

NYERERE'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION FOR SELF-RELIANCE: A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article investigates on whether education for self-reliance continues to be relevant and important for developing nations like Tanzania. It gives a comprehensive philosophical exploration on the idea of *education for self-reliance* implemented by Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere. Nyerere employed this idea as a national education policy. He proposes education for self-reliance as the best form of education which should be provided in Tanzania. Nyerere's vision of education for self-reliance represents a fundamental moral and philosophical assertion regarding the essence of humanity, the importance of knowledge as well as ethical values of the society.

Using qualitative method, specifically Critical-Analytical method, the study explores how Nyerere was influenced by different traditions such as empiricism, pragmatism, Platonism and African socialism. From these school of thoughts, Nyerere shaped his educational philosophy known as *education for self-reliance*. Such vision aimed at making people self-independent, free from depending on foreign aid, virtue, and self-actualization.

Key Words: Ujamaa, Self-reliance, Education, Development, Community

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical reflection on the philosophical foundations and implications of the *Education for Self-Reliance* as implemented by Mwalimu Nyerere. In his Ujamaa ideology, Nyerere proposed a radical rethinking of education as an instrument towards national development, freedom as well as human flourishing. His educational philosophy stance advocates for a system that actually empowers individuals to be productive, responsible and self-reliant. He proposes education for self-reliance as the best form of education that should be provided in Tanzania. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the understanding of education for self-reliance particularly by examining the meaning, purpose, implementation and recommendations of this ideology as far as societal development is concerned.

Understanding the Background of Nyerere

Julius Kambarage Nyerere (1922-1999), was a Tanzanian politician and anti-colonial activist. He was born in Tanganyika (now Tanzania). He played a crucial role in the country's struggle for independence from British rule. Nyerere became the first president of Tanganyika and later of Tanzania when it was formed through the union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar in 1964. Nyerere was known for his socialist ideas and the development philosophy of "Ujamaa" emphasizing communal living and self-reliance. He served as Tanzania's president until 1985 and remained influential in African politics. Nyerere is often remembered for his commitment to African unity, education, and rural development.¹

¹ J. K. Nyerere, *Freedom and Liberation: A Selection from Speeches 1976 – 1999*, (Dar-es-Salaam: The Mwalimu Nyerere Foundation, 2011), 2.

Philosophical Influences

In the conception of his philosophy of *Education for Self-Reliance*, Nyerere was influenced by other philosophies since he had the habit of reading through the ideas presented by other philosophers before his time. In this section, we shall see few of the influences of Nyerere's philosophical ideas relating to his philosophy of education for self-reliance.

Empiricists Influence

Empiricists emphasize on the role of experience in understanding reality. It holds that true knowledge is attained when a person gets engaged with the things that are to be known. Knowledge arises from active engagement of human being to their environment. Experience is privileged to be the reliable source of knowledge.² John Locke is one among the empiricists who believed that, the human mind is born tabula rasa, therefore knowledge comes from life experience. Locke is known for his famous statement, "No man's knowledge here can go beyond his experience."³ From this statement therefore, human beings gain knowledge from life experience. Nyerere adopted this view and contextualized it to his idea of *education for self-reliance*. For example, he insisted that, in schools, students should not be taught on the basis of theories but rather the curriculum should be enriched with experimental trainings whereby student, learn by observing and doing. Empirical observation and manual activities are essential in Nyerere's *education for self-reliance*.

Platonic Influence

In Plato's thought, as he presented in his famous book *Republic and Statesman*, the aim of education is to produce a complete person who has developed intellectually, morally as well as aesthetically. For Plato education involves the acquisition of virtues and good habits. Plato's theory of education cannot be explained without the theory of *The Allegory of the Cave* and the theory of the *Divided Line*⁴. It is upon these theories, Plato departed also in making the

explanation of education as the movement from doxa world to epistemic world, from the world of darkness to the world of light.⁵ In the same way, Nyerere, in his idea of education for self-reliance, approaches education as a tool that has to produce a complete person who is equipped with virtues of prudence, wisdom, justice, courage and honesty. Just like Plato, Nyerere is convinced that education should produce wise men who can plan, organise and make decisions for their society. Furthermore, for Nyerere, education has to liberate people from the chains of ignorance as Plato explained that it is education which will liberate the prisoners in the cave from the world of darkness into the world of light.⁶

Pragmatic Influence

Pragmatism is the school of philosophy which holds that, whatever is useful and practical is that which is true and has to be held. Anything is meaningful, if it works satisfactorily and is found in the practical consequences. For Pragmatist, any impractical idea has to be rejected and has no meaning.⁷ For example, John Dewey is a pragmatist who argued that, knowledge is the result of doing and experiencing things. We always learn through solving real problems, testing ideas as well as seeing what works. Truth changes as we learn more through experience.⁸ Nyerere like Pragmatists, in his idea of education for self-reliance insists that, education provided in schools and even informal education should be more practical. Education provided both in schools and in the society should enable a student or a person to practise at home regarding the need of the society he comes from.

The Meaning and Purpose of Education for Self-Reliance

The policy of self-reliance emerged from the time when African countries were emerging from colonialism. During this period, it was observed that most of these countries, including Tanzania, were experiencing the highest form of poverty. By then, in

² F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. iv, (New York: Continuum, 2003), 279.

³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. H. Nidditch, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 128.

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992), 514a-520a.

⁵ S.E. Stumpf, *Socrates to Sartre: A History of Philosophy*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 51-52.

⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 514a-520a.

⁷ A. Malachowski ed., *Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism*, 1-2.

⁸ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 10-12.

Tanzania, TANU under Julius Kambarage Nyerere as a ruling political part sought to liberate Tanzania from the dam of poverty; it had to take a charge of providing guidance for the reduction, or even elimination, of poverty at all. "We are involved in a war against poverty and oppression in our country. Now, we must gear the struggle to move with us altogether from a state of poverty to a state of prosperity."⁹

Tanzania was one of the poorest countries in the world. The country was suffering from poor life conditions in all essential aspects of life. Nyerere as highest and authoritative leader, had to opt for difficult course, socialism, an ideology that advocated collectivization of agriculture and all other major means of production and villagization. He argues that socialism, like democracy, is an attitude of mind needed to ensure that people care for each other's welfare. It is the attitude that makes the difference between socialist from non-socialist society.¹⁰

Nyerere insisted on working; he viewed everybody as a worker and no one should expect to exploit the other by consuming without working so that people can be free from poor life conditions they were in. There was no other way to live without working. Even visitors were supposed to work; remember the Swahili saying of Mwalimu Nyerere: *Mgenisikumbili; sikuyatatumpejembe*. In actual fact, a guest was likely to ask for a hoe even before his host had to provide him one, because he knew what is expected of him and would have been ashamed to remain idle while his host is busy working. Working was part and parcel of life, there is no such thing as 'life without work.'¹¹ This sense of working hard was incorporated even in education system that involved manual work for productivity. The quest for the transformation of the country from a state of poverty to a state of prosperity greatly contributed to the birth of popular educational policy stance in the country, *Education for Self-Reliance* during Arusha Declaration so that people could be taught the principles of self-reliance.

Education for self-reliance means doing things for ourselves rather than letting things done for us. But at

the same time it does not mean we do not need others, we need others to provide some sort of assistance that will enable us to do things for ourselves. Becoming self-reliant means building the character needed to live both independently and freely in the community for oneself, with others, and for others.¹²

Education for self-reliance means to culture young people into being agents of their own development. It is delivering knowledge about self-reliance. Education for self-reliance means that Tanzania's development should depend on her natural resources.¹³ Education for Self-Reliance focuses on liberating an individual from mental slavery, which contribute to a million people suffering from poverty, diseases and other evils. Education for self-reliance is the complete freedom. It enables man to enjoy his complete freedom and to control his environment. It is an education that should inspire a person to acquire scientific mind, that is, the desire to know and to respect the truth.¹⁴

For Nyerere Self-reliance had two intentions, the first one was to make the country free both politically and economically to decide and perform the internal matters without external interference and the second intention was to ensure the freedom of an individual. Nethertheless, in order to achieve the purpose and intention of making the country self-reliant, it should begin with an individual, to family level. As Nyerere writes:

If every individual is self-reliant then ten house cells will be self-reliant; if all the cells are self-reliant the whole ward will be self-reliant; and if the wards are self-reliant the district will be self-reliant. If the districts are self-reliant, then the region is self-reliant, and if the regions are self-reliant, then the whole nation is self-reliant and this is our aim.¹⁵

This aim would not be well realized if education program in the country would not be part of it. Nyerere thought that it is easier to change a person by

⁹S.J. Nyirenda&Ishumi, *Philosophy of Education:An Introduction to Concepts, Principles and Practice*, 34-35.

¹⁰ Ochieng & Odhiambo, *Trends and Issues in African Philosophy*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 168.

¹¹W. Friedland & C. Rosberg, ed., *African Socialism*, (California: Stanford University Press, 1964), 241.

¹² J.K. Nyerere, *Education for Self-Reliance: Education for Self-Reliance*, (Dar-es-Salaam: Government Printer, 1967), 25.

¹³Nyerere, *Education for Self-Reliance*, 25.

¹⁴ B. Bulugu& D. Kamugisha, *Principles of Education: Issues and Perspective*, (Mwanza: Mahelo, 2019), 22.

¹⁵J.K. Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*, (Dar-es-Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1968), 34.

impacting his or her mind-set. Education is one of the essential tools to multi-impact society. This is due to the educational nature to change and transform the mind to innovative, creative and exploitative roles. So as a country, in order to have bigger impact, you have to invest and enrol bigger number of students. Colonialism did not provide these qualities to Africans; but rather it educated a very small number of people for their own benefits. So Nyerere aimed to reduce the number of poor peasants' children, who were helpless, because the workers and other middle-class people had taken their children to study abroad in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, USSR and other places.¹⁶ The education for self-reliance program intended to impart both soft and hard skills to a student. Through it a student would learn how to farm, to cook, to keep livestock in and a bit advanced way. It was preparing a student to face reality and involve in economic production and social activities soon after completion of his or her studies.

Furthermore, education keeps updating people about crucial information and data that can be useful in controlling day to day environment. Nyerere emphasizes more that the basic purpose of education in Tanzania is to alleviate poverty and make people independent to sustain themselves.¹⁷ According to Nyerere, education must set people free in order to encourage the citizens to rely upon their own development as well as realizing their full potentials. The educated individuals should serve others and must realize and recognize themselves as part of the society. For him, the best way to bring about development is to educate people. He had the conviction that people should be agents of their own development, and they become so by getting quality education. Thus, human development is essential for Nyerere. "You cannot develop people, you must allow people to develop themselves."¹⁸ He opted for this kind of education that will enable to reflect the reality of people in Tanzania. He abandoned the colonialist education that does not address the social realities of Tanzania.

Nyerere insisted on the quality of education, which would help to boost development within a country. He suggested that, "we have to train our youth to live the real life in the villages where they have to strive for a better life and contribute to our economic development."¹⁹ Nyerere was very much aware of the situation left by colonial education, which isolated Africans from their culture and constructive mind to develop Africans. Nyerere argues:

The education provided by the colonial Government in the two countries which now form Tanzania... was not designed to prepare young people for the service of their own country; instead, it was motivated by a desire to inculcate the values of the colonial society...(it) induced attitudes of human inequality and practice under-pinned the domination of the weak by the strong, especially in economic field.²⁰

He proposed that the educational system should be a community rather than individual based where by parents and other guardians should be involved in day-to-day development of their children, provision of moral and material support. Hence, during those times of Self-Reliance, many schools were built by communities themselves. From the World Bank report, many primary schools were built across the country through community-based program.²¹ It seems that Nyerere wanted to implant the ownership spirit to the people. He found it important for the people to keep in mind that the social infrastructure and institutions belong to them so that they would take care and develop themselves accordingly.

From that point of view, the ideology of Ujamaa insisted on technical and agricultural training. The education that could liberate man from poverty was the main agendum of Nyerere. When a person is educated, it meant that s/he could assist to reduce poverty in the society. In order to make this idea alive, many people should strive to be educated. To attain this goal Nyerere introduced another program called the

¹⁶ Colin Legum & Geoffrey Mmari, eds. "Mwalimu, The Influence of Nyerere," (Dar-es-Salaam: MkukinaNyota, 1995), 50-55.

¹⁷ Bulugu & Kamugisha, *Principles of Education: Issues and Perspective*, 55.

¹⁸ Bulugu & Kamugisha, *Principles of Education: Issues and Perspective*, 56.

¹⁹ Kasimila, "Mwalimu Nyerere and His Efforts in Poverty Eradication," (Morogoro: Mzumbe Book Project, 2012), 22.

²⁰ Legum and Mmari, eds. *Mwalimu The Influence of Nyerere*, 51.

²¹ Kasimila, "Mwalimu Nyerere and His Efforts in Poverty Eradication," 23.

universal primary education (UPE),²² a program that contributed to the poverty reduction in Tanzania. Under that program, many people were employed as primary school teachers, soldiers, farmers, and pastoralists.

Recommendations of Nyerere's Philosophy of Education for Self-Reliance

Being influenced by Paul Freire, that education should liberate oppressed people from the oppressive plight they live in, Nyerere argues that education should liberate an individual and then awaken others from imperialists attitudes that can enslave them. Education is a tool for liberating both an individual and the society. Liberation should be directed to both the mind and the body, that is, it has to attend to both the physical, mental, cultural and economic needs to the attainment of some human good. The aim of education according to Nyerere is to make a person self-reliant and self-less. By self-reliance, it enables man to master his environment, to defend himself and those around him. Being self-less, education should make man dependable and available to contribute to the change and transformation process of his society; to be educated is to be reliable to your community.²³ Nyerere argues that education has no meaning if it does not have positive impacts on the society. Professionals like teachers, journalists, doctors, engineers become useful in the community when they use their knowledge, skills and competences in service of others and for betterment of the society.²⁴ Nyerere is appealing to educated citizens to liberate the masses from all human sufferings such as poverty, diseases and ignorance; and tackling societal problems. Nyerere emphasizes that, education should be for 'common good.' By 'common' it means that, education should aim at working for others, in the sense that, the educated individuals should use their education to promote the quality of life in society without considering bias.²⁵ Furthermore, he argues that, education should give an individual a basic confidence

in his own position as a free and equal of the society who values others and is valued by others. It has to make a person particularly a learner to develop self-confidence and cooperative spirit with fellow members of the society. This is for both formal and informal education. By the virtue that knowing gives the right to be sure, an educated person has no need to step out of what he or she knows. He is expected to possess a basic confidence with what he/she has learned and practices at school when making it relevant to the society he lives in.²⁶

Nyerere thought that, education should aim at addressing life reality as John Dewey says that 'education is not preparation for life but life itself'.²⁷ This means education provided in school life should reflect the life out of the school. For example, agriculture, pastoralism education should be found in schools' curriculum because it is what people live at home. In a special way, Nyerere emphasizes that education should be oriented to rural life because rural areas host the majority engaged in production especially agricultural activities.²⁸ He further contends that schools should prepare the graduates to be productive for the society. Education for self-reliance in productivity has to make people conscious of *ujamaa* objectives such as participating in national economic production and development and villagization plans.²⁹ In this sense, education for self-reliance as Mwalimu Nyerere proposed, intends to make education more relevant to Tanzanian context through integrating education with society by linking the needs of individuals, nation and community.³⁰ Moreover, Nyerere argues that primary education has to be a complete system of learning that allows productivity instead of being a preparation for secondary since not all are selected to join secondary education.

In the light of a way forward Nyerere, education has to give a citizen of Tanzania the desire for change which Nyerere pointed out in the construction of the policy of self-reliance that is the change from the state of

²² Kasimila, "Mwalimu Nyerere and His Efforts in Poverty Eradication," 49.

²³ J.K. Nyerere, *Freedom and Liberation: A Selection from Speeches 1974 - 1999*, (Dar es Salaam: The Mwalimu Nyerere Foundation, 2011), 203.

²⁴ Nyerere, *Freedom and Liberation*, 203.

²⁵ Nyirenda & Ishumi, *Philosophy of Education, An Introduction of Concepts, Principles and Practice*, 151-152.

²⁶ Nyirenda & Ishumi, *Philosophy of Education*, 155.

²⁷ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 12.

²⁸ Bulugu & Kamugisha, *Principle of Education*, 26.

²⁹ Bulugu & Kamugisha, *Principles of Education*, 103.

³⁰ Bulugu & Kamugisha, *Principles of Education*, 104.

poverty to the state of prosperity.³¹ The educated have an obligation to transform the society and make it a better place as much as they can. They should regard/recognize themselves as being a part of society. Being the idea of the one who got out of the Cave and saw light, Nyerere commented that educated people, can be effective only when they are full members of the society they are trying to change, involved in its good and bad fortune and commitment to it whatever happens.

Educated individuals are expected to tackle societal problems by using their knowledge and skills acquired both at home and school. Also, he finds that the educative process must involve not only training in specific skills and techniques through a method of practical work geared to problem solving, but also acquiring good rooted habits that make him or her virtuous.³² Virtues like prudence, courage, honesty, justice, wisdom, understanding, will enable an educated individual to solve and manage affairs of this world with foresight.³³ Just like Aristotle, Nyerere believed that an individual acquires full happiness by being part of the society not only because man is rational being but also because an individual human is both social and political being, has always lived in some kind of society. The chief good and success of an individual lies in his being a member of society.

Practicability of Education for Self-Reliance in the Current Education system of Tanzania

Since the introduction of Education for Self-Reliance in 1967 as part of the Arusha Declaration, Nyerere's philosophical vision was to make education as a tool to empower individuals not only to gain theoretical knowledge but also to become proactive agents capable of creatively transforming their surroundings through self-help, collaboration as well as accountability. Abel Ishumi for example, emphasizes that, Education for Self-Reliance aimed to promote autonomy and creativity instead of merely preparing students for white-collar jobs, thereby rendering education a lived experience rooted in the realities of

Tanzanian society.³⁴ The 1967 policy document, education for Self-Reliance explicitly stated: "Education provided in Tanzania for the students of Tanzania must serve the purposes of Tanzania, it must encourage the development of a proud, independent and free citizenry which relies upon itself for its own development."³⁵ Philosophically, this aligns with virtue ethics emphasizing industriousness, solidarity as responsibility as the key educational outcomes rather than viewing education solely as a means to wage labour. Nevertheless, despite this ideal, numerous graduates historically exited school lacking practical skills, revealing a disparity between the philosophical aspirations and their actual implementation.³⁶

In the modern context, the ElimuyaAmali initiative (which involves the establishment of 103 vocational/practical secondary schools, workshops, and dual certification with NACTVET) signifies a tangible effort to realize Education for Self-Reliance's vision within the present Tanzanian education framework. For instance, the government has allocated over Tsh. 41.6 billion to create practical schools, each equipped with facilities for carpentry, plumbing, masonry, and other related trades, with several nearing completion at over 90%.³⁷ This initiative philosophically enhances Education for Self-Reliance by connecting knowledge with productive skills, echoing Nyerere's assertion that education should be "integrated with work and the realities of society."³⁸ Nevertheless, the effectiveness of Education for Self-Reliance ultimately relies not only on the physical infrastructure but also on promoting an ethical and cultural transformation where both educators and learners embrace self-reliance as a fundamental aspect of life.

³⁴ Abel G. G. Ishumi, "Julius Nyerere of Tanzania: Thoughts and Ideals that Shaped His 'Education for Self-Reliance' Philosophy Cum-Policy in Education," *Education: Journal of Teaching and Learning* 1 (2025): 14.

³⁵ Julius K. Nyerere, *Education for Self-Reliance* (Dar-es-Salaam: Government Printer, 1967), 3.

³⁶ Shukrani K. Mbirigenda, "Reflection on Education for Self and National Reliance: Challenges of Access, Equity and Quality in Higher Learning Institutions in Tanzania," *Tanzania Journal of Development Studies* 18, no. 2 (2020): 19.

³⁷ "Samia Graces Construction of 103 Vocational Schools Worth 41.6bn/-," *Daily News (Tanzania)*, June 18, 2025, para. 6.

³⁸ Nyerere, *Education for Self-Reliance*, 7.

³¹ J.K. Nyerere, *Freedom and New World Economic Order: A Selection from Speeches 1974 - 1999*, 237-238.

³² Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity: Inauguration of the University of East Africa*, 219-220

³³ Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity: Inauguration of the University of East Africa*, 220-221.

Conclusion

Nyerere's philosophy of education for self-reliance gives a vision for African societies that are seeking for authentic development. His idea of education for self-reliance is rooted in African values and more enriched by global philosophical traditions. Moreover, it is also grounded in principles of justice and dignity. His idea is still relevant since it is tool towards socio-economic and political development as it is not a privilege for the educated but for the good of the society. He believes that, his education policy is an education that empowers, liberates, and integrates society. It is practical and work oriented education aimed to provide solutions to societal needs. It involves working together for the common goal and exploitation by none, sharing the resources which are produced by fellow humans. Therefore, his education policy gives solution to some challenges such as inequality, poverty as well as alienation.

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