

Thandika, Indefatigably Human¹

On Friday, 27 March 2020, while still coming to terms with soft self-isolation, I received a WhatsApp message from a long-time comrade, Abdoulaye Bathily:

It is true Prof. Thandika has left us for eternity... A bright star has dimmed over our sky. May his soul rest in peace, Amen.

It was devastating! Was it true? I didn't wait for confirmation. I know Bathily too well to doubt the authenticity of the information. What to do, alone as I was? I couldn't run out in the street to meet another comrade, or drive to a comrade's house on campus to mourn together. But why should I mourn, I asked myself. My friend and comrade of many years had lived a full life, a worthy life of which any human being would be proud. He was a decent, humble human being. In storm or stress, humanity never left him. I wouldn't mourn. I'd celebrate my friend's life. That soliloquy birthed a poem in Kiswahili, which was translated into English by another comrade's daughter, Ida Hadjivayanis (appended at the end of this article).

Since then many fine tributes have been making rounds on the social media. Friends have written on his personal life, on his humane character, on his intellectual prowess, on his scholarly curiosity, on his absolute dedication to Pan-Africanism, and on his untiring efforts to creating an African intellectual community. I do not wish to add one more tribute in the same vein lest it

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becomes one too many. It reminds me of a stanza from the poem by Vladimir Mayakovsky² written on the death of Lenin:

They'll rig up an aura round any head;

the very idea – I abhor it,

that such a halo poetry-bred should hide Lenin's real, huge human forehead

I'm anxious lest rituals, mausoleums and processions,

the honeyed incense of homage and publicity

should obscure Lenin's essential simplicity.

It is Thandika's 'essential simplicity' (which Lenin had) and humour (which Lenin didn't) on which I want to remark through a few personal anecdotes.

I must have first met Thandika in the late 1970s at meetings at the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning (IDEP), which was then headed by Samir Amin, or in the early 1980s at the Zimbabwe Institute for Development Studies (ZIDS) where I gave a seminar. Our late friend Sam Moyo once reminded me that Thandika was present at that seminar. Since then, I met Thandika numerous times – at the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), the Association of

African Political Science (AAPS), and many other meetings and conferences. Thandika taught me two things: how to operate a printer and watch good movies. In 1987, I spent a year of my first sabbatical at the University of Zimbabwe, in Harare. Thandika paid me a visit at home. I had just completed writing my book on my new Zenith laptop with two floppies but couldn't print it. Thandika offered to help. To his chagrin and my embarrassment, I hadn't connected the printer with the correct port.

On learning to watch good movies, I can do no better than quote a passage from the citation that I read out introducing Thandika as the Distinguished Nyerere Lecturer, 2013, at the University of Dar es Salaam:

Having missed my flight, I was staying with Thandika in Dakar, Senegal, where he spent almost two decades of his 'exile'. Invariably, Thandika would be rushing to the office in the morning. Invariably, he would skip his breakfast. When I woke up, instead of bread on the dining table, I would always find a carefully selected [video-cassettes], which, I must confess, I enjoyed watching so much that I forgot all about breakfast. That was a display of Thandika's characteristic wit, with a characteristic message; Issa, man doesn't live by bread alone! He was commenting on my artistic primitiveness!³

When I invited Thandika in 2013 to deliver the Annual Nyerere Lecture, there was a war of words going on between Malawi and Tanzania on jurisdiction over

what Tanzanians call Lake Nyasa and Malawians call Lake Malawi. Thandika shot back with an email.⁴

Thandika: Given the border conflict between our countries how can I be sure you guys won't take me hostage in exchange for oil from the lake?

Issa: Hunh! Very thoughtful question! Wear white all through, ok?

Thandika: Great advice if the White is not interpreted as either surrender or Taliban uniform.

Issa: No, not surrender, a bearer of peace, a euphemism for surrender!

'Thandika had a telling sense of humour, playful on the surface, profound in its message'.⁵

Thandika delivered a majestic lecture painting in broad strokes fifty years of Africa's development trajectory with its woes and aimless wanderings, aimless for Africans but meaningfully aimed by the erstwhile funding agencies and donors to serve their interests.⁶

My last, albeit virtual, encounter with Thandika was just five months ago. In November 2019, I invited Thandika to write an endorsement for our biography of Julius Nyerere. At the time he could not have been in good shape; yet he did one for us. I wrote back thanking him and praising the endorsement as exactly what I wanted. Once again came back his mischievous response: 'That's why I love Tanzanians: low expectations 😊😊'.

I said at the beginning that there have been many tributes covering his large corpus of writings in heterodox economics, social policies, African academic institutions and many other related areas.⁷ Yusuf Bangura (in this issue) in his tribute covers this fairly comprehensively.

There is one writing of Thandika's which does not quite fall in any of these areas, but stands out. Its title is tantalising: "The Terrible Toll of Post-Colonial 'Rebel Movements' in Africa: Towards an explanation of the Violence against the Peasantry".⁸ I read it when it first came out in 2002, enjoyed it enormously and was intrigued by its thesis. When I set out to write this tribute, I reread it. I felt today, over 17 years later, that Thandika's thesis needs to be revisited in the context of our debates in the Agrarian South Network and in the journal, *Agrarian South*, on the agrarian question generally and the peasant question in particular. What revolutionary potential does the peasantry hold, if any?

Thandika's thesis, in short, is that post-colonial rebel movements have been largely urban-based with the aim of conquering power whose seat is essentially in urban centres. The state's writ runs largely in urban areas. And its presence in the villages manifests itself as a merchant or tax collector. Out of necessity or inability to wage an urban guerrilla struggle, the rebels move to rural areas but have no interest or capacity to mobilise peasants against the state. In this case, in many African countries, barring settler colonies where there was massive land alienation, the peasantry does not lend itself to easy mobilisation. They have access to land and can fall back on subsistence food production, should the need arise. So, there is neither land nor food hunger in the countryside. While some surplus is extracted from the peasantry, this is mainly at the level of the market. Consequently, exploitation is neither easily seeable nor feelable. 'Land to the tiller', the traditional slogan to rally the peasantry for pitting them against feudal landlords, does not strike a chord.

Rebels fail to become Mao's fish in the water. They find themselves on dry land. The result is that the rebels' interest in the peasantry is simply to loot them for food for their own survival. They thus appear as marauders rather than liberators to the peasantry. The peasantry is subjected to relentless violence by the rebels, which further alienates the peasantry from the rebel movement.

It is arguable whether Thandika's generalisations could hold empirically even then, but much more now. We have witnessed massive 'land grabs' since then, in which the state has been instrumental, and in many countries land and food hunger are real issues.⁹ While this is not the place to go into details, I would only flag, what I believe to be two gaps in Thandika's understanding of the agrarian and land question in peasant-dominated African formations. One relates to his conception of the exploitation of the peasantry only at the surface level of the market. No doubt this is how it appears, but deeper analysis of political economy of peasant exploitation would show – and there were writings to that effect even at the time Thandika was writing¹⁰ – that, in fact, capital exploits the peasant at the level of production, in that the reproduction of the peasant household falls on the peasantry itself. Besides minimising its necessary consumption, the peasant household also subsidises capital through women's and children's free labour. Thus, the peasant is reduced to living subhuman existence, while exerting superhuman labour.

The second gap is that Thandika does not explore the relation of African formations in question with imperialism. The question of imperialism is conspicuously absent from Thandika's analysis.

This is true both at the level of the domination of imperialism with the extant African countries but also imperialists' ubiquitous support for the rebel movements that he is discussing.

Notwithstanding, Thandika's question on how could such a peasantry be mobilised politically against the feudal-cum-merchant state in alliance with imperialism is valid and remains. In my view, to answer that question one would have to investigate the social configuration, ideology, and aims of the rebel movements themselves. In fact, none of the movements which Thandika has in mind – barring the Eritrean and Ethiopian which would require a separate analysis in their own right – had liberation and emancipation on the agenda. These were movements with the short-term aim of getting into power, in many cases with the aid of imperialism to destabilise the existent governments (for example, Renamo in Mozambique, Unita in Angola, or SLP in Sudan under Salva Kiir).

Having said all this, Thandika's article under consideration remains one of his finest, with a sharp eye for the unusual. It does not shy away from trying to understand a difficult phenomenon in post-colonial Africa. What is more, it convincingly debunks Western authors' explanations verging on the racist. For that alone, we remain eternally indebted to Thandika's magnificent and uncompromised scholarship.

Thandika our beloved

We are grieving

The mat is laid for mourning.

Thandika smiles: O Issa, why this mat!

Celebrate life

Death is but an interruption

Let it not unsettle you all

The struggle must continue

To liberate Africa

To Unite Africa

To create that alternative civilization

*That overflows with justice and equality*¹¹

Notes

1. This tribute was originally written for *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2020. It is republished in this Bulletin with the permission of the author.
2. V. Mayakovsky, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, in *Lenin 150*, New Delhi: LeftWord Books, pp. 15–118. Published in collaboration with Batalla de Ideas, Expressão Popular and Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, https://www.thetricontinental.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Lenin-150_Leftword.pdf, accessed 30 April 2020.
3. I. G. Shivji, "Professor Thandika Mkandawire," in W. Soyinka, S. Amin, B. H. Selassie, M. G. Mũgo and T. Mkandawire, with an introduction by I. G. Shivji, *Reimagining Pan-Africanism*, Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 2015, pp. 201–204.
4. Shivji, *ibid*, p. 204.
5. Shivji, *Ibid*, p. 201.
6. Thandika Mkandawire, "Fifty years of African independence: Personal reflections," in W. Soyinka, S. Amin, B. H. Selassie, M. G. Mũgo and T. Mkandawire, with an introduction by I. G. Shivji, *Reimagining PanAfricanism*, Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, pp. 205–256.
7. See, generally, this Special Issue of *CODESRIA Bulletin*, No. 2, 2020, which has been carrying, and will continue to carry, tributes to Thandika who was CODESRIA's third Executive Secretary.
8. "The terrible toll of post-colonial 'rebel movements' in Africa: towards an explanation of the violence against the peasantry," in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 40, no. 2, 2002, pp. 181–215.
9. See, generally, Sam Moyo, et. al., (eds.), *Reclaiming Africa: Scramble and Resistance in 21st Century*. Singapore: Springer, 2019.
10. See, for instance, I. G. Shivji, "The roots of agrarian crisis in Tanzania: A theoretical perspective," in *Eastern African Social Science Research Review*, Vol. 3, no. 1, 1987, pp. 111–134; reprinted in P. G. Forster and S. Maghimbi (eds.), *The Tanzanian peasantry: Economy in crisis*, Aldershot: Avebury, 1992, pp. 124–150; and for a more recent treatment, U. Patnaik and S. Moyo, with a preface by I. G. Shivji, *The agrarian question in the neoliberal era: Primitive accumulation and the peasantry*. Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2011.
11. This poem was translated from Kiswahili by Ida Hadjivyanis, London, 28 March 2020.