

Running While Others Walked: Remembering Thandika Mkandawire

Rama Salla Dieng interviews Adebayo Olukoshi** on the life and work of Thandika Mkandawire. Olukoshi shares memories of how Thandika helped to shape development thinking in Africa and beyond.*

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On 9 April 2020, I had the privilege to have a conversation with Professor Adebayo Olukoshi, Director of Africa and West Asia of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA International) on his friendship and comradeship with Thandika Mkandawire. The interview was also a ‘reunion’ with my former boss, as I worked with Professor Olukoshi when he was the Director of IDEP (the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning) and he contributed to my intellectual development between 2010 and 2015.

Rama Salla Dieng (RSD): How, when and where did you first meet Thandika Mkandawire?

Adebayo Olukoshi (AO): In 1983, CODESRIA (the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in

Rama Salla Dieng
Centre of African Studies,
University of Edinburgh

Adebayo Olukoshi
Director, IDEA
(Africa and West Asia office)

Africa) organised a conference on the economic crisis then facing African countries at my alma mater: Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria. That was the first time I heard about Thandika Mkandawire. Cadman Atta Mills who led the CODESRIA delegation mentioned his name during the debates. CODESRIA was one of the leading research institutions of social sciences on the continent, and inevitably, I connected with them.

The conference was a reflection on the structural nature of the economic crisis in African countries following austerity measures recommended by International Financial institutions (IFIs), and how they could diversify their economies. The questions being asked then were whether the crisis was a temporary hitch due to the neoliberal onslaught or a longer-term crisis.

After my doctorate at Leeds and subsequent return to Nigeria, I was invited to be part of a network set-up by CODESRIA, first on a project on social movements in Africa coordinated by Mahmood Mamdani, Ernest Wamba Dia Wamba and Jacques Depelchin. Later, CODESRIA organised a Pan-African conference at NOVOTEL in Dakar on Struc-

tural Adjustment in Africa. For me, there were two striking insights from Thandika Mkandawire's presentation on Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) in Africa, and their role in the broader neoliberal agenda. Firstly, his introduction was illuminating and far from being just protocol and ceremonials as was the case of such presentations especially in Nigeria. Thandika offered very substantive comments in his welcoming remarks about why we needed to mobilise African thinking on the question of SAPs and how we could interrogate current trajectories and influence future policy directions. He spoke to the heart of the matter and was not immersed in ceremonials. Secondly, despite being the then Executive Secretary of CODESRIA, he stayed with all the invited participants throughout the conference and presented his own paper [Thandika was Executive Secretary from 1985 to 1996]. He highlighted that the thinking on SAPs was a battlefield of policy and power. Therefore, it was empowering and inspiring that he asked for comments from us after his presentation. I presented a paper at that conference after Thandika's.

Back in Lagos, I received a phone call from him as he followed up on the conference and asked me to set-up an internal peer-review committee in order to help publish the conference papers. This will later become our edited book on The Politics of Structural Adjustment in Africa: Between Liberalisation and Oppression, published in 1995 by CODESRIA. That was the

beginning of our intellectual association and friendship.

RSD: How would you describe Thandika as a person?

AO: Thandika was versatile, multi-talented, and had a broad knowledge of wide topics. There were hardly any subject, academic, or not, on which Thandika did not have insights to offer. He read extensively about varied themes happening in different parts of the world. He had the ability to capture information from different sources and bring a unique interpretative and analytic perspective on issues pertaining to economic development around the world.

Thandika could not be beaten as a serious scholar, but neither could he be beaten at being a social and sociable comrade. There was a joke at CODESRIA that you needed to have a cut-off point at which you could escape if you planned to spend an evening with Thandika because he was so engaging. He discussed a wide-range of topics including music (from Kora to Youssou Ndour or Baaba Maal), history, agriculture and the arts. I remember going to bed at 5 or 6 am after having dinner with him, only to remember that I had to present a paper a few hours after. At CODESRIA, we used to ask him how he could manage all his responsibilities and always be on time.

RSD: What do you think are the three most important intellectual contributions of Thandika to development thinking in and on Africa?

AO: First, Thandika was of the opinion that a multidisciplinary

lens was necessary in understanding the development trajectory of the African continent. Yet, he also reminded us that we needed to be strong in our own discipline and know it inside out, before going beyond that terrain with our knowledge of other disciplines. Multidisciplinary was not a shortcut for avoiding rigour in analysis but involved drawing insights in order to confront narrowed interpretations of African realities.

Secondly, Thandika insisted that African scholars must not leave the theorization of the development of the continent to anybody. This was something he was simply not ready to accept. Therefore, he always insisted that we invested in the building of theory without being dogmatic so we could bring unique perspectives to the development of the African continent. This was to be done without stigmatising and denigrating the continent. This is something that was replete in the neopatrimonialism, corruption, or the crisis of development literature, which he took issues with. This was eye-opening for us. In addition, he recommended refraining from just observing social and economic events on the surface but to try to understand the logic of the factors at play that produce such outcomes.

Thirdly, he always highlighted the importance of historicising development, and he always tried to analyse development phenomena with a historical perspective, and that's what he did in his own work. For instance, the 1960s and 1970s were described by the World Bank and the IMF as the lost

decades for development in Africa in mainstream development thinking. Thandika showed, with growth figures, that structural adjustment decades were in fact Africa's lost decades, a diversion from development. Just after independence, most African states were faring very well because the leaders, notwithstanding their ideologies, were invested in the theory and practice of development. Yet with SAPs, the majority of them abdicated to the experimentations of the IFIs which they later contested. That was his entry point in joining the debate on developmental states in Africa. He never succumbed to the idea of the impossibility of developmental states in Africa, therefore, the question was never really about their feasibility neither was it about the false dichotomy between developmental and democratic states (as was the case in most South-East Asian states). Authoritarianism was never a viable path, and as a matter of fact, Africa was 'condemned to democracy, in every sense' as he used to say.

RSD: To what extent do you think his thought influenced development policy in Africa?

AO: Thandika influenced economic policy direction on the continent directly and indirectly. In the first case, he was personally invited to be part of many policy brainstorming sessions for example by Thabo Mbeki in South Africa, Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia. And indirectly, he had a huge intellectual following, and many such leaders convinced by his theoretical thinking tried to apply

it while designing key government policies all over Africa.

After some 16 years at CODESRIA, he joined the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and revolutionised its policy research agenda. He shifted the focus from macro-economic indicators to bring the social back in as a central focus of policymaking (especially through development planning), drawing from comparative insights from many parts of the world, including the salutary examples of Scandinavian countries. Learning from the many economic and financial crises including in South America in 1978-79, East Asia in the 1990s, and the great recession, his own unique contribution is that having sound was not incompatible with good economic performance, in fact it aided it.

RSD: Is there a particular lesson you learned from Thandika?

AO: 'Whatever you do, do it with energy, commitment and conviction.' Thandika never came across as off-putting. Though he was hard-working, he was never too serious, he was very approachable, gave his time to people and was always smiling. He never turned people away and engaged with their ideas and thoughts. He made everything he did look so simple and effortless that if you did not know the amount of work involved, you could be mistaken to believe he existed in an atmosphere of pure enjoyment!

As Executive Secretary of CODESRIA, he built a for-

midable reputation for the institute without ever giving the impression of being overwhelmed at any point in time. I had the good fortune of being the Executive Secretary after him, and I asked him how he managed as everyday seemed to involve crisis management. He said: 'Yes, yes that comes with the job. When I asked: 'How did you managed to keep such a calm, friendly and inviting demeanour throughout your tenure? Nobody could have assumed you were dealing with so many challenges.' He answered: 'You have to also understand that as Executive Secretary, you are called on to offer leadership and that requires being able to master challenges in a way that encourages people rather than discourage them.' Thandika was a true leader.

RSD: What is your favourite memory of Thandika?

AO: I have so many memories of him in different settings. Often scholarly and serious, in many other times. Presiding over international events. Memories of him as a researcher in Denmark when I was a researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) in Uppsala. I also have a specific memory of a dinner we had together in Dakar at the beginning of my association with him at CODESRIA. We were then working on editing the book on Between Liberalisation and Oppression: The Politics of Structural Adjustment in Africa. He was very relaxed and I discovered another facet of the man. He was a slow eater who ate intermittently and when his favourite song was being played, he got

up in the middle of the dinner and started dancing. I became very shy as I could not have imagined this side of him, and at the end of the song, he sat down and finished his dinner.

During his time at LSE and at the University of Cape Town (Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance), I never saw him humbled by any challenge in the course of his life.

RSD: How did Thandika impact your life?

AO: Meeting Thandika, at the time I did, allowed me to grow an additional sense of self-confidence. I have been fortunate to have come out of the radical Zaria political economy school which included the likes of Tunde Zack-Williams, Yusuf Bangura, the late Yusuf Bala Usman, younger scholars such as the late Abdul Raufu Mustapha, Jibrin Ibrahim gave me a strong foundation as this radical thinking was comparable in many ways to the Dar es Salaam School. I also had the privilege of doing my PhD at Leeds which was the home of ROAPE. There I met Lionel Cliffe, Ray Bush who was one of his mentees and friends, Morris Szeftel, then at the Leeds School of Economic and Social Affairs, and at CODESRIA I met Thandika, Archie Mafeje, Shahida El-baz, Mahmood Mamdani, Issa Shivji, etc. who we used to call the 'Grandies of CODESRIA.'

In addition, I had the privilege of not only being a co-editor with him, but also following in his footsteps at CODESRIA to maintain this institution as a shining star of social science research; in the process

this meant I learned quite a lot from him. Learning not to be doctrinaire, learning to marshal an argument properly, and learning to listen to others and hearing where they are coming from in terms of theoretical influences.

When I became CODESRIA's Executive Secretary, Thandika came out of his way to spend a couple of days with me in Dakar to reminisce about the CODESRIA journey, the CODESRIA story. You could not have a better mentoring than that. I was intellectually more self-assured after that as I benefitted from his wisdom and stayed in touch with him and sought his advice. He never hesitated to give me his feedback. We are so much poorer now that he has left us. He handled responsibilities in an exemplary fashion. He was an institution builder.

RSD: How can we honour his memory?

AO: We need to ensure that this tradition of critical and engaged scholarship that Thandika represented throughout his life is kept alive in the work that we do and we need that now more than ever. Some of the challenges we have encountered in different contexts require a new generation of scholars who are able to address them, borrowing from his confidence, knowledge, work ethics, and sense of diligence and purpose. His generation, who built CODESRIA, understood what their mission was, now your generation needs to discover yours and fulfil it. We all need to ask what should CODESRIA mean to all of us today? What

type of theorising, organising and institution building do we want? CODESRIA needs to be preserved, as well as all of Thandika's writings. CODESRIA has exhaustively compiled his bibliography and is also surveying his writing that is not in the public domain. I know there are many scholars in my generation, including Jimi Adesina, and others, who are working towards a proper memorialisation of his work. He left an immense intellectual scholarship, that needs to be preserved.

RSD: Thanks, so much Prof for taking the time to have this conversation with me and ROAPE followers. We are grateful.

* **Rama Salla Dieng** is a Senegalese writer, academic and activist. She is currently a Lecturer in African and International Development at the Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh. Rama is the editor of the Talking Back series on roape.net and a member of ROAPE's editorial working group.

** **Adebayo Olukoshi** is the former director of the United Nations African Institute for Economic Development and Planning (IDEP), and the current director of the Africa and West Asia office of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. He is also a member of ROAPE's International Advisory Board.