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Thandika Mkandawire : An Intellectual Giant, an Incurable PanAfricanist

An Obituary by Ibbo Mandaza

Thandika Mkandawire who passed away in Stockholm, Sweden, on 27 March 2020, after a protracted battle with cancer, was a renowned development economist, an institution builder and a PanAfricanist of note. He leaves us having contributed to the development of a formidable community of African social scientists over the half a century that coincides with his professional career. Those like me who had interacted with him ever since his days at CODESRIA in 1978, are grateful for having associated with this great man, my elder brother.

Born in Gwanda, Zimbabwe, of a Zimbabwean mother and a Malawian father who was a migrant worker, Thandika spent most of his formative years as a student in Zimbabwe, in the Copperbelt of Zambia, and only arrived in Malawi at the age of 13, as his father believed that education was better in that country than in the Copperbelt. Thandika participated as a young man in the nationalist struggle for independence in Malawi, working variously as a vibrant journalist and publicist, until he found himself exiled by Kamuzu Banda in 1965, ending up as a political refugee in Sweden soon thereafter.

The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, CODESRIA, a premier organization that Thandika helped to found in 1978, was among the first to announce the passing away of Professor Thandika Mkandawire, describing him as “a brilliant economist and prodigious scholar whose works on African political economy challenged dominant ways of seeing the African continent on a wide range of issues that included structural adjustment and economic reform, democratic politics, neopatrimonialism and insurgent violence.”

Thandika succeeded to the leadership of CODESRIA as its Executive Secretary in 1985 till 1996, but it was also during its formative years that his role was central as the organization became both the crucible and platform for radical African scholarship, extending its tentacles across the African continent and its diaspora, thereby rendering largely useless the old divides of "Anglophone", "Francophone", "Lusophone", or even "Arabophone", if there was such a term, in favour of a PanAfricanist thrust that was simultaneously contagious and irresistible. Thus, to this day, the CODESRIA General Assembly in Dakar, Senegal, is a “pilgrimage” to behold, as Africa's social science organizations gather over a week of deliberations, mobilizing as it does, among the best of the continent's minds. So sad, then, that the 2020 General Assembly will be without Thandika Mkandawire, for the first time since CODESRIA's founding in 1978.

For, there were periods during which special projects took him away from CODESRIA : in 1982-85, we succeeded in persuading the organization to afford us his services at the new Zimbabwe Institute of Development Studies (ZIDS); and on the expiry of his term of office at CODESRIA, Thandika moved on to head UNRISD in Geneva (1996-2006); and thereafter the distinguished professorship of African Development at the London School of Economics. That's excluding the various stints done across Africa, including the University of Cape Town and the Thabo Mbeki Leadership Institute in Johannesburg.

Ultimately, CODESRIA was his home; and compliments galore to those - Adebayo Alukoshi, Ebrima Sall and Godwin Murunga - who became Executive Secretaries after him, CODESRIA - and its community of African scholars that includes all of us - has never forgotten Thandika Mkandawire. On April 11-13, 2016, CODESRIA organized a conference in Lilongwe Malawi, on the theme "Thinking African Epistemological Issues: Celebrating the Life and work of Thandika Mkandawire". This was a grand occasion, even though there wasn't the requisite response on the part of the Malawian community to an event which was a celebration of one of their icons. Along with other contemporaries like Peter Anyang' Nyongo and Mike Chege of Kenya, Helmy Sharawi of Egypt, Abdoulaye Bathily of Senegal, to mention only a few among the many that thronged the event, I was honoured and privileged to be party to an occasion that, in retrospect, was a fitting farewell to my elder brother and comrade, even though we would meet again three years ago, as we laid our brother Sam Moyo to rest in Harare.

As I will have occasion to elaborate in the conclusion to this tribute to Thandika Mkandawire, the Lilongwe meeting helped me understand that Thandika was a PanAfrican par excellence, not confined within the boundaries of a given nation-state; and it also reminded me of one of the most emotional episodes I have ever witnessed in my life. This was the occasion of the launch in Blantyre, Malawi, in 1994, of the book, **Malawi at the Crossroads: The post-colonial political economy**, written by Malawians (most of them in exile at the time - before the demise of Kamuzu Banda in 1994), edited by Thandika's cousin (now late) Guy Mhone and published by Sapes Books in Harare. For both Thandika and Guy, this was their return to Malawi after a whopping 32 years in exile. Thandika would write about the event as part of his obituary on Guy Mhone in 2005: "He was so moved by the event and by the opportunity to finally participate in an intellectual event in Malawi that he broke down in tears and was not able to complete his speech." For me, it was a measure of the man's emotional strength that Thandika himself saw the event through to the end when most of us who packed the Ryans Hotel in Blantyre that night were visibly overcome by the poignancy of the moment: the return, after more than 30 years in exile, of two of the best intellectuals that ever emerged out of Malawi. It was as emotional an event as it was an opportunity to know and understand the self-less, humble but imposing personality that Thandika Mkandawire was. A great human being, an amazing man. Through him, I grew to understand the tragedy of post-independent Malawi, one often forgotten for its violence and intolerance under Kamuzu Banda, but a near normal for the scourge that has been Africa generally under the post-colonial state.

There is no one who has associated with Thandika that will ever forget his strong sense of commitment to both his work and those he worked with. In Zimbabwe, in particular, we will remember not only his sterling work at the Zimbabwe Institute of Development Studies (ZIDS), an institute I had helped establish in 1981, on the back of the (short-lived) euphoria that accompanied independence in 1980, and in the hope that the ideals of the liberation struggle could be sustained and developed through the mobilization of among the best intellectuals and technocrats at Zimbabwe's disposal. Thandika did his best under the most difficult of circumstances, including the vagaries associated with a state increasingly overwhelmed by its own failures and, therefore, the growing disdain (or is mistrust?) for intellectuals. As it turned out, not even Thandika could save ZIDS which, on his departure in 1985, was shunted to an uncertain future at the University of Zimbabwe, to be finally dissolved a decade or so later.

Yet, it was during Thandika's tenure at ZIDS, and in conjunction with CODESRIA's series of national research working groups, that he helped launch and flaunt Zimbabwe's academia through the book, **Zimbabwe: The political Economy of Transition 1980-1986**, edited by myself and

including a host of young scholars that were members of ZIDS and became prominent public intellectuals in subsequent years. Among these were the likes of Sam Moyo, Theresa Chimombe, Brian Raftopoulos, Lloyd Sachikonye, Thomas Shopo and Rungano Zvobgo; along with those of my generation like Masipula Sithole, Daniel Ndlela, Clever Mumbengegwi, Joyce Kazembe and Samuel Agere. On my part, I am eternally grateful to Thandika, not only for the opportunity through which I was able to mobilize and constitute a team of among the best minds in Zimbabwe, but also for mentoring me into the world of institution building, including the establishment of SAPES Trust in 1987.

As Thandika Mkandawire wrote in his **Foreword to Zimbabwe: The political Economy of Transition 1980-1986**, the national research working groups which CODESRIA established at the time were part of the capacity building towards the "indigenization" of scholarship in Africa, as a challenge to the "African Studies" industries of the northern hemisphere :

First, there was a growing demand for African scholars to be on the forefront of the studies of their respective countries and thus break the strong hold on the analysis of African reality by researchers elsewhere. If Africa was to be developed, it was incumbent upon African scholars that a large part of our understanding of our societies should be generated from within Africa..... One of the most humiliating experiences of African scholars is witnessing intellectual 'debates' on their countries in which nationals are only marginally engaged, if at all...

This book by Zimbabwean researchers is part of CODESRIA's contribution to the formidable task of extending Africa's sovereignty in the realm of scientific mastery of the continent's reality and destiny....

In conclusion, we have to remember Thandika Mkandawire as, among many of his outstanding attributes, a PanAfricanist par excellence, by which is meant also one not confined to, nor constrained by, the spatial demands of a nation-state. Yes, his exile status meant having had to obtain refuge in Sweden which afforded both a home and, of course, a passport. (In this regard, I recall an incident at one of the European immigration posts in the 1980's: on presenting his Swedish passport, the officer on the other side of the window asked Thandika, "Are you Swedish?" "Yes!" responded Thandika. "You could have fooled me!" retorted the officer, handing back the passport, after routinely stamping it.) Yet here was a person who could be at home in any part of the world, self-confident and, above all, a proud PanAfrican. I cited the following excerpt when I was presenting a Public Lecture on PanAfricanism in 1988. It was meant to extoll both PanAfricanism and the PanAfricanist himself; and so, here is Thandika Mkandawire in his own words:

As anyone who understands Bantu knows; Wakanda is the plural of Mkanda which is, of course, the abbreviation of Mkandawire. The great question my clan in Malawi, Zambia and Tanzania must answer is how they were left out of Wakanda?

On a serious note, when Africa's sagging pan-Africanist spirits are their nadir, its Diaspora has stood up to remind us of the dream – from William Blyden, Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, Malcolm X, Bob Marley, W.E.B Dubois, and, of course, Bob Marley "Africa's Must Unite".

The history of pan-Africanism is characterized by seesaw-like shifts in emphasis as continental or Diasporic issues have become dominant. In Africa, as elsewhere, Diasporas have played an important role in the reinvention and revitalisation of the "homeland" identity and sense of itself. And today, with the increased capacity to participate in the political life of their homelands, there can be no doubt that the Diaspora will be even more immediate to the rethinking of a new Africa.

While pan-Africanism started as a "stateless" and nationless movement, since the 1958 conference in Accra, it has had to reconcile its more transcendental agenda with the national agenda of new states and nations. And since then the new agenda of pan-Africanism has been much messier than its earlier variants, leading some to nostalgically long for the "Golden Days" when the Pan-Africanism message, task and articulation were much more coherent and straightforward and with a moral sway that was unchallenged.

The sheer size of the continent and the dispersion of peoples of African descent has meant that the pan-Africanist project has had to come to terms with a wide range of identities, interests and concerns which include gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, race and geographical allocation, to only name some major one. However, as I have said on several occasions, I do not believe that the failure of pan-Africanism can be attributed to lack of identification with Africa by Africans chauvinistically mired in their diverse identities, as it is often stated. Nor is it because individual countries have firmly established successful national identities that somehow militate against the pan-African ideal. "Africa" is probably the most emotionally evoked name of any continent. Its people sing about it, paint it, and wear it more than any continent. Its artists produce hundreds of icons of this much "beloved continent". Every major African singer has at least sang one song about Africa. Even national anthems often evoke Africa much more than individual country names.

This said we need all the cultural reinforcement to the pan-African project. Black Panther has contributed in a spectacular way to the cultural underpinnings and imaginary of pan-Africanism.

Thandika Mkandawire is survived by his partner Kaarina Klint and his two sons, Andre and Joshua; plus the six children left by his late brothers; and 3 grandchildren.