

In 1969, two years after former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere inaugurated the national policy of *ujamaa* in his momentous Arusha Declaration, a small group of students at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) launched a radical publication called *Cheche*. The term *ujamaa* – Kiswahili for ‘familyhood’ – registered Nyerere’s desire to forge a developmental strategy that borrowed from socialist principles and the precepts of modernization theory, yet was firmly grounded in an indigenous African tradition of what he called ‘tribal socialism’. On the other hand, the term *cheche* – Kiswahili for ‘spark’ – explicitly situated the UDSM students’ publication within a more classically Marxist tradition dating back to 1900, when a Russian political newspaper called *Iskra* – ‘The Spark’ – began production under the management of Vladimir Lenin. (*The Spark* was also the title of a leftist journal published by former Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah’s office between 1963 and 1966.) *Cheche* ultimately proved to be a short-lived venture, though hardly for lack of commitment and enthusiasm on the part of its young writers and editors. In 1970, four issues into publication, *Cheche* and its organizational base, the University Students African Revolutionary Front (USARF), were banned by the Nyerere-led Tanzanian government.

Without question, the perceived threat to the authority of the Tanzanian leadership and the official myth of national consensus represented by *Cheche*’s resolutely socialist stance and critical orientation accounted for this death sentence. In addition to provoking anxieties among the senior cadre of TANU (Tanganyika African National Union, the ruling political party) because of the potentially destabilizing momentum of the youth activism it represented, *Cheche* raised concern because its pages propounded a version of socialism more consistent with standard Marxist theory than with the ideologically flexible and unevenly-implemented project of *ujamaa*. These two aspects of *Cheche* – the remarkable political engagement of university students it demonstrated, and the vigorous spirit of debate within the field of African socialism that it exposed – are wonderfully captured in a new collection of essays edited by Karim F. Hirji, *Cheche: Reminiscences of a Radical Magazine*. Hirji, one of three former editors of *Cheche*, has compiled a series of reflective and analytical pieces – about half of which are penned by other former USARF members, and half by Hirji himself – that offers a historical account of Tanzanian student activism, but also seeks to revive the

Remembering and Reviving Student Activism in Tanzania

Priya Lal & Samuel Mhajida

Cheche: Reminiscences of a Radical Magazine

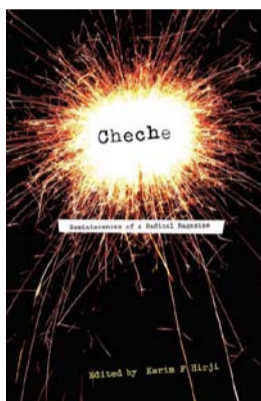
by Karim Hirji (ed.)

Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 2010, 231 p.

ISBN: 978-9-98708-098-4

extinguished spark of this radicalism in the present and future. These colourful and vivid reminiscences bring to life an era of intellectual versatility and political dynamism, and supplement a renewed drive at UDSM – led by the Mwalimu Nyerere Chair in Pan African Studies and others – to raise awareness among younger generations about the unique history of ‘the Hill’ (as the University campus is popularly known).

Cheche and its successor magazine, *Maji Maji*, emerged due to a number of forces that were global, continental, national, and local in scope. The politics of the Cold War – driven by an antagonism between the proponents of socialist and capitalist ideologies across the world – created an era of global turbulence, and thus comprised the most significant of these forces. The Cold War dynamic in turn intersected with the politics of decolonization on the African continent in the 1960s and 1970s, producing a set of pressures and controversies implicating newly independent African nations like Tanzania. The continental aspect that caught the attention of most scholars during this period was that of the liberation struggles in southern Africa. Tanzania’s direct engagement and symbolic role in Cold War debates and ongoing anti-colonial movements identified the East African country as a paragon of both substantive national independence and Pan-African commitment. Tanzania’s international standing changed significantly after Nyerere’s pronouncement of the Arusha Declaration in 1967. The Declaration was applauded by many citizens and denounced by a few others, and it quickly transformed what the *Cheche* editors termed the ‘bourgeois’ culture of academic enterprise at the Hill. The new Tanzanian policy of *ujamaa* and self-reliance, plus the charismatic leadership of Nyerere – ‘the African star’, in Hirji’s words – made Tanzania a source of hope for



revolutionaries as well as a focal point for moderate scholars who flocked into UDSM in the late 1960s. The combination of all of the above forces made Tanzania an ideological battleground of sorts.

Within Tanzania, the University of Dar es Salaam became a particularly charged site of debate, discussion, and activism concerning the future of *ujamaa*, African liberation, and the world as a whole. UDSM was initially established in 1961 as a college of the University of London. In 1963, it became one of three constituent branches of the University of East Africa, and in 1970 it became an independent national university. This shift integrated the university into the program of national development sweeping the country at the time. However, it also ended the university’s independence, so to speak. It was under the circumstances of the late 1960s that the idea of having an independent left-wing student magazine was conceived, and it was within the context of TANU’s increasingly direct intervention in university life that *Cheche* came to an end. During its short existence, four issues of *Cheche* appeared containing analytical essays, political poetry, and artwork by its student editors and their peers, as well as several faculty contributors (including renowned radical scholars such as Issa Shivji). The magazine soon stirred the intellectual and political atmosphere on the Hill and beyond, eventually reaching readers well outside Tanzanian and even outside African borders. What made it so popular was its uncompromising critical tone, its willingness to take on the regional and global forces shaping life in postcolonial Tanzania, and its fearless attempts to redirect the *ujamaa* initiative towards a more rigorously socialist path. These same qualities were behind the official order to ban the publication.

Cheche: Reminiscences of a Radical Magazine takes on the most

mundane and personal aspects of the magazine’s history, as well as the large-scale political, economic, and social contexts of its production. In a sense, Hirji’s compilation can be read as two books. The first is a collection of memories and anecdotes about the production of *Cheche* from the diverse perspectives of its makers (reinforced by the inclusion of excerpts from the publication itself as appendices and in a chapter of poems). The second comprises Hirji’s analysis of Tanzania’s history and world history in the fifty years since the country’s independence, taking us from the Cold War context of the early 1960s to the rather bleak neoliberal landscape of the present.

In its first form, *Reminiscences* offers not just a detailed history of the laborious editorial meetings, weekend study groups, writing projects, late-night printing sessions, and distribution efforts that went into the four issues of *Cheche*, but also a variety of autobiographical snapshots that illustrate the lasting legacy of this period of vibrant scholarly and social engagement in the lives of its participants. ‘These experiences formed the basis of my future interests, and made me what I am,’ the magazine’s sole female editor, Zakia Hamdani Meghji, notes. Each narrative overlaps with the next, yet exhibits a distinct voice and approach. Current Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, for instance, unsurprisingly emphasizes the militancy of the USARF movement against the ongoing imperialism in Southern Africa and emerging neo-colonial geopolitical structures, while sociologist George G. Hajivavanis fondly remembers the lively, often humorous, interpersonal exchanges and deep sense of empathy central to the *Cheche* project. Though Hajivavanis laments that he and other former radicals eventually ‘became more petty-bourgeoisified’, in many ways the accounts in *Reminiscences* – particularly Hirji’s – capture the reader by the passion and urgency that they infuse into their analysis of the present.

At times, the intensity of the purpose can descend into overblown rhetoric and a tendency towards self-aggrandizement; the authors consistently criticize how the university and political administration misinterpreted their struggle, while seeming to paint a romanticized picture of saintly brothers and sisters absolutely sure of themselves and their mission. Moreover, Hirji and his fellow writers rely on a narrative style that occasionally pushes history into staticism, writing as if all things at UDSM stood still as a handful of student radicals composed, edited, debated, or cyclostyled *Cheche*. Yet this stylistic device, while depicting

life on the Hill in an incomplete or skewed way, also effectively animates the cosmopolitan, engaged scholarly spirit of UDSM in the 1960s and 1970s. The diversity of the *Cheche* cohort – including individuals (albeit mostly male) from mixed ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds – and the students' determination to repudiate 'armchair scholarship' and academic elitism – like their mentor Walter Rodney – stand out as unique and admirable qualities of the radical intellectual community in *ujamaa*-era Tanzania.

In its second form, as a historical, political, and economic inquiry and polemic by Hirji, *Reminiscences* represents a refreshingly frank effort to evaluate the successes, failures, and lessons of *ujamaa* as a whole. To this end, Hirji also includes an attempt at honest self-criticism of the *Cheche* project itself, mitigating the excessively heroic tone of some of the sketches presented earlier in the book (the analytical section follows the individual narratives in sequential order). Hirji's analysis begins with an overview of Tanzanian history since independence but quickly expands into a treatment of nothing less than the course of global politics and the world economy over the past half-century. The spatial and thematic scope of *Reminiscences* is one of the strengths of the book. Rather than focusing solely on questions of governance within Tanzanian borders, or isolating a discussion of economic progress from a broader exploration of matters of human freedom and welfare, Hirji highlights the interconnectedness of continued obstacles to meaningful national development.

When dealing with the past, *Reminiscences* sticks to the position

espoused by the editors and writers affiliated with *Cheche*, arguing that *ujamaa* ultimately amounted to 'empty socialist rhetoric' and 'symbolism without substance'. In a chapter entitled 'Socialism Yesterday', Hirji excoriates the petty-bourgeois class base of TANU, the insufficiently decolonized structure and composition of the postcolonial Tanzanian state, the lack of proper state planning, and the overall preservation of Tanzania's embedded peripheral status within an exploitative capitalist world economy. The following chapter, entitled 'Contemporary Capitalism', offers a sometimes meandering discussion of neo-colonialism, targeting everything from AFRICOM to Chinese foreign policy, and Tanzania's dependency on food imports.

Rather than grappling with the problems of the present by dwelling upon the shortcomings of *ujamaa*, Hirji spends a final chapter, 'Socialism Tomorrow', asking 'whether the ideas and visions that inspired the student activism of the past are relevant today'. Without being overly dogmatic, *Reminiscences* answers this question in the affirmative, thoughtfully listing five broad tools that Tanzanian students today might use to approach the challenges of the future: intellectual independence, stellar scholarship, integrated conceptualization, historical awareness, and intellectual integrity. This list touches upon some of the main obstacles to concerted student activism in the present. Central among these is the institutional situation of UDSM and higher education in Africa in general. For more than two decades after *Cheche*'s extinction, UDSM was the only national university in Tanzania, and it remained tightly controlled by party

organs in an arrangement that often threatened academic freedom. (A massive expulsion of university professors in the late 1970s resulted from friction between a TANU-affiliated Vice-Chancellor and a number of faculty members committed to intellectual autonomy.)

In the 1980s, Tanzania – like much of Africa – experienced a prolonged period of economic hardship, during which time the university hardly trained or hired any new academic staff owing to reductions in government funding mandated by structural adjustment policies. The result of this was obvious among UDSM lecturers and professors. Many of them either started seeking jobs abroad or left the academy for political positions (a trend which had continued into the present). During this time, journals (including *Utafiti* and *Zamani*), academic fora, and professional organizations (such as the Historical Association of Tanzania) at the university struggled to stay alive or faced extinction. The impact of these developments on the student experience was alarming, and was compounded by constant student strikes interrupting the learning process in the 1990s.

In the contemporary context, though the arrival of multipartyism in Tanzania has strengthened academic autonomy in one sense, resource constraints still present an enormous challenge for young and old scholars on the Hill. Moreover, problems with the English-language medium of secondary and tertiary schooling across the country compound the crisis of Tanzanian education. Yet, it is precisely these circumstances that demand a renewed spirit of creative

intellectual and political engagement and a reinvigoration of the older spirit of self-reliance and energy that *Reminiscences* documents, embodies, and urges. The innovative and thoroughly interdisciplinary approach to issues of development described by the book's authors represents a model for breaking out of the rigid disciplinary categories and approaches currently plaguing scholarship on Africa, on the continent and beyond. It is impossible for young Tanzanian scholars to tackle the enormous forces preventing meaningful development in their country, *Reminiscences* asserts, if they do not simultaneously practise the principles they preach within the smaller scale of their own intellectual endeavors.

Most importantly, a fuller knowledge of the history of such efforts is crucial to the success of future radical movements. For its significant contribution to this historical record alone, *Cheche: Reminiscences of a Radical Magazine* comprises a uniquely valuable compilation – one whose worth can only be enriched by the primary source material appended at the end of the text. This extraordinary book not only expands our understanding of the dynamics of intellectual life at UDSM, it also enhances our comprehension of the *ujamaa* project and of African socialism more broadly, and adds to a larger, ongoing story – that of the struggle for substantive development, meaningful independence, responsive leadership, and true social justice fought by young people across the African continent.

