Thandika Mkandawire, The Boss

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I do not like funeral orations. They announce, with brutality and despair, the disappearance of a loved one who has marked his time and left a mark. They strive to tell a story, to unearth a remarkable contribution, to bear witness to its closure, even if we wish for continuity. Notwithstanding our efforts, funeral orations signal death; they bury a person, leaving only a trace, and close a life.

What shall I say about Thandika? What testimony accounts for the complexity of his personality? Following the departure of my colleague Zenebeworke Tadese, from the Publications department, who personally approached me, Thandika recruited me to assist in setting up the CODESRIA research program. I knew CODESRIA publications and some of its coordinators (editors), without being very familiar with them or the institution. I arrived as my colleague Boubacar Barry was just leaving the Council.

Economists and other political economy and social science specialists, but also his closest friends, Issa Shivji, Peter Anyang Nyong'o, Mahmood Mamdani, Zenebeworke Tadese, and his compatriot and young brother Paul Zeleza, will offer more detailed testimonies to best describe him in academic and human terms, where his strong personality and his qualities are displayed with disarming sincerity. They will certainly explore his scientific contribution and analyze the results of his untiring efforts to ensure the sustainability and scientific output of an African institution, which in a world troubled by the consequences of the Cold War, the crisis of post-colonial states, linguistic divides and an array of knowledge production and training traditions, strives to affirm its presence on the academic stage. Some of them will recognize his iconoclastic questions and arguments, backed up by a considerable documentation, produced through poaching from all over the continent.

Two issues, on which he did not specifically elaborate though, inform his research. First, the past and future of a capitalism carried by a dominant "African" bourgeoisie. Thandika was the advocate of a thorough investigation of the manifestations of this nascent "African" capitalism stifled by colonialism (in the colonies of the Gold Coast, Kenya and South Africa), and by postcolonial regimes (Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana). On the other hand, he questioned the "pan-African" commitments of two "resolutely neocolonial" countries, resisting all "socialisms", even an African one – his country of birth, Malawi and Côte d'Ivoire. The two countries have, for at least three decades, received migrants from neighboring countries. Migrants were granted the right to vote in Côte d'Ivoire. His hypothesis remains to be verified by future research: Malawian and Ivorian plantation economies were heavy consumers of labor.

Rightly or not, I have always thought that some of these iconoclastic issues, including the two I selected, to which may be added his participation in democratic transitions in the late 1980s and early 1990s, are the reason for his interest in the study of structural adjustment programs. A maneuver that, despite his proclamations, systematically explored the second of the three mechanisms that established the "colonizing structure, the incorporation of colonial economies into those of imperial metropolises. The first mechanism is territorial conquest and the last, the reformation of the indigene's (Native's) mind (Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 1988). While contributing to discussions on "delinking" so dear to Samir Amin, Thandika's interventions documented the connection and colonial maneuvers to stifle economic and democratic endeavors in Africa. The concepts framing Samir Amin's analysis of global center–periphery geography of uneven development, indeed favor the systematic deconstruction of imperialist relationships. Thandika's interventions, without departing from this geography, pay more attention

to internal situations in their local African space and the economic, political and social rationale they are associated with. They were not just obliquely concerned with revolutionary rupture, so central to the center-periphery and to unequal development theory; nor to a third way promoted by the non-aligned movement. I always suspected him (perhaps wrongly) of settling in between a theory and pragmatism imposed by his research themes (economic policies and their social and political consequences). A positioning that sometimes intrigued his African leftist friends and Bretton Woods institutions and economists. Had he not become (a little bit) a Swede? Both in his governance of the Council and in his conversations, traces of the social-democrat tradition of his adopted country emerge.

The gap he discerned in the discussions of African academics, during meetings of CODESRIA and other institutions, and their scholarly interventions, made him say that African intelligence had attained a point of incandescence at the margins. Can we reconcile the two, he wondered? He emphasized, with precise examples, the insight that forges from the analyses, which sprung out off the university beaten path, in an ironic and vernacular language, to explore daily life and its manifestations. Both the local ethnography on which they are founded, and the primary theoretical elements they fiddle with, give the analysis an unprecedented scale, he observed. They give a relevant account of colliding paths and of an obscene brutality of the governance of African societies. Analyses that are deeply rooted in the unveiling of internal mechanisms of domination. A quest that remained at the heart of his academic research. Thandika had always been concerned with the time of the world in its local manifestations.

Thandika was also adept at providing practical and programmatic responses to the consequences of structural adjustment programs on higher education and research infrastructures. For some, including Thandika, in the face of the terrible crisis affecting African universities, CODESRIA must directly participate in the training of the third generation of African humanity and social science researchers (Three generations of African Academics: A Note, *Transformation* 28, 1995). Others felt that the Council should not be diverted from its main task: The promotion of African research in the social sciences and humanities. Thandika managed to maintain a balance by strengthening the presence of academic institutions in CODESRIA's activities and by setting up a small grants program for master's and doctoral thesis students. This is probably the program with the most indisputable success. It has succeeded in maintaining quality research in many African universities and in making many African students competitive on the international educational stage.

On research, Thandika was strongly conscious of the time and space on the world stage necessary to highlight the social science and humanities in Africa, whose interventions affirm the autonomy of the latter and its scientific confrontation with international research. For example, refusal to be an annex is the reason for the establishment, after numerous forums, of the Gender and Democratic Governance institutes. By engaging the discussion on gender in the historical foundations of Africa and the Diaspora, and by calling for "democratic" governance, he opened a path to plural indigenous reflections that powerfully question the social science and humanities library, and contributed to its review by introducing African experiences.

I would also like to talk about the man I worked with every day for six or seven years at CODESRIA headquarters, first in Fann Résidence and on Avenue Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar. He expressed a reluctance for bureaucracy that paradoxically made him the perfect bureaucrat, as evidenced by his successful adventure in the mysteries of UN bureaucracy, as head of UNRISD (1998–2009). He mobilized the institution on social policy issues (in particular, social protection, education, and health) closely anchored in the issue of development. Personally, during this period, Thandika invested in examining the figures that deal with the African situation and the (universal or vernacular) conceptual and political representations of development.

In the mind-boggling mess of his office, he found orderly ways to challenge the bureaucratic order. Thandika knew how to seduce Europeans (Scandinavians in particular) and American foundations. He knew how to take them on, meet their requirements and maintain the autonomy of the Council. The rule was simple: All funding had to meet the needs of programs developed by CODESRIA. Not by donors. Against all odds, he managed to maintain that rule.

He was persuasive because the scientific programs he submitted were solid and well-argued; in the end, intellectual and financial reports were not disputed. How many times have I heard CODESRIA partners say "this time

your boss will get nothing". His disarming smile, his earthly laugh, his sometimes caustic mood, always light, never aggressive, brought barriers down.

Thandika was a bridge; he could handle the oversize egos of a community that felt cramped and marginal, and to which CODESRIA offered a space of unmatched commitment. His long exile, as well as his professional activities, in Stockholm, Dakar, Harare, Geneva and London, opened up multiple horizons and incommensurate ethnographic acuity. Reading and presence at popular urban spaces combined with a perfect knowledge of Senegalese mbalax and music from Southern Africa that he called Raceland as opposed to *Graceland* by Paul Simon, gave him access to a multiplicity of territories. His cosmopolitanism was under control because it was the product of varied transactions. It made it difficult to identify a home (Malawi?) on the continent.

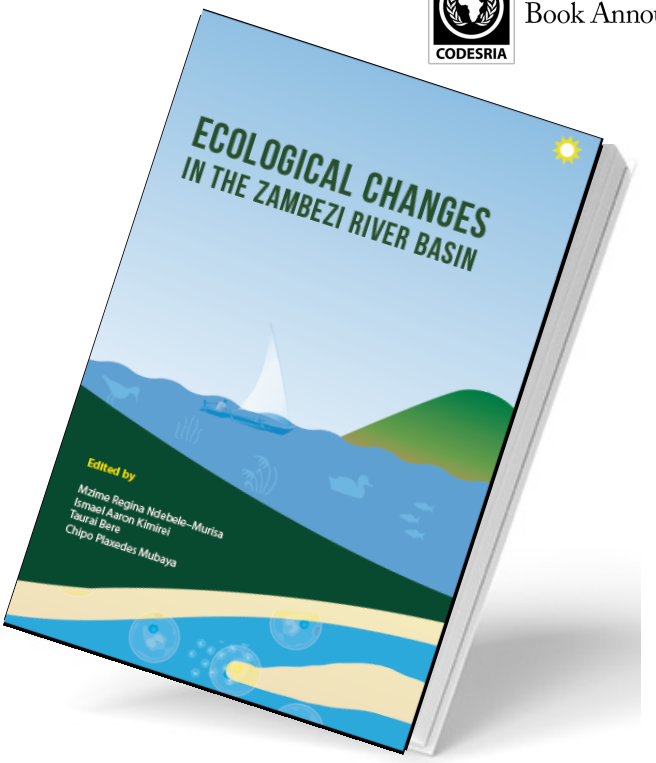
I have always wondered if his nomadic spirit came from his peregrinations. Thandika was born in Zimbabwe and grew up in Nyasaland (present-day Malawi); he grew up in the mining towns of Rhodesia. Unlike the great majority of intellectuals of his generation, he was not of peasant origin. He was an urban. He had hilarious reflections on the impact of this dominant peasant origin on CODESRIA's intellectual agenda. I will always remember our unrestrained laughter when I came to tell him that the green color of CODESRIA publications was really *"boring and unattractive"*. I was showing him sketches by a Senegalese artist, Aissa Dionne, tasked with proposing a new cover for CODESRIA publications. His amused reaction was to say: "It is a cover with the colors of the Sahel, the ochre-brown color of drought as opposed to wet landscapes of green, trees and herbaceous savannas". In a way, he was highlighting how water and its absence had configured our imaginations and imaginary.

Thandika left CODESRIA; then it was my turn a few years later. We continued our conversation, intermittently, at various meetings of the Council. We met twice a year at the Board of Directors of the American Social Science Research. His favorite joke at every meeting was to conclude by saying that he was my boss. That the situation had changed because of my role as Chair of the Board of Directors.

My reply was always the same. He will forever be "my boss". He introduced me to the world of African, English-language and international research, and the relations between the many traditions of academic research.

Where did I meet him last? Dakar, or New York? I cannot remember. He calmly told me about his illness. And as usual, he made me laugh, confiding with disgust, that instead of his favorite beverage, beer, he now drank tea. It made me smile. He also said to me: "Aging sucks", marking a distance with the wisdom attributed to the elderly. A very urban iconoclast.

CODESRIA Book Announcement



This book provides an analysis of the ecological conditions and ecosystem goods and services of the Zambezi River Basin (ZRB), the fourth largest river in Africa. Various environmental and anthropogenic factors; inclusive of climate, environmental flows, hydrology, morphology, pollution and land use changes among others and their interactions are considered as drivers of the river ecosystems. The book therefore, provides empirical and research based evidence to support strategic planning and policy development in the wake of ecological changes that nations and indeed regions such as the ZRB are grappling with while seeking to sustainably manage precious river systems.