

Archie Mafeje, *Anthropology and Independent Africa: Suicide or End of an Era*, Dakar, CODESRIA Monograph Series, 4, 1996, 40p.

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During the eighth General Assembly of CODESRIA, Africa's premier research institution, Archie Mafeje, the South African born Anthropologist, promised to declare Anthropology in Africa dead. This was not so much because he was to kill it but because of its evident circumstance of atrophy. This Mafeje posited was a self-evident situation begging for action and he intended to actualise it. The monograph under review is therefore his attempt to make good his promise. Mafeje, however, leaves room for mitigation by African anthropologists. But his reasons for declaring Anthropology in Africa dead are in themselves the reasons for this attempted verdict. Thus, rejoinders to his position ought to promise and make apparent the falsity of his reasons.

Among the reasons for Mafeje's death sentence are that Anthropology was first and foremost a child of colonial conception and birth and could therefore not operate outside a colonial framework. Secondly, that it was designed to study the 'other'. Since colonialism is gone, perhaps never to appear in the old guise again, and the perfidy of the 'other' in Africa is evident, Mafeje thinks that the subject matter of Anthropology no longer exists. What is worse is that there have been no African attempts to refine or transform Anthropology and to command the discipline through an African perspective. On the contrary, given the African silence on this for close to 25 post-independence years, some Northern scholars have taken to the task of speaking on behalf of the 'other', but not always sensibly as Mafeje demonstrates.

What may be new to those who are not conversant with Anthropology is that Mafeje's death verdict is not new to the discipline. The author reviews both British and American Anthropologists who held the same view from as early as 1963 when most of Africa gained independence. Drawing from such scholars as C. Levi-Strauss, Jacques Maquet, Peter Worsley, G. D. Berreman and Kathleen Gough, Mafeje built an argument that demonstrates the concern

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of metropolitan anthropologists of charting out new research areas for Anthropology. What however interests Mafeje more is their failure in charting out a new course for the discipline. This concern however drove many of the aforementioned anthropologists to Marxian or Leftist approaches that coalesced around the New Left Review in Britain. The headways made by the coalition, Mafeje informs us was cut short by the brief but disruptive interlude by African anthropologists, especially Magubane (1971) and Mafeje (1971). The two offered not only learned but also experience-based penetrating critiques of anthropology as it was practised by Western scholars in and on Africa. This noble initiative, however, lost stamina in its infancy. Mafeje does not explain why.

The makers of anthropology would not let go off easily. The early 1970s saw attempts to patch together various strands of anthropological thought emanating from the debates of late 1960s in an effort to reconstitute the discipline and come up with new avenues of research in Britain and America. Two studies by Talal Asad, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973) and Dell Hymes, *Reinventing Anthropology* (1974) constituted the British and American responses respectively. But these books faced the crises in anthropology in feeble and vainly constituted arguments, full of 'platitudinous statements about anthropology's capacity to understand cultural diversity' (p.10) and maintained an evasive attempt to stress that anthropology by the very fact of being an already established discipline retained scholarly relevance. This amounted to begging the question.

Mafeje locates the emergent theoretical uncertainty and confusion in anthropology in the emerging swing towards French Marxian Anthropology. But this juncture reflected new transformation in the discipline which, however, failed to usher in new theoretical rigour and refrain from the confusion characteristic of the prodding postmodernist perspectives. From *Reinventing Anthropology* by Dell Hymes (1974), where forerunners of postmodernism received standing ovation, to *Writing Cultures: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography* by Clifford and Marcus (1986), traditional anthropology seemed to give way to post-anthropological ethnography. What was at stake, however, was not only the earlier epistemological fragments of the discipline, but even its subject matter and focus. Mafeje sees a conceptual problem especially in the way different authors in the latter book conceive the term 'ethnography' which he thinks reflects the non-disciplinarity rather than the interdisciplinarity of anthropology (p. 12). The book, according to Mafeje is wrought with vagueness and he demonstrates how postmodernism is responsible for the scattering of classical anthropology which as a consequence distorted the remnants of a discipline which eurocentric writers

seemed to continually and insistently privilege and allege its vibrancy against all indications to the contrary.

The author pays some attention to *Writing Cultures* because of its postmodernist posture. He does not however critique succinctly the very basis of post-modern privileged discourse which seems to be the latest threat to most social science disciplines in Africa. Of course, the direct attack on history for instance by the world financial bulldozers has a postmodernist objective of absolving imperialism of its causal impetus in most of Africa's contemporary problems. Its close association with postcoloniality and the afropessimist emphasis can play no other objective role than to side-step imperialism in any explanation of the African crises. Reconstituting Anthropology in Africa, the emergence of postmodernism and the anthropologisation of history are projects of Western liberalism in Africa today. And the whole project of anthropologising history and historicising anthropology, as the joint works of David Cohen and Elisha Atieno-Odhiambo reveal, boils down to reducing scholarship to language games and narrative in which consequence the historical logic of cause and effect is constantly fought.

The privileging of the mind in Western scholarship is one of Mafeje's concern in this study which he argues has resulted into lifting epistemology into the all embracing orge of philosophical knowledge. If epistemology is privileged and yet it is specific to the European mode of philosophising, the rest of the other philosophies are at best consigned to the penumbra of discourses which acts to perpetuate Western intellectual hegemony. In Mafeje's humble submission, such a manner of re-inventing or reconstructing anthropology is akin to the old privileging of European anthropology which in all respects was anachronised by the end of colonialism.

In the sequel, the general complaint about historicisation of anthropology emerges in Mafeje's analysis of John and Jean Camaroff's *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (1992). To the author, the terrain these two scholars venture into in an effort of deconstructing anthropology is at best ambiguous. The avowed niche of the book is 'ethnography' and 'historical anthropology'. Their concept of historical anthropology is defended as having been the preoccupation of British anthropologists all along. If this was the case, anthropology would not need to be defended. What is worse is that Mafeje finds the Camaroffs faulty in their conception of 'culture' which they reduce to mean everything and how it relates to 'ethnography'. Because of the imprecision in their working concepts, the Camaroffs failed to establish the necessary link between culture and ethnography and, above all, develop a

unit of analysis in their work. How valid can this be as a defence of their discipline?

In the last half of the book, a review of African anthropologists' suggestions of revamping and animating African anthropology is undertaken. The author concentrates on the ideas of Bujra, Prah and Amadiume. It is noticeable here that the critically angry tone in the previous section gives way to a penetrating and searching reflection. Yet Mafeje is not in agreement with the suggestions of these scholars for several reasons. First, because he thinks that the necessary African initiative has already been stolen from under their bootstraps by Western anthropologists who pretend to speak for the 'noble savage'. This is partly because African anthropologists hibernated for long after 1971. Secondly, there can be no possible reconstruction of anthropology before deconstruction is undertaken and so far Western anthropologists have been more successful in regurgitating old ideas within the discipline. What further struck Mafeje about this debate is the unreconciled absence of Francophone Africa from this discussion by African anthropology.

Lastly, the author thinks that the attempt at resurrecting anthropology is facile given that apart from the rhetoric, texts on anthropology read more like 'a post-mortem of anthropology' as it was known before independence. Are African anthropologists to remain critical readers of existing texts and veer into other disciplines as their new occupation? How else do we account for their long years of existence as anthropologists yet they did not practice conventional anthropology as we have always known it?

If postmodernism provides some avenues for anthropology because of its conceptual free-for-all posture, epistemological, theoretical, methodological and emotional/psychological constraints limit this laissez-faire attitude. It is because of these fundamental constraints, heavy in their insurmountable posture that Mafeje thinks and forcefully suggests that anthropology cannot hide the eminent atrophy. Mafeje demonstrates the essential nature of this collapse in the last section using his experiential attempt at deconstructing anthropological concepts over the years and why he did not have to be an anthropologist to achieve what he did in the book: *The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formations: The Case of the Interlacustrine Kingdoms*, Dakar, CODESRIA (1991). In a nutshell, Mafeje's argument is simple: that the subject matter of anthropology in Africa could only possibly be contained in the colonial environment. And since colonialism was removed under the banner of African nationalism, then, anthropologists have nothing to study. In other words, that the discipline has no reason for existing, it should therefore cease to exist.

As it is demonstrated in this study, the fact that anthropology has no more life in Africa must be restated forcefully. Mafeje seems to see a connection between postcoloniality, anthropologists trying to reproduce themselves, and the guises of neo-colonialism both at the intellectual and socio-economic levels. Post-modernism seems to provide such scholars new guises of reproducing themselves. The absence of African anthropologists on the ground in these discourses acts to validate the Northern European dominance in this new initiatives. But whose project is Western Anthropology fronting in Africa?

It is true however that Mafeje's concern is as old as 1970 when Okot P'Bitek, also a trained anthropologist, declared the tenure of anthropology on any African university over (see his *African Religion in Western Scholarship*, 1970). Unfortunately, Mafeje seems to pay no attention to P'Bitek, therefore overlooking his contribution. The difference between P'Bitek and other African anthropologists that when he declared anthropology dead in Africa, he actually redirected his energy into literature to the extent of championing the field of oral literature. P'Bitek's contribution is one that we cannot overlook.

In general however, the compelling reason why anthropology may have no other alternative in Africa other than quitting is the near absence of African anthropological discourses. The forceful point that this study makes is that African anthropologists seem to be making meaningful contributions from outside their area of training. Thus, the cover of anthropology seems useless for African anthropologists. On the contrary, the domineering stance of Western scholarship appears to want to give anthropology a new neo-colonial leverage. This is mainly through the postmodernist mirage whose instance seems to spell doom for social science subjects in Africa like history, sociology, critical literature, etc. Perhaps, social scientists ought to step up their efforts in response to the provocative thesis entailed in this study under review. This monograph seems to contain a new initiative seeking for theoretical and empirical networking among relevant social science disciplines in Africa. It is designed not only to be forcefully radical in its suggestion but also provocative and insightful in its inspiration for Africa. It bears a message which no attentive African can avoid reading. For the Western anthropologists who have not decolonised their perception of Africa, it is time they woke up to the reality of independent Africa and stopped hiding under postmodernism with its Afropessimist anthem and postcoloniality.