

Quality Debate in CODESRIA Journals Requires Quality Research

Keynote address presented at the Annual Conference of Editors of CODESRIA Journals on the theme "CODESRIA Journals as Forums for Scholarly Debates Informed by and Relevant to African Realities", Hotel Residence Ndiambour, Dakar, Senegal, 11- 12 November 2009

Introduction

Journals of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) were created to support social research and knowledge production and consumption in Africa and by Africans, in line with CODESRIA's vision and mission as articulated in its Charter in 1973.

The role of CODESRIA journals, editors, and editorial advisory boards is detailed in CODESRIA's Publications and Dissemination Policy, last updated in 2005 and available in hard copy and from the web. They are expected to promote African scholarship relevant to African predicaments and aspirations. They also help CODESRIA orient the intellectual agenda on the basis of which Africa is studied. I invite us all to reread CODESRIA's 2007-11 strategic plan, anchored on how to promote rethinking of Africa's development. Rethinking requires support for scholarship that deconstructs epistemological fallacies informed by ambitions of dominance that have sustained the caricaturing of African social realities. Such scholarship should legitimize African encounters and forms of knowing and knowledge construction.

What CODESRIA prescribes and expects of its journals is therefore quite clear. Because we are not here simply to rehash and re-enact those prescriptions and expectations, I would like us to dwell on the heart of the future: How to go about fulfilling the CODESRIA vision and mission beyond sterile rhetoric on the need for African scholarship and African voices in the marketplace of ideas. How do we translate our wishes into horses in real terms? For 36 years we have persevered in trying to create space for an alternative world through alternative research into alternative voices by alternative researchers. How will we fulfil CODESRIA's mission through its journals going forward? How alternatively will we ask the ques-

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tions to ensure that we do not simply reproduce conventional wisdom and business as usual in the name of the African Alternative in scholarship and in the journals that communicate that scholarship?

To pave the way for forward-looking thinking at this conference, I'd like us to briefly refresh our minds about the role of CODESRIA publications in general and its journals in particular.

CODESRIA publications have the formidable task of promoting greater visibility and accessibility of African scholarship in and outside Africa. But not just scholarship for the sake of scholarship, rather, scholarship in tune with African values, revelatory of social theory and practice in African contexts, and relevant to the developmental needs of the continent. What is needed is theoretically and methodologically creative and innovative scholarship, not unquestioning or unproblematised adoption and reproduction of conceptual and methodological outfits designed with scant regard for the lived experiences of Africans.

CODESRIA stresses the need for critical rethinking of development and related concepts and conceptualisation of social phenomena, thus emphasising thinking over doing, creative appropriation over mimicry and production over reproduction. The research projects supported by CODESRIA are meant to deliver scholarship that asserts African humanity and creativity while respecting the highest standards of scientific excellence and rigour. In turning to the wider social research community, beyond its immediate membership, the idea is to shop around for excellent scholarship that showcases the

best from and on Africa and that is relevant to her peoples and their needs and aspirations.

There have been, and indeed, continue to be great debates in CODESRIA journals in the form of book reviews, review articles, thematic and special issues and reports on innovative research. We only need to flip through the pages of the *CODESRIA Bulletin*, *Africa Review of Books*, *Africa Development*, *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, *African Sociological Review*, or any other CODESRIA journal to appraise some of these debates. Many of us would recall the Archie Mafeje/Ali Mazrui debate in the pages of the *CODESRIA Bulletin* (see No.3&4 2008), and are of course familiar with the attention and commentary received by Thandika Mkandawire's critical commentary on the intellectual itinerary of Jeffrey Sachs, published in the *Africa Review of Book* of March 2006. However, the quality of debate in CODESRIA journals and other publications depends on the quality of research and thought produced. For the research it sponsors, CODESRIA should provide quality assurance at each stage, from calls for proposals and abstracts, to methodology and writing workshops, fieldwork, and the submission of reports or articles for publication. Even before manuscripts are submitted for peer-review, coordinators of CODESRIA networks and journal editors play an important role in verifying that work rhymes with CODESRIA's strategic orientations, and that authors are sufficiently familiar with local and global debates that relate to African realities, and that their scholarship is cognizant of the complex and nuanced nature of such realities.

This ensures that the peer-review process focuses more on how to enrich manuscripts than on having to eliminate scholarship running counter to the vision and mission which CODESRIA funds and

supports and for which it receives core funding and other support. It is simply naive to presume that because someone looks or passes for African (by accident of phenotype or geography), his or her scholarship and intellectual *habitus* necessarily demonstrates deep understanding or meaningful representations of African realities. Similarly, it is not because someone espouses rhetoric about challenging paradigms that tend to caricature and misrepresent Africa that that person necessarily produces rigorous scholarship to help upset those paradigms.

A danger in preaching to the converted is that critical instincts are blunted by all the alleluias and amens that come in sharing the same basic faith, beliefs and assumptions. While there is a compelling need, both scientifically and politically, to continue to promote African voices articulating African predicaments, CODESRIA should augment attention to the scientific quality and social pertinence of research and scholarship. What is published should be in line with CODESRIA's mission. Every time we publish counter to it, we retard development and also jeopardise CODESRIA. CODESRIA must practice what it preaches. The quality and pertinence of the research questions we ask and encourage will determine the quality and pertinence of intellectual arguments and debates reflected and circulated in CODESRIA's publications and to some extent even in other social science journals on the continent.

Research Questions are Key, Intellectual Arguments Paramount

Much of what passes for scholarship on Africa is conceptually shoddy and highly problematic. Insufficient time and effort are accorded to conceptual and methodological rigour, leaving the impression that almost anything goes, perhaps because one is dealing with Africa. If this is the attitude, it is unfortunate, as Africa needs all the intellectual rigour it can mobilise, because of the sheer magnitude of its predicaments. Paradoxically, some of the shoddy thinking and research comes from people well funded to do serious empirically well substantiated research. CODESRIA and indeed every social scientist that cares for Africa must aggressively and continuously challenge such attitudes and practices.

How well CODESRIA journals fulfil their mission of relevance in scholarship and debate will depend very much on how successful CODESRIA is able to instil a culture of critical research among its members, the networks it supports, and the universities and other partners with which it works. While the editors of CODESRIA journals should expect and even encourage relevant material from scholars outside CODESRIA networks of partners, its journals also need content from within the ranks of the vibrant CODESRIA community of social researchers and scholars. Indeed, donors would be alarmed if CODESRIA had little to show within the pages of its own publications for the resources it deploys yearly for training and research. There must be value for money. The value of CODESRIA publications is in the degree to which they stimulate and satisfy the crave for African world outlooks and epistemological, methodological and empirical work of quality embedded in African realities and thinking.

Research is all about asking the right questions, and scholarly writing about communicating persuasively the results of research. Mahmood Mamdani did both in *Myth of Population Control*, published a year before CODESRIA was founded in 1973. In this work he critically reviewed an American-sponsored survey of birth control practices in a region of India, which concluded that people are poor because they have large families. With a different set of questions, based on the cultural context, Mamdani concluded that people have large families because they are poor. His practice of the art of critical reinterpretation is evident in other works such as *Citizen and Subject*, *Good Muslim Bad Muslim*, *When Victims Become Killers*, and *Saviors and Survivors*, all of which benefited from CODESRIA support either for research or publication or both.

The tradition of critical research and critical writing, to buttress alternative thinking in tune with our African aspirations, is present and needs only to be harnessed in more systematic and sustained ways at CODESRIA. The Council has, for example, contributed to the advancement of research on women and gender, and by women, through various research, training, policy dialogue and publication programmes, including the 1997 landmark book, *Engendering African Social Sciences*, edited by three of Africa's leading

gender scholars: Ayesha Imam, Anima Mama and Fatou Sow.

These two examples show that our gurus have a key role to play, promoting a culture of debate and ensuring the mentorship necessary for young and budding scholars to acquire and excel in that culture. How can we better build on intellectual heritage and strengths, even as we remain critical and alert intellectually, regardless of whether or not the gurus are ours?

Asking the right questions and building science entails carefully and critically situating the object of one's study within existing knowledge by drawing on and feeding back into it in terms of theory, methodology, issues and debates. Researchers need to continually listen to, draw on, interact with and edify the work of peers. They must understand the local context and involve those researched in the production of knowledge about their realities and predicaments. We must resist the syndrome of talking at, talking on, talking past and hardly talking to or talking with the very ordinary Africans we claim our scholarship is about, and for whom we tend to arrogate to ourselves the status of spokespersons. Researchers should see themselves as instruments of society, rather than as all powerful theatre or film directors working with "local actors." We should be like bridges – bridging understandings of realities and power dynamics and linking the past and the present in the making of the future.

These considerations and sensibilities about situation, dialogue and participation should be rule of thumb in research and scholarly writing, and thus in the debates that animate the pages of CODESRIA journals. This challenge, however, is more easily stated than met. Why? Partly because of the vertical and dogmatic power dynamics that characterise knowledge production, a world of local and global interconnecting hierarchies informed, among other things, by race, place, culture, class, status, gender and age. The fate of ideas and research findings, however compelling, often boils down to the race, geography, culture, ethnicity, class, status, gender or age of the researchers involved, as these factors largely determine participation and attitudes at scientific gatherings and in other scholarly processes in the not so democratic marketplaces of ideas. Who here present would not agree that these fac-

tors often weigh in more than the scientific content of material subjected to peer-review? We all know stories of notoriously popular scholars, well situated in terms of these parameters, who impose themselves over and above peer-review mechanisms. They tend to think they are doing you a favour publishing in your journal or, as kings, kingmakers, princes, princesses, dinosaurs, gurus or whatever they choose to call themselves or are called, that the peer-review process does not and should not apply to them.

If these challenges are common to all sciences, they are even more glaring in the social sciences and humanities, where the very object of study – society – changes and redefines itself in ways that nature cannot quite match. This makes theory building in the social sciences and humanities particularly challenging. Given the accentuated prevalence of hierarchies and unequal power relations that play into how social research is conceptualised and implemented, the risk of theoretical and methodological fallacies is great, and so is the likelihood of their being imbibed or internalised uncritically. CODESRIA researchers and journal editors should be sensitive to and sensitised about these issues. They should demonstrate a high degree of consciousness and critical engagement with these factors and the attitudes and assumptions they occasion.

CODESRIA and its journals are particularly well placed to notice and expose the extent to which global intellectual gurus are naked in their imagined clothes, old or new. To excel in this role, the intellectual agenda of CODESRIA journals must stay faithful to its paramount mission of promoting multidisciplinary debate informed by social research which derives from and is relevant to the experience of the African continent and its peoples. In a world of hierarchies, achievement of this mission necessitates institutional policies to encourage social research and debate on various aspects of life and society. Beyond policy, it requires deliberate and diligent attempts to critically question and deconstruct conventional theories, methodologies and research, using the basic assumptions underlying them. Such deconstruction, if consistent and systematic, will raise consciousness about the trappings of Intellectual Bandwagonism, whereby Africans are invited to research or debate themes determined and conceptualised by others, with scant regard for

the problematic nature of the theoretical and methodological frameworks proposed. Intellectual Bandwagonism, shaped by International Intellectual Fashion Designers, with little or no regard for the African condition, remains a serious threat to the development of Africa. CODESRIA journal editors must not fall prey to these tricks and trends. They must be vigilant and make African perspectives and viewpoints central as they receive and process submissions for publication.

Social research is embedded in cultural values. Societies, even in their dynamism, are characterized by major differences in culture, language, demographic structure, experience and expectations. This precludes the use of carbon copy methods which assume that genuine comparability can be achieved by administering the same questions in the same way in all countries or regions involved in a study. Methods of data collection, no matter how appropriate in one context, are not necessarily so in another. Editors of CODESRIA journals, in the interest of meaningful, lively and innovative debates, must privilege and actively encourage originality in thinking and practice, while condemning mimicry and bandwagonism. Autonomy of thought and practice should be stressed.

Autonomy of thought and practice, however, is a challenge when the development of research in Africa has to compete with donors and NGOs chasing after unpaid and underpaid scholars desperate to make ends meet. All together, they preach efficiency and practicality and conspire to conduct mostly ahistorical and atheoretical work which hardly relies on well formulated questions and hypotheses. Because it is usually aimed at resolving precise policy, commercial, social or development problems, it tends to be more concerned with sampling than conceptualisation and more preoccupied with description than analysis. This piecemeal approach does not emphasize integration and continuity. Irrespective of the nature of the social phenomenon under investigation, the final research report is usually confined to statements about amenable but relatively superficial aspects of a complex issue. Such a positivistic or behaviouristic approach often blinds its practitioners to the value assumptions implicit in the formulation of research questions that determine research design. Like uncritical consultants, the researchers in this tradition hardly

bother to redefine the research problem brought to them by governments, industry, NGOs and other purported agents of development, and so their research tends to reinforce the security, privileges and profits of those who pay for it. Clearly, CODESRIA, with a mandate to promote critical scholarship in relation to pressing development imperatives, cannot condone research that continues to caricature substantive issues and gloss over important epistemological concerns. Unfortunately however, shoddy research is not the prerogative of the positivist tradition, as many so-called progressive scholars have contented themselves with qualitative platitudes, rhetoric, and slogans.

Nothing of value comes easily, and this is true of the study of Africa. CODESRIA thus has the challenge and imperative of re-socialising and reappraising researchers and scholars in alternatives that have been forgotten, minimised, ignored and unimagined. This involves calling into question certain basic assumptions, conventional wisdom, academic traditions and research practices which social researchers in Africa have uncritically and often unconsciously internalised, but which remain largely ill adapted to African contexts.

Some scholars have suggested multi-methodological approaches in African research. For example, they question the tendency to make *a priori* distinctions between sociological and anthropological methods and to equate the latter with the study of "primitive," "archaic," or "rural" societies and suggest that every research situation should determine its methods, especially given the fact that rural communities, perceived as "primitive" or "archaic", are not as decipherable as some of the literature and stereotypes would seem to suggest.

I would like to suggest to CODESRIA editors that flexible and diverse methodological buffets offer better prospects than the insensitive insistence that certain methods must go with certain disciplines or types of inquiry. As Cheikh Anta Diop argued perceptively in the early 1960s (ready as he was to pay the price for his stubborn perceptiveness and determination to challenge the marginalisation of African contributions to human creativity and scholarship), nowhere else better than in the study of African societies, can anthropology and sociology combine

their methods and collaborate more effectively. For in Africa where indigenous elements co-exist with western and oriental ones, changes are in process that are yet to be adequately understood with research methods drawn from both disciplines.

It is in the light of these insights that CODESRIA should insist on innovative epistemological and methodological approaches in the research proposals it receives for funding, and in the papers generated by its networks for publication in its journals. Proposals and papers should show evidence of critically engaging, not only the related shoddy scholarship on Africa, but also, and more importantly, African scholarship produced on the continent. The invitation here is not to celebrate that scholarship, but simply to critically and seriously engage it. Simply dismissing or endorsing it through passing references is hardly good enough, and it does not indicate that one has actually taken time to read and understand it. Researchers must be actively involved with research and draw on research findings indicative of the fact that African populations do not live in dichotomies. In other words, meaningful deconstruction and reconstruction of theories and methodologies cannot be articulated in the abstract. It necessarily has to be informed by actual social processes. Systematically ensuring critical engagement with scholarship guarantees good value for resources, as CODESRIA helps the African social research community build on past critical research results to identify knowledge gaps and issues for further research, thereby minimising duplication that is wasteful of human and financial resources and the expectations of academic and policy communities.

The magnitude of intellectual effort and research involved in systematic and meaningful deconstruction and reconstruction of theories and methodologies speaks in favour of CODESRIA's model of funding and promoting networks of researchers rather than individuals. The composition of all networks and editorial boards should reflect its interest in promoting elite, cutting edge, world class research, as well as mentoring younger and bud-

ding scholars to develop a research culture and excel as scholars. A modality should be worked out to institutionalise and systematise collaborative research and publication initiatives and networking between senior and junior researchers beyond the occasional mentorship in its current form. In this way, junior scholars are able to benefit from the experience of seasoned researchers, a type of seniority determined not by age but by quality scholarship and evidence of a track record in critical research informed by Africa and its realities of local and global inter-connecting hierarchies.

Research training workshops should focus more on innovative and critical approaches. They should target junior lecturers teaching methodology courses and become part and parcel of the curriculum in African universities. Other linkages and alliances between CODESRIA and African university spaces should be strategized and strengthened as well. As Bernard Fonlon insisted, writing around the same period as Cheikh Anta Diop, any university that does not teach a student to think critically and in total freedom has taught him or her nothing of genuine worth. CODESRIA has a role in helping to ensure that critical thought.

By Way of Conclusion

In concluding, I would like to recognize the mileage and kilometres covered by CODESRIA journals and other publications in the past 36 years. They have been indispensable in making available African scholarship and supporting and encouraging the problematisation and conceptualisation of African realities. In this address, I have implored you to be more aware and more vigilant and to make our production more critical, more questioning, more challenging, more constructive, and more imbued with the ingenuity of Africa. This takes untiring reminders, constant nurturing, and strategic efforts by all, considering the goliath structures dictating knowledge production globally.

It is true that I have focussed overly on knowledge production, leaving the question of knowledge consumption unat-

tended. That is deliberate, as I would like all editors present to help CODESRIA address the question. To what extent are we, as editors, aware of and sensitive to how the journals and debates in them are consumed, or not consumed? Are the journals getting into African universities and courses? Are they shaping the curriculum and thus the thinking? How does the scholarship get cited, used, and appropriated? Perhaps here, editors would like CODESRIA to chip in, given the volume of applications and research output it regularly receives from scholars funded and supported within its networks? Is it important for those responsible for journals to take consumption issues into account? As journal editors, what examples do we have to share of how articles in "your" journal have helped scholars and others refute fallacies and point the way to alternative paths? Like Mahmood Mamdani, Ayesha Imam, Amina Mama and Fatou Sow did? Such examples, I am sure, would inspire others. You might, at the end of all what I have been saying, challenge me to say why, in an ever changing world, CODESRIA should continue exactly with the same prescriptions with which it started when its publications programme was first launched. Is CODESRIA just supposed to do more of the same, in promoting space for critical, deconstructive, reconstructive and alternative work, or do changing contexts necessitate evolving strategies? Finally, given its vision, mission and pan-African approach, what is CODESRIA doing to offer training and promote similar dialogue with editors and granting councils across the continent in these critical approaches?

Success for CODESRIA resides in the ability and commitment of its network and programme coordinators and journal editors to institutionalise a culture and practice of scholarship that systematically, consistently and dynamically enacts its mission beyond merely stating or reproducing it. CODESRIA must be a catalyst for ongoing deconstruction of existing theories and rigorous and creative methodological and theoretical reconstruction that helps the continent understand and project itself into the 21st century.

Gender, Sport and Development in Africa

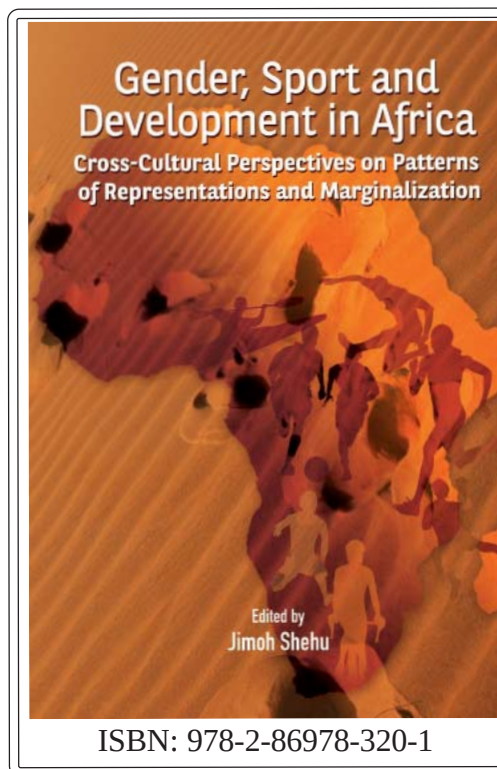
*Cross-Cultural Perspectives
on Patterns of Representations and Marginalization*

Edited by Jimoh Shehu

CODESRIA, Dakar, 2010, 168 pp

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In this volume, eleven African scholars offer insightful analyses of the complex ideological and structural dimensions of modern sport as a cultural institution. Drawing on various theories and cross-cultural data, the contributors to this volume highlight the various ways in which sport norms, policies, practices and representations pervasively interface with gender and other socially constructed categories of difference. *Gender, Sport and Development in Africa* is an immensely important contribution to current debates on the broader impacts of sport on society. It is an essential reading for students, policy-makers and others interested in perspectives that interrogate the grand narratives of sport as a neutral instrument of development in African countries.

