

The Familial Side of Prof Thandika Mkandawire*

A number of obituaries have been written about Professor Thandika Mkandawire focusing on his work life. Family in Malawi thought it important to have an obituary from Zimbabwe focusing on his mother's side of the family.

His mother was Dedani Esther Siziba from Gwanda District in Matabeleland South, Zimbabwe. She was the first-born in a family of six children, my mother was second, then three brothers, and a younger sister who is still alive. Esther was her Christian name and is the name that was on her formal documents. Her first son, Jordan Nkiwane, was fathered by a young man she was not allowed to marry as her parents said he was a close relative. She later met her future husband, Mr Mkandawire. Old Mkandawire later told us that he was passing through Zimbabwe on his way to South Africa to look for opportunities at the mines. He saw Esther singing at a concert and could not proceed!! Some will know that Thandika loved music

Ntombizakhe Mpofu Mlilo

Gwanda State University,
Zimbabwe

and that he raised some of his living expenses through singing while studying in the USA. Well, he inherited the love of music from his father and the gift of singing from his mother!

They married and had three sons; Godwin (GG), Jeremiah (Thandika) and Joshua. They later moved to Zambia leaving Jordan behind. Because Esther had no daughter, my parents gave her one of my sisters, Irene, and she went to Zambia with the Mkandawires. Thandika, therefore, grew up in a family of three boys and one girl.

Initially there was regular contact with family back in Zimbabwe and I remember my mum, and my twin sister and I at a young age, being in Ndola. I am told we

travelled by train from Bulawayo all the way to Ndola. When the whole Mkandawire family moved to Malawi, communication with our aunt was through letters and she was diligent at writing and keeping in touch. Many have written about Thandika's political life and how he had to be separated from his family in Malawi. It is his mother's persistent letter writing to Zimbabwe that later connected her to her son. Thandika came to work in Zimbabwe after the Zimbabwean independence. His job brought him back to his birth place as if to connect him to his immediate family in Malawi. I was in my last year of my first-degree studies at the University of Zimbabwe when I met Thandika and I told him that his mother and I write each other regularly. Soon after my graduation I told my aunt that I was now working and instead of just writing I can also visit. She coordinated my trip to Malawi in April 1984 very well. I was met by Thandika's cousin at

Lilongwe airport, his Dad met me in Mzimba and we went together to Kanyama village, a village name I was too familiar with as I would write it on the envelopes I addressed to my aunt.

I was pleasantly surprised that the Tumbuka language spoken in Malawi had some similarities with my Ndebele language. Back in Zimbabwe, I gave Thandika my report on his family's trying situation and that his parents were looking after his late brother's six children. After my visit, Thandika's father came to Harare to visit his son. As things improved politically in Malawi, Thandika was able to go home and he moved the family to Lilongwe. He literally overhauled the lives of those six people – a modern-day miracle!! Thandika used to say there are so many unwritten books in Africa, this is one of them. I visited my aunt several times when I was on business trips to Lilongwe. I would marvel at the comfort the family enjoyed but still I would complain about this and that just to keep Thandika on his toes and he would, much to his mum's amusement, say out his usual cry: "Ndebele women. Difficult to please!"

Politics deprived Thandika of family so much but when the situation changed he grabbed the opportunities he got with both hands. He would call, he would visit, he would support both emotionally and financially. For example, when things were reported as hard in Zimbabwe he would call just to check how we were managing and throw in some humour. During one of his calls he asked me if there was a chance of things getting better. I said "oh things will definitely improve". He asked "what are the indicators to support that statement?" Then he went on about how Africans let our leaders off the hook. I retorted that

I was having a simple telephone conversation with a brother and didn't need to punctuate it with proper figures and statistics and, after all, I was not under oath! He drew up our family tree which is still on the net. He would check who is where and would make a point of looking us up when he could. For example he would call to say he had dinner with a niece in Lusaka, in Cape Town; he would ask what Ndebele name is suitable for a new grandchild just born in Malawi; he would want to know how to handle a rift that seemed to be growing between his daughters. He would occasionally send money to my aunt, his mother's youngest sister.

I worked in Addis Ababa from 1998 to 2001. Thandika came to Addis for a writing workshop for one of his books. I was coordinating a course for animal geneticist from sub-Saharan African countries. Our events were at the same venue. On one of the days we had lunch together and he asked, "Do you think when our mothers were going to fetch water at the river as young girls they ever mused about having children and their children running international workshops in Addis Ababa?" We laughed. We wondered if they even knew of Ethiopia, whether they ever thought of any of their children going to high school or university. We swallowed tears of joy and then asked someone to take a picture of us together. Our mothers loved each other and shared a lot, including their children. This love is the one that saw Thandika looking after his nieces and nephews, who in our tradition, cannot be referred to as nieces and nephews but as his children. Similarly, to him we were sisters and not cousins!

Thandika was a true and genuine person and genuine people do succeed as they speak and write about what is from within them

as opposed to what will sell – and genuine things end up selling anyway. He worked hard when in Harare and one time I admonished him for staying too long at work and even working during weekends. His answer was, "Others move up because their uncles put in a good word for them. Unfortunately for you and I, our uncles are Gwanda villagers so we need to do it for ourselves" – and a loud laugh.

He would laugh easily and also cry easily. He couldn't finish his speech at Irene's funeral. When his mother died, he was the only one of her children alive – Jordan, GG, Joshua and Irene had all died. His mother died in Malawi and was buried at the village. According to tradition, it was important that elders in Zimbabwe, as they could not attend the funeral, meet him and pay their condolences. He came to Zimbabwe and we went from village to village and he met all the relevant people who knew him as Jeremiah and it was fun watching him acknowledge being addressed by that name. He also squeezed out as much Ndebele sentences as he could – I had years back, at his request, bought a Ndebele language book and a dictionary for him. The following morning he tearfully told me that he had such a peaceful sleep and when I saw him off at the Bulawayo airport later that week we had such an emotional farewell.

As years went by, we talked less and less frequently. But like one good friend of mine said, "we don't want to burden good relationships with too frequent communication but important is to give that relationship a special corner in our big hearts, and a true friend will know that that special corner exists". When he became critically ill and I realised that I was not going to talk to him, I withdrew to that theory, to that corner of my heart where I had placed him,



and said all my goodbyes and I know he understood.

You will sleep peacefully Thandika, Jeremiah ka Dedani, because you worked hard on this earth and deserve the rest, and after all you will be joining all those people you

loved and who loved you so dearly and who appreciate so much all the hard work you remained behind doing for the family. What is left for us is to accept your departure and carry on with our lives treasuring the memories we will always have.

* This Tribute first appeared in the Chronicle on 29th April 2020 <https://www.chronicle.co.zw/the-familial-side-of-prof-thandika-mkandawire/>