Introduction

Bibi Amina and the Persistence and Evanescence of Development

This book has its origin in a number of questions that I found impossible to avoid while researching the impoverished colonial past of Southeast Tanzania, and in the process negotiating its impoverished present.[1] To wit: why is it that rural poverty in this region appears both easy to explain and mystifying, whether judging by historical sources or by everyday conversation? Why, in the early to mid-2000s when I did most of my fieldwork, was *maendeleo*, 'development', on everybody's lips, when actual attempts at fostering development had been ephemeral and/or unpopular for decades? Why is it that some of the stratagems then being tried in development projects were near-identical to ones tried in the 1930s, yet being offered as something new? What kept the development show on the road? Moreover, why did many people who had very little means to improve their situation appear ready to hold their poverty against themselves? And why is it that the purveyors of development, officials and experts alike, appeared to balance so awkwardly between their often extensive knowledge of the region's problems and a variety of more or less glib jargons used to describe putative ways to address it? This could be observed, mutatis mutandis, both in the colonial archive and in the public meetings focused on development then ongoing.

The life of Bibi Amina, the grandmother of my longest-standing research assistant, Zuhura Mohamed, showed the urgency of these questions. When I met her in 2000, she was over seventy years of age.

[1] By 'Southeast Tanzania' I refer to the area comprising the two present-day administrative regions of Lindi and Mtwara, circumscribed in the south by the Ruvuma river, in the east by the Indian Ocean, in the north by the Rufiji river, in the northwest by the Selous game reserve, and in the west by the border Songea region.

Born in a village north of the Lindi-Masasi road, she had followed her husband to live in Masasi town as a teenager, and never left again. The marriage did not last and, since her divorce, she had lacked access to cultivable land in her own right, as she had no relatives in the town. Nevertheless, she had been working the same 'borrowed' plot for decades. With little access to manure or fertiliser, it did not produce enough to meet her food needs, let alone allow her to sell crops to meet her cash needs: Bibi Amina was poor, even by Masasi standards. As I will argue below, the problem that she could either eat her crops or earn cash from them, but not both, has been central to the constant recurrence of rural poverty here since the colonial period. This is the part where poverty seems simple: the Southeast lacks reliable high-value cash crops, as well as transport links to affordably extract what cash crops there are. It becomes baffling, though, when considering counter-factuals and roads not taken. Why didn't higher-value cash crops such as cotton catch on? Why do fertilisers not seem to work as expected?[2] Why did it take until 2009 to provide roads of a standard that made extracting lower-value cash crops reasonably profitable? Could Bibi Amina have networked more for better plots, in an area where family networks still did at least as much as titles for land access?

The last suggestion seems unlikely, as Bibi Amina did not lack social graces. She was a wiry, dark-skinned woman with a deep, sonorous voice, and her most distinctive turn of phrase was *ndiyo kushukuru*, 'this is something to be thankful for'. I suspect in hindsight that she said this loudly in case there were neighbours passing within earshot, who might want to know that she appreciated their frequent small gestures of support. Bibi Amina's survival depended on neighbours, friends, and family. Her daughter was a nurse at the regional hospital in Lindi Town, a two-hour drive away. There were four granddaughters, one of whom lived in Masasi, one in Lindi, both housewives, while another was a medical assistant in a village a couple of hours' drive away. It was the fourth, though, my research assistant, Zuhura, who had paid for building Bibi Amina's home, with the income from

[2] J. G. Bennett, L. C. Browne, A. M. W. Geddes, C. R. C. Hendy, A. M. Lavelle, R. Rose Innes, and L. G. Sewell, 'Report of the zonal survey team in phase 2, volume 2: The farming systems and development prospects'. Ministry of Overseas Development/Mtwara Lindi Regional Integrated Development Programme/Land Resources Development Centre, Tolworth Tower, Surbiton, 1979, 148 and 169.

an earlier research assistant's job. It was L-shaped, with three rooms barely two metres wide, and wonkily built, but it was made of cement bricks (not mud and wattle) and had a metal (not grass) roof. A low rickety fence surrounded it and marked out the courtyard between the two arms of the L.

In her relationships and what they provided for her, Bibi Amina exemplified the mixture of luck and skill required to get by with minimal resources. I observed them at work while sleeping in a guest house across the road from her home and visiting during the day. She lived in *Wapiwapi*, 'where-where', a higgledy-piggledy but central quarter. In her yard, I watched her spoon small portions of black tea leaves into pyramid-shaped bags made from torn-up newspaper, selling them for a pittance to people who could only afford a day's worth of tea: this was her only *mradi*, 'income-generating activity'. But small-scale non-monetary exchanges occurred daily; neighbours' children coming by to pick up glowing embers if Bibi Amina had lit her fire first, or getting samples of the food she had cooked; bags of pigeon peas and bundles of sugar cane that neighbours sent. While she expressed gratitude and approval loudly, talk of her wayward son, currently hiding from a court case for stealing building materials, had to be hushed, especially after dark, when you never knew who was passing. Bibi Amina allowed herself one luxury: chewing tobacco, consumed in small pinches from a plastic box that had once held a roll of photographic film. She would roll herself up on her side to chew it, hugging her knees and spitting the juice with great force and precision through a gap between her front teeth.

Bibi Amina's conversation and especially her reminiscences, meanwhile, provide examples of the ambiguity that surrounded the notion of development: its power, its evanescence, and the way this evanescence appeared to impugn people like her. She did not, on the whole, lack confidence. She was a fast and often assertive talker, and took pride both in her relative autonomy and her ability to manage her good-neighbourly relations. But her confidence faltered when remembering the adventurous spirit of her youth; the rallies, dances, and slogans of the independence campaign. She said she had lost her enthusiasm for rallies after she was involved in a near-fatal car accident on the way to a rally in the years after independence; as she put it, they had become *mwiko*, 'taboo', for her. But what was the alternative? Bibi Amina mused on how different things were now, on the dissipation of

the hopes for quick progress towards collective prosperity that had animated them. Wondering where things had gone wrong, she sometimes made disparaging remarks about *sisi wakulima*, 'us cultivators', or, more vaguely, *sisi watu wa huko*, 'us people from here'. Unlike others in similar contexts, she never impugned *sisi Waafrika*, 'us Africans'.[3] But it was clear that she wondered what people like herself had done wrong to live out their lives amid dirt roads and thatched pit latrines, and that she longed for things to change.

I was not a neutral presence in Bibi Amina's back yard, and perhaps these questions exercised her more in the presence of somebody who, in a sense, embodied what she lacked. But I kept showing up in her yard for long enough to stop being news, to melt into the background somewhat as Mama Amina conversed with neighbours and grandchildren, and I trust, also from conversations with others, that her questions were not merely out of deference to me. This book, then, can be described in part as an attempt to answer Bibi Amina's implicit questions about what was wrong with her and her neighbours for being so poor, a very long way of saying 'nothing'. I trace out environmental constraints, administrative dynamics, and an economic and political context that, I think, make this region's failure to prosper throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first quite understandable.

At the same time, the book also tries to examine rather than dismiss Bibi Amina's self-questioning. Even if it is prompted by deep disappointment, there is something admirable in the open-minded self-examination that was evident in her conversation, and in that of many others I met in this region. Outside moments of crisis, it is rarely found in the more affluent societies I have encountered. Why, then, does it make sense for people in her situation to view themselves so critically? Further, why did it make sense for the purveyors of development to encourage this kind of critical self-examination, especially when they showed little interest in examining their own antecedents and record in the long term? Why the recurrent, grating contrast between officials' often detailed knowledge of the problems faced by the poor, their vague awareness of past failure, and their grand, bland pronouncements about future development? *Were* there, after all, 'missed

[3] On the use of 'African' as a 'category of abjection', see James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. California: University of California Press, 1999.

chances'? Perhaps, but I have come to think that the peculiar rhetoric serves above all to manage potential political fallout from the fairly predictable lack of progress.

The Routine Nature of Failure and the Political Need for Optimism

The attempt to answer the questions just raised has entailed engagement with a rich and diverse literature. It ranges from Marxist-inspired studies of the history of rural poverty in colonial Africa to liberal economists' search for a correlation between the nature of political institutions in contemporary Africa and levels of development, and on to the critical anthropology of development with its attention to the entrenchment of state power in the name of poverty reduction.[4] Alas, much of it initially only heightened my bafflement. The problem was not a lack of relevance to my area of interest, but rather the opposite: both Marxist or dependency-theoretical and market-optimist, institutionalist approaches provided elements of a plausible explanation. So did the emphasis in the anthropology of development on the inescapability of hierarchies and the inescapably political nature of development intervention. Yet none of these approaches seemed to me to quite account for the particular mixture of understanding and condemnation, of resigned pragmatism and self-flagellation, and of careful observation and formulaic advice that I found in my archives and conversations, recurring, different terms notwithstanding, over decades. Likewise, they did not fully reflect the pragmatic, at times quite optimistic interest interlocutors in the region took in development initiatives.

Further, what is the observer to do with the fact that schools of thought supposedly in conflict appeared to account for the outcomes in Southeast Tanzania to similar extents? Reflecting on the literature

[4] To provide examples of each of these schools, Edward A. Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves in East Central Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975; Robin H. Palmer and Neil Parsons, *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977; Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson, 'Reversal of fortune: Geography and institutions in the making of modern world income distribution', *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 117 (2002), 1231–94; James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

I encountered, I found myself adding a further question to the ones inspired by Bibi Amina: why is it the grand narratives about the merits and demerits of capitalism as a path to prosperity were impossible to ignore when reflecting on the Southeast, even though the limitations of all these narratives are by now so obvious? Seen from this region, it is clear that neither socialism nor *soko huria*, 'the free market', neither Nyerere-era *ujamaa* nor the liberalisation strategies that followed it, have kept their promise.[5] Conversely, their ability to explain the past is evidently a matter of interpretation, thus ultimately one of conviction as well as evidence: the narrative chapters that follow will demonstrate how both make sense up to a point. Meanwhile a great deal of information relevant to the Southeast's predicament sits at an angle to either worldview; most importantly, that on soils and climate. But still, the grand ideological faultlines, and their political and policy ramifications, are traceable throughout the relevant literature, and they do come to mind confronting the sources.

My tentative explanation for their salience is bound up with my understanding of the recurrence of victim-blaming in development. Central to it is the slightly paradoxical observation that development's grand claims about economic systems and transformations do not channel the strength of the 'development machine', the transnational set of institutions involved in the practice of development, but rather its weakness in terms of concrete, practical effects.[6] The point is not to deny that these institutions exert power in a number of ways: as players in international diplomacy, funders for national governments and individual projects, as employers and evaluators on specific projects. But this power needs to be considered in relation to what they set out to achieve, and what their practical options are in pursuit of these aims. The pronouncements about ending poverty then translate into

[5] As is evident from Priya Lal, *African Socialism in Post-Colonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015; Leander Schneider, *Government of Development: Peasants and Politicians in Postcolonial Tanzania*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014; Maia Green, *The Development State: Aid, Culture and Civil Society in Tanzania*. Oxford: James Currey, 2014; and Michael Lofchie, *The Political Economy of Tanzania: Decline and Recovery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.

[6] For the term 'development machine' to describe the complex of local, national, and international institutions involved in the practice see Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*.

things such as seed stations, demonstration plots, village market halls, and feeder roads: these are the not-so-mighty weapons with which experts in the field take on the vagaries of global markets, local climates, and the shifting priorities of national governments. Tracing these activities in Southeast Tanzania over several decades reveals the recurrence of similar, always tentative, always limited stratagems, in discursive guises that shift with the times. From this point of view, invoking the grand narratives validates practices that cannot necessarily stand on their own merits. Similarly, implicating the poor in their poverty helps both to open up paths for future action and to account for past failures.[7]

To explain this understanding of the history of poverty and development, two points of departure need further elaboration. The first is to think of development projects very explicitly as attempts to address poverty, expressed in the chapters that follow in the use of the term 'anti-poverty intervention' as synonymous with 'development'. This does not necessitate attributing a humanitarian impulse to them, as poverty could also be a political embarrassment, and the poverty to be addressed was that of the state thwarted in its interventions as much as of the people targeted by development projects. Nevertheless, poverty was and is bound up with questions of moral and social order, especially as the presence of some people who were not or less poor raised the issues of inequality and justice. Potentially at least, a whiff of scandal hangs around poverty, it can become a source of challenges to rulers' legitimacy in very varied political orders.[8] At the same time, poverty had a dire facticity and predictability about it: people remained poor because they were poor to start with. 'Facticity' in this case does not denote simplicity or naturalness. But even factors that might have been negotiable, such as the policy preferences set in Dar es Salaam, took on the character of bare, unshiftable facts from the point of view of provincial officials and cultivators.

[7] On the resulting 'educational' approaches to development, see Green, *The Development State*, especially chapter 4.

[8] Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*. New York: Knopf, 1984; William Galston and Peter Hoffenberg, *Poverty and Morality: Religious and Secular Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010; John Iliffe, *The African Poor: A History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Yet, routine though poverty was and remains, it was not a simple thing. In the language of present-day development experts, poverty constitutes a multi-dimensional problem.[9] There is food poverty, income poverty and (related but not identical) monetary poverty, asset poverty, land poverty, lack of skills, lack of entitlements, agricultural poverty, and other dimensions.[10] A distinction is often made between 'absolute' poverty, that is the inability to meet essential needs, and 'relative' poverty, that is the inability to access goods available to better-placed people in the same place or society, or similarly between those who struggle to meet their basic needs and those who fail to do so.[11] In short, while it is safe to assume that, with much of Africa, the Southeast was consistently poor, poverty was made up of many parts and far from stable. The relative weight of different aspects changed, and there were periods at the onset and towards the end of colonialism when the area exhibited signs of relative wealth.[12] The narrative that follows uses 'poverty' predominantly in the broad sense of the routine material deprivation of a distant region with poor roads, low earning capacity, and poor health and educational services: in the sense, that is, that people in the region have come to define themselves by it. It also pays attention to the changing social location of the very poor, of those struggling to feed themselves.

My second point of departure, already touched upon, is to set aside the focus on the apparent might of the 'development machine' and its colonial precursors, and work with the proposition that its provincial

[9] Caterina Ruggeri Laderchi, Ruhi Saith, and Frances Stewart, 'Does it matter that we do not agree on the definition of poverty? A comparison of four approaches', *Oxford Development Studies* 31 (2003), 243–74; Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, 'Global poverty and unequal development: Contemporary trends and issues', in Galston and Hoffenberg, *Poverty and Morality*, 15–43.

[10] Martin Ravallion, *The Economics of Poverty: History, Measurement, and Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

[11] Iliffe, *The African Poor*, introduction, on the distinction between the struggling and the failing.

[12] C. F. Elton 'On the coast country of East Africa south of Zanzibar', *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society* 44 (1874), 227–52; Georg Lieder, 'Reise von der Mbampa-Bai am Nyassa-See nach Kisswere am Indischen Ozean', *Mitteilungen des Seminars fuer Orientalische Sprachen* 10 (1897), 95–142; Paul Fuchs, 'Die wirtschaftliche Erkundung einer Ostafrikanischen Südbahn', *Beihefte zum Tropenpflanzer* 6 (1905), nos. 4–5, for the late pre-colonial period, J. Gus Liebenow, *Colonial Rule and Political Development in Tanzania: The Case of the Makonde*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1971, for its end.

representatives more often acted from positions of weakness than strength. The weaknesses of both colonial and post-colonial states in Africa are, of course, much discussed.[13] But development intervention tends to be associated with the moments when these feeble leviathans gather strength and strike out, or with the covert and indirect entrenchment of elites and growing nodes of state power.[14] My aim here is not to deny that these things happen; rather, I try to dig out something else that also does: officials' and experts' dogged effort to cope, to manage incapacities, to explain and exculpate failure, to protect individual and collective reputations, and to assert hope for future success. What is of particular interest, in other words, is not that colonial states were often and post-colonial ones continue to be weak, but, rather, how the representatives of these states coped with this predicament. Part of this perspective is the acknowledgement that officials and experts at different administrative levels could have quite divergent priorities and were not necessarily out to help each other. In the Southeast, I argue, the pursuit of anti-poverty intervention was left largely to provincial officials whose clout in Dar es Salaam was limited, and deeply shaped by their needs and dilemmas. It responded to the political embarrassment of famine and low tax returns. As officials sought to make the case that the region was worth spending money on, despite these problems, they relied on unfounded optimism to dissimulate vexing problems.

Clearly, 'failure' is a political and polemical term, but its importance to the course of development interventions and the way they are discussed is evident. Although critical studies of specific development projects again and again bring up good reasons why these projects did not achieve what they set out to do, the financial and political stakes in such projects mean that they are typically observed from the assumption that they really ought to 'work'.[15] But it is useful to try out

[13] Karen E. Fields, *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985; Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000; Jean Francois Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. London: Longman, 1993; Patrick Chabal and Jean Pierre Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as a Political Instrument*. London: James Currey, 2010.

[14] Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is Another Way for Africa*. London: Allan Lane, 2009; Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*.

[15] Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; Moyo,

the opposite assumption: that 'failure', at least in the terms of the aims initially defined, is the most reasonabe outcome to be expected of many development projects. There are two reasons why failure may well be taken as the default. First, inasmuch as a society's prosperity is a function of its interaction with its environment, particularly in an agricultural region, trying to elevate the level of prosperity means trying to change the dynamics of this interaction. This is a tall order, considering that human beings, even in the technologically most advanced societies, clearly find it difficult to keep track of the way they interact with and shape their environment.[16] Even if a development project's resources may seem abundant relative to those normally available to its targets, that is not to say that they suffice to understand, let alone change, environmental constraints that typically involve climate and topography. The second major reason why the ineffectiveness of development is unsurprising is its much-discussed entanglement with politics, power, and multiple and conflicting social aims and factions, which pull even carefully designed projects this way and that.[17]

If we accept that development projects falling short of their aims is not, after all, surprising, we face the question of how the practitioners of development square the likelihood of failure with the promise of transformation inherent in their pursuit. No doubt, individual stratagems to do so exhibit both patterns and great variations. What is constant is that there is a chasm between aims and results, and, with this in mind, it appears that the promises of transformation that development projects run on reflect not the likelihood of success, but its elusiveness. This unfounded assertiveness can be taken as a sign of arrogance, but also of something else, which, for want of a better term,

Dead Aid; Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*. New York: Public Affairs, 2011.

16 See, e.g. the endless debates on how to track and respond to climate change.

17 For the colonial period, Monica van Beusekom, *Negotiating Development: African Farmers and Colonial Experts at the Office du Niger, 1920–1960*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002; Monica van Beusekom and Dorothy Hodgson, 'Lessons learned? Development experiences in the late colonial period', *Journal of African History* 41 (2000), 29–33, as well as the case studies contained in the same journal special issue; for post-colonial Africa, Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*; Inge Brinkman, *Bricks, Mortar and Capacity Building: A Sociocultural History of SNV Netherlands Development Organisation*. Leiden: Brill, 2010. On the internal politics of a bilateral development organisation.