



# OPINION



NOVEMBER 22-28, 2014

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Richard Sezibera

## Letter from the future to Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, with whom it all began

**S**hikamoo Mwalimu. Next week, the Summit of Heads of State of the East African Community will take place in Nairobi, Kenya. The Community is currently chaired by Uhuru Kenyatta, President of the Republic of Kenya. Yes sir, you may share this news with Mzee Kenyatta and Mzee Milton Obote when you see them. The East African Community did not die permanently in 1977; it has been resurrected and is thriving.

I am writing to seek your wisdom and blessings. You see, when the Summit meets, they will be deliberating, among other things, on the best way to start a constitution-making process for the Federation of East Africa! Yes, the debate is back. You remember those many years ago, in 1963, when you offered to delay Tanganyika's Independence to give chance to East Africa to get its Independence as a federal entity?

You feared that entrenched sovereignty and the trappings of national authority would blind us to the strategic imperatives of building a united East Africa capable of harnessing all its resources for the socio-economic development of its citizens. You were worried that narrow parochial concerns would lead to the marginalisation of our continent. You saw clearly that Independence within the borders of colonial constructs would simply reinforce the colonial enterprise, marginally tweaking the relationship between the former colonies and the metropole, while leaving the colonial enterprise intact. Well sir, you were right.

Can you imagine that by 2005, the entire GDP of East Africa was only \$40 billion — the wealth of one modern high net worth individual? That our fragmented economies remained stuck in the mud for decades, trying to produce more cotton, coffee, and raw minerals for the consumption of the Western world? The harder we worked, the poorer we became, until we were told that the only solution was to reduce our investments in health, education, infrastructure and energy. We did need macroeconomic discipline, Mwalimu, but we balanced our books on the backs of the poor. We were too weak to resist, our valiant struggle against apartheid notwithstanding. We all agreed to take the medicine.

Our current leaders have decided to reverse the trend. They have decided to go back to the future. And they are succeeding. East Africa is now a Customs Union, and we are slowly turning it into a Single Customs Territory. Beyond the free movement of goods, the region is now slowly but surely turning into a Common Market, and plans are underway to build a Monetary Union. Shared investments in infrastructure are gaining momentum. Remember when you decided to invest in the Tazara railway against all opposition? You may be saddened to

Illustrator: John Nyaga



hear that line now carries less than 10 per cent of what it did in its heyday. I am glad to report however that for the first time in over 100 years, Kenya and Uganda are beginning to lay a new, modern railway line. Rwanda and Burundi are determined to follow suit. Investments in energy generation are on the rise. East Africa is determined not be a dark region, both figuratively and literally.

Do you know, Mwalimu, that since East Africa decided to deepen and widen its integration, its GDP is now over \$100 billion and growing? Over 700,000 students are enrolled in 344 institutions of higher education including 161 universities. This is a sharp rise from the 160,000 enrolled in the 1990s. They pay local fees across the region, and 2015 is the target year for turning East Africa into a Common Higher Education Area.

There were those who kept telling you that East African integration would benefit Kenya to the detriment of Tanzania and Uganda. Plus ça change,

plus c'est la même chose... Yes, we do speak French and Chinese, in addition to Kiswahili, our lingua franca. But my apologies Mwalimu. I forgot to inform you that Burundi and Rwanda are now members of the Community. You remember the pan-African discussions you used to have with Prince Louis Rwagasore of Burundi and Mwami Mutara Rudahigwa of Rwanda? The pan African seeds they planted have come to fruition.

But I digress. There still are some people who are fixated on intra-EAC competition rather than co-operation. They would like to see more barriers to trade. The naysayers refuse to see, for example, that Tanzania has recorded the fastest growth in intra-EAC exports, that Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi have all seen their exports to Kenya and the rest of East Africa grow. They fail to appreciate that Kenya is now a major source of "foreign" direct investment in the EAC, displacing the Western powers of yesteryear. That intra-EAC trade has risen to over 26 per cent from less than 10 per cent a decade ago — and that it is qualitatively better than trade with the rest of the world, consisting of trade in value added products, and not the raw materials we export to the West, the East, the North and the South.

When we show them the data, they change the terms of the debate, raising the bogey of land. Do you know, Mwalimu, that in recognition of the sensitivity of land ownership, use and management, the East African Common Market Protocol has made it very clear that land is a national and not an East African Issue? Yet, merchants of fear whip up the peoples' emotions, that other East Africans are only interested in taking over their land. They refuse to see it as a factor of production, derailing all attempts at making it produce wealth for their nations or the region. They get dizzy, trying to walk backwards on a fast moving economic escalator.

They are so fearful that they want to hinder the free movement of people. Do you know it still is more difficult for Africans to move, live and work in Africa than for non-Africans?

So, this is the context in which the Heads of State Summit will meet this coming week. They refuse to simply accept what is, and want to invest in what can be. They want to turn East Africa into a federal entity, believing that economic integration is not enough. They want to follow in your footsteps, Mwalimu.

Dr Richard Sezibera is Secretary General of the East African Community