

50 Years After, What is still Left of Nyerere's 'Education for Self-Reliance'?

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Introduction

In the context of observable crises of access, content, quality, relevance and funding across Africa today, what might Julius Nyerere, the late Tanzanian president's 1967 essay "Education for Self-Reliance" still offer the policy mill for consideration? This essay argues that though written with Tanzania, his country, in mind, the essay is still the text to engage with on the main challenge of organising education across much of contemporary Africa. However, the lofty ideals of his grand discourse, *Ujamaa Vijijini* which underpinned Nyerere's philosophy of education also misled him to gloss over a number of contradictions embedded in the text. In the sections that follow, I break down the argument to its specifics, starting with a summary of Nyerere's philosophy of education in section one, identifying and discussing the context with which the question of what is meritorious or not could be decided in section two and, in section three, draw up a merits and demerits list. I conclude the essay in section four.

"Education for Self-Reliance"

The basis of renewed attention to the late president of Tanzania's essay lies in how, by 2017, it was 50 years old, having been articulated in 1967. As one such document, it warrants a critical review in terms of what it still offers not just to Tanzania but also Africa. Nyerere opened "Education for Self-Reliance" by pointing out how the question of the essence of education itself had not been posed before the time he was penning his essay even as demand for education kept rising. He argues the impossibility of government spending 20% of its resources on education without the justification for that being very clear beyond just acquisition of certificates. Describing Tanzania as a poor, undeveloped and agricultural economy, a country with very little capital to invest in big factories or modern machines; with no sufficient reserve of skilful resource persons base but only abundant land and people, (1967: 419), he saw the educational question to be one of what sort of educational products would ensure the realisation of the self-reliant and egalitarian society he wanted. In other words, education must have relevance for the kind of society Tanzania should be. 50 years has subtracted nothing from this standpoint as far as much of Africa is concerned. No African country has achieved any substantial manufacturing economy as to have reversed Nyerere's argument yet, not with the experience of de-industrialisation.

Starting with an appraisal of what was on the ground then, he concluded that Education in colonial Tanzania had been designed to make young people serve not their own country but the colonial state as lowly and submissive operatives. It had, in his view, been geared towards individual wealth and individualistic orientation rather than the co-operative ethic and the domination of the weak by the strong from one generation to the next. This, he considered to be as inadequate and inappropriate or the country would not have entered independence without massive spread of education and with so few educated elements to supervise the development process. The education had also been based on race and racial practice. The new government at independence had started by abolishing racial and religious dichotomy as well as commenced what can be called the Tanzanianisation of educational content, manifesting in the incorporation of topics such as African history, language, songs, civic orientation into the content. Similarly, there had been relatively huge expansion in educational opportunities. The task was, however, to align the educational system with the desired social order or how to make education serve "the social goals of living together and working together for the common good", (1967: 420).

In this regard, he offered key foundational principles emphasizing co-operative endeavour as against individual advancement; education that stressed equality and the responsibility to give service, be it carpentry, animal husbandry or academic pursuits. That is, as Nyerere put it; education that negated temptations to intellectual arrogance, dichotomy between those with academic and those with non-academic abilities or those with no remarkable abilities “but are just human beings”, (1967: 420). Wanted was education that guarded against arrogance in a society that aimed at equality of citizens.

Similarly, he identified education that prepared young people to fit into rural Tanzania where the challenge of nation building was most concentrated, being an agrarian society; education that developed critical minds rather than robots with no ability for reflexivity or adaptation and education that removed the conditions alienating pupils from the society by guarding against anything that inculcated sense of inequality, intellectual arrogance and intense individualism in the young people who go through schools. He attacked the elitist character of existing education as something for the few who are stronger than their ‘Others’, thereby countering the egalitarian agenda by superiorising some above others. The boarding system was particularly considered alienating of pupils from their parents because it disallowed pupils from experiencing poverty even as their parents were materially poor. He insisted on devaluing paper qualification. His correctional interventions were, among others, for changing the curriculum, organisation of school and entry age into school.

Curriculum change would prioritise teaching students what they need to know, not what always came back as the questions in examinations. It would also incorporate schools as communities which practiced self-reliance along with simple rather than sophisticated demonstration farms. He advocated downgrading the examination grading system because, although it acts as a critique of nepotism and tribalism, it is never a measure of capacity for critical judgment beyond regurgitation of facts. He equally autonomised primary school as an answer to “the problem of primary school leavers” which he explained in terms of pupils entering that level of education too early only to graduate at an age at which they are good for nothing else beyond having to proceed to the secondary school. But in his argument, the only true justification for secondary education in Tanzania is that “it is needed by the few for service to the many” as well as “the education which goes beyond seven years”, (1967: 424) that he argues the teacher in a seven-year primary school system to need.

50 Years After

By what overarching parameter might one assess the above checklist in terms of what could be called its merits and demerits in relation to today and the complexity enveloping it? In contemplating answer to this poser, it is worth recalling that, unlike today when political education is not a common attribute of political leadership in much of Africa,, almost all the first generation of African leaders at Independence were philosophers. Most of them had attended universities or equivalent training programmes in foreign countries such as the United States, Britain and France and they could problematise the society they were set to rule one way or the other. This is irrespective of whether we are talking of Zik, Nkrumah, Ahmadu Bello, Awo, Nyerere, Modibo Keita, Ahmed Ben Bella, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Aminu Kano, Mobutu Sese Seko and so on. As philosophers in their own right, each of them emerged with a paradigm they believed to be the best guide towards producing the sort of society they wanted. This was the case, from Senghor’s Negritude to Aminu Kano’s Democratic Humanism, Nkrumah’s Consciencism, Milton Obote’s *The Common Man’s Charter* or Awolowo’s Democratic Socialism, among others. As holistic claims, such paradigms contained intervention on every facet of society, be it social welfare, education, health, party building, organisation of government, etc.

In the case of Nyerere with whom we are concerned in this essay, his grand discourse was the *Ujamaa* and within which alone we can make sense of his argument on what education should aim at, what should be its content, who should have access to it and how it might best be organised. Kassam, relying on Gillette, therefore, made a very acceptable claim in tracing the context of Nyerere’s philosophy of education to the “realities of underdevelopment, perpetuated by colonialism and nascent capitalism in many Third World countries, including the United Republic of Tanzania”. He adds how it equally emerged as a critique of the “inherited Western model of education in a poor and developing country aspiring to a self-reliant and socialist development”, (Kassam, 1994: 247). What the above submission suggests is the specificity of the Nyerere philosophy of education to the immediate post colonial era in Africa when the task of nation building was the all consuming challenge. This context provides the single most important ground for assigning merit or otherwise since the educational philosophy was part and parcel of a broader strategy of confronting the overarching challenge identified.

Within this context, identifying merits and demerits must start with reckoning with the notion of African Socialism which was the broader strategy of nation building in the immediate post colonial era.

African leaders in what Datta, (2006) call the heydays of African Socialism, (1950-1970s) suffered from what another scholar called “the opium of Africanity”, (Onimode, 1988, cited in Datta, 2006:86). By that is meant that most of them subscribed to state and nation building based on idealisation of the African communal idyllic that predated colonialism. In spite of variations in that, they all share a rejection of class warfare as the route to Socialism essentialised by classical Marxism. They thought and some still think that it is possible to build a sharing, egalitarian society without the element of class warfare. African Socialism then became an attempt to Africanise Marxian Socialism and its egalitarian and anti-capitalist ethics but without accepting its rejection of religion. Hence the qualifiers that accompanied each variant such as Democratic Humanism, Negritude, Democratic Socialism, Ujamaa and so on.

If we follow this argument, we can construe the details Nyerere set out in “Education for Self-Reliance” as the educational face of *Ujamaa Vijijini*, taking note of Nyerere’s categorical declaration that “We want to create a Socialist society” (1967: 18). The contention here is that it is from this background that the question of possible merits and demerits of Nyerere’s philosophy of education can be determined, 50 years after it was espoused.

And, in doing that, one major, lasting merit of Nyerere’s philosophy of education relates to the insider status of the narrative as opposed to an outsider account. In other words, having been a teacher, Nyerere wrote about education as an insider. Insider-outsider dichotomy is under siege in the contention that meaning is a dialogic process. That does not function automatically to dismiss or undermine the specificity that underpins Nyerere’s argument. That is, whatever he said in his philosophy of education came from how he understood them from where he stood. The implication is the relative weight for his argument as articulated in the text in question even as they are open to deconstruction. The first merit is thus the methodological merit.

The other side of that argument, however, takes us to a major demerit in that post-positivism which holds insider account to be ‘sacrosanct’ also argues that discourses are about power because language use is always an attack or a defence of something in favour of the language user, (Grillo, 2005: 4). What this means is that Nyerere was not a neutral discussant in his philosophy of education. Rather, his ‘Education for Self-Reliance’ embodies a powerful attack on those that could/can be said to stand in opposition to his framing of the issue. This tends to present a contradiction since Nyerere wanted a harmonious society but since it was never the case and it is still not the case that everyone in Tanzania or any part of Africa accepted his own standpoint.

A second case to look at in terms of merit is the argument for government take – over of the organisation of education. In a developing society, this has merit because it disallows the reality of educational provisioning based on different proprietary ideologies, some even anti-thetical to the idea of ‘One Nation’ because of the externality of some of the ideological influences behind the diversity. In the context of compacting multi-ethnic state into being in the typical post-independent African state, a single source of authority in managing education speaks to the heart of the matter. The only drawback or demerit of Nyerere’s philosophy in this regard is its lack of provision for adjusting the rule book in this respect as society advances. Without such express provision, it would be difficult to imagine what his 1967 would look like in Tanzania of today, not to talk of the rest of Africa.

A third point on merits and demerits relates to what Linton regards as Nyerere’s privileging of ‘Thought Reform’ (1968: 3) as a key requirement for the success of *Ujamaa*, a position well defended by Nyerere when he said that institutions can be subverted if the human beings to run them lack the appropriate mental orientation. So, as we can see in his philosophy, he laid emphasis on principles of humility, hard work, commitment to certain ethics, anti-elitism and so on. But, as Linton also pointed out, Nyerere had little interest in the development of cadres. Linton does not agree that the Kivukoni College in Dar es Salaam was that sort of school even though it groomed a kind of cadres but mainly from the public service. The relevance of Linton’s observation to our discussion here is how Nyerere’s philosophy of education left unattended the question of who carries forward the ideals of both his philosophy and that of the broader *Ujamaa* without cadres. In other words, if we check the Tanzanian society today, are we likely to find the ideals of Nyerere’s philosophy of education entrenched? If the answer is no, would the main explanation be found outside the fact of Linton’s observation?

The fourth pair I raise here is the great idea of challenging colonially oriented curriculum and educational practices such as bookishness, separation of students from their local environments into being bred in boarding schools in a way that alienates them from the community.

Or his well made case that schools can be run in such a way that students contribute to making them partially self-supporting, especially in food production. In the process, the students also come to grips with the dignity of labour and the logic of self-reliance. Like previous merits, this too also has an other side. It lies in its disregard for the theory and practice of elite universities upon which the production of technocratic management of modernity depends. The way Nyerere framed his grand philosophy of education is to say the egalitarian society does not need expertise, a claim which is not sustainable if the history of development politics in Germany, Japan, Korea, Taiwan tells us anything. At the First National Conference of the College of Education of Veritas University, Abuja in Nigeria in May 32018, Prof Michael Adikwu, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Abuja who was the Keynote Speaker argued that the predominance of American universities in the first 15 positions in the global ranking of universities is a measure of the American economy. The implication is that, whether in the making and sustenance of the economies of the First World countries or in the rise of 'Third World' countries, elite universities were crucial. Nyerere either did not accept this or did not anticipate it.

Lastly, Nyerere makes a great point in seeing education as an instrument for social purpose, not a realm in which anything goes in a nation caught up in a vicious development crisis as immediate post independence Tanzania. His standpoint harmonises sensitive leadership with agenda setting leadership because it makes education an instrument. However, scholars such as Muideen, (2017) have echoed the assessment that no variants of African Socialism, of which Ujamaa is one, have brought anything substantial to the continent. The assessment is then that if that has been the case, then a system of education built on each of such variant of Socialism was bound to fail, logically. In other words, Ujamaa which shaped Nyerere's educational framework was problematic. This is a contestable argument but a very logical inference.

Conclusion

50 years after it was developed and argued out, Nyerere's philosophy of education remains engaging in terms of certain observable challenges in the domain of education. Defined as what speaks to the unfinished business of nation building such as the decolonisation of educational content, the re-orientation of students against elitism, the restructuring of school entry age to respond to a specific problem of scarcity and the question of making schools and pupils less parasitic on society, Nyerere's discourse offers many attractive options. On the other hand, each of these merits carried a contradiction that could undermine the essence of the educational philosophy. Nevertheless, Nyerere's philosophy of education provides a good case study in innovative and thoughtful leadership peculiar to that generation of African leaders. Typical of most African leaders of that generation who subscribed to African Socialism and which wrongly assumed a contradiction-free idyllic, Nyerere put a body of ideas on the table in terms of the way forward. His 'Education for Self-Reliance' remains an engaging text, not only in relation to the broader issues about education but after and beyond that domain. The body of ideas in question has been developed in such a way that it still provides society with a pathway. This is more so in relation to where Africa is today, developmentally speaking and the role of a more contextually sensitive educational ideology in social transformation.

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