

Forthcoming Special Issue Tributes to Thandika Mkandawire

Farewell, Thandika!

If I am to use a single phrase to describe Thandika to someone younger, someone who had only read him, I would say he combined two rare attributes: he was both a complete intellectual and a complete human being.

It is difficult to think of any significant aspect of human and social life that escaped Thandika's scrutiny. He read voraciously. Unlike many of us, a lot of his reading was without instrumental intent. He had retained the eye of a child, open to newness. He could tell if and when the emperor had no clothes on. He reveled in the joy of discovery, however small or insignificant it be.

It is hard for me to remember the first time I met Thandika, but it must have been some time in the 1970s in CODESRIA, maybe after he had returned from his one year at the Zimbabwe Institute of Development Studies. It took a decade before we became close friends. Ours was a Dakar-based friendship. We explored much together, whatever we could lay our eyes, hands or ears on, whether ideas, food or people. Much of it

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took place between official business conducted in seminars or meetings. Over interminable cups of coffee in the morning and early afternoon, and beer (FLAG: Thandika called it *Front de Liberation Alcoolique Gauchiste*, in English, *Front for the Liberation of Left-Wing Alcoholics*) and then, as the clock struck midnight, at Kilimanjaro, where we would often enjoy music and dance into the early hours of the morning. Then a taxi ride to buy some fresh bread (*baguette*) before going to bed. During conferences and meetings, sleep came in two phases: first, three hours after dinner, usually 9 to 12, and then three hours after Kilimanjaro, usually 5 to 8 in the morning.

Thandika's preferred hotel was Lagon 2. Asked why, he would say: "Because it is the only hotel where you see the bar before you see the reception." I shared Thandika's preference for this small boutique-style hotel with modest rooms

which faced the ocean, and where the sound of waves against the walls of the hotel unfailingly drew you into a slumber.

Thandika led a balanced life: as much as he loved to immerse himself in Dakar's drink, dance and music-filled evenings, he found even more time to read and to exercise. His favorite mode of exercise, at least the decade we were good friends, was skipping rope as he marked time without changing place. I remember being fascinated when I found Thandika in the midst of the skipping rope routine one morning. He asked me to try it, which I did as he gave me a brief lecture on its many advantages. He then offered me his rope as a gift. I gladly accepted. The next morning, Thandika was at my door, apologizing for his mistaken judgment: I did not realize how much I would miss the rope-skipping. He extended his hand. I handed the gift back to him.

Thandika was a man of the world, this world, in many ways. For a start, he knew much about the world he inhabited and continued to explore as if seized

by a voracious appetite. He also negotiated the world incessantly, whenever possible, physically, across geopolitical boundaries and cultural borders. Once we were both in New Delhi, by chance since we were attending different conferences. I introduced Thandika to the family of a friend with whom I had been at the university in the 1960s. My friend's wife had a hard time remembering Thandika's last name, and twice asked him to say it, then a third time to repeat it, but still could not get her tongue around it. Thandika finally turned to her, addressing her by first name, Titli – which too was also a small tongue-twister – he said with ease and grace: “If you find Mkandawire hard to remember and say, just say I-am-kind-of-weary.” Titli burst into peels of laughter. She shortened it to “kind-of-weary.” From then on, she looked for every opportunity to call him by name. What had appeared as a cultural wall had suddenly turned into a friendly bridge, a small example of Thandika's genius in negotiating barriers, no matter how big or small.

The CODESRIA fraternity, and after some time, there developed a sorority too, was among Thandika's central concerns and preoccupations. He put an enormous amount of energy into it, and yet seemed to do it all effortlessly. He had a way with people. In no time, he could grasp a person's bent of mind, what made it twist or turn. He had a way of challenging us, in issues big or small, without evoking resentment of any sort. He would often remind us of the one-sidedness of our passionately held preoccupations. As Executive Secretary of

CODESRIA, he often had to deal with an Executive Committee comprising intellectuals convinced that we knew not only how the world worked but also how it should work. In the 1980s, there was one master key to all problems, global or local: democracy. Thandika would tell us: think of how much of your talk on democracy is a power grab. Do not forget that CODESRIA is a continental body. Its membership is spread over the entire continent. Its representatives, the Executive Committee, do not meet except twice a year. The hard work of building CODESRIA is done by the Secretariat. CODESRIA can survive a weak EC, but it will never survive a weak Secretariat, he would add with his customary and mischievous smile.

CODESRIA was proud of its multi-disciplinary orientation. Thandika was perhaps among the first to see through this claim. He recognized one leading note in this multi-disciplinary chant. This was political economy, then the master discipline. Just about everyone at CODESRIA – whether historian, political scientist, lawyer or literary theorist – everyone claimed to be a political economist. Thandika would often complain we were building this inter-disciplinary community on a shallow foundation. We risked weakening the grounding of every discipline, especially political economy, if we did not move away from this chorus.

Thandika could criticize and accept criticism. If he could dish it out, he could also take it. I remember this when discussing a possible title for my book, eventually called ‘Citizen and Subject.’¹ Thandika was particularly upset that I had used a phrase – ‘non-racial apartheid’

– in my chapter on South Africa. Without race, there is no apartheid, he said. “Racial discrimination was practiced by every colonial power, long before apartheid,” I argued. “Then what do you think apartheid is, just another word?” he retorted. “No, it is the race thing but reinforced, with another wall of discrimination, one built on tribal identity and tribal privilege, added to racial identity and racial privilege,” I responded. “So you think apartheid is an African thing. Right?” I had never seen him so upset. Things got hot and voices got raised. We were in a bar, three of us: Thandika, Zene (Zenebework Tadesse) and I. Zene looked worried. She thought we may soon come to blows. As Zene looked for ways of calming things down, we seemed to be going from one bottle of beer to another, each reinforcing the energy and the gusto we seemed to bring to the argument. There was a truce but it was never formally declared. We never discussed the issue again – until the last General Assembly in 2018.² Thandika formulated the question from the floor and graciously listened to my response. We were back on trail.

After Thandika moved from CODESRIA to UNRISD, and from there to LSE, we had less opportunities to meet. Ours became more of an email friendship. He would often share the draft of an article he intended to publish, and I would respond with comments. But the flow of conversation was missing, as was the flow of beer. Anyway, Thandika had given up beer since his cancer operation. I had hoped to bring him to Kampala to spend a couple of weeks, to give a set of lectures and spend some time traveling the countryside. But that opportunity was not to be.

The last time I met him at the General Assembly, over a drink (I do not know what it was, but it was not beer), I asked him how he was. “Old age sucks,” was his short reply.

We come into the world, and inevitably pass on, leaving behind traces, called memories. Amongst

all colleagues I have had the good fortune of knowing, Thandika came closest to the old adage that the passing of an elder (though 6 years older, he was always much livelier) is like the loss of a library. Let us learn from Thandika, not just mourn him!

Notes

1. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, 1996, Princeton University Press.
2. See video of the discussion using this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ltehDLdfog