



Remembering Thandika, Africa's Foremost Social Scientist

By Karuti Kanyinga



On March 27, 2020, around mid-morning, my friend Said Adejumobi informed me of the passing of our friend Thandika Mkandawire. I received the news with shock and called my friend Said back to ask him to clarify what he had told me. Both of us remained quiet on phone for some time. We did not seem to believe what we were discussing. Our personal emotions did not allow us to say much.

But immediately after our short and mumbling conversation, I decided to call Bayo Olukoshi in Addis. I thought he would be emotionally stronger to brief me. It was the same on his end too. Involuntarily, I sat down to read the messages that Thandika and I had exchanged in December 2019 and early in January 2020. I turned attention to the selfies we had taken on 9 December 2019 in Nairobi, over, first, several cups of tea, and later, several Tusker beers (for him) and red wine (for me), which he helped select.

Love of data and objectivity

Several reasons made me counter-check the sad news about Thandika's death. We had been friends since the 1990s. In my interactions with him, I learned the need to check and counter-check data and information irrespective of the source. Thandika was one person whose dexterity with data remain unparalleled. He did not believe in using data without verifying its objectivity, as well as the

manner in which the data was assembled. He could literally “torture” data to speak the truth by comparing different sets and sources. Triangulation - if you may - was a major issue of concern to him. This is what I learned from him, especially at the time of finalising my PhD studies at Copenhagen’s Centre for Development Research (CDR), where he came for a research fellowship around 1998.

The second reason for counter-checking the sad news about Thandika was personal. At midnight of 23 November 2019, at exactly 00:08, I received a message from Thandika. The message read: “Are you in Nairobi the first 12 days of December?” I immediately replied and said: “Hi Prof: Yes, I will be; let us keep in touch!” This was the usual way we communicated for a number of years, especially when he joined the London School of Economics. He would send students for field work to Kenya. Before doing so, he would send me a message asking whether I am around. He would then let me know that a student would be coming to see me. And the students he sent to speak to me or seek advice were the type you would love to have around for long. They were brilliant and schooled in “torturing data”, Thandika style.

Our meeting in December 2019 was also special in a way. We met on 9 December. He asked me where we could meet in the Westlands part of Nairobi and I could not immediately pick a place. I knew he had been unwell, and I was not sure whether I should take him where we could have a cup of coffee and meal or a place for a drink. I decided to pick a coffee shop - Java - which he liked very much.

Thandika was open to conversations, especially conversations based on data. Our meeting in December happened to be one such conversation. The meeting over coffee was one of the best I ever had with him. He was finalising his manuscript on his passionate topic. He was analysing new trends in Africa’s development. Many of us certainly knew that he was always very creative in the use of data and would find innovative solutions using data that was in the hands of many. During our conversation, I could see his fresh ideas in examining Africa’s development challenges and policy solutions.

The manuscript he discussed with me had data on Africa’s growth and development from the 1960s to 2019. He called one of the graphs a “killer graph” because he was able to examine growth factors from the 1970s to the present. He was of the view that the factors that fuelled Africa’s growth in the 1970s were very different from the factors that have been accelerating Africa’s growth from the late 2000s period. He identified the services sector and, in some instances, the ICT sector as responsible for the current growth. He argued that these would not have sound impact on Africa’s development. This is the argument he wanted me to critique once he was through with the drafting.

Coffee shop or beer bar - the embarrassing choice

Thandika was a man of humour. There was an instance at one particular conference in Nairobi where a speaker could not pronounce Thandika’s second name, Mkandawire. Thandika simply made it easy for him by telling him to pronounce it as Mkanda Wire (mkanda is Swahili for rope; and wire is a metal thread/rod). This left everyone laughing.

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He was humorous even when talking about serious and personal issues. After our coffee, he suddenly asked me: “Karuti, I did not know you would bring me to a coffee shop! When did you think

I stopped taking Kenyan Tusker?" Of course, I had chosen the coffee shop as a venue because I thought I was being considerate. He had had cancer treatment and I thought we should consume something light. He told me that he had remained in remission for a while. But in his usual genius way of stating even the most difficult subjects, he quickly added, "But you know these things change...remission may be temporary or permanent...".

We proceeded to a different restaurant for a Kenyan beer and my red wine, which he had the pleasure of selecting for me. I dropped him late at night at his apartment. I was feeling guilty because we had stayed out so long at night.

Influence on African scholarship

Sometime in 1998, Thandika came to Copenhagen for a research fellowship, just after his tenure at the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). It was here, at the Centre for Development Research (CDR), that I came to really understand and appreciate the immeasurable support he lent me and other younger scholars. He had come to join our friend and leading Africanist, Peter Gibbon, a friend who was also my supervisor.

Thandika arrived in Copenhagen and had immediate intellectual impact. He had the ability to see things that Danish Africanists would or could not see. In fact, in some discussion, there was a question on why African scholars were no longer writing as they did in the previous decade and why they were not influencing policy thinking. Thandika simply walked the discussion through the turns and crises of higher education, neoliberalism and its impact on scholarship, and the significance of politics on university education.

Again, he showed his ability to look at Africa with fresh eyes when he pointed out to them two simple facts. One, the consultancy "industry", including Denmark and Sweden (his home), had drained universities of talents that should be used for research. This was the basis of his then CDR working paper, "Notes on Consultancy and Research and Development Research in Africa".

He also gave another reason, but in passing: the generation of African leaders that was implementing the neoliberal Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in Africa did not have an understanding of the role of higher education in Africa's development. For him, the first generation of African leaders, such as Julius Nyerere in Tanzania and Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, had a good understanding of this role, especially because many of them were educated and had peasantry backgrounds. (These challenges were later well addressed in a book on African intellectuals that he edited and which was published by CODESRIA.) He did point out that there was a quest to build a developmental state in Africa that would play the role of building institutions, but this effort was increasingly undermined by restructuring efforts forced by the West.

I am indebted to Thandika in another respect. We had a habit of occasionally going for simple lunch meals or going for a drink during some evenings. Nothing fascinated Thandika than research ideas. One of these evenings, we discussed my research work on the politics of land in Kenya. Before I could explain what my main research question was, he immediately quipped: "Why is land such an issue so many years after independence? Where are the large farms that the colonial settlers occupied in the white highlands?" This, of course, led to me to go further to get answers through a review of records - and getting new dimensions in every page I turned.

After a quick review of the data on large farms, I realised that the land question is a political question whose solution does not lie in titling or market solutions. At this time, Thandika had consolidated his arguments on the paper on "Crises Management and the Making of Choiceless Democracies", as well as a paper on Malawi's agriculture, employment and labour. Our discussions

around these issues revealed the primacy of the state and the struggles for democratic reforms as central issues in understanding the state of development on the continent.

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It was when he was in Denmark that Thandika was approached to apply for the post of Director at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). There had been no other African at this post and it was evident that regional blocs, including South East Asia and some European countries, were lobbying for their candidates. We had long discussions on what to do and how to do it but, trust me, Thandika does not lobby. It was left to his credentials to speak for him. His writings and publications spoke for him, in addition to extremely good reference letters by prominent scholars and Africanists.

He continued to publish and his works on Africa’s development are extensively cited by researchers. I have included his works in the courses I teach. I usually find it refreshing going back to his publications whenever I want to reboot my thoughts on Africa’s development. Indeed, one time I came to learn that my students often joke that one cannot be my friend without citing Thandika Mkandawire’s works.

IDS and CODESRIA

Every time we met, Thandika would ask about the state of research at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi, where I am based. He was indeed very happy when we met in Copenhagen and learnt that I was based at IDS. This is because of many reasons. First, as he told me and explained during the 15 CODESRIA General Assembly, IDS (Nairobi) and CODESRIA have an organic relationship. The life of both institutions was quite intertwined. CODESRIA has origins anchored in IDS and other development studies centres in Africa.

Thandika explained that in the early 1970s, the directors of development research centres in Africa met several times in Bellagio, Italy, with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation. But the African directors of development research institutes, including the then IDS Director, Dharam Ghai, decided to meet more regularly because they had lots of things in common. They began to convene as the Conference of Directors of Economic and Social Research Institute (the original CODESRIA). The meetings were generally informal and aimed at sharing information and research ideas on the state of development in their respective regions. They met annually and decided to rotate the hosting of the meetings, moving every year from one region to another. Over time, however, Samir Amin, the eminent and quintessential intellectual, decided to host the “conference of directors” at the UN Centre where he was the director - the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning (IDEP) in Dakar. After getting a “permanent home”, the conference transformed into a council - the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (the present-day CODESRIA).

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With this history, Thandika would always ask me about the state of development research at IDS and the challenges we face. When he learned that I had been appointed the Director of IDS, he immediately wanted to know what help I required from his end; and whether there was room for public debates similar to the “Kenya Debate” that IDS convened in the 1970s. In our meeting of December 9, he specifically asked me to plan for his “coming at IDS” to give a public lecture in March/April 2020. He had requested that I pass this message and greetings to his old friends, Prof. Peter Anyang’ Nyong’o; Prof. Michael Chege; and Prof. Winnie Mitullah. We had agreed that I would begin convening public intellectual debates, and that I would reach out to CODESRIA to add value to these debates. On 11 January 2020, I received another message from Thandika reminding me of our drink and discussion. I remember I was awaiting his manuscript. And he was waiting for the big debate at IDS in March/April 2020.

It was not meant to be. How I wish we could stop death! Thandika Mkandiwire’s passing is not easy to just accept on my part. He has left a mark on the academy and his influence will remain forever in our social science texts in Africa. I have had the honour of referencing his works; and asking students to read his articles for fresh ideas. I feel that his mark on African scholarship is indelible.

Farewell Thandika! My heartfelt condolences to his Wife Kaarina, his family and his many friends across the globe.

Farewell my mentor! Farewell my friend

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