

Molony, Thomas: *Nyerere. The Early Years*. Woodbridge, Suffolk & Rochester: James Currey 2016. ISBN: 978-1-84701-150-3; 302 S.

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Thomas Molony, senior lecturer of African Studies at the University of Edinburgh, claims in his introduction to *Nyerere. The Early Years* that no adequate biography of the leading figure of Tanzania's independence had been published until that moment. His book came out in 2016 to partly fill that gap by providing a rich chronological account of the first thirty years of Nyerere's life. He draws upon an extensive corpus of secondary literature, archival material from personal and public collections in Edinburgh and Dar es Salaam as well as interviews. It is probably this assemblage of sources and the way Molony braids them together that provides a unique glimpse into the formative years of 'Baba wa Taifa', the father of the nation.

The introductory words prepare the reader to navigate between the fields of historical and biographical writing, a combination that is still to inspire deeper reflections on its full potential for the study of the past.¹ The author addresses some of the challenges that encompass the writing of lives, particularly when the subject is a prominent figure whose public memory still stirs a huge degree of devotion.² Nonetheless, Molony seems to have circumvented them by, first, narrowing the scope to the early years (1922–1952) and thus evading the controversies of Nyerere's later period as statesman, and second, substantiating informants' statements with written primary sources and a thorough selection of secondary sources. It becomes obvious from the very first pages that Molony conducted in-depth research on previous studies dealing directly or indirectly with Nyerere's biography, aiming at understanding the personal and political circumstances that surrounded the elaboration of these accounts and which may have interfered with the interpretations of certain episodes and the subsequent mythicization of

particular personality traits.

His portrait of a young Nyerere is intrinsically connected to the places where he was born, lived, studied, and held his first positions as teacher ('Mwalimu'). The chapters of the book are clustered accordingly, drawing a geography of transits where tribal settings and customs intersect with colonial and metropolitan scenarios. This spatial approach provides the frame for studying the intellectual, political or social influences he was exposed to, as well as the impact of his performance in different contexts throughout the years. By pinning down the individual, he brings about a series of insights about the imperial politics of the moment. Issues of racism, colonial educational policies for African elites or the spread of anti-imperialist sentiments among the educated few open up the scope to a wider historical perspective, as it has been similarly addressed in other biographical works about prominent African figures like Nkrumah or Kenyatta.³

The opening chapter reveals the many layers that interact in his origins as 'Kambarage Nyerere', the son of a Zanaki tribal chief of Butiama. It digs into the ancestral beliefs, practices and institutions that shaped his first understandings of the world, on the one hand, and the impact of colonial rule on certain aspects of this traditional society, on the other.

Chapter two expands on his first years in the village, combining descriptive passages about his family life with more interpretative readings of his rural although privileged upbringing as the chief's son. This chapter also includes an analysis of his spiritual and educational transition from a traditional

¹ Esperanza Brizuela-García, *The Past Never Stays Behind: Biographical Narrative and African Colonial History*, in: *Journal of Historical Biography* 2 (2007), pp. 63–83, p. 65; David Nasaw, *Historians and Biography*. Introduction, in: *The American Historical Review* 114/3 (2009), pp. 573–778, p. 573.

² Simeon Mesaki and Mrisho Malipula, *Julius Nyerere's influence and legacy: From a proponent of familyhood to a candidate for sainthood*, in: *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 3/3 (2011), p. 93–100, p. 99.

³ Marika Sherwood, *Kwame Nkrumah: The Years Abroad, 1935–47*. Freedom Publications, Legon 1996; Alex Free, *Jomo Kenyatta, LSE and the independence of Kenya*. LSE History blog, October 11, 2017.

belief system to Christianity and from the Native Authority School in Mwisenge to the elitist Tabora Government School, popularly known as „the Eton of Tanganyika“ (p. 54). Molony’s reconstruction of Nyerere’s time in Tabora is especially critical on „the morality tales“ that tend to capitalize on anecdotes about his extraordinary sense of justice or that attribute him dubious merits like that of being the founder of the school debating society. Despite the challenge to balance these narratives by relying on original references, the author’s exercise of combining previously unknown sources like unpublished memoirs or personal correspondence with „confident conjecture“ (p. 5) renders a more human image of the young student educated under the strict control of the British colonial administration.

The third chapter follows Nyerere’s spiritual evolution, which culminates with his baptism and a change of name –from Kambarage to Julius– as well as his move from Tabora to Makerere College in Uganda, where he studied a teacher training course. Moving closer to more personal aspects, chapter four elaborates on some crucial decisions he faced after graduation: workplace, marriage, and educational path. Shedding light on the decision-making process, the author emphasizes certain values and traits of Nyerere’s personality at the time. It initially locates Nyerere on a series of in-between situations: salary and career prospects within the colonial educational system vs. the less ambitious working environment of a catholic school; pursuing higher education abroad vs. engaging deeper on political activities at home; customary practices vs. his personal and catholic-informed stances towards private life. This is probably one of the richest chapters since it approaches the protagonist from multiple dimensions while introducing other central figures like his child bride, or his fiancé and later wife, Maria Nyerere.

The following four chapters focus on the three years Nyerere spent in the United Kingdom. Loyal to the hybridity of the genre, the author delves into the singularities of the political and social atmosphere that characterize this period of his life in order to hint at events and encounters that might have in-

fluenced him. Molony exploits others’ anecdotes such as Nyerere’s love for *The Scotsman’s* crosswords to explore the potential impact of extracurricular activities on his development. „Hazarding a guess on what Nyerere might have listened to would be nothing more than pure conjecture“ (p. 124) – warns Molony about his exposure to media–however, his meticulous analysis of newspaper articles about Scottish nationalism or the race question in South Africa and the comparison with texts written by Nyerere at the time, backed up the author’s hypothesis of a broader involvement of the young Tanganyikan with the world beyond the university walls.

Unlike other authors that overemphasize the influence of left-leaning politics on his years in Edinburgh⁴, Molony claims that Nyerere’s eagerness to read and his „curiosity towards progressive academic European views on Africa“ (p. 146) were likely more relevant than any involvement with a concrete ideology or political association. Following this trail, the author leads the reader through an accurate appraisal of the mandatory readings from the courses he took on politics, philosophy, economics, history and anthropology, with the main goal of drawing links between the theoretical grounding he gained while studying in Edinburgh and his later speeches and writings. While his approach may initially sound unreliable and vague, Molony has successfully managed to create an entertaining narrative that breaks down the most abstract theories and concepts by providing concise and practical examples that leave little room to doubt about the profitability of this academic literature for his intellectual maturity.

As Molony acknowledges in the conclusive chapter, „it is very difficult to demonstrate a definite instrumental link between Nyerere’s educational career and choices and the development of his political ideology, but it is possible to argue for a non-instrumental link“ (p. 202). Here lies though the originality of his

⁴ Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals*. Routledge, London 2003; Bonny Ibhawoh and J.I. Dibua, *Deconstructing Ujamaa: The Legacy of Julius Nyerere in the Quest of Social and Economic Development in Africa*, in: *African Journal of Political Science* 8/1 (2003), pp. 59–83, p. 62.

contribution, a critical portrayal which „gives volume to some silences“ (p. 199) about Nyerere’s formative years but also an exhaustive study that enhances the broader discussion on the foundations of ‘Ujamaa’ and African socialism or post-colonial politics in East Africa. All in all, Molony’s work transcends the limits of biographical writing and provides, through an actor-centred perspective, relevant hints on integral topics for the study of 20th century transnational history as the circulation of African elites, the role of religious missions in promoting Africans’ mobility or the functioning of metropolitan milieus where anticolonial solidarities unfurled.

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