

Our Task of the Day is to Spearhead an Insurrection of Pan-African Ideas

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Thiam, Garba and Ba: Prof. Shivji, as a towering figure in the study of Africa for social transformation, you embody the progressive movement in its radical commitment to African (and human) dignity. How would you define/describe/situate your training, your research and your commitments relative to African research?

Professor Shivji: I entered the University of Dar es Salaam, then a university college of the University of East Africa, in 1967. We were the first post-Arusha Declaration generation. As you know, the Arusha Declaration on Socialism and Self-Reliance was the ruling party's blue-print to build a socialist country under Julius Nyerere. The Campus was vibrant with debates and discussions - both inside and outside the lecture room - on socialism and the role of the University and intellectuals in it.

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Significantly, this debate was happening in the international context of world-wide struggles. There was the struggle of the Southern African liberation movements against Portuguese colonialism, and white settler regimes in Zimbabwe, Namibia and apartheid South Africa. Many of these movements were based in Tanzania and fully supported by Nyerere's party and the state. The civil rights movement in the US was at its height. All over the world there were demonstrations and protests against the United States' carpet bombing of Vietnam. In 1968, French students almost toppled De Gaulle's government. China was in the throes of the Cultural Revolution. Elsewhere there were vociferous debates on Marxism and generally left politics. In short, the revolution was at the zenith, as Samir Amin would have put it.

This was the context which radicalised a small group of University students who came from all over Africa. Some of the radical faculty exposed us to amazing plethora of radical literature. These includes Frantz Fanon, C. L. R James, Kwame Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral and of course Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao and Marxist writers from different tendencies. Radical students formed their famous organisation, the University Students African Revolutionary Front (USARF) which published a magazine called *Cheche*, 'The Spark' named after Lenin's *Iskra* and Nkrumah's 'The Spark'.

In my third year of undergraduate studies in law, *Cheche* published my long essay titled 'Tanzania: The Silent Class Struggle', as a special issue (September 1970). This was not a class essay or an academic assignment. The immediate motivation is described in the introduction which I quote to give your readers the flavour of the time:

"The present situation in Tanzania appears to be both confusing and confounding. This is made doubly so because hitherto no attempt has been made to do a scientific analysis of the socio-economic formation in Tanzania. The vacuum resulting from the lack of a theoretical analysis of the total situation has given rise to the dangerous phenomenon of finding a substitute in platitudes, phrase-mongering or chanting of hollow slogans. ... The psychology, attitudes and utterances of personalities are increasingly replacing concrete, objective material conditions as a yardstick for assessing particular actions. Long term perspective has receded into the background. ... Appearances pass as reality while proper analysis of reality is met with ignorant contempt or condemned as 'doctrinaire'. Subjectivism is on the verge of triumph!"

The essay sparked off a debate. Among others, Walter Rodney, Joh Saul, Thomas Szentes, Kassim Guruli and Justinian Rweyemamu commented on the essay.¹

You ask me about research. During this time, University faculty was involved in *basic* research. This was not simply an academic enterprise. It was engaged and committed research to understand the reality and interpret it so as to change it. My own research and writing has been informed by this tradition.

Thiam, Garba and Ba: [Your deep and longstanding involvement with institutions that have played pivotal roles in advancing the social sciences across the African continent, namely the University of Dar es Salaam, Makerere University, the](#)

¹ For the original essay together comments see Issa Shivji, et al., (1973). *The Silent Class Struggle*. Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House.

Institute of African Studies in Accra, University of Ghana, and CODESRIA, makes you a prime witness to the evolution of African research. Can you provide some insights into the historical moments that shape the outlook of these institutions (at a general level)?

Professor Shivji: With the benefit of hindsight, I'd define two moments, the nationalist and the neoliberal, as pivotal in the research and development of social sciences on the continent. And there was the transitional moment between the two - that of structural adjustment programmes and its various iterations. The nationalist moment engendered two schools: That based on received theories like modernisation; and that grounded in nationalist reaction such as the nationalist school of historiography which sought to seek and highlight African agency. In radical institutions like CODESRIA, the Pan-African dimension of nationalism was an important referent although not always prominent. The dependency and underdevelopment schools were prominent within the nationalist school, albeit going beyond seeking an African agency to delineating the insertion of the continent in the wider world capitalist system. It is important to underscore two elements of the latter. One, that the work was interdisciplinary, attempting to breach disciplinary boundaries of the bourgeois and colonial thought-mode. Two, in this context, politics was in command, so to speak, in that radical researchers and engaged scholars did not shy away from analysing and understanding imperialism and the nature and character of their state.

During the transitional moment, when our universities were under heavy onslaught by donors and Western academia to neo-liberalise our education,

CODESRIA played a prominent role in developing a formidable critique of SAPS and its various reincarnations.

In short, I would say that in understanding how the outlook of our institutions were shaped, we should not ignore or understate historical specificities without losing sight of general trends and tendencies of the process of world-wide capitalist accumulation and its political manifestations, albeit mediated by complicated layers of ideologies and practices.

Thiam, Garba and Ba: *For the benefit of younger faculty and the next generation of researchers seeking to understand the importance of the aforementioned institutions, can you speak about the significance of these institutions in shaping the African intellectual landscape for progressive social transformation?*

Professor Shivji: Right at the outset, I would like to assert one thing: While institutions matter, ideas matter more. Ideas determine the outlook of institutions, not the other way round. Having said that, of course, ideas must find a home. And our institutions of higher learning undoubtedly provide a home for ideas within which ideas can be developed, nurtured, critiqued and defended; burning issues identified and theorised.

I must sound a caution, though. It is not only institutions, which more often than not assume an elitist posture, where ideas are produced, for people think; Organisations of working people outside these institutions also produce ideas, perhaps not systematically and in an articulate fashion. It is therefore our responsibility, as intellectuals, to learn from these ideas and practices and give back to the people systematically what we receive from them confusedly.

Thiam, Garba and Ba: We're now in an era of global capitalism marked by what is called the 4th Industrial Revolution and the accompanying digitalization of every aspect of life with consequent challenges to migration, human security, democracy, capitalism, and the liberal understanding of human rights (something you have critiqued). How can Pan-African research help us make sense of this moment? What forms of intellectual struggles do you think we need to wage?

Professor Shivji: Let me first say that we should not be mesmerised by new vocabularies and new technologies – digitalisation, artificial intelligence etc etc. We must fully understand these, of course, but also understand that the dominant social order incessantly generates new forms of domination through, among other things, hard and soft technologies accompanied by new forms of ideological hegemonies. I have yet to be convinced that robotisation, digitalisation and artificial intelligence can replace human agency. In robotisation and kindred technologies, there is a lurking danger that the increasingly small class of fascist forces bent on dominating the world could embark on, perhaps it is already doing so, to *robotise* (and digitise) human beings. It is this that we have to fight with all our might and human creativity. Hence, the singular importance of robust and critical humanities programmes in our institutions of learning.

In this regard, I think, we should reclaim and reconfigure Pan-Africanism as a world outlook, as an ideology, as a movement and as a category of intellectual thought. In its sentiment and solidarity, in my view, Pan-Africanism has an inherent element of humanity and the potential to humanise. Let us dare go beyond received human rights ideology and liberal democracy based on individuation of human beings to reclaim elementary human solidarity based on the human whole. Humanity is not simply an aggregate sum of abstract individuals; rather individual human beings are a specific, concrete, diverse and beautiful expression of humanity as a whole. We need to break the chains of bourgeois world outlook that imprisons us in our racial, tribal, ethnic, religious and parochial containers. We are part of the whole humanity and humanity lives in each one of us.

Thiam, Garba and Ba: In conclusion, kindly share with us any final words that you may have.

Professor Shivji: In the light of what I have just said, I think our task of the day is to spearhead an insurrection of Pan-African ideas; foremost of all underscoring its emancipatory and humanising potential. We need a resurgent scholarship, an audacious scholarship, not a scholarship that regurgitates. Our scholarship must be grounded in solid, basic research away from the shallow consultancy syndrome. Our scholarship must be prepared and confident to break new ground theoretically. And finally, our scholars and intellectuals must be prepared to challenge the powers that be, that is to say, speak truth to power.