Inaugural Statements

A Milestone in the Study of Africa

So, the *Africa Review of Books* (ARB) is born! The road that has been traveled to produce this maiden edition of the *Review* has been a long one and the obstacles that have had to be surmounted numerous. In fact, at a point, such was the magnitude of the difficulties encountered that some were tempted either to give up on the project altogether or to postpone it indefinitely or even modify it so radically as to alter its identity as an autonomous product of the African social research community. But many others also held on tenaciously to the dream, convinced that the impeccable ideals that underpinned it necessitated the investment of all the energies required to bring it to fruition. That is why the appearance of this first issue of the *Review* carries with it a sense of historic moment which, hopefully, will also mark the beginning of a new phase, indeed, even a turning point in the study of Africa. It is for this reason too that there is a pervasive sense of celebration accompanying the issuance of the maiden edition of the publication.

There are other reasons for celebrating the publication of the maiden issue of the *Review*. From an institutional point of view, the birth of the publication not only represents a major success in realising one of the major strategic projects of CODESRIA in its role as the apex pan-African social research organisation but also marks the triumph of the collective will of African scholars as symbolised by the Council and the victory of perseverance over despair. We in the CODESRIA Secretariat share fully in this sense of celebration and, in doing so, thank all those who by deeds and/or encouragement helped to bring the project to fruition. We also congratulate the Forum for Social Studies (FSS) and the Centre for Research in Social Anthropology (CRASC) on their selection by the CODESRIA Executive Committee at its meeting held in July 2002 in Maputo, Mozambique, as the two institutions to pilot the production of the *Review*. Theirs is a mandate with clear historic proportions; their success in responding to the challenges of the responsibility that has been thrust on them will also be the success of all African scholars. Working closely with them, the CODESRIA Secretariat will strive to ensure that the *Review* establishes and sustains a reputation as a standard bearer of the best in the study of Africa.

The discussion on the need for a review of books published in Africa dates back about a decade at least. It arose from debates within CODESRIA networks about the state and future of African Studies at a time when Afro-pessimist sentiments/perspectives were in the ascendancy and the temptation to denigrate Africa was high. While international scholarly publishing on Africa maintained its high tempo, even if research funding was more uncertain, the quality of much of what was being published and the politics of the dissemination and appropriation of knowledge left much to be desired. Furthermore, the mismatch between the concepts that were in vogue and the changes taking place across Africa pointed to a crisis of theory that was clearly in need of being redressed. And yet, the structure of power in the production of knowledge about the continent made such a task of redress as difficult as it was hazardous. The high priests of African Studies increasingly constituted themselves into a closed network of gate keepers who retained and reproduced their power and influence through an incestuous form of inbreeding and selective cooptation that frustrated as many people as it excluded and, in so doing, underdeveloped the study of the continent. In that context, contestations built up on agenda-setting and methodology in the study of Africa as the gulf between interpretative frames employed in critical African knowledge centres and most of those emanating from outside the continent grew ever wider. Not a few scholars were to observe that the trend also seemed to point to the mass production of second and third rate studies on a continent which was increasingly typologised as a "basket case" in a self-justifying logic of thinking. It was a state of affairs which was considered unacceptable not so much because there was no crisis in Africa or even in its higher education system as that the difficulties confronting the continent, serious as they are, call for nothing less than the best quality analyses possible as a first step towards overcoming the problems. Regrettably, much of what was being published did not provide those kinds of analyses.

Most of the participants in the discussion about the need for an African review of books felt that the institution that was best placed to undertake the project was CODESRIA for the simple reason that its institutional mandate as set out in its Charter, and its record of achievement in the period since its founding in 1973, made it the natural choice for hosting such a bold new initiative. In the subsequent consultations that followed, ideas were exchanged on alternative possibilities for the content, design, financing, and management of the project as a sustained initiative capable of contributing to the transformation of the study of Africa. The quality and range of the consultations and exchanges that took place, and the sheer commitment that was displayed even in those early days meant that the publication was conceived from the outset as a *collective* venture belonging to the entire African social research community in all its diversity. Little wonder then that when an unscrupulous attempt was made to hijack and privatize the *Review* in the course of 2000 and 2001, it met with a stout, all-round resistance that also signalled the need to accelerate the production of the publication. An open call for submission of proposals to host the *Review* was issued out of which the FSS and CRASC emerged as the institutions selected, the former with overall editorial responsibility, the latter with responsibility for the French language editorial content. The *Review* will be published twice yearly in the first instance; the ambition over the long haul is to make it a quarterly publication.

The emergence of the ARB should serve to fill several important gaps in the study of Africa. For one, it will function as a critical multidisciplinary forum for debate on trends and directions in African Studies. For another, it will bring interesting work published in Africa but which are not sufficiently well-disseminated to the attention of a wider reading audience both within and outside the continent. Also, by the range and diversity of books which it is able to cover through the reviews that it publishes, the publication will not only help to alleviate the worst effects of the book famine that continues to afflict some parts of the continent but also serve as a useful reading guide to students and staff alike as they wade through the vast literature that is produced annually on Africa. Furthermore, it will provide a forum for reviews from Africa of studies published on the continent by the big African Studies community that exists outside the region. In serving as a critical platform for responding to these studies, the *Review* is expected to contribute to redressing the growing culture of scientific impunity in African Studies in which excessive liberties are taken with evidence, method and theory on a scale not comparable to what goes on in the study of other regions of the world. It is in this sense that the *Review* can be expected to be a standard bearer in the study of Africa. In this role, it will regularly draw attention to interesting new ideas and innovations and, at the same time, challenge the tendentiousness, lack of rigour, and reliance on a shaky empirical foundation that is all too prevalent today. To do so with credibility, the entire editorial team of the *Review* will strive not only to ensure that the materials included in the publication meet the highest standards of quality but also reflect the best of the diverse interests and perspectives of the social research community.

Obviously, the sustainability of the *Review* will depend, in large measure, on the quality, quantity and diversity of the contributions that are received. We will, therefore, be counting on readers to submit reviews and longer thematic essays to the editors of the publication for consideration. As has become established in CODESRIA institutional practice, we pledge to all contributors that their input will be treated with professionalism both in the exercise of editorial judgement on the material received and in the commissioning of peer assessments as may be necessary. For, it is only through such a careful and sensitive nurturing of the seed that has just begun to germinate that we will as a community be able to guarantee its growth into a giant *Iroko* tree, standing tall and proud in the forest as an undisputed number one. Together, we will do it!

Adebayo Olukoshi,
Executive Secretary,
CODESRIA