

# KUJENGA TAIFA: STATE, SOCIETY, AND NATION-BUILDING IN TANZANIA

VICTORIA GORHAM

In June 2017, I began nine months of fieldwork in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania for dissertation research on nation-building and the post-independence state. My research is primarily concerned with the sites of state-society interaction that serve as the focal points of nationalist articulation and mobilization. In an effort to better understand the ongoing discourses surrounding who a Tanzanian is, what history they share, and what future they aspire to, I conducted open-ended interviews with citizens and experts and did limited participant observation in places like museums to better understand the official narrative of the Tanzanian nation. Because Tanzania has such an elaborate track record of nation-building policies, I also worked in the National Archive in Dar es Salaam to piece together the official actions that aimed to create a nation out of an extraordinarily diverse postcolonial state.



I wanted to figure out what the official imagining of the nation is; in order to get a sense for what the Tanzanian story is, I spent time in state-run museums as a consumer of nationalist pedagogy because these sites are places of largely unmediated state storytelling about the national community and its constituent parts. Exhibits that portray history and culture are opportunities for the state to present its vision of the nation to visitors. The national narrative is consistent across multiple museum sites and leaves little room for contestation or criticism of the ruling party; it is inclusive of ethnic diversity even as it works to downplay its significance. The cast of principal characters and set of climactic events show up in every telling; while not historically inaccurate, this portrayal tells a certain type of story about Tanzania and its people.

I went on to conduct interviews to ascertain the extent to which Tanzanian citizens have internalized the national narrative. The protocol included broad questions designed to elicit interlocutors' own tellings of national history and their own

explanations of Tanzanian-ness and its role in their social and political worlds. These interviews confirmed what Afrobarometer had already suggested: my respondents were generally proud and enthusiastic Tanzanians; they often recalled national histories very closely tied to those told in museums or in schools. For many interlocutors, Tanzanian-ness was more than legal status; it is also a set of values that is derived from historical experience and sets them apart from their neighbors. So, if the nation-building project has been so successful, why is that the case?

Archival research provides us with the roadmap for how the post-independence state and the elites that occupied it crafted education, language, and economic policy that self-consciously sought to turn peasants into Tanzanians and pull them into the orbit of the state. In retrospect, we know that some of these policies – most notably *ujamaa*, or Tanzanian socialism – failed to deliver on its promises, but expert interlocutors generally agreed that these policy choices were successful in teaching

citizens to love their country and to imagine themselves to be a part of it. Looking at this question in historical perspective allows us to think about the long-term implications of these policies, and to consider how things have changed as we become more removed from the independence moment. One frequent subject that interviews touched upon was the role of democracy in Tanzanians' understanding of themselves and their relationship to the state. Throughout these conversations was a sense of anxiety about the state of democratic governance in Tanzania and a feeling that young Tanzanians are less connected to the nation than ever, which has significant implications for the future of the Tanzanian nation.

*Victoria Gorham is a PhD candidate in political science. This research was conducted with support from a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad fellowship.*