

## Thandika Mkandawire: A Tribute

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“I’m kinda weary”, is how Thandika Mkandawire suggested I remember his surname when we met for the first time in Dakar in the early 1990s at a CODESRIA workshop on Reflections on Development. He was the Executive Secretary at the time, but shunned the grand chauffeur-driven pomp which usually accompanied his seniority. Instead he drove around Dakar in a small beaten-up French car. I was immediately struck by his endearing modesty and even though he was an extraordinarily busy man, he always gave you the sense that he had time for you. Hence, he was not only respected, but also loved by all of us who were mentored by him. I always felt enormously privileged to be in his company – his effervescent energy, his alive intellect, his wit and of course his *joie de vivre* were all infectious. We are inspired by him and we must honour his memory by continuing his scholarly search for solutions to

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our multifarious continental problems. It is impossible to do justice to Thandika’s oeuvre in such a short tribute. What follows is an attempt to capture a few vignettes of our interaction over the last thirty years which I hope demonstrate not only his breadth of scholarly and political interests but also his personal warmth.

Thandika, as he was widely known, dreamed of setting up a Centre for Reflection for senior African scholars in his fatherland, Malawi, but his standpoint however, was invariably pan-African. While recognising the fact that the colonial borders had not changed in any substantial way since independence, his search was for an African

perspective of and by the continent in its entirety. With his encyclopaedic knowledge of the continent, he managed to embrace everybody from the furthest nooks and crannies of rural Africa to the bustling urban environments where he was most at home. Thandika was, above all, a man of ideas. More than anything, else he loved to engage in debate and discussion and always had an angle that he could back up with his prodigious evidential knowledge of virtually everything, from political economy, to art and music, to history, culture and language. In particular he challenged dominant global discourses about Africa, many of which are informed by deeply racist attitudes parading as scholarly works. He eschewed these stereotypes and instead offered penetrating analyses grounded in African experiences, invariably connected with an abiding commitment to Africa’s development in all its diversity.

The very fact that everybody addressed Thandika by his first name speaks volumes about the manner in which he challenged the stultifying hierarchies in much of African academia. For him, it was not a matter of where you stood on the ladder at your university, as a junior lecturer, or senior professor, a dean or even a vice chancellor. What mattered was the force of your ideas and how you could marshal evidence and theory into an argument. He was thus much more than a mentor; he was an intellectual companion.

Thandika's father was Malawian and his mother was Zimbabwean. Born in Zimbabwe in October 1940, he spent much of his early childhood as well as part of his adult life there and in Zambia following his migrant father. Later, after assuming Malawian citizenship, he was imprisoned a number of times, before going into exile in Sweden where he became a citizen, in line with his broadly social democratic approach to political economy.

The rich tapestry of Thandika's life requires a detailed intellectual biography, not only for his role in shaping ideas about Africa's development, but also in institution building globally. Starting off as a teenage journalist in Malawi to being a student of economics in the US, to entering the realm of academia in Stockholm as an economics lecturer, to the decade as Executive Secretary of CODESRIA in Dakar, to his Directorship of UNRISD and finally to the chair of African Development at the London School of Economics, Thandika has made an inestimable impact. Younger scholars need to appreciate the full might of his ideas as well as the widespread influence of the institutions he built which only a

lengthy all-encompassing account can accomplish.

Following the Reflections on Development workshop in Dakar, I was in close contact with Thandika concerning the *South African Sociological Review (SASR)*. In the wake of the demise of apartheid, there was a flurry of mergers in professional associations. Sociology was not untouched by this euphoria. Consequently the previously whites-only and apartheid-supporting Suid Afrikaanse Sosiologiese Vereniging (SASOV) merged with the anti-apartheid and non-racial, Association for Sociologists in Southern Africa (ASSA) to form the South African Sociological Association (SASA) in 1993. Since the merger effectively meant the jettisoning of the foundations of both associations and the formation of a new active intellectual enterprise, I approached Thandika about the possibility of dropping the "South" to form instead an *African Sociological Review (ASR)* into which the SASR could be incorporated. Thandika's response was, "Give me a proposal, and if the idea is good, we'll find the money for it". Within a week I gave him a proposal and that's how the *African Sociological Review* was established, with his support and stewardship through the various CODESRIA Boards and Committees. One of my treasured memories, a few years later, is Thandika praising the ASR as having become the "flagship of CODESRIA" even though it had been his encouragement and continued interest in the journal that had allowed it flourish, especially as a platform for intellectual arguments.

Our paths crossed several times at various CODESRIA meetings, workshops and General Assemblies. In April 2007, the Humanities Faculty of Rhodes University

awarded him a Senior Doctorate which is reserved for work that according to the Rhodes Calendar of 2020 "...constitute(s) a distinguished contribution to the advancement of knowledge in that field". We are grateful to Jimi Adesina for encouraging Thandika to put forward a selection of his work for examination. The Faculty selected five external examiners from Africa, Asia and Europe and their reports were unanimously in favour of the award of the degree. The prestige of this accomplishment is evident in the fact that in the 114 year history of the university only two senior doctorates have been awarded in the Humanities Faculty. I was Dean of the Faculty at the time and to present Thandika for the conferment of the degree is etched in my memory.

Having ensured that the CODESRIA foundations were firmly rooted after leading the institution for a decade, from 1986 to 1996, Thandika proceeded to become the Director of UNRISD where he transformed the research agenda towards a new broadside against dominant thinking in development, one linking social policy directly to emancipatory outcomes for the masses, captured in the notion of inclusive social policy. Premised on the Nordic experience, Thandika posited that it was imperative for Africa's development to be democratically grounded. As late industrialisers the Nordic experience was vital for the continent and yet it was not integrated into development thinking at the time.

While at UNRISD Thandika launched a research project entitled "Financing Social Policy", and he approached me to do a paper on pensions in South Africa. Basically, he was interested in establishing whether pension funds could be employed in development

as had happened in Finland in particular. “But I know nothing about pensions” was my retort. “You’ll learn” he said and so began a fascinating encounter with a brand-new research area into the role of pensions in development. I will forever remain grateful to him for prodding me in this direction of understanding South Africa’s political economy and its prospects for development. He mentored me along the way, suggesting readings and generally introducing me to new angles of research. I relished the opportunities this engagement with him opened up for me.

CODESRIA hosted a commemorative conference in Lilongwe, Malawi in April 2016 under the theme, “Thinking African, Epistemological Issues: Celebrating the Life and Work of Thandika Mkandawire” in Thandika’s honour. It was also the occasion to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Kampala Declaration on Academic Freedom. I felt very fortunate to be present and used the occasion to highlight some of the many quotable quotes from Thandika’s prodigious corpus, which I have used and in some instances, even over-used, to demonstrate the wide impact of his thought. I recall a few here to provide some context. One example is, “(W)e are probably the only part of the world about which it is legitimate to publish without reference to local scholarship”.<sup>1</sup> At the time he was referring specifically to the so-called Kenya Debate about the role of the indigenous bourgeoisie in development in the context of global capitalism. More recently, he broadened this insight to include other African countries as well. Thus, as another example, in an interview with Kate Meagher published in *Development and Change* he said, “It’s still quite possible to write a whole book on

Nigeria with no reference to Nigerian scholars”.<sup>2</sup>

Lamenting the consequences of the lack of dialogue between scholars in the North and the South, provides further examples when Thandika says, “Any student of Africa is confronted by two research communities that rarely interact. This shows up in the hiatus between the currency of topics and the datedness of the bibliography in African writing on the one hand, and the dated content and current biographies of ‘Northern’ writers on the other hand. A lot is lost in this gap”.<sup>3</sup>

As far as the engagement with the state is concerned, Mkandawire makes the pointed statement that one of our big problems is the “failure of the political class to establish a productive and organic rapport with their own intelligentsia/intellectuals” and that across the continent, only in Algeria and in apartheid South Africa did such an organic link develop between the two.

In July 2015, Thandika published a far-reaching Review Article in *World Politics* entitled “Neopatrimonialism and the Political Economy of Economic Performance in Africa: Critical Reflections”<sup>4</sup> in which he provided a stinging critique of this so-called school of thought in the study of Africa. In response to this article, as editor of the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies (JCAS)*, I organised a Colloquium in conjunction with the Human Sciences Research Council on African Perspectives on Global Corruption using Thandika’s article as a centrepiece. While his article offered a crushing critique of neopatrimonialism as an explanation for Africa’s poor economic performance, it did not directly offer an alternative analysis

of corruption as one of the supposedly major factors. The proceedings of the colloquium were published in *JCAS* Volume 36 Issue 4 of the journal in 2018. It leads with a wide-ranging interview with Thandika conducted by Nimi Hoffman, one of the journal’s co-editors, in which Thandika gives a full explanation for why neo-patrimonialism is so deeply problematic.<sup>5</sup>

The most recent issue of *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* is a special issue on Zimbabwe and it leads with an article by Thandika in which he offers a comprehensive account of the difficulties experienced in Zimbabwe’s transition.<sup>6</sup> He recognises the extreme polarisation in scholarship on Zimbabwe and points to how this has led to simplistic analyses of its failure. Instead, Thandika argues that a fuller understanding of Zimbabwe’s recent history must take account of the multiple (five) transitions it has gone through over the last three decades and how this transition overload has weighed very heavily on the country. The article is vintage Thandika, always mindful of the broader context and eschewing the easy ahistorical answers usually proffered for Zimbabwe’s predicament. It is indeed a great pity that he will not see it in print; nonetheless, it will contribute to the huge archive he has bestowed on us. Furthermore in its own right it will live on as yet another lesson on how to avoid “bad social science” which he so deplored throughout his life. We are very grateful to Kaarina, Andre and Joshua for signing the Author Publishing Agreement (APA) forms on his behalf.

Thandika’s emphasis on historical context induced him to develop a periodisation of various generations of African scholars and he counts himself as part of the first

generation of students who were “airlifted” to study at universities abroad, mainly in the USA. The post-colonial university scene is vastly different to those early days, but it is well to remember this evolution now that Thandika’s passing counts as the end of an era.

I wish to end this tribute to Thandika on a personal note. Thandika was my intellectual mentor, but we also spent many hours after official meetings continuing our conversations, often leading to even greater insights. He was not averse to having fun and was an enormously attractive man, especially away from the stiffness of formal meetings. It was as though Thandika cherished these periods even more, where his creativity was let loose, bursting through the volleys of articulation of the raconteur. And despite this ‘lightness’ he did not countenance sloppy thinking. Thandika also loved music, seeking especially a deeper appreciation of the diversity of African music. This love shone through, whether it was in the backyard nightclubs or at the Maynardville Amphitheatre in Cape Town towards the end of 2015 where I met him at an Abdulla Ibrahim concert. It is not surprising at all that one of his sons is a musician.

We have lost one of our intellectual giants and we feel bereft, but he will be the first to implore us to study and appreciate our continent in ways which allow for our voices to be heard, not via slogans and cheap rhetoric, but instead, by deep penetrating analyses, grounded in the African experience.

## Notes

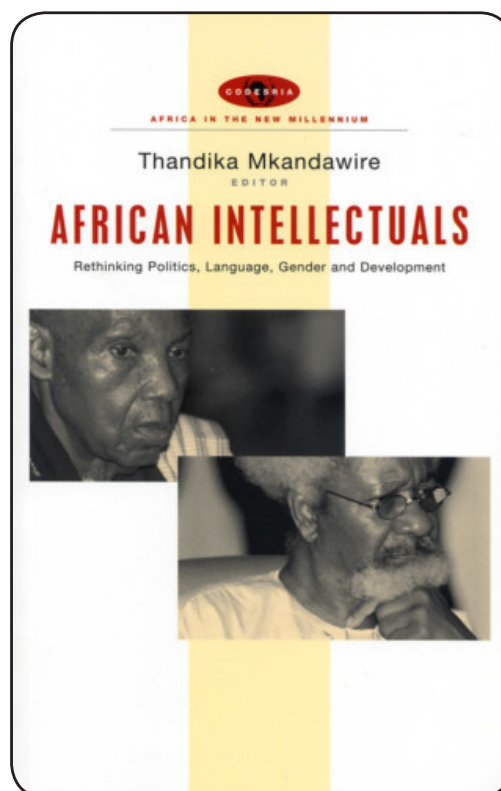
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## African Intellectuals Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development

Edited by Thandika Mkandawire



In this thought-provoking overview of the history, fate and possible future roles of African intellectuals both within Africa and in the African Diaspora nearly half a century on from Independence, some of the Continent's most eminent thinkers discuss the issues at stake. Their starting point is the uniquely difficult circumstances confronting intellectuals: regimes intolerant of independent debate, economies in sharp decline, societies wracked by violent conflict, and official languages different from people's mother tongues. Africa has experienced, compared with Asia or Latin America, much higher rates of emigration of its intelligentsia to North America and Europe, as well as frequent displacement from home countries to other parts of the continent.