In a paper he presented at a Conference co-organized and hosted by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in January 2013, Achille Mbembe, a one-time executive secretary of the Council, drew our attention to one of the recent books of Jean and John Comaroff, Theory from the South, in which they argue that

“the history of our times” is now made outside of the West, especially in the Southern parts of the world. This being the case, they [the Comaroffs] then ask how does one de-center social theory and the production of knowledge in such a way as to better account for the complexities of modern world history and for the multiple ways in which various parts of the world relate to each other. The project of de-centering theory is not only a response to the colonial event. De-centering theory has been part of a larger quest to rewrite world history (Mbembe 2013: 1-2).

It is a project that has been at the heart of the thinking of all the great pan-African intellectuals, from W. E. B. Du Bois, through Nkrumah and many others, to Cheikh Anta Diop.

De-centering theory and rewriting African and world history is, in some sense what CODESRIA has also been engaged in, all through its 40-year history. Promoting social science research and knowledge production in Africa and by Africans was, as Cabral used to say, a question of encouraging African intellectuals to learn to “think with our own heads, based on our own realities”. This has led to the interrogation of theories and the critic of dominant paradigms of development, governance and international relations.1

Indeed, one of the challenges facing African scholars has, for a long time, been how to produce counter-narratives and alternative ways of understanding African and global issues as well as representations of Africa and African realities. For CODESRIA in particular, and for many great scholars in or from the African continent, it has also been

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1 The 2007-2011 Strategic Plan of CODESRIA was deliberately focused on the critic of development theories.
about the imagining of new futures for Africa and for the world, but a world in which Africa is not a peripheral player, but a key one.

In January 2013, news of the destruction of some of what are now often referred to as the “Timbuktu manuscripts” by the armed groups that had occupied the old city of Timbuktu, in Mali, came as a reminder that Africa has a history of higher education and scholarship that goes back several centuries. The Timbuktu manuscripts and the larger body of knowledges produced by what Ousmane Kane calls “non-Europhone intellectuals”, cover a broad range of subjects (Kane 2012; Jeppie and Diagne 2008; Sharawy 2005). What this shows is that the study of Africa and of African encounters and engagements with the rest of the world has, on the continent itself, a long history.

However, it is with the creation of modern universities and the emergence of a networked pan African social science community that scholarly debates began covering contemporary global issues. The building of such a community of scholars at the continental level has, from the start, been among the main objectives of the CODESRIA. A number of other organizations, professional associations, networks and consortia also pursued similar objectives at the level of specific sectors, sub-regions or disciplines. At the level of some countries, such as South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal and Egypt, one also finds associations and networks of scholars that are engaged in research and academic debates that could be quite vibrant. These communities grew in size as the numbers of higher education and research institutions increased, particularly during the post-colonial period. It is a known fact that the colonial administrations left only a small number of universities in Africa, such as the universities of Dakar, Makerere, Ibadan and what was to later become the University of Kinshasa.

2 The Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA) pursued objectives similar to those of CODESRIA but at the level of Eastern and Southern Africa only; the Association of African Universities (AAU) brings together African universities, but doesn't include research NGOs, nor does it include the regional, sub-regional and national knowledge networks; SARUA is the Southern African equivalent of AAU; the African Association of Women Researchers for Development; (AAWORD) is a pan African network of women researchers only; the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), the Pan African Association of Anthropologists, the now defunct African Association of Political Science (AAPS), the African Association of Historians, and the African Association of Sociology, are all discipline of subject specific pan African networks.

3 Associations such as the Ethiopian Studies Association and the Mande Studies Association include both researchers in or from Africa and Africanists based outside of Africa.