Introduction

The unpaved road to the interior from the southeastern Tanzanian town of Mtwara, cleared in the early 1950s, remains today the main corridor connecting many rural settlements in the area to the regional capital on the coast. A contemporary traveler shares the road with villagers riding on rusty bicycles loaded with firewood, rural people trekking alone or in small groups on foot, minibuses laden with passengers and parcels, the occasional privately steered sedan or pickup truck, and conspicuously well-maintained SUVs carrying foreign development workers. A few miles out of town, the electricity cables lining the sides of the road disappear abruptly, yielding to the lush greenery of cashew and papaya trees, coconut palms, and small plots of cassava or maize. Periodically, the traveler passes through a village, marked by a concentration of mud houses with thatched roofs, makeshift marketplaces, chickens blundering about, and occasionally a school, church, mosque, or health center housed in a concrete structure with a tin roof.

Any journey along this route – even for those driving gleaming new SUVs – is a fundamentally uncertain affair. The road's uneven and sometimes treacherously muddy surface renders flat tires and stallings an inevitable fact of life for those fortunate enough to ride in private vehicles or on bicycles. For those traveling without such means, long distances and the unpredictability of local transport (minibuses pass infrequently and irregularly, often already filled to maximum capacity) make the trip a difficult one. In this respect, the experience of traversing the Mtwara–Newala transportation corridor embodies the profoundly insecure and contingent character of everyday life for many rural residents of southeastern Tanzania. The road – like the landscape of rural Tanzania more broadly – at once epitomizes the legacy of late colonial and early postcolonial development initiatives and reflects ensuing decades of state abandonment. It also continues to be remade by its local neighbors and transient commuters, for whom the Mtwara–Newala road is but one part of an intricate, though not immediately visible or easily

1

FIGURE 1. The Mtwara–Newala Road bisecting Nanguruwe Village, 2008. Photograph by the author.

accessible, network of intersecting routes linking southeastern Tanzania's farms, villages, and towns to each other and the world beyond (Figure 1).

Because of its poverty and poor infrastructure, the region of Mtwara is conventionally thought of as a static, isolated, backward periphery – within Tanzania and the world as a whole. Yet Mtwara's social, political, economic, and physical landscape has long been evolving in ways deeply connected to global events and processes. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European settlement in southern Africa, the Indian Ocean slave trade, and the expansion of German and British empire directly or indirectly shaped the region. Over a relatively short period of time, these dynamics brought warfare, forced labor, a money economy, and colonial institutions to this corner of East Africa, introducing new modes of living, working, and governing to its residents. After waves of decolonization started to sweep across sub-Saharan Africa, leading to the formation of the United Republic of Tanzania in 1964, a new chapter of Mtwara's history opened. For the first time ever, Mtwara's fate was tied to the decisions of an African-led national government. Yet the postcolonial Tanzanian state and the realities of life in Mtwara continued to be influenced by broader global forces – including

ongoing decolonization, the Cold War, and what one scholar evocatively calls the "great clanking gears" of the capitalist world economy.[1]

The initial period of Tanzanian independence began in the early 1960s as a heady time of high hopes and ended with widespread disappointment in the mid-1970s. The roughly fifteen years between these temporal bookends saw nothing less than a thorough transformation of the human geography of rural regions like Mtwara, just as they constituted an era of tremendous political upheaval across the globe. At the center of these changes in Tanzania, as in many other countries, was a project of state-led socialism. In February 1967, Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere announced his vision for Tanzanian development, outlining the ideological contours of a political program termed *ujamaa* ("familyhood" in Swahili). He explained that the implementation of *ujamaa* would begin with the immediate nationalization of banks, major industries, and natural resources by the one-party state, but the focus of *ujamaa* would be the longer-term undertaking of reorganizing the Tanzanian countryside into socialist villages. The *ujamaa* village would be defined by collective property ownership and communal agricultural organization; the hard work and united spirit of *ujamaa* villagers would fuel national development. Although villagization began as a voluntary effort, between 1973 and 1975, it morphed into a compulsory drive in which millions of peasants were forcibly relocated into concentrated settlements. At the end of this campaign, called Operation Vijiji (or "Villages"), officials abandoned the *ujamaa* project altogether, as the pressures and constraints imposed by Tanzania's increasing indebtedness and poverty eclipsed the earlier goal of achieving substantive socialism.

Although *ujamaa* was a Tanzanian initiative, it was part of a broader continental phenomenon of African Socialism – a blend of political concepts and strategies sourced from the diverse ideological field of the 1960s world. *Ujamaa* was easily the most ambitious version of African Socialism, and within Tanzania the seemingly sleepy region of Mtwara came to be the site where *ujamaa* was most thoroughly implemented. Official records, secondary studies, and anecdotal evidence all suggest that Mtwara became home to more *ujamaa* villages than any other region in the country and that almost every rural resident of Mtwara moved from dispersed settlements into dense, ordered villages – like those still lining the Mtwara–Newala road pictured earlier – between 1967 and 1975. Yet the lack of comprehensive documentation of how *ujamaa* was actually executed on the ground means that we continue to know little about how or why the people of Mtwara came to live in the villages that most of them still currently inhabit. By the same token, we know little about how such Tanzanians thought and talked

---

[1] Michael Watts, "Development and Governmentality," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 24, 1 (2003): 29.

about *ujamaa* and about how *ujamaa* informed the everyday ways in which they lived their lives and anticipated their futures.

In a sense, the uncertainty of any journey along the Mtwara–Newala road mirrors the indeterminacy and obstacle-ridden nature of the historian's route to this episode of Mtwara's – and Tanzania's – past. The memories of rural Tanzanians and local officials are the most direct point of access to this historical period. However, these memories, like the landscape of rural Tanzania itself, are imprinted by the decades of economic hardship, political rupture, and social transformation that have followed the *ujamaa* era. On a larger scale, a number of conceptual challenges coincide with the logistical complications of uncovering a full picture of Tanzania's socialist past. From the vantage point of the present, it is tempting to reduce the *ujamaa* experiment to a quixotic scheme and mere historical curiosity, at best, or to dismiss it as one of many examples of state authoritarianism confirming the generalized dysfunction of postcolonial African politics, at worst. Both perspectives define *ujamaa* not just by its ultimate failure to accomplish its intended goals but by the presumption that it was inherently doomed to fail from its very inception. Most studies of this episode of Tanzanian history have implicitly, if not explicitly, adopted this position, focusing on explaining what was wrong with Tanzanian socialism rather than asking the more primary question of what *ujamaa* was. A historical blind spot persists.

Yet the stakes of understanding *ujamaa* are high, because its policies played a key role in the lives of Tanzanian citizens and because African Socialism was an important though overlooked part of twentieth-century world history. At the local level, even a casual contemporary observer of the Mtwara countryside can still find ample evidence of *ujamaa* villagization inscribed onto the area's physical landscape and woven into the fabric of its residents' daily practices. Many settlements appear to be organized according to a central grid bisected by a major road, with individual houses lined up along straight village streets. Every morning, it is common to see village residents – especially women – departing from their homes on long daily journeys to labor on their farms or collect water for their family's use. Meanwhile, at the center of most settlements, young men often gather around the marketplace or village office to discuss the going price of charcoal in town or the results of the latest national election. Each element of these scenes betrays different aspects of *ujamaa*'s impact. During villagization, rural people moved – by choice or compulsion – into villages organized according to "modern" layouts, characterized by clean lines and neat symmetry, and located along roads designed to facilitate contact with the new Tanzanian state. Although *ujamaa* aimed to equalize gender relations by forging socialist community, it often reinforced distinct developmental roles for men and women. Thus, rural women today continue to bear most responsibility for domestic duties, which include providing food and water

for their children, while most men participate in petty wage labor or other informal economic activities. Because villagization did not succeed in abolishing private property and was often carried out without sufficient planning, many village residents maintain their original farms hours away from their post-*ujamaa* homes and walk substantial distances to collect water for ordinary use. Finally, although *ujamaa* emphasized socialist internationalism, it was also a nation-building project, cultivating an unprecedented engagement with national politics among average men and women in even the most far-flung corners of Tanzania. This engagement took many forms and endures today, manifesting in attitudes ranging from active investment in multiparty politics to bitter disillusionment with national leaders.

Beyond the site of the individual Mtwara village, the afterlives of *ujamaa* (and African Socialism more broadly) are also still apparent, albeit in more subtle ways, in evolving transnational political and economic formations. In the wake of the Cold War, it has become common to speak of "postsocialism" and "neoliberalism" as overarching categories describing the decline of the welfare state, the erosion of socialist moral economies and political communities, and the ascendance of powerful new strains of unregulated market capitalism across the world.[2] Such contemporary developments represent a striking shift from the leftist spirit of the 1960s, perhaps nowhere more clearly than in former socialist countries such as Russia, China, and Tanzania. Yet these recent ruptures often conceal or are concealed by continuities that facilitate the transition between socialist and postsocialist periods. *Ujamaa*-era idioms and practices live on in the present in reconfigured form – for example, in Tanzania's extensive ties to China, a former socialist partner turned profit-seeking capitalist. Chinese officials invoke *ujamaa*-era discourses of Third World solidarity to legitimate their often exploitative current economic involvement in Tanzania, while many Tanzanian citizens use this same socialist lexicon to critique their Chinese employers.[3] On the ground, Tanzanian farmers displaced from their rural homes by today's large-scale land grabs draw on the same adaptive survival strategies that they used to cope with forced villagization in the 1970s. In some cases, Tanzanian leaders even justify such contemporary peasant displacement by invoking the welfarist logic of villagization, claiming that state action actually taken to satisfy corporations' appetite for land is intended to benefit rural people according to the socialist principles of the past.[4]

[2] Foundational works on these topics include C. M. Hann, ed., *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia* (London: Routledge, 2002) and David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[3] Ching Kwan Lee, "Raw Encounters: Chinese Managers, African Workers and the Politics of Casualization in Africa's Chinese Enclaves," *China Quarterly* 199 (2009): 647–66.

[4] Oakland Institute, *Understanding Land Investment Deals in Africa* (Oakland, CA: The Oakland Institute, 2011); Oakland Institute, *Understanding How Land Deals Contribute to Famine and Conflict in Africa* (Oakland, CA: The Oakland Institute, 2011).

With *ujamaa*'s continuing implications and resonances in mind, this book takes up the following question: what was *ujamaa*? To respond, I draw on written records from official and newspaper archives in Tanzania, the United States, and the United Kingdom; interviews with more than one hundred elderly villagers and former state officials in Mtwara; and a variety of secondary studies. I do not seek simply to document the effects of *ujamaa* on Tanzanian villagers or explain why the *ujamaa* project failed. Rather, my inquiry is at once a more open-ended and deeper one. I ask how people ranging from Julius Nyerere to cashew farmers in Mtwara imagined and understood the *ujamaa* vision in the first place; how they practiced, experienced, and sometimes contested policies like villagization; and how they ultimately shaped this political formation through their interactions with each other and the outside world. In the following pages, it will become clear that I do not intend to squeeze the story of *ujamaa* into the rigid container of a linear historical narrative or a monolithic developmental paradigm. The historical terrain of *ujamaa* is full of unexpected twists and turns, of tensions and contradictions that make it as difficult as it is rewarding to traverse. I highlight these ambiguities and inconsistencies, even while identifying coherent historical patterns and axes of causation, so as to present the history of *ujamaa* in its full complexity.

Like the rural Mtwara road described earlier, this book establishes connections between places that once seemed remote or separate from one another, and it intersects with routes leading in different directions. This story is simultaneously about the southeastern corner of Tanzania and all of Tanzania; even more broadly, it is about Africa in the early days of independence. But in a fundamental sense the story of *ujamaa* is also about the larger world of the mid- to late twentieth century. During this time, turbulent struggles for decolonization and the intensifying dynamics of the Cold War converged, joining people and spaces in Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas in unprecedented ways. These linkages were both symbolic and material, operating along new as well as older, reconfigured global circuits. Tanzania was a critical node in many of these networks – a focal point for anticolonial organizing, Cold War contests, leftist politics, and developmental exchange across the world. Nonetheless, Tanzania and Mtwara within it occupy a strikingly marginal position in most popular and scholarly mappings of the past. This book presents an alternative historical geography situating Tanzania and, more specifically, Mtwara at the center of the changing global landscape of the 1960s and 1970s.

* * *

The British colony of Tanganyika, formerly part of German East Africa, gained independence on December 9, 1961.[5] This transition, the culmination

5 More precisely, Tanganyika was a British League of Nations mandate between 1922 and 1946 and a British United Nations Trust Territory between 1946 and 1961. Tanganyika merged with Zanzibar (a former British protectorate) in 1964 to become the United Republic of Tanzania.

of years of advocacy and organizing by anticolonial activists, brought with
it a tremendous sense of possibility. Yet independence also posed enormous
challenges to both leaders and average citizens. Some of these merely rep-
resented continuations of older struggles – such as the long-standing daily
battles of rural people to maintain a livelihood – whereas others were fresh
arrivals to the scene, products of the unique political and economic cir-
cumstances of the 1960s world. Like its recently decolonized counterparts
elsewhere on the African continent, Tanganyika emerged from decades of
colonial rule with paltry financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and
a distorted economy. Although it achieved independence peacefully, the new
country was surrounded by territories destabilized by unfolding or immi-
nent civil wars or liberation conflicts. Throughout the early 1960s, civilian
refugees from the Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi streamed across borders
onto Tanganyikan soil, accompanied by freedom fighters from Mozam-
bique, Rhodesia, and South Africa. A wave of army mutinies across East
Africa in 1964, coinciding with a violent revolution in neighboring Zanz-
ibar, intensified this climate of insecurity. Meanwhile, officials in the United
States, Great Britain, and both East and West Germany anxiously eyed
the region, applying subtle and overt forms of pressure on Nyerere, Tan-
ganyika's first president, to conduct his country's affairs in ways that com-
plied with their ideological doctrines and conformed to their geopolitical
loyalties.

Although this context imposed considerable constraints on government
leaders and officials of what came to be the country's ruling political party,
the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), the early days of indepen-
dence also presented expansive, unprecedented opportunities.[6] The spirit of
political experimentation that attended decolonization, accompanied by a
burgeoning agenda of radicalism generated by movements and states across
the colonial and postcolonial worlds, enabled and sustained new transre-
gional solidarities and local revolutions. As continental coalitions germi-
nated and regional federations materialized, the Pan-Africanist vision of a
united, free Africa seemed closer to becoming a reality than ever before.
Moreover, a shared commitment to combating colonialism in *all* of its
guises – both formal and informal – underwrote transnational political
and economic relationships that stretched far beyond the African conti-
nent, often under the discursive umbrella of Third Worldism. In turn, these
border-crossing material ties facilitated ideological cross-fertilization and
thus fostered policy innovation at the national level. Much of this politi-
cal ferment transcended the bipolar paradigms of the Cold War even while
constantly confronting them.

Ujamaa was produced by and responded to this global field. The Tan-
zanian project simultaneously drew on major themes of international

---

[6] Frederick Cooper, "Possibility and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspec-
tive," *Journal of African History* 49, 2 (2008): 167–96.

socialism – by rejecting exploitation and inequality in favor of collective effort and welfare – and departed from the existing global repertoire of development policy – by proposing a decentralized, pastoral version of socialist democracy. Rather than proclaiming *ujamaa* a fixed blueprint for revolutionary change, Tanzanian leaders styled it as a flexible, improvisational utopian project driven by a shifting dialectic between state-directed policy and popular subjective transformation. In his first explanation of the *ujamaa* concept, in 1962, Nyerere announced that "a socialist attitude of mind, and not the rigid adherence to a standard political pattern," would distinguish Tanzanian socialism.[7] Over time, this utopian attitude of mind took on an increasingly definite form in the official imagination, and by 1967, *ujamaa* had crystallized into a more precise set of policies. At the heart of these developmental prescriptions was an elevation of the communal village as both the embodiment of Tanzania's socialist ideals and the tool by which to achieve them on a national scale.

This village-centered political imaginary had many faces and precedents. Throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century, intellectuals, activists, and leaders across the world forged and embraced programs for social and political reorganization that revolved around the site of the village (or the concentrated rural settlement).[8] These visions and plans could have a variety of ideological motivations and associations, but they often conceived of the village temporally as well as spatially. One version viewed the village in nostalgic terms, encouraging deculturated city dwellers to return to rural communities so as to restore meaning and morality to their lives, building a new, radically decentralized political order while recovering an idealized past. Mohandas Gandhi's vision of village republicanism, outlined during the Indian independence struggle of the 1930s and 1940s, represented such an endorsement of rural community.[9] Conversely, another contemporaneous strand of political thought explicitly conceived of the village in terms of modernization and scientific progress. This approach manifested in attempts by the British colonial state during the 1940s and 1950s to relocate its African subject populations into concentrated rural settlements so as to combat medical threats such as sleeping sickness and environmental hazards such as soil erosion.[10] From yet another perspective, the village was a technique of political control to be deployed in emergency, conflict situations. The US military's "strategic hamlets" program in early

---

[7] Julius Nyerere, "*Ujamaa*: The Basis of African Socialism," in Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity: A Selection from Writings and Speeches, 1952–65* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1966), 162.

[8] Nicole Sackley, "The Village as Cold War Site: Experts, Development, and the History of Rural Reconstruction," *Journal of Global History* 6, 3 (2011): 481–504.

[9] Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[10] Joseph Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010).

1960s Vietnam, for instance, drew on this logic, using fortified rural settlements and targeted welfare interventions to "contain" the spreading communist insurgency in the Vietnamese countryside.[11] On the other side of the Cold War, Soviet policies in the 1930s configured the collective village as a fundamental unit of social transformation and socialist production. Collectivization reflected an understanding of older rural practices as backward and corrupt; it sought to restructure villages into cooperative sites where highly organized labor brigades would generate surplus food to enable rapid industrialization.[12]

Although Tanzanian officials consistently spoke of the *ujamaa* project as a socialist venture, they incorporated elements of all of the aforementioned political formations into what became the policy of *ujamaa* villagization. The *ujamaa* village was to reproduce a romanticized past and achieve a modern future, cultivate decentralized forms of community while enabling state intervention, and emerge organically from popular initiative but respond to coercive official policy. This amalgamation of ideologies and impulses was framed within the language of African Socialism, a loose political discourse assembled in the 1950s and 1960s by members of the first generation of postcolonial African leaders who espoused a form of socialism rooted in indigenous traditions and tailored to contemporary local realities. The key architects of African Socialism – such as Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and Guinea's Ahmed Sékou Touré – represented this vision as a common ethical orientation that produced divergent policy recommendations in distinct national settings.[13] As the most comprehensive and sustained iteration of African Socialism, the Tanzanian *ujamaa* initiative exemplified many of the shared characteristics of this continent-wide formulation but also adopted its own priorities and followed its own trajectory. The agrarian focus of *ujamaa* – along with its emphasis on the three entwined, multivalent principles of familyhood, self-reliance, and security – set Tanzania apart from its continental counterparts. Moreover, the sheer scale of the villagization program distinguished the *ujamaa* project from not just other African Socialist ventures but other contemporaneous African development programs across the ideological spectrum.

[11] Philip Catton, "Counter-Insurgency and Nation Building: The Strategic Hamlet Programme in South Vietnam, 1961–1963," *International History Review* 21, 4 (1999): 918–40.

[12] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[13] The only major volume on African Socialism remains William Friedland and Carl Rosberg, eds., *African Socialism* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964). A shorter, useful recent collection is Kelly Askew and M. Anne Pitcher's special issue on "African Socialisms and Postsocialisms," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 76, 1 (2006). For a thoughtful comparative treatment of African Socialist discourse, see Chapter 3 of James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

By the mid-1970s, however, Tanzania's problems had begun to resemble those of postcolonial Africa more broadly, as the country lost its developmental momentum, abandoned its earlier political ideals, and sank into a cycle of economic dependency and indebtedness. Conventional scholarly wisdom holds that this transition from an early 1960s moment of possibility to a mid-1970s condition of crisis was precipitated by fundamental flaws in the *ujamaa* experiment itself. Most studies of *ujamaa* identify and seek to account for a tension between the way in which *ujamaa* was initially articulated – its stated utopian intentions – and the way in which it came to be implemented – in what is usually described as a top-down or haphazard style. This argument often implies that *ujamaa* ultimately reproduced a generic sort of authoritarianism apparently inherent in the concept of development itself or points to the dysfunctional character and artificial foundation of the modern state in Africa.[14] These factors, it follows from this logic, are to blame for *ujamaa*'s failure and Tanzania's ongoing underdevelopment.

I take a different approach, identifying tensions *within* the *ujamaa* project – in both its imaginative form and the concrete ways in which it was applied. Instead of emphasizing a contradiction between theory and practice, in other words, I highlight the contradictions internal to both.[15] As a political vision, *ujamaa* had many meanings; African Socialist ideology could

[14] This is a large body of work; representative examples with revealing titles include Zaki Ergas, "Why Did the *Ujamaa* Village Policy Fail? Towards a Global Analysis," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 18, 3 (1980): 387–410 and Leander Schneider, "Developmentalism and Its Failings: Why Rural Development Went Wrong in 1960s and 1970s Tanzania," PhD diss., Columbia University, 2003. Recent versions of this approach have followed the example of James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Conditions to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998). For a comprehensive bibliography on *ujamaa*, see Paul Bjerk, "Sovereignty and Socialism in Tanzania: The Historiography of an African State," *History in Africa* 37 (2010): 275–319. Exceptions to the analytical tendencies I have identified include the following insightful works on the cultural politics of *ujamaa* in urban Tanzania: Kelly Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); James Brennan, "Blood Enemies: Exploitation and Urban Citizenship in the Nationalist Political Thought of Tanzania, 1958–1975," *Journal of African History* 47, 3 (2006): 1–25; and Andrew Ivaska, *Cultured States: Youth, Gender, and Modern Style in 1960s Dar es Salaam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[15] In this respect, I am particularly inspired by the example of two scholars of French colonialism. Monica van Beusekom, in examining the Office du Niger project, "focuses on both development ideology and practice" and "suggests, more generally, that considering practice, policy, or ideology in isolation would lead to an incomplete picture of development." Van Beusekom, *Negotiating Development: African Farmers and Colonial Experts at the Office du Niger, 1920–1960* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), xxi. Gary Wilder, in scrutinizing "colonial humanism," eschews an emphasis on "contradictions between plans and implementation" and instead identifies "a deeper antinomy between universality and particularity" – a "constitutive contradiction" of the French imperial nation-state "expressed on multiple scales (national, colonial, imperial) and at various levels of abstraction (in policies, in political forms, in their underlying rationality)." Wilder, *The French*