

Das Kapital in Kiswahili

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Joachim Mwami on translating Marx — and Marxism — into the vocabulary of East Africa

Few books have had as great an impact on how people think about — and seek to change — society as Karl Marx's *Capital*. First published in German in 1867, a Russian translation of his magnum opus subsequently appeared in 1872, followed by a significantly reworked French edition in 1875. After Marx's death in 1883, an English translation was issued four years later in 1887, overseen by his lifelong political and intellectual partner, Friedrich Engels.

As the ranks of the socialist movement swelled in the decades that followed, demand for Marx's analysis of the capitalist "laws of motion" grew inexorably and *Capital* was translated into dozens more languages. Beginning with the founding of the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow in 1919, *Capital* enjoyed state patronage from the Soviet Union and other states that emerged in its wake, ensuring that the volume was disseminated among millions of readers in the second half of the twentieth century.

Interest in *Capital* and Marxism more generally declined considerably after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, but has been rekindled in recent years as a result of the global financial crisis of 2008 and mainstream economists' failure to anticipate such a cataclysm. Since then, Marxism has been rediscovered by a new generation — not as a series of rigid formulations or iron laws, but rather as a dynamic analytical framework for understanding how capitalism grows and sustains itself as a system, often to the detriment of people and the planet.

It was around this same period that Dr. Joachim Mwami, a retired professor of sociology at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, began translating *Capital* into Kiswahili, the language spoken by roughly 100 million people across East Africa. Mwami himself read *Capital* for the first time in the 1970s, and has spent decades applying Marx's ideas to his own studies of Tanzanian society. Yet much to his and other Tanzanian Marxists' frustration, hardly any literature by Marx, or any Marxists for that matter, was available in local languages — a circumstance he hopes to change. Now, as his translation is finalized for publication with support from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, he sat down with Loren Balhorn to talk more about the project and the utility of Marxism in a neo-colonial context.

Joachim Mwami taught sociology at the University of Dar es Salaam from 1992 to 2013, before joining the faculty at Umaru Musa Yar'adua University in Nigeria. He is currently finalizing a Kiswahili translation of *Capital* and an introductory guide to Marx for Kiswahili readers.

Professor Mwami, you've been working on a Kiswahili translation of Karl Marx's *Capital* for quite some time. Can you tell us a bit more about the project?

The project originally began sometime in the mid-1980s, when I and one of my colleagues, who unfortunately passed away, agreed that we should translate *Capital* and divided up the chapters amongst ourselves. But it didn't actually materialize until 2008 or 2009, when my colleague at the University of Dar es Salaam, Professor Issa Shivji, approached me about the idea.

I finally completed a first draft of all 33 chapters in 2014. I was teaching in Nigeria at the time, and when I came back in 2015 on holiday, I visited a young colleague of mine, Sabatho Nyamsenda, and discussed the work with him. I moved back to Tanzania in 2016 and continued to edit the translation until recently, when Dorothee Braun, who directs the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's office in Dar es Salaam, approached me about hiring someone to finish editing the translation and publish it. I said "excellent", or, as you say in German, *wunderbar!*

What is the state of the translation right now?

The manuscript is now being transferred to an expert editor to ensure that the language, concepts, and terminology are consistent throughout the book. This includes a smaller booklet, a guide to reading Marx that I wrote over the last few years.

It sounds like you've devoted quite a lot of time and energy to the project over the last few decades. Was it an easy task?

It has been quite a bit of very difficult work on my part because I was doing it on my own. It's particularly difficult to find the right Kiswahili equivalent for many English words, because the vocabulary in English is very wide and rich compared to Kiswahili. Now that the manuscript is being given to professional editors, I hope they will come up with better terminology than I was able to.

Could you give me an example of a term that was difficult to translate?

For example, the word "commodity", which is very central in *Capital*, has been translated as a *bidhaa*. There's no problem with this translation. But there are two aspects of commodities: use value and exchange value. Value can easily be translated as *thamani* in Kiswahili. But use value? I use the word *thamani mafao*. The other one is *thamani mauzo*, which translates as "exchange value". But whether this will easily be comprehended by Kiswahili speakers, I cannot say.

There are also other common concepts, such as the origin of money. Marx tried to highlight the origin of money, and he used certain terminology to do so. For example, value forms. When I translate them into Kiswahili, I'm never really sure if my translation is correct or not. Remember, I cannot refer back to the German original, but that's not really the problem. The problem is: do the Kiswahili words accurately reflect the meaning conveyed in the English version?

***Capital* is a very dense and difficult text, even for native English or German speakers. Who do you hope will read your translation?**

Capital is essentially a book for the proletariat — the working class, those who are exploited and oppressed by the capitalist system. I'm convinced that if the book is distributed to low-income people, it will have a very positive impact. I may not be able to prove this, but I believe it and it has also been my personal experience.

In 1976, during my undergraduate studies at the University of Dar es Salaam, I happened to teach Marxist political economy at one of the textile mills in the city. I used the same terminology that I'd been utilizing in the university. What I learned is that the workers in the factory were able to understand better when we discussed issues like "What is exploitation?", or "Who is a worker, and who is a capitalist?" They were able to internalize these concepts much better than my students at the university, who were educated members of the petit bourgeoisie.

I was one of what they called "militants" at that time and had internalized Marxism at a young age, but when I discussed these ideas with my fellow students, they were unable to understand these concepts: "No, Mwami, we have no exploitation in Tanzania." This experience proved to me that low-

income people can understand *Capital*. Like I said, I may not be able to prove it, but history will prove me right.

You said you internalized Marxism at a young age. How did you encounter Marxist ideas in the first place?

In 1968 I was employed as a library assistant in Dar es Salaam, and I started reading a lot of literature that was critical of Roman Catholicism and religion in general. In 1972, Walter Rodney published *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, and I was one of the first in the library to read it. By then I was a proper nationalist — this was around the time of the Arusha Declaration, when many young people were interested in establishing and implementing socialism in Tanzania.

The University of Dar es Salaam was a reservoir of critical thinking in the 1960s and 1970s, and in the library we had access to a lot of magazines produced by radical students. That's when I started to imbibe Marxist knowledge. So in 1975, when I joined the University of Dar es Salaam as a mature student, I was one of the most enthusiastic radicals, reading a lot of Marxian literature, particularly Marx himself. By the time I graduated in 1978, I was really a Marxist — at least in terms of acquisition, if not application.

Was Marxist literature easily accessible?

At the university level, yes. The good thing about that period was that a good number of student radicals in the universities had a very potent influence. They would always encourage us to read more. Whenever we read bourgeois literature, we would be encouraged to read books on the same subject but from a Marxist point of view.

We were also encouraged by radical lectures like Shivji, who taught me at the time, or Mahmood Mamdani, who was also at the university. They encouraged us to use this opportunity to gain more knowledge so that we would be able to confront these “bourgeois” radicals who were always in opposition to us.

So you were defining yourselves in contrast to the “African socialism” that was the official state ideology of Tanzania?

Exactly. Remember, before I went to the university I was a pure nationalist, and very enthusiastic about *Ujamaa*, the African socialism espoused by [Tanzanian President] Julius Nyerere. But as I began reading Marx and other Marxist literature, I learned that this was a rubbish type of socialism, similar to what was introduced in England during the nineteenth century by Robert Owen and so forth, what Engels called “utopian socialism”. That's when I broke with Nyerere, because he lacked a scientific understanding of capitalism and of oppression and exploitation.

Is Marxism still popular at the universities?

No, it's gone. There are very few Marxist teachers left. I find that students today are often reluctant to discuss Marxism or to identify as Marxists, for fear of not being able to get a financial grant if they expose themselves. Things aren't the way they used to be.

Many self-professed Marxist thinkers like, for example, Cedric Robinson or Gayatri Spivak, have argued that classical Marxism is inherently Eurocentric — it offers some useful insights, but it isn't sufficient to understand social and economic developments in the non-Western world. Do you agree?

No, I don't. I disagree completely. I think this is the result of a misunderstanding of Marxism and

Marx himself. I tend to state the following: Marxism is scientific, but more importantly, it is a scientific philosophy that is completely different from liberal philosophy. Now, misunderstanding Marxism is nothing new. It's a way of stupefying the minds, especially young minds, and the minds of people who don't understand what is happening in Africa.

Africa today is a product of colonialism, but colonialism itself is a product of capitalism. You can never understand the present state of affairs in Africa without understanding capitalism and how the two are integrated, and you can never understand the inner core of capitalism without Marxism. The way that economists identify and define "society" is completely rubbish, completely misguided. Society is always a totality, always a whole — this is one of Marx's most important contributions, to say that society is an "ensemble of social relations". But you can't understand these relations with any kind of positivist social theory or philosophy, because they are too tied to physical manifestations. Marxism helps us to understand the invisible processes beneath the surface.

Those who attack Marxism do so for their own reasons. And those who say that Marxism can't work in Africa are completely wrong — they vulgarize Marx. In fact, in Tanzania, some of us have been using Marx and Marxism to better understand our own social context.

How would you characterize Tanzanian society today, in Marxist terms?

That is a very good question. We classify Tanzania as a "neo-colonial" society. Tanzania was colonized in two or three essential phases, starting with German colonialism and followed by British colonialism. After we won independence, we entered neo-colonialism, a phase which continues until today.

Our argument is that colonial social and economic structures were established under the German and British colonial systems. What Nyerere and the regime after him did was to copy and adopt these social economic structures. They were never abandoned or revolutionized, so we still have the same economic and social structures.

We argue that the basic function of any colony in the world, both today and yesterday, is to create conditions whereby wealth is taken away and transported to the imperialist countries in Western Europe, but also in Asia and North America. Nyerere at least tried to understand these structures and, in a particular way, to change or transform them. But since he used the very awkward method of what we call "utopian socialism", he did not manage to change the structures. That's why he failed. Because of this failure, a new social class, which was already being created in the 1960s, was able to consolidate itself as a capitalist class in Tanzania.

This class continues to rule today, but in a subordinate position. It's not an independent capitalist class. It is subjugated to imperialist powers in Europe, America, and Asia.

What implications does that have for socialist strategy in Tanzania? How can Marxists engage in politics under those conditions?

In my opinion, we must accept that Tanzania is a neo-colonial country, completely different in terms of economic perspectives from Europe, Asia, or America. We have a small group of capitalists and a very, very large peasantry. But at the same time, we also have a small industrial sector and a small working class, and a lot of unemployed people. These social classes are the most important source of mobilization — not people like you and me. Our role is simply to transfer this particular knowledge, Marxism, to their minds, so that they can design their own methods of how to struggle against oppression and exploitation.

Is much Marxist literature available in Kiswahili?

No, I would say there is none, except for a few pieces of literature which some militants have translated from English. But even Marxist books in English are very rare and very hard to obtain in Tanzania. Even some of the books by Professor Shivji, who lives in Tanzania, are not available in bookshops here.

So there's a real need for more socialist literature in the country.

Exactly. There are very few Marxists in the country, you can count them on two hands, and even they are very old. There are a few young ones coming up, but they face many problems such as economic pressure which makes it difficult to balance academic and political work. The tempo of learning and publishing is still quite slow.

But I think the future is good. There is a cadre of young people emerging, people who are questioning why unemployment is rising, why economic disparities are very great, and I am quite optimistic than in perhaps ten years' time we will have a large number of young people leaning towards a Marxist political orientation.

You work closely with the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's office in Dar es Salaam. Has the foundation's presence had an impact in the region?

The foundation has made a big difference and impact, there is no doubt about that. The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation has sponsored many programmes, allowing us to go out into the villages and talk to workers. It has also sponsored a lot of our publications. Some other organizations have stopped working with us in recent years out of fear of political repression, but the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation has always stood by us. It's been fantastic.

You've translated the first book of *Capital*. Are there plans to translate the other two volumes?

Before I die, my plan is to at least translate Volume Two. Right now I am working on Chapter 12 of Volume Two, and I have finished about 250 pages. After that, I will translate Volume Three. Then I can die happily. That is my basic programme.

But more importantly, after the official publication of Volume One, I have plans to start a Marxist course with my best students, where we read and discuss *Capital* in Kiswahili chapter by chapter and book by book.

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