

## *Tributes to ABDALLA BUJRA //*

## *Hommage à ABDALLA BUJRA*

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### **PROFESSOR ABDALLA SAID BUJRA, (1938–2025) A Pioneer Pan-African Scholar, an Institution-Builder and Man of Conscience**

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**P**rofessor Abdalla Said Bujra, the Kenyan scholar who passed away on 8 January in Malindi, leaves behind an internationally recognised contribution to the social science disciplines in Africa, his published body of work ranging from social anthropology to an informed history of Eastern Africa's coast, from the problems of underdevelopment and neocolonialism in Africa to social democracy and governance reforms in contemporary Africa. He was actively involved in the founding and management of Africa's leading social and economic research centre – the Council for

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the Development of Economic and Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in Dakar, Senegal – in the 1970s, as well as the Development Policy Management Forum (DPFM) in Addis Ababa and Nairobi, in the 1990s. He taught at universities in Kenya, Tanzania, Germany and the US, and is widely published. But unlike the windbags and self-appointed 'professors'

who now saturate the social media and the press, Bujra shunned publicity and was modest to a fault. As a result, many Kenyans may not have heard of him, let alone met him outside his small circle of serious scholars and committed policy analysts.

Bujra was born in Lamu in 1938 and went to schools in Mombasa up to form four. He then proceeded to Huddersfield Polytechnic in England in 1957 for his 'A' levels, in the trail of the distinguished pan-African scholar, Ali Mazrui, who had gone there in 1955 and years later wrote about his experi-

ence there. After Bujra completed his undergraduate education and a doctorate in social anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London, he took up a lectureship in Sociology at University College, Nairobi (as it was then) in 1968, becoming the first Kenyan to teach in the department. But under the Jomo Kenyatta government, the window of academic freedom started to close and in short order he transferred to the Sociology Department at University College, Dar es Salaam, attracted there by the congenial and more vibrant academic left-wing environment there than in Kenya. The much-respected South African scholar, Archie Mafeje, who was to become a leading participant in CODESRIA's activities, was then head of the department.

The state of the development policy debate at the University of Dar es Salaam at the time, widely available in print, has been recounted most recently from an eye-witness position by Professor Issa Shivji, Saida Yahya-Othman and Ng'wanza Kamata in Volume 3 of their opus, *Development as Rebellion: A Biography of Julius Nyerere*.<sup>1</sup> Bujra was witness to all of it and was inclined to quote from it many years later, while discussing failures in democracy and development in contemporary Africa. Though largely sympathetic to socialist-inclined policies, Bujra remained independent in his convictions in an increasingly partisan intellectual environment.

In 1974, he moved to Dakar to take up the new position of Executive Secretary of CODESRIA. He was to remain there for a decade. Working alongside Samir Amin and Thandika Mkandawire, he built the

Council from scratch into a formidable network of research groups, training workshops, conferences, journals and publications that define the institution's core structure even today. In 1992, CODESRIA honoured him with its highest award – Distinguished African Social Scientist.

In the 1990s, Bujra went to Addis Ababa to launch a policy research and training centre – the Development Policy and Management Forum (DPFM) – domiciled at the UNECA, to provide an alternative to the scorched-earth market liberalisation agenda then being pursued by the IMF and the World Bank. At that time, many governments and political parties in Europe that were committed to a social democracy agenda – as opposed to the market fundamentalism of the Reagan and Thatcher governments that informed the 'Washington Consensus' of the Bretton Woods institutions – became outwardly critical of what the Bank and the Fund were proposing for Africa under the rubric of 'structural adjustment'. The DPFM took the middle position – market economies with social welfare benefits for all – as found in the Scandinavian economies and the Netherlands. Indeed, Bujra's 2005 edited book on democratic transition in Kenya advocated 'a struggle from liberal to social democracy', not the hard-left Maoism of some of his old Dar colleagues. All the while, Bujra still found time to serve as chairperson or board member in many institutions: The Katiba Institute in Kenya, the African Centre for Economic Growth, the African Union Eminent Persons Group on the Rwanda Genocide, the UNDP Africa Futures Project, and many others.

In the final years of his life, Bujra returned to the subject of the multiple heredities of peoples of the East African coast, a theme found in the novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah, the recipient of the 2021 Nobel Prize for Literature, which celebrate the medley of African, Asian and Middle Eastern cultures on the East African coast. Indeed, Bujra's doctorate was a splendid ethnography of the Huridah community (part of the Hadhramut people) in Yemen, with members in Kenya. While based at the Institute of Cultural Heritage at Morogoro University he was taken ill and briefly hospitalised in Mombasa in late 2024. Early this year he passed away at his home in Malindi – still working on the subject, still reminding his visitors of the vitality of personal integrity and fairness to all, which is the life that he had lived. On both the local and pan-African scale, Professor Abdalla Said Bujra has left a legacy that will be hard to match in a world in which the post-1945 architecture of interstate relations is crumbling under assault by the US government. But his life shows us that notwithstanding international adversities, an African intellectual project like CODESRIA can still continue into maturity and benefit generations of African scholars.

## Note

1. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 2022.

\* Professor Michael Chege is a research affiliate of the Institute of Development Studies, University of Nairobi. He has known and worked with Professor Bujra in many capacities over the years.