

# JULIUS NYERERE

a biography

by

George Dunheved

*“We, the people of Tanganyika, would like to light a candle and put it on top of Mount Kilimanjaro, to shine beyond our borders, giving hope where there was despair, love where there was hate and dignity where before there was only humiliation.”*

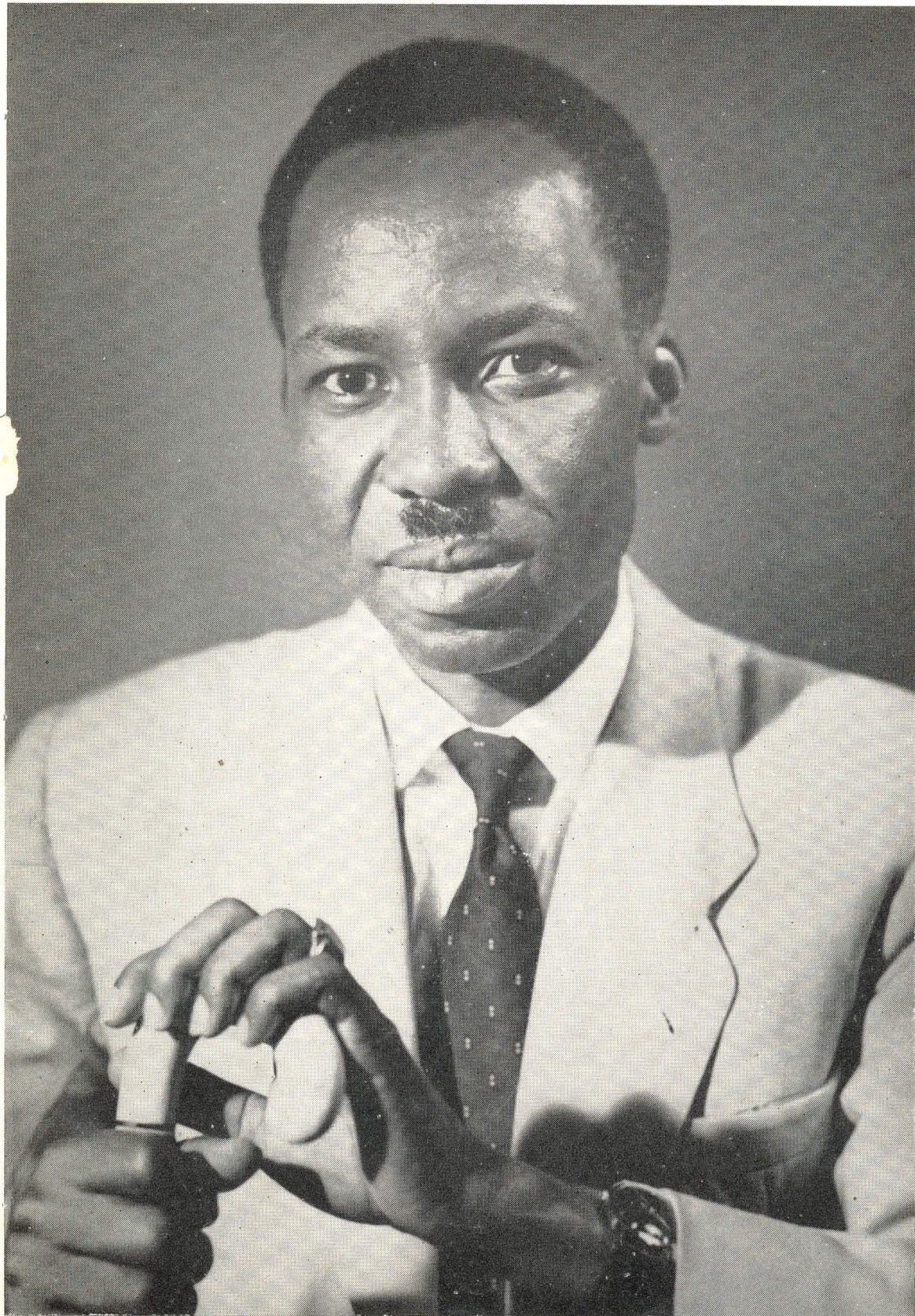
J. K. Nyerere in  
Legislative Council,  
October, 22nd 1959.

# JULIUS NYERERE

a biography

by

George Dunheved



In the brooding quiet of an evening more than six years ago, a young schoolmaster walked from a tense interview with the Principal of a Mission school at which he worked, determined to turn his back on both an academic career and the prospects of a comfortable middle class future, so as to devote all his time and energy to a political organisation aimed at the removal of foreign government.

Julius Nyerere had been advised by the well-meaning priest who ran the school, to give up politics and confine himself to teaching. Instead, Nyerere told his young bride and elderly mother to pack their bags for the return journey to his late father's country on the shores of Lake Victoria, where he would think out his plans for the future.

In the vital period of reassessment that followed his rejection of the not inconsiderable prospects and security open to one of the few professional Africans in the entire country at that time, Nyerere's resolve hardened.

He had returned from Britain after graduating in history and economics, acutely conscious of the intolerable position of his own fellow men under colonialism. His researches into history taught him that people had fought and died for their national independence and freedom over the centuries. The study of economics revealed that systems alone were responsible for maintaining one section of a people in bondage, while another section enjoyed to the full the fruits of the earth.

It was his bitter knowledge that the then colonial government was not merely reactionary towards the party he had indoctrinated with nationalism, but that a careful watch was being kept on his every movement and declaration in anticipation of his eventual prosecution and detention.

As an antidote to desperation Nyerere galvanised himself into action and set off on a countrywide safari to probe the party organisation for weaknesses.

The strategy he conceived for the days and years ahead was negotiation through strength. And strength through unity.

Nyerere untiringly reached into the remotest corners of the country. He explained to the people that tribalism was a weakening factor in politics and economics. Then he sought to identify every man and woman with a single and clearly defined policy of national self-determination.

He had built a party that could be transformed at the push of a button from a passive body of thousands of men and women to an army capable of paralysing the administration of the entire country. As things resolved themselves, Nyerere never had to use his weapon for such purposes.

Julius Nyerere believed that if a man was not prepared to fight and even die for the cardinal principles of individual and national liberty, then he betrayed his birthright. And in pursuing this condition he narrowly escaped jail on a

number of occasions, for several years he refused to sit in the legislature, and rejected all overtures to enter into association with a pseudo-nationalist party established by the Nominated Members of the Legislative Council at the instigation of the then British Governor.

Nyerere never made the error in the stages leading up to independence of admitting non-Africans to the party he founded, despite his personal admiration for many individual Europeans and Asians and his avowed policy not to seek their departure from Tanganyika.

It was, he felt, for the Africans to fight for and achieve their birthright alone. Tanu was formed to win independence. The Africans in Tanu were not organised against the white community, but against colonialism as such. The issue was one of colonialism and not one of racialism.

By 1958 the party had passed the building up stage and began to manifest an increased militancy and urgency in its demands.

\* \* \*

The decision reached on a Sunday night in March, 1955, was but one of the many that Nyerere has made in his scant 39 years; decisions that interlock in the jigsaw that is this vast country's destiny.

Destiny indeed. For earlier that month—on Monday, March 7, 1955—Julius Nyerere had expressed to the 15th session of the Trusteeship Council his hope that the Council would one day meet, not to consider whether an individual African should come before it to express his people's views, but whether an independent Tanganyika should become a member of the United Nations.

On July 13, 1961, Julius Nyerere made his third appearance before the Trusteeship Council. This time his role was not one of petitioner but as Tanganyika's first Prime Minister.

And as he had prophesied only six years earlier he was able to tell the delegates, "Before the end of the year we hope to join the United Nations organisations as a fully-fledged member." (The General Assembly on April 21, 1961, unanimously adopted a United Kingdom motion terminating the Trusteeship Agreement.)

The date was brought before his eyes: December 9, 1961. When that day was but one minute old, a new flag—green, black and gold—would be raised above the 29th independent sovereign state in Africa.

\* \* \*

Nyerere was born the son of Chief Nyerere Burito of the Zanaki, one of the smallest of Tanganyika's 120 tribes, then divided into eight chiefdoms, but now welded into one under Chief Wanzagi Nyerere, a half-brother of Julius.

As was customary in the tribe, Chief Nyerere Burito was a polygamist, and Julius was one of the children born to a man who had also been a chief in the times of German rule in Tanganyika. Until he was 12 years old Julius lived according to the pattern that had prevailed in rural Africa for centuries.

He performed his duties herding cattle. At six his eyes stared in wonder at their first motor car and white man!

When he was 12 years old Julius was sent away from home at Butiama to attend school at Musoma, 26 miles distant. From then onwards he was to spend little time at the place of his birth. In 1934 he became interested in Christianity, and nine years later he was baptised into the Roman Catholic Church.

He crowded four years of primary education into three while attending a school managed by the Native Authority at Musoma, before going to Tabora in the Western Province, where he progressed in six years at the secondary school from Standard V to Standard X.

At Makerere College in Uganda he studied from 1943 to 1945 and obtained a Diploma in Education that enabled him to return to Tabora to instruct pupils of the mission school of St. Mary's.

The year 1949 brought the opportunity of entering Edinburgh University where he spent more than three years and graduated as a Master of Arts in 1952, returning to Tanganyika in October of that year.

\* \* \*

Back in Tanganyika he renewed his connection with the Tanganyika African Association, which owed its existence to a group of civil servants who formed it in 1929 as a social organisation for Africans.

In 1953 Nyerere was elected President of the Association. By then he was aware of its inadequacy as a vehicle of political action, and set to work on a new draft constitution which completely re-orientated its objectives and policy and was enthusiastically adopted at its annual conference in July, 1954.

It was at this conference that a new name for the Association was discussed. As Nyerere now recalls, the conference "stumbled" on the title "Tanganyika African National Union" (Tanu).

The young politician was at this time teaching at St. Francis' School, Pugu, near Dar es Salaam. He had not long since married a maiden from a neighbouring tribe, to whom he had become affianced before leaving for Scotland in 1949.

Nyerere had by this time already earned a reputation as a dynamic and purposeful politician, and in 1954 he accepted the Governor's nomination as a temporary Member of the Legislative Council in the absence of a fellow African. Although his introduction to parliamentary life lasted barely four months, it served to alert him for the exacting responsibilities that lay ahead.

It was during 1954 that a United Nations Mission visited the Trust Territory of Tanganyika, and in March of the following year Nyerere flew to New York as a representative of the then-infant Tanu.

In fact, Tanu had warmly endorsed the Visiting Mission's report as a "balanced, true, honest and comprehensive study" of Tanganyika's problems.

On the floor of the Trusteeship Council, Nyerere made a lasting impression as an orator and as spokesman "of my people's hopes".

He explained that the major object of the Tanganyika African National Union was to prepare the people of Tanganyika for self-government and independence. As a first step towards that goal it sought to see the elective principle established and the Africans securing a majority on all representative public bodies in accordance with the Trusteeship Agreement and Article 76 of the United Nations Charter.

