



When You Drag a Tree Branch, the Leaves Also Follow: Thandika Mkandawire's Legacy

Influential African intellectuals, many admirers and academics the world over are still distilling the disappearance of one of the most prolific and creative minds they have crossed. The disheartening news hit me under confinement in Cape Town, thinking about the impact Covid-19 was going to provoke across the continent. My first thoughts were about the paradoxes of life. At a time we were going to need Thandika so much, to shepherd us with his constant enthusiasm and energy towards reflection on solutions, alternatives, contestations and doubt, he was gone. It was a selfish thought, I concede. But one that is in line with the way his friends and comrades got used to. He was like a solid tree. A tree that was there for all to lean on and consult, a reference in the landscape. What about the leaves when the branch is disappearing, gone? They are thin, vulnerable. Left by themselves the leaves lose color and energy. That was the way, I am sure, many of us felt.

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Obituaries written on Thandika remind us his legacy must be passed on to the younger generation. I agree. It was people like him that shaped my generation seeking a pan-African public engagement. Thandika was born almost 80 years ago in Zimbabwe. His early life was punctuated with difficulties before he moved abroad to study at Ohio State University. Political choices marked his life from that time, obliging him to live in Sweden (where he acquired nationality), Zimbabwe and Senegal, where he led CODESRIA.¹

It was at the Fann-Residence neighborhood of Dakar, where CODESRIA Headquarters in the early 1980s was located, that I

first met him. I had heard so much about his contributions from Mário de Andrade, the first President of the MPLA and former Chief editor of the famous Paris-based journal *Présence Africaine*, under whose umbrella I started my professional career in Guinea Bissau. When I visited Dakar, it was to request Thandika to support a young group of researchers that had the audacity of establishing Guinea-Bissau's first national research institution.

Thandika was generous with his time and invited me for dinner the very first day we met. He was enthusiastic about Guinea-Bissau's prospects, pledged to help and followed-up with multiple initiatives. I would venture to say a lot of what we end up accomplishing as a group was to not disappoint him. We were so proud of his recognition. But he did all he did as a matter of fact. It was natural in him to share, to self-efface and to totally embrace every challenge with humour. So unique.

Thandika was the anti-thesis of authority. In fact, he devoted a great deal of effort to explain why African intellectuals were often forgotten. But what mattered for him was they being forgotten by the owners of the narrative, like the ‘Africanists’, not the owners of State or economic power. He was adamant that African intellectuals’ analytical contribution was fundamental, their explanation of complexity irreplaceable, provided they themselves were not alienated by the exercise of power to pursue grandeur and notability.²

Thandika will be remembered as one of the most important contributors to the construction of a new African narrative. During his 10 years as CODESRIA’s Executive Secretary he became the glue for social sciences across the continent, decisively unifying its various artificial linguistic borders and academic traditions. He gently started this journey under the wings of Samir Amin and the “Dependency School”, before helping construct a more inquisitive approach to explain Africa’s political economy. At that time there was no talk of influencers, we rather used the term organic intellectuals, following the Gramscian tradition.³ Otherwise we would have recognised in Thandika the ultimate influencer that he was. He marked the last 40 years of African social sciences with new ideas and frames of discussion.

“Thinking about the Developmental States in Africa”,⁴ written in 2001 is a landmark interpretation of structural transformation that is more relevant today than ever. The same could be said of Thandika’s robust response to the structural adjustment approach, initially formulated by the Berg Report.⁵ A report that dominated Africa’s

policy space for over 20 years through the infamous Washington Consensus.⁶

When later in life I was helping formulate a critique of technical cooperation he joined the party with a brilliant essay on the changes required for a functional administration capable of responding to social imperatives.⁷ In fact Thandika’s constant interrogation about the social dimensions of the development debate, certainly inspired by his exposure to the Swedish social democratic experiment, made him a good fit to lead UNRISD⁸ from 1998 to 2009. His article on “Transformative Social Policy and Innovation in Developing Countries”⁹ originally positioned the debate on what is today a universal agenda for renewed social protection.

His last 2 years at the helm of UNRISD coincided with my appointment to lead the other twin United Nations Institute, UNITAR,¹⁰ and that of Yash Tandon to lead the South Centre. We obviously found ourselves in the same cold city of Geneva a way to firm up our common agenda to further Africa’s research agenda for transformation.

Thandika Mkandawire was awarded honorary degrees by the University of Helsinki, University of Ghana and York University. He was Chair and Professor of African Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Olof Palme Professor for Peace with the Swedish Institute for Future Studies as well as Honorary Professor at the University of Cape Town. But he will rather be remembered as the beacon of CODESRIA. The branch we – the leaves – will continue to lean on.

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Notes

1. Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, the apex social sciences organisation of the continent.
2. Mkandawire, T. (ed), 2005, *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*, Dakar: CODESRIA.
3. Mkandawire, T., 2000, ‘Non-Organic Intellectuals and “Learning” in Policy-Making Africa’, in Jerker Carlsson and Lennart Wohlgemuth, *Learning in Development Co-operation*, Stockholm: EGDI.
4. Mkandawire, T., 2001, ‘Thinking about Developmental States in Africa’, *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 25(3): 289–314.
5. Berg, A., 1981, *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Plan for Action* (The Berg Report). Washington, DC: World Bank.
6. Mkandawire, T., 1994, ‘Adjustment, Political Conditionality and Democratisation in Africa’, in G. Cornia and G. Helleiner (eds) *From Adjustment to Development in Africa: Conflict, Controversy, Convergence, Consensus?*, pp. 155–73. London: Macmillan; and Mkandawire, T. (ed.), 2003, *African Voices on Structural Adjustment*, Dakar/Trenton: CODESRIA/IDRC/AWP.
7. Mkandawire, T., 2002, ‘Incentives, Governance and Capacity Development: What Role for Technical Assistance in Africa?’ in Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Carlos Lopes and Khalid Malik (eds), *Capacity Development. New Solutions to Old Problems*, London: Earthscan.
8. United Nations Institute for Social Development.
9. Mkandawire, T., 2007, ‘Transformative Social Policy and Innovation in Developing Countries’, *The European Journal of Development Research* 19(1): 13–29.
10. United Nations Institute for Training and Research.