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Mafeje and Langa: The Start of an Intellectual's Journey

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Abstract

Drawing on material in the Wilson papers in the University of Cape Town archives, this article reviews the contribution Archie Mafeje made to Monica Wilson's research project in Langa (Cape Town, South Africa) in the early 1960s. It also discusses the character of the relationship between Wilson and Mafeje that emerged in the course of his contribution to the project, showing how a warm and respectful relationship was sustained through the difficult period of the late 1960s, and into the 1970s when Mafeje reformulated his arguments relating to Langa and his assessment of liberal, 'assimilationist' South African anthropology. The article concludes by drawing out some of the wider implications of this episode of intellectual history, seeking to contextualise the antipathy towards anthropology that Mafeje expressed in later years.

Résumé

Basé sur les écrits de Wilson répertoriés dans les archives de l'Université du Cap, cet article analyse la contribution d'Archie Mafeje sur le projet de recherche de Monica Wilson à Langa (Le Cap, Afrique du Sud) au début des années 1960. Il est aussi évoqué dans cet article la nature de la relation entre Wilson et Mafeje qui s'était développée au cours de la contribution de ce dernier au projet, mettant ainsi en relief la relation chaleureuse et respectueuse qu'ils ont pu maintenir malgré la période difficile de la fin des années 1960, mais aussi dans les années 1970, période durant laquelle Mafeje reformula ses arguments vis-à-vis Langa et sa critique sur l'anthropologie Sud Africaine libérale et 'assimilationiste'. En conclusion, cet article met en lumière les effets considérables de cet épisode de l'histoire intellectuelle, tout en essayant de mettre en perspective le sentiment d'antipathie par rapport à l'anthropologie que Mafeje nourrissait dans les années qui suivront.

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Archie Mafeje's contribution to Monica Wilson's research project in the township of Langa in Cape Town was crucial. Wilson employed Mafeje as the project's field researcher from late 1961 to mid-1962. He worked very hard in this capacity, explaining – in a letter to Wilson – that, particularly in the early part of his field research, he had hardly left Langa before midnight on any of his research days.¹

Mafeje's long hours in the field provided Wilson with the detailed case studies of life in Langa that had been sorely lacking before he came along. He also provided acute insight into the ways the different categories of residents related to each other, and their views and opinions of each other. He introduced her to the terms – such as 'ooscuse me', 'ooMac', and 'iibari' – the residents in these various categories used to refer to each other, providing sensitive explanations of their connotations, and when and where they were used or not used.

The Langa Project

The Langa project had been in considerable trouble before Mafeje was recruited as field researcher. It had actually commenced as early as 1954, shortly after Wilson's own appointment as Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The project had been conceived as a study of African urbanisation in Cape Town, and it was an interdisciplinary endeavour involving Professor Jack Simons from the School of African Life and Languages and Dr Sheila van der Horst of the university's Department of Economics. Wilson was to contribute an ethnographic study of contemporary urban life, Simons a history of the African presence in the city (with a special focus on the changing legal constraints on this presence), and Van der Horst a study of African industrial workers.²

Wilson and her colleagues faced several difficulties with regard to the project in the course of the 1950s. Funding was secured from the state's National Council for Social Research in 1954, but the council insisted that the UCT researchers should link up with a team of University of Stellenbosch researchers that was embarking on a broadly similar project among the so-called 'coloured' inhabitants of the city and its immediate environs.³ This 'racial' division of labour may not have been uppermost in the researchers' minds at the outset, but it soon came to be accepted that UCT was studying the African population of Cape Town, and Stellenbosch its coloured inhabitants.

The Stellenbosch researchers included Professor R.W. Wilcocks, who was well known for his part in the Carnegie Commission of Inquiry into the so-called 'Poor White Problem' in the 1930s, the sociologists S.P. Cilliers and Erika Theron, and the anthropologist (or *volkekundige*) J.P. Bruwer.⁴

There is nothing in the record (in the Wilson papers in the UCT Archive) to suggest that there were any tensions between the two sets of researchers on personal or explicitly political grounds (although the Afrikaner Nationalists had taken over the government in 1948 and were beginning, slowly, to elaborate the policy of apartheid). But there were signs of divergence over objectives and methods of research between the two parties. The UCT researchers saw their endeavours as being of the nature of pure research, and Wilson, in particular, laid great emphasis on the necessity for detailed, qualitative inquiry. The Stellenbosch researchers, on the other hand, seemed more inclined to think in terms of policy research, and to deploy the more rapid research techniques they deemed appropriate to this end.⁵

Wider political circumstances impacted on the project when the National Council for Social Research refused, in 1955, to fund a period of research leave for Jack Simons on the grounds that the National Party government had declared him a 'listed' person (because of his communist sympathies). The UCT researchers were incensed at this obstructionism, but their Stellenbosch counterparts were not unsympathetic to the difficulties Simons faced, and the council was persuaded to change its decision in 1957 (although by then it was no longer possible for Simons to take the research leave for which he had applied earlier).⁶

Wilson's main difficulty in this period was the Social Research Council's rigid insistence on the submission of regular progress reports as the key to renewed research funding. This insistence evidently drove her close to despair, and she considered throwing in the towel on her portion of the project on several occasions in the late 1950s.⁷ The problem was the extraordinary difficulty of finding a suitable researcher to conduct detailed field research in Langa. Wilson may have compounded the difficulty by her apparent insistence that any researcher had to have a Cambridge – or, at a pinch, an Oxford – background in order to qualify as suitable. She managed to employ the Cambridge-trained A.R.W. Crosse-Upcott, who had some experience of fieldwork in rural Tanganyika, for twenty-one months between mid-1955 and the end of 1957.⁸ But after he left the project, to take up a permanent position in Tanganyika, Wilson went through a list of potential fieldworkers, only to be disappointed by her failure to engage their services. One of the people she tried, without success, to involve in the project was John Middleton, recently graduated from Oxford, who provided relief-teaching in Anthropology for a period when Wilson was on sabbatical leave.

Wilson was to send Mafeje to Cambridge in 1966, after he had completed a Masters degree in Social Anthropology at UCT under her supervision. In 1961 he was in his final year of a BA degree, with majors in Social

Anthropology and Psychology (he already held a BSc degree from UCT). Mafeje passed his Anthropology successfully at the end of 1961, but failed the final examination in Psychology. He told Wilson he was furious at the lack of self-discipline he had shown in approaching this final examination, not least because he was obliged to take time off from the Langa research in order to prepare for the supplementary examination – which he negotiated successfully – early in 1962.⁹

The quality of the information Mafeje acquired in the field is best understood by comparing his findings with those of Crosse-Upcott. In a rather defensive response to a request from UCT's Principal in 1959 for a yet another progress report, Wilson explained that Crosse-Upcott 'disliked town work, and though he worked hard he did not prove as good an urban field worker as he had been in a remote district'. He left her '560 pages of typed notes, reporting his observations and interviews', but she complained that 'the great difficulty in anthropological research is that it is almost impossible for one investigator to make much use of field material collected by someone else'.¹⁰

The small portion of Crosse-Upcott's tome that I have examined – an eleven-page report on the first nine months of his field research – gives some indication of why Wilson should have come to these conclusions.¹¹ He appears to have been very tentative in his approach to the residents of Langa, fearing that – aside from the 'leading personalities' with whom he conducted 'private interviews' – they were bound to regard him with animosity. His report referred to the need to avoid 'arousing concerted opposition from potentially hostile quarters', as well as 'publicity that would enable extremists to sabotage the survey'. Why he believed that Langa was peopled by 'extremists' who were necessarily 'hostile' in the mid-1950s is hard to say. Wilson observed later that 'at the time of the investigation what the inhabitants of Langa regarded as a case of corruption by a European (official) was being discussed everywhere', but she gave this as the reason why some of the things people had said to Crosse-Upcott were 'probably libellous', not as a pointer to the fact that they would not speak to him at all.¹²

Crosse-Upcott began his study of social groups in the township by looking at the churches, on the grounds that they were 'strong, friendly, and sophisticated'. His report divided the churches into 'established' and 'independent' categories, and then spent a good deal of time explaining that this 'demarcation is blurred', to such an extent that even the 'ultra-conservative African priesthood of the Anglicans' shared much of the 'nationalistic outlook typical of the "independent" Churches'. This same outlook was also to be found among the leaders of the sporting, recreational, occupational and

commercial groups whom he had interviewed (in much less detail than the church leaders), and he warned that since the leaders of the women's groups he had encountered were 'both articulate and aggressive, investigation of their affairs must proceed with caution'.¹³

Mafeje's Field Research

Crosse-Upcott may have become less hesitant as he proceeded further with his field research, but Wilson still noted in 1959 that he had 'failed to collect material on various topics (e.g. kinship and the groups of "homeboys") on which I pressed for information'.¹⁴ Mafeje supplied material on these issues in abundance, as shown by the letters he exchanged with Wilson during his field research, and the relevant parts of the eventual book. In my opinion the best part of *Langa* is the one dealing with the 'six "home-boy" groups' (Wilson & Mafeje 1963:56–73), particularly insofar as it was able to compare the histories of these groups on the basis of when their respective members first arrived in Cape Town and the social class they achieved in the city. And I would go further to say that the chapters of the book in which Mafeje's hand is most evident as field worker (such as those on 'Home boys', 'Kinsmen', and 'Arbitration in Disputes') are far more convincing than those that relied largely on Crosse-Upcott's efforts ('Churches' and 'Clubs'). Mafeje was clearly able to give Wilson much more ethnographic detail with which to work than his predecessor had managed.

Mafeje was, of course, an 'insider' in a way Crosse-Upcott could never have been. This was not only because he was a native Xhosa-speaker, like most of the residents of Langa, but also because of his political activism, which one doubts he kept entirely to himself in the field. In the 1950s he had been associated with the Society of Young Africa (SOYA), a youth organisation affiliated to the All-African Convention (AAC), which had been founded in the mid-1930s to mobilise popular opposition to Herzog's segregationist bills (Kayser & Adhikari 2004:8). The AAC had joined forces with other movements in the 1940s to form the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), which positioned itself to the left of the African National Congress (ANC) at the time, insofar as it took an avowedly non-racial stance from the outset, and envisaged a struggle for freedom that would necessarily involve a socialist revolution in the wake of national liberation (Kayser & Adhikari 2004:5). The Cape Peninsula branch of SOYA had at least a hundred members by the end of the 1950s, drawn from working youth in the city's townships and students at tertiary institutions such as the University of Cape Town (Kayser & Adhikari 2004:9). It is therefore likely that Mafeje was known to some of Langa's younger residents in this capacity, although he may have sought not to draw

too much attention to his link to SOYA when dealing with the relatively large number of middle-class, 'oosuse me' people in the township, who were more likely – on the basis of Crosse-Upcott's comments – to have been aligned with the ANC.

On the other hand, this link may have stood him in good stead with the migrant workers in the so-called 'barracks' in the township, and with at least some of the residents of the 'zones' (the intermediate area – between the barracks and the 'respectable' family housing – where many, not-quite-'middle-class' people still retained strong links with the Eastern Cape countryside). In the wake of the Sharpeville shootings, the Langa uprising, and the march on Cape Town by 30,000 people in March 1960, the NEUM constituents decided to launch a new organisation to take advantage of what they regarded as the 'pre-revolutionary' conditions that had arisen in the country. Mafeje was one of the founder members of the African Peoples' Democratic Union of Southern Africa (APDUSA), formed at a secret meeting in the Cape Peninsula in January 1961 (Kayser & Adhikari 2004:5). APDUSA was intended to realise the NEUM's objective of a non-racial struggle to overthrow white supremacy and achieve national liberation as a prelude to a socialist revolution. It sought to forge an alliance between the urban proletariat and the rural 'peasantry' to this end, and therefore made the issue of land redistribution in the countryside central to its programme.

APDUSA's programme was elaborated over time, of course, particularly at and after its first National Conference in 1962 (Kayser & Adhikari 2004:9). This means that, even if he had wanted to do so, Mafeje may not have been in a position to discuss its finer points with the migrant workers and members of the 'home-boy' groups in Langa during his field research in late 1961 and early 1962. Yet the general thrust of the programme, and particularly its focus on migrant workers as the bridge between proletariat and peasantry, seem evident in the interest Mafeje took in the circumstances of the residents of the Langa barracks, and the detailed case histories of the 'home-boy' groupings he passed on to Wilson. His careful noting of which of these 'home boys' still had access to rural land, even if they had spent a great many years working in the city, may have had a significance for him far beyond what Wilson read into it.

But it is important to bear in mind that, his personal credibility in Langa notwithstanding, Mafeje was also a student who had only just completed his undergraduate studies in Anthropology, as well as a neophyte field researcher working under a professor whom he clearly regarded with considerable respect. At this stage, and for a good many years after this, Mafeje indicated to Wilson that social anthropology was his chosen field and, indeed, his

'calling'.¹⁵ He also gave evidence of a deep regard, both professional and personal, for his mentor. He wrote, for instance, in response to Wilson's comments on one of his field reports, that:

It is very important for me to hear your comments because, as it happens, out of the many people through whose hands I have gone, you are one of the few I do not only approve of but also have complete faith and trust in. This explains, love for social anthropology aside, the tremendous pleasure I derive in working for you. You might not believe me when I tell you that, at the present moment, there is nothing I enjoy more than working on the Langa study.¹⁶

Mafeje was 24 years old when he wrote this effusive passage at the start of the 1960s. As another of Wilson's students (a decade later), I can empathise with the sentiments he expressed in it, sensing that he was responding to the intriguing combination of scholarly erudition, regal bearing and personal vulnerability that was manifested in the way she related to junior colleagues in whom she took an interest. My reference to 'junior colleagues' is intentional since, in my experience, Wilson made a point of treating the arguments and observations of students in whom she saw promise with great seriousness, giving them the impression that they had been admitted to an inner circle of fellow professionals (or at least professionals in-the-making). It is clear, from the correspondence concerning Langa between them, that she regarded Mafeje in exactly this light, and one may speculate that he was the student on whom she honed her skill in this regard. Wilson certainly let him know how impressed she was with his field reports, but did so in subtle ways, often combining praise with an injunction to expand his interpretation of events or go back to the field to seek further detail.¹⁷ More explicit praise for his efforts, and open acknowledgement that they were vital to her attempt to rescue the Langa project from the doldrums in which it had landed in the late 1950s, she reserved for her communications with other people.¹⁸

The part of privileged student was not always easy to play. Exactly how much intimacy was being granted by one's distinguished mentor? This question seems, on occasion, to have exercised Mafeje. I would be very pleased if you could tell me what you feel about this work and things in general. To be honest, I am anxious to hear from you. Silence from you affects me very unfavourably. The fact that you are my professor cannot be overlooked. I enjoy doing this work only if you are pleased or satisfied with it. I should imagine this would be the attitude of any student. Now, as it were, I am not certain whether one could really speak to one's professor as I am doing at the moment. Anyway, I hope you will understand my position.¹⁹

These personal exchanges are, I think, essential background to an appreciation of Mafeje's response to the manuscript of the *Langa* book, which Wilson gave

him for comment prior to its publication. Wilson wrote the text on her own, drawing on the field reports by Crosse-Upcott and Mafeje, but she acknowledged the latter's contribution by publishing the book as a joint endeavour. Mafeje was forthright in pointing to mistakes in areas – such as the correct spelling and use of Xhosa terms – where his knowledge was clearly superior to hers. He was similarly direct in dealing with her notoriously wayward spelling and syntax in English. The didactic tone he adopted in these instances is self-conscious, and no doubt afforded him more than a little satisfaction.

I found this chapter very weak in punctuation. Adverbial clauses of condition, time, and concession introduced by 'if', 'when' and 'though', respectively, are often not marked off by a comma from the principal clauses they precede. When a complex sentence is introduced by a relative clause instead of the principal clause, the two clauses are always separated by a comma. ... I found the same thing in the use of 'but', introducing an adversative clause or to express mere contrast. 'But' introducing the above mentioned clauses is always preceded by a comma unless, by doing so, the writer gets the feeling of 'over-stopping'.²⁰

Mafeje was also direct in his response to broad political issues that arose in Wilson's text. Referring to a passage in the draft of the chapter on 'Classes and Leaders' (Chapter 7), Mafeje wrote sharply 'You describe Noni Jabavu's book "Drawn in Colour" as admirable. From what point of view is it so? One critic, an African writer and nationalist, remarked that the book is "thoroughly drenched with snobbery".... I also do not like the tone of the book. It is riddled with sentimentalism, and its condescending attitude is simply nauseating'.²¹ What Wilson made of this spirited sally one does not know, but it is noticeable that she made no reference to the 'admirable' character of Jabavu's work in the final text, and mentioned her book only in a footnote.²²

On the other hand, at the end of his commentary, Mafeje gave Wilson's text his unstinting approval.

Other than the few points I have raised, I am satisfied with the exposition of facts in this work. I am also in agreement with the fundamental ideas expressed – that is, at no time did I find myself forced to compromise my ideas. I am particularly pleased about this because I look at this study as purely scientific work which has nothing to do with what white or black nationalists feel or think. It grieves me to think that under present conditions the[re are] certain truths which, though demonstrable, cannot be stated.²³

Such wholehearted approbation gives pause for thought. In the light of his subsequent, and well-known, reservations about the whole 'acculturation' paradigm in anthropology (of which the book on Langa was clearly part), why should he have praised Wilson's text in this fashion? Why should he

have been able to express severe criticism of Jabavu's 'condescending' views about the thin veneer of 'civilisation' she encountered among the people of Uganda (Jabavu 1960), and yet have overlooked Wilson's notorious conclusion that 'the innumerable associations of the modern African townships (such as Langa) may, indeed, be seen as a school for civilisation', where Africans ostensibly 'gained experience in the organisation of groups which are no longer based on kinship and which are part of a money economy' (Wilson & Mafeje 1963:179)?

The evidence on the relationship between Mafeje and Wilson persuades me that one cannot reasonably ascribe the former's praise for the *Langa* draft to mere dissimulation. I do not think one can say that Mafeje indicated his agreement with 'the fundamental ideas expressed' simply for strategic reasons – in order either to flatter Wilson or to avoid criticising her. Nor do I think it would be fair to either party to suggest that Mafeje sought refuge in the idea that the Langa manuscript was 'purely scientific work' that had 'nothing to do with what black nationalists think'. This particular comment was in many ways a straightforward statement of his personal position, since he was never – either then or in his subsequent career – a narrow African nationalist. One of his admirable characteristics was that he remained true, throughout his life, to the principles of the NEUM and the African Peoples' Democratic Union, particularly regarding the importance of non-racialism and the need for the liberation struggle to continue beyond the first phase of national revolution. Fifteen years beyond the end of apartheid in South Africa, his long-standing insistence on these principles looks ever more appealing.

But in the early 1960s, one may venture to suggest, Mafeje had not yet worked out how to bring the principles derived from his political activism to bear on his standing as a beginning anthropologist. His contribution to the Langa project through his field research was masterly, but it would take him another decade and more to arrive at a position from which he could use this field research to formulate a convincing counter to Wilson's liberal interpretation of his and Crosse-Upcott's findings. Wilson's argument that the basis of social cohesion among Langa residents was undergoing a radical transition from ascription to achievement, and that social groups based on common interest were replacing those grounded in the generalised solidarity of kinship, was given added weight by the presence of so-called 'middle class' (or 'oosuse me') people in this township in far greater numbers than in other, similar areas with which she and Mafeje were familiar. Moreover many of these people would doubtless have endorsed her liberal insistence that there was nothing, apart from the white government's intransigence, that could have prevented this wholesale transition to 'civilisation' from succeeding.

Rethinking Langa

The flaw in this conviction was easy to identify when confronted with Jabavu's views about faraway Uganda, but it was probably much more difficult for Mafeje, at this early stage, to make his own observations in Langa speak to the same objection. He returned explicitly to this issue only in 1975, in his contribution to Wilson's Festschrift (Whisson & West 1975). By this time, of course, he had his own Cambridge PhD under his belt, had been through the chastening experience of the 'Mafeje affair' at the University of Cape Town, and had been joined in interrogating the shortcomings of liberal South African anthropology by compatriots-in-exile such as Bernard Magubane (1973). Moreover the field research Mafeje had undertaken in the Transkei in the mid-1960s gave him deeper insight into circumstances in Langa, and his contribution to *Religion and Social Change* turned on a comparison between these two field sites.

Viewed on its own, Langa seemed to be an exemplification of the 'modernisation' story Wilson had sought to tell. Many of the migrant workers, who were at the bottom of the social hierarchy (and at the spatial margins of the township), were reported still to be pagans. Most of the urban residents, on the other hand, were identified as Christians, but they fell into two categories in which there was a correlation between social class and the 'types' of church to which people belonged. The 'respectable', middle-class people belonged mainly to the established churches, while the less respectable, lower-class urban residents adhered to one or other of the independent churches in Langa. Wilson's intention was, no doubt, to provide a more subtle account than this, but one could certainly read into the text of *Langa* a very straightforward story about the sequence of steps by which the urban encounter was 'schooling' black South Africans in Christianity in particular, and 'civilisation' in general.

The Transkei studies provided the vantage from which to give an alternative account of Langa. They allowed Mafeje to make two crucial points. One (which was well-known from Mayer's work in East London, but was not clearly spelt out in Langa) was that the Christian-pagan (or School-Red) division was a long-standing rural phenomenon (Mayer 1963). The other was that, in the Transkei settlements he studied, adherents of the independent churches were looked down on by established-church Christians and pagans alike. Even the All Saints Mission Station, indeed, constituted a social environment in which Anglicans and pagans regarded each other with a strong measure of respect, in part because this distinction did not correspond, anywhere near as clearly as in Langa, with social class and standing. Moreover the 'Red' pagans at the mission station were conscious, and proud, of their paganism. Mafeje argued that they were 'militant' pagans, who deliberately

refused to succumb to the self-alienation they saw among their Christian neighbours, and in this respect they stood in contrast to the 'defensive' pagans of the outlying settlement he studied, who – in the absence of in-their-faces antagonists – were merely waiting disconsolately for the tidal wave of 'western' civilisation to break over them (Mafeje 1975:177–84).

His Transkei observations allowed Mafeje to supplement the initial questions about the character of social groups and the types of churches in Langa (which he acknowledged had been 'inane') with an attempt to grasp what Christianity meant for people in the different social classes evident in Langa (Mafeje 1975:167). He emphasised that there were both pagans and Christians among the migrant workers in the barracks, pointing out that if the pagans appeared in any way apologetic about their beliefs this was because they, like their Christian counterparts, were at the bottom of the township's socio-economic hierarchy. There was little space for militant paganism in Langa. On the other hand, however, there were many merely nominal Christians, particularly among the township's youth, who were contemptuous of the Christian piety displayed by their elders, whether aligned with the established or the independent churches. In his reconsideration of the material, Mafeje clearly found these young people the most interesting category of the general population, mainly because they – like the militant pagans in the countryside – had come closest to realising that Christian piety went hand-in-hand with the 'respectable' people's willingness to mimic white, middle-class civilisation in all respects, and to ignore the obvious contradictions, as well as the costs in terms of 'self-alienation', involved in doing so.

Mafeje's contribution to Wilson's *Festschrift* was, in my opinion, the best piece in an otherwise pedestrian collection. This was, in large measure, because he succeeded in introducing many of the principles of his political activism into his reconsideration of the Langa field material. By 1975 he had clearly worked out how to formulate academic questions that were firmly grounded in his political convictions, and he did this by showing that some of the people in Langa, and indeed also (and perhaps particularly) in the Transkei, came close to sharing his understanding that a social order grounded in racial capitalism – not simply 'white domination' – constituted the major problem facing black South Africans.

Does 'social change' or 'being civilised' mean, unambiguously, being assimilated into the white middle-class cosmic view? What will it take for that view to transcend itself? (Mafeje 1975:184).

Mafeje looked, in this context, to what he hoped was the growing influence of the militant urban youth, and the militant pagans in the countryside, for the answer to his questions. Whether the answer still lies in these particular

categories of the population is, no doubt, a subject for contemporary debate. But the questions he posed remain as pertinent today as they were a quarter-century and more ago.

Mafeje's reformulation of the Langa material marked a formal, and obvious, break with the teachings of his distinguished mentor. Yet this break was achieved without any hint of hostility or rancour. One might reasonably expect no such hint to be apparent in a contribution to a book intended to honour Monica Wilson and her scholarship. But it is also the case that there is no evidence of any parting of personal ways in the private correspondence between Wilson and Mafeje in the 1960s and 1970s. Their regard for each other survived the ordeal to which it was subjected during the abortive attempt to appoint him to a teaching position in the Anthropology Department at the University of Cape Town in 1968.²⁴ At the height of this crisis, Wilson wrote to Mafeje in Cambridge to suggest that he might wish to consider turning the job down, because the South African government's hostile reaction to his initial appointment indicated that any career he might have at the university would be neither easy nor of long duration. Mafeje's reply was solicitous and firm. He regretted the difficult situation in which Wilson had been placed on his account, but he also declined the idea of withdrawing from the job.²⁵ For many years after this he continued to address Wilson in his letters as 'Aunt Monica'.

Speaking Truth to Power

In the light of his later writings, we have become accustomed to the idea of Archie Mafeje as a scholar who spoke truth, unfailingly, to power. The value of the archival material relating to his early career is that it shows that he had to work hard to develop the skill to be able to do this. He did not criticise the *Langa* manuscript on substantive or theoretical grounds in the early 1960s. The fact that he did not do so was not an indication that he was unwilling to criticise his mentor, or that he had not yet arrived at the political principles that guided his later work. His endorsement of the manuscript suggests, rather, that he had not worked out how to marshal the findings of his field research in Langa in a way that would allow him to support his political convictions by means of his anthropology. His contribution to *Religion and Social Change* shows, on the other hand, that he had found a way to do this by the mid-1970s.

The start of Mafeje's intellectual journey therefore tells us several important things. One is that it requires time, and careful reflection, to be able to speak truth to power effectively. Another important insight is that while speaking truth to power calls for hard and uncompromising intellectual argument, it

does not require personal animosity towards, or the denial of respect for, those with whom one comes to argue.

A third lesson, on which I wish to dwell for a moment in concluding this article, is that the act of speaking such truth is most effective, in the case of an anthropologist, when it is grounded in a sophisticated understanding of one's own ethnography. In this respect I am struck by the fact that Mafeje always insisted on the importance of his ethnographic inquiries, even when, in later years, he explicitly turned his back on the notion that he was an anthropologist (Mafeje 1998a, 1998b). What he objected to about anthropology was not its methods of research or the evidence that could be produced by careful participant observation. Even at his most critical he took care to endorse the value of this form of inquiry relative to others. In this respect, one may say, he remained faithful to Wilson's injunction that any attempt to understand the circumstances of people in Africa required first-hand inquiry into what they made of these circumstances themselves.

What Mafeje objected to, by contrast, was an anthropology in which particular epistemological assumptions – which he invariably characterised as 'Western' – were allowed to overwhelm whatever it was that people on the ground had to say about the conditions in which they found themselves. In this article, I have shown how he developed his argument on this score in his early research in Langa. Liberal observers such as Wilson suggested that Africans in towns had embarked on a process of social transformation that would remake them, ever more closely over time, in the image of 'Western civilisation'. This was not in all senses incorrect, since these observers would have been able to point to people in places such as Langa who believed that they were undergoing this process of refashioning themselves. But the crucial point, at which Mafeje had arrived by the mid-1970s, was that this was by no means true of all the residents of Langa. This insight allowed him to distinguish between 'assimilation' as an analytical framework (which he, like Magubane, rejected outright), and 'assimilation' as an ideology to which some people in Langa undoubtedly subscribed. It also allowed him to argue that their adherence to this ideology was something that had to be explained by means of a more acceptable analytical approach, giving rise to his insistence that many of the 'respectable' residents of the township had become caught in the contradictions of a form of nationalism that encouraged them to mimic 'Europeans' in order to demonstrate that they were every bit as good, and as sophisticated, as the latter were purported to be.

Mafeje knew that the presence of such people had to be acknowledged. But he also knew that it was necessary to show, as Wilson and other liberal anthropologists had not, that there were others in Langa who had not succumbed to these contradictions, and were on the road to overcoming

them. Liberal anthropology could accommodate a narrative of African liberation based on assimilation, but it could not recognise the voices of the people who challenged the assumptions on which this narrative rested.

Mafeje objected to this kind of anthropology because anthropology was the discipline he knew best – the one he had said was his ‘calling’ at the outset of his professional career. Had he had cause to express himself with equal fervour in respect of other disciplines, he would no doubt have found the epistemological premises of their liberal versions as objectionable as those of liberal anthropology. What clearly distressed him in later years was the attempt by African scholars to resuscitate a form of anthropology that had evidently learnt nothing from his own confrontation with liberal thinking, and that sought – from a position of self-imposed disadvantage – to mimic ‘Western’ academic orthodoxy.

Notes

1. University of Cape Town, Manuscripts and Archives Division, Godfrey and Monica Wilson Papers, BC 880 (hereafter BC 880), Correspondence with Archie Mafeje re Research 1960–1, K1.2 (hereafter K1.2), Mafeje to Wilson, 22 July 1961.
2. BC 880, Proposals, correspondence, reports 1953–1962, K1.1 (hereafter K1.1), Proposal to the National Council for Social Research (NCSR), 29 March 1954.
3. BC 880, K1.1, NCSR to University of Cape Town (UCT), 25 April 1954.
4. BC 880, K1.1, Universiteit van Stellenbosch, *Ontwikkeling van Wes-Kaaplandse Navorsingsprojek*.
5. BC 880, K1.1, Wilson to T.B. Davie, 17 May 1954.
6. BC 880, K1.1, Minutes of a Meeting of the Supervisory Committee, 3 June 1957; Wilson to UCT Principal, 6 October 1959.
7. BC 880, K1.1, Minutes of a Meeting of the Liaison Committee for Research on Non-Europeans in the Western Cape, 18 August 1956; Minutes of a Meeting of the Supervisory Committee, 3 June 1957; Wilson to UCT Principal, 6 October 1959.
8. BC 880, K1.1, Wilson to UCT Principal, 6 October 1959.
9. BC 880, K1.2, Mafeje to Wilson, 20 January 1962.
10. See note 8.
11. BC880, K1.1, A.R.W. Crosse-Upcott, *Progress Report on a Survey of Langa African Township, July 1955–March 1956*.
12. BC 880, K1.1, Wilson to UCT Principal, 6 October 1959.
13. See note 11.
14. See note 12.
15. BC 880, K1.2, Mafeje to Wilson, 13 February 1962.
16. BC 880, K1.2, Mafeje to Wilson, 20 January 1962.
17. BC 880, K1.2, Wilson to Mafeje (undated).

18. BC 880, K1.1, Wilson to Secretary, National Council for Social Research, 20 June 1962.
19. BC 880, K1.2, Mafeje to Wilson, 18 January 1962.
20. BC 880, K1.2, A. Mafeje, *Comments on the Manuscript* (undated).
21. See note 20.
22. Wilson & Mafeje 1963:143.
23. See note 20.
24. UCT Libraries, Manuscripts and Archives Division, Sir Richard Luyt Papers, BC 1072, Mafeje Affair 1968, B2.
25. BC 880, Correspondence, K1.

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