



Thandika's Voice Will Keep Talking to us

Paying tribute to Thandika is a singularly difficult task considering that he touched many people who in turn hold different perspectives about his life and work. Mine is a small footnote that shares selective experiences of how he influenced me, indirectly and directly. The risks of attempting to draw an accurate assessment of Thandika are many, ranging from the possibility of errors of judgement to faulty evaluations. These difficulties are compounded by a lack of very close personal contacts of an individual who rose to prominence in the late 1970s while I was still learning to read and write at primary school. But I can confidently rely on some landmark encounters as firm points of reference to one of the most intelligent and prolific intellectuals, whose presence I started to feel

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in early 1990s as a young and upcoming scholar at university in Kenya. I, together with some other nascent social scientists, admired with awe the way Thandika and his colleagues at CODESRIA articulated some of the emerging and trending issues at the time. We were inspired to pursue a career in academics.

While I have always been an avowed admirer of Thandika's remarkable optimism of the future of Africa, it is impossible to attempt to present a complete picture of his intellectual philosophy. I shall cite as examples four of what I consider the most

important viewpoints, though not systematic and comprehensive, and speak briefly on each of these encounters, the impressions they formed and the impact they left in my intellectual life.

Before meeting Thandika physically, I had come across his exalted name and brilliant ideas in the prestigious and progressive *CODESRIA Bulletin* that analyzed and explained with honesty and courage, and in simple terms, the African situation. The great experience of reading the publication was instrumental in raising my awareness of a wide spectrum of themes of African history and development, and the canvas of so many different aspects of the continent's reality. With its variety of content, diversity of inspiration, hunger for reality and divergent points of view, the *CODESRIA Bulletin*, I must ad-

mit, had special relevance and fundamental influence in my formative intellectual years. It had a critical and lasting impact on my productive years with CODESRIA being the institution which has turned out to be my richest source of inspiration dealing with real situations of Africa and its institutions.

Thandika's seminal piece "Three Generations of African Academics: A Note," *CODESRIA Bulletin* (1995) marked a turning point in my desire and curiosity to know him better. The impression I got was of someone who was creative, imaginative and enormously enthusiastic about the role of intellectuals in African development. His deep, open and genuine concern for the intellectual development of African scholars like myself, and his breathtaking knowledge and realistic understanding of the state of affairs on the continent inspired and influenced me in profound ways.

I was privileged to join CODESRIA as a young lecturer in the mid-1990s and in subsequent years participated in some of the important activities and events that Thandika initiated or contributed to building. These included a number of Institutes; anniversaries and General Assemblies. CODESRIA and its various publications became and remain special spaces of encountering big ideas and debates about African development. Courageous explorations, brilliant explications and intelligent analysis of development issues from different perspectives have become the rock and foundation for some of the most notable social science and humanities research at CODESRIA. The way scholars of different backgrounds spark provocative debates and articulate their persuasions by unsettling disciplinary borders both epistemologically and

methodologically present us with an idea of which intellectual path Thandika really cared about and was committed to.

As part of the generation of African intellectuals who were passionate and optimistic about African development, Thandika was a wonderful person with a huge presence and a very sharp critical intellect. He emerged as a formidable and prominent proponent of Afro-optimism and had a very clear voice in the debates on the future of the continent. He offered probing constructive insights with positive formulations. He was an active source of strength and one of the most significant and distinguished intellectuals who influenced my academic trajectory earlier in my career.

I was motivated in my academic life by a compelling and overwhelming genuine admiration for Thandika's intelligence. His taste for discussing Africa that engages the present with an originality, a coherence and a radical form of perception that embodies traditional values of intellectualism such as fidelity, thematic resonance, a unity of vision, a realized integration of elements and a propitious choice and use of language influenced my thinking a great deal.

Thandika's thinking and ferocious intellect were reflected in the range of his extraordinary writing that was characterized by a penetrating analytic force that made a lasting impression on the reader. His breadth of knowledge and capacity for alternative thinking of bringing together diverse insights from different disciplinary fields was admirably enriching. This strong crossing of boundaries, this blurring of limits, this questioning of categories and this challenging of old disciplinary divides

provoked my interest to embrace new possibilities and experiment with overcoming the watertight separation between epistemologies and methodologies. It aroused my curiosity and nourished my interest in close reading of forms, objects, and texts of knowledge, how they intersect with each other and the creative dialogues they generated.

Thandika's immense contribution to building CODESRIA into one of Africa's largest and most vibrant intellectual institutions dealing with the development of the social sciences and humanities has shaped my understanding of the disciplines and impacted my outlook in so many ways. The character of CODESRIA and the creative manner of analyzing the inner logic of the influence of events on ideas, and ideas on events from a variety of multidisciplinary perspectives is unique. I believe I speak for many of us who are most indebted to CODESRIA for shaping our thinking with fresh inspiration and influencing our ways of dealing with the interplay of ideas and events from the whole spectrum of social sciences and humanities.

My membership on the Executive Committee of CODESRIA provided yet another opportunity to interact closely with Thandika during the internal review process of the Council in 2015-2016. Three very important activities were to be undertaken simultaneously: review of the intellectual agenda; reform of the governance system and revamping of the membership of the community. While responsibility for the exercise was vested in a tireless and devoted small group of intelligent and accomplished social scientists, I single out Thandika, not just because he was the chair, but for his significant intellectual contribution through discussion,

writing and interviewing. In selecting who to chair, the decision by the EC to propose Thandika to guide the exercise was not difficult: Not only was he acquainted with CODESRIA, but he had a thorough understanding of major and most important aspects of contemporary Africa as illustrated by his critical, judicious and illuminating comments of a large area of issues and events on the continent and beyond. His knowledge, faith and interest in both the continent and the community were great assets we desired to draw from.

Thandika led three small advisory teams of social scientists to remind us that the needed reforms were necessary to ensure that CODESRIA does not remain an outmoded institution. Their submissions were not investigations but rather analytical reports based on facts collected from many sources. Their purpose was to understand the extent and nature of issues at hand in order that responsible discussion may take place unencumbered by misunderstanding and distortion.

Throughout the review process, I came to truly appreciate Thandika as an immensely gifted, highly distinguished and a committed Pan-Africanist intellectual who devoted his time to realistic observation, objective description, acute analysis and constructive criticism of African society and its institutions. His intelligent reflections and comprehensible arguments on the nature and situation on the continent, its institutions and of their potentials and possibilities convinced us that CODESRIA needed reorientation as part of self-renewal towards intellectual maturity. Original in thought and highly efficacious, he was brilliant, sensitive and imaginative in reminding us that

the EC had a noble opportunity to demonstrate that change must not be feared but welcomed and embraced as self-rejuvenation.

Besides gracious and generous wise counsel to the EC, Thandika's enormously valuable experience, historical memory and insights were very helpful throughout the exercise. It was not just his ideas that commanded respect and praise, but the impressive way the noble sentiments were presented with passion and principle that engaged our interest and fascination.

He argued that reforms are designed to make CODESRIA a better institution for the community, staff and development partners. Historically, the growth and vibrancy of CODESRIA has occurred around a series of reforms and that each one has thrust the Council forward. CODESRIA is bred on intellectual engagements that allow for constructive dissent and its cause is strengthened when different opinions are allowed to spur its growth and survival.

Triggered by changes in society and fuelled by a continuing yearning for improvement, a current of the need for renewal surges through CODESRIA so very often. The quest for reforms and innovations was a venerable tradition in the history of CODESRIA, and there were lessons of experience of vigorous self-renewal to learn from where the Council had undergone profound changes in conception of itself and the world in which it operates.

By confronting relevant issues and events timely, honestly and in a just manner, CODESRIA has always sided with rapid institutional evolution. Hence, carrying out necessary reforms should be viewed as a legitimate method of produc-

ing needed institutional change for progressive transformation and facilitating positive change. He reminded us that it was ironic how many of those changes remained peaceful and unnoticed by many.

There were worthwhile lessons to be learnt about the fascinating, interesting and incredible history of CODESRIA, especially its ideological roots and the need to address itself to fundamental questions of development. Thandika counselled members of the EC to devote their energies in the most imaginative way to make CODESRIA resurgent in structure, form and subject in the service of the community. The EC must understand the force driving the desired change and it has a solemn duty to initiate positive actions.

My other encounter with Thandika was when he was chosen to chair a search committee tasked to assist the EC in its responsibility to recruit a new Executive Secretary. In order not to breach the confidentiality of the search committee and deliberations thereof, I will not discuss details of its work but rather focus on attributes that Thandika displayed as chair and which offer vital lessons of experience.

Based on his knowledge and experience of leadership at CODESRIA and other institutions elsewhere, the choice of Thandika was meant to make the search process a positive and effective one, and also bring a higher level of objectivity. Thandika was well qualified to chair the committee because of the high regard and respect he commanded from diverse constituencies. Although he was busy at the London School of Economics, he accepted the responsibility and created and devoted time to the search and selection process and assisted the EC in its hiring responsibilities.

With calm authority and reassuring insight, Thandika was emphatic that both effectiveness and success of CODESRIA depended on quality professional leadership and management practices. Hence, it was imperative to apply best principles and practices in recruiting the ES and fairly select the most qualified and talented candidate, ready and willing to head an institution of CODESRIA's calibre and one who would contribute to making it the progressive and innovative community of scholars that will impact positively on the development of Africa. He argued that quality leadership is a fundamental force in achieving the organization's mandate and a competent ES has a key role to play in setting direction, creating a positive culture and supporting and enhancing staff motivation and commitment necessary to foster and promote success.

I was particularly impressed in the way the whole exercise was conducted in a timely and professional manner to generate a strong pool of candidates and which the search committee played a major role in screening and evaluation. The committee report and recommendations had details that added value and contributed significantly to better hiring decisions by the EC.

The last time I interacted with Thandika was in March 2017 at the London School of Economics Africa Summit Research Conference where I was privileged and honoured to make a presentation at a panel he chaired. My paper was on the strategic importance of Kiswahili language as an important social institution in the process of mobilization and empowerment of the citizens of the East African Community for regional integration and sustainable development.

Not the all-seeing all-knowing dismissive critic type, Thandika's critical analysis of the role of language in general in regional integration and Pan-Africanism was a brilliant synthesis of Africa's linguistic dependence that is often not noticed and addressed in development communication. His comments were not just an off-hand insight and evaluation of my presentation, but provided me with the most comprehensive, extremely perceptive and helpful criticism by pointing out the intellectuals of the generation of Cheikh Anta Diop who staked their reputations on the importance of local languages in African development.

The foregoing encounters with Thandika are some of the high points of my intellectual life. I never failed to learn something every time I met him or his ideas. He was a dedicated and inspiring individual who has impacted entire generations of scholars. He had an affirmative attitude towards Africa's prospects and destiny. He was a scholar with a

sense of mission towards Africa and his obsessive fascination, love, compassion and hope for the continent, as transposed into the various discourses he engaged in, was in favour of more imaginative ways of rendering its existence and that of its institutions. This he did personally, patiently and passionately with power and persuasion.

No complete, critical and genuine discussion of the intellectual history of CODESRIA can ignore Thandika Mkandawire. He has lived long enough and the reality of his life has been determined by the limitations only time imposes on any man. His popular and omnipresent stature in CODESRIA and our lives will not be obliterated by death. His death should inspire us to always aspire to emulate the many impressive things he has accomplished for CODESRIA. Thandika's one way of life has left to the other side, but his spirit lives; for death is life. His voice will keep talking to us.

