

# Reflections on CODESRIA After Fifty Years: Change, Turmoil and Progress in Society and the Social Sciences

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## The Foundation of CODESRIA and Its Mission: A Personal Reflection

In 1973, as I was finishing my PhD dissertation proposal on ‘Coffee Production in Ivory Coast and Kenya: Capital and Labour in Post-Colonial Political Systems in Africa’, in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago, I had a combination of professors in my committee who were a very good mix for the kind of advice I needed. Their own research and fields of teaching were in the politics of development, class interests and class conflicts and the character of development and underdevelopment in Africa.

From the writings and teachings of Aristide Zolberg on *One-Party Government in Ivory Coast*, I came to the conclusion that the agricultural revolutions from colonial times in Kenya and Côte d’Ivoire (then, Ivory Coast) were comparable. No wonder they both emerged after independence with strong, presidential authoritarian systems as one-party states. But to what extent was the agricultural bourgeoisie in coffee production in the two countries the sinew that stitched together the class alliances to form stable political systems after independence?

I finally redefined the problematic of my thesis as the study of what Marxist political economy

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called ‘an articulation of modes of production’ in coffee farming in Kenya and Côte d’Ivoire.<sup>1</sup> It was interesting to note that, at the outset of capitalist coffee farming, white male owners of the farms – Englishmen in Kenya and Frenchmen in Côte d’Ivoire – both used forced labour (*travail forcé*) to compel Africans to work on their farms. This became costly, unpredictable and politically volatile, as their colonial civil servants observed. A process of appeasing labour and incorporating ‘political hotheads’ into the profit-making game was necessary. However, complicated the tools and machines of production are, in the final analysis labour is vital in setting production in motion. Voluntary and enthusiastic labour, needing no expensive supervision and treating ‘the farm’ as their own, has always been vital in capitalist agriculture. This is what historically distinguishes agriculture based on slave labour from agriculture based on paid labour. How did this process manifest itself ‘historically’ in both Kenya and Côte d’Ivoire, and

how did it lead to the emergence of nationalist political parties with strong support from both the peasantry and the working class?

In the end I narrowed down my research and the writing of my thesis to Cote d’Ivoire. To this day I have never published the thesis but it provided me with a strong foundation for my later work. This move was greatly influenced by my stay in Dakar at the UN Institute for Development and Economic Planning (IDEP), which was at that time directed by the well-known African political economist, Samir Amin. I thought that staying at IDEP as a visiting fellow would give me an opportunity to have a clearer picture of the political economy of agriculture in West Africa. And it did. I enthusiastically read Samir Amin’s books on West Africa, such as *Neo-Colonialism in West Africa*, originally published in French as *Afrique de L’Ouest Bloquée*.<sup>2</sup> I participated in various conferences and seminars, which covered theoretical and practical research issues on the political economy of Africa and the developing world. But more than this, I met two people who were there, literally in two offices ‘in the ribs of IDEP’, to start a new research entity specifically for social science research and intellectual development, called the Council for the Development for Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). These two

people were Professor Abdala Boujra from Kenya and Thandika Mkandawire from Malawi.

Samir Amin knew and realised that IDEP was a UN entity, not an African one. We Africans needed something authentic and African, from its very foundation, for the African social sciences community to feel at home with and where they could do their own original thinking and research, which would take the place of IDEP when people like Samir were no longer there. This was a wonderful idea, and I am glad I was there at the creation and birth of CODESRIA and the tail end of the glory of IDEP. CODESRIA lives to this very day and my *séjour* in Dakar gave me a very good opportunity to clarify my mind on what I was going to do in Côte d'Ivoire. Since then, I have continued to be a member of CODESRIA, take part in conferences and working groups, share ideas and experiences with fellow African scholars, publish articles and books together and build what can be called 'a community of African social scientists', the way the founding fathers – Samir Amin, Abdala Boujra and Thandika Mkandawire – envisaged it.

### **CODESRIA'S Vision and Mission Today**

CODESRIA defines its vision and mission as building a strong and vibrant African social science and humanities research community. It serves to mobilise researchers and scholars from various disciplines to share experiences, ideas and publications through its many research groups, training programmes and so on. In large part, its avant-garde publications, *Africa Development* and the *Bulletin*, have become the rallying

point for African scholarly exchange of ideas on development, social conflicts and the challenges that face African people and states.

### **CODESRIA in the Period of Change and Turmoil**

We must note, however, that the nature and character of intellectual and academic work and research has been changing radically in our institutions of higher learning, particularly in universities, in Africa. Universities in Africa are largely state-owned and state-run – that is. they are public institutions. What affects the state, and the kind of output the state expects from them, affects the kind of personnel they recruit and retain.

As 'left-leaning academics', which we were in the seventies, however much the students loved what we were teaching them the university authorities and the state regarded us as a thorn in the flesh. Very soon we faced political harassment; some of us were quite often arrested and detained, or finally forced to flee our countries to take up teaching and research in foreign institutions. The late Professor Micere Githae Mugo, of the literature department at the University of Nairobi, ended up working in the US from the early eighties. I left the University of Nairobi in 1981, ostensibly to go to El Colegio de Mexico on sabbatical. but never to be allowed back again at my home university.

During all this time CODESRIA remained our umbilical cord, connecting us with our colleagues in social science research and teaching, through its conferences, working groups, workshops and scholarly exchange programmes with such institutions as the UN University.

While in academic and political exile in Mexico, it was CODESRIA and IDEP that helped me maintain contact and a political community with my fellow African scholars. I must confess that without this sustaining umbilical cord, I would not have had the opportunity to lead a CODESRIA Working Group of leading African scholars who studied popular resistance to authoritarian regimes in Congo, Uganda, Kenya, Liberia, Swaziland and Ghana, which led to the publication of *Popular Struggles for Democracy in Africa* (1987),<sup>3</sup> of which I was the editor.

I could also mention some of my other publications that I can link to discussions and exchanges within the CODESRIA network, such as 'What the friends of the peasants say and how they pose the question of the peasantry' (2007).<sup>4</sup> The so-called 'CODESRIA Debate', ignited by an article I had written in the CODESRIA journal, *Africa Development*, in 1988,<sup>5</sup> attracted a sharp discussion involving Issa Shivji, Shadrack Gutto and Thandika Mkandawire, both in the *Bulletin* and the journal. Thandika's erudite article, 'Comments on Democracy and Political Instability'<sup>6</sup> (1988) would be very appropriate reading today in the context of the military coups in West Africa.

CODESRIA has gone much further in institutional development by creating training, grants and fellowship programmes to support the development of dissertation proposals, research skills, publications and continuous intellectual discourse. Doing this at a time when the space for the social sciences is becoming narrower in African universities, CODESRIA has created an invaluable opportunity to sustain critical

research and publications, as well as quality of teaching where some limited opportunity may still be available.

Social science departments in our universities have become much more consultancy-oriented than before. Contract research, focused on what is usually justified as 'policy relevance', takes a good chunk of time from our scholars. It may very well be that such research actually helps policy-makers in government to make good policies. Well and good. But the 'gold rush' mentality that it creates within certain faculties in our universities may be harmful to the time devoted by scholars to such 'social value' issues as social inequality, political oppression, gender discrimination, cultural integrity, the integrity of creation and climate change.

### CODESRIA'S Achievements

One of CODESRIA's major achievements is that it has created an 'escape route' for scholars who are interested in developing research skills and research methodologies without being tied down to the consultancy culture. The Institute on Democratic Governance plays a key role in this year after year. So do other training programmes that bring together graduate students to work on dissertation proposals.

Conferences provide opportunities for scholars to exchange ideas, discuss theories and analyse on-

going political and socioeconomic changes in Africa. The series of military coups that have occurred in former French colonies in West Africa should elicit a new look at the coup, perhaps as a failure of authoritarian regimes trying to legitimise themselves through the façade of elections. Elections, by themselves, do not constitute a democratic process, nor can they necessarily lead to voters electing their rulers 'freely and fairly', where 'rules of the game' predetermine who will be elected.

Military coups and the challenges to democratic governance are a subject that CODESRIA could give fresh focus to in discourses and research, because such coups are likely to mushroom in Africa. Condemning military coups as anathema to democracy is a moral stand, not a useful formulation of the problem.

### Conclusion

My reflections are an appreciation of CODESRIA'S work since its inception fifty years ago and serve to point out further challenges to this very important social science and humanities research and discussion forum, which is bound to be the home of Africa's social scientists, now and into the future. They also record my own personal appreciation of what I have contributed to and gained from CODESRIA.

### Notes

1. By 'articulation of modes of production' I did not simply mean the mechanical or practical activity called 'coffee farming', but the social relationships engendered and necessary in producing coffee and transferring surplus values from actual workers to the so-called owners of farms or the rural bourgeoisie – *without any duress* – justified as their 'profits' or rewards for owning land. See, for example, Archie Mafeje's writings on land and agrarian issues in tropical Africa.
2. Samir Amin, 1974, *Neo-Colonialism in West Africa*, New York: Monthly Review Press.
3. Peter Anyang' Nyong'o, ed., 1987, *Popular Struggles for Democracy in Africa*, London: Zed Books.
4. Peter Anyang' Nyong'o, 2007, 'What the friends of the peasants say and how they pose the question of the peasantry', *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 8, Issue 20, pp. 17–26.
5. Peter Anyang' Nyong'o, 1988, 'Political Instability and the Prospects for Democracy in Africa', *Africa Development*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 71–85.
6. Thandika Mkandawire, 1988, 'Comments on Democracy and Political Instability', *Africa Development*, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 77–82.