I came to Tanzania for the first time in 1984, visiting Dar es Salaam, which then was a sandy city, not well lit, and on the wide boulevards that led to far away suburbs there were more buses than cars. Few hotels catered to foreign guests at the time and you had to pay in dollars. Julius Nyerere (everyone in Tanzania called him the Mwalimu, which meant teacher) was President of the country at the time and was one of the most deeply respected leaders in all of Africa. I had a very high opinion of Mr. Nyerere before coming to Tanzania. After I first arrived, my opinion of him sank when I visited the island of Zanzibar (which is part of Tanzania) and found it not only to be a police state, but very poor.

Before coming to Tanzania, I had met Walter Bgoya in Harare, Zimbabwe, at the Zimbabwe Book Fair, in early 1984 and he invited me to stay at his home in Dar es Salaam; that was the beginning of a long friendship and also of my Tanzanian education. Walter was head of the Tanzanian Publishing House (a parastatal, which is a socialist term for a government run company) and was a very important literary figure in the country. I met Ebrahim Hussein (a close friend of Walter’s), who was a playwright and poet. Our friendship has developed over time.

Ebrahim, a Muslim, also a professor at the university, seemed to be always angry with the Mwalimu (himself also a teacher) for one reason or another. First, Ebrahim felt the President had done very little to promote the coastal area of Tanzania, which was mostly Muslim. He was also mad because there was no road that led to Kilwa, his hometown and he blamed President Nyerere for this oversight too.

At the time, in 1984, I saw myself (perhaps naively so) as a Tanzaphile (someone who saw himself as a defender of Tanzanian socialism). Still, I felt that other Tanzaphiles were praising Nyerere for the wrong reasons: that he was a good economic leader but I didn’t think so. I edited an issue of Politique Africaine on the “economic transition” of Tanzania from socialism to a market economy and indeed it was. In 1985, Mr. Nyerere resigned as President of Tanzania and Ebrahim resigned from the university because he didn’t think anything was working in the country. The country was trying to find a new balance and a new momentum but it would take over a decade for Tanzania to begin to right itself. Still, at the same time I had grown to love the country, was drawn to it and I have come back many times over the years.
In 1985 Tanzania was still a sleepy and incoherent country, but in the nineties you could travel all over the country. In 1997 I began travelling by boat to Mtwara, then I went to Kigoma and Mbeya by train. I still feel that there are very few places in Africa where you can do such long and hazardous travels, in such a beautiful country without being harassed or attacked: Nyerere might not have been an economic genius but he understood some of the secrets of peacemaking. I began to rethink my negative assessment of Nyerere and begin to understand that he had a very important skill—that of a peacemaker—and that he was a great man on some levels. I find it strange that in 2011 there still is no published biography of the Mwalimu, Julius Nyerere transitioned in 1999.

A few facts: Julius Nyerere was born in Butiama, in 1914 and for all these years I thought this place was in Central Tanzania, but it isn’t. There is a Zanaki Street, named after his people, near the Cathedral in Dar es Salaam. I had only a vague idea of who the Zanaki people were and where they lived. Then I found out they didn’t really live in Central Tanzania but in the North, around the Serengeti, south of the Kenyan border, and it was not easy to reach. They lived not far from Lake Victoria though, around Musoma, which is, as I recently discovered, a nice, quiet town on the Lake. The Mara river flows into the lake north of the Musoma peninsula, and south of it lies Speke’s Gulf, also on Lake Victoria, where most probably Burton’s travel companion decided he had found the reservoir of the Nile! The peninsula almost reaches out to the Ukerewe islands, which has a small paradise of banana trees, lush greenery, where the Tanzanian writer Aniceti Kitereza (1896-1981) set the stage for his long novel, Myombekere. The novel (published by the Tanzania Publishing House and edited by Walter Bgoya) was written inikikerewe, which is not too different from kizanaki, and which is in the group of Kihaya (language group: Bantu wa Mazwi: Bantu from the Great Lake region).
As I wrote earlier, Julius Kambarare Nyerere was a man from the Great lakes and he went to Catholic School in Butiama, then to Tabora in Nymawezi land, then to Makerere—then taught in Catholic schools before going to Edinborough to study history. He came back to politics in the early fifties. Nyerere was a man of profound historical consciousness and he chose the unity of Tanganyika and Kiswahili, against those of the Lake politics. When he built a house for himself when he was President, he took care not to erase the rock paintings that were in his seating room. For thousands of years people had lived there and many had been agriculturalists. The British Institute is now digging in the islands of Lake Victoria, unearthing remnants of lost, forgotten big African kingdoms. The history of this part of the world is today being rewritten and Julius Nyerere knew he was helping to build something important for history.

With this realization, I felt we needed to make a documentary about Tanzania and Nyerere, so we embarked on making a film on Nyerere’s dream: a film about speaking Kiswahili, which would be a film about a language, like Nurith Avis’s film on Hebrew, Misafa Lesafa. We asked Walter Bgoya to collaborate and went together to Butiama. Walter knows the language of this area, knows how to speak to the people in this area about Nyerere’s swahili dream, and about his dream of peace.

Butiama is a pleasant place and it is where the former president built a house for himself: his widow still lives there. The government added another house. In the village there is the house he lived in: a sculptor carved the Mwalimu in wood. In his garden there is another sculptor bust cast in bronze. The two houses are facing a garden, in the garden are the tombs of his parents and a small mausoleum for the president. His tomb is covered with flowers and his burial site is beautiful. Large rocks surround the houses of the compound. On top of one rock there is a Mwenge, recalling Mount Kilimanjaro. On another stands a statue of the Virgin Mary, reminding visitors that the family has been deeply influenced recently by Marian cults. Also, in 2005, the Vatican agreed to start the process that could eventually lead to the beatification of the Mwalimu.
His birthplace is not only a historical site of memory, it also has become a pilgrimage site for visitors. We filmed Walter in the garden, had long conversations with Madaraka, Nyerere’s son; he runs the Foundation in charge of the house. Madaraka is well travelled, competent, humorous, writes columns for the Tanzanian press. He is a warm host and a true intellectual. Our Kenyan driver, Stamford, could not believe a President had lived in this compound, in an unguarded area, that he had a Chinese tricycle in his garage. No barbed wire, no electric gates were built on his property, no snarling pit bulls roamed the grounds of his compound to guard against possible intruders. Our driver could not get over the difference between his country north of the Mara and Tanzania, where he had never been before coming here. And he seemed very, very happy to realize indeed there was a difference in this place, and that probably was also a dream of Julius Nyerere.

Sources


Aniceti Kitereza, Bwima Myombere ne Bidi Bugonoka, Dar es Salaam Tanzania publishing house, 1980 (English translation, Dar es Salaam; Mkuki na Nyota, 2002).
