

Thandika Mkandawire (1940–2020): Scholar, Mentor and Institution Builder

On 27 March 2020, CODESRIA announced the sad news of the passing of Professor Thandika Mkandawire after a brief hospitalization in Stockholm on 24 March 2020. Thandika, as he was fondly referred to by friends and colleagues, young and old, was buried on 15 April 2020 in Stockholm at a ceremony attended only by family. A simultaneous ceremony composed of family and close relatives was also held in Malawi, his first country of citizenship. The closed and simultaneous ceremonies separated by thousands of kilometers was dictated by the current Covid-19 pandemic which has forced restriction on movement of persons and large gatherings the world over.

Since then, an outpouring of tributes and messages of condolences have been written and shared through CODESRIA and in other organisations that Thandika belonged to, including IDEAS. This Bulletin is a special issue in memory of Thandika and contains tributes and messages that we received. The Council also started an online book of condolences at <https://www.codesria.org/thandikamkandawire/> where we have collected into one space most of Thandika's work. Work on digitizing Thandika's work through the CODESRIA Documentation and Communication Centre (CODICE) has commenced while videos of his speeches have already been uploaded on this site. The Council

Godwin R. Murunga

Executive Secretary,
CODESRIA,
Dakar, Senegal

plans a series of activities in memory of Thandika and will continue to update the community periodically on the plans. It is planned that once done, CODESRIA will be the place to visit to access in one single instance most, if not all, of Thandika's intellectual work.

Thandika Mkandawire was CODESRIA's third Executive Secretary, having served the Council in various capacities since 1983 when he came to Dakar for a six-month stint to lead a CODESRIA programme on the future of southern Africa. The six months ended up as 13 years of extraordinary service to a pan-African community of scholarship. He joined the service of the Council when Samir Amin was Executive Secretary and went on to serve under Abdallah Bujra, the second Executive Secretary. He took over the leadership of CODESRIA in 1985, initially in an Acting capacity and then in 1986 having been appointed by the Executive Committee chaired by the late Prof. Claude Ake and served until 1996 when his mandate came to an end during the Presidency of Prof. Akilagpa Sawyerr.¹ From CODESRIA, Thandika went on to give exemplary leadership to

UNRISD in Geneva where, by all counts, he continued to mobilise research on many of the important issues on which he had pioneered or led while in Dakar. His work at UNRISD has been ably captured in Yusuf Bangura, Jomo Kwame Sundaram and Kate Meagher's tributes included in this special issue of *CODESRIA Bulletin*.

In many respects, Thandika's term of service at CODESRIA was inextricably linked with the institutionalization of the Council as a key player on the African higher education scene and within the terrain of development thought and practice.² Under him, CODESRIA grew into a significant actor on the pan-African and global knowledge production sphere, seeking, as he stated in the Preface to the book *Academic Freedom in Africa*, to "pay greater attention to the nature of the research environment on the continent."³ Thandika's intellectual stewardship of the Council during this period of growth in turn defined his emergence as a doyen of African scholarship, an icon whose intellectual influence was sought after and cherished and an intellectual whose name was invoked widely through published citations, at workshops, symposiums, and in conferences as well as within policy circles. As Karuti Kanyinga illustrates in his tribute, Thandika was also a compelling teacher actively cited in graduate classes across the

continent and beyond. The late Meles Zenawi who led Ethiopia as Prime Minister from 1995 to 2012, acknowledged that Thandika's thoughts on the developmental state influenced his thinking.

So critical to Thandika was CODESRIA that it is not an exaggeration to say that Prof. Ntombizakhe Mpofo Mlilo, while justifiably seeking to reveal the familial side of Thandika, did not include a member in her tribute published in this Bulletin. That member was CODESRIA. The Council had graduated into an integral part of his being and Thandika was as concerned about CODESRIA as he was with anyone dear to him. Thandika celebrated the Council, accepted any invitation to a CODESRIA event, took up any tasks the Council requested of him, worried about it and wished the very best for the Council until his passing on. His last major assignment was as the Chair of the committee mandated by the Executive Committee in 2016 to shortlist applications for the position of Executive Secretary. Before that, he had been a member, together with Akilagpa Sawyerr and Pierre Sane, of the CODESRIA Internal Review Committee undertaking an Internal Evaluation of Membership and Governance.⁴ Once one took the responsibility of managing the Council, Thandika took it upon himself to worry about your success and to alert you to the challenges you needed to know of and manage. I was a direct beneficiary of this support especially when we met in Stockholm and had uninterrupted hours of discussion. We both served in the Research Training and Capacity Development Committee of the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and were guaranteed periodic meetings in Stockholm. These often turned

unforgettable mentoring sessions. At the 15th CODESRIA General Assembly, Thandika walked over to a team of CODESRIA staff and assured me that I should only worry about the success of the first day; the rest will take care of itself.

Thandika's principal contribution will be that he defined what CODESRIA meant to at least four generations of African academics, the first three about whom he wrote⁵ and the last one mainly through what they read from and about him and how, as Sharra shows in this issue of the Bulletin, he mentored most of them through interactions at conferences.⁶ For many in the fourth generation, a chance meeting with Thandika at a CODESRIA meeting, often the General Assembly, was an unforgettable moment and an opportunity to draw from the fountain of wisdom that he was.⁷ His pithy note on "Three Generations of African Academics" in *CODESRIA Bulletin*, No. 3, 1995 elaborates the framework of this influence. That note was as autobiographical as it was a commentary on generations of African academics and it carried as much of Thandika's story of engaging with numerous African knowledge producing institutions as well as his efforts to transform or change the institutions to serve the African continent better.

Born a Malawian in Zimbabwe and having lived in Zambia and worked, among other places, in Zimbabwe in the context of the transition from colonial rule to independence (see the tributes of Mpofo Mlilo and Mandaza), Thandika understood the tribulations of being an intellectual in Africa. After all, he matured into a formidable journalist under Kamuzi Banda's dictatorship and was forced into exile precisely because he refused to

kow-tow to the Ngwazi's totalitarian power. In this, he was among a rare few among whom one can cite Jack Mapanje and David Rubadiri.⁸ If CODESRIA then became a space for intellectual exiles and the protection of academic freedom became a key preoccupation of the institution, it is because of these earlier experiences of the founders who defined and redefined the Council's mission to focus on creating an autonomous space for intellectual thought unencumbered, initially, by the dictates of the state and later, by external actors who assumed Africans had no capacity for autonomous intellectual leadership and sought to determine the agenda of African institutions.

In his discussion of the three generations, Thandika reveals the changing nature of the institutional bases of knowledge production in Africa, adroitly illustrating the trials, travails and tribulations of these generations, illuminating the coping mechanisms that individual academics and their institutions implemented as they encountered a harsh state in Africa and an equally adversarial global knowledge production industry. Thandika was aware that the global knowledge networks reserved only marginal space and attention to the continent and insisted on the need to "break local barriers and negotiate international presence."⁹

Thandika demonstrated a mastery of the terrain of African social sciences in a way that perhaps only a few could. He credited this mastery to CODESRIA when he pointed out in an interview with our colleague, Kate Meagher, that "My stay there improved my skills as a social scientist because I had to deal with some of the leading scholars in social science in Africa who were part of the CODESRIA

community.”¹⁰ The broad corpus of his intellectual contribution, the erudition he brought to bear on his academic outputs, the panoramic view that he cast on African realities, and his mentorship of generations of African academics is evident in the avalanche of tributes so far received following his death.¹¹

Thandika was at his best when reflecting on his area of specialization – development economics. His unmatched critical engagement on structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), his work on the developmental state, and his lucid framing of the issues of social policy all point to an icon who had mastered the canon and was at ease in interdisciplinary historiography. Thandika’s writings on development may have focused on Africa, but they drew inspiration from a broad observation and reading of the dilemmas of development globally. The work on the developmental state and social policy, for instance, drew lessons from Asian and European experiences; experiences he distilled and put into conversation with processes in Africa. It is for this reason that Thandika always underscored the importance of local agency; a point that he emphasized repeatedly in his Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola Lecture cited above or in his spot-on review of Jeffrey Sachs’s book on poverty titled *“The Intellectual Itinerary of Jeffrey Sachs”*. He noted that “You would expect that from his analysis, Sachs would place Africans at the centre of the development policies. No! After patronizing encomiums directed especially at the grassroots, he allots the driving seat to international experts.”¹²

Thandika’s critique of SAPs delivered some of the heaviest blows to a neo-liberal ‘prophecy’ that lacked intellectual, policy and moral cre-

dentials. His contribution resonated widely and is aptly summed up in his co-authored study with Charles C. Soludo, *Our Continent, Our Future*.¹³ He taught that no country has ever developed or risen out of poverty based on external intervention alone. He reminded us that the state is indispensable to development generally and Africa’s development in particular and dismissed the tendency within Bretton Woods Institutions to treating the role of the state simply as that of a “night watchman”. His contribution resonated widely. Thandika understood the importance of “social policy in a development context” and managed to convince us that the locus of effective social policy is good politics.¹⁴ For him, good policy had to be thought through historically and comparatively, but at the end, it needed to focus on a range of welfare needs, the generation of social capital and the reinforcement of legitimate authority. The notion of “transformative social policy” was meant to capture this. This is why his piece on “Good Governance: The Itinerary of an Idea”, rescued the notion of governance from its abuse by the Bretton Woods Institutions and refocused it on state-society relations. For Thandika,

“the main challenge of development was the establishment of state-society relations that are (a) developmental, in the sense that they allow the management of the economy in a manner that maximises economic growth, induces structural change, and uses all available resources in a responsible and sustainable manner in highly competitive global conditions; (b) democratic and respectful of citizens’ rights; and (c) socially inclusive, providing all citizens with a decent living and full participation in national affairs.”¹⁵

Thandika concluded appropriately that “Good governance should

therefore be judged by how well it sustains this triad”. He entered the verdict that the neo-liberal appropriation of “good governance” failed to sustain the triad. Therefore, his notion of “the making of choiceless democracies” out of the neo-liberal desire for economic deregulation and political liberalization was ground-breaking. Thandika, alongside Adebayo Olukoshi and Bjorn Beckman, understood that the market reform processes in Africa engendered authoritarianism and, as Beckman aptly summarized, “it is resistance to SAP, not SAP itself that breeds democratic forces. SAP can be credited with having contributed to this development not because of its liberalism but because of its authoritarianism.”¹⁶

Thandika was driven by a genuine pan-African vision, inspired perhaps by years of travel across the continent and the rest of the pan-African world. This allowed him to see the many sides of the continent’s socio-economic realities. As Mamdani’s tribute in this Bulletin mentions, he resisted the desire within the Marxist circles to prioritize class over other entry-points in the understanding of Africa. Thandika appreciated that the experiences of many Africans were also shaped by nationalism. Many times, Thandika felt constrained to caution that CODESRIA was not constituted by a bunch of inflexible radical Marxists and repeatedly pointed out the intense internal debates within the community. Occasionally, he did this even at the risk of revealing otherwise confidential administrative processes.

The need for caution stemmed from the fact that Thandika led a community that held widely divergent, even if, radical views. Often Thandika was unsure if it was

a radicalism driven by fidelity to materialist analytic frameworks or whether it was radicalism informed by nationalist convictions. Thandika understood that European Marxists did not know how to handle nationalism and tended to dismiss it cavalierly in favour of class analysis. He was aware that while class analysis captured the realities of Africans, ideologically, nationalism did shape aspects of African identities and visions in ways that a pure class analysis was unable to comprehend. Thus, some of his most inspirational essays focused on nationalism, pan-Africanism and the state. The chapter on “African intellectuals and nationalism” is majestic in its review of the “turbulent link between African nationalism, African intellectuals and the academic community”¹⁷ while the paper on “The terrible toll of post-colonial ‘rebel movements’ in Africa” contextualises the post-colonial rebel movements within an urban-rural framework and helps explain violence against the peasantry with refreshing analytical clarity.¹⁸ Issa Shivji’s reflections in this Bulletin ably captures the distinct contribution Thandika’s essay makes to the study of the agrarian question and is correct in concluding that this “remains one of his finest, with a sharp eye for the unusual”. It also reveals how much of interdisciplinary thinking Thandika had adopted.

Interdisciplinarity based on nuanced understanding of African realities seemed to come almost naturally to Thandika. He was a grounded scholar in every sense of the word who used nuanced analyses for institution building. Regarding the primacy of interdisciplinarity, Thandika acknowledged that he “learnt the importance of interdisciplinarity in studying problems of development. But I also learned

it was intellectually demanding. It was not enough to bring together a little economics, a little politics and a little history to concoct interdisciplinary scholarship. You have to build interdisciplinary approaches and interdisciplinary institutions.”¹⁹ This was true in how he dealt with and inflected the assumption that development could only happen in the context of the Third World under authoritarian regimes, for instance. Rather than argue for a developmental state, Thandika argued for a democratic, developmental state.²⁰ He came well prepared to this given his debate on democracy and development with Peter Anyang Nyong’o in the pages of *CODESRIA Bulletin*. Thandika challenged Anyang Nyong’o’s linkage of democracy to development in an instrumentalist way and argued “that democracy should be an end in itself.”²¹

At the time when this debate took place, Africa was going through rapid democratic changes and it was clear that there was a paucity of good analysis of the transformations occurring in Africa. There was a similar dearth with respect to gender analysis. CODESRIA responded by initiating the CODESRIA Democratic Governance Institute, an annual residency of young African academics who gathered to discuss issues relevant to democratization processes in Africa. Started in 1992, the Institute has hosted hundreds of laureates and sharpened the analytical skills and policy ideas of some of Africa’s leading academics and policy practitioners. With respect to gender, following enormous pressure from many African feminist scholars, CODESRIA convened a workshop in 1991 on “Engendering African Social Science.” At the opening session of the workshop,

Thandika questioned whether there was “a corpus of methodologies, approaches or empirical studies based on gender analysis awaiting to be appropriated by a newly converted social science community.” But in closing the workshop, he acknowledged that his initial doubts were a clear illustration of the “triumph of ignorance over intellectual humility and open-mindedness” and accepted that indeed such a corpus existed.²² CODESRIA began to invest in gender analysis and even launched the Gender Institute in 1995 which has convened African scholars to discuss gender issues since then.

Thandika seems to have learned a critical lesson that enabled him to place and connect his different projects to a broader goal that included the production of quality and relevant knowledge that also embedded an intentional commitment to change Africa. In his Inaugural Lecture for Chair, African Development at the London School of Economics titled “‘Running While Others Walk’: Knowledge and the Challenge of Africa’s Development,”²³ Thandika argues that knowledge is integral to the realization of development and that the agency of Africans and African knowledge producers is key to realizing this. All his intellectual outputs, therefore, demonstrated a sharp consciousness, commitment and fidelity to basic canons of intellectual labour, including that craft of “torturing data” to get the facts that Karuti Kanyinga alludes to. Thandika aspired to see change in the condition of Africans based on an understanding of African realities. He aimed to project the voices of a plurality of Africans and he quickly became the voice of the African social science community in numerous international forums.

Many have marvelled at Thandika's humour, his ability to witfully cannibalise a concept in order to deliver its hidden, often corrosive, implication for Africa. Nowhere was this more evident than in how he took 'innocent' words like "networking" or concepts like neo-patrimonialism and turned them on their heads.²⁴ He did this in his soft-spoken manner, often punctuated by sarcastic laughs, knowing full well the power of his cryptic comments. Thus, when the tendency grew in the funding world to demand that Africanists [those working on Africa outside the continent] must partner and 'network' with their counter-parts on the continent, Thandika quickly took note that the demand required African academics in the global South to do the 'working' while Africanists in the North did the 'netting.' Of course, Thandika knew that there was a historic division of labour that trapped Africans into generating data for theory-building in the North and a mere demand for networking would not dismantle that hegemonic structure. He understood this to be a framework enabled by years of unfair practices in the research and publishing industry including the peer review system and editorial gatekeeping in academic journals and major publishing firms. As early as 1995, Thandika had observed that the "routine rejection" by international journals of African submissions perpetuated the very problem it sought to address leading to the "bizarre situation" where "Africanists' publish materials with the latest bibliographical references but dated material while African scholars include the latest information on their countries but carry dated bibliographies."²⁵ In the end, the outcome was the dilemma of 'working' and 'netting'. Little did Thandika know

that at the apex of his intellectual carrier he would fall prey to this watchful gatekeeping. In 2010–2011 the UK-based Africanist journal, *African Affairs*, having cajoled Thandika both by email and through phone calls to submit his Inaugural Professorial Lecture titled "Running while others walk" for consideration, dismissed it with, among other ridiculous arguments, that the "author does not understand World Bank literature".

As a community, we understand better why Thandika worked so hard to secure CODESRIA as an autonomous intellectual space for Africans and to protect it from the exclusivity tendencies of mainstream Africanist engagement with Africa. At the heart of this autonomy has been a dilemma of funding given the old adage that s/he who pays the piper calls the tune. In many ways, Thandika was responsible for securing the autonomy of the Council when he facilitated the initial engagement with SIDA that has seen CODESRIA grow and institutionalise itself. Not only was he able to secure the funding, but he was also able to negotiate a framework of support in which the Council fully accounted for Swedish taxpayer funds while securing the autonomy to define its research agenda, training priorities and publications. The longevity of the CODESRIA project owes much to the foresight, vision, strategy, mentorship, care, wit, and commitment of many, but among them, Thandika Mkandawire's name occupies a towering space. The Council and its community will sure miss him.

Notes

1. His farewell note titled "A Kind of Farewell" is published in *CODESRIA Bulletin*, no 2, 1996, pp. 1-4.

2. See his "The Spread of Economic Doctrines and Policymaking in Postcolonial Africa", *African Studies Review*, Vol. 57, Number 1, April 2014, pp. 171–98.
3. See Preface to Mamadou Diouf and Mahmood Mamdani, *Academic Freedom in Africa*, Dakar, CODESRIA, 1994.
4. See their Report titled Internal Evaluation: Membership and Governance, Dakar, CODESRIA, 2015.
5. See his "Three Generations of African Academics: A Note", *CODESRIA Bulletin*, No. 3, 1995, pp. 9–12.
6. On the Fourth, see Mshai S. Mwangola, "Nurturing the Fourth Generation: Defining the Historical Mission for our Generation", *Africa Development*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2008, pp. 7-24.
7. See the essays in the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2018 specifically the interview with Nimi Hoffmann in that issue titled "Diagnosing neopatrimonialism: An interview with Thandika Mkandawire".
8. Jack Mapanje's two essays in Kofi Anyidoho, ed., *The Word Behind Bars and the Paradox of Exile*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997, give a good illustration of what this meant while Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) underscores the "essential sadness" and "crippling sorrow of estrangement" that exile means.
9. See his 1996 Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola Distinguished Lecture "The Social Sciences in Africa: Breaking Local Barriers and Negotiating International Presence", *African Studies Review*, vol. 40, No. 2, 1997, pp. 15–36.
10. See Kate Meagher, "Reflections of an Engaged Economist: An Interview with Thandika Mkandawire", *Development and*

- Change*, Vol. 50 no. 2, 2019, pp. 511–541.
11. <https://www.codesria.org/thandikamkandawire/>
 12. See his “The Intellectual Itinerary of Jeffrey Sachs”, *Africa Review of Books*, March 2006, p. 5.
 13. Thandika Mkandawire and Charles Soludo, *Our Continent, Our Future: African Perspectives on Structural Adjustment*, Dakar and Ottawa, CODESRIA and IDRC, 1998.
 14. See his “Social Policy in a Development Context,” Social Policy and Development Programme Paper No. 7, Geneva, UNRISD, 2001.
 15. See “Good Governance: The Itinerary of an Idea,” in *Development in Practice*, Vol. 17, Nos 4-5, 2007.
 16. Cited in Thandika Mkandawire and Adebayo Olukoshi, “Issues and Perspectives in the Politics of Structural Adjustment in Africa”, in Mkandawire and Olukoshi, eds. *Between Liberalisation and Oppression: The Politics of Structural Adjustment in Africa*, Dakar: CODESRIA, 1995, p.4 & 11.
 17. “African intellectuals and Nationalism” Thandika Mkandawire, ed. *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*, (Dakar and London: CODESRIA in Association with Zed Books, 2005), p.46.
 18. See “The terrible toll of post-colonial ‘rebel movements’ in Africa: towards an explanation of the violence against the peasantry”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2002, pp. 181-215.
 19. See Meagher, “Reflections of an Engaged Economist.”
 20. See his “Thinking about developmental states in Africa,” in *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol. 25, Issue 3, 2001, pp. 289–314.
 21. See the series of debates in *CODESRIA Bulletin* eventually summarized in No. 2, 1991.
 22. See details in Ayesha M. Imam, “Engendering African Social Sciences: An Introductory Essay,” Ayesha Imam, et al., eds. *Engendering African Social Sciences*, Dakar: CODESRIA Book Series, 1997, p. 1.
 23. See the revised version “‘Running While Others Walk’: Knowledge and the Challenge of Africa’s Development,” in *Africa Development*, Vol. 36, no. 2, 2011, pp. 1-36.
 24. See his analysis of the neopatrimonialism in “Neopatrimonialism and the Political Economy of Economic Performance in Africa: Critical Reflections”, *World Politics*, Vol. 67, no. 3, 2015, pp. 1-50.
 25. See footnote no. 7 in his “Three Generations of African Academics: A Note” *CODESRIA Bulletin*, No 3 1995, p. 11.



Our Continent, Our Future is the very first publication to present the African perspective on the Bretton Woods approach to structural adjustment, and it does so with the input and support of top economists and scholars from every corner of Africa. This important book should be read by students, professors, academics, and researchers in development, economics, and African studies; professionals in donor organizations around the world; policymakers in both the governmental and nongovernmental sectors; and all citizens concerned with the future of Africa and issues of sustainable and equitable development.

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