

Mwalimu in the Squared circle

\_While this effort was being made, Amin postured:

"I challenge President Nyerere in the boxing ring to fight it out there rather than that soldiers lose their lives on the field of battle...Mohammed Ali would be an ideal referee for the bout."

-- George Ivan Smith  
GHOSTS OF KAMPALA (1980)

As the Tanzanians began to counterattack, Amin suggested a crazy solution to the dispute. He declared that the matter should be settled in the boxing ring. "I am keeping fit so that I can challenge President Nyerere in the boxing ring and fight it out there, rather than having the soldiers lose their lives on the field of battle." Amin added that Mohammed Ali would be an ideal referee for the bout, and that he, Amin, as the former Uganda heavyweight champ, would give the small, white-haired Nyerere a sporting chance by fighting with one arm tied behind his back, and his legs shackled with weights.

-- Dan Wooding and Ray Barnett  
UGANDA HOLOCAUST (1980)\_

#

Nyerere looks up through the haze of blood masking his vision and sees the huge man standing over him, laughing. He looks into the man's eyes and seems to see the dark heart of Africa, savage and untamed.

He cannot remember quite what he is doing here. Nothing hurts, but as he tries to move, nothing works, either. A black man in a white shirt, a man with a familiar face, seems to be pushing the huge man away, maneuvering him into a corner. Chuckling and posturing to people that Nyerere cannot see, the huge man backs away, and now the man in the white shirt returns and begins shouting.

\_"Four!"\_

Nyerere blinks and tries to clear his mind. Who is he, and why is he on his back, half-naked, and who are these other two men?

\_"Five!"\_

"Stay down, Mwalimu!" yells a voice from behind him, and now it begins to come back to him. \_He\_ is Mwalimu.

\_"Six!"\_

He blinks again and sees the huge electronic clock above him. It is one minute and 58 seconds into the first round. He is Mwalimu, and if he doesn't get up, his bankrupt country has lost the war.

\_"Seven!"\_

He cannot recall the last minute and 58 seconds. In fact, he cannot recall anything since he entered the ring. He can taste his blood, can feel it running down over his eyes and cheeks, but he cannot remember how he came to be bleeding, or laying on his back. It is a mystery.

\_"Eight!"\_

Finally his legs are working again, and he gathers them beneath him. He does not know if they will bear his weight, but they must be doing so, for Mohammed Ali -- that is his name! Ali -- is cleaning his gloves off and staring into his eyes.

"You should have stayed down," whispers Ali.

Nyerere grunts an answer. He is glad that the mouthpiece is impeding his speech, for he has no idea what he is trying to say.

"I can stop it if you want," says Ali.

Nyerere grunts again, and Ali shrugs and stands aside as the huge man shuffles across the ring toward him, still chuckling.

#

It began as a joke. Nobody ever took anything Amin said seriously, except for his victims.

He had launched a surprise bombing raid in the north of Tanzania. No one knew why, for despite what they did in their own countries, despite what genocide they might commit, the one thing all African leaders had adhered to since Independence was the sanctity of national borders.

So Julius Nyerere, the Mwalimu, the Teacher, the President of Tanzania, had mobilized his forces and pushed Amin's army back into Uganda. Not a single African nation had offered military assistance; not a single Western nation had offered to underwrite so much as the cost of a bullet. Amin had expediently converted to Islam, and now Libya's crazed but opportunistic Quaddafi was pouring money and weapons into Uganda.

Still, Nyerere's soldiers, with their tattered uniforms and ancient rifles, were marching toward Kampala, and it seemed only a matter of time before Amin was overthrown and the war would be ended, and Milton Obote would be restored to the Presidency of Uganda. It was a moral crusade, and Nyerere was convinced that Amin's soldiers were throwing down their weapons and fleeing because they, too, know that Right was on Tanzania's side.

But while Right may have favored Nyerere, Time did not. He knew what the Western press and even the Tanzanian army did not know: that within three weeks, not only could his bankrupt nation no longer supply its men with weapons, it could not even afford to bring them back out of Uganda.

#

"I challenge President Nyerere in the boxing ring to fight it out there rather than that soldiers lose their lives on the field of battle..."

The challenge made every newspaper in the western world, as columnist after columnist laughed over the image of the 330-pound Amin, former heavyweight champion of the Kenyan army, stepping into the ring to duke it out with the five-foot one-inch, 112-pound, 57-year-old Nyerere.

Only one man did not laugh: Mwalimu.

#

"You're crazy, you know that?"

Nyerere stares calmly at the tall, well-built man standing before his desk. It is a hot, humid day, typical of Dar es Salaam, and the man is already sweating profusely.

"I did not ask you here to judge my sanity," answers Nyerere. "But to tell me how to defeat him."

"It can't be done. You're spotting him two hundred pounds and twenty years. My job as referee is to keep him from out-and-out killing you."

"You frequently defeated men who were bigger and stronger than you," notes Nyerere gently. "And, in the latter portion of your career, younger than you as well."

"You float like a butterfly and sting like a bee," answers Ali. "But 57-year-old presidents don't float, and little bitty guys don't sting. I've been a boxer all my life. Have you ever fought anyone?"

"When I was younger," says Nyerere.

"How much younger?"

Nyerere thinks back to the sunlit day, some 48 years ago, when he pummeled his brother, though he can no longer remember the reason for it. In his mind's eye, both of them are small and thin and ill-nourished, and the beating amounted to two punches, delivered with barely enough force to stun a fly. The next week he acquired the gift of literacy, and he has never raised a hand in anger again. Words are far more powerful.

Nyerere sighs. "\_Much\_ younger," he admits.

"Ain't no way," says Ali, and then repeats, "Ain't no way. This guy is not just a boxer, he's crazy, and crazy people don't feel no pain."

"How would you fight him?" asks Nyerere.

"Me?" says Ali. He starts jabbing the air with his left fist. "Stick and run, stick and run. Take him dancing til he drops. Man's got a lot of blubber on that frame." He holds his arms up before his face. "He catches up with me, I go into the rope-a-dope. I lean back, I take his punches on my forearms, I let him wear himself out." Suddenly he straightens up and turns back to Nyerere. "But it won't work for you. He'll break your arms if you try to protect yourself with them."

"He'll only have one arm free," Nyerere points out.

"That's all he'll need," answers Ali. "Your only shot is to keep moving, to tire him out." He frowns. "But..."

"But?"

"But I ain't never seen a 57-year-old man that could tire out a man in his thirties."

"Well," says Nyerere with an unhappy shrug, "I'll have to think of something."

"Think of letting your soldiers beat the shit out of his soldiers," says Ali.

"That is impossible."

"I thought they were winning," said Ali.

"In fourteen days they will be out of ammunition and gasoline," answers Nyerere. "They will be unable to defend themselves and unable to retreat."

"Then give them what they need."

Nyerere shakes his head. "You do not understand. My nation is bankrupt. There is no money to pay for ammunition."

"Hell, I'll loan it to you myself," says Ali. "This Amin is a crazy man. He's giving blacks all over the world a bad name."

"That is out of the question," says Nyerere.

"You think I ain't got it?" says Ali pugnaciously.

"I am sure you are a very wealthy man, and that your offer is sincere," answers Nyerere. "But even if you gave us the money, by the time we converted it and purchased what we needed it would be too late. This is the only way to save my army."

"By letting a crazy man tear you apart?"

"By defeating him in the ring before he realizes that he can

defeat my men in the field."

"I've seen a lot of things go down in the squared circle," says Ali, shaking his head in disbelief, "but this is the strangest."

#

"You cannot do this," says Maria when she finally finds out.

"It is done," answers Nyerere.

They are in their bedroom, and he is staring out at the reflection of the moon on the Indian Ocean. As the light dances on the water, he tries to forget the darkness to the west.

"You are not a prizefighter," she says. "You are Mwalimu. No one expects you to meet this madman. The press treats it as a joke."

"I would be happy to exchange doctoral theses with him, but he insists on exchanging blows," says Nyerere wryly.

"He is illiterate," said Maria. "And the people will not allow it. You are the man who brought us independence and who has led us ever since. The people look to you for wisdom, not pugilism."

"I have never sought to live any life but that of the intellect," he admits. "And what has it brought us? While Kenyatta and Mobutu and even Kaunda have stolen hundreds of millions of dollars, we are as poor now as the day we were wed." He shakes his head sadly. "I stand up to oppose Amin, and only Sir Seretse Khama of Botswana, secure in his British knighthood, stands with me." He pauses again, trying to sort it out. "Perhaps the old \_mzee\_ of Kenya was right. Grab what you can while you can. Could our army be any more ill-equipped if I had funneled aid into a Swiss account? Could I be any worse off than now, as I prepare to face this madman in" -- he cannot hide his distaste -- "a boxing ring?"

"You must \_not\_ face him," insists Maria.

"I must, or the army will perish."

"Do you think he will let the army live after he has beaten you?" she asks.

Nyerere has not thought that far ahead, and now a troubled frown crosses his face.

#

He had come to the office with such high hopes, such dreams and ambitions. Let Kenyatta play lackey to the capitalist West. Let Machal sell his country to the Russians. Tanzania would be different, a proving ground for African socialism.

It was a dry, barren country without much to offer. There were the great game parks, the Serengeti and the Ngorongoro Crater in the north, but four-fifths of the land was infested with the tsetse fly, there were no minerals beneath the surface, Nairobi was already the capital city of East Africa and no amount of modernization to Dar es Salaam could make it competitive. There was precious little grazing land and even less water. None of this fazed Nyerere; they were just more challenges to overcome, and he had no doubt that he could shape them to his vision.

But before industrialization, before prosperity, before anything else, came education. He had gone from the bush to the presidency in a single lifetime, had translated the entire body of Shakespeare's work into Swahili, had given form and structure to his country's constitution, and he knew that before everything came literacy. While his people lived in grass huts, other men had harnessed the atom, had reached the Moon, had obliterated

hundreds of diseases, all because of the written word. And so while Kenyatta became the Mzee, the Wise Old Man, he himself became Mwalimu. Not the President, not the Leader, not the Chief of Chiefs, but the Teacher.

He would teach them to turn away from the dark heart and reach for the sunlight. He created the ujamaa villages, based on the Israeli kibbutzim, and issued the Arusha Declaration, and channeled more than half his country's aid money into the schools. His people's bellies might not be filled, their bodies might not be covered, but they could read, and everything would follow from that.

But what followed was drought, and famine, and disease, and more drought, and more famine, and more disease. He went abroad and described his vision and pleaded for money; what he got were ten thousand students who arrived overflowing with idealism but devoid of funds. They meant well and they worked hard, but they had to be fed, and housed, and medicated, and when they could not mold the country into his utopia in the space of a year or two, they departed.

And then came the madman, the final nail in Tanzania's financial coffin. Nyerere labeled him for what he was, and found himself conspicuously alone on the continent. African leaders simply didn't criticize one another, and suddenly it was the Mwalimu who was the pariah, not the bloodthirsty butcher of Uganda. The East African Union, a fragile thing at best, fell apart, and while Nyerere was trying to save it, Kenyatta, the true capitalist, appropriated all three countries' funds and began printing his own money. Tanzania, already near bankruptcy, was left with money that was not honored anywhere beyond its borders.

Still, he struggled to meet the challenge. If that was the way the Mzee wanted to play the game, that was fine with him. He closed the border to Kenya. If tourists wanted to see his game parks, they would have to stay in his country; there would be no more round trips from Nairobi. If Amin wanted to slaughter his people, so be it; he would cut off all diplomatic relations, and to hell with what his neighbors thought. Perhaps it was better this way; now, with no outside influences, he could concentrate entirely on creating his utopia. It would be a little more difficult, it would take a little longer, but in the end, the accomplishment would be that much more satisfying.

And then Amin's air force dropped its bombs on Tanzania.

#

The insanity of it.

Nyerere ducks a roundhouse right, Amin guffaws and winks to the crowd, Ali stands back and wishes he were somewhere else.

Nyerere's vision has cleared, but blood keeps running into his left eye. The fight is barely two minutes old, and already he is gasping for breath. He can feel every beat of his heart, as if a tiny man with a hammer and chisel is imprisoned inside his chest, trying to get out.

The weights attached to Amin's ankles should be slowing him down, but somehow Nyerere finds that he is cornered against the ropes. Amin fakes a punch, Nyerere ducks, then straightens up just in time to feel the full power of the madman's fist as it smashes into his face.

He is down on one knee again, 57 years old and gasping for breath. Suddenly he realizes that no air is coming in, that he is suffocating, and he thinks his heart has stopped...but no, he can feel it, still pounding. Then he understands: his nose is broken,

and he is trying to breathe through his mouth and the mouthpiece is preventing it. He spits the mouthpiece out, and is mildly surprised to see that it is not covered with blood.

\_"Three!"\_

Amin, who has been standing at the far side of the ring, approaches, laughing uproariously, and Ali stops the count and slowly escorts him back to the neutral corner.

\_The pen is mightier than the sword.\_ The words come, unbidden, into Nyerere's mind, and he wants to laugh. A horrible, retching sound escapes his lips, a sound so alien that he cannot believe it came from him.

Ali slowly returns to him and resumes the count.

\_"Four!"\_ Stay down, you old fool, Ali's eyes seem to say.

Nyerere grabs a rope and tries to pull himself up.

\_"Five!"\_ I bought you all the time I could, say the eyes, but I can't protect you if you get up again.

Nyerere gathers himself for the most difficult physical effort of his life.

\_"Six!"\_ You're as crazy as he is.

Nyerere stands up. He hopes Maria will be proud of him, but somehow he knows that she won't.

Amin, mugging to the crowd in a grotesque imitation of Ali, moves in the for kill.

#

When he was a young man, the president of his class at Uganda's Makerere University, already tabbed as a future leader by his teachers and his classmates, his fraternity entered a track meet, and he was chosen to run the 400-meter race.

I am no athlete, he said; I am a student. I have exams to worry about, a scholarship to obtain. I have no time for such foolishness. But they entered his name anyway, and the race was the final event of the day, and just before it began his brothers came up to him and told him that if he did not beat at least one of his five rivals, his fraternity, which held a narrow lead after all the other events, would lose.

Then you will lose, said Nyerere with a shrug.

If we do, it will be your fault, they told him.

It is just a race, he said.

But it is important to us, they said.

So he allowed himself to be led to the starting line, and the pistol was fired, and all six young men began running, and he found himself trailing the field, and he remained in last place all the way around the track, and when he crossed the finish wire, he found that his brothers had turned away from him.

But it was only a game, he protested later. What difference does it make who is the faster? We are here to study laws and vectors and constitutions, not to run in circles.

It is not that you came in last, answered one of them, but that you represented us and you did not try.

It was many days before they spoke to him again. He took to running a mile every morning and every evening, and when the next track meet took place, he volunteered for the 400-meter race again. He was beaten by almost 30 meters, but he came in fourth, and collapsed of exhaustion ten meters past the finish line, and the following morning he was re-elected president of his fraternity by acclamation.

#

There are 43 seconds left in the first round, and his arms are too heavy to lift. Amin swings a roundhouse that he ducks, but it catches him on the shoulder and knocks him halfway across the ring. The shoulder goes numb, but it has bought him another ten seconds, for the madman cannot move fast with the weights on his ankles, probably could not move fast even without them. Besides, he is enjoying himself, joking with the crowd, talking to Ali, mugging for all the cameras at ringside.

Ali finds himself between the two men, takes an extra few seconds awkwardly extricating himself -- Ali, who has never taken a false or awkward step in his life -- and buys Nyerere almost five more seconds. Nyerere looks up at the clock and sees there is just under half a minute remaining.

Amin bellows and swings a blow that will crush his skull if it lands, but it doesn't; the huge Ugandan cannot balance properly with one hand tied behind his back, and he misses and almost falls through the ropes.

"Hit him now!" come the yells from Nyerere's corner.

"Kill him, Mwalimu!"

But Nyerere can barely catch his breath, can no longer lift his arms. He blinks to clear the blood from his eyes, then staggers to the far side of the ring. Maybe it will take Amin 12 or 13 seconds to get up, spot him, reach him. If he goes down again then, he can be saved by the bell. He will have survived the round. He will have run the race.

#

Vectors. Angles. The square of the hypotenuse. It's all very intriguing, but it won't help him become a leader. He opts for law, for history, for philosophy.

How was he to know that in the long run they were the same?

#

He sits in his corner, his nostrils propped open, his cut man working on his eye. Ali comes over and peers intently at him.

"He knocks you down once more, I gotta stop it," he says.

Nyerere tries to answer through battered lips. It is unintelligible. Just as well; for all he knows, he was trying to say, "Please do."

Ali leans closer and lowers his voice.

"It's not just a sport, you know. It's a science, too."

Nyerere utters a questioning croak.

"You run, he's gonna catch you," continues Ali. "A ring ain't a big enough place to hide in."

Nyerere stares at him dully. What is the man trying to say?

"You gotta close with him, grab him. Don't give him room to swing. You do that, maybe I won't have to go to your funeral tomorrow."

Vectors, angles, philosophy, all the same when you're the Mwalimu and you're fighting for your life.

#

The lion, some 400 pounds of tawny fury, pulls down the one-ton buffalo.

The 100-pound hyena runs him off his kill.

The 20-pound jackal winds up eating it.

And Nyerere clinches with the madman, hangs on for dear life, feels the heavy blows raining down on his back and shoulders, grabs tighter. Ali separates them, positions himself near Amin's

right hand so that he can't release the roundhouse, and Nyerere grabs the giant again.

#

His head is finally clear. The fourth round is coming up, and he hasn't been down since the first. He still can't catch his breath, his legs will barely carry him to the center of the ring, and the blood is once again trickling into his eye. He looks at the madman, who is screaming imprecations to his seconds, his chest and belly rising and falling.

Is Amin tiring? Does it matter? Nyerere still hasn't landed a single blow. Could even a hundred blows bring the Ugandan to his knees? He doubts it.

Perhaps he should have bet on the fight. The odds were thousands to one that he wouldn't make it this far. He could have supplied his army with the winnings, and died honorably.

#

It is not the same, he decides, as they rub his shoulders, grease his cheeks, apply ice to the swelling beneath his eye. He has survived the fourth round, has done his best, but it is not the same. He could finish fourth out of six in a foot race and be re-elected, but if he finishes second tonight, he will not have a country left to re-elect him. This is the real world, and surviving, it seems, is not as important as winning.

Ali tells him to hold on, his corner tells him to retreat, the cut man tells him to protect his eye, but no one tells him how to win, and he realizes that he will have to find out on his own.

Goliath fell to a child. Even Achilles had his weakness. What must he do to bring the madman down?

#

He is crazy, this Amin. He revels in torture. He murders his wives. Rumor has it that he has even killed and eaten his infant son. How do you find weakness in a barbarian like that?

And suddenly, Nyerere understands, you do it by realizing that he is a barbarian -- ignorant, illiterate, superstitious.

There is no time now, but he will hold that thought, he will survive one more round of clinching and grabbing, of stifling closeness to the giant whose very presence he finds degrading.

Three more minutes of the sword, and then he will apply the pen.

#

He almost doesn't make it. Halfway through the round Amin shakes him off like a fly, then lands a right to the head as he tries to clinch again.

Consciousness begins to ebb from him, but by sheer force of will he refuses to relinquish it. He shakes his head, spits blood on the floor of the ring, and stands up once more. Amin lunges at him, and once again he wraps his small, spindly arms around the giant.

#

"A snake," he mumbles, barely able to make himself understood.

"A snake?" asks the cornerman.



"Draw it on my glove," he says, forcing the words out with an excruciating effort.

"Now?"

"Now," mutters Nyerere.

#

He comes out for the seventh round, his face a mask of raw, bleeding tissue. As Amin approaches him, he spits out his mouthpiece.

"As I strike, so strikes this snake," he whispers. "Protect your heart, madman." He repeats it in his native Zanake dialect, which the giant thinks is a curse.

Amin's eyes go wide with terror, and he hits the giant on the left breast.

It is the first punch he has thrown in the entire fight, and Amin drops to his knees, screaming.

\_"One!"\_

Amin looks down at his unblemished chest and pendulous belly, and seems surprised to find himself still alive and breathing.

\_"Two!"\_

Amin blinks once, then chuckles.

\_"Three!"\_

The giant gets to his feet, and approaches Nyerere.

"Try again," he says, loud enough for ringside to hear. "Your snake has no fangs."

He puts his hand on his hips, braces his legs, and waits.

Nyerere stares at him for an instant. So the pen is not mightier than the sword. Shakespeare might have told him so.

"I'm waiting!" bellows the giant, mugging once more for the crowd.

Nyerere realizes that it is over, that he will die in the ring this night, that he can no more save his army with his fists than with his depleted treasury. He has fought the good fight, has fought it longer than anyone thought he could. At least, before it is over, he will have one small satisfaction. He feints with his left shoulder, then puts all of his strength into one final effort, and delivers a right to the madman's groin.

The air rushes out of Amin's mouth with a woosh! and he doubles over, then drops to his knees.

Ali pushes Nyerere into a neutral corner, then instructs the judges to take away a point from him on their scorecards.

They can take away a point, Nyerere thinks, but they can't take away the fact that I met him on the field of battle, that I lasted more than six rounds, that the giant went down twice. Once before the pen, once before the sword.

And both were ineffective.

Even a Mwalimu can learn one last lesson, he decides, and it is that sometimes even vectors and philosophy aren't enough. We must find another way to conquer Africa's dark heart, the madness that pervades this troubled land. I have shown those who will follow me the first step; I have stood up to it, faced it without flinching. It will be up to someone else, a wiser Mwalimu than myself, to learn how to overcome it. I have done my best, I have given my all, I have made the first dent in its armor. Rationality cannot always triumph over madness, but it must stand up and be counted, as I have stood up. They cannot ask any more of me.

Finally at peace with himself, he prepares for the giant's final assault.

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