



Teniola Tayo

May 6th, 2020

What Thandika Mkandawire taught me about African development

1 comment | 4 shares

Estimated reading time: 5 minutes



Professor Thandika Mkandawire (1940–2020) transformed economic and development scholarship on Africa, developed a community of African social scientists and campaigned for greater recognition of the continent's knowledge production. Teniola Tayo writes on his tremendous influence and her response to the news of his recent passing.

I first heard Thandika Mkandawire's name from my friend, Vivian, a fireball Tanzanian woman who shows more daring every day than I could muster in a lifetime. We are a group of African students, meeting for the first time in the post-graduate student lounge at the London School of Economics, all studying International Development. This is at a time when, fresh from our various African countries, we are earnestly plotting the charts that will guide us through our year at LSE, using academic modules as reference points.

There is undeniable excitement in the air, and we are expectant. *I am here for Africa*, I remember saying, *so I will take all the 'Africa' courses.*

The courses I am referring to are African Political Economy, African Development and a bonus Poverty module – of course. *Eiii, I am not doing any of those courses*, I remember Vivian saying, *but Thandika Mkandawire will teach the African Development module and I think you will like him.*

The second time I hear his name, we're in a similar group of African students. We are now halfway into the semester and have lost most our initial exuberance. We are sitting outside the lecture theatre after an 'Africa' class speaking about our experiences with our studies thus far. The mood is sombre. *Thandika Mkandawire will be the best person to talk to about these issues*, someone tells us. Thandika. We are informed that the issues we are currently facing, as Africans studying development, are battles that Thandika himself has fought. One such fight apparently included Thandika firmly rejecting a rumoured proposal to reduce the entry requirements for Africans to get into LSE. *They tried to do what?! We are appalled. It is hard enough trying to navigate our academics with our heads held high. We can't imagine what it would be like if people assumed we were only offered places because we are from poor countries. Why isn't he here?* I ask. *He has been unwell*, comes the response, *but he should be back on campus to teach next term.* He never returned.

I learned of Thandika's death on a WhatsApp group for the LSE Africa/Caribbean Society. *Thandika Mkandawire is dead*, someone had posted. My first reaction was *???? Professor Mkandawire had died?! Yes, it's on Twitter.* Thandika was dead. It took a while for the reality to sink in.

That night I bury myself in unending videos of him alive. I start with the recording of his inaugural speech, after he was appointed the Head of the LSE Africa Initiative in 2010. The first thing I observe is the humility with which he carries himself. The second thing is his passion – more specifically, for **African knowledge production**. 'If we bring back development, we have to bring back the question of knowledge at the heart of the development process.' He shares his vision for the Africa Initiative, a

partnership with African universities to improve the capacity of their faculties. His opinion about 'Africa Centres', that they are mostly for helping Europe understand Africa, amuses me. He jokes: 'Most Africans who come to Europe to study don't study Africa eh?' Haha!

A few more videos and other statements stir me. 'African states have never been able to develop an organic link with their intelligentsia'. My former boss – a Policy Advisor in Nigeria – used to say something similar: that the failure of African development was a failure of the African intelligentsia. At the time I was never sure exactly what he meant. I understood now that Thandika's death was a terrible blow to an already feebly recognised body of knowledge-producing Africans who have made developing their continent their life's work. 'Nobody takes African thinking seriously'. An unfortunate reality that is still applicable today. 'You can say crap [about] Africa and you know there will be no response', he writes. 'I have taken it upon myself that, as long as I live, I will review what has been written about Africa and respond.' Sigh.

I mourn Professor Mkandawire the way a child might mourn a mother who died before they gained the ability to remember. He is the teacher and mentor I never had, but at the same time I can feel his influence on my work. I continue to learn from him, even in death. 'I am very interested in the development of nations. I am African so I don't have a choice.' It is interesting to hear him say what I have often said myself. I guess I was his student even before I realised it, despite never having crossed paths in the corridors at LSE.

The LSE has lost a treasure and a great torchbearer as it continues to grapple with Africa's place in its intellectual pursuits. More than a decade ago an article in its student paper, the *Beaver*, asked *Where is Africa in the curriculum?* Ten years later, there is still a struggle to *decolonise* the curriculum. If one thing is for certain, I am not only learning to understand the causes of things (the university's slogan) but, instead, like many Africans before me, I am learning to question everything. I am learning the

art of persistent contestation, as I refuse to be comfortable in the hole that the world has carved out for me, as an African.

Thandika's passing is surrounded by unfortunate circumstances. A pandemic on the loose is disrupting the world's fabric as we know it. More than two hundred thousand people have died, and a long-standing debate about what value to assign to human life in the equation of economic growth and development approaches a feverish crescendo.

Governments and health systems around the world are enduring a test of fire, and many are failing, with their citizens paying the ultimate price. The online talking heads, initially surprised that the African continent seemed mostly to avoid the worst of the outbreak, are now looking expectantly towards the continent preparing to report what they expect will be a humanitarian disaster of enormous proportions. This is a critical juncture for the global economy, and African thinkers, independent of opinions reliant on the 'global North', are needed more than ever.

What is our vision for society? We have an opportunity to shape a world that is different. A third world, in its original sense. A world that will include everyone, with people at the centre rather than simply the economic unit. Social policy is at the heart of development policy – that is how Thandika described it. This is what he wanted. It is what he preached. I think he would have been deeply intrigued by the ongoing political experiment in Africa, with many governments as a result of the pandemic cautiously trying on the aprons of welfarism.

African development should be pursued as the development of people – this is what Thandika has taught us, and this is how we will honour his memory. A great man has fallen from our ranks, but now is the time to regroup. We need all hands on deck, now more than ever.

Because I never had the opportunity to meet Thandika, here are a few articles by people who knew him much better than I did.

- **Thandika Mkandawire** by *Laura Mann* (who taught alongside Thandika for five years)

- **Thandika Mkandawire: an intellectual giant and incorrigible Pan-African** by *Ibbo Mandaza*
- **Thandika Mkandawire: in memory of an intellectual giant** by *Paul Tiyambe Zeleza*
- **Development-driven, iconoclastic, witty and informal: thinking about Thandika Mkandawire (1940–2020)** by *Yusuf Bangura*
- **The world has lost a giant of development economics** by *Isabel Ortiz*
- **The familial side of Prof. Thandika Mkandawire** by *Ntombizakhe Mpofu Mlilo*
- **A poem for Thandika** by *Issa Shivji*

You can find a list of his works [here](#).

About the author



Teniola Tayo

Teniola Tayo is a public sector consultant passionate about Nigeria and Africa's development. She is currently a Research Fellow at the French Institute of Research in Africa (IFRA-Nigeria) and was previously a consultant with the West African Think Tank (WATHI) in Senegal. She has worked as a Policy Analyst in Nigeria as well as a Senior Legislative Aide to a past President of the Nigerian Senate. She is a 2019 Chevening Scholar and is pursuing an MSc in Development Management at the London School of Economics

Posted In: Development | Obituaries
