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Martin Kayamba and the Nationalist Struggle in Tanganyika: The Role of the Seuta People (1891–1939)

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Abstract

This paper examines the contribution of the Seuta people to the nationalist struggle in Tanganyika, with a specific focus on Martin Kayamba (1891-1939), a pivotal figure in the early period of the resistance to colonial rule. Furthermore, this paper explores how Kayamba's nationalist consciousness and leadership mobilized the Seuta people to resist colonial oppression and contribute to the broader nationalist movement in Tanganyika. His legacy, although underappreciated in mainstream historical accounts, is integral to understanding the grassroot dynamics of the anti-colonial struggle in the region. Finally, the paper underscores the lasting impact of Martin Kayamba's contribution to the nationalist movement in Tanganyika and the continued relevance of his leadership and advocacy for African education and self-determination. The study not only highlights Kayamba's role but also elevates the historical significance of the Seuta people in the early and current stages of the struggle to both National and African Unity.

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Introduction

The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a turbulent period in the history of Tanganyika, a region that was under colonial rule first by Germany and later by Britain. The imposition of colonial policies led to the exploitation and marginalization of indigenous populations, sparking resistance movements throughout the region. As the colonial

state exerted control over land, labor, and local economies, various ethnic communities began to organize and mobilize against foreign domination (Smith, 1982).

Tanganyika's nationalist struggle for independence was a response to these oppressive systems, with multiple groups contributing to the broader movement for self-determination. These contributions were particularly evident in rural areas where resistance leaders emerged to represent the interests of

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their people (Mugabi, 1990). The struggle, while often led by prominent national figures, was also fueled by the collective action of local communities who, although less recognized in mainstream historical narratives, played significant roles in the resistance (Chachage, 2015).

One such leader was Martin Kayamba, a key figure from the Seuta community, whose role in the nationalist movement from 1891 to 1939 offers a crucial yet often overlooked perspective on the local dimensions of Tanganyika's fight for independence. This paper aims to explore the contribution of the Seuta people to the nationalist struggle in Tanganyika, focusing on Martin Kayamba's involvement from 1891 to 1939.

The Seuta, a group with distinct cultural and social characteristics, faced unique challenges under colonial rule, yet their resistance to foreign domination has been underrepresented in historical accounts (Kapinga, 2000). By focusing on Martin Kayamba, this study seeks to highlight the ways in which local figures and communities shaped the broader nationalist movement, particularly in the earlier, formative years of the struggle. Martin Kayamba, an influential leader from the Seuta community, emerged as a prominent figure in organizing resistance against colonial oppression. His efforts not only galvanized the Seuta people but also contributed to the broader push for Tanganyika's independence (Suleiman, 2005). Understanding his leadership within the context of Seuta society provides valuable insights into the local dynamics of the nationalist movement and the significant yet often overlooked roles played by uncelebrated communities, heroes and heroines.

The central thesis of this paper is that the Seuta people's contribution, particularly through the leadership of Martin Kayamba, was pivotal to the early period of the nationalist struggle in Tanganyika. Despite limited recognition, the Seuta's resistance efforts played an essential role in challenging colonial rule, and Kayamba's leadership serves as a crucial example of local engagement in the national struggle for independence (Twaweza, 1997). This study will illuminate how grassroots movements, such as those led by Kayamba, were integral to the formation of Tanganyika's nationalist identity and its path to independence.

Brief History of Seuta People

Seuta is a historical terminology denoting a linguistic group and natives of Northeastern coast of Tanzania (Iliffe, 1979). The group comprises mainly of four communities; the Zigua, Shambaa, Nguu and the Bondei (Ibid). After its fragmentation, the Seuta community spread and dispersed to present day

Handeni, Kilindi, Lushoto, Muheza Pangani, and Korogwe Districts (Ibid). While (Nkondokaya, 2006) suggests that the parent group of the Seuta, the Zigua, migrated from Somalia to the Eastern coast of Tanganyika during the Bantu migration perhaps about 2000 years ago, Mwalumwambo (1974), notes that the Seuta split into groups following their defeat in the fighting described as "Nkondo ya kutula nyala" (the war that broke grinding stones) against the Portuguese on the coast from the 15th to 16th centuries.

A respondent recalled that initially, the Seuta Community fought a war (*nkondo ya kutula nyara*), against the Portuguese in the 16th Century. After being defeated by the Portuguese, the Community disintegrated. According to a respondent; "in the past there was a war between the Zigua and the Nyamwezi. I can't remember the exact year but during that war the Zigua were defeated and their cattle taken away by the Nyamwezi. When the youths who were looking after the cattle were asked what happened to the cattle, they replied; *"izi ng'ombe waziguaha"* (the cattle have been taken). That was the origin of the name "Zigua".

Some of its members went to lowland areas (mabonden) and became the Bondei (Wabondei). Others spread (kusambaa) to highland areas as the Sambaa (Wasambaa). While the Zigua remained in Handeni and occupied areas vacated by the Bondei and the Sambaa. In fact, the Bondei and the Sambaa referred to them as people who had taken their land (*wayaguha*) and few years later the Nyamwezi cemented the name Zigua after the war between Nyamwezi and Zigua (Selemani Mabunduki, interviewed at Kwedifonyera on 26th December 2024). Other respondents complemented the narrative and supplemented it accordingly. The Nyamwezi found the name "Zigua" being used in the sense of taking away the land vacated by the Bondei and the Sambaa. As the Zigua did not like to be associated with such allegation, they preferred the name to be used in the sense of *"izi ng'ombe waziguaha"*. To date, the Nyamwezi like to tease the Zigua on this incident (Ramadhani Msemwa and Haji Balati, interviewed at Kwedigunda on 16th December 2024).

As regards Kilindi where the Nguu live, the Zigua and the Nguu belong to the same Community. During the dispersal, some of the people who remained in Handeni, migrated to Kilindi with a view to going to Dodoma or Morogoro to carry out farming and pastoralism. Due to this common ancestry, it is not surprising that the Zigua, Bondei, Nguu and the Sambaa conduct traditional rites by appealing to the spirit of Seuta (*Mzimu wa Seuta nogone*) to exorcise evil spirits, poverty, diseases, infertility, curses, conflicts and other malevolent and undesirable events in their lives. The areas occupied by the Seuta community is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Areas Occupied by the Seuta Community

The unity of the community was symbolized by the Seuta statue (Figure 2). It resembles mostly the female body. According to legends, during his lifetime Seuta was fond of enjoying himself with women day and night. He was given a nick name “*chidya wavyele*” That is why his statue resembles a female body (Selemani Kibonge (75), interviewed at Mkata on 12th December 2024). Suffice to note that there is no deal in these legends, as it is a law of nature for “like poles to repel and unlike poles to attract each other”. The statue is basically an illustration of the matrilineal structure of the Zigua society. However, Mzee Samnyau noted that, Seuta’s regime was later disturbed by Mbegha from Kilindi (Ally Samnyau (75), interviewed at Kulimba on 17th December 2024).

It should be noted that under the British, the Shambaa King at Vugha was recognized as the Overlord or Paramount Chief as a result of which even Zigua headmen were annexed by the Shambaa. The Zigua were offended as they considered themselves as the real Seuta and parent tribe of the Nguu, Sambiaa and the Bondei. The majority of the Zigua who resided in other districts were united in 1928 to form a tribal federation. This development was greeted with jubilation by the Zigua. “It was not like in the olden days of our ancestors when they met with furious faces ready for war. Let all the Zigua descendants return and enter into the unity and become

a nation. So that our fellow Zigua people in various countries will hear that now Zigua has united into one nation”.

Incidentally, the Zigua under the Kilindi authority, were motivated to establish an organization “to protect their interests in the country of their adoption” (Iliffe, 1979). In spite of this development, in 1943, the Zigua asked for the valley lands to be restored back as they had been part of Uzigua prior to German invasion. In fact it was prior to German invasion that Kimweri ye Nyumbai assumed the office of the Paramount Chief of the Sambiaa. In retrospect, the reign of Kimweri who had 300 wives came to be seen as a golden age (1815 – 1862).

It was said of him; “Kimweri ye Nyumbai placed sons in the chiefdoms, and he was respected... in those days there was nothing but peace and good will in the land... Such peace is not seen in the days of every king. It was seen in the days of Kimweri, because if a person had no wealth, if his wife's

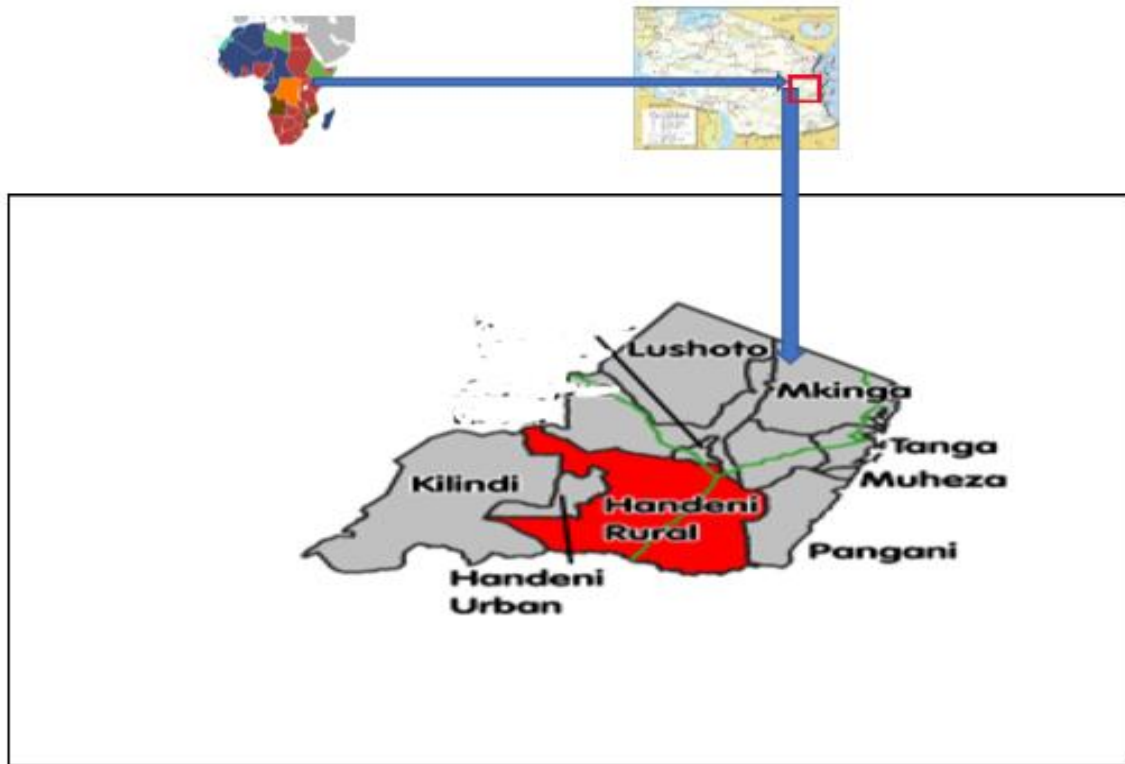


Figure 2: Statue of Seuta (Source: Cultural Office, Handeni District)

lineage was about to take her from him, he could say, "Oh king, my wife is being taken." Kimweri would say, "Go to the following place. There is a cow of mine which you may take." He didn't like to be told, "This is the son of so and so." He liked to say, "They are all my children." And when he sent a son to rule, he would say, "You are to build a village, and live nicely with your companions, so that there is no conflict. In judging cases, show an evil man his own evil. But if there is a man with no evil, don't introduce evil into his life" (Feieirman, 1990: 89).

In 1943, the British refused to grant the Zigua their request for land restoration in order to "divide and rule". Moreover, they were advised by a missionary at Mlalo not to grant it, of course to the "Moslem Zigua". The persistence of irredentism influenced significantly the response of the Zigua to the nationalist struggle in the 1950s. For example, Moyo wa Uzigua na Nguu (The Spirit of Uzigua and Nguu) was established in 1938 to fund raise for a Zigua Boarding School. However, it had deeper roots. First, in the conflicts between the inherited Muslim Chiefs and the educated Christian Zigua. Secondly, its roots could be traced in the local economy's collapse after tsetse's invasion. The fall of the Pangani valley to Shambaa rule and the split of Uzigua among multiple British districts was the third factor which gave Zigua tribalism significant inward looking and parochial orientation (Iliffe, 1979).

Moyo evolved into the most active tribal development society in the whole country. Its founder, a teacher called Paul Nkayemka, joined the Native Authority Council. With the support of the District Office, he was appointed Council Secretary. Moyo, brought together Zigua and Ngulu, two distinct tribes according to the British. It also claimed kinship with the Bondei and the Shambaa, descendants of Seuta, the Zigua National Hero (Ibid).

At the Offices of the Native Authority, the Provincial Commissioner unveiled a clay statue of Seuta in 1951 (Image 1). Besides opening its doors to Seuta descendants, Moyo pushed for the return of the lost Pangani valley or Tambarare as it was known locally, from Shambaa to Zigua authority. In 1954, they established the Tambarare Citizens Union in order "to protect the interests of the people of the plains as against those of the hills" (Ibid). These and related contradictions of colonialism were soon delegated to TANU for effective articulation and resolution in its nationalist struggle for the right to National Independence and Self – Determination for the people of Tanganyika. To understand the background and roots of TANU, it is essential to go back to the life and work of Martin Kayamba who was born in 1891 and died in 1939.

Martin Kayamba: A Pioneer of East African Modernity and Identity

Martin Kayamba's life, as chronicled in his autobiography *My Life and Work in East Africa* (1935), offers a compelling account of an African figure navigating the tides of colonialism, cultural transformation, and social reform during

a pivotal period in East African history. Born into nobility, shaped by missionary education, and tested by personal tragedies and colonial injustices, Kayamba's experiences reflect the complexities of African identity, resilience, and leadership in the early 20th century. His story is deeply interwoven with key themes that illuminate the broader historical and socio-political landscape of the region.

One of the defining aspects of Kayamba's life was his noble heritage and identity. Born into the prestigious Kilindi dynasty of the Tanga region—descendants of Kimweri ye Nyumbai, one of the most influential rulers in East African history is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Simba Mwene Kimweri Mputa Magogo

Kayamba was raised with a strong sense of lineage, leadership, and cultural pride. His grandfather, Chief Mwelekwanyuma, ruled over vast areas, including the Bondei and the coastal regions from Pangani to Vanga. This connection to traditional authority profoundly influenced Kayamba's self-perception and later fueled his sense of civic duty and moral responsibility. His noble background provided him with the foundation for leadership, even as he operated within European colonial structures.

Equally significant was the influence of Christian missionaries and Western education on his upbringing. His father, Hugh Peter Kayamba, had converted from Islam to Christianity and was educated in England—a rare achievement for an African in the late 19th century. This shift from Islamic to Christian religious tradition signaled a broader generational transformation, as African elites began to engage more deeply with European ideologies, systems, and institutions. Martin himself received his education at renowned mission schools

such as Kiungani College and UMCA institutions, where he was immersed in English, Christian ethics, and British pedagogical methods. Although he briefly served as a teacher, Kayamba eventually moved into civil service—a career path that reflected the limited but impactful roles available to educated Africans within colonial administrations.

Despite his competence and dedication, Kayamba's professional career was shaped by frustrations under colonial rule. He held several key positions in the Public Works Departments across Kenya, Uganda, and Zanzibar, often praised for his efficiency and trustworthiness. Yet, like many Africans of his time, he encountered entrenched racial hierarchies that limited his advancement. Indian and European colleagues performing similar or lesser duties received better pay and recognition, leading Kayamba to resign from several posts in protest. These experiences exposed the racialized nature of colonial labor systems and highlighted the injustices that educated Africans faced, even when they conformed to European standards of professionalism.

Kayamba's life was also marked by profound tragedy and personal loss, which deeply shaped his worldview. While working in Uganda, he received devastating news of his wife's sudden death in Mombasa, followed soon after by his mother's passing. These losses not only caused immense emotional suffering but also disrupted his professional and educational pursuits, including his correspondence studies with the International Correspondence School (ICS) in London. His return to Zanzibar signaled a period of mourning and re-evaluation, as he shifted his focus toward more grounded, culturally resonant endeavors within his community.

The outbreak of World War I further complicated his life, exposing the precarious position of Africans caught between colonial powers. While engaged in trading in German East Africa, he was arrested by German authorities under suspicion of being a British spy. Detained in Tabora until the Belgian occupation, Kayamba's experience reflects the vulnerability of Africans whose identities and loyalties were arbitrarily judged by foreign rulers. His imprisonment underscores the broader challenges faced by colonial subjects during global conflicts that were not of their making, yet had deep repercussions on their lives.

Following the war, Kayamba emerged as a leader and civic organizer, assuming a groundbreaking role as a civil servant in Tanga. In 1925, he became Head Clerk at the Tanga District Office, the first African to hold such a position in East Africa. This milestone was not merely symbolic; it represented a shift in the colonial administration's trust in African capability and integrity. His appointment paved the way for further African

involvement in administrative roles, and his co-founding of the Tanganyika Territory African Civil Servants Association (TTACSA) in 1922 marked a significant step in the evolution of African civil society. Through this organization, Kayamba championed African rights, unity, and professional development, laying the groundwork for future nationalist movements.

Central to Kayamba's vision was his passion for education and social progress. He believed in the transformative power of learning and was committed to fostering intellectual and cultural growth within his community. Under his leadership, the TTACSA aimed to establish a library and created a social club that became a hub for both civic engagement and entertainment. Kayamba also played a vital role in developing sports and music culture in Tanga, leading to the formation of football clubs that would evolve into national institutions such as Simba SC and Yanga SC. These initiatives reflected his belief that education, sports, and cultural expression were essential tools for empowerment and national cohesion.

Martin Kayamba's life is a powerful testament to the resilience, adaptability, and vision of early 20th-century African leaders. Rooted in noble tradition yet shaped by missionary education and colonial realities, he navigated a world of contradictions with grace and determination. His story embodies the struggle for dignity and equality in the face of racial injustice, the enduring value of education, and the potential for Africans to lead in their own right. As such, Kayamba remains a foundational figure in the history of modern Tanzania and East Africa at large.

The Contribution of Martin Kayamba During the Early Period of the Nationalist Struggle in Tanganyika

The history of nationalism in Tanganyika is often narrated through the achievements of mid-20th-century leaders like Julius Nyerere. However, this narrative would be incomplete without acknowledging the foundational contributions of earlier figures such as Martin Kayamba, whose life bridged the gap between traditional authority and emergent African political consciousness. Born in 1891 in Zanzibar and passing away in 1946, Kayamba lived during a time of colonial consolidation, but he laid crucial groundwork for the nationalist movements that followed. His engagement in education, public service, and community mobilization reveal how early African elites resisted colonial domination not through armed struggle, but through institutional participation, advocacy, and a strong belief in social progress (Perham, 1963).

Early Life and Educational Influence

Martin Kayamba's early exposure to both African and European cultural frameworks uniquely positioned him to navigate—and later challenge—the colonial system. Born into the Kilindi royal lineage, Kayamba carried the legacy of traditional political authority. His father, a convert to Christianity and an English-educated teacher, and his mother, a strict disciplinarian and educator, infused his upbringing with both spiritual and intellectual discipline (Perham, 1963). These influences were further cemented through his education at prominent missionary schools such as UMCA Schools in Zanzibar and Mombasa and Kiungani College.

This Western missionary education shaped Kayamba's intellect but also introduced him to the contradictions of colonial ideology. Though he gained access to literacy, Christian ethics, and administrative training, the curriculum reflected a European-centered worldview that undermined African agency and identity. His eventual disillusionment with the system—particularly its reliance on corporal punishment and cultural erasure—would later inform his criticisms of colonial rule and his support for African empowerment (Iliffe, 1979).

Civil Service, Inequality, and Political Awakening

After completing his education, Kayamba entered the colonial workforce through the Public Works Department (PWD), working across British East Africa, including Kenya, Uganda, and Zanzibar. While he gained recognition for his efficiency and trustworthiness, he was acutely aware of the institutional racism and labor exploitation embedded in the colonial structure. His frustration over unequal pay and limited career mobility—especially compared to Indian and European colleagues—prompted him to resign multiple times (Perham, 1963). These experiences deeply shaped his political outlook, leading him to believe that African advancement could not occur within the colonial hierarchy without collective resistance.

It was in Tanganyika, particularly in Tanga, that Kayamba began to translate these frustrations into organized political engagement. In 1922, he co-founded the Tanganyika Territory African Civil Servants Association (TTACSA). This was a landmark moment in Tanganyika's proto-nationalist history. TTACSA aimed to advocate for the rights of African civil servants and promote unity across religious and ethnic lines (Iliffe, 1979). Kayamba, by then Head Clerk in the Tanga District Office (appointed in 1925), was the first African in East Africa to hold such a senior administrative role—a position that gave him both influence and visibility (Perham, 1963).

Advocacy for Unity and Early Nationalist Ideals

TTACSA's inclusive membership—bringing together Muslims, Christians, Africans, and Arabs—reflected Kayamba's vision of pan-African solidarity, well ahead of its time. He explicitly rejected tribal parochialism and warned against ethnically exclusive organizations such as Moyo wa Uzigua na Nguu and the Tambarare Citizens Union, which prioritized sub-ethnic identities (e.g., Zigua vs. Shambaa) over national unity (Ilfie, 1979). For Kayamba, real progress required a shared African consciousness rooted in respect, education, and a commitment to common goals.

His guiding principle was clear:

"Religion is a matter of the heart and must come first, but it does not prevent members of one religious community from combining with members of another... Africans will never progress well unless they realize the necessity for unity." (Perham, 1963, p. 74)

This forward-looking vision was not simply rhetorical. TTACSA would later serve as a foundation for successive political organizations, including:

- African Association (1929)
- Tanganyika African Association (1948)
- Tanganyika African National Union (1954)
- Afro-Shirazi Party (1957)
- Chama Cha Mapinduzi (1977) (Ilfie, 1979)

Thus, Kayamba's early organizing laid a structural and ideological framework for later nationalist movements.

Recognition and Broader Influence

Beyond TTACSA, Kayamba's civic involvement extended into education policy. In 1928, he was appointed to the Tanga Provincial Committee on African Education, and in 1929, he joined the Advisory Committee on African Education for the entire territory (Ilfie, 1979). These roles placed him at the center of early African debates about curriculum development, school accessibility, and the need for culturally relevant education.

In 1931, Kayamba was chosen as one of only three Africans to testify before the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the East African Union, a major forum that influenced British colonial policy. His participation highlighted the growing respect for African voices in shaping regional policy, even if those voices were still marginalized in actual decision-making (Perham, 1963).

His life and work were honored in Margery Perham's 1936 publication, where he was featured alongside notable African figures from across the continent (Perham, 1963). This recognition underscores the pan-African scope of Kayamba's contributions and the high regard in which he was held by his peers and observers.

Bridging Tradition and Modernity

Kayamba's ability to straddle traditional authority and modern political engagement made him a uniquely influential figure. Though proud of his Bondei-Zigua heritage and lineage from the Kilindi dynasty, he did not confine his politics to tribal identities. Rather, he redefined what it meant to be African in the colonial era: educated but culturally rooted, Christian yet inclusive, loyal to heritage but committed to national unity (Ilfie, 1979; Kibonge, 2024).

This balance is especially evident in his autobiography, *My Life and Work in East Africa* (1935), a rare and candid reflection by an African civil servant at that time (Perham, 1963). In it, Kayamba provides rich accounts of colonial life, bureaucratic frustrations, personal tragedies, and his hopes for African advancement.

Martin Kayamba's contributions to the early nationalist struggle in Tanganyika were subtle yet foundational. Through his civil service, advocacy for education, and insistence on cross-cultural unity, he helped nurture a generation of African leaders and thinkers who would later guide the nation to independence. His commitment to justice, equity, and human dignity—even in the face of systemic oppression—positions him as a visionary figure in Tanzanian history (Ilfie, 1979; Mabunduki, 2024). By understanding Kayamba's life and ideals, we not only enrich the history of Tanganyika's nationalist movement but also gain insight into the broader dynamics of African resistance, adaptation, and leadership during the colonial era.

Conclusion

Through his active participation in the civil service, education reform, and community organization, Martin Kayamba contributed significantly to the foundation of the nationalist struggle in Tanganyika. His autobiography offers an invaluable perspective on the intellectual and practical foundations of the African resistance movement during the colonial era. By challenging the exploitative nature of colonial institutions and advocating for unity, Kayamba set the stage for the eventual rise of political movements that sought to end British colonial rule.

Kayamba's story is not just that of an individual who navigated the complexities of colonialism, but also a reflection of the larger struggle for African self-determination. His life and work in East Africa exemplify the quiet yet powerful role that education, leadership, and solidarity played in the early nationalist efforts in Tanganyika. As one of the key figures of his time, Martin Kayamba's contributions later inspired the nationalist movements that led to the independence of Tanganyika in 1961. His legacy is an enduring reminder of the importance of intellectual, social, and political engagement in the struggle for national liberation.

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