

# Book Review – Nyerere: The Early Years by Thomas Molony

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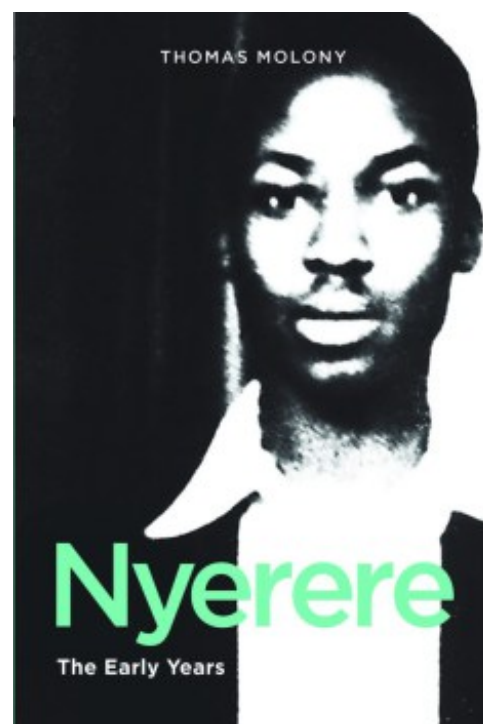
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*LSE's Richard Stupart says this book offers a detailed, entertaining account of the life and ideas of one of Africa's greatest statesmen.*

Bringing together a range of previously-unconsidered sources on the early life and education of independent Tanzania's first leader, *Nyerere: The Early Years* adds complexity to a story often told more as a hagiography. A senior lecturer in African Studies at Nyerere's alma mater, Thomas Molony draws on both previously-known archival sources from Nyerere's early days in Tanganyika and many new ones from Nyerere's time as a student at the University of Edinburgh. The result is an entertaining and detailed outline of many of the people and intellectual currents that a young *Mwalimu* encountered in the days before he emerged as a public political figure.

The book traces Nyerere's life from his earliest days as a child in Butiama, from his high school education at the elite Tabora Boys, to his time at Makerere and his studies at the University of Edinburgh. In part, the book strives to undo an overly simplistic account of Nyerere's political thought that traces his political philosophy back to his days of life in a Zanaki village idyll. Nyerere's *Ujamaa* socialism, Molony argues, was influenced in no small part by his time spent at Edinburgh and the combination of academics and texts he read and heard as a student there. Reflecting critically on the circumstantial nature of much historical evidence, Molony nevertheless argues for the likely importance of Nyerere's Edinburgh period to his later thinking. The key texts in liberal philosophy that Nyerere studied in Scotland and his exposure to many leading thinkers in what was then English socialism were, on this account, foundational to his later thinking about the nature of the state and the rights of citizens.

As much as the book focuses on excavating many of the intellectual influences on Nyerere the student, its account of his early years would be of interest to a broader audience than simply those curious about the history of East African political thought. Along the way, Molony provides insight into the broader context in which Nyerere's education proceeded – from the politics of colonial administration to its efforts to create and co-opt a class of foreign-educated Africans as loyal civil servants. Correspondence between Nyerere and various colonial officials, for example, throws a fascinating light on the roles that it was hoped this UK-educated elite would fill, and the degree to which this process was imperfectly micromanaged – right down to the minutiae of trying to avoid 'communists' welcoming newly-arrived students in Edinburgh.





A statue of Julius Nyerere in Dodoma  
Photo credit: Pernille Bærendtsen via Flickr( <http://bit.ly/2kEvFtg>) CC BY-SA 2.0

Even more abstracted from Nyerere's specific experience, the book paints a fascinating picture of how political ideas come to form in young leaders, and the role of the social and educational milieu in which a foreign student lives and studies. Similar stories have been told about the time spent overseas by the future leaders of various postcolonial struggles across Africa, but accounts of such periods are worth being told anew – and in the case of Nyerere, for the first time. Such processes continue in many universities in the United Kingdom, the US, and elsewhere, as students abroad begin to orient themselves and organise politically in comparably permissive political cultures, influenced by the texts and personalities of the great universities of the day.

Whether it is the 'failed' political education of Saif Gaddafi during his years as a foreign student at the LSE, or the more successful development of the politics of university alumni like Desmond Tutu or John Kufuor, the influence of leaders' early years can be overlooked in accounts that begin at, or near, moments of prominence. *Nyerere: The Early Years* offers a detailed, entertaining account of the life and ideas of one of Africa's greatest statesmen that reaches far earlier than this, and makes a valuable contribution to Africa's political history as a result.

**[Nyerere: The Early Years](#). Thomas Molony. James Currey. 2016**

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**The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.**