

I Owe CODESRIA: Tribute to a Pan-African Intellectual Council

Introduction

I would like to declare my indebtedness to CODESRIA. The balance sheet showing what I contributed to CODESRIA and what I received from it weighs heavily in favour of the latter. I am indebted in ways that this short tribute can barely testify. Here I can simply mention some of the highlights and lows of my engagement with an organisation now celebrating its jubilee. Simply surviving for half a century in a climate of hostility is a major accomplishment. CODESRIA has done much more than merely survive. It has thrived to become the premier scholarly association for the social sciences on the continent and is now unrivalled in its all-encompassing reach and reputation.

Let's be frank, the reputation has not been all good. In fact, for long periods it was plagued by administrative inefficiency and a

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cavalier approach to management and governance. Any candid assessment of the organisation cannot but mention these frailties, but they pale in relation to the inestimable role that CODESRIA has played in the lives and careers of so very many African scholars. I was one of the many thousands of its beneficiaries. I would like to recount my indebtedness, not like a backslapping praise-singer but rather as a recollection of my engagement with CODESRIA using the metaphor of a balance sheet. Through this engagement, I hope to reveal a broader narrative of an evolving organisation and its struggle to build communities

of social science scholars and scholarship in a context of major asymmetries in knowledge production between the global North and the South and during a time of enduring continental crises.

Early Days

I was first introduced to CODESRIA by Kwesi Prah in the late 1980s, when we were colleagues in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. He encouraged me to apply for CODESRIA's Reflections on Development postdoctoral fellowship and he acted, together with Neville Alexander, as a referee for my application. I was fortunate to have been awarded the fellowship and it profoundly shaped my life. At our first seminar in Dakar in the early 1990s, I remember the vitality of our discussions, the immediacy of our concerns, and the critical awareness that we were part of an

intellectual community struggling to decipher the intricate details of our condition. It was a heady sense of excitement and fulfilment to participate in something bigger, encompassing the entire continent. But I also recall the vibrancy of the city, alive with the graceful posture of a liberated people, especially the women. As a reminder, South Africa was changing at the time, but we were still under an apartheid regime. Walking around Dakar's Independence Square and our compulsory visit to Goree Island left an indelible impression on me.

The fellowship also gave me the great opportunity to meet, befriend and be mentored by Thandika Mkandawire, who looms very large in my experience of and encounters with CODESRIA over the years and, of course, beyond his time as executive secretary. Our friendship continued until his untimely death, and I am very pleased that while I was editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* we published his last article, posthumously, a tour de force on transition in Zimbabwe.

It was also in the early 1990s that CODESRIA went through a major transformation, from being an association made up exclusively of directors of research institutes, centres and faculties of social science to an organisation with dual institutional and individual membership. New scholars made up the bulk of the latter, drawn to CODESRIA on account of its environment of independent research, away from their own institutions' constraints and, often, the political tyranny of their home countries. They started to play a significant role in determining the trajectory of the organisation. Steeped in activism and steeled by struggles at their universities and further afield, these younger scholars profoundly shaped new directions

for CODESRIA. As Mkandawire (1999: 26) asserted, 'The radical turn of political economy in CODESRIA circles was largely accounted for by the fact that pan-African institutions (such as CODESRIA, AAWORD and AAPS) were created and led by pan-Africanists and pan-Africanism'.

It was the heyday of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in Africa and CODESRIA took the bull by the horns in providing wide-ranging critiques of them from a diversity of perspectives. Besides the dismal failure of the SAPs' stated objective of improving economic growth, these programmes undermined the very basis of African sovereignty, propped up undemocratic regimes, severely damaged African universities (the casualties of the World Bank prioritising primary education) and marginalised African researchers in favour of so-called expert consultants. CODESRIA was at the forefront of an intellectual response to the programmes, which were obviously deleterious to African interests.

Not only did CODESRIA promote a direct role for African intellectuals in the face of the enormous challenges confronting African economies and livelihoods, they also fostered an understanding of the broader connections between research, an informed citizenry and democracy. Defending intellectual freedom lay at the heart of this concerted CODESRIA effort. Premised on the conviction of autonomous African intellectual voices, CODESRIA did more than most in revealing the enormous detriment of these programmes.

But there was something amiss here. How should local intellectuals engage with the state in Africa? And what should be the modalities of this engagement? In this regard, Mkandawire made

the pointed statement that one of our big problems is the 'failure of the political class to establish a productive and organic rapport with their own intelligentsia/intellectuals' (Mkandawire 2001: 205), and that across the continent, only in Algeria and in apartheid South Africa did such an organic link develop between the two. Precisely because of an experience of widespread persecution, often by dictatorial regimes, it was not surprising that African intellectuals, especially those of a critical bent, would be reluctant to collaborate with the state. In fact, the crises at universities in Africa occasioned by the SAPs were closely connected to the wider economic and political crises. African intellectuals were caught in the middle of this unfolding drama of economic decline, institutional disintegration, social uncertainty and political turmoil in their home countries, and it is not trite to state that CODESRIA provided a safe haven for them. The struggle for intellectual freedom was seen as intrinsic to the broader struggles for liberation and democracy. I felt very at home in the broadly anti-imperialist stance of much of the writing and in the positionality of CODESRIA itself. It was the kind of hospitable embrace that gave me a sense of what we could accomplish in fostering an overarching pan-African approach.

The change in focus in CODESRIA culminated in the adoption of the Dakar Declaration following the 1988 General Assembly. It articulated the connections between the struggles at universities and in wider society in the following terms:

The task of resolving the African crisis imposes a specific responsibility on the African social science community. To meet this responsibility, it must take stock of its own

shortcomings ... the research process must not only seek to achieve self-reliance within the international social science community ... but should also focus on the issues and relations that are of concern to the vast majority of the toiling peoples of Africa as they engage in their daily struggle for existence. These struggles must be for the basis for scientific conceptualisation, and the focus of scientific analysis ... It will also serve to put social science knowledge at the service of the vast majority of the African population, especially the movements for the democratization of the continent and the full emancipation of its people. ('Dakar Declaration' 1988, cited in Hoffmann 2017: 158)

Two years later, this positioning in relation to popular struggles was consolidated in the adoption of the Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility. Article No 22, for example, states:

The intellectual community has the responsibility to struggle for and participate in the struggle of the popular forces for their rights and emancipation. (my emphasis) (cited in Diouf and Mamdani 1994: 352).

This is a very different approach to the legalism and implied individualism of much writing on academic freedom. The very emphasis on intellectual instead of academic freedom speaks volumes about the shift in emphasis in CODESRIA. There can be little doubt that the Kampala Declaration unambiguously calls for an engaged intelligentsia, one that locates itself within social struggles.

African Sociological Review

Following the Reflections on Development workshop in Dakar, I was again very fortunate to be

given the opportunity to establish a continental vehicle for sociological thought and research. The *African Sociological Review (ASR)* was launched in 1997 at a conference at the University of Cape Town (UCT) on Cultural Transformations in Africa, organised jointly by Mahmood Mamdani at the Centre for African Studies at UCT and the Law School at Emory University.

Our editorial team has changed over the years. Momar Coumba Diop was appointed editor for French submissions from the second issue; in Volume 5, published in 2001, we included Francis Nyamnjoh and Abdelkader Zghal; from Volume 6, Jeff Lever and Momar Diop withdrew as editors; from Volume 8 onwards, we appointed Elizabeth Annan-Yao and Onalena Selolwane as editors and Alcinda Honwana as book review editor. Our editorial meetings, whether in Senegal or South Africa, were always jam-packed with fascinating discussions about the state of our continent, often interlaced with stories of the ingenious practices of political corruption. We joked about these, and laughed at ourselves, since humour seemed the only rational way to deal with just how outrageously brazen every new case of corruption had become.

The launch of the journal came with a warning from Thandika Mkandawire about what he described as the syndrome of African journals: the first issue is launched with great fanfare, only for it to be the last issue. The *ASR* was established with the support and stewardship of Mkandawire and fellow sociologist, Tade Akin Aina, through the various CODESRIA boards and committees. Going through some of the earlier issues of the journal from the late 1990s and early 2000s, I am struck by how the work of some CODESRIA

stalwarts is foregrounded. I had met Archie Mafeje about a decade earlier in Washington DC and I am still awed by his polemic in an article we published as the opening for our first issue. As editors, we entitled it 'Who are the Makers and Objects of Anthropology? A critical comment on Sally Falk Moore's "Anthropology and Africa"' (Mafeje 1997). It was a powerful engagement with the issues that we, as editors, regarded as central to our mission in the new journal – how an awareness of the politics of knowledge production should inform an authentic Africanist discourse.

This review article was followed two issues later by another comprehensive overview, entitled 'Anthropology and Independent Africans: Suicide or End of an Era?' (Mafeje 1998). It was a provocative challenge to African anthropologists to question their post-independence identity, to interrogate their silence in the face of Northern intellectual hegemony and to consider the authentic distinctiveness of anthropology as a discipline. We invited a number of anthropologists to respond to Mafeje. Five took up the challenge, kindling a debate about the future of anthropology that remains relevant to this day. Mafeje wrote a magisterial response to his critics and, in my view, any student of anthropology cannot claim to know the discipline in Africa without an acquaintance with these interchanges. They are indispensable to a full appreciation of the nature of the discipline.

Since I viewed debate as the lifeblood of any journal, I tried to encourage intellectual exchanges – for example, by arranging a review symposium on Mahmood Mamdani's pathbreaking book, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of late*

Colonialism (1996). As we did for Mafeje, we invited a number of African scholars to review the book and we gave Mamdani a chance to respond to his reviewers. While the exchange was rich, I must admit that I felt a bit cheated after reading Michael Chege's review of the book, which was published in the very first issue of the *African Studies Quarterly* in 1997. It is a brilliant article, from which I recall this quote, which I believe is definitely worth sharing as an invitation to all to try to read the entire review itself.

But all this reinforces the terrific diversity of colonial structures at the grassroots. Indeed, long after independence, there were regions in Africa – like northern Chad and interior Mozambique – where it was news that the colonialists had departed. The people had never heard of their arrival. (Chege 1997: 49)

Nostalgia also overtook me when I looked at all the addresses we had published. As editor I hunted down people at the meetings I attended, and as a result of making a nuisance of myself we published a number of speeches. The first of these was a presidential address given at CODESRIA's ninth General Assembly in December 1998 by Akilagpa Sawyerr, on 'Globalisation and Social Sciences in Africa' (Sawyerr 1999), which is a comprehensive, detailed account of the wide variety of meanings of globalisation. I have a vivid recollection of Sawyerr's address. In a packed hall in the steamy heat of Dakar, he provided a carefully crafted intervention, in which he offered a frank assessment of the parlous state of CODESRIA.

In essence, it amounted to a frontal attack on the performance of the then executive secretary, Achille Mbembe. It must be remembered

that Mbembe came very close to presiding over the demise of the organisation. So poorly was the place run, so random the decisions taken, with blithe attention to due process, that the funders had started to become very edgy. I am informed by the current executive secretary, Godwin Murunga, that soon after Mbembe departed, his successor – Adebayo Olukoshi – reported to the Council that it had less than one month's worth of finances to support operations. Surely, this must count as one of the low points of the organisation, but it simultaneously raised questions about CODESRIA's dependence on external funding, which remains an ongoing concern for the organisation. While it is clear that CODESRIA's funders may not have interfered in the direct running of the place, there is a broader problematique related to the nature of the organisation, its autonomy and democracy. The administrative failures were also accompanied by a shift in intellectual focus, away from the committed and engaged scholarship tied to the popular struggles.

We were very fortunate that Thandika Mkandawire agreed that the *ASR* could publish his Claude Ake memorial lecture, also given at the ninth General Assembly. Entitled 'Social Sciences and Democracy: Debates in Africa', Thandika offered a sort of intellectual history of CODESRIA, highlighting important debates with some really interesting anecdotes. I wish here to provide just two short extracts to give you a sense of the speech.

A major preoccupation of CODESRIA has been to create an autonomous space where African intellectuals can reflect on the continent's processes. It was part of the struggle for liberation – this

time extended to the intellectual sphere. (Mkandawire 1999: 30)

Self-censorship was ... widespread and not always tied to fear of the state. For example, it was politically incorrect to criticise intellectuals who were at the same time being hounded by the state. (Mkandawire 1999: 23).

Amina Mama delivered a keynote address titled 'Challenging Subjects: Gender and Power in African Contexts', at a Nordic Africa Institute conference in Uppsala in October 2001, which we published in the same year. This beautiful formulation has remained with me all these years.

At the present time, if we choose to look beyond the sinister machinations of late capitalism and listen beyond the battle cries of powerful men we will hear the quietly persistent challenge articulated by women. (Mama 2001: 71)

We also published an address by Herbert Vilakazi (2001) to the Africa Institute of Southern Africa in August 2001, 'African Intellectuals and the African Crisis: In Honour of Professor Ben Makhosezwe Magubane', as well as a brilliant keynote address presented at the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala in September 2002 by Tade Akin Aina (2003), called 'Scales of Suffering, Orders of Emancipation: Critical Issues in Democratic Development in Africa'. Publishing these addresses allowed our readers access to material relatively quickly after the actual event, before the days of immediate access.

It pleases me enormously to report that Godwin Murunga, current Executive Secretary of CODESRIA, reviewed more books and wrote more review essays than anybody else during the twelve

years that I was one of the editors of the *ASR*. I was always thrilled by his insights on a wide range of topics in the many books that he reviewed for us. There are few practices of good academic citizenship that surpass the reviewing of books. It is an absolutely vital brick in building communities of scholarship, especially in a period when the production of knowledge, irrespective of its quality, appears to dominate its consumption. In my view, people are writing too much, a great deal of it drivel, and reading too little. There is possibly a link between the lack of quality in our output and a poor reading culture. Murunga's sustained commitment to reviewing is therefore to be applauded.

In the early days when we started the *African Sociological Review*, it must be remembered that as editors we did everything ourselves: ensuring that we got good copy; finding reviewers and badgering them to submit their reports; communicating with authors; dealing with printers; inserting the journals fresh from the printers into the envelopes we had labelled and posting them to subscribers. So primitive were our methods at the time that I remember tracing the CODESRIA logo by hand in order to copy it for the *ASR*. Since it is still alive, with twenty-six volumes published and counting, I think we can safely say that we've not succumbed to Thandika's syndrome.

Deans and Editors

CODESRIA has attempted to mobilise the widest possible social science participation in its activities. I was part of at least two such initiatives, viz. editors' meetings and meetings of deans. My recollection is that neither translated into any lasting institutional structure, despite

our best efforts. The former was always a good opportunity to share experiences as editors and to see how we might improve our practice. I benefitted a great deal from these meetings as we debated our pet hates as editors, the main problems we continued to face in securing good copy, the difficulties in finding reviewers for our submissions, then the tough task of ensuring that they submitted their reports timeously, and so on. Here I would just like to mention one such pet hate: the arrogance of established scholars in submitting work that is sub-par and expecting us to publish it on account of their past reputation.

Thus, while I found the editors' meetings worthwhile, I think the attempt to organise deans was dead in the water from the start. I suppose part of the problem here is the wide variety of models of deanship on the continent, basically operating as a continuum between deans who are elected by members of their faculties on the one hand and executive deans appointed by those above, on the other. I am unsure how this might have informed the idea of establishing the South African Humanities Deans' Association (SAHUDA), of which I became the founding president, but I think it is safe to say that there is a connection here and I would encourage the establishment of such national deans' associations across the continent. Perhaps they could be the springboard for continental cooperation at a deanly level.

The Rise and Decline of Debate

There was a time when debate reigned supreme in CODESRIA, when we waited with bated breath for the next issue of the *Bulletin* in order to follow the ongoing intellectual battles. Archie Mafeje

was often at the heart of this exciting engagement, and I tried to capture some of these exchanges using the metaphor of 'argument as war' in an article published in the *Bulletin*, entitled 'Crossing Swords and Drawing Blood: Archie Mafeje – A Warrior in a Double Battle' (Hendricks 2008). Mafeje could always be relied upon to push the boundaries of our understanding in ways that boring attention to empirical detail could never hope to accomplish.

CODESRIA is of course not the only organisation where there has been a decline in debate. Instead, it is part of a much wider syndrome of dumbing down, of a lack of critical engagement, of severing ties with the struggles and challenges that face ordinary people and, consequently, of a major shift towards careerism and so-called professionalism. So, the question I would like to pose is: why should professionalisation result in a segregation from struggle? Should these struggles not form the creative roots of our scholarship? I am reminded of a discussion I had with Thandika soon after he took on the job as Director of UNRISD. In proposing a new direction of social policy research, this was questioned by the existing staff, who argued 'we have contact with the grassroots in Africa'. Thandika's retort was vintage: 'What you see as grassroots, I see as my intellectual community'.

The trappings of professionalisation have definitely stultified our disciplines, and there is a real need for us to recommit ourselves to the mission of the humanities, social sciences and arts, broadly defined. Let us not get bogged down in the endless debates about the boundaries of the broad bands of our disciplines. Instead, let us

follow Archie Mafeje's lead in identifying social problems and research questions outside of contrived disciplinary frames.

Every day, across the continent, there are popular struggles around a wide range of issues – land, for example, urban and rural, or industrial disputes, or educational crises, or municipal incapacity to deliver social services. Yet it is rare to notice the work of university-based academics being debated in the public sphere. My main argument is that our work within the boundaries of our campuses will become petrified if it is not fed by the creative possibilities of an active dialogue with those outside these boundaries. By those outside, I mean the state and civil society. In other words, we have to decipher both ongoing struggles and state policies. Part of the reason for the confinement of our scholarship to university campuses is a misguided notion of the so-called professionalisation of our disciplines, which coerces scholars into particular modes of practice with little concern for the real problems our societies face.

In the light of this deleterious impact of professionalism, I would like to call for a deprofessionalisation of our disciplines. Let us shake them loose from the shackles imposed on them. One of our huge advantages in the global production of academic work is our intimate knowledge of language and culture, and we need to use this intimacy as a basis for our own theorisations of our condition. I am not suggesting that we sink into empiricism, nor is this a call necessarily for authenticity. Instead, we should use the richness of this local knowledge to challenge stereotypes and produce the kind of knowledge that cannot be ignored by anybody.

However, even this is not enough. Simply producing and facilitating high-quality scholarship is not enough because of the power relations in knowledge production, which prevent some of our brilliant manuscripts from being published. The global free market of ideas is a complete misnomer, as we have seen how the self-appointed gate-keepers ensure Northern dominance, if not monopoly, over certain areas. In response, our agency has to take account of the necessity for organisation and mobilisation. Communities of scholarship are not going to emerge spontaneously. We have to organise them – and CODESRIA has done more than most in ensuring that this happens.

Despite its prodigious accomplishments, the work of CODESRIA is not done. If we take just one measure, Africa's contribution to global book output, then we see just how huge the challenges are that we face. Currently, Africa contributes less than 2 per cent of books annually published in the world. But the really telling statistic is that 60 per cent of these books are school textbooks. Taking this into account, we can see how high the mountain is that we still have to climb. We can do this only through a concerted effort of building self-referring and self-respecting communities of scholarship across the continent.

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