

## Thinking about Thandika, A Friend, Mentor, and Africa's Foremost Social Scientist

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On March 27, 2020, around mid-morning, my friend Said Adejumobi informed me of the passing of our friend Thandika Mkandawire. I received the news with shock and had to call Said back to clarify what he had told me. We both remained quiet on phone for some time. We did not seem to believe what we were discussing. Our personal emotions did not allow us to say much. But immediately after our short and mumbling conversation, I decided to call Bayo Olukoshi in Addis. I thought he would be emotionally stronger to brief me. It was the same on his end too. Involuntarily I sat down reading the messages that Thandika and I exchanged in December 2019 and early in January 2020. I turned my attention to the selfies we had taken with Thandika on December 9, 2019 in Nairobi, over, first, several cups of tea and, later, several beers (with me on my usual red wine, which he helped select, and him on Kenyan Tusker).

### Love of data and objectivity

Several reasons made me counter-check the sad news about Thandika's death. We had been friends since the 1990s. In my interactions with him, I learnt the need to check and counter-check data and information irrespective of the source. Thandika was one person whose dexterity with data remain unparalleled. He did not believe in using data without verifying its objectivity as well

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as the manner in which the data was assembled. He could literally 'torture' data to get facts by comparing different sets and sources. Triangulation – if you may – was a major issue of concern to him. This is what I learnt from him especially at the time of finalizing my PhD studies at Copenhagen's Centre for Development Research (CDR) where he came for research fellowship around 1997.

The second reason for counter-checking the sad news about Thandika was personal. At midnight of November 23, 2019, exactly 00:08 am, I received a message from Thandika. The message read: 'Are you in Nairobi the first 12 days of December?' I immediately replied and said: "Hi Prof: yes I will be; let us keep in touch!" This was the usual way we communicated for a number of years especially when he Joined the London School of Economics. He would send students for field-work to Kenya. Before doing so, he would send me a message asking whether I am around. He would then let me know a student will be coming to see me. And the students he sent to speak to me or seek advice were the type you would love to have around you

for long. They have been brilliant and schooled in 'torturing data' Thandika style.

### Coffee shop or beer bar – the embarrassing choice

Our meeting on December 9, 2019 was also special in a way. He asked me where we would meet in the Westlands part of Nairobi and I could not immediately pick a place. I knew he had been unwell, and I was not sure whether I should take him where we would have a cup of coffee and meal or a place for a drink. I decided a Java restaurant which he loved quite well.

Thandika was open to conversations and especially conversations based on research data, and this meeting happened to be one of such conversations. The meeting over coffee was one of the best I ever had with him. He was finalizing his manuscript on his passionate topic. He was analysing new trends in Africa's development. Many of us certainly know that he was always very creative in the use of data and would find innovative solutions using data that was in the hands of many. In our conversation, I would see his fresh ideas in examining Africa's development challenges and proffering innovative policy solutions.

The manuscript he discussed with me had data on Africa's growth and development from the 1960s to 2019. He called one of the graphs a 'killer graph' because he was able

to examine growth factors from the 1970s to the present. He was of the view that the factors that fuelled Africa's growth in the 1970s are very different from the factors that have been accelerating Africa's growth from the late 2000s period. He identified the service sector and – in some instances the ICT sectors – as responsible for contemporary growth. He argued that these would not have sound impact on Africa's development. This is the argument he wanted me to critique once he was through with the draft.

Thandika was a man of humour. There was an instance in one particular conference in Nairobi where a speaker could not pronounce Thandika's second name, Mkandawire. Thandika simply made it easy for him by telling him to pronounce it in "Mkanda Wire" (*mkanda* is Swahili for rope; and *wire* is the metal thread/rod). This left everyone laughing but easy to pronounce.

He was humorous also whenever he wanted to say something he was sure to pinch. He was humorous even when talking about serious and personal issues. After our coffee, he suddenly asked me: Karuti, I did not know you would bring me to a coffee shop! When did you think I stopped taking the Kenyan Tusker? Of course, I had chosen the coffee shop as a venue because, I thought, I was being considerate. He had had cancer treatment and I thought we should do something light. He replied that the cancer had remained in remission for a while. But in his usual genius way of addressing even the most difficult subjects, he quickly added 'But you know these things change...remission may be temporary or permanent...'.<sup>1</sup>

We proceeded to a different restaurant for a Kenyan beer;

and my red wine which he had the pleasure of selecting for me. I dropped him late in the night at his apartment. I was still having a sense of guilt on my side because we stayed long at night.

### **Influence on African Scholarship**

Sometimes in 1997, Thandika came to Copenhagen for a research fellowship just after his tenure at CODESRIA. It is here at the CDR that I came to really understand and admire the immeasurable amount of support he would lend me and other younger scholars. He had come work with among others our friend and leading Africanist, Peter Gibbon, a friend who was also my supervisor.

Thandika arrived in Copenhagen and had immediate intellectual impact. He had the ability to see things that Danish Africanists could not see. In fact, in some discussion, there was a question on why African scholars were no longer writing as they did in the previous decade and why they were not influencing policy thinking. Thandika simply walked the discussion through the turns and crises of higher education, neo-liberalism and impact on scholarship, and the significance of politics on university education. Again he showed his ability to look at Africa with freshness when he pointed to them two simple facts. One, the consultancy 'industry,' including that of the Danes and Swedes (his home), had drained universities of talents that should have been used for research. This was the basis of his CDR working paper, 'Notes on Consultancy and Research and Development Research in Africa.'<sup>1</sup> Second, he argued, the generation of African leaders that was implementing the neo-liberal Structural Adjustment

Programmes in Africa (SAPs) did not have an understanding of the role of higher education in Africa's development. To him, the first generation of leaders such as Julius Nyerere in Tanzania and Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana had a good understanding of this role especially because many of them were educated and had peasantry background (these challenges were later well addressed in a book he edited and published by CODESRIA.<sup>2</sup> He did point out that there was a quest to build a developmental state in Africa that would play the role of building institutions, but this effort was increasingly undermined by restructuring efforts forced by the West. In subsequent discussions, Thandika emphasised to many that the crisis of state's role in development in Africa could not be fully understood by use of neo-patrimonial theories. He pointed out that neopatrimonialism lacked explanatory ability and could not explain the challenges Africa was facing.<sup>3</sup>

I am indebted to Thandika in another respect. We had a habit of occasionally going for simple lunch meals or going for a drink in the evenings. Again nothing fascinated Thandika more than research ideas. One of the evenings, we discussed my research work, the politics of land in Kenya. Before I could end explaining what my main research question was, he immediately quipped: why is land such an issue many years after independence? Where are the large farms that the colonial settlers occupied in the white highlands? This of course led me to poring through the records – and seeing new perspectives in every page I turned.

With a quick review of the data on large farms, I realized that the land question is a political

question and whose solution does not lie in titling or market solution. By then, Thandika had already consolidated his arguments on the paper on 'Crises Management and the Making of Choiceless Democracies' as well as a paper on Malawi's 'agriculture, employment and labour'.<sup>4</sup> Our discussions around these stressed the primacy of the state and highlighted struggles for democratic reforms as central issues in understanding the state of development on the continent.

It was while in Denmark that Thandika was approached to apply for the post of Director at United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). No other African had held this post before and it was evident that regional blocs, including South East Asia, and some European countries were lobbying for their candidates. We had long discussions on what to do and how to do it but, trust me, Thandika does not lobby. It was left to his credentials to speak for him. His writings publications – spoke for him; in addition to extremely good reference letters by prominent scholars.

He continued to publish and his works remain extensively cited on Africa's development. I have included his works in the courses I teach and usually find it refreshing going back to his publications whenever I want to refresh thoughts on Africa's development. In fact, one time I came to learn that my students often joked that one could not be my friend without citing Thandika Mkandawire's works.

## IDS and CODESRIA

Every time we met, Thandika would ask about the state of research at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi, where I am based.

He was indeed very happy when we met in Copenhagen and learnt that I was based at IDS. This is because of many reasons. First, as he told me and explained during the 15th CODESRIA General Assembly, IDS (Nairobi) and CODESRIA have an organic relationship. The life of both institutions was quite intertwined. CODESRIA has origins anchored in IDS and other development studies centres in Africa.<sup>5</sup>

Thandika explained that in the early 1970s, the directors of development research centres in Africa met several times in Bellagio, Italy, with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation. But the African directors of development research institutes, including the then IDS Director, Dharam Ghai, decided to meet more regularly because they had everything in common. They began to convene as Conference of Directors of Economic and Social Research Institute (CODESRIA). The meetings were generally informal and aimed at sharing information and research ideas on the state of development in their respective regions. They met annually and decided to rotate the hosting of the meetings, moving every year from one region to another. Over time, however, Samir Amin, the eminent and quintessential intellectual, decided to host the 'Conference of Directors' at the UN Centre where he was the Director – the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning (IDEP) in Dakar. After getting a 'permanent home' the conference transformed into a Council, the present-day Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA).

With this history, Thandika would always ask me about the state of development research at the IDS and the challenges we face.

When he learnt that I had been appointed the Director of IDS, he immediately wanted to know what help I required from his end; and whether there was room for the public debates similar to the "Kenya Debate" that IDS convened in the 1970s. In our meeting of December 9, he specifically asked me to plan for his 'coming to IDS' to give a public lecture in March/April 2020. He had requested that I pass this message and greetings to old friends, Prof. Peter Anyang' Nyong'o; Prof. Michael Chege; and Prof. Winnie Mitullah. We had agreed that I would do so – begin convening public intellectual debates – and that I would reach out to CODESRIA to add value to these debates. On January 11, 2020, I received another message from Thandika reminding me of our drink and discussion. I remember I was awaiting his manuscript. And he was awaiting the big debate at IDS in March/April, 2020.

Poor me. How I wish we can stop death! Thandika Mkandawire's passing is not easy to just accept on my part. He has left a mark on the academy and his influence will remain for ever in our social science texts on Africa. I truly feel that his mark on African scholarship is indelible.

My heartfelt condolences to his wife Kaarina, his family and many friends across the globe.

Farewell Thandika!

Farewell my mentor!

Farewell my friend.

## Notes

1. Mkandawire, Thandika. "Notes on Consultancy and Research in Africa," Copenhagen: Centre for Development Research (CDR) Working paper, 1998.



2. Mkandawire, Thandika. *African intellectuals: rethinking politics, language, gender, and development*, Dakar and London: CODESRIA in association with Zed Books, 2005.
3. See for instance, Mkandawire, Thandika. "Neopatrimonialism and the Political Economy of Economic Performance in Africa: Critical Reflections". *World Politics*. Vol. 67, No. 3, p. 563-612, 2015.
4. Mkandawire, Thandika. "Crisis Management and the Making of 'Choiceless Democracies' in Africa," in Richard Joseph, ed., *The State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa*, Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999, p. 119-36 and Mkandawire, Thandika. "Agriculture, Employment and Poverty in Malawi." Harare, Zimbabwe : ILO/SAMAT Policy PA Series, 1999.
5. See the video here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyUkq09U9hc&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyUkq09U9hc&feature=emb_title)