

Book Reviews

Jessica Achberger

Michigan State University, East Lansing

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Book Reviews

Jessica Achberger
Michigan State University, East Lansing

Nyerere: The Early Years. By Thomas Molony. (London: James Currey, 2014), 284 pp.

Molony writes in his introduction, speaking of alternative biographies of Nyerere, that ‘minor details are not so important’ (4). Yet it is Molony’s attention to detail and sensitivity to his topic that makes his biography of the early years of Nyerere’s life so compelling. These two parallel themes of precision and attention to not just what a biography is, but what it should be, run throughout the volume. A note on the nomenclature preceding the introduction shows an attention to linguistic detail and complexity that is mirrored in the historical precision of the work, which details Nyerere’s life from his birth in 1922 in Tanganyika Territory to his graduation from Edinburgh in 1952. A focus on these years makes Molony’s biography unique in relation to other similar works, and he argues that this concentration on early life allows us to see Nyerere’s ‘later politics in a new light’ (1).

The remaining chapters are presented chronologically, the first of which discusses the ‘physical and mental’ geography of Nyerere’s ancestral home, Butiama, and his people, the Zanaki (11). Though Nyerere does not feature largely in this first chapter, it provides a foundation for the chapters that follow, and an important basis for debunking the widely-held belief that Zanaki was the foundation for Nyerere’s *ujamaa*. Chapter two examines the early years of Nyerere’s life, including his upbringing in what Molony terms “an apparently egalitarian society”, the effects of which can be later applied to Nyerere’s philosophies and policies as a political leader (37). Kambarage, as Nyerere was named, was greatly influenced by his educational opportunities, which were centered in the Catholic Church, into which Kambarage was baptised, in 1943, as Julius. The importance of this trajectory and the ways in which it influenced a young Nyerere are developed throughout the chapters, with some postulation, but none which seems entirely contrived or conflated.

Molony then moves on to explore the important setting of Makerere College, which Nyerere attended from 1943 to 1945. Makerere was an exciting place to be during the post-War period – designed to be the primary institution for higher education in eastern Africa, it was also, as Molony points out, intended to

prevent students from being exposed to subversive ideas at foreign universities. This, Molony argues, “Makerere failed to do” for its students, including Nyerere (65). It is in this chapter that we can begin to see direct influences of Nyerere’s experiences on his future political life, which in some ways began in Makerere and certainly continued when he returned to Tabora to teach, actively participating in the local African Association. In the chapter, ‘Return to Tabora’, Molony explores Nyerere’s young adult life as a new teacher and activist, and while this period of Nyerere’s life may not be entirely unique for biographical inquiry, some of Molony’s sources are, including an interview with Magori Watiha, his child bride, as well as textual analysis of one of Nyerere’s early writings on women’s freedom. It also describes the development of his relationship to his wife, Maria Waningu, and their engagement.

The biography then follows Nyerere to the United Kingdom, in three chapters that explore his time in Scotland, at the University of Edinburgh, as well as his time in London. Molony again takes time to explain the landscape, detailing race relations in the United Kingdom and influences of communism, particularly for students from Africa. Molony relies on letters from Nyerere to fellow students, academic faculty at the University of Edinburgh, missionaries, and colonial officials. It also considers the courses that Nyerere took and their content, paying close attention to what Nyerere read and the reflections of his professors. It is clear that Nyerere’s position as a “mature student”, as well as a foreign one in a course with many Europeans, and concerned with the financial difficulties of his family back home, influenced his approach towards learning. Nyerere’s approach towards politics and his relationships with fellow Tanganyikans in the United Kingdom are the subject of chapter six. Nyerere’s political activities in Edinburgh centered on protesting the formation of the Central African Federation, but more Molony argues, as a writer/philosopher, rather than a political radical. Molony focuses on the influence of Fabianism and other European philosophers on Nyerere’s political activities, which included co-authoring with John Keto, whom Molony interviewed, ‘The Race Problem in East Africa’, in *The Student* magazine.

Molony continues to develop his argument of the importance of understanding Nyerere’s philosophical development in chapter seven, which focuses on the historical and anthropological training Nyerere received and its relation to the development of *ujamaa* as an ideology. Through the annotated books of Nyerere, another unique and uniquely used, source, Molony makes a case for Nyerere’s study of traditional African society, as well as peasant studies of China, as the basis for *ujamaa*, rather than his family background and upbringing. The writer/philosopher Nyerere became increasingly political after his move to London, in

the final chronological chapter of Molony's narrative. Increasing associations with African nationalists inspired Nyerere to resign from teaching and enter politics full-time. Here Molony continues to privilege correspondence, this time Nyerere's correspondence with Catholic priests in Rome, and also considers the Colonial Office file that began to be developed on Nyerere at this time.

In Molony's concluding chapter he argues, "The new evidence provided here has offered much-needed depth to the sparsely-informed and predominantly uncritical account of Julius Nyerere's life" (199). However, perhaps more important than its critical nature, Molony's biography allows the development of Nyerere in space and time. As he argues, "Many portrayals of Nyerere were made in retrospect, shaped by the knowledge of what he became" (200). Therefore, while Molony's *Nyerere* is an interesting and historically rich read, that is not, I believe, the most important contribution of the book. Molony's consideration of the scope and purpose of biographies, which frames his introduction, is an insightful and valuable essay in its own right. A discussion of other biographies of Nyerere leads Molony to ask both 'what should a biography be?' as well as 'what should it not be'? He argues that such a work should not be hagiographic, nor the opposite, and it must consider time and place, as well as person. He also asks the important question of who is qualified to write a biography? Molony, as a Lecturer in African Studies from Nyerere's own alma mater of Edinburgh has a unique connection, as well as a strong sense of sensitivity and nuance to the subject. And *Nyerere* stands as what a biography can, and should be.

Jessica Achberger
Michigan State University