

CODESRIA Tribute
Thandika Mkandawire (1940-2020):
Scholar, Mentor and Institution
Builder

On 27th March 2020, CODESRIA announced the sad news of the passing on of Professor Thandika Mkandawire after a brief hospitalization in Stockholm on 24th March 2020. Thandika, as he was fondly referred to by friends and colleagues, young and old, will be buried tomorrow on 15th April 2020 in Stockholm at a private ceremony in the presence of close family members. Other family members will gather in Malawi, his country of birth at the same time. These simultaneous ceremonies, separated by thousands of kilometres, have been necessitated by the current COVID-19 pandemic that has forced restriction on movement of persons as well as of large gatherings.



Thandika Mkandawire was CODESRIA’s third Executive Secretary, having served the Council in various capacities since 1983, when he came to Dakar for a six months stint to lead a CODESRIA programme on the future of Southern Africa. Those six months ended up as thirteen years of extraordinary service to a pan-African community of scholars. He joined the service of the Council under its founding Executive Secretary, Samir Amin; and went on to serve under Abdallah Bujra, CODESRIA’s second Executive Secretary. He took over the leadership of CODESRIA in 1986 having been appointed by the Executive Committee chaired by the late Claude Ake; and served until 1996 when his mandate came to an end during the Presidency of Akilagpa Sawyerr.¹ From CODESRIA, Thandika went on to give exemplary leadership to UNRISD in Geneva where, by all counts, he continued to mobilise research on many of the important issues on which he had pioneered or led research on while in Dakar.

In many respects, Thandika’s term of service at CODESRIA was inextricably linked with the institutionalization of CODESRIA as a key player on the African higher education scene and within the terrain of development thought and practice.² Under him, CODESRIA grew in leaps and bounds into a significant actor in the pan-African and global knowledge production sphere seeking, as he stated in the Preface to the book, *Academic Freedom in Africa*, to “pay greater attention to the nature of the research environment on the continent.”³ Thandika’s intellectual stewardship of the Council during this period of growth in turn defined his emergence as a doyen

¹ His farewell note titled “A Kind of Farewell” is published in *CODESRIA Bulletin*, no 2, 1996, pp. 1-4.

² See his “The Spread of Economic Doctrines and Policymaking in Postcolonial Africa,” in *African Studies Review*, vol. 57, Number 1, April 2014, pp. 171-198.

³ See Preface to Mamadou Diouf and Mahmood Mamdani, *Academic Freedom in Africa*, Dakar, CODESRIA Book Series, 1994, p.

of African scholarship, an icon whose intellectual influence was sought after and cherished, and whose name was invoked widely through published citations, at workshops, symposiums, and in conferences as well as within policy circles. The late Meles Zenawi who led Ethiopia as Prime Minister from 1995 to 2012, acknowledged that Thandika's thoughts on the developmental State influenced his thinking. So too has Dr Blade Nzimande, South Africa's Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation in his tribute published separately.

Thandika's principal contribution will be that he defined what CODESRIA meant to at least four generations of African academics; the first three about whom he wrote⁴, and the last one mainly through what they read from and about him.⁵ For many of the fourth generation, a chance meeting with Thandika at a CODESRIA meeting, often the General Assembly, was an unforgettable moment and an opportunity to drink from the fountain of wisdom that he was.⁶ His pithy note on "Three Generations of African Academics" in *CODESRIA Bulletin*, No 3 1995 elaborates the framework of this influence. That note was as autobiographical as it was a commentary on the different generations of African academics; and it carried as much of Thandika's story of engaging with numerous African knowledge producing institutions as well as his efforts to transform or change such institutions to serve the African continent better.

Born a Malawian in Zimbabwe, having lived in Zambia, and having worked, among other places, in Zimbabwe in the context of the transition from colonial rule to independence, Thandika understood the tribulations of being an intellectual in Africa. After all, he matured into a formidable journalist in Malawi under Kamuzi Banda's dictatorship and was forced into exile precisely because he refused to know-how to the Ngwazi's totalitarian power. In this, he was among a rare few, among whom Jack Mapanje and David Rubadiri would also be counted.⁷ If CODESRIA then became a space for intellectual exiles and the protection of academic freedom became a key preoccupation of the institution, it is because of the earlier experiences of founders such as him. They defined and redefined the Council's mission to focus on creating an autonomous space for intellectual thought unencumbered, initially, by the dictates of the state; and later, by external actors who, assuming Africans had no capacity for autonomous leadership, sought to determine the agenda for African institutions.

In his discussion of the three generations, Thandika reveals the changing nature of the institutional bases of knowledge production in Africa, adroitly illustrating the trials, travails and tribulations of these generations while illuminating the coping mechanisms that individual academics and their institutions implemented as they encountered a harsh state in Africa and an equally adversarial

⁴ See his "Three Generations of African Academics: A Note," in *CODESRIA Bulletin*, No 3 1995, pp. 9-12.

⁵ On the Fourth, see Mshai S. Mwangola, "Nurturing the Fourth Generation: Defining the Historical Mission for our Generation," *Africa Development*, vol. 33, No. 1, 2008, pp. 7-24.

⁶ See the essays in the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2018 specifically the interview with Nimi Hoffmann in that issue titled "Diagnosing neopatrimonialism: an interview with Thandika Mkandawire."

⁷ Jack Mapanje's two essays in Kofi Anyidoho, ed., *The Word Behind Bars and the Paradox of Exile*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997, give a good illustration of what this meant while Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) underscores the "essential sadness" and "crippling sorrow of estrangement" of exile means.

global knowledge production industry. Thandika was aware that the global knowledge networks reserved only marginal space and attention to the continent, and thus insisted on the need to “break local barriers and negotiate international presence.”⁸

Thandika demonstrated a mastery of the terrain of African social sciences in a way that perhaps only a few could. He credited this mastery to CODESRIA when he pointed out in an interview with our colleague, Kate Meagher, that “My stay there improved my skills as a social scientist because I had to deal with some of the leading scholars in social science in Africa who were part of the CODESRIA community.”⁹ The broad corpus of his intellectual contribution, the erudition he brought to bear on his academic outputs, the panoramic view that he cast on African realities, and his mentorship of generations of African academics is evident in the avalanche of tributes so far received following his passing on.¹⁰

Thandika was at his best when reflecting on his area of specialization – development economics. His unmatched critical engagement on structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), his work on the developmental State, and his lucid framing of the issues of social policy, all point to an icon who had mastered the canon and was at ease in interdisciplinary historiographies. Thandika’s writings on development may have focused on Africa, but they drew inspiration from broad observation and reading of the dilemmas of development globally. The work on the developmental state and social policy, for instance, drew lessons from Asian and European experiences; experiences he distilled and put into conversation with processes in Africa. He obviously reserved a special place for the Swedish example, citing it as having influenced his thinking. Thandika always underscored the importance of local agency; a point that he repeatedly emphasized in his Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola Lecture cited above, as well as in his spot-on review of Jeffrey Sachs book on poverty titled “*The Intellectual Itinerary of Jeffrey Sachs*.” He noted, “You would expect that from his analysis, Sachs would place Africans at the centre of the development policies. No! After patronizing encomiums directed especially at the grassroots, he allots the driving seat to international experts.”¹¹

Thandika’s critique of SAPs delivered some of the heaviest blows to a neo-liberal ‘prophecy’ that lacked intellectual, policy and moral credentials. His contribution resonated widely and is aptly summed up in his co-authored study with Charles C. Soludo, *Our Continent, Our Future*.¹² He taught that no country has ever developed or risen out of poverty based on external intervention alone. He reminded us that the state is indispensable to development generally and Africa’s development in particular and dismissed the tendency within Bretton Woods Institutions of treating the role of the state simply as that of a “night watchman.” Thandika understood the

⁸ See his 1996 Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola Distinguished Lecture “The Social Sciences in Africa: Breaking Local Barriers and Negotiating International Presence,” in *African Studies Review*, vol. 40, No. 2, 1997, pp. 15-36.

⁹ See Kate Meagher, “Reflections of an Engaged Economist: An Interview with Thandika Mkandawire,” in *Development and Change*, vol. 50 no. 2, 2019, pp. 511-541.

¹⁰ <https://www.codesria.org/thandikamkandawire/>

¹¹ See his “The Intellectual Itinerary of Jeffrey Sachs,” in *Africa Review of Books*, March 2006, p. 5.

¹² Thandika Mkandawire and Charles Soludo, *Our Continent, Our Future: African Perspectives on Structural Adjustment*, Dakar and Ottawa, CODESRIA Book Series and IDRC, 1998

importance of “social policy in a development context” and managed to convince many that the locus of effective social policy is good politics.¹³ For him, good policy had to be thought through historically and comparatively, and at the end, it always needed to focus on a range of welfare needs, the generation of social capital and the reinforcement of legitimate authority. His piece, “Good Governance: The Itinerary of an Idea,” rescued the notion of governance from generalised abuse by the Bretton Woods Institutions and refocused it on state-society relations. For Thandika,

“the main challenge of development was the establishment of state–society relations that are (a) developmental, in the sense that they allow the management of the economy in a manner that maximises economic growth, induces structural change, and uses all available resources in a responsible and sustainable manner in highly competitive global conditions; (b) democratic and respectful of citizens’ rights; and (c) socially inclusive, providing all citizens with a decent living and full participation in national affairs.”¹⁴

Thandika concluded appropriately that “[g]ood governance should therefore be judged by how well it sustains this triad.” He entered the verdict that the neo-liberal appropriation of “good governance” failed to sustain the triad. His notion on “the making of choiceless democracies” out of the crusade for economic deregulation and political liberalization was meant to expose any pretences that neo-liberalism carried for democracy promotion. Thandika, alongside Adebayo Olukoshi and Bjorn Beckman, understood that the market reform processes in Africa engendered authoritarianism and, as Beckman aptly concluded, “it is resistance to SAP, not SAP itself that breeds democratic forces. SAP can be credited with having contributed to this development not because of its liberalism but because of its authoritarianism.”¹⁵

Thandika was driven by a genuine pan-African vision inspired, perhaps, by years of travel across the continent. This allowed him to see the many-sidedness of the continent’s socio-economic realities. He resisted the pressure, emanating from Marxist circles, to prioritise class over other entry-points in the understanding of Africa. He appreciated that the experiences of many Africans were also shaped by nationalism. Many times, Thandika felt constrained to caution that CODESRIA was not constituted by a bunch of inflexible radical Marxists and repeatedly pointed out the intense internal debates within the community. Occasionally, he did this even at the risk of revealing otherwise confidential administrative processes.

The need for this caution stemmed from the fact that at CODESRIA, Thandika led a community of widely divergent, including in some cases, radical views. Often Thandika was unsure if it was a radicalism driven by fidelity to materialist analytic frameworks or whether it was radicalism

¹³ See his “Social Policy in a Development Context,” Social Policy and Development Programme Paper No. 7, Geneva, UNRISD, 2001.

¹⁴ See “Good Governance: The Itinerary of an Idea,” in *Development in Practice*, vol. 17, nos 4-5, 2007

¹⁵ Cited in Thandika Mkandawire and Adebayo Olukoshi, “Issues and Perspectives in the Politics of Structural Adjustment in Africa,” in Mkandawire and Olukoshi, eds. *Between Liberalisation and Oppression: The Politics of Structural Adjustment in Africa*, Dakar: CODESRIA Book Series, 1995, p.4 & 11.

informed by nationalist convictions. Thandika understood that European Marxists did not know how to handle African nationalism and tended to dismiss it cavalierly in favour of class analysis. He was aware that while class analysis captured the realities of Africans, ideologically, nationalism also did shape aspects of African identities and visions in ways that a pure class analysis was ill-equipped to handle. Thus, some of his most inspirational essays focused on nationalism, pan-Africanism and the state. The chapter on “*African intellectuals and nationalism*” is majestic in its review of the “turbulent link between African nationalism, African intellectuals and the academic community”¹⁶; while the paper on “*The terrible toll of post-colonial ‘rebel movements’ in Africa*” contextualises the post-colonial rebel movements within an urban-rural framework and helps explain violence against the peasantry with refreshing analytical insights.¹⁷

Interdisciplinarity based on nuanced understanding of African realities, therefore, came naturally to Thandika. He was a grounded scholar in every sense of the word who used nuanced analyses for institutional building. Regarding the primacy of interdisciplinarity, Thandika acknowledged that he

“learnt the importance of interdisciplinarity in studying problems of development. But I also learned it was intellectually demanding. It was not enough to bring together a little economics, a little politics and a little history to concoct interdisciplinary scholarship. You have to build interdisciplinary approaches and interdisciplinary institutions.”¹⁸

This was true in how he dealt with and inflected the assumption that development could only happen in the third world context under authoritarian regimes for instance. Rather than argue for a developmental State, Thandika argued for a democratic, developmental state.¹⁹ He came well prepared to this argument given his debate on democracy and development with Peter Anyang Nyong’o in the pages of *CODESRIA Bulletin*. Thandika challenged Anyang Nyong’o’s linkage of democracy to development in an instrumentalist way and argued “that democracy should be an end in itself.”²⁰

At the time when this debate took place at the beginning of the nineties, Africa was going through rapid democratic changes and it was clear that there was a paucity of good analysis of the transformations occurring on the continent. There was a similar dearth with respect to gender analysis. Under his leadership, CODESRIA responded by initiating the CODESRIA Democratic Governance Institute, an annual residency of young African academics who gathered to discuss issues relevant to democratization processes in Africa. Started in 1992, the Institute has hosted

¹⁶ “African Intellectuals and Nationalism” in Thandika Mkandawire, ed. *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*, (Dakar and London: CODESRIA Books in Association with Zed Books, 2005), p.46

¹⁷ See “The terrible toll of post-colonial ‘rebel movements’ in Africa: towards an explanation of the violence against the peasantry,” in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2002, pp. 181-215.

¹⁸ See Meagher, “Reflections of an Engaged Economist.”

¹⁹ See his “Thinking about developmental states in Africa,” in *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol. 25, Issue 3, 2001, pp. 289–314.

²⁰ See the series of debates in *CODESRIA Bulletin* eventually summarized in No. 2, 1991.

hundreds of laureates and sharpened the analytical skills and policy ideas of some of Africa's leading academics and policy practitioners.

With respect to gender, following enormous pressure from many African feminist scholars, CODESRIA convened a workshop in 1991 on "Engendering African Social Science." Thandika first publicly questioned whether there was "a corpus of methodologies, approaches or empirical studies based on gender analysis awaiting to be appropriated by a newly converted social science community." But at the end of the workshop, he acknowledged that his initial doubts were a clear illustration of the "triumph of ignorance over intellectual humility and open-mindedness" and accepted that indeed such a corpus existed.²¹ CODESRIA began to invest in gender analysis and even launched the Gender Institute in 1995 which has since then regularly convened African scholars around that very corpus of gender.

Thandika seems to have learned a critical lesson that enabled him to sequence and connect his different projects to a broader goal that included the production of quality and relevant knowledge that also embedded an intentional commitment to change Africa. In his inaugural professorial lecture as the Chair, African Development, at the London School of Economics titled "*Running While Others Walk': Knowledge and the Challenge of Africa's Development*,"²² Thandika argues that knowledge is integral to the realization of development and that the agency of Africans and African knowledge producers is key to realizing this. All his intellectual outputs, therefore, demonstrated a sharp consciousness, commitment and fidelity to basic canons of intellectual labour. Thandika aspired to see change in the condition of Africans based on an understanding of African realities. He aimed to project the voices of a plurality of Africans and he quickly became the voice of the African social science community in numerous international forums. It is no wonder that under Thandika's leadership, all CODESRIA Publications were translated into and appeared in both English and French.

Many have marvelled at Thandika's humour, his ability to wittfully deconstruct a concept in order to deliver its hidden, often corrosive, implication for Africa. Nowhere was this more evident than in how he took 'innocent' words like "networking" or insidious concepts like "neopatrimonialism" and turned them on their heads.²³ He did this in his soft-spoken manner, often punctuated by sarcastic laughs, knowing full well the power of his cryptic comments. Thus, when the tendency grew in the funding world to demand that Africanists [those working on Africa outside the continent] must partner and 'network' with their counter-parts on the continent, Thandika quickly took note that the demand, in reality, cast African academics in the global South to do the 'working' while Africanists in the North did the 'netting.' Of course, Thandika knew that there was an historic division of labour that trapped Africans into generating data for theory-

²¹ See details in Ayesha M. Imam, "Engendering African Social Sciences: An Introductory Essay," in Ayesha Imam, et, al., eds. *Engendering African Social Sciences*, Dakar: CODESRIA Book Series, 1997, p. 1.

²² See the revised version "*Running While Others Walk': Knowledge and the Challenge of Africa's Development*," in *Africa Development*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2011, pp. 1-36.

²³ See his analysis of the neopatrimonialism in "Neopatrimonialism and the Political Economy of Economic Performance in Africa: Critical Reflections," in *World Politics*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2015, pp. 1-50.

building in the North, and thus a mere demand for networking would not dismantle that hegemonic structure. He understood this to be a framework enabled by years of unfair practices in the research and publishing industry including the peer review system and editorial gatekeeping in academic journals and major publishing firms.

As early as 1995 while still at CODESRIA, Thandika had observed that the “routine rejection” by international journals of African submissions perpetuated the very problem it sought to address leading to the “bizarre situation” where “‘Africanists’ publish materials with the latest bibliographical references but dated material, while African scholars include the latest information on their countries but carry dated bibliographies.”²⁴ Little did Thandika know that at the apex of his intellectual career as holder of a chair at LSE, he would fall prey to this watchful gatekeeping. With his usual self-deprecating humour, Thandika would later tell the story of how the then editors/peer reviewers of the UK-based Africanist journal, *African Affairs*, having cajoled him both by email and through phone calls to submit the above cited Inaugural Professorial Lecture for consideration, then dismissed it with, among other ridiculous arguments, that the author does not understand World Bank literature.

As a community, we now understand better why Thandika worked so hard to secure CODESRIA as an autonomous intellectual space for Africans and to protect it from the exclusivist tendencies of mainstream Africanist engagement with Africa. At the heart of this autonomy has been a dilemma of funding given the old adage that s/he who pays the piper calls the tune. In many ways, Thandika is responsible for securing the autonomy of the Council when he facilitated the initial engagement with the SIDA that has seen CODESRIA grow and institutionalise itself. Not only was he able to secure the funding, but he was also able to negotiate a framework of support in which the Council fully accounted for Swedish taxpayer funds while securing the autonomy to define its research agenda, training priorities and publications. The longevity of the CODESRIA project owes much to the foresight, vision, strategy, mentorship, care, wit, and commitment of many, but among them, Thandika Mkandawire’s name occupies a prominent position. The Council and its community will sure miss him.

Godwin R. MURUNGA
EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

14th April 2020

²⁴ See footnote no. 7 in his “Three Generations of African Academics: A Note,” in *CODESRIA Bulletin*, No 3 1995, p. 11