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Thabo Mbeki; Julius Nyerere

Ian Taylor

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BOOK REVIEWS

Thabo Mbeki, by Adekeye Adebajo, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2017, 190 pp., £11.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0821422748

Julius Nyerere, by Paul Bjerck, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2017, 116 pp., £11.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0821422601

The two books under review are about prominent but, to varying degrees, flawed African political leaders: one from the dawn of Africa's postcolonial experience and one from much later. Both men sought to lead both their countries and influence their continent and both were contradictory in their diverse ways. Of the two, Nyerere towers over Mbeki. The two biographies are different in both tone and scope, although both authors clearly admire their subjects. Paul Bjerck's is an honest appraisal of Julius Nyerere and details both the successes and challenges (even failures) that accompanied his tenure. Adekeye Adebajo's book is a (failed) attempt at a hagiography of Thabo Mbeki, which becomes increasingly problematic as the volume proceeds. Starting a book with the statement that 'Thabo Mbeki is the most important African political figure of his generation' (p. 7, repeated p. 158) may set up one's stall early on, but evidence is needed for this bold assertion, which just is not there. Instead, inadvertently—and almost comically—Adebajo's book conclusively demonstrates the opposite and ends up being an exposé of just how bad Mbeki was. Almost every policy or venture that Mbeki embarked upon, and which Adebajo enthusiastically details, ends up with a subsequent admission by the author that in fact, failure was the result. This contrasts with Bjerck's approach, which weighs the evidence carefully and is not afraid to itemise the weaknesses of Nyerere. However, a more careful context is provided that often explains the reasons for Nyerere falling short.

Perhaps the different tones of the two books are related to the very characters of the two subjects written about. As Bjerck notes, Nyerere was an unusually modest state leader. At a time in Africa's history where there were various Emperors, Presidents-for-Life, Redeemers and Conquerors of the British Empire, Nyerere preferred the sobriquet 'Mwalimu', the Swahili term for a teacher. Modestly guiding his nation was Nyerere's style and he is certainly a member of the pantheon of great African leaders. Nyerere was perhaps a tad too idealistic, yes, but he was principled and a statesman. Unlike Mbeki, he had no time for race-baiting or justifying the unjustifiable and was often brutally honest about contemporary events. For instance, at a time when autocracy and dictatorships stalked the continent, Nyerere noted that:

There is this tendency in Africa to think that it does not matter if an African kills other Africans. Had [Idi] Amin been white, free Africa would have passed many resolutions condemning him. Being black is becoming a certificate to kill fellow Africans.¹

Very few African leaders at the time were prepared to break ranks in such a fashion. By contrast, Mbeki's racialised view of the world informed almost every aspect of his rule. When the time came, Nyerere moved swiftly and removed one of Africa's worst-ever leaders, Idi Amin of Uganda. Compare that to Mbeki, who dedicated a large part of his presidency to making sure Robert Mugabe stayed in power, whatever the consequences for the Zimbabwean people. Typically, Adebajo writes that Mbeki's Zimbabwe policy 'was widely criticised by the Western media, several Western governments and many South African analysts' (p. 134). This conveniently fits the Mbeki narrative that only 'outsiders' (no doubt mostly white), condemned his policy towards South Africa's northern neighbour. In fact, the main opposition party in Zimbabwe, which no doubt would have won the Presidential elections from 2002 onwards if violence and

rigging had not been put to work, expressed deep disdain for Mbeki's antics. African civil society across the continent also rejected Mbeki's approach to Zimbabwe, as did a number of African governments. Both Levy Mwanawasa of Zambia and Ian Khama of Botswana wanted the Southern African Development Community to play a stronger role and saw the situation as a major regional emergency. Mbeki blocked them and continued protecting Mugabe, resulting in absolute disaster for Zimbabwe and its people.

When he stepped down, Nyerere was only the third modern African leader to surrender power voluntarily. In contrast, Mbeki was humiliatingly sacked by his own party after his arrogance and subterfuge alienated all. Nyerere gracefully left a united country that was stable and which enjoyed respect at the global stage. Mbeki was ignominiously forced to vacate his position, leaving a divided nation, a deeply dishonest government and, of course, bequeathed Jacob Zuma to the nation: the gift that keeps on giving.

While Mbeki was more at ease at Davos or playing golf with corporate executives, Nyerere never earned more than US\$8,000 a year and used to drive around Dar es Salaam in an old car with only a chauffeur. There was never a whiff of corruption involving Nyerere. Mbeki, on the other hand, oversaw a mass degeneration of the South African polity into a mire of corruption, from which it is unlikely it will ever emerge. Characteristically, when commenting on the US\$5 billion arms deal scandal, which happened under his watch, Mbeki waved criticisms aside as based on 'the racist conviction that Africans, who now govern our country, are naturally prone to corruption, venality and mismanagement'.² Never mind the facts: all critics are racist. This refrain was a constant under Mbeki and poisoned political debate in South Africa.

There are a number of eccentricities in Adebajo's book. Firstly, Adebajo claims that Mbeki was a committed Marxist, yet Mbeki's close friend, Willie Esterhuysen, has elsewhere asserted that Mbeki was effectively Oliver Tambo's ears and eyes on the Central Committee of the South African Communist Party and that Mbeki quickly left the party when Tambo felt assured that there was no longer any threat from communism within the ANC. A CIA report in 1988 supports this thesis, arguing that Tambo had long been subtly curbing and channelling South African Communist Party (SACP) influence. One would not know this from the book at hand. Equally, Adebajo's status as a Nigerian has meant that an unwarranted amount of the book is devoted to celebrating a supposed Pretoria (Adebajo insists on calling it 'Tshwane', even though the South African government does not) axis with Abuja. In fact, the 'alliance' was entirely based on personalities and had no substance, as subsequent events proved once Mbeki and Olusegun Obasanjo were out of the picture.

Nyerere's tenure saw about 70% of Tanzanians move into planned villages under the *ujamma* programme. Literacy in the country rose extraordinarily, and over 80% of Tanzanians could read and write when he retired. Nyerere also ruled over a hugely diverse country, but managed to develop a sense of national identity hitherto unknown. Egalitarian economic policies, though not always successful, were attempted and Nyerere became one of the most conspicuous proponents of the New International Economic Order, aimed at pressing forward the South and refashioning economic relations with the industrialised North. Tackling Africa's underdevelopment and the disastrous legacy left by the colonialists was at the top of Nyerere's agenda. In contrast, Mbeki actively promoted neoliberalism across the continent with his abortive New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development and enforced onto South Africa a self-imposed structural adjustment programme in the form of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) plan. Rather than advance poor people's development, as Nyerere did, Mbeki was responsible for killing off the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which had had very strong strategies and set targets in terms of public housing, electricity for underprivileged people, safe drinking water, employment creation, etc. Mbeki did absolutely nothing to challenge Africa's position in the global division of labour and what policies

he promoted only served to reify the continent's dependent status. Mbeki in fact was a notable celebrant of free market globalisation. Nyerere (or Nkrumah) he was not, despite Adebajo's nonsensical claims (p. 9).


Nyerere inherited from the British very little and had effectively to build his country from scratch, in the context where agricultural prices dropped sharply while the price of oil, machinery and other imports rose dramatically and where Cold War rivalry stymied any possibility of continental unity. By contrast, Mbeki inherited a colossal reservoir of political goodwill built up by his predecessor, Nelson Mandela, as well as Africa's most diversified, richest and powerful economy. However, Mbeki bungled it and never exhibited a clear appreciation of South Africa's interests, particularly with regard to poverty and inequality and how to address these to the betterment of those people whose lives had been destroyed by apartheid. Instead, empowering a clique of African businessmen through affirmative action (the so-called Black Economic Empowerment project) was enough for him. 'The market' would decide on the rest. It is no wonder that when he left, the South African business press, while critical of Mbeki's failings, all bemoaned the loss of a leader who had prioritised 'stability' and *their* economic interests.

While Nyerere was deeply respected as a global voice, he never sought to make himself some sort of continental leader. By contrast, Mbeki believed that he alone had the talent and far-sightedness to change Africa for the better, an idea that was first exhibited in his 'African Renaissance' project (something which sunk without a trace). Here, Adebajo, in his eagerness to promote Mbeki's genius, entirely misses out the very real tensions and sparring between Mbeki and Muammar Gadhafi during this period and Gadhafi's role in the formation of the African Union (AU) is entirely written out of history. It is as if the AU is entirely Mbeki's creation. Surely Adebajo is aware that the AU was a result of the Sirte Declaration of 9 September 1999? Adebajo does however concede that Mbeki's outlandish ideas about HIV/AIDS cost the lives of at least 365,000 South Africans (p. 105) and is a major stain on his time as president.

At the most basic level, at least Nyerere tried to change things and improve his people's lot. Mbeki on the other hand asked people to 'call him a Thatcherite' and arrogantly rejected out of hand any and all criticism. Fittingly, Bjerck ends his book with the comments that 'in Mwalimu Nyerere we meet a leader of rare integrity, intellect and commitment—and in that sense a fine person' (p. 148). The same cannot be said for Mbeki, thus attempting to pen a praise poem for him was always bound to be unsuccessful.

Notes

1. This is a quote from Michael Kaufman 'Julius Nyerere of Tanzania Dies; Preached African Socialism to the World', *New York Times*, 15 October 1999.
2. This is a quote from Thabo Mbeki 'The ANC, ANC leaders, BEE, and corruption', *ANC Today*, 6(48), 8–14 December 2006.

Ian Taylor
 University of St Andrews
 ict@st-andrews.ac.uk

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