

News/Feature

"Ujamaa" - Tanzanian style

This is the first of a series of articles on Africa.

by Nancy K. Cameron

"The essence of socialism is the practical acceptance of human equality. That is to say, every man's equal right to a decent life before any individual has a surplus above his needs;...and his equal responsibility to work and contribute to the society to the limit of his ability."

- Dr. Julius Nyerere

"Ujamaa" is an African word which can be roughly translated as "togetherness." When a man from the small, northern, Zanaki tribe became the first President of the newly-declared Republic of Tanzania in 1962, "ujamaa" took on a much deeper shade of meaning. President Julius Nyerere introduced it as the basis for a whole economic system for his East African country.

In traditional society in Tanzania, each extended family operated in a spirit of cooperation, working together to benefit each individual and thus to benefit the group as a whole. Subsistence agriculture was the main activity, and remains so today, engaging 85% of the population.

Cooperation was shown, not only in the fields and grazing lands, but also in the daily life of the village. For example, today it is still the custom for funeral arrangements to be looked after completely by the fellow villagers of a grieving family; the elders prepare the body and set the burial date, young people prepare the grave, and the whole village population turns out for the actual burial. Sometimes the bereaved family will hold a thank-you dance for the villagers forty days after the burial. It is a reflection of the practice of community self-help.

Nyerere simply applied this existing principle of ujamaa to society as a whole. Under his leadership, Tanzanians began to work cooperatively beyond the extended family, taking on projects of national scope.

Under ujamaa as a larger system, the first step in any proposed project is to form a work group. If the undertaking is quite extensive, a sub-committee is also formed. The committee serves to make recommendations to the group; at no time are its decisions imposed upon the group. The group shares the

committee's recommendations with the villagers, and the people as a whole make any decisions. Under agreement with the Tanzanian government, the village carries out its share of the project and, when those terms have been fulfilled, the government provides the services it has promised. For instance, in the case of an institution, the villagers might provide the materials and the labour to build the base and walls, and the government supplies the roofing material.

In addition to the projects operating at the community level, Nyerere initiated a program of "national service" at the level of the individual citizen. Upon graduating from school with an "A-Level" certificate (Advanced-Level, according to the British education system), each student serves in the national service for one year. Half the year is spent at CTS (Central Training School), where the first three months are designed to build up physical strength and to teach military drills, and the next three months are used to familiarize the student with military equipment and military operations. After the initial six-month period, the student moves from the CTS to a Service Camp. (The location may be the same.) Although living in military barracks, the student (unless wishing to make a career in the military) works outside the camp for the remaining six months, in the profession of his or her choice.

Students who leave school before the A-Level also must do national service, if they opt to take any sort of specialized training of a duration longer than nine months. National service is not compulsory for students leaving school at "O-Level" (Ordinary-Level) or lower, but such students may join voluntarily, and can serve for up to three years.

Nyerere's ujamaa went beyond individuals and communities. He felt that togetherness, a togetherness which will encompass an entire nation, makes it necessary to impose a commonality upon all the various tribes which co-exist within that geographic area. There are over 120 ethnic groups in Tanzania; any

policy introduced at the time of independence which would promote ethnic differences would run the risk of splintering the country. Nyerere designated one official language—Ki-Swahili—not the language of his own



Maasai boys at initiation ceremony

Nancy Cameron photo

small natal group) as the language to be spoken by all Tanzanians. Ki-Swahili is the language of instruction in all Tanzanian schools for the first seven years of education, with English taught as one course. (Beyond that point, due to the fact that textbooks at a more advanced technical level are not available in Ki-Swahili, and that many students will complete their higher education somewhere in the Western hemisphere, the language of instruction is English, and Ki-Swahili is offered as one course.)

To further develop the theme of sameness, Nyerere made public services and utilities equally available to people at all levels of society. A teacher by profession, he offered free education throughout Primary School (seven years), Secondary School or O-Level (four years), and A-Level (two years). The university is government-owned, but each student meets some of the expenses of his or her university education. (Pre-school and kindergarten are run by private agencies and are not free.) The entire infrastructure for electricity, telephone, postal, and transportation services became government-owned; by keeping the rates down, the government could ensure that the services were universally accessible.

Following the retirement of their first President, the people began to question the single-party political system. (The citizens of Tanzania are well-versed in alternative political systems—the subject "Political Education" is taught throughout the school career, and a student cannot graduate without passing that subject.) By the turn of the decade, Tanzania had a multi-party system, and a new policy of freedom of the press. Independent newspapers such as *The Family Mirror* serve to act as a safeguard by aiming constructive criticism at the government, and by also giving praise when it is due.

Further changes in the government policy have led the country away from complete ujamaa to a partial accommodation of the world market system. In order to be eligible for aid from the World Bank, Tanzania must produce cash crops. This transition poses a serious di-

lemma; if the shift to cash crops is made too quickly and completely, without careful consideration of all factors, the result can be famine. Thus external forces can skew a country's economy.

Internal forces are also a factor in the economy. In Tanzania, the introduction of cash crop production was accompanied by a move to denationalize public utilities. Thus, corporate free enterprise gained a foothold. Although private enterprise on a personal level has always been acceptable in Tanzania, in the past couple of years the country's economy has shifted from 100% ujamaa to 50% capitalism. As an example, whereas formerly all telecommunications services were under one department in the Tanzanian government, now the installation of phones is carried out by several private companies, and the connection of the phone to the phone network is done by a public-owned corporation.

The effects of such a shift are far-reaching. By the very nature of an infrastructure, any price fluctuations or other changes which occur in one segment will be felt in all other segments. That interdependent balance whose stability was guarded by the former governmental monopoly, is vulnerable under varied corporate ownership.

What is perhaps not in jeopardy is the spirit of ujamaa living in the hearts of the people of Tanzania. Despite the coming of capitalism and corporate enterprise, ujamaa in Tanzania is alive and well at the grass-roots level. The togetherness in the villages (and even in the towns) ensures that its principles are still extant.

In any Tanzanian village, each person knows every adult and child who lives in that same community, and strangers are quickly introduced and accepted. Their special emphasis on social life is natural, in a farming country whose annual rainfall limits agriculture to four months in some parts (throughout the year in other parts).

During the remaining eight months of the year, every activity in the village holds an open invitation to all; no one is excluded. Dances begin on a Saturday at noon and go until midnight. Sometimes,

men dress in long-sleeved white shirts, white shorts, white socks, and black shoes and ties, the costume of the "Mganda," a dance from the south. Or the sinuous movements of the "Snake Dance" (native to one northern tribe) might be performed. Other dances include the Sindimba, Mdundinko, Ling'oma, and Abatekaya, from the regions of the south, coast, southern highlands, and northwest, respectively.

For thirsty dancers and on-lookers alike, beer, wine and soft drinks—made out of pineapples, bananas, peaches, apples, mangoes, or other local foods—are available each ethnic group having its own variation, and the alcoholic content varying from locality to locality). Ugali, corn meal cooked in a white mass (known as fufu in other African countries), and a spicy dish of rice and meat may be part of the festive fare.

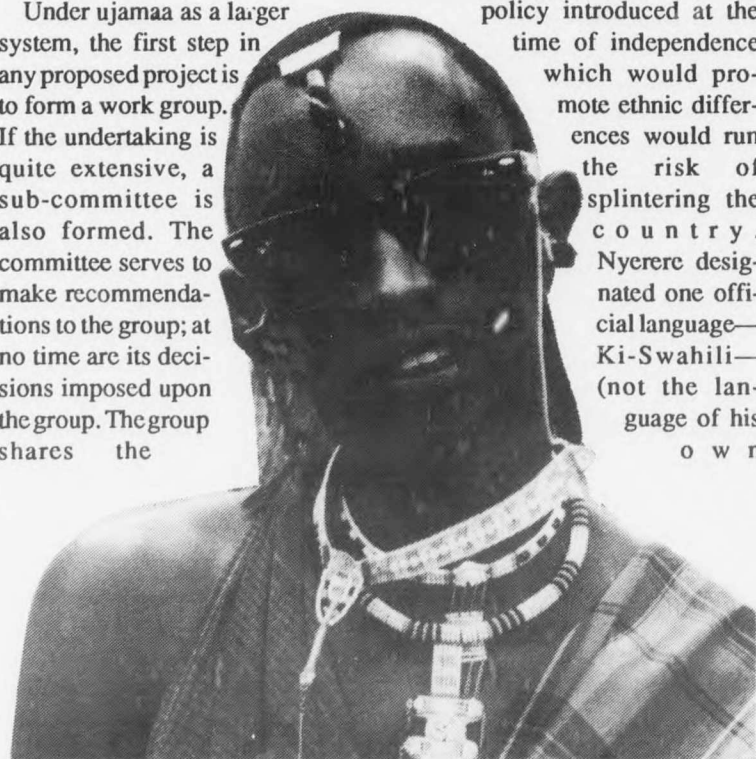
The sharing of food, drink, dances, and all aspects of their lives is central to the character of the people of Tanzania. One can see the spirit of ujamaa move within the people.

It was through Pres. Julius Nyerere that this principle became elevated to the status of a new political system—one now being taught in Tanzania's Ideology University, to politicians, civil servants, and civil and military administrators from countries around the world.

At the time of his voluntary retirement from the Presidency in 1985, in a century marked by civil and national strife for any African nations, Dr. Nyerere could look back on a quarter of a century of peaceful rule. His long term of office under the banner of ujamaa is marked by the absence of ethnic conflict and civil war. In the East African nation of Tanzania, the essence of human equality is contained within the word "ujamaa." Learn more about Africa and try your luck in our quiz!

Come to Africa Night on February 6th at the SUB

Nancy Cameron is a free lance writer living in Fredericton. She plans to move to Africa this summer to do research.



A young Maasai blending cultures

Nancy Cameron photo