

Issa Shivji: The Intellectual Vanguard of Africa's Liberation

By Karibu Staff

04 November 2025

Issa G. Shivji, one of Africa's foremost thinkers, stands as a towering figure in the continent's intellectual and political landscape. The Tanzanian scholar has made invaluable contributions to the study of law, political economy, development, socialism, and the broader African liberation struggle. Over more than five decades of scholarship, his work has helped shape debates around justice, dependency, and the meaning of freedom in postcolonial Africa, as well as the applicability of class in Africa.

Shivji is best known as the author of *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (1976), a Marxist classic that redefined the study of class and power on the continent. His writings continue to influence thinkers across the Global South, offering a sharp critique of imperialism and calling for Africa to reclaim its right to define knowledge on its own terms. The book is perhaps the best critique of Julius Nyerere's Tanzania and 'Ujamaa'.

At the heart of Shivji's intellectual project lies a deep conviction: that African thought must be liberated from the shadow of Western hegemony. He insists that genuine emancipation cannot be achieved without intellectual sovereignty - the freedom to think, theorise, and act from Africa's own material and historical conditions. This philosophy, which he calls "*thinking from Africa*", challenges the assumption that progress must be measured through Western categories.

For Shivji, Africa's continued subordination is not only political or economic but epistemic, rooted in the dominance of foreign frameworks that define what counts as knowledge, democracy, or rights. His struggle for intellectual sovereignty is thus a fight against what he sees as a form of cognitive colonialism, which has long relegated African thought to the margins. Shivji calls on scholars and citizens alike to ground their understanding in the lived realities of African people, reclaiming theory as a weapon in the broader liberation struggle.

In one of his most provocative areas of scholarship, Shivji critiques the mainstream conception of human rights, arguing that the idea has been co-opted by imperial powers to legitimise global inequality. He argues, the dominant human rights discourse reflects Western political interests and conceals the structural forces that oppress the poor and working classes. For Shivji, these rights have not been applied universally.

The Review of African Political Economy summarises his argument incisively: "these dominant accounts suffer from five key deficiencies: (i) they abstract from social history and concrete material conditions; (ii) they divorce the history of human rights from the history of the class struggles that were crucial in shaping them (with natural rights as the sword advancing the class interests of the rising European bourgeois and positively enacted rights as their shield once in power); (iii) they elide the 'ideologically and politically charged' nature of debates over the priority of rights (civil and political v social and economic etc.); (iv) 'the prevailing human rights

discourse on Africa has been singularly 'deficient' in contextualising the human rights ideology within the imperialist domination of Africa'; and (v) the individualist and ahistorical approach to human rights allows for a focus on discrete episodes or human rights violations, while remaining blind to the structural causes of human rights abuse and denial."

For Shivji, structural causes like capitalist exploitation, neocolonial dependency, and class oppression must be at the centre of any discussion on rights. It is this refusal to separate theory from lived struggle that sets him apart from many of his contemporaries.

Shivji is not an armchair intellectual. Throughout his career, he has remained in close engagement with trade unions, student movements, and community organisations, seeing intellectual work as inseparable from activism. He continues to engage with debates on democracy, land reform, and neoliberalism, arguing that democracy must mean more than periodic elections: it must also ensure the redistribution of power and resources.

In *Class Struggles in Tanzania*, Shivji delivered a bold critique of his country's post-independence socialist experiment under Julius Nyerere's Ujamaa policy. He demonstrated that despite the rhetoric of equality, class divisions and exploitation persisted, revealing the enduring influence of foreign capital. For him, Tanzania's dependence on external capital was not merely an economic issue but a political and ideological one, entrenching inequality and underdevelopment.

This position placed him alongside other radical thinkers such as Walter Rodney and Samir Amin, who combined Marxist and Pan-Africanist perspectives to critique global capitalism. As scholar Leo Zeilig notes, "he [Shivji] has helped to ensure the continuity of Marxist ideas on the continent and challenged the devastation caused by the IMF, the World Bank, and the never-ending pillage by Western governments."

During his long tenure at the University of Dar es Salaam, from 1970 to 2006, Shivji developed a critical approach to law, exposing how legal systems often mask the interests of capital. As Professor Emeritus of Law, he argued that the celebrated "rule of law" is frequently a cover for the rule of capital, preserving property relations that serve the bourgeois elite and the global corporate order.

Shivji's influence extends beyond academia. His work continues to inspire a new generation of African thinkers, including Ugandan intellectual Mahmood Mamdani, who have carried forward his call to think critically from within the continent's realities.

In a world where neoliberalism, foreign debt, and resource extraction continue to define Africa's place in the global system, Shivji's scholarship remains profoundly relevant. His writings remind Africans that liberation cannot be imported, nor can freedom be borrowed from foreign institutions. It must be imagined, theorised, and built by Africans themselves.

This article is an opinion piece submitted on 01 November 2025. The views expressed by the author do not necessarily reflect those of Karibu! Online or Khanya College. You may

republish this article, so long as you credit the authors and Karibu! Online (www.Karibu.org.za), and do not change the text. Please include a link back to the original article.