

Some Personal Reflections on CODESRIA

The year 2023 is a special one in the lives of two organisations with which I have been closely associated: CODESRIA and the Forum for Social Studies (FSS) of Ethiopia. It marks the Golden Jubilee of CODESRIA, with which I have been associated since the early 1990s, and the Silver Jubilee of FSS, which I helped found with five other colleagues in 1998 and which I have headed at various times as Board Chair and Executive Director. As it will become evident further down, the lives of the two organisations became intertwined more than once.

I was first exposed to CODESRIA through my good friend and CODESRIA veteran Zenebeworke Tadesse, who knew about me and arranged that I be invited to a CODESRIA conference in Dakar in 1990. She was then Deputy Executive Secretary and Publications Officer of CODESRIA. It was a baptismal experience as I partook in the vibrant debates that are so characteristic of the CODESRIA community. My presentation was on a topic that I broached earlier at a Horn of Africa conference in New York on the Ethiopian military in politics.

As it turned out, that paved the way to my initiation into a CODESRIA research network on military and militarism in Africa. This was one of the Multinational Working Groups (MWG) that the organisation had launched at the time. It was ably coordinated by Eboe Hutchful of

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Wayne State University, who had an uncanny ability to combine serious application with an inexhaustible supply of humour. He was assisted by Abdoulay Bathily of the University of Cheikh Anta Diop, designated to handle the Francophone side of the team work. It was a truly multinational team, with researchers coming from Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Lesotho, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. In addition to the case studies, there were papers on cross-cutting themes.

The group had two workshops: the methodology workshop in Dakar and the final workshop in Accra. During the latter, I distinctly recall sitting next to Thandika Mkandawire, then Executive Secretary of CODESRIA, and discussing his fascination with my statement that the saxophone was the preferred musical instrument to accompany the traditional Ethiopian war chant, *shelela* or *fukara*. I also recall our refreshing trip to Cape Coast, hometown of Eboe Hutchful, after the end of the workshop, when we had a chance to visit the infamous slave trade outlet, Elmina Castle. Our group's research finally resulted in one of CODESRIA's

prime publications, *The Military and Militarism in Africa* (1997), co-edited by Eboe Hutchful and Abdoulaye Bathily.

Later in that decade, I was invited to join another MWG on the theme of 'Urban Processes and Change' led by AbdouMaliq Simone. I was introduced to the project by the Congolese Tshikala Biaya, who was working at the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) at the time. Tshikala and I have come to know each other closely as Research Associates of the OAU-initiated International Panel of Eminent Personalities to investigate the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. As it happened, the panel was led by a former Executive Secretary of CODESRIA, Abadalla Bujra. Over lunch, Tshikala, who had come to be fascinated by the urban tapestry of Addis Ababa, urged me to join the research group and put the city on the continental urban landscape, along with Cairo, Cape Town, Dakar and Lagos, among others. I readily consented to the proposal and explored how Addis Ababa has evolved over time to become a polycentric city. My article, 'The City Centre: A Shifting Concept in the History of Addis Ababa', came out in 2005 in the volume entitled *Urban Africa: Changing Contours of Survival in the City*, edited by AbdouMaliq Simone and Abdelghani Abouhani.

Over and above my academic engagement, I was also involved administratively with CODESRIA. And here is where the interlacing with FSS becomes most prominent. In 2003, CODESRIA was celebrating its thirtieth anniversary with a series of regional workshops in a build up to the grand finale that was scheduled to take place in Dakar in December 2003. The Eastern African edition was held in Addis Ababa in early 2003 under the auspices of FSS. As Chairperson of the Board, I was involved in the hosting of the conference, along with Zene Tadesse, who was the inspirational figure behind the founding of FSS. The papers presented at this regional conference were published in 2005 under the title *East Africa: In Search of National and Regional Renewal*, edited by Felicia Arudo Yieke. Included in the collection was my own paper, 'Intellectuals and Soldiers: The Socialist Experiment in the Horn of Africa', even though I had actually presented it at the final conference in Dakar in December 2003 rather than at the Eastern African edition.

Within a year of that joint undertaking, the CODESRIA-FSS relationship assumed a more enduring shape with the launch of the *Africa Review of Books*. The idea of initiating a journal dedicated to the substantive review of books on Africa, modelled pretty much after the famed *New York Review of Books* or the *London Review of Books*, has been a long-standing objective of the CODESRIA leadership. But it took quite a while to make it a reality. In the end, after a call for proposals to manage the journal was made to various think tanks and research institutes, FSS was selected to manage the bilingual journal, with the Algerian-based Centre de recherche en anthropologie sociale et culturelle (CRASC) responsible for

the French section. I was designated by FSS as the English Editor while Zene served as Managing Editor. CRASC assigned Hassan Remaoun as Editor of the French section.

The launch of the long-awaited *Africa Review of Books (ARB)* was greeted with considerable jubilation, as can be gauged from the following welcoming statement by the Executive Secretary at the time, Adebayo Olukoshi:

So, the Africa Review of Books (ARB) is born! The road that has been travelled to produce this maiden edition of the Review has been a long one and the obstacles that have had to be surmounted numerous. In fact, at a point, such was the magnitude of the difficulties encountered that some were tempted either to give up on the project altogether or to postpone it indefinitely or even modify it so radically as to alter its identity as an autonomous product of the African social research community. But many others also held on tenaciously to the dream, convinced that the impeccable ideals that underpinned it necessitated the investment of all the energies required to bring it to fruition. That is why the appearance of this first issue of the Review carries with it a sense of historic moment which, hopefully, will also mark the beginning of a new phase, indeed even a turning point in the study of Africa. It is for this reason too that there is a pervasive sense of celebration accompanying the issuance of the maiden edition of the publication.

FSS also welcomed the publication of *ARB* as

a challenge for which we feel the experience of the last six years has prepared it adequately. It is a calling to which it responds with no illusion of the hard work involved but also with a determination to give the best and the utmost of what it has. For

this is an initiative that addresses a long-standing need and realizes the dream of the African social science research community.

While we are prepared to give all, we do earnestly hope that we will also get the reciprocal support of the academic and research community concerned with Africa as well as the non-academic groups and individuals for whom this initiative marks a turning point in the critical discussion of African publications and African issues. The success of such a venture depends as much on the widest and most active participation of the audience as in the dedication and hard work of the editorial staff.

FSS's call did not fall on deaf ears. Particularly in the initial years, *ARB* was able to attract some of the best minds of the CODESRIA community to contribute to the biannual issues. Over time, the English section came to count on some dedicated reviewers like Adekeye Adebajo and Sanya Osha for the English version. The French section likewise had some regular contributors, notably members of the sizeable CRASC staff. The result was that *ARB* did not experience the problem of backlog from which so many other journals, including CODESRIA ones, suffered. Moreover, the journal earned a high reputation in the academic community. Although review articles were generally solicited rather than submitted, and although they did not undergo the review process of standard journal articles, some of the published articles were reportedly presented for academic promotion by their authors.

An Index prepared by FSS in 2016 gave a good overview of the amount of work done in the preceding twelve years. The index was divided into three components: general, reviewers and publishers. What becomes

evident from a cursory review of the index is that almost every African country was represented in the books reviewed as well as the reviewers solicited. Although some essays were included, most of the contributions were reviews of a book or sometimes multiple books. While we might not have risen to the level of our models, the *New York Review of Books* and the *London Review of Books*, a number of the reviews were of high quality.

At the risk of being capricious, one can cite in the Essays category, Godwin Murunga's 'African Cultural Identity and Self-writing' (Vol. I, No. 1), Ali el Kenz's 'Les chercheurs africains, une "élite"?' (Vol. I, No. 1), Georges Nzongo-lantlaja's 'The Great Lakes Region since the Genocide of 1994 in Rwanda' (Vol. I, No. 2), and Ibrahim Abdullah's 'Africans Do Not Live by Bread Alone: Against Greed, not Grievance' (Vol. II, No. 1). Likewise, in the Reviews category, one can cite Thandika Mkandawire's review of Jeffrey Sachs' book, *The End of Poverty*, and Mahmood Mamdani's review of two books on the Rwanda genocide (both reviews appearing in Vol. II, No. 1), Adekeye Adebajo's review of Mandela's biography by Tom Lodge (Vol. IV, No. 1) and his review of three books on Barack Obama's life, including his two autobiographies (Vol. V, No. 2), Gebru Tareke's review of two books on the Ethiopian student movement (Vol. V, No. 1), and Sanya Osha's review of the biography of Fela Kuti (Vol. IX, No. 1).

One or two special issues were also published. Such was the case with Volume I, No. 2 (2005), which was designed to mark the decennial of two contrasting developments in the continent: the final liberation of South Africa from apartheid, and the genocide in Rwanda. There was also a special issue dedicated

to Lusophone Africa, in partial recognition of CODESRIA's initial mandate of quadrilingualism.

All this is not to say that the production of the journal was without its problems. The initial publishing agreement with the University of South Africa Press did not go so well. Production became relatively smoother after CODESRIA took over the publishing from the second issue on. But the greatest challenge was getting reviewers for books. Although writing book reviews had the incentive of keeping the review copies to oneself, not all potential reviewers were enticed by it. There were also cases when reviewers got review copies and failed to deliver. The French section faced this problem to a lesser degree because CRASC could draw on the large pool of researchers attached to it. On the other hand, the French reviews suffered from being too much focused on the Maghreb, with the rest of Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa rather sparsely represented.

From the outset, the need to synchronise the activities of the two editorial teams was strongly felt. That was the rationale for the joint meeting held in Oran (seat of CRASC) in May 2005, a year after the launch of *ARB*. The meeting was attended by members of the two editorial teams as well as Adebayo Olukoshi, the Executive Secretary, and Francis Nyamnjoh, the Head of Publications, representing the CODESRIA Secretariat. Somewhat inadvertently, the meeting turned out to be at the same time a formal launch of the journal, as our CRASC colleagues had invited members of the academia and civil society to the event. The meeting discussed and resolved various editorial issues, including an update on the maiden issue of the journal, progress reports on subsequent issues, the activation of the International Advisory

Board, clarification on the essential character of a review journal as distinct from other journals, and a strategy for the long-term future of the journal. The Oran meeting also decided to have only one issue with two sections (English and French) rather than two separate issues, as was mooted at some stage. Also broached at this stage was the idea of making *ARB* a self-sustaining enterprise rather than it being totally dependent on CODESRIA, an idea that Thandika emphasised more than once but proved elusive to the end.

ARB was, of course, one of eight or so journals that CODESRIA was publishing. That was quite a daunting task by any standards. One of the ways by which the organisation tried to synchronise their activities was the holding of annual journal editors' workshops, when the editors would present progress reports and exchange experiences for better effect. These business exchanges were usually preceded by a fruitful discussion on the publishing world around a concept paper prepared by the Publications Department of CODESRIA. Probably the last such meeting of editors, the 9th edition, was held in tandem with the 13th General Assembly held in Rabat, Morocco, in December 2011. The rationale for the coincidence of the two events was to give the journal editors to get to know potential contributors and reviewers to their respective journals. The meeting was opened with a keynote address by Adam Habib, then Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Johannesburg, on the theme of 'Equitable Higher Education, Inclusive Development and the Commercial Academic Publishing Industry'. Unfortunately, this useful tradition of annual meeting of journal editors was suspended after that, presumably because of shortage of funds.