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Feeling Mwalimu Nyerere Intellectual Festival (/pan-africanism/feeling-mwalimu-nyerere-intellectual-festival)



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Njuki Githethwa (/author/njuki-githethwa) | Jul 06, 2018

The author shares his experiences during this year's Mwalimu Nyerere Intellectual Festival, which was the 10th edition of that event that celebrates the life and legacy of President Julius Nyerere.

The festival starts for us at the Airport named after him; Julius Nyerere International Airport, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. His memory is a presence in this country. It crushes out of his name and observes from the shadows. My friend Gacheke and I arrive in the company of his greatness.

We are received at the airport by a companion in high spirits. His smile spreads across his face and infects me to return a smile the same way. It is a bad attempt. I feel mine has been trapped in the corners of my mouth.

“I am Tumbu from JULAWATA!” he tells us.

JULAWATA is short for *Jukwaa la Wajamaa Tanzania*, Tanzanian Socialist Forum. I get his name easily. It is close to *tumbo*, stomach, company always, making and remaking us.

We agree with Tumbu to await the arrival of two other guests. He disappears into the airport crowd. We mark time on the seats. The space around is crowded by people of all kinds, different nationalities. People reduced to common status by the dictates of the space.

Tumbu returns shortly. He is accompanied by two companions from South Africa. One is tall, light skinned, medium sized body. His smile is a grin. My smile feels comfortable in his. We embrace with Kamanzi like we have known each other for ages. His companion is Rakei, younger, a little dark skinned, slender as his age. His hair is a kind of rasta; not the Bob Marley roots Rasta. The thick mass of his dark hair shoots upwards like Mau Mau spikes. Rakei smile rivals that of Tumbu, only a little wider, bigger and diverse as his *soi-disant* rainbow nation. I feel younger and slimmer in their presence.

Tumbu hands us his mobile phone. Professor Penina Mlamba is on the line. She is the chair of Mwalimu Nyerere Intellectual Festival. She officially welcomes us to Tanzania and to the festival.

*

There is peculiar calmness in Dar es Salaam. The calmness hugs heavy in the humid air. It is reserved on the faces of the people on the streets. It is reflected on the buildings. The character of the city is calm. This calmness is only betrayed by the chaotic traffic jams on the streets, lawless and ruthless, humankind organising their confusion.

Our driver escapes the traffic jams by slipping through alternative inner city roads. We arrive in a shorter time than we might have at the University of Dar es Salaam – the host and venue of the festival. The University is a huge estate, a small town actually, much unlike other city universities I know that are squeezed in afterthought spaces.

The festival starts with a procession from the Council Chambers to Nkrumah Hall – the distinguished venue of the festival. Nkrumah’s memory and legacy, akin to Nyerere’s bestride dinosaur like on this continent, unparalleled, irreplaceable, questioning our existence and the meaning of our struggles.

The festival opens with the national anthem of the Republic of Tanzania, same tune as South Africa’s *Nkosi sikelel’ iafrika*. I sing along in my heart the Kenyan version of the song, *wimbo wa mapambano*, song of struggle, same tune.

Kupigwa na kupokonywa maisha

Hakutatuzuia sisi wanainchi

Kunyakuwa uhuru wetu

Na haki ya jasho letu...

Professor Mlama is a self-effacing don. Her attire is as ordinary as her demeanour. She has an aura of simplicity and humility that carries her along and comes out unfettered in her big smile, half laughter. She welcomed all of us when we arrived at the University. Now she welcomes everyone to the 10th Mwalimu Nyerere Intellectual Festival.

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The installation of Mwalimu Nyerere Distinguished Lecturer is a ceremony. It begins with song and dance by artists from Bagamoyo College of Art and Design. Their rhythms and sounds jerk the audience to their feet. Ululations somewhere, whistles and cajoles, everywhere. The festival ushers guide the distinguished lecturer to the stage. He is from South Africa. He is unpretentious. His smile enlivens the stage. Post-colonial smiles have twisted our mouths. Smiles lost in sneers and suspicions. Smiles to survive the betrayals and angsts of the times. His smile is shared across by many of us. He is Professor William Gumede, School of Governance, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa.

The chair of the festival and the Vice-Chancellor of Dar University places on his shoulders the symbolic clothe. Now he is formally the distinguished lecturer of this festival. That part of the ceremony is over. He strides to the podium. I expect him to shoot straight arrows of knowledge. The title of his lecture is interesting: "Rethinking African Decolonisation." He throws many arrows of knowledge. I manage to intercept a few, crudely. "Africa's dependence on foreign aid and support for its survival is a shame." I feel it. "Restoring the dignity of this continent is the imperative of all of us." Applause.

But wait, how, when? "We should focus on the human capital in Africa as the power. The ideological rigidity must come to an end. We need to pursue a hybrid model" I wanted to ask, I didn't: If Africa takes a little of something from somewhere, wherever, what would this continent be? A mongrel of ideologies. A continent with a mangled identity. When you have nothing of your own, you lose everything else. "Seventy percent of the members of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party are engineers. Commerce and Industry is taking over." Africa should not be on this gravy train. We are on our own. We must do something. This is an understatement. It is rephrased in my mind by another scholar. Ali Mazrui in one of his films, *Africa: A Triple Heritage*. We must produce what we consume and consume what we produce.

His arrows of knowledge are over for me. His lecture has ended. He awaits reactions. Someone from Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy quotes Winston Churchill: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, they must end in the minds of men." And rephrases: "Since colonialism starts in the minds of colonisers, decolonisation must start from the minds of the colonised."

I recline on my seat. The lecture with myself has ended as well. Decolonising our minds. This is a straight shooting arrow to end the lecture. We go out for a short break.

*

Taking refreshments during the break is a class struggle. The privileged are having them inside the Council Chambers. The rest in long queues at the back of Nkrumah Hall. Nyerere stares helplessly from his image on the wall. This is out of his character. His memory is haunting.

Shortly, we are exhorted back to the hall where the so-called voices from the grassroots are assembling. The presenters here talk about the effects of commercial mining and farming in various rural communities in Tanzania. Theirs is a story much like anywhere else in this continent. Natural resources that should be free for everyone are possessed, commercialised and exploited for private gain. People are disposed of their natural heritage. They have become stakes in the lottery of casino economies. This country should be different.

Mwalimu Nyerere wielded the big whip against the exploitation of Africa's natural resources for private capital. He raged against the exploitation of the people, the owners of the land. This is why we are assembled here in his name.

Is everything lost? Is there any hope for Africa?

The youth in their session argue they are well positioned to protect Africa's natural resources. The education and language session is about education for the liberation of minds. Colonial languages were imperial agents in the scramble and exploitation of Africa. Colonial languages are still dividing and ruling this continent. Kiswahili is an African language for reclaiming and possessing Africa's heritage and dignity in ourselves. Naming, liberating and uniting Africa with our tongues. Language is the first and last colony.

But even Kiswahili has a long road to travel. Even this festival is largely in English. I am writing this in English. Only Tanzanians in this festival have the confidence to speak fluently in Kiswahili. Members of JULAWATA are best at it. They dissect and distil global politics and ideologies in Kiswahili in the context of local realities like child play. My Kiswahili feels suicidal.

*

Kamanzi, the companion from South Africa we met at the airport is on the education forum. He talks about the Arusha Declaration of 1967 in Tanzania and the self-reliance movement. They were inspired by Nyerere's *Ujamaa* model of education for self-reliance in their struggles for alternative forms of education in his country. He tells about the fees must fall movement in South Africa. The carrying over some of the ideals of the movement into Pathways for Free Education, their collective struggling for free education for all. Free education for everyone as a weapon of struggle for freedoms and equity. Education for liberation, not for the marketplace. Paulo Freire takes his side. Education to read and name the word and the world. Education is politics. It is never neutral. For whom and for what I educate, and against whom I educate. On whose side are we? Freire asks. Education is either in favour of domination or emancipation.

Education cannot exist in isolation of the circumstances in the society. Education engages either critically or through the culture of silence. It is a political choice. "To wash one's hands in the face of oppression is to re-enforce the power of the oppressor and to side with him!" Freire states. Their arguments are home and dry.

*

Rakei, the other companion from South Africa comes on stage on the last day of the festival. He presents about the International Finance Capital: The role of colonial economics in shaping the underdevelopment of Africa. He shares the stage with Professor Peter Lawrence who presents about Corporate Power and the State and its relationship to the scramble for Africa's natural resources. They bash capitalism, the system in which a handful of wealthy people and advanced countries are financially strangling and oppressing a great majority of world population. Mwalimu Nyerere understood capitalism simply: "Capitalism means that the masses will work, and a few people – who may not labour at all – will benefit from that work! The few will sit down to a banquet, and the masses will eat whatever is left over."

The world's wealthiest people, one percent of all humankind now owns half of the global wealth. The wealthy become philanthropists after thriving on the sweat and blood of workers who cannot make ends meet. It is obscene that a brand celebrity earns millions from a shoe factory that the worker, the mender of the shoes and dependants will never make in a lifetime.

Capitalism copulates well with imperialism, the world system in which powerful capitalist countries dictate oppressive economic terms to weaker countries and exploit them by different means. International finance capital is the tendency of capitalism to conquer the international character and masquerade as the world economy. Imperialism is the empire of capitalism.

Nasoro Kitunda from JULAWATA puts it academically: This is the hegemony of capitalism. Its ideology is imperialism, its theory is neoliberalism and its politics is commodification, privatisation, economic disarticulation and dispossession, dollarisation of the economy, militarisation, entrepreneurship and other outgrowths of capitalism.

They echo Lenin: *Imperialism is the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. The function of the international financial capital (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Financial_capital) in generating profits ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Profit_\(economics\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Profit_(economics))) from imperialist (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperialism>) colonialism (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exploitation_colonialism) as the final stage of capitalist (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capitalism>) development to ensure greater profits. Kwame Nkrumah clarifies context: *Neo-Colonialism is the Last Stage of Imperialism*. Neo-colonialism represents imperialism in its final and most dangerous stage. The nature of neo-colonialism is that the state, which is subject to it, is in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. But in reality its economic system and political policy is directed from outside.

The presenters bring home the reality that the expansion of imperialism has not been changed by the national liberation struggles that resulted in the achievement of national independence in former colonial countries. International finance capital still demands that what is crucial for developing countries is the drive for capitalist economic hegemony on the waves of imperialism. The waves of imperialism have closed in on us, organised, while the forces of progressive Pan Africanism are still agonising on the shores.

The session I am involved in is on day two of the festival. I am on the panel with the indefatigable companions from JULAWATA. One is on my right. The heavy locks of his rasta hair, thick as roots of a baobab tree stretch out of his thread rasta cap, evidently in a struggle to be set free from the captivity of the cap. His name is Muhemsi. On my left is Ntile, the panel moderator, the ever smiling companion, humble to a fault. The unrehearsed humility I fear, too careful to hurt in any way. On the left of the moderator is another companion whose name is various extractions of your Highness. Her name is Bweye. The stage is ready.

The moderator introduces us and the topic of our presentations: “Africa’s quest for cultural identity, self-determination and the socio-economic liberation of the poor – lessons from Mwalimu Nyerere.” I am the first presenter in this session. I try to do it in Kiswahili, to translate thoughts of Nyerere, Cabral, Fanon, among other Pan Africanists on the centrality of culture in the liberation of the people. I am trying to say in limping Kiswahili that Mwalimu Nyerere was the epitome in Africa’s quest for cultural identity, self-determination and socio-economic liberation of the poor. In his simple and modest life, his practices, speeches and writings as President of Tanzania and global statesman, he laid out the vision and path ingrained in the philosophy and practices of *Ujamaa* and self-reliance that his country and other countries in the global South need to follow to realise meaningful liberation of the people.

I discuss about Africa’s quest for cultural identity, self-determination and the socio-economic liberation of the poor as exemplified in the life, practices, speeches and writings of Mwalimu Nyerere. But my Kiswahili does not seem to convince even me. I feel as though I have scattered my thoughts all over the place without any anchor idea. Memusi, my fellow presenter rescues my guilt. He delivers his organised presentation in flawless Kiswahili. The audience is applauding continuously to each drop of his words. I am his audience too. At some point in his presentation, my spirit abandons my body and joins the audience on the front row to stare him straight to his face. He twirls words in his bass voice, spitting venom to capitalism and imperialism that are massacring people’s culture and decimating the identity, pride and oneness of this country and Africa. This man can speak on to eternity. His audience is sold out by his thoughts and oratory. We urge him on. The moderator is not covered. He shows him his time is up and hands over the stage to Your Highness.

Your Highness Bweye is a petite, slim and jovial lady of medium height, modest as many other companions from JULAWATA, the ideological offsprings of Mwalimu Nyerere. We met her when we arrived in the company of fellow comrades. She hugged everyone widely and warmly. That kind of hug that is an art: organised, sincere and haunting. The comradely hug she now radiates in spirits to an excited audience as she speaks of the colonising imperial cultures that have destroyed the self-identity, self-determination and the socio-economic fabric of Africa and her people. Her Kiswahili is flawless, really beautiful, interjected by jocular words and her snippets of mirth carrying along her spellbound audience.

JULAWATA comrades have organised their presentations. They have written them systematically on paper into long essays. They have summarised the theory and practices on socialism in the local and continental context in simple and buoyant Kiswahili that the audience shows to feel and accept in their loud applause and approving gestures. They meet every Saturday afternoon for ideological classes. Memusi is the coordinator of their ideological classes. They usually meet at the compound of an adult education school in the city. We pay them a

solidarity visit on a Saturday after the end of the festival. About 30 members have assembled. Tumbu, the unassuming companion who received us at the airport is also a singer, dancer, mobiliser and leader of causes for African liberation.

*

Tumbu leads in singing songs of struggle and liberation from all over the world. Many songs are from South Africa where stories and songs of resistance seem to be profound, enduring infectious and dramatic.

“From Cape to Cairo, Morocco to Madagascar...” The Pan-African song floats. I hear it often sung by militants from the Economic Freedom Fighters down South.

“My father was a garden boy, my mother was a kitchen girl, and that’s why I am a socialist!”

This is sung with the trepidation of guerrilla fighters ready for anything. I see in my mind Matlawe, a companion associated with the Housing Assembly in Cape Town stomping this song wherever he can in comrades gatherings. His body jerks with the rhythms as his voice soars with its possessive spirits. We sing about Solomon Mahlangu, the young South African (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Africa) operative of Umkhonto we Sizwe (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umkhonto_weSizwe) hanged in 1979. Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba come alive here chanting Vuyisile Mini’s ominous song loosely translated as Beware the Black man, Verwoerd, a rallying cry for many struggles for liberation in South Africa and other colonial states.

Only a few of us are able to match Tumbu’s energy and enthusiasm. I try, but I am more of a third eye of the boundless energies in this gathering. I see Karimi Nduthu singing these songs before he was assassinated in 1996 by the undercover security operatives of the dictatorship in Kenya. I sing in my heart one of the songs he loved.

“Nataka roho yangu. Iende kulinda ardhi yetu. Uhuru uangaze Kenya. Tulenge lengo la Ukombozi...”

But the songs and dances have to be suspended. The spirits of the songs hung in the air like protective ancestors. We sit down in a circular manner like a common elders meeting. Monica, a companion resplendent in an African outfit moderates the discussions. She is a member of JULAWATA and speaks Kiswahili so fluently to the chagrin of most of us native Africans. She rolls out words in Kiswahili, easily moderating in a language she has embraced and keeps learning in the course of her interactions with ordinary people and her comrades.

We share experiences of the struggles in South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, elsewhere in Africa and the world by companions from *Ujamaa* Collective, the Pan African Network. JULAWATA is a member of *Ujamaa* Collective. So are Azimio Movement and Mathare Social Justice Centre in Kenya, Pathways to Free Education and Housing Assembly in South Africa, Left Roots in United States of America, among other movements, collectives, groups, spaces and like struggles for a just social order.

We present books to JULAWATA from Ukombozi Library in Nairobi. Ukombozi means liberation in Kiswahili. The library has an extensive collection of books and publications that have inspired cadres of liberation movements in Kenya and many other parts in the world. Exploits of Mau Mau, Kenya People’s Union, December Twelve

Movement, Mwakenya, UWAKE, Saharawi, Palestine, among other past and contemporary struggles roam freely on many pages here. This is a pool of knowledge and inspiration for the revolution.

The library is in an ancient building across the street from the University of Nairobi's main campus. It is on the left after the flyover along University Way, the first small cream door on the left towards Nairobi Safari Club. The staircase leading to the library is narrow and creaky. Take care not to trip down. Walk up to the second floor. Kimani Waweru will be there. He is the coordinator of the library. When Kimani smiles, other smiles around pale into tackle-less grins. His is scientific. It comes out in measured laughter. The knowing smile and laughter discerning antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions in our struggles.

Kimani speaks of scientific socialism as easily as reciting a verse. Thousands of books and publications are present here, engaged in all manner of lovemaking. Choice is spoilt.

"Pick any book you may like." Kimani urges. It is 1,000 Kenya Shillings, about US \$10 to register as a member of the library. "Rush here while the offer lasts." He warns.

*

Friends of Kigoda, as Mwalimu Nyerere Intellectual Festival is popularly known locally are recognised on the morning of day two of the festival. Many are recognised, including Professor Issa Shivji, the founder Chair of the festival. He is currently the Director of Nyerere Resource Centre. "Shivji is a veteran of the unapologetic leftist intelligentsia to whom honour is due." The late Doctor Tajudeen Abdul – Raheem wrote of him on the occasion of his retirement from the University of Dar es Salaam. "He may be retired but he is certainly not tired", Tajudeen maintained.

Professor Mlama presents Shivji with a gift of Kigoda publications and another sealed gift. Gacheke and I are also recognised. I can identify the publications. I am curious to know what the sealed gift could be. My fingers are itchy to open it here and now. No, an inner voice cautions. Do not open this gift in the presence of its givers. This will kill its excitement. I cannot wait to unwrap it. Gacheke is a regular of the festival. He and Mulialia, another companion from Kenya had travelled by bus to the very first festival having struggled to raise the bus fare. They lodged in modest surroundings close to the venue from where they walked daily to the festival. The festival participants at the instigation of Shivji contributed their fare back to Nairobi.

Now Gacheke and I have been put by the festival organisers in an upmarket hotel. Gacheke calls it a bourgeoisie hotel. I often hear that the kind of bed in this room is known as King Size. That when sleeping on such a bed, you are supposed to feel like a king, dream like a king and behave like a king. The bed is so huge. It invites loneliness. I spread the gifts on the bed to atone its demons of solitude. The wrapped gift is a beautiful cup produced to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the festival. It is inscribed on one side with the image of Nyerere surrounded by the name of the festival in Kiswahili, *Kigoda cha Taaluma Cha Mwalimu Nyerere*.

10th Anniversary is engraved below the emblem of the festival. The other side of the cup is the emblem of the University of Dar es Salaam. The motto of the University in Kiswahili is captivating, *Hekima ni Uhuru*, Wisdom is Freedom, very Nyerere like.

*

JULAWATA takes over the stage again on the third day of the festival, just before the closing ceremony. They present on democracy in Africa and empowerment for control of Africa's natural resources. They have a firebrand woman on the stage who is introduced as coming from the grassroots unlike the other presenters who are university students.

"Democracy for me is not about the big and complicated words being said in this forum." She says. "It is about the right to food, the right to good housing, the right to good health, the right to breath, basic rights. It is about my children's school fees, about the prevalent unemployment. Why we are paid such low salaries, why there is corruption. It is about our basic survival..." She goes on and on. Kido, the session moderator urges her on. Time is running out for the closing ceremony. The session master of ceremonies whispers to Kido to end the session. Kido declines. He says that professors and the so-called big people were given all the time to speak in various sessions of the festival.

"Now that a grassroots woman who does not speak in your language, big words and terminologies is addressing the forum, you want her to stop. She will not. It is our turn to speak. Continue!" He urges her on.

He is applauded loudly by sections of the audience, especially students. They are rebelling against authority. This is said in a subtle manner by the master of ceremonies when Kido finally hands her back the stage. .

"This is how dictatorship sets in! What you have done will be copied by another and another. Finally, there will be no order." She says.

*

The closing ceremony of the festival is short. It is officiated by the chair of the festival and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Dar es Salaam.

We linger behind after the closing ceremony to exchange niceties of the festival and for photo sessions. Vitali Maembe is around. Maembe is a seasoned musician from Tanzania. He lightened up break-out sessions at various times of the festival. He is a regular in many fronts of African liberation events and struggles. His songs of protest and liberation are his weapons in the struggle. He irks oppression and dictatorship anywhere, especially the governments of his country. He is beloved by audiences. Most of us shot up from our seats and danced to the rhythms and sounds of his music several times during the festival. The aftermath is the flurry of photo sessions and selfies with him going on after the closing ceremony.

Book sellers outside the festival venue are closing up too. We had brought a load of books from Ukombozi Library, some to sell, some to donate to JULAWATA library, but mainly to sell.

First day, no copy sold.

Second day, no copy sold.

We reduce the prices of the books.

Still no copy sold.

We cannot reduce the prices anymore.

This is like giving them away for free.

Third day, last day, all the books are sold out.

We had placed the books on the long table in the tent of the organisers of the festival alongside their publications.

The lady who assisted to sell the books is grinning widely:

“I was losing hope. “ She says. “Look, now they are all gone.”

“*Ahsante sana!*” It’s all I could say, short of words.

Readers view the books on the first day like they are just another lifeless pile of knowledge. On the second day, the pile of knowledge gains life. The books invite random browsing and sampling. On the third day, last day, the readers and the books are in love. The lovers do not want to leave each other. They carry along those ready and willing for long lasting love. All the lovers are now gone. The money sold does not seem a worthy sacrifice from the lovers. But it will support to produce and bring more lovers together at Ukombozi Library and other places, other times.

Africa Dinner night is the final curtain of the festival. It is being held at House No. 1, University Road. We walk there, along the university streets and roads. This University is a busy small town. *Dala Dalas*, the public service vehicles are plying the streets of the university in their usual chaos and disorder. The grounds of the dinner venue are bedecked in colourful tents. Chairs look like seated people all clad in white. DJ music is booming from big speakers. Maembe packs his guitar. He is leaving for home. I had expected him to grace the dinner with his music. He will not. The DJ rules the airwaves tonight.

There is so much meat here and other food; sodas, water, juices, beers. Beers run out quickly. There is some dancing at the front. University dons dance alongside their students. The floor is open. Everybody dance! The atmosphere is riveting. Everyone leaves at own pleasure. Till next year.

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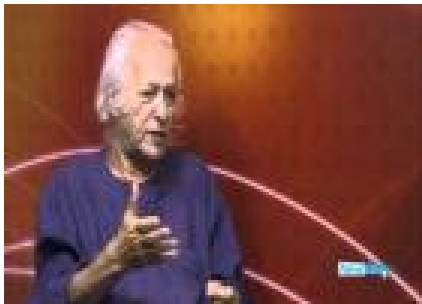


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