

Thandika Mkandawire: In Memory of An Intellectual Giant

Thandika Mkandawire, the towering Pan-African Malawian-Swedish public intellectual died on March 27, 2020. The world of social thought, as Samir Amin, another departed luminary, called it, is so much poorer that he has left us, but so much richer that he lived for eight decades enlightening the world with his prodigious mind. Through his copious writings, engagements in numerous forums, and teaching in various universities he provoked and animated minds and imaginations for generations across Africa, the diaspora, and world at large. His extraordinary intellectual insights and incisive and surgical critiques of conventional, sometimes celebrated, and often cynical analyses of development and the African condition, to use a beloved phrase of the late Ali Mazrui, the iconic man of letters, were truly inspiring.

Thandika, as we all fondly called him, has joined our illustrious intellectual ancestors, whose eternal wisdom we must cherish and embrace in the continuing struggle for the epistemic, existential, and economic emancipation of our beloved continent.

When I think of Thandika, many images of the luminous beauty and brilliance of his mind come to my mind. His passion for rigor and impatience with lazy thinking. His bountiful joy of living. His love of music and the arts. His boundless faith in Africa and equal opportu-

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nity dismissal for Afropessimism and Afro-euphoria. His devotion to Pan-Africanism and the diaspora. His deep sense of globalism. His lifelong and unromantic commitment to progressive causes. His generosity in mentoring younger African scholars. His exemplary leadership of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). And his remarkable modeling of the life of a principled public intellectual.

He is simply one of the most brilliant people I have ever known in my life. As my wife observed on several occasions, Thandika was the only person she witnessed who I was so enthralled by that I could sit and listen to for hours! To be in his company was to marvel at the power of the human mind for extraordinary insights and the joys of living for he was a bundle of infectious joviality, humor and wit. The breadth and depth of his intellectual passions and unwavering faith in Africa's historic and humanistic agency and possibilities was dazzling.

I had known Thandika years before I met him in person. I had heard

of the fiery Malawian intellectual who as a young journalist had been in the forefront of the nationalist struggle. Like many of us born before independence, his personal biography encompassed the migrant labor political economy of Southern Africa: he was born in Zimbabwe and grew up in Zambia and Malawi. And like many smart and ambitious young people of his generation in the early 1960s, he trekked to the United States for higher education, as there was no university in Malawi at the time. He did not return to Malawi until 1994, after spending 32 years in exile, following the installation of a new democratic government.

He was a student in the United States in the 1960s at the height of the civil rights movement, and as an activist, he immediately saw the intricate connections between the nationalist and civil rights movements in Africa and the Diaspora. This nurtured his profound respect and appreciation of African American society, culture, and contributions, which was a bedrock of his Pan-Africanism in the tradition of Kwame Nkrumah and others. Also, like many activists of his generation the trajectory of his life was upended by political crisis in Malawi, known as the 'Cabinet Crisis' that erupted a few months after independence in 1964.

The octogenarian, conservative and authoritarian Malawi leader, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, fell out with his radical younger ministers

who preferred democratic politics and more progressive development policies. They were forced to escape into exile. Thandika was suspected of sympathizing with the 'rebels' as Banda's regime vilified them, and his passport was revoked. Thus, began his long personal sojourn into exile and the diaspora, and professional trajectory from journalism into academia. His exile began while he was in Ecuador on a project and unable to return to the USA, he got asylum in Sweden.

His experiences in Latin America and Sweden globalized his intellectual horizons and reinforced his proclivities towards comparative political economy, a distinctive hallmark of his scholarship. They also reshaped his interests in economics, pulling him away from its dominant neo-classical paradigms and preoccupations, and anchoring it in the great questions of development and developmental states, areas in which he made his signature intellectual and policy contributions.

Thandika also immersed himself in the great debates of the 1960s and 1970s centered on Marxism, dependency and underdevelopment, African socialism, and the struggles for new international orders from economics to information.

The intellectual ferment of the period prepared him well to participate in African debates about the state, democracy and development when he joined the newly established Institute for Development Studies at the University of Zimbabwe in the early 1980s in the immediate euphoric aftermath of Zimbabwe's liberation victory. In 1985, he became the head of CODESRIA as Executive Secretary, initially in acting capacity and substantively in 1986.

He joined CODESRIA in the midst of the draconian anti-developmentalist assaults of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed on hapless and often complicit authoritarian African states by the international financial institutions working at the behest of the market fundamentalist ideology of neo-liberalism propagated by conservative governments in Washington, London, Berlin, Ottawa, and Tokyo.

Through his own comparative scholarship on regional economic histories, development paths, and the patrimonial state in Africa and other world regions, especially Asia as well as national and multinational projects commissioned by CODESRIA, he led the progressive African intellectual community in mounting vigorous critiques of SAPs. Moreover, his monumental work offered alternatives rooted in the historical realities of African economies and societies, the aspirations of African peoples, and the capacities of reconstructed African democratic developmental states.

In the late 1980s, when the gendarmes of neo-liberalism and apologists of Africa's bankrupt one-party states were railing against democracy, or watching struggles for the 'second independence' with indifference or suspicion, Thandika unapologetically called for democracy as a fundamental political right and economic necessity for Africa. He was particularly concerned about the devastation wrought on African capacities to produce knowledge through the willful dismantling of African universities and research capacities.

At a conference of Vice Chancellors in Harare in 1986, the World Bank infamously declared that Africa did not need universities. Mendacious

studies were produced to show that rates of return were higher for primary education than for tertiary education. Rocked by protests against tyranny and the austerities of SAPs, which dissolved the post-independence social contract of state-led developmentalism, African governments were only too willing to wreck African universities and devalue academic labor.

Under Thandika, CODESRIA valiantly sought to protect, promote, and project an autonomous space for African intellectual development, for vibrant knowledge production. That is how I finally met Thandika in person. In 1989, CODESRIA established the "Reflections on Development Fellowship." I was one of about a dozen African scholars that won the scholarship. My project was on "African Economic History in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." This resulted in the publication of *A Modern Economic History of Africa. Volume 1: The Nineteenth Century* in 1993, which went on to win the prestigious Noma Award for publishing in Africa. Some regard this as my most important book.¹

Thus, I like many other African scholars who experienced the devastation of African universities during the continent's 'lost decades' of the 1980s and 1990s are deeply indebted to Thandika and CODESRIA for ensuring our intellectual support, networking, sanity, and productivity. This is at the heart of the outpouring of tributes by African scholars for Thandika since his passing. He was not only one of the most important African intellectuals of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, he was also an architect of an African intellectual community during one of the bleakest periods in the

history of the African knowledge enterprise. His intellectual and institutional legacies are mutually reinforcing and transcendental.

In August 1990, the recipients of the “Reflections on Development Fellowship” met for nearly two weeks at the Rockefeller Conference and Study Center, in Bellagio, Italy. I had not experienced an intellectual indaba like that before. Thandika dazzled the fellows, who included several prominent African scholars, with his incisive comments and erudition, legendary humor, and striking joyousness. Meeting him at Bellagio left a lasting impression on me. His brilliance was accompanied by his uncanny ability to put very complex thoughts in such a pithy way, rendering an idea so obvious that one wondered why one had not thought about it that way before.

Thandika was one of those rare people who effectively combined institutional leadership and intellectual productivity. This was the praxis of his reflexive life, in which administrative challenges inspired academic work. While at CODESRIA, he pioneered and produced important studies on structural adjustment, development, and African universities and intellectuals.² In 1987, he edited the groundbreaking collection, *The State and Agriculture in Africa*; in 1995, he co-edited the comprehensive collection on structural adjustment, *Between Liberalisation and Oppression*; in 1999 he co-authored, *Our Continent Our Future*.

After he joined UNRISD, he continued working on his old intellectual preoccupations as he embraced new ones, as reflected in his journal articles and book monographs. The latter include the co-authored, *African Voices on*

Structural Adjustment (2002), and the edited, *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development* (2005).

Soon after joining UNRISD, which he led from 1998 to 2009, he launched a program on social policy that increasingly reflected his growing research interests. The articles include, “Thinking about Developmental States in Africa” (2001); “Disempowering New Democracies and the Persistence of Poverty” (2004); “Maladjusted African Economies and Globalization” (2005); “Transformative Social Policy and Innovation in Developing Countries” (2007); “Good Governance’: The Itinerary of an Idea” (2007); “From the national question to the social question” (2009), “Institutional monocropping and monotasking in Africa” (2010); “On Tax Efforts and Colonial Heritage in Africa” (2010); “Aid, Accountability, and Democracy in Africa” (2010); and “How the New Poverty Agenda Neglected Social and Employment Policies in Africa” (2010).

In 2009, he was appointed at the London School of Economics as the inaugural Chair in African Development. This gave him space to expand his intellectual wings and produce some of his most iconic and encyclopedic work as evident in the titles of some of his papers. They include “Running While Others Walk: Knowledge and the Challenge of Africa’s Development” (2011); “Welfare Regimes and Economic Development: Bridging the Conceptual Gap” (2011); “Aid: From Adjustment Back to Development” (2013); “Social Policy and the Challenges of the Post-Adjustment Era” (2013); “Findings and Implications: The Role of Development Cooperation”

(2013); “Neopatrimonialism and the Political Economy of Economic Performance in Africa: Critical Reflections” (2015); and “Colonial legacies and social welfare regimes in Africa: An empirical exercise” (2016). He also published monographs including the co-authored, *Learning from the South Korean Developmental Success* (2014), and a collection of lectures he gave at the University of Ghana, *Africa Beyond Recovery* (2015).³

Following my encounter with Thandika at Bellagio, our personal and professional paths crossed many times over the next thirty years. The encounters are too numerous to recount. Those that stand out include CODESRIA’s conference on Academic Freedom, held in November 1990 at which the “The Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility” was issued; and numerous CODESRIA conferences, workshops, and general assemblies including the one in 1995 where I served as a rapporteur. These forums were truly invigorating for a young scholar meeting the doyens of the African intelligentsia. Like many of those in my generation, I matured intellectually under the tutelage of CODESRIA and Thandika.

In return, when I relocated to the United States in 1995 from Canada, I invited Thandika or played a role in his invitation to conferences in the US. This included the 25th Anniversary Celebration of the Center for African Studies at the University of Illinois in 1995 where I served as director of the center, and the 1996 US African Studies Association where he gave “The Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola Distinguished Lecture.” The lecture, later published in the *African Studies Review*

entitled, “The Social Sciences in Africa: Breaking Local Barriers and Negotiating International Presence,” was a veritable tour de force.⁴ It brilliantly traced the development of social science knowledge production on Africa and offered a searing critique of Africanist exclusionary intellectual practices.

Later, when Thandika was head of UNRISD, he invited me to join the nine-member Gender Advisory Group to work on a report on the implementation of the United Nations Fourth World Women’s Conference held in Beijing in 1995. Out of this conference came the report, *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World* published in 2005 to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the Beijing conference.⁵ In return, I also invited Thandika to contribute to my own edited collections, including *The Encyclopaedia of Twentieth Century African History* to which he contributed a fine essay on African intellectuals.⁶

Our personal encounters were even more frequent and deeply gratifying. In the 1990s, I used to go to Dakar frequently, sometimes several times a year. On many occasions, Thandika hosted me or took me out to sample the incredible culinary delights and vibrant music scene of Dakar nightlife. I recall one night going to a club where Youssou N’Dour was playing. It was an indescribable treat. In his customary insightful and pithy way, he made me understand the social vibrancy of Dakar. In contrast to the apartheid cities of southern Africa from which we were alienated in the townships, Dakar is an old city whose residential patterns and social geography are deeply embedded in the rhythms of local culture.

Another memorable encounter was Christmas in the early 2000s where our two families and close friends spent the entire day at the lake in Malawi. As usual, he regaled us with jokes interspersed with acute observations on Malawian history, society, economy and politics. Last December, he and his dear wife, Kaarina Klint, were in Nairobi. What had been planned as a luncheon turned out into an engagement that lasted until dinner and late into the night. We had not seen each other for several years, although we had been in touch, so there was so much to cover. We excitedly discussed his forthcoming 80th birthday celebration, and the possibility of him joining our university as a Visiting Distinguished Professor.

It turned out to be our last meeting. But what a special day it was. Thandika was his usual self, affable, hilariously funny, and of course he made brilliant observations about African and global developments. Thank you Thandika for the privilege of knowing you and your beautiful mind. You will always be a shining intellectual light for your

generation, my generation, and generations to come of committed, progressive African, diaspora and global academics, researchers, thinkers and activists.

Notes

1. P.T. Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History of Africa. Volume 1: The Nineteenth Century*, 1993, CODESRIA Book Series.
2. Refer to the full bibliography of Thandika Mkandawire’s work found at this link: <https://www.codesria.org/thandikamkandawire/thandikas-work/>
3. See a collection of lectures Thandika gave through this link: <https://www.codesria.org/thandikamkandawire/videos/>
4. Thandika Mkandawire, “The Social Sciences in Africa: Breaking Local Barriers and Negotiating International Presence,” in *African Studies Review*, vol. 40, No. 2, 1997, pp. 15-36
5. UNRISD, *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*, 2005, UNRISD.
6. Dickson Eyoh and Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *The Encyclopaedia of Twentieth Century African History*, 2005, Routledge.



From left to right: Thandika Mkandawire, Zenebeworke Tadesse, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Abdallah Bujra & Adebayo Olukoshi