

ABDALLA BUJRA's Legacy in Building the CODESRIA Community

When the final night falls on us
as it fell upon our parents,
we shall retire to our modest home
earth-sure, secure
that we have done our duty
by our people;
we met the challenge of history
and were not afraid.¹

With hindsight, from the vantage point of more than half a century on, it is easy to take for granted the legacy that Prof. Abdalla Bujra bestowed on us as a Council, as a continent and as a community of intellectuals stretching far beyond this continent. For us at CODESRIA, he was one of the (almost mythical at this point) founders, synonymous with the seminal decade of our establishment. His visionary foresight and painstaking labour laid the groundwork for the community we know today. Reflecting on the rich treasure trove of historical reminiscences of CODESRIA's past, delivered during the 50th anniversary celebrations in 2023, I am struck by the immensity and daring of the challenge that he willingly embraced at the behest of Prof. Samir Amin, working closely with colleagues such as Prof. Thandika Mkandawire to build the institution that today is one of the most vibrant and robust African epistemological communities. There is enduring sadness that, with his departure, the Council has closed a chapter in laying to rest the last of the indomitable core crew that

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worked tirelessly to nurture it into being. However, that grief is tempered with the knowledge of the precious-beyond-words legacy bequeathed to us as a responsibility to hold in trust and pass on to those who will follow.

What an exciting decade that must have been, as Amin, Bujra and Mkandawire set in place the foundation for the Council! The story has been told often enough: of how Samir Amin – then director of the United Nations Institute for Development and Economic Planning (UN-IDEP) based in Dakar – became persuaded of the imperative to set up, in 1973, what Peter Anyang' Nyong'o has described as 'something authentic and African, from its very foundation, for the African social science community to feel at home with and where they could do their own original thinking and research'.² For about two years, Amin juggled his responsibilities at UN-IDEP and those at the fledgling organisation, before relinquishing the reins and bulk of the administrative burden to Bujra, who stepped into the role of Executive Secretary, a position he then held for a decade before passing the baton in turn to Mkandawire.

It was during Bujra's tenure (1975–1985) that CODESRIA developed its distinct characteristics and become a fixture of the African intellectual landscape through an innovative programme of activities that continues to flourish today. At the heart of it was a rich diversity of gatherings: conferences, workshops and seminars designed to meet the different needs of the various constituencies of the African social science community. Each of these was convened around one of the priority concerns of the African social science intelligentsia, attracting a committed core of individuals who gradually evolved into a vibrant epistemic community that fiercely guarded, to borrow a phrase from Elisio Macamo, 'the freedom to differ'.³ This phrase not only translated into a robust defence of African intellectual work against a then-prevalent norm within the Western(ised) academy that considered African academics and the African academy as a whole as intellectually inferior. It also manifested in vigorous and vibrant internal debates and discourses, many of which have become seminal interventions in African intellectual history. It is another mark of the foresight of the founders that this period, under Bujra, also saw the establishment of what has become a formidable archive of publications that is undisputably today a wellspring of African intellectual thought, including the flagship journal, *Africa Development*, which marks its own golden jubilee anniversary this year.

Clarity of purpose with regard to the mission of the Council, an unapologetic embrace of Pan-Africanism, and the manifest commitment of that seminal team to African intellectuals and intellectual entities contributed to the making of a vital sanctuary that few could have foreseen at its establishment would play such a critical role in the lives of so many African thinkers. I am especially struck that, while juggling the copious responsibilities that came with establishing a pathbreaking continental institution, the team still prioritised the nurturing of community, turning CODESRIA into a 'home-away-from-home' and family for African intellectuals in crisis or need. This has been the case especially for those in political exile or facing life- or career-threatening opposition because of their work, who could rely on this family for support and community. Although we formally date the beginnings of CODESRIA's engagement with academic freedom as a structured programme to November 1990, it was during Bujra's tenure that the principles that saw the Council extend much-needed solidarity to multiple African intellectuals over the years were firmly laid down. It was during his tenure, as well, that CODESRIA institutionalised the practice of Pan Africanism as a core component of all its programming, to such an extent that it has since become second nature for the institution. Bujra's understanding of the importance of building networks of researchers within national boundaries, and of nurturing these communities across the continent, continues to guide the Council's approach to its work to this day.

My own engagement with Prof. Bujra came long after he had left the staff of the Council. I met him

at the 30th anniversary celebrations in 2003. What I do remember from that gathering was that sense of community: the warm camaraderie and comradeship extended by even its most senior members towards awestruck early-career scholars like me, who were thrilled to listen to, let alone meet, storied names like his. He extended to me an invitation to visit his Development Policy Management Forum offices in Nairobi, an offer I indeed took up, becoming a frequent visitor on my return to Kenya after graduate school. It is only recently, though, that I have begun to get an inkling of the size of the community of fellow mentees that he somehow managed to find time for in one way or another. This was not just in Nairobi but in every place he had sojourned to in his illustrious career.

In retrospect, witnessing his commitment to institution-building and creating spaces for African intellectuals to do their work and find support has helped me appreciate CODESRIA's strong motivation to nurturing and sustaining community, a critical asset that has kept the Council alive through the many seasons it has been through. Over time, he also nurtured my growing interest in the *longue-durée* history and present-day implications of East Africa's engagement with the Ziwa Kuu (Indian Ocean) Maritime Zone, a research interest that became one of his consuming passions towards the end of his long and distinguished career. It was only after a visit to his ancestral home in Lamu that I also learned of his dedicated commitment to the priorities and concerns of the local community, manifest in his incisive interventions, alongside other activists, mobilising against the proposed development of a new seaport that threatened the cultural heritage of his home island.

Abdalla Bujra has now departed from among us, joining his 'co-conspirators' Samir Amin, Thandika Mkandawire and a heart-breakingly large number of the indomitable seminal cohort of CODESRIA militants. Still, we can be grateful for the gifts he has left us: a growing and diverse portfolio of programmes that continue in this twenty-first century to further the original vision of an authentically African intellectual community; an uncompromising set of principles and priorities that serve as the guiding star for the Council's engagements with the world; and a passionate and unequivocal community who understand the privilege and responsibility that has been passed on to us to hand over to the next generation. In return, we can only commit to emulate the example of our founders, such as Bujra, so that the same may be said of us, when our own time comes:

... we have done our duty
by our people
we met the challenge of history
and were not afraid.

Notes

1. Kofi Awoonor, 2013, "To feed our people", in *The Promise of Hope: New and Selected Poems: 1964–2013*. Dakar: Amalion Publishing, p.13.
2. Peter Anyang' Nyong'o, 2023, 'Reflections on CODESRIA After Fifty Years: Change, Turmoil and Progress in Society and the Social Sciences', *CODESRIA Bulletin*, Nos 3 & 4, *Special Issue – 50th CODESRIA Anniversary*, pp. 8–9. Also see Jimi Adesina, 2023, "CODESRIA at Fifty! What a Journey!", pp 16–21 of the same bulletin.
3. Elisio Macamo, "The Freedom to Differ", *CODESRIA Bulletin*, Nos 3 & 4, *Special Issue – 50th CODESRIA Anniversary*, pp.30–33.

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