

African Socialism in Retrospect: Karim Hirji's *The Travails of a Tanzanian Teacher*

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Tanzania in the 1960s and 1970s was a beacon of progressive politics on the African continent. The country served as a base for Southern African liberation movements as a key “front-line state”, and assumed the mantle of Pan-African leadership in the aftermath of the coup against President Nkrumah of Ghana in 1966. As such, it attracted radical scholars and activists from all across the African diaspora, including Walter Rodney, Malcolm X, and Kwame Ture. ^[1]

that traditionally Africans had “lived as families, with individuals supporting each other and helping each other on terms of equality” based on communal ownership of land.^[2] Thus, “traditional African society was a socialist society”.^[3] At times, Nyerere seemed to imply that there were no classes in Tanzania and consequently; it did not make sense to adopt a theory that emphasized the role of class struggle in bringing about social transformations.^[4] To this extent, African socialism was advanced by its proponents as an indigenous version of socialism that was more suitable for African conditions than Marxism-Leninism.

A fascinating first-hand account of how Tanzanian Marxists interpreted and criticized economic, social, cultural, and political developments in the country during this period is provided by Karim F. Hirji’s memoir, *The Travails of a Tanzanian Teacher* (2018).^[5] Hirji was involved in Marxist political organizations in Dar Es Salaam, and even though his Marxist orientation eventually led to his internal exile, he remained active as a Marxist scholar and activist in Tanzania, and he still contributes articles to progressive outlets on the African continent such as [Pambazuka News](#).

Hirji’s book, somewhat overlooked since its release, offers a compelling analysis of the history and

chapter provides an overview of Hirji's career as a teacher. The second presents an account of Hirji's experiences as a teacher under training, especially in light of the Arusha Declaration of 1967 and the turn towards building socialism in Tanzania, and the philosophy of education for self-reliance that Nyerere attempted to institutionalize. The next four chapters provide a detailed account of Hirji's years as a teacher at the University of Dar Es Salaam (UDSM) from 1971 until his dismissal and internal-exile in 1974.

Of particular interest is chapter five, which provides a detailed account of the confrontation known as the "Akivaga Crisis," which took place in July 1971. ^[6] This incident saw progressive students and faculty, in alliance with campus workers, face off with the UDSM's governing body. Hirji also provides a critical literature review of what has been written on these events (Appendix B: Akivaga Crisis in History), which is an invaluable source for anyone who wants to acquire an understanding of their importance. The events in question derive their significance from the fact that they can be interpreted as showing the limits of TANU's progressive politics. ^[7] In a confrontation between the party's appointed university administration on the one hand (which by all accounts was not tremendously competent) and progressive students, faculty, and campus workers on the other hand, the party employed the coercive

of African Socialism than the students whom they were confronting.

Hirji criticizes the exaggerated role which has been attributed to Walter Rodney by other socialist scholars, such as Haroub Othman and Issa Shivji. ^[8]Hirji asserts that, contrary to what is sometimes claimed, “Rodney kept a low profile during the crisis”. ^[9]Hirji thus provides a much-needed corrective to the one-sided accounts of intellectual and political life at UDSM during the early 1970s which tend to center on Rodney. ^[10]

Hirji’s tenure as assistant lecturer, during which time he was actively involved in attempts to develop courses that would breakdown disciplinary boundaries, is detailed in chapter six of the book. This involved the introduction of two new courses: East African Society and Environment (required for all social sciences students) and Development Studies (required for all non-social sciences students). The seventh chapter of the book discusses Hirji’s 18-month stint as a bureaucrat following his dismissal from UDSM in 1974. The reason for his dismissal was his critical stance towards some of Nyerere’s policies –specifically, his critique of the policy of “education for self-reliance” published in 1973. Hirji argued that the requirement for manual labour was imposed on teachers without any

much more than manual work” and it was unpopular with many African students who associated manual work with colonial education. ^[11] In Hirji’s view, the kind of political education which would have made it clear to students that manual labour, as mandated by the policy of education for self-reliance, was different from what took place under colonialism was altogether absent. Instead, students were only taught political education in an “insipid, sloganeering style”. ^[12] For his trouble, Hirji was dismissed from UDSM and appointed as a bureaucrat in the Regional Planning Office of Rukwa region, with a posting in Sumbawanga, the regional capital. Sumbawanga was previously used by the British as a place of internal exile and Hirji clearly understood his appointment in such terms.

Hirji’s experiences as a cog in the machine of the Tanzanian bureaucracy were decidedly negative. No real work was done by his office, and his boss was simply not interested in deploying Hirji’s statistical knowledge (a planning office that does not care much for statistics does not inspire much confidence!). In fact, Hirji notes that he was not really expected to produce much, and that he could get away with spending the workday reading newspapers and other materials in the office, so long as he pretended to be doing something. It is noteworthy that Hirji’s appointment took place just two years after the

decentralization. Hirji notes that for all of Nyerere's exhortation of self-reliance, this decentralization project "had been constructed for Tanzania with the expertise of the McKinsey Corporation, a global American consultancy firm that facilitates the smooth operations of the international capitalist order".^[13]

In general, Hirji is rather harsh in his assessment of Tanzania's development programs under Nyerere. He points out that despite the rhetoric of self-reliance; Tanzania was dependent on foreign donors, who drove the country's educational policies even during the 1960s and 1970s.^[14] Moreover, while TANU deployed the rhetoric of "African socialism", workers had no say in how the nationalised public-owned companies were managed.^[15] Hirji is especially critical of the forced villagization program which was launched in the 1970s. While the aim of the villagization program was to concentrate rural inhabitants in villages so that services could be more easily provided, inadequate planning meant that farmers who were forced to move to the new villages often had to wait a year or more in order to get deep wells dug in them.^[16] Hirji's criticisms of the Ujamaa period are not directed at undermining the significance of the achievements of the independence struggle, but rather to take aim at excessively nostalgic treatments of the period.^[17]

individual teacher and of teaching in general. During his time as a bureaucrat, he recounts his founding of a mathematics club at the local secondary school. Hirji did not separate his role as a teacher of mathematics from his role as a Marxist educator. He gave lectures to the students on mathematics, but also incorporated a Marxist account of the history of mathematics into his lectures: “the students are fascinated by the diversity of ways in which mathematics developed in ancient Babylon, India, China, Egypt, and Greece. I venture into the general history of those societies as well, and relate mathematics to the level of economic development”.^[18] This approach seems to have been pedagogically successful, since it allowed students to understand mathematics as a fundamentally human practice whose abstractions can, in the final analysis, be historically traced to human social activities.

Hirji’s sensitivity to sociological questions pertaining to science and mathematics education and research in Tanzania is evident throughout the book. One example points to the costs of what Paulin Hountondji describes as “extraversion” in scientific research and training on the African continent, i.e., externally oriented and directed practices of research and teaching.^[19] Due to donor dependence, an approach to the teaching of mathematics that was shortly to be abandoned in the US was imported into

developed in the US in an attempt to catch up with Soviet advances in science and technology. It aimed to modernize the teaching of mathematics in the country by placing an emphasis on the introduction of general and abstract concepts at the beginning of instruction before moving onto concrete exercises. Students would begin by considering such questions as “‘What is a number?’ ‘What is a variable?’ ‘function?’ ‘What is an equation?’”^[20] This approach to teaching mathematics was in place in the US from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. However, by the mid-1970s, it had clearly failed due to its over-emphasis on abstract elements. This makes it all the more remarkable that it was adopted as the primary teaching approach to mathematics in Tanzania in the late 1960s and 1970s.^[21] What this means is that Tanzanian students were subjected to a second-hand, cast-off curriculum that was on the way to being abandoned by its donors in their home country. A more devastating example of the long-term consequences of scientific dependency and extraversion at the level of both teaching and research would be hard to find.

Chapter eight provides an account of Hirji's role as a teacher at the National Transport Institute, while the last three chapters of the book provide an assessment of the state of universities in Tanzania today – as well as Hirji's own teaching philosophy. Hirji paints a grim

adjustment programs on Tanzania – Nyerere was eventually forced to enter into negotiations with the IMF between 1981 and 1985.^[22] The salaries of professors were cut dramatically as part of the austerity program. Universities are now run on a business model with students occupying the role of customers. Naturally this places pressure on faculty to pass failing students and to lower academic standards.^[23] Moreover, because many academic institutions depend on foreign funding, their academic programs are sometimes guided by foreign academics and administrators who often do not know what they are talking about, but are tolerated because they provide funding.^[24]

However, Hirji is careful to point to internal problems as well. Hirji himself refuses to lay all the blame at the feet of international financial institutions. After all, it was TANU's failure to restructure the Tanzanian economy that provided the opening for international financial institutions to swoop in. For example, while Hirji recognizes the significance of the expansion of university education under Nyerere — in 1971 Tanzania had one university with less than 3,000 students, by 2017 it had fifty universities with around 200,000 students — he also notes that there was a decline in the quality of the education that was provided.^[25] In the 1970s, degrees obtained at UDSM were recognized by other universities (e.g., in the

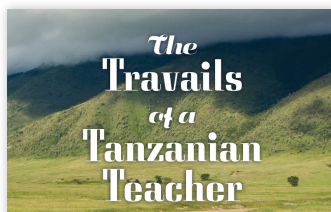
assistants. In fact, Hirji had no teaching assistants during his time as a professor at Muhimili University of Health and Allied Sciences, MUHAS.^[27] The situation in Tanzanian universities became so dire that, in 2017, 19 universities were ordered not to enrol new students and a further 22 were prohibited from enrolling new students in 75 programs.^[28] Clearly this is a recipe for the perpetuation of dependency on foreign “experts” with all the connected negative consequences. Hirji provides us with an important account of the different factors which have contributed to the crisis of the university in Tanzania. Yet, he does not explicitly provide answers to the question, *what is to be done?* Nevertheless, readers who are interested in a Marxist account of the historical origins of the current plight of universities in Tanzania will find this book of tremendous use.

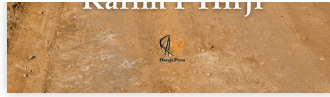
Overall, Hirji’s book is an excellent account of the dilemmas that Marxists faced during the Bandung-era. In countries like Tanzania, where a progressive nationalist government was in power, Marxists had to make difficult decisions in relation to the extent to which they should support their governments in their struggle against imperialism (the “national question”) while also pushing for the recognition of the importance of internal social transformations (the “social question”). Perhaps the primary failing in this respect is that Marxists in Tanzania (and in other

social and economic transformations. This book shows how, absent the requisite internal structural transformations, the rhetoric of self-reliance can lead to a path that terminates in the most humiliating forms of dependency.

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BOOK DETAILS





The Travails of a Tanzanian Teacher (2018).

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