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# Subject to translation: Shakespeare, Swahili, Socialism

FAISAL FATEHALI DEVJI

*Bibi mkubwa wangu alikuwa miongoni mwa watazamaji. Baada ya nusu ya kwanza aliondoka asirudi tena. Baadaye tulipomwuliza kwa nini hakurudi alituambia kwamba alihuzunishwa sana na kifo cha Juliasi Kaizari, ndiyo maana hakupenda kuendelea kuuona.<sup>1</sup>*

My mother was among the audience. After the first half she left not to return again. Later, when we asked her why she hadn't come back, she replied that she had been so affected by the tragedy of Julius Caesar that she couldn't continue watching.

In 1963, the year after he became first president of an independent Tanganyika, Julius Nyerere published the first translation into Kiswahili of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The incident described above, which I quote from Nyerere's introduction to the second edition of his translation, occurred during the play's initial performance at St. Francis College Pugu. As an illustration of theatrical effect, this incident itself effects a number of theatrical displacements. On the one hand, the dread felt by the African president's mother at a spectacle evokes that felt by the Roman dictator's wife at a dream, both these reactions being mediated by the work of an English playwright. On the other hand, the subject responsible for this theatrical effect shifts from Shakespeare's Caesar, to Nyerere's Shakespeare, to St. Francis Pugu's Nyerere, since the president remains silent about whose work it was exactly that provoked his mother's departure. In other words the theatrical effect that Nyerere remarks upon in his introduction is one whose agent remains elusive. And it is the elusiveness of such a subject, manifested in the duplicity of translation, that I in turn mean to play out in this essay in order to inquire into the problematic effect of African agency in a situation where this subject remains dependent in one way or another on a European original.

Now Nyerere's translation of *Julius Caesar* emerges in a milieu so impoverished of nationalist literature that this absence allowed for its overdetermination.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that *Juliasi Kaizari* is a translation which does things like introduce blank verse into Kiswahili literature, for instance, it is the authority of Nyerere himself that became the primary issue in the play's reception.<sup>3</sup> So the coincidence both of given name and of political position that linked Roman dictator to African president in the play led to speculations regarding Nyerere's ambition and fate. Indeed, given the fact that the translation's publication

coincided with the violent overthrow of the neighbouring sultanate of Zanzibar, a mutiny of the country's armed forces that forced Nyerere to go temporarily underground, and the first assassination of an African head of state, that of Togo's Sylvanus Olympio, whose killing Nyerere tearfully announced to the National Assembly, these discussions regarding the president's tragic interest in Julius Caesar were not unwarranted. One commentator, in fact, went so far as to posit an imaginative connection between the assassinations of the Kiswahili Caesar, Sylvanus Olympio, and the Habsburg Franz Ferdinand, who mediates the two insofar as his death, leading as it did to the First World War, signalled the end of German rule in both Togo and Tanganyika, the subsequent partition of German Togoland, whose repercussions resulted in Olympio's killing, and the coming of British rule in Tanganyika, which allowed Nyerere to meditate on the nature of power through English rather than German literature.<sup>4</sup>

The proliferation of coincidental relations that we see in Nyerere's *Julius Caesar* transforms it into a medium for the problematization of subjective agency in general, and national subjectivity in particular. After all, the bourgeois novel as the classical medium of national subjectivity, one which Hegel calls a totality of objects, is displaced here by a totality of movement in which the singular bourgeois subject and its world of national objects does not emerge at all. What emerges, instead, is a coincidental proliferation of subjects linked by theatrical movement rather than by novelistic objecthood.<sup>5</sup> It is this that might account for the overdetermined character of Nyerere's *Juliasi Kaizari*, whose very title evokes not only the fate of presidential power, but also its devious relations with the Kaiser who once ruled in Nyerere's place, and even the British monarch, whose germanicised use of the Arabic-Swahili word Qaysar, that translated the Latin Caesar, expressed imperial rivalry in four languages. The possibility of a singular bourgeois subject in a linear national history, therefore, is displaced precisely by the evocative movement between terms like caesar, qaysar, kaiser, and kaizari.

Perhaps a more effective literary example of the totality of movement and its logic of coincidence comes not from *Julius Caesar*, but from the *Merchant of Venice*, which Nyerere translated in 1969 as *Mabepari wa Venisi*. The term for merchant here is not the Arabic-derived *mtajiri*, or large trader, but the Gujarati-derived *mabepari*, shopkeeper, which was used in the language of Nyerere's socialism to refer insultingly to the Indian commercial bourgeoisie which this socialism sought to destroy.<sup>6</sup> Indeed the image of Shylock, both in the comedy and in the drawing that prefaced its Kiswahili translation, evoked the Indian in East Africa, depicting as it did a leering, hook-nosed character with a knife in one hand and a pair of scales in the other. Nyerere's use of the word *mabepari*, of course, also displaces the identity of the play's merchant from Antonio, a well-meaning member of the majority, to Shylock, the representative of a usurous minority. The East African Indian, then, is evoked through a series of displacements, both within the play and without it, by the figure of a European Jew, and this in a way that ends up problematising East Africa itself as a context for his subjectivity.<sup>7</sup> (In this respect it is interesting to note that the image which prefaces *Juliasi Kaizari* has a distinctly African appearance, one which comments upon the language of race that has served politics so well in this region.)

Such a coincidental proliferation of subjects, of course, is by itself neither unusual nor even un-bourgeois, but it does become worthy of remark in a situation where the novelistic narrative of national singularity is practically non-existent. How does the ambiguity of national subjectivity here allow us to re-think its history more generally?

If what I have called a logic of coincidence informs Nyerere's translations of Shakespeare, it also informs his political language in a way that erases the distinction between fact and fiction to produce a complex ideological field that we shall see problematises national subjectivity altogether. It is the weakness of a Tanzanian middle class and its inability to hegemonically represent nationality that results in Nyerere's denial of agency by the displacement of a bourgeois subjectivity whose singularity is fearfully reflected upon in the persons of Caesar and Shylock.<sup>8</sup> One of the outcomes of this middle class incapacity for national representation is a dispersal of the field of political subjectivity in a Pan-Africanism that displaces national agency entirely by deploying a logic of coincidental necessity to create a thoroughly ambiguous political community. So, in a speech innaugurating the University of Zambia on July 13, 1966, President Nyerere dismisses even the attempt at bourgeois nationalism in the following argument:

None of the nation states of Africa are "natural" units. Our present boundaries are—as has been said many times—the result of European decisions at the time of the scramble for Africa. They are senseless; they cut across ethnic groups, often disregard natural physical divisions, and result in many different language groups being encompassed within a state. If the present states are not to disintegrate it is essential that deliberate steps be taken to foster a feeling of nationhood. Otherwise our present multitude of small countries—almost all of us too small to sustain a self-sufficient modern economy—could break up into even smaller units—perhaps based on tribalism. Then a further period of foreign domination would be inevitable ... All that I have been saying so far amounts to this: the present organization of Africa into nation states means inevitably that Africa drifts apart unless definite and deliberate counteracting steps are taken. In order to fulfil its responsibilities to the people it has led to freedom, each nationalist government must develop its own economy, its own organizations and institutions, and its own dominant nationalism. This is true however devoted to the cause of African unity the different national leaders may be. For while it is certainly true that in the long run the whole of Africa, and all its peoples, would be best served by unity, it is equally true, as Lord Keynes is reported to have said, that 'in the long run we are all dead' ... And then, in 150 years' time, Africa will be where Latin America is now, instead of having the strength and economic well-being which is enjoyed by the United States of America.<sup>9</sup>

I have quoted Nyerere at such length in order to point out that his concern with theatrical effect as a translator is itself translated here into a concern with the political effect of a nationalism that for him is equally theatrical. Moreover, this nationalism is described by the president in the terms of Shakespearean tragedy, since he is not sanguine about the future of his own Pan-Africanist solution to this nationalist *crise de theatre*. In this respect Nyerere's quotation from Keynes, the great theorist of conflict displacement in the nation-state, becomes significant, for his own tragic vision of a Pan-Africanist solution makes the displacement of conflict into an end in itself. Thus, the President's pseudo-

Leninist concept of uneven development, where the supposed non-existence in Tanzania of real class relations made for a direct transition to a socialism also not based on class, allowed him to define this latter as a kind of inevitable and therefore non-subjective development.<sup>10</sup> So, in a speech at the opening of Kivukoni College, Dar es Salaam, on July 29, 1961, Nyerere describes what is to become Tanzanian socialism neither as Eastern or Western, nor indeed even as some Third Way, but as an unmodelled ‘groping forward’ that is neither here nor there:

Africa’s vital contribution to the world at this stage of history must be to welcome new ideas freely and openly ... It is here that the value of the “eccentric”, the non-conformist in society, comes in. He it is who by the irritation he causes stops society from ceasing to think, forces it to make constant re-examinations and adjustments ... In this too, we have in practice to grope our way forward.<sup>11</sup>

The flexibility of Tanzanian socialism, something which was always more than merely theoretical, depended upon a rather curious notion of social relations that is expressed in its definition:

“Ujamaa”, then, or “familyhood”, describes our socialism. It is opposed to capitalism, which seeks to build a happy society on the basis of the exploitation of man by man; and it is equally opposed to doctrinaire socialism which seeks to build its happy society on a philosophy of inevitable conflict between man and man.<sup>12</sup>

What is curious about this definition is not simply its invocation of familial language to describe a nostalgic or reactionary *Gemeinschaft*, but rather its exclusion both of bourgeois contractual individualism, and of more collective forms of subjectivity as well, to produce a nation which is simultaneously pre- and post-capitalist. For the family that Nyerere is speaking of is an explicitly nuclear entity which displaces both individualist and collectivist modes of political agency. Indeed the Arabic-derived root *jam-*, which refers to all kinds of voluntary congregation, such as in the word *jamhuri*, republic, is here confined to a definition of family that avoids the contractualism of bourgeois individuality as well as the organicist ideology of collectivism. In effect the subject of Ujamaa had to be both and neither individual and collective:

In determining our future out of the lessons of our present and past, we shall be working out a new synthesis, a way of life that draws from Europe as well as Africa, from Islam as well as Christianity, from communalism and individualism.<sup>13</sup>

It is easy to derive the impression from these quotations that we are dealing here with some diffident form of liberalism, some feeble form of politics with no rigor of method. Such an impression, however, would be mistaken, for Nyerere’s negative brand of socialism possessed not simply a logical, but also a political rigor that profoundly transformed Tanzanian society. The country’s alleged incapacity for nationalist mobilisation along bourgeois lines, for example, leads Nyerere to the almost obsessional fear of a political subjectivity which could only fail to take its place. So he employs the language of coincidental or subjectless necessity to still any movement in this direction by on the one hand ending a multi-party parliament or nationalising large sections of the economy,

and on the other hand placing significant obstacles to the accumulation of capital by the party elite or refusing to countenance the control of industries by their workers.<sup>14</sup> A good example of the theatrical rhetoric which justifies such actions by endlessly displacing the subjects of class, race, religion, and tribe one by the other, is provided in Nyerere's inaugural address as president on the tenth of December, 1962:

The majority of our people are both poor and uneducated. And unfortunately, as a result of the immediate past, this dividing line between the "haves" and the "have-nots" coincides with yet another dividing line ... In that small group of the educated and well-to-do a very large number are Indians and Europeans. For this reason there is a very real risk that the economic division can lead to racial enmity between our African and our non-African citizens. But this sort of enmity would be just as unreasonable as, for example, the enmity which could be stirred up by the evil-minded between Muslims and Christians; for, as we all know, the colonial government did not concern itself very much with African education and therefore the majority of those who managed to acquire any did so in the mission schools, and are therefore mostly Christians. Here again, then, we have a division which by its very existence constitutes a potential threat to unity. And if you follow up this "division" you will find it does not even end there. You will discover that the missionaries did not build their schools all over Tanganyika, but only in certain areas. And that as a result of this not only are the majority of educated Africans today likely to be Christians, but a very large proportion of them are drawn from the Wahaya, Wanyakyusa, and Wachagga peoples. So those who would strike at our unity could equally well exploit this situation to stir up animosity between the tribes.<sup>15</sup>

In other words any positing of subjective difference here displaces itself onto other forms of subjectivity until the whole of society is unravelled. But surely national subjectivity did mean something in Tanzania? Ali Mazrui suggests what this meaning might be in his discussion of the language of militancy in Tanzanian politics.<sup>16</sup> After the mutiny of 1963 Nyerere sought to destroy the army as a political agent not only by curtailing its authority, but also by de-professionalising it in opening it up to such things as a citizens' militia and national service. Paradoxically, therefore, the elimination of the army as an autonomous political actor resulted in the abstract universalisation of military language and even the development of militant attitudes regarding issues of liberation elsewhere in Africa. It is the sheer emptiness of this militancy without a subject that interests me, for I believe that national subjectivity in Tanzania was equally empty, and for the same reasons. Is it not, after all, precisely the middle class, whose missing hegemony leads to Nyerere's displacement of political subjecthood, that constitutes here the empty universality of nationalism in its very absence? Only such a mobilisation around the empty place of the middle class as claimant to the universal subjectivity of nationalism explains the following definition by the President of a citizenship not mediated by any specificity:

I believe that this word 'African' can include all those who have made their home in the continent, black, brown, or white ... Yet it can only happen if people stand

as individual citizens, asking only for rights which can be accorded to all other individuals. This means forgetting colour, or race, and remembering humanity.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed Issa Shivji, in his important study *Class Struggles in Tanzania*, suggests, although without meaning to, exactly this conclusion, since he points out that the lack of a national bourgeoisie here resulted in its place being occupied by a petty bourgeoisie which, however, was too weak to constitute a ruling class for itself and so had to create a bureaucratic or Bonapartist elite to act on its behalf.<sup>18</sup> Now this series of dramatic displacements, in which classes exist in, but not for, themselves, illustrates that the true location of political subjectivity is the empty place of the middle class. All this, of course, echoes Lenin's *State and Revolution*, but does not become more believable thereby, for the problem of the missing middle arises from the unquestioned normativity of the bourgeois nation-state itself. And even if the 'weak' states on the post-colonial periphery operate with this ideology of political subjecthood, the very rhetoric of displacement and proliferation they give rise to gives the lie to it. Issa Shivji in fact indicates as much in his description of the strictly anti-nationalist because unsubjectivised character of the Tanzanian economy, which evades the problem of depositing control of the means of production in a class by ceding this sphere to international capital and problematising the simple control of circulation instead:

From the start the ruling petty bourgeoisie lack an objective independent economic base except the one provided by the colonial economy which was itself an appendage of the metropolitan economy. The most they could do was to liquidate those *specific* features (where it had not already been done) which tied the economy and the institutions to a particular metropolitan country (mother country) and instead *multilateralize* the imperialist domination thereby becoming authentically part of the world capitalist system. This undoubtedly represents change and motion, enough to satisfy the "*status quo* socialists" and quite in keeping with the objective changes in the international system. As we know, since the Second World War, imperialism itself has become multilateral with its own world-wide social, political and economic institutions (viz. the international corporations, world-wide agencies like the World Bank, the IMF, GATT etc.).<sup>19</sup>

While Shivji uses globalisation here simply to explain socialist Tanzania's paradoxical reliance on international lending agencies, we might see it in terms of another kind of Leninist uneven development, where the country's direct subsumption by an unmediated form of universal capital actually obviates the properly bourgeois necessity of national subjectivity altogether in a peculiar sort of post-modernism. Yet the state continues to require some kind of national subject, and it is this necessity that results in Nyerere's attempt to lay claim to the empty place of the missing middle class, which continues to be the political subject *par excellence*. Such a strategy, after all, sees nationalism for what it is by acknowledging the ideally bourgeois character of all political agency within it. And this acknowledgement puts Nyerere beyond the critique of Andrew Coulson's *Tanzania: A Political Economy*, which accounts for the president's diffidence regarding national subjectivity by attributing it to an interested

shuttling between bourgeois and worker dominance, without realising that it is precisely this choice that is not given to Tanzanian nationalism.

Having displaced national subjectivity as such in the empty ideal of the middle class subject, however, the president was faced with the question of his own subjecthood, or rather of political agency itself as a concept. Despite the curbs put on the party's accumulation of capital, therefore, or perhaps because of them, Nyerere is haunted by the spectre of subjective agency as a properly metaphysical problem. This haunting, in other words, occurs in the theatre of a socialism for which all subjects, those of class, race, religion and tribe, have been displaced in favour of the empty agency of a missing middle class:

But with all this stress on his individual responsibility how can we at the same time safeguard the individual against the arrogance of looking upon himself as someone special, someone who has the right to make very heavy demands upon society, in return for which he will deign to make available the skills which that society has enabled him to acquire?<sup>20</sup>

We have to encourage initiative in business, commerce, and agriculture, without the vision of great individual wealth for the person or group concerned. We have not yet solved this problem.<sup>21</sup>

Now these statements are metaphysical, not only because the individuality they mention is abstract agency and clearly not individualism, but also because they recognize the impossibility of avoiding such agency altogether. Very often the haunting of this metaphysical actor puts the president's own authority into question, so that he ends up publicly mortifying it in various ways. During the elections of 1965, for instance, calls for Nyerere to become president for life led him to point out the dictatorial possibility of his becoming Sultan Nyerere the First.<sup>22</sup> What is interesting in this Caesar-like refusal of sovereignty is the fact that Nyerere's reference here to the recent and violent end of the Zanzibari sultanate again manifests his fear of the sovereign subject, both as deposed dynast and as revolutionary citizen.

The problem of the missing national subject, I have said, comes to be overdetermined in cultural products like Nyerere's translations of Shakespeare, and is so thought there in both its most general and succinct form. The very lack of ostensible political subjectivity in these texts, therefore, allows them to translate precisely the problem of this lack into the language of post-coloniality. After all, is not the theatrical effect of Nyerere's Kiswahili reducible at some level to Shakespeare's English as ghost-writer? This is not to say that the English in such a situation become a 'real' subject in a simple narrative of colonial responsibility. On the contrary, the logic of coincidence that we have seen operating in Nyerere's translations renders the English into an agentive subject only as a kind of *a priori* which makes translation possible by giving way to it. In fact, Nyerere affirms this somewhat cannibalistic function of translation in his introduction to the second edition of *Juliasi Kaizari*, where he states his intention to prove that Kiswahili possesses the literary prowess to de-anglicise and re-make Shakespeare entirely on its own terms and with no reliance on foreign words or constructions.<sup>23</sup> But this means something more than merely reducing a problematic (because colonial) Englishness to the



aprioritic necessity of a pre-text. Rather a Tanzanian nation is created here in a perverse identification with Englishness as a real nationality in much the same way as Antonio Gramsci tells us an impoverished Italian nationalism lacking a dominant bourgeoisie is created culturally through the popularity of national literatures translated from other European languages.<sup>24</sup>

And yet what President Nyerere translated was not a specific text of bourgeois nationalism so much as the abstract expression of nationality defined by language itself. For as Walter Benjamin remarks, translation addresses a language, and so also a people, as a totality invoking another language and another people in an abstract mirroring that stands apart from any particular subjectivity.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Ali Mazrui suggests that the tribal associations of many African languages and literatures resulted in the adoption of European equivalents as the only neutral media for colonial nationalisms.<sup>26</sup> Thus he points to the fact that political parties, such as the one which led Tanzania to independence, often emerged from literary organisations of a distinctly European and *therefore* African bent.<sup>27</sup> This reflexivity of translation, in other words, made possible an eternal back-and-forth between English and Kiswahili, a movement which displaced any national subject by allowing England to evoke Tanzania, and vice-versa, in a logic of coincidence that displaced subjective positivity as such. Perhaps it was the empty nationality produced in this play without end that Nyerere's mother wished to avoid when she walked out of her son's theatre of subjectivity.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Julius Nyerere, "Utanguluzi wa Toleo la Pili" in William Shakespeare, *Juliasi Kaizari* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1969), vii.
- <sup>2</sup> See Ali Mazrui, "The African Symbolism of *Julius Caesar*" in *The Anglo-African Commonwealth* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1967), 121-136.
- <sup>3</sup> Mazrui, "The African Symbolism."
- <sup>4</sup> Mazrui, "The African Symbolism."
- <sup>5</sup> See the chapter "Historical Novel and Historical Drama" in Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1983).
- <sup>6</sup> See for this the seventh and eighth chapters of Issa Shivji, *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1976).
- <sup>7</sup> Nyerere himself compares Indians with Jews, although not necessarily in a derogatory way. See, for example, Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1968), 258.
- <sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of Nyerere's problematic postponement of national subjectivity in the face of bourgeois- and worker-incapacity, see Andrew Coulson, *Tanzania: A Political Economy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).
- <sup>9</sup> Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism*, 208-211.
- <sup>10</sup> Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1965), 170.
- <sup>11</sup> Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity*, 122.
- <sup>12</sup> Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity*, 170.
- <sup>13</sup> Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity*, 116.
- <sup>14</sup> For this see Coulson, *Tanzania: A Political Economy*.
- <sup>15</sup> Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity*, 179.
- <sup>16</sup> Ali Mazrui, "Anti-Militarism and Political Militancy in Tanzania" in *Violence and Thought* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), 24-49.
- <sup>17</sup> Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity*, 117.
- <sup>18</sup> Issa Shivji, *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1976), 64, 95.
- <sup>19</sup> Shivji, *Class Struggles in Tanzania*, 20-21.

- <sup>20</sup> Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1968), 185.
- <sup>21</sup> Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Development* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1973), 332.
- <sup>22</sup> Ali Mazrui, "The African Symbolism of *Julius Caesar*" in *The Anglo-African Commonwealth* (Oxford: Pergamom Press, 1967), 130.
- <sup>23</sup> Julius Nyerere, "Utanguluzi wa Toleo la Pili" in William Shakespeare, *Juliasi Kaizari* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1969), vii.
- <sup>24</sup> See the sections "People, Nation and Culture" and "Popular Literature" in Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From Cultural Writings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).
- <sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 76-77.
- <sup>26</sup> Ali Mazrui, "Shakespeare in African Political Thought" in *The Anglo-African Commonwealth* (Oxford: Pergamom Press, 1967), 112.
- <sup>27</sup> Mazrui, "Shakespeare in African Political Thought", 118.