

Transcendental Thandika: Tribute to a Global Pan-African Luminary

In 2011, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) had planned to hold a colloquium in Malawi from 2 to 4 May, to celebrate the lifetime contributions of Prof. Thandika Mkandawire to global knowledge. The colloquium was being organised in collaboration with the University of Malawi and the Archie Mafeje Research Institute of the University of South Africa (UNISA). Three weeks before the colloquium, CODESRIA issued a statement announcing a postponement of the event. The reason for the postponement was “gross violations of academic freedom” at the University of Malawi. CODESRIA wanted to express solidarity with the striking lecturers of the University of Malawi Chancellor College.

The strike was triggered by an event that happened on the evening of 12 February 2011. Then Inspector General of the Malawi Police Service, Mr Peter Mukhito, had summoned University of Malawi political scientist, Prof. Blessings Chinsinga. Prof. Chinsinga was teaching a public policy course, and to illustrate a point, he used an example from the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, referred to as the Arab Spring. One student in the class, a police officer, reported Prof. Chinsinga to his supervisors in the police service. The ensuing academic freedom strike lasted beyond an academic year.

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The colloquium eventually happened five years later, from 11 to 14 April 2016, in Lilongwe. It was themed “Thinking African, Epistemological Issues: Celebrating the Life and Work of Thandika Mkandawire.” I had just joined the Catholic University of Malawi a month earlier. Participants came from different parts of the world, totalling 21 countries, according to the programme. There were 48 presentations, spread over 13 sessions. There were two keynote addresses, one by Thandika Mkandawire himself. It was my fifth or sixth time to meet Thandika in person, someone I had first heard about some 26 years earlier. The story of how I first heard about Thandika is one I feel compelled to narrate.

In narrating the story of my encounters with Thandika, I will describe how he brought me into his fold, inviting me to some of the institutions that shaped and defined his life’s work. I will discuss why Thandika’s work was important for Africa and the for the world, and conclude with thoughts on the legacy he has left for the engaged academy in Malawi and beyond.

Let me start toward the end of my secondary school days. My secondary school English teacher, Mr Lot Dzonzi (who would later become Inspector General of Police, and afterwards Malawi’s Deputy Ambassador to the UN), wanted me to think of myself as a serious writer. He would take me to his friends who were writers and were teaching at the University of Malawi’s Chancellor College. He encouraged me to introduce myself to other writers as well. I met the late Prof. Steve Chimombo, who introduced me to the late Dr. Anthony Nazombe, both of whom were lecturers in the Department of English at Chancellor College. I frequented their offices and showed them my poetry and fiction to which they generously shared their feedback. This was in 1989, and I was 18 years old. One such afternoon, I sat in Dr Nazombe’s office as he went through a poem I had written. We discussed several things, and at some point he mentioned the name Thandika Mkandawire, whom he said was Executive Secretary at CODESRIA. As a teenage secondary school leaver, this did not mean very much to me, until about a decade later.

In August 1997 I arrived in Iowa City, in the American midwest, to attend the University of Iowa’s International Writing Programme (IWP). It was the third time a Malawian writer was attending

the programme. The late Edison Mpina was the first Malawian, in 1982, and Steve Chimombo followed in 1983. A Malawian who was finishing his PhD in Comparative Literature at Iowa, Dean Makuluni, introduced me to an email listserv for Malawians in the diaspora, called Nyasanet, the first ever Malawian social media space. These were very early days of the Internet. Dean Makuluni helped me open my first ever email account and subscribe to Nyasanet. I soon found that Thandika was a prominent voice on the forum, sharing all kinds of content on Malawi's history, African politics, and global economics.

In 1998, the late Kofi Annan, then UN Secretary General, appointed Thandika as Executive Director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UN-RISD). It was very big news, and I wrote a news article on it. It was published by *The Nation* newspaper in Malawi. Later, in 1998, I started graduate school at Iowa, and began taking a strong interest in Thandika's academic work. That interest continued throughout my graduate school years. We exchanged quite a few emails with Thandika throughout that period.

Back in Malawi working on a teacher professional development project, Thandika sent me an email, sometime in 2011. He was alerting me to a programme the London School of Economics (LSE) was establishing. It was the Programme for African Leadership (PfAL), and LSE was inviting applications for the first cohort of fellows. To establish the programme, LSE had received a generous donation from one of its alumni, Firoz Lalji, a Ugandan based in Canada. Thandika wanted to make sure I did not miss the opportunity. I

applied, and in 2012 became one of the inaugural LSE PfAL fellows. Thandika was one of our lecturers, and he focused on areas he had done pioneering research in and had become globally renowned for, developmental states and social policy. We had lectures from other world leading scholars in areas that included human rights, climate change, women, HIV/AIDS, gender and population, and leadership ethics.

In the course of the programme, Thandika took me to his office in the LSE Department of International Development, where we had long chats on various matters. One evening we took the tube and went to a fancy London restaurant where we had dinner and a long conversation. To date, PfAL has trained more than 400 young Africans, including three other Malawians. PfAL is now part of a larger initiative under the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa at the LSE.

From November 2014 to December 2015, Thandika was Visiting Professor and Senior Fellow in Residence in the Building Bridges programme in the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Development Policy and Practice (later renamed Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance). With the facilitation of Dr Marianne Camerer, programme director for the Building Bridges programme, Thandika gave a series of lectures, and ran regional workshops around the broader theme of African Economic Integration. The workshops were held in Dakar, Lusaka and Dar es Salaam, and involved up to 120 participants from 20 African countries. For the Dakar workshop, Thandika and Marianne invited twenty-one scholars, in October 2015. I was at the University of

Botswana at the time, where one of the courses I was teaching was on curriculum and language policy in Africa. My presentation was titled "Breaking the Deadlock: Language, Integration and the African Renaissance," in which I argued about the importance of African languages in the journey toward the African Renaissance.

In his reaction to my presentation, Thandika observed how African languages were enjoying a new lease of life, through mobile phone companies who used local language themes in various promotions of their products. Thandika was a firm believer in the importance of African languages in African development. This is clear in a 2005 book he edited, titled *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*. Amongst the chapters in the book is one by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, on the promotion of African languages as the challenge of Pan-Africanist intellectuals in the era of globalisation. Another one is by Beban Sammy Chumbow, on the language question and national development in Africa.

Before I left Dakar to return to Gaborone, I had a conversation with Thandika, in which he told me about why he had invited me to the workshop. In the course of the workshop, Thandika had shared several stories about his time in Dakar in the 1970s and then again in the mid-1980s through to the mid-1990s. That was when he served as Executive Secretary of CODESRIA. Thandika wanted me to appreciate the role CODESRIA played in Africa's intellectual life and research agenda. Having brought me to CODESRIA's headquarters, it was important that I respond to and participate in as many CODESRIA events

as possible. It would be a great thing for me to become a paid-up member, he added.

Thandika would repeat that exact advice about getting involved with CODESRIA when we met again, five months later. That was in April 2016, in Lilongwe, during the colloquium to celebrate his life and work. He said he had wanted me to participate because it was another CODESRIA event.

I eventually paid my membership to CODESRIA in 2018. That year, CODESRIA held its 15th General Assembly, a triennial event, in Dakar, Senegal. When Thandika saw from the programme that I would be attending and presenting a paper, he sent me an email in which he asked me to bring recent issues of Malawi's daily newspapers and magazines. I brought him copies of *The Nation*, the *Daily Times* and their weekend versions, and *The Lamp* magazine. He always kept up to date with what was going on in Malawi.

I arrived in Dakar on the afternoon of Saturday, 15 December 2018. The following day, David Nthen-gwe, a Dakar-based Malawian working for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), came to pick me up from my hotel. We joined Thandika and his wife Kaarina Klint, at Le Cabanon, a pleasant restaurant overlooking the shimmering, expansive Atlantic Ocean. As we got up to go to the lunch buffet, I noticed that everyone left their phones and tablets on the table. I tagged at David and asked if it was safe to leave our gadgets on the table. "Very safe. Nobody would steal them here." He said. "You mean here at this restaurant, or..." Before I could finish, David replied: "I mean here in Senegal. People don't

steal in this country." I was very surprised. "How do you build a country like that, with no thieves?" I asked. "Now that's a very good question. Let's ask **Thandika**."

We asked Thandika how it was possible that people didn't steal in Senegal. Thandika thought it was because Senegal had not gone through the brutality and hardships other African countries had gone through. When people are treated kindly by their governments, they treat each other kindly too. They do not become violent criminals, he responded. We spent much of that afternoon listening to Thandika talk about his youth in Zambia and Malawi, his secondary school days at Zomba Catholic (famously known in Malawi as "Box 2"), his active participation in the struggle for Malawi's independence, his journalism days at the *Malawi News* in the early 1960s, and many other fascinating topics. He told us about how Aleke Banda¹ turned down a scholarship to go and study for a degree at Harvard, opting to work on the forefront of the struggle for Malawi's independence.

He told us about his studies in the US, becoming stateless in Ecuador during a research trip, and ending up in Sweden where he was offered citizenship. It was chilling to hear him say he still met, in Sweden, one of the people who betrayed him, leading to Kamuzu Banda's order to strip Thandika of his Malawian citizenship. He retold a story he had told me back in 2016 in Lilongwe. While living in Dakar in the 1970s and again in the 1980s, a group of Malawian government officials came to study for their masters' degrees. Thandika taught some of the courses in the programme.

On completing their degrees, the Malawians would not dare

take their masters theses with them back to Malawi. Kamuzu Banda's machinery was notorious for putting people into detention without trial for things they had written, even for research purposes. One of the former students from the 1970s came to meet Thandika in Lilongwe in 2016. "Do you remember the story I told you about those Malawians who came to Dakar for their masters' degrees, but left their theses behind for fear of Kamuzu?" He asked me, pointing toward a Malawian who had come to greet him. "He was one of them." We all burst out into a loud laugh.

Amongst the most memorable sessions at the 2018 CODESRIA General Assembly was a tribute to the late Prof. Samir Amin, an Egyptian Pan-Africanist and political economist who died on 12 August that year.² Many scholars present spoke about Prof Amin and his contributions to African institutions, scholarship and freedom. An entire special issue of the *CODESRIA Bulletin* was dedicated to reflections on Amin's life and work.³ As Director of the African Institute for Economic Development Planning (IDEP) in Dakar, Amin gave CODESRIA an institutional home and a foundation. He became CODESRIA's inaugural Executive Secretary, and amongst the people he worked with in the early years, was Thandika.⁴

That afternoon of Thursday, 20 December 2018, the penultimate day to the end of the 15th CODESRIA General Assembly in Dakar, Thandika spoke first and set the stage for the Samir Amin tribute session. He said no one had shaped his life the way Samir Amin did. He spoke about how he first met Amin in Stockholm, Sweden.

As a student in Sweden, Thandika had penned a rather critical review of Amin's book and sent it to Amin, not knowing Amin would be coming to Stockholm. Amin came to Stockholm, and Thandika invited him home. They discussed Thandika's review, among other things. "Samir Amin was opposed to typologies but ironically he wrote the best treatment of typologies in African economies," said Thandika.

He went on to say Amin was both Marxist and nationalist, something that was hard for the left, including for people like Kwame Nkrumah and Claude Ake. Said Thandika: "The worst sin you could commit with Samir Amin was not to be nationalist. You could be a bad Marxist, do bad class analysis, but you could set him off if you were not nationalist in the sense of defending Africa and Africa's interests. We will miss Samir Amin. The world will miss Samir Amin in that sense."⁵

As of April 2016, Thandika had ninety-one publications to his name, according to the programme document CODESRIA printed for the colloquium to celebrate Thandika's life and work. There were twenty pieces he had written in various outlets; twenty-four book chapters; thirty-five journal articles, and ten books he had authored or edited. He published a few more works after that, but was spending much of his time working on a book which he wanted to be the most definitive expression of his overall thoughts on how international financial institutions had shaped development economics and African economies.

A good overview of Thandika's thought over the decades can be found in two events. The first is his **inaugural lecture** when he

became Professor and the first ever Chair of African Development at the London School of Economics. He gave that lecture on 27 April 2010. Titled 'Running while others walk: knowledge and the challenge of Africa's development,' it was a much-anticipated event⁶. Thandika argued, in the lecture, that Africa's development problems were problems of knowledge and the undermining of African expertise and experience. He argued for broader systems of education and knowledge, observing that human capital models and education for all campaigns were too narrow to deliver the transformation that Africa needed.

Thandika blamed the problems of African development on types of biases, including anti-education, anti-intellectual and anti-elite biases. The aid establishment had created a reward system that favoured consultancy reports over peer-reviewed journal articles, effectively sidelining home-grown African knowledge. "A people's existence is not defined only by their material conditions but also by their ideas and moral views. Africans do not live by bread alone. That said, bread matters," said Thandika in the inaugural lecture⁷.

He argued that the crisis of African development, brought about largely by neoliberal policies, was related to the crisis of African universities. He called on Africanists at Western institutions such as the LSE to support their African colleagues "against the ravages of the consultancy syndrome that rewards reports over refereed academic papers." He further asked Western academics to support African academics against what he termed the "criminal negligence" of African governments that gave way to pressures to commercialise education systems.⁸

Another occasion that provides one with a brief yet comprehensive narrative of Thandika's intellectual biography is an **interview** he gave to Kate Meagher, published in a 2019 issue of the journal *Development and Change*, from the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague.⁹ The interview was published under the title 'Reflections of an Engaged Economist: An Interview with Thandika Mkandawire.' In the discussion, Thandika articulated his views on what two decades of structural adjustment policies had done to African economies. He said compared to the American Great Depression of the 1930s, the period of structural adjustment policies in Africa lasted much longer. We should call it, he suggested, the Great African Depression.

Three decades after the SAPs, per capita incomes in Africa were yet to return to levels of the 1970s. The World Bank, he observed, had been expressing *mea culpas* over their policies on infrastructure, higher education, state institutions, sequencing of policies, and policy ownership, among others. "If you have that many *mea culpas*, you create an economy, and that economy behaves in a particular way. These are some of the legacies we should be looking at to understand African economies, not just colonial or pre-colonial legacies."¹⁰

Thandika was equally critical of African governments as he was of "their peripatetic international advisers". But there was a distinction: "The latter could always walk away from the scene of crime, while African policymakers were left with the smoking gun."¹¹

Thandika said he was critical of both "Hopeless Africa" and "Africa rising" tropes, which he said neglected the history of their

legacies and consequences on current realities. Whereas the Great Depression in the West had led to many new economic ideas, in Africa the neoliberal hegemony had blocked any new thinking. Arguing that SAPs had eroded capacities of African states to capture rents from commodity booms, he used the example of Chile which made \$35 billion from copper, while Zambia made only \$200 million from its copper. The erosion of human capital led to the neglect of higher education, resulting in the brain drain, and in the incapacitation of African institutions.

As currently practiced, Thandika was critical of social policy in Africa, which he said was largely donor-driven, and did not link to socio-economic transformation. He said donors had been very clever in “using the little money they give to leverage the entire policy regime.” He urged African governments to seriously focus on domestic resource mobilisation. “There is no money of the required magnitude that will come in from outside,” he said.¹² The majority of global savings, 61 percent, goes to the United States. China was able to industrialise through domestic savings, relying on foreign investment only for technology, not capital. SAPs had subdued Africa’s aspirations and had limited the continent’s visions, said Thandika. Thandika’s numerous works provide greater detail to this and many of his ground-breaking ideas, but it is not the purpose of this piece to get into that kind of detail.

Let me return to my last meeting with Thandika, and then back to the 2016 colloquium and the legacy it created for Malawi’s academic space. On the day I arrived in Dakar for the CODESRIA General Assembly in December 2018, I bumped into him in the lobby of the

King Fahd Palace Hotel, the venue of the conference. We exchanged greetings, and I handed over to him the newspapers and magazines I had brought from Malawi. I asked him about the book he had said he had been working on for some years. He beckoned for us to sit down on a chair. He took out his laptop, opened a document, and went to a page with a graph. That graph, he said, showed how much African economies had been growing from the time of independence up to the time of the SAPs. The decline was dramatic. He said he still had some work to do on the manuscript before it could be complete.

After the colloquium to celebrate Thandika’s life and work in 2016, I returned to campus at the Catholic University of Malawi with a new determination. It had been a phenomenal week celebrating Thandika and engaging in fascinating conversations about higher education in Malawi and in Africa. There had to be a way of continuing with those conversations, at least for the Malawians.

On 28 April 2016, I sent out an email to twenty-five friends and colleagues working in universities in Malawi and abroad. I asked them if there was an association of Malawian university lecturers, and if there was an online forum where they shared ideas. It seemed there were none. I shared with the colleagues an idea about creating a google forum, to be called *Higher Ed Malawi*. A handful of them responded and encouraged the idea. “I think the forum is a brilliant idea but you may have to have a light touch moderation to avoid sectarian capture,” was Thandika’s advice. He became an active presence on the forum.

To date, the forum has just over 400 participants, drawn from uni-

versities and colleges in Malawi and beyond. In June 2018, Malawian academics from the forum organised the first ever international **higher education conference**, under the theme ‘Higher Education in the 21st Century.’ As the conference came to an end, the organising committee was reconstituted, and converted into a task force charged with the responsibility of creating the Universities and Colleges Association of Malawi (UCAM). The new committee is organising the next international higher education conference, to be held later this year.

Admiring the breadth, depth and originality of Thandika’s ideas, I have sometimes wished I had become a development economist myself. But Thandika was much more than a development economist. He transcended disciplinary boundaries. He was a transdisciplinary intellectual and provided penetrating insights into complex global problems. I have attempted to follow his path by being an eclectic reader and lifelong student of ideas.


As one whose main thrust is curriculum and the education of teachers, and latterly public policy, I have drawn insights from Thandika’s views on human knowledge. I have used epistemological lenses to develop a sociological perspective of knowledge production for the purpose that Julius Nyerere ascribed to education in Africa. Nyerere ascribed two purposes to education. One was the process by which a society passes on to the next generation the knowledge and values it holds to be important. The other was a duty to contribute to society and to the greater good of humanity. Thandika fulfilled both purposes, and he has passed on the mantle. May his kind, gentle and compassionate soul rest in peace.

Notes

1. Aleke Banda joined politics in his late teens, in the struggle for Malawi's independence in the late 1950s into the early 1960s. He worked with Thandika on the staff of the *Malawi News* during the independence struggle. Upon independence Aleke joined Kamuzu Banda's cabinet but was later arrested and detained by Kamuzu for 12 years. He was never charged. He died in 2010.
2. See the intervention at this link: <https://www.codesria.org/thandikamkandawire/>
3. CODESRIA Bulletin, No. 3&4, 2018.
4. Samir Amin tells the story of the encounter with Thandika in his *A Life Looking Forward: Memoirs of an Independent Marxist*, 2007, Zed Books.
5. Thandika Mkandawire, Tribute to Samir Amin, as orally presented, 2018.
6. Thandika Mkandawire, 'Running While Others Walk: knowledge and the challenge of Africa's development', 2011.
7. Thandika Mkandawire, 'Running While Others Walk', p.33.
8. Ibid.
9. Kate Meagher, 'Reflections of an Engaged Economist: An Interview with Thandika Mkandawire.' in *Development and Change*, Vol. 50, No. 2 March, 2019;
10. Thandika Mkandawire, 'Reflections of an Engaged Economist,' p.12.
11. Thandika Mkandawire, 'Reflections of an Engaged Economist,' p.13.
12. Thandika Mkandawire, 'Reflections of an Engaged Economic,' p.21.

Tuesday, March 31, 2020

JUST RELEASED




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White Ferocity
The Genocides of Non-Whites
and Non-Aryans from 1492 to Date

The slave trade, the conquest of the Americas and the invasion of Africa have deeply transformed the relations between Europeans and other groups. The jump from difference to superiority and racial hierarchy was so swift that it led to the moral collapse of Europe and North America. By shifting the devaluation of so-called 'inferior' beings from non-Whites to non-Aryans, Nazism committed the unforgivable crime of bringing into the heart of the European world a ferocity up to then reserved for other continents. In this book, *White Ferocity: The Genocides of Non-Whites and Non-Aryans from 1492 to Date*, Plumelle-Urbe investigates and demonstrates, with harrowing evidence and analyses, how Europeans justified the destruction of other peoples as unavoidable based on the officially declared belief of others being inferior.


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Rosa Amelia Plumelle-Urbe

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"Rosa Amelia Plumelle-Urbe's book needed to be written; now it must be read. The magnitude of the crimes described in detail in this book cannot be disputed. ...In my view one might be tempted to say all this belongs to the past. But it should not be an excuse to forget history and the questions that still affect the reality of our world. The year 1492 is not a random date. Not the year of the 'discovery of America'. The year 1492 is when the conquest and destruction of the Americas by Europeans began. Plumelle-Urbe is right to say that the ferocity of the Nazis is not an anomalous, inexplicable occurrence. It is integral to the rationale for implementing ferocity, which, I once again stress, is inherent to capitalism. To understand where this ferocity originates, look at the logic of capital: accumulate, accumulate, regardless of the price (in human terms)."

– Samir Amin (1931–2018)
Professor of Economics and former Director of
Third World Forum, Dakar, Senegal

"Rosa Amelia Plumelle-Urbe's work will be struck down by those who glancing through it will form their opinions on the basis of the table of contents, and those who spending just a little more time, but not much, will in one fell swoop dismiss that this Black woman writing about Black people has the distance allowed to anyone speaking about the history of the calamities which have happened where they come from."

– Louis Sala-Molins,
Emeritus Professor of Political Philosophy,
Université Paris 1 and Université de
Toulouse 2, France