mwijage 1994). Largely, these criticisms emanate from the fact that, as an African statesman-cum-theorist Nyerere had to deal with two forces: the first was westernization, and the second the cultural contradiction of a multiparty system.

The first force was cosmopolitan and a product of history. Nyerere, for example, embraced much from western political frameworks in his thinking. As the son of a Zanaki chief, he was familiar with indigenous political systems and thus had cause to meld both indigenous and western political frameworks. That is to say, on the one hand, was western nation-statism with its multiparty system and, on the other hand, was indigenous decision making and social organization with its direct democracy. In theory, melding the two was clear, but in practice balancing the

two proved difficult. Partly it was because Nyerere was obsessed by European history where he "derived his theoretical and political understanding and imagery of the nation-state" (Shivji et al. 2021: 3). For example, he often cherished and defended the idea of the nation-state. This is one of the weaknesses he had in terms of advocating for African homegrown institutions. As he himself admitted, "I've questioned many, many things from Europe, but I've not questioned the nation-state" (Sutherland and Matt 2000: 76, as cited in Shivji et al. 2021: 3).

Even when he was interviewed late in 1990s, he still had his conviction for inheriting the European nation-state, which to a large extent contributed to some of his failures to practice what he theorized, especially about democracy and freedom. In that interview he was of the view that "once you have accepted the nation-state, you accept the consequences including armies, including security services, bureaucracy, police and the lot" (Sutherland and Matt 2000, as cited in Shivji et al. 2021: 39). As Shivji, Yahaya-Othman, and Kamata aver, it was "in building a non-racialist nation" that "Nyerere could be consistent and maintain the high moral ground, but it was a different case with regard freedoms when, in his perception, some people misused freedom to pose a threat to the security of the nation-state that he was trying to build" (2021: 33).

The second force is Nyerere's failure in party building. Instead of building a strong political party, "he ended-up building a bureaucratic party-state" (Shivji et al. 2021: 41), which by its very nature could not enhance the democracy he intended. This state-party fusion in addition to his maintenance of an inherited, and oppressive, nation-state obstructed the many intentions and theories he propagated from being implemented.

Criticisms of Nyerere's Democratic Theory

Issa G. Shivji, an African Marxist scholar, was one of the first to critique Nyerere's theory of democracy, particularly the conceptualization of Tanzania as a classless and peaceful society advanced in Nyerere's socialist philosophy, *Ujamaa na Kujitegemea* or Socialism and Self-reliance, which was put into practice from 1967 after the *Arusha Declaration.* Shivji's critique challenged this assertion by characterizing Tanzania as a country *with* class struggles. The basic thesis in Shivji's "Tanzania: The Silent Class Struggle" (1973) and *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (1976) was that revolution does not depend on a single individual and that its direction is determined by the course of class struggles and not by the inclinations of the leader. Thus, one of the questions Shivji raised was whether Nyerere's

so-called *Ujamaa* was really socialism, and if it was, which class was its driving force, what characterized the nature of the nation-state and what shaped its accompanying processes of power accumulation. It was in this context that Shivji argued the class in power in Tanzania was comprised of a bureaucratic bourgeoisie in alliance with imperialists. His critique of Nyerere's democratic theory was effective and attracted numerous responses in support.

For example, Peter Anyang' Nyong'o and Laurent Magesa joined Shivji in arguing that "while it is true that political parties did not exist in the so-called traditional African societies, it also follows *logically* that the concept *political party* cannot be used in analyzing the politics of pre-capitalist African societies. People who justify the one-party system on the basis of cultural heritage have, therefore, been essentially involved in *false* analogies" (Nyong'o 1992: 2, emphasis original). Magesa in his 2013 book, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* takes this debate further by cementing that the "leader who obliquely or openly appeals to 'African tradition' to justify his or her authoritarian tendencies and activities are either ignorant of the political mechanism of indigenous Africa or insincere" (Magesa 2013: 139). This is so because there is "not much evidence in African indigenous systems of governance to back up undemocratic claims" (Magesa 2013: 139). Thus as Hunter remarked, "more recently, post nationalist historians have offered a different analysis, contextualizing the move to one-party in terms of defensive reaction prompted by the weakness of postcolonial states, unable to meet the higher expectations placed upon them" (2015: 187).

Although "it cannot be denied that some of the African leaders who chose one-party rule in postcolonial Africa did so out of a penchant for personal rule and sometimes a proclivity for megalomania, it should not be concluded that all partisans of one-party rule were cut from the same cloth" (Táíwó 2004: 249). I find, from this footing, that Nyerere's theory of democracy does not abandon the possibilities of a functioning multiparty democracy. It instead propounds its dangers and conditions under which it can operate. According to Nyerere, "a two-party system or multiparty democracy can be justified only when parties are divided over some fundamental issues; otherwise it merely encourages the growth of factionalism" (1963: 8).

Put differently, the only time when a political group can represent the interests of a section of the community without being a faction is when the group fights to remove a grievous wrong from the society. Thus, unless the differences between this group and those responsible for the wrong it is fighting are fundamental there can be no question of national unity until the differences have been removed by the pursuit of

change through justice. Based on this justification, it is evident that most of the nationalist parties could not qualify as opposition parties as they ultimately all wanted the same outcome—independence. Nyerere warns:

> [T]he two-party systems are not, and cannot be, *national* politics; they are the politics of *groups* whose differences, more often than not, are of small concern to the majority of the people. . . . If, on the other hand, you have a two-party system where the differences between the parties are *not* fundamental, then you will immediately reduce politics to the level of a football match. . . . [Thus] it is hard to avoid the conclusion that people who defend the two-party system are actually advocating 'football politics', that they really consider a spirit of artificial rivalry, like that which exist between a couple of soccer teams, is appropriate to the relationship between opposing political parties. (Nyerere 1963: 9–10)

To Nyerere, only a fundamental difference between parties could serve as the yardstick for the necessity for the existence of a two or more party system. However, given that all parties prior to independence were agitating *for* independence and that TANU scooped all except one seat of total seats for the Legislative Council during the August 1960 general election that granted TANU the right to form an internal government, this set the precedence for perceiving any multiparty-system as irrelevant for Tanganyika/Tanzania. Further to that, the fact that even the one seat that went to an independent candidate, that candidate was a former TANU member. To Nyerere, this outcome was confirmation of the lack of fundamental differences among parties at the time. In short, Nyerere's reason as to why there was no need of multiparty politics in Tanzania from the 1960s to the 1980s is given as follows:

> Now that the colonialists have gone, there is no remaining division between "rulers" and "ruled"; no monopoly of political power by any sectional group, which could give rise to conflicting parties. Therefore, there can be only one reason for formation of such parties in a country like ours—the desire to imitate the political structure of a totally dissimilar society. . . . [He emphatically insisted] . . . that where there is *one* party—provided it is identified with the nation as a whole—the foundation of democracy can be firmer, and the people can have more opportunity to exercise a real choice, than where you have two or more parties—each representing only a section of the community. (Nyerere 1963: 15, 23)

Despite his defense of the one-party political system, criticism against his theory of democracy never ceased since the system did live up to its expectations for freedom of participation, that is, it did no offer to the people avenues for exercising freedom. It was only through the 1992 Fifth Constitutional Amendment, which introduced multiparty democracy,

and the Political Parties Act No. 5 of 1992 – seven years after Nyerere resigned from twenty years in office – that procedures and modalities for the registration and functioning of political parties in Tanzania were granted. But as Cheeseman (2015) and I (Masabo 2019) observed, this move soon translated itself into what is known as the "transition from a single-party to a dominant-party system" which, in a way, replicated most of the behaviors observed under the one-party system. Put differently, due to continued ruling party influence and lack of active participation in party competition, the transition just ended up being cosmetic.

Following this scenario, there is a concern among scholars (Cheeseman et al. 2021; Paget 2021) who now link the ruling party's (CCM under Nyerere in 1977) dominance as another critique of the foundations set by Nyerere's as he was trying to enact his theory of democracy. These scholars are convinced that contemporary challenges facing Tanzania's democracy, such as the existence and use of repressive laws, democracy backsliding, and issues of public resources in favor of the ruling party (that is: corruption, nepotism), all find their root in Nyerere's theory of democracy. Indeed, if one approaches Tanzania's democratic trajectory from a historical perspective, they will soon realize that the major challenge it faced is what Cheeseman, Matfess, and Amani call "the disturbing side of Nyerere's legacy" (2021: 80): which is that the CCM had constantly asserted its dominance, especially when it felt threatened electorally or otherwise.

The way the CCM asserts its dominance in times of challenge is based on three interconnected authoritarian control mechanisms. The first is the manipulation of the legal system to harass and detain opponents. The second is the tight control of media and information. And the third is the diversion of state resources to sustain the ruling party (Cheeseman et al. 2021). Each mechanism has remained a central feature of Tanzanian democracy and each finds their base in the one-party state apparatus developed under Nyerere. It can be said with confidence, that, although in 1990s Nyerere became a leading champion for multiparty democracy, he did not do well to dismantle the framework he laid, which continues to weaken and limit any progress that sought to democratize Tanzania's political and government systems.

Nyerere's Theory of Democracy and the Challenges of Twenty-first-century Politics

Having surveyed Nyerere's theory of democracy, its justificatory arguments and criticisms, one of the remaining questions is whether the

ethical side his theory of democracy can be salvaged in Tanzania today. The answer to this question entails contextualizing Nyerere's theory of democracy as one of the tools for realizing his major political projects: nation-building and socialism, major concerns of his political philosophy, but with "African characteristics," which a number of scholars have affirmed. One of these scholars is Saul who argues that, "at the core of both Nyerere's political philosophy and his life work in the public sphere were his own imaginative takes on the theory and practice of 'democracy' on the one hand, and of *Ujamaa na Kujitegemea* ('socialism and self-reliance') on the other" (2002: 194). This means that separating democracy from the discussion of nation-building, socialism, and self-reliance ought to be a matter of analysis as the two presently reinforce each other. There is a need to reposition Nyerere's theory within the continental discussion on democracy and for it to be used in the defense of African homegrown theories and philosophies of democracy, as it occupies an important position in the African canon and is one of the major contributions to African political theory.

Despite the problems that Nyerere has caused for Tanzania, in his attempts at applying his democratic theory, by disqualifying it from the list of great ideas from Africa by Africans, one would be applauding the general trend denying Africans' ability to reason. It is no secret that putting theory into practice is an inherently difficult undertaking that almost always faces problems. My contemporaries and I are learning from a long experience of battling over the place of African philosophy in philosophy and we can now confidently argue that there is nothing disqualifying or otherwise preventing us from contributing, from making, democratic theory, even in difficult postcolonial circumstances. In that regard, then,

> [Nyerere's theory of democracy] . . . cannot, therefore, be restricted to conceptual parameters of the Western epistemological paradigm. . . . [But rather it] must be re-conceptualized from a universalistic perspective that acknowledges both the cultural specificity of its origin, on the one hand, and its universal potential to transcend the specificity of its origins, on the other hand, in a spirit of inter-cultural dialogue. (Cloete 2019: 85–86)

Just as Nyerere's theory ought not to be disqualified from democratic theory it should also not be judged in terms of whether it is a perfect and faithful replica of other theories of democracy. Rather, as Ann Cudd and Sally Scholz rightly put it, the concept of democracy should be "inextricably context-specific. At times, it means a system of rule by the people in their own interest. At other times, democracy means something closer to a state-sponsored redistribution of resources in the interest of the good of the community" (2014: 6). And if we are to go by Tangwa's advice,

> democracy in Africa need not to necessarily follow Western models or paradigms, some of whose elements are in fact dubious. Democracy in any actual context needs to adapt itself to the culture, values, customs and practices of the society in question, as long as these do not contradict the fundamentals of democracy. (2011: 179)

In that respect, Nyerere's theory should be approached in its context and its uniqueness (Cheeseman and Sishuwa 2021: 707–710) and not be measured against how well it performs against the liberal or social democratic theories of the West. As Michael Perry (2015) advised, critical reflection on Nyerere's democratic theory will need to be done across four dimensions: people, sovereignty, structure, and practices. This is so since a consideration of these aspects will help us understand what Nyerere's democracy entails for Africa, and perhaps the rest of the world, today.

Conclusion

This article is not an exhaustive take on Nyerere's thought on democracy but rather it is an attempt to make a brief survey from the terrain of Nyerere's philosophical thinking as this has, in democratic theory, not received much attention. The argument I posited is that, in theory, Nyerere tried to meld his understanding of indigenous African direct democracy with the western representative democracy he came to study and both critique and admire. His theory, however, did not manifest as intended, and this was more prominent in the eyes of Nyerere's observers as the statesman-cum-theorist was sometimes obstinate in his assertions, even after leaving office, and sometimes blind to the facts of his governments' performance. In the end, Nyerere's democratic theory holds promise for democratization in Africa – especially in its assertion that many forms of democracy are homegrown, are African, and that institutions should reflect these autochthonous approaches to democratic governance. The test, it seems, is whether practitioners in Tanzania, and across the continent if not the globe, can learn from Nyerere's implementation mistakes and the punishing costs of their aftereffects.

Thinking forward, an extensive and critical examination of Nyerere's philosophical discourse, especially after he stepped down from presidency and as chair of his party, promises to be an interesting area of research that deserves more attention. The hope is that this article will serve as a stepping-stone toward this area of scholarship in both Nyerere and democracy studies.

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