The African Library Project and the 'Big Ideas'

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The issue of research priorities is closely linked with our collective intellectual history, the history that we have been saying, for the past eleven years or more, that we must document. I remember attempts being made to commission Aminata Diaw and the late Archie Mafeje to write the 'intellectual history' of CODESRIA. The issue of priorities is also linked to the mandate of CODESRIA and how we interpret it at every given moment.

The African Library

That what Mudimbe calls the 'colonial library' has not been the only 'library' that ever existed in and with regard to Africa, has been sufficiently demons-trated. There is a 'Muslim', as well as a larger 'non-Europhone' 'library' (Ousmane Kane). The social sciences, as we know them today, came to us through the encounter with the West. Our ambition and our struggle have been to build an African library. Part of the difficulty we were, for a long time, faced with as a commu-

nity, was that our community was fragmented in many ways. CODESRIA, in trying to build a 'networked community of scholars' has so far mainly focused on, and deployed efforts to transcending the linguistic, gender, gene-rational, regional and ideological divisions.

One of the biggest and most fundamental dividing lines, however, has been the one that disconnects us 'modern' scholars from both the extremely rich and vibrant intellectual traditions that Africa has had in the past (see Jeppie and Diagne's *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, and Kane's *Les intellectuels non-europhones*, for instance, one co-published by HSRC and CODESRIA, and the other by CODESRIA), and from the 'non-europhone intellectual traditions' of today. It has been argued

by Kane, Thiam and others that Africa has had its own 'enlightenment', perhaps with its own downside too, as was the case with the European enlightenment. The reconnection with, and reclaiming of that part of our history has begun, and I believe CODESRIA is well placed to take that process forward.

The second major difficulty has been that of trying to build our own library, the 'African library', using borrowed concepts, theories and paradigms, reading the social dynamics in our societies and interpreting our experiences by analogy, and not even using our own money, but by using other people's money, because, with a few notable exceptions, African governments have largely refrained from funding research and investing in knowledge production. The struggle of CODESRIA since its creation is the struggle for autonomy – the 'indepen-dence of thought' – as stated in earlier versions of the Charter, or, simply put, academic freedom. Beyond the narrow definition of academic freedom, what we have been

really talking about is the capacity of the African scholarly commu-nity to conceptualise / theorise, rather than leave all that and more to 'experts' on 'African affairs'. Not so much because there can ever be something remotely resembling what could be called an 'African science', given that science is universal, but because we must know, we must go into the global repository of concepts, theories and methodologies, and take, own, use as is what we can use as is, but also re-cast, where possible, or throw away what we cannot use or re-cast because it is inappropriate, and replace that with what is more suitable for us. We ought to be able to contribute our own narratives, and contribute to the increase of knowledge produced at the global, regional and other levels. In the long history of the Council, I think we have covered a lot of ground. But we still have a long way to go.

The third major difficulty has been to 'free' the 'African library' that we (African scholars) are trying to build, from the risk of its constituent elements being dominated by outputs of what, elsewhere, Jean-Bernard and I called 'command science' (*la science du commandement*) – that is, science in the service of the dominant powers and the dominant order, whose approach is to read society from a rather externalist point of view, and whose aim is to decipher, categorise and name or label, and map social groups, phenomena or dynamics in a process that is more or less part of a state project consisting of what James Scott calls 'making societies legible', in order to make them controllable (or 'governable'). The CODESRIA project, as I understand it, is a fundamentally emancipatory project. But we have not yet systematized our approach in the way that the Subalterns Studies, for instance, have been systematized, even with all the limitations of an epistemological and political nature. The best examples of 'command science' are in colonial ethnography and ethnology. I would argue that the literature on governance is replete with modern forms of that kind of 'science' which, these days, exist in all guises. (See Michel Foucault's writings on governmentality).

The 'Big Ideas'

I borrow the notion of 'big ideas' or 'big pictures' from Mahmood Mamdani, Abdul Raufu Mustafa and Jimi Adesina, and I call 'big ideas' the major themes that we have been researching and debating in Africa since the early sixties. Mamdani, is partly in agreement with Shamil Jeppie and Jimi Adesina when it comes to the periodisation of the post-independence intellectual history of Africa, much of which was centred on CODESRIA since the birth of the Council in 1973. There are also periodizations of the history of higher education (Zenebeworke Tadesse, Tade Aina, Thandika Mkandawire, N'Dri Assie-Lumumba ...). I quote the following from a recent communication from Mamdani, referring to the think-pieces written by Jimi, Shamil and Samir for the meeting on CODESRIA's new Strategic Plan:

"I outline below my understanding of the periodization of CODESRIA's intellectual project since its inception and conclude with a suggestion of the big ideas that need to drive the current endeavour.

1. The first phase focused, as Jimi says, on the question of 'development'.

2. I mark the beginning of the second phase with the 1984 General Assembly where there was a critique of the overly economic character of CODESRIA's intellectual project and a decision to launch a multi-national research on social movements and democratization (followed by a Green Book). In my view, the second phase has been marked by two big ideas: (a) critique of the neoliberal project (as Jimi says); and (b) the democratic struggle and social movements.

3. We are at the cusp of a third phase, which needs to be driven by multiple ideas. I suggest the following: (a) development in the post-neoliberal era (as Jimi suggests and Samir agrees. This point has also been made by Issa Shivji); (b) citizenship and rights in an era of state and civil crisis (as formulated in my contribution); and (c) re-thinking African history, philosophy and social thought in light

of the Timbuktu archive (I am thinking of the joint contributions of Ousmane Kane, Suleymane Bachir Diagne and Shamil Jeppie)."

Mamdani's periodization overlooks the years of debate on Structural Adjustment, that is, on the very process of liberalization that occupied African scholars for two decades or so. These also were the years of political liberalization, during which conflict also reached unprecedented years. Mahmood's third phase therefore ought to be considered the fourth, and it is the phase that the 2007-2011 CODESRIA Strategic Plan, under the umbrella theme "Re-Thinking Development and Reviving Development Thinking" covered.

Beyond Neoliberalism

The search for ways of responding to, and rolling back neoliberalism seems to me to be one of the single most important issues and challenges for CODESRIA. The recent global financial crisis has led to a partial rehabilitation of neo-Keynesianism and some new interest in social democracy. However, in the social sciences themselves, neoliberalism has led to a high level of marketization which has resulted in increased fragmentation, as Burroway has argued, rather than their 'opening' and greater unification that the Gulbenkian Commission Report (authored by Wallerstein and his team) seemed to have observed. In the context of the African academy, the forms, manifestations and consequences of the marketization of the social sciences themselves is yet to be fully understood – we have spent much more time and efforts in studying the marketization of higher education, than that of the social sciences, which is where we perhaps ought to have started from.

For CODESRIA, therefore, understanding the pervasive logic of neoliberalism in a whole range of domains, from trade to the environment, is crucial. The objective that we should not lose sight of, is that of 'building a united Africa of emancipated citizens and communities, one in which life has value and is valued, rights are respected and enjoyed, and social bonds are strong'.