

On the Question of Theory

A Brief Summary of Some Points Made in Relation to the Question of Theory

Some of the suggested themes of interest for future research direction include global change, environmental change, social policy, knowledge, emerging powers, indigenous knowledge, women; all with Africa at the centre, and a multidisciplinary approach without compromising the disciplines.

Some of the general discussion points made in relation to the above themes, besides questions of administration and funding, also appropriately address the important question of theory. CODESRIA needs to respond to two important issues – theoretical work and publication; and to aid this, putting in place a Visiting Scholars programme (Mohamed Salih). To re-focus and improve on these issues of theory and publication, should CODESRIA be thinking of establishing a policy-working group to replace the existing training methodology workshops? (Ebrima Sall). CODESRIA is limited by the state of universities in Africa, and should decide whether to be a CODESRIA of the masses or of the elites (Aminata Diaw). For this reason, its work is not just training, but to nurture excel-

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lence; not just books, but the content of these books, hence a need to re-organize training for manageability, relevance and critical thinking.

For the work of theory, a research institute is different from a think-tank, and knowledge production should be linked to the purpose of social transformation – contributing to a new episteme. How do we create enduring knowledge in a constantly changing world? If theory is to be African focused and African driven, where do we locate it? In indigenous knowledge production and conserved within that knowledge, and this should be a major project for CODESRIA. Endogeneity is how to theoretically approach Africa's development in the post-neoliberal context (Jimi Adesina). CODESRIA needs a critical series to record what theoretically is being said at each period, that is, a programme of an anthropology/sociology of knowledge or a social science of knowledge in Africa

and around the world. Such a programme would record our ability to analyze and understand Africa as well as the world; analyze epistemic ruptures in theory, new ways of doing things, understand African realities for African relevant theories, and redress the problem of an increased theoretical marginalization of Africa and greater social dispossession, toward a better understanding of new changes. In this way, CODESRIA can be locally grounded and globally relevant.

On theory and policy in bringing research to policy and to public issues, the local, cross-boundary, and global again seem relevant, especially in being able to overcome the limitations of the nation-state in even dealing with the overall Africa (Manthia Diawara). Also in this context is the ghettoization of gender (Sylvia Tamale), and CODESRIA should work on bridging the gap between academic and policy institutions. For example, CODESRIA and ECA, the largest think-tank in Africa should complement each other, and should note the difference between consultancy and policy advising. While consultancy responds to a codified industry, policy-making can make a transformative impact; therefore, research and think-tank should both be

for debate and critical thinking. We should be aware of the commoditization of research as a symptom of neo-liberalism, and therefore the research agenda of CODESRIA should not be negotiable. CODESRIA is for a better world for humanity.

My Thoughts and Proposal on the Question of Theory

Due to the technological revolution, there is a lot of emphasis these days on the easy availability of new ICT, online media and social media and the accompanying access to an immense volume of research and academic material, leading also to an over saturation with information, sometimes called information overload. An aspect of this information bombardment relates to the question of selective reading in academic research, without one feeling left behind or lagging behind. There is a difference between following the trend to be 'current' in quick response, no matter how rushed and disconnected the linking of ideas and research, and the slow and steady picking of one's steps in a continuous path, without the pressure of the immediate here-and-now of a quick response to current events and demands. This is often at the expense of a deeper genealogy or a longer trend of ideas in a theoretical path. Scholarly methods require organizing research material and making a contextual sense of it all, often involving many years of tedious research work and writing. This process seems, to me, quite distinct from the work of quick response. The present challenge might be how to recognize and weigh the merits of these two trends, and if and when necessary to separate or combine them to strengthen the scholarly tradition of advancing and enriching knowledge. These two trends of a deeper knowledge tradition and an immediate quick response pattern can be related to points made and questions raised by our colleagues:

On a Long-term Vision of Where to Take CODESRIA in the Next Period

Fatima Harrak – on the side of a deeper knowledge tradition and continuity – is concerned with what has been achieved, and what to pass on to the new generation, especially new insights. I understand this to mean an assessment of major works and milestones achieved in major thematic projects, and current new insights – certainly building on existing works. This, to me, is the key concern that

contextualizes the work of CODESRIA, and around which all other discussions revolve. It demonstrates knowledge of and confidence in the work that has already been done, and that CODESRIA is poised to test new ideas. This is the core scholarly and intellectual aspect of its work. Other issues can then be compartmentalized and related to this core base or foundation. In this business of academia, we don't really just chance on such an amount of research, but work and build toward a more knowledge-informed and better future.

Some of the other issues are about the material and infrastructural conditions in which research work is done in Africa, compared to global standards. Abdul Raufu Mustapha raises a major concern about where African universities are digitally compared to top universities in the West, particularly in light of increasing market-driven processes of internationalization. Here again, there is the question of CODESRIA defending its core base of knowledge production, while gladly embracing, more and more, the new Information Technology and social media. But then again, the question can be raised about how the speed of this new social media generates more of the quick response pattern at the expense of a deeper knowledge tradition. There is also the problem of influence and accountability in relation to dealing with private businesses and corporations who own and control the new IT and media. A counter-argument might be to strive for more accessibility and openness. Either way, it raises a concern about the politics of knowledge.

The other problem related to poor conditions of research in Africa that perhaps determines the choice of research traditions is addressed by N'Dri Assie Lumumba, who reminds us of the efforts that scholars elsewhere are making to overcome the limitations imposed by poor institutional infrastructure. Cuba, for example, is also facing the problem of neglect of academic institutions, but with resourcefulness is doing well with what it has. Cuba chooses to put her efforts in the kind of research tradition that involves critical thinking. Latin America has, and continues to be a source of inspiration to progressive democratic traditions in the South and the non-aligned movement for self-determination. A bottom-up pedagogy was a core ideological lesson learned

from Latin America. This national approach to popular education and conscientization is different from the national structural deficiencies in African higher educational institutions to cause a research institution like CODESRIA to do basic writing and research training. It is a great source of deep worry and concern to know that all of Africa still does not have free primary education, when we thought that in the twenty-first century, we would be boasting of free secondary education. This is in the category of 'first-things-first', so that our researchers and intellectuals can focus on their work. The effort and energy that CODESRIA puts into this level of training needs to be reassessed within the process of deciding a future direction in the next period of its work in this competitive climate. It involves making a political and strategic decision about its own history; what strategies to carry over, what to discard, and new beneficial challenges to tackle and incorporate in its plans for moving forward in the context of all the issues being raised about the present national and global climate of research work.

Ebrima Sall says that CODESRIA has been a pacesetter. There is no doubt about the cutting-edge work that has been done in CODESRIA. However, I would not agree that the development period has come to an end; hence, a need to reflect and plan a long-term vision of where next to take CODESRIA in the next period. We can give a straightforward answer by providing a list of thematic projects as listed above. There is also the more challenging question of re-setting the ideological button to provide a guideline and direction to maintain the tradition of CODESRIA as a pacesetter. This current period of energized assertiveness, globally articulated in diverse ways, seems to be quite ripe for a renewed independent and cutting-edge vision. A major challenge involves a discourse about theoretical paradigms and their implications within a broad framework. Here, I have in mind, under the global internationalization, the limited regional epistemological libraries within Africa itself that inform our work.

It was a big deal some years ago when Anglophone intellectuals began to check out the works of Francophone intellectuals, and vice versa, and Lusophone African intellectuals to some extent. We can see this interest in the variety of the

ten journals produced by CODESRIA. There is *Africa Development*, a quarterly bilingual social science journal that focuses on issues of the development of society – perhaps the strongest and more frequent of the ten journals. The other journals are mostly published biannually on a variety of subjects that include history; identity, culture and politics with ethnic studies; anthropology; review of social science methodology; sociological review; international affairs; review of books; media review; higher education; and selections for social sciences. All of these journals emphasize a focus on Africa, even when international or co-produced with other research centres elsewhere. Besides topical interests, even extending to the new Asian powers, especially China in Africa, there are provisions for more analytical, critical and theoretical works.

CODESRIA provides a website of thematic bibliography on themes from research workshops, conferences and publications. Roughly, these works can be arranged under two categories to illustrate my point about a deeper knowledge tradition. By this, I mean issues of long-term concern, requiring strategic, continuous deeper reflection, constantly re-visiting the perennial questions, in view or in the context of new social manifestations. The other category is what I refer to as immediate quick response – meaning issues of immediate concern. Under the big theme of secularization, we have:

1. Economics themes (Capitalism, Dependency and Structural Adjustment);
2. Democratization themes: The State, Governance, Social Movements, Conflict Resolution (talking or fighting), Human Rights;
3. Modernization and Development.

All of these themes are dealt with in relation to the state and civil society in African nations, even when examining the questions of Labor, Youth, Citizenship, Intellectuals, Women and Gender. I would think that these are the themes of the big theoretical questions, with a long history of engagement with the theories of secularization that all are still globally grappling with, regardless. A continued focus on these big theoretical questions with a deep history of research in CODESRIA could mark the difference

between CODESRIA and the more recent research institutes and centres.

In the second category of quick response are the more recent targeted themes dealing with specific and immediate policy needs, it seems to me. These themes, under a quick response approach, mostly deal with under-funding, bad management, etc., as for example, Migration, Health, Sports, The Media and ICTs, Higher Education, Sexualities, Music and Art, Security.

What is further needed for where to take CODESRIA in the next period are more empirical and theoretical inputs from a broader framework of regional epistemological libraries within Africa itself? Our works are dominated by the Western Anglophone libraries and intellectuals, and less by the Francophone libraries and intellectuals. There are now calls to incorporate African Arabophone libraries and intellectuals, Lusophone libraries and intellectuals, the global pan-African libraries that include the diasporic extensions of Africa, especially the Caribbean, African American and Latin American libraries and intellectuals, and most importantly the indigenous libraries and intellectuals. How marginalized seasoned scholars that are versed in these other areas of knowledge production that relate to Africa must feel!

A discourse about theoretical paradigms within, between and across these examples of a broad framework of libraries of knowledge production indicated above would be useful if undertaken by the network of scholars associated with CODESRIA. This can be approached through an assessment of individual works done so far, the organic theoretical developments and the journey of these theories – in other words, further application of these theories to new topics and themes, and perhaps more interestingly to interdisciplinary challenges. I can illustrate from my own work by first posing some relevant questions of ‘what’ and ‘how’ of theory. How do we go about developing long-lasting theories from non-Western and non-Eurocentric perspectives for something new and different? How would we go about doing this: a) within disciplines for the depth of knowledge? b) Between and across disciplines (interdisciplinarity) for the insights and the excitement of discourse? c) What do we mean by a progressive-

informed scholarship, as opposed to what? Would this mean as opposed to being politically informed? Is a progressive-informed scholarship the same as a politically informed scholarship? These are the sorts of useful and self-directing questions that we periodically need to pose and address, especially during periods of historical change, re-alignments and transformation.

There is a difference in works that test, challenge and advance the demands and ideals of social change and social justice. This is as opposed to works that marginalize and further disempower. With a progressive consciousness, there is a different level of engagement, after the basic work has been done. There is more openness and more freedom of analysis and comparison – all done with an open mind, focus and anticipated excitement of engagement. Can we say that this is where CODESRIA is at this time in history in its present work for African ideas and perspectives for Africa’s self-propelled development and future, and in excitedly anticipating where next to take CODESRIA in the next period? In response to some of these issues, I do think that the question of theory is very much linked to a search for a new paradigm.

In relation to theory and paradigm, I am, certainly, constantly revisiting, further developing my own theoretical positions, and relating them to the works and ideas of other scholars. I can briefly illustrate this from aspects of my work with networks of scholars that are associated with CODESRIA. One aspect of this work is related to the theme of social movements and the place of women in this research and theories. Critiquing both the history and character of the inherited post-colonial state in Africa also involves a re-examination of the composition of civil society in relation to marginalized structures and organizations of traditional societies. This is what has led me to the structural function of gender analysis, and both the history and structural roles of indigenous women’s organizations in Africa, and their central place in theories of gender and social movements. It puts to shame the non-inclusiveness and inadequacies of the contemporary state, its colonially defined structures of governance and its narrow notions of civil society. Similarly, an interrogation of paradigmatic theories of Social Justice and

God-biographies, that have a patriarchal bias, and therefore raise questions of gender marginalization and inequality, and necessitates working on uncovering counter-patriarchal principles and theories that are implied or hidden, if not sometimes glaring, in my ethnographic data. Following a long engagement, interrogation and analysis, this has resulted in the theoretical challenges of providing an alternative analysis in flexible gender, paradigmatic opposition, patriarchal principles and relational patriarchal principles, patriarchy and the alternative of an overarching broad framework of a progressive matriarchitarianism that captures all these trends.

It is obvious that I have been addressing some of the relevant questions of 'what' and 'how' of theory that I posed earlier. In this, the keyword is inclusiveness in proposing progressive theoretical visions of where to take research and society in the next period. There is no need to further marginalize and disempower sections of society, partner nations and other human beings – some might even add other natural elements to human beings, arguing that this is how we ought to be thinking now, and what we ought to be doing way into the 21st century. In this context, I would like to sound a note of caution, especially on the search for a more inclusive paradigm by marginalized areas of research. Some of the publications are beginning to address the question of the neglect of research in Arabophone Africa, in spite of the massive existing literature in Arabic or Ajami (Arabic written in an African language script, not a translation). Here is certainly where Francophone and Arabophone scholars can work together with Anglophone scholars, especially in West Africa. But then, we have the whole of North Africa, the Maghreb and the Sahel; and as Nouria Remaoun of Algeria points out, social sciences in the Maghreb needs to link up with work in other parts of Africa – as for example, in the history of anthropology, sociology to address the question of modernity. However, I would expect that these researchers would not lose sight of

the questions of imperialism, colonialism and patriarchal oppression that researchers and scholars of Africa address in relation to encounters with and presences of other regions of the world. I would also expect that Africa remains the focus of such research and scholarship in a positive way, especially in seeking to propose a paradigm of text as a milestone of civilization that does not consider the hieroglyphics originated in ancient Egypt. We should not lose sight of the anteriority of Egypt. We should also not ignore the work of Sheikh Anta Diop on this question and more.

The huge question of indigenous people and the indigenous library and intellectuals is closely linked to the search for inclusive paradigms by marginalized areas of research. James Murombedzi of CODESRIA spoke with sincerity and palpable passion in proposing that Environmental Research be given a central stage. This, in my view, is a topic that could be approached on the two levels of a deeper knowledge tradition and a quick response. The two themes of the struggles of indigenous rights and the struggle for social justice both call for a continuous theoretical engagement, and also immediate policy research on issues of natural resources, peasants and rural populations. Murombedzi points out the fact that environment or environmental issues are marginalized in theory and the social sciences, despite the fact that issues of environment are central to the daily lives of ordinary Africans, although acknowledging a new Climate Change programme in CODESRIA.

Knowledge about the daily lives of ordinary Africans is about the indigenous library and intellectuals. If we were not so focused on playing catch-up in agendas set elsewhere, this is a major area that needs deep research and theoretical proposals for an on-going analysis and discourse. It is interesting that the hegemonic Eurocentric focus on environment is panic disaster and catastrophe-driven, due to the accesses of capitalist exploitation and exploitation. However, when environment is examined within the

landscape of indigenous knowledge and its people, the picture changes, and we are faced with different theoretical questions from both synchronic and diachronic holistic approaches. Sometimes, I have used the terms symbiotic or cyclical to describe this relationship in which both take and give back to each other – in which the marching forward of civilization sees the humbling imperative of renewal coming from the infinite environmental landscape. In the capitalist thinking of neo-liberalism, development pursuit is unidirectional, and environment fits into this same equation of continuous encroachment, exploitation, contamination, pollution, over-use and eventual depletion. This is the reason for the panic and concerns driving the environmental movement.

How can we come up with counter-capitalist theories in indigenous libraries? On the one hand, we say that the global system is falling apart (Samir Amin). On the other, we sound an alarm about 'ferocious globalization'! (Olukoshi, Ouédraogo and Sall). All of this points to the importance of theoretical works on Africa-informed alternatives. In this context, I would like to invent a term such as 'decapitalization' and 'decapitalism' for the study of conscious reverse thinking and approaches in social thought and social practice. One approach to 'decapitalism' is the study of the indigenous library for an abstraction of theories embedded within, or implied, in order to bring indigenous voices and thoughts into contemporary discourse. The other approach is an alternative theorization of 'decapitalism' (slowing down and reversing course for another better pathway) within contemporary discourses from an interdisciplinary perspective. Both these approaches – in which Africa can look at itself and take its cue from within – need not be mutually exclusive, as I demonstrate in my recent work on theoretical progressive patriarchy, and the discourse of social text from the perspective of an indigenous social library.

CODESRIA, in my experience with it, is a place of research and scholarship, but also of affect and nurturance, all of which are important in producing excellence.