Remembering Thandika Mkandawire, A Friend and an Indefatigable Scholar

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I remember one weekend in Dakar, Senegal, when Thandika and I had had a long afternoon talking and having some beer in his apartment. We were discussing Marxist approaches to the study of African politics which Thandika thought was rather deficient, with "everything being reduced to relations of production however poorly understood." The year was 1979, and the African Institute for Economic Planning and Development (IDEP) was at its highest point of radical intellectual fire-power, headed by Samir Amin, the eminent political economist of the "accumulation on a world scale" fame. The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) had just been born literally from the ribs of IDEP, headed by Abdalla Bujra, the well known Kenyan anthropologist. Thandika straddled between the two institutions, subsequently succeeding Bujra to ensure that CODESRIA became the spring board for most young African scholars as astounding social scientists.I remember that afternoon very vividly. Thandika was full of innovative ideas and impatient with some pedantic social science scholarship on the African scene. I was surprised Thandika had hardly published on any of the innovative ideas on which he had expressed so convincingly. So I challenged him to stop being a typical African in love with the oral tradition and begin writing and publishing. It did not take long before he hit the road, leaving me miles behind in a very short time. Not long ago Thandika sent me the following mail:"Here is an article I recently published in *World Politics*. Remember it is you who once challenged me to begin writing when we were in Dakar. I will never forget that." The article was on "Neopatrimonialism and the Political Economy of Economic Performance in Africa: Critical Reflections" (*World Politics*, Vol. 67, No. 1, January 2015). I found this article to be perhaps one of the best analyses and critique of development theories in Africa, debunking theories of those who view the state as a pariah in Africa. Those who lump all African heads of state and government as "big men" out to eat state and society to the bone didn't sit pretty with Thandika in this article either. Seeing the future of Africa as foretold, doomed and bereft of any meaningful development almost for ever is something that could pass as propaganda but not social science.

On 25th of October 2013, Thandika wrote me as follows: "Early this year I met Willy Mutunga (later our Chief Justice) who reminded me of a meeting at your house where we drafted the principles of the Kenyan constitution. It is nice to see some things come true."Neither Willy nor I worked on these principles with any idea that after the constitution was promulgated we would occupy the positions that we eventually did. Thandika was, of course, miles away only to be happy eventually that his contribution to our struggle eventually paid some dividends in Kenya's social progress.

That is why Thandika could never accept a "one shoe fits all" view of Africa's political economy. Not all African middle classes are "comprador" nor all African states are dependent in the same way on external forces. Class relations are historically given within social formations which can be subjected to analysis by the same theoretical models of political economy that are capable of bringing out their similarities and differences. This comes out very clearly in Thandika's *World Politics* article I have referred to above.When I was writing the "Introduction" to a book I recently published on *Presidential or Parliamentary Democracy in Africa: Choices to be Made* (Nairobi: Booktalk Africa, 2019), I remember that sometime in the mid-1990s, when we met as Kenyan academics to discuss how we could advance the democratic struggle in our country, Thandika happened to be among us. As usual, he was always very ready to contribute productively

to such discussions. We were so sure that the Moi regime was the only impediment between us and democracy.But Thandika, always ready to be an intelligent gadfly at such times, posed the question: "Have you people thought about what kind of government you want to put in place after Moi which will be acceptable to the Kenyan people and which will achieve the democracy you seem to be looking for?"From this statement one can see where Thandika's theory of the "national democratic and developmental state" as a progressive alternative to the presidential authoritarian regimes of the Moi type came from. He had a deep commitment to democracy rooted in popular acceptance by the people because it is, among other things, capable of paying democratic dividends.

On a light note. We used to drink a beer in Dakar called "Flag". For Thandika, these letters stood for "*Front de Liberation Alcoolique de Gauche*." We were definitely leftist Africans committed to the liberation of our continent. But we were not always drunk!

Rest in Peace Thandika.

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