Rediscovering Archie Mafeje and How South Africa is Coming to Terms with its Ignored Intellectual Icon: A Rejoinder

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Towards Atonement

A month before Professor Archibald Boyce Monwabisi Mafeje passed away, I published a short article as a tribute to his immense contribution to African scholarship (Lebakeng 2007). The article was meant to pay my intellectual debt to Professor Mafeje as an erstwhile mentor during my undergraduate studies in sociology at the American University in Cairo (AUC), Egypt. More importantly, it was a lament on how South Africa was failing to recognise a shining intellectual star in their mist. Mafeje was literally and dishearteningly ignored in South African institutions of higher learning before and since his coming back from exile. A month after this publication, the man posthumously referred to as 'an African intellectual pathfinder', 'a pioneering intellectual powerhouse', and 'an intellectual giant' passed away.

Naturally, it was with despair that many of us who knew him learnt of his passing. Personally, I thought that, as a country, we had missed a glorious opportunity as we lost a bright light in the cause for intellectual and cultural liberation, cognitive justice and critical pedagogy. After all, in the lofty battle against epistemicide and alterity, Professor Mafeje was a worthy representative of a country that predictably failed to acknowledge, celebrate and affirm his profound contributions while he was still alive. He displayed rare instances of genuine brilliance that one does not often come across. That, as a country, we ignored such an intellectual treasure was scandalous at best.

Various reasons can explain this thoroughly miserable reception, ranging from the fact that (1) when Professor Mafeje left South Africa at the age of twenty-eight, he had not yet established a national presence in the country intellectually; (2) he came back at retirement age and modern South Africa is proving not to be socially kind to retirees and (3) there was always a cabal of intellectual elite within the South African Communist Party in exile, in concert with the political elite of the liberation movement that was not comfortable with his intellectual and philosophical pronouncements. In addition, Professor Mafeje was a scholar who spoke the truth, unfailingly, to power and did not – to use an ambiguous compliment – suffer fools gladly.

It is now six years since Professor Mafeje passed away. In death though, we have observed a flurry of concerted efforts from government officials, think-tanks, institutions of higher learning and interested individuals in South Africa, aimed at atonement for the way the late Professor Mafeje was treated in his country of birth. Such post-humous tributes are a case of better late than never for an individual who was a source of immeasurable intellectual delight and a consequential intellectual critic of our time.

In this regard, he spoke truth not only to friends and foes alike, but more importantly, to power. Throughout his exile years, he was distrusted by the political elite of the liberation movement. Many young South Africans were warned not to associate with him. They even imputed evil motives on him. This was not an indictment of Professor Mafeje but a testimony to our long-standing intolerance of all those who hold different views or dare to propose intellectually and politically non-conforming views. Politically and intellectually, this unfortunate tendency has resulted in major assaults on honest and highly needed debates in our democratising society.

Among these efforts could be mentioned the following: The University of South Africa (UNISA) established the Archie Mafeje Institute for Applied Social Policy Research. The policy research institute, known in short as the Archie Mafeje Research Institute (AMRI), is based at University of South Africa. It is dedicated to promoting the legacy of Professor Mafeje in terms of innovative knowledge production for applied social policy, in pursuit of progressive change in African society through the provision of fresh thinking and novel policy ideas for the fight against poverty, inequality, social disintegration, lack of social justice, weak citizenship, collapse of institutions of community and family and other societal ills. AMRI conducts research and facilitates scholarly and policy debates based on a rigorous understanding of African social formations and a clear definition of societal transformation aimed at social justice and poverty eradication in Africa. In particular, AMRI is concerned with change that results from knowledge garnered from the experiences and thought patterns of ordinary Africans. This is critical since Professor Mafeje was dedicated to truly decolonizing the social sciences and humanities from Eurocentric biases and theories that deny Africans agency such as modernist paradigms.

Acknowledging the role he played, I will quote in extensor from the UNISA website: 'As a result of his passion for alternative and trans-disciplinary discourses on the African condition, Prof. Mafeje dedicated his life to promoting endogenous knowledge that would inform solutions to African social problems and to building an epistemic community of African scholars dedicated to creative thinking about critical African policy challenges. For this reason, AMRI aims to provide a platform for African scholars and analysts to become thought-leaders for social transformation on the continent' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012).

The second example is the creation of the Archie Mafeje Fellowship Programme by the Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA) to celebrate the intellectual and inspirational impact which he had. This is part of AISA's attempt to build a solid community of social science scholars in Africa. The organization found it vital that it pays tribute to the pathfinders, the icons and the frontrunners in order to demonstrate its appreciation for the

contributions of such individuals. Therefore, the Fellowship provides an opportunity for African scholars to conduct critical and cutting-edge research in line with the Mafeje tradition, and to contribute to AISA's research programmes. In keeping with Professor Mafeje's pan-Africanist involvement, scholars from all over the continent are specifically targeted to apply and will be based in Pretoria, South Africa (http://www.ai.org.za).

Professor Mafeje Celebrated and Honoured

Also, the Walter Sisulu University (WSU) and AISA hosted a Memorial Lecture in honour of Professor Mafeje on Wednesday, 9 March 2011 in Umtata. The lecture was delivered by Professor Jimi Adesina, then Professor of Sociology at Rhodes University (now with the University of Western Cape), who was also a friend to Professor Mafeje. By all accounts, Professor Adesina, who has provided interesting insight into Professor Mafeje thought (Adesina 2008a; 2008b), left an indelible impression, as the audience sought ideas as to how to move forward with Professor Mafeje's ideas.

Guest speakers, Professor Lungisile Ntsebeza from the Department of Sociology at the University of Cape Town and Professor Mbulelo Mzamane, Director, Centre for African Literary Studies, Pietermaritzburg, stressed the importance of learning from Majefe's works. The speakers also expressed their sadness that South Africa could not honour this illustrious son of the soil whilst he was still alive but commended WSU and AISA for their efforts in trying to remedy that great tragedy.

Earlier in 2010, WSU had honoured Professor Mafeje with an honorary degree of Doctor of Literature and Philosophy, posthumously, in recognition of his distinguished contribution to the growth of scientific knowledge through teaching, research and publications as well as his path-breaking work on the land and agrarian question in Africa.

Another instance is illustrated by the nostalgia demonstrated by former students of the UCT who, in August 2008 gathered to pay tribute to a student protest that shook the campus over 40 years earlier, after Professor Mafeje was prevented from taking up a post there during colonial-apartheid. Despite rejecting Professor Mafeje for the second when he applied for another post, UCT has now, belatedly, apologised for the way he was treated. His family formally accepted the apology and the university awarded Professor Mafeje a posthumous honorary doctorate. A scholarship is to be inaugurated in his name and his works published (and the whole world is eagerly waiting for this). The room in which the university Council meets, and which was occupied during the protest those years ago, has been renamed in his honour.

In October 2010, there was an exhibition which travelled to 3 South African universities and which will eventually be housed at Walter Sisulu University. It is an exhibition about Archie Mafeje as a young man. The exhibitionist is a history professor who has written a rather controversial book about Professor Mafeje as a young anthropologist (see Bank 2010; Nyoka 2011).

Who was Archie Mafeje?

A great deal has been written about Professor Mafeje since he passed away. A special tribute issue of this bulletin contained contributions from Professor Mafeje's peers and colleagues, former students and family members, covering various spectrums of his life (*Codesria Bulletin* 2008, Nos 3 & 4). As Professor Nabudere points out, 'the tributes demonstrate the high regard of Mafeje held by those who knew him and had worked with him (Nabudere 2011). It is clear from such tributes that South Africa's loss was Africa's (and the world's) gain. In essence, Professor Mafeje was a pan-Africanist academic giant who broke barriers as he was a visible presence on the continent's intellectual landscape. Although Professor Mafeje used to introduce himself as 'a South African by birth, a Dutch by citizenship and an Egyptian by domicile,' one could not but admire his dedication to his country of birth and the liberation of the African continent.

Professor Mafeje was born in the highly remote and rural village of Gubenxe, Engcobo on 30 March 1936. When he passed away on the 28th March 2007, he had had a professional career spanning four decades. After completing high school at Healdtown, he enrolled for tertiary education at Fort Hare University where he studied Zoology for one year before being expelled for political activities. In 1957, he enrolled with the UCT and in 1963 he completed his master's degree cum laude at the same institution. He was granted a British Council scholarship in 1964 to pursue his doctoral studies at Cambridge University. His university research on commercial farmers in Uganda began a lifelong engagement with agrarian issues and the ethnography of East Africa. It culminated in his 1991 book, *The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formations: The Case of the Interlacustrine Kingdoms*.

According to Professor Mafeje, his visa expired while he was still studying and the colonial-apartheid South African consulate advised him to go back to South Africa to renew it. Sensing that he might not be allowed back into England to complete his studies, he ignored the suggestion because he could not understand why the consulate could not do it.

In May 1968, the UCT Council unanimously approved his appointment as a senior lecturer in Social Anthropology. He was eminently suitable, having graduated from the university with an MA in the subject, cum laude, three years earlier. Moreover, at the time of his appointment, he was about to complete his doctorate at the Cambridge University [see citation read by Wilson, 2008]. A month later, after pressure from the apartheid government, the same Council withdrew the appointment. This ignited students' anger in August 1968, during which an estimated number of 600 students began a nine-day occupation of the Bremner Building, demanding the reinstatement of Professor Mafeje by the UCT Council. Instead of acceding to the demand, the institution established an Academic Freedom Research Award in honour of Mafeje. UCT then put up a disclaimer, saying that the government had taken away its right to appoint lecturers. That decision marked the beginning of Mafeje's exile and a journey that eventually led to one of the most outstanding academic careers. The Mafeje affair was a turning point for UCT, which bowed to pressure from the apartheid government, rather than standing up for the values essential to an authentic and thriving intellectual community. The events exposed the pretension of liberalism at the institution

and it is noteworthy that, since then, UCT did not make any black academic appointment until the 1980s.

Since he could not go back to South Africa because the South African consulate refused to renew his passport, the Cambridge University created a special lectureship post for him. Soon thereafter, in November 1968, the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, Netherlands invited him to take up a position as a senior lecturer. Not being satisfied with being away from the continent and eager to deal with issues that were close to his heart, such as researching African settings, he applied to several African universities in Ghana, Zambia, Uganda and Tanzania. Professor Mafeje pointed out that his short stay at the ISS seemed to decouple him from continental developments. It is noteworthy that during the period 1967–1973, internationally, there was an upsurge of revolutionary activities all over the world, including the Civil Rights Movement in the US, the May French student uprisings, the Vietnam liberation war and the liberation struggles in Africa (Shivji 1993).

Finally, he settled for the then hub of intellectual activity, the haven of global intellectuals and beehive of ideological and intellectual fervor, namely, the University of Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania, where he became head of the Department of Sociology. That the university was characterized by intense intellectual ferment and ideological debates is illustrated by the fact that staff around that time included the likes of Walter Rodney, Dan Nabudere, Mahmood Mamdani, Ibbo Mandaza, John Saul and Yash Tandon. Visiting lecturers or speakers included CLR James, Abdulreham Babu and Ali Mazrui (who later mocked this unabashed attraction to Tanzania as Tanzaphilia), while students included Issa Shivji and Yoweri Museveni (current president of Uganda).

It was during this period at the University of Dar-es-Salaam that he published his classic and often quoted article on 'The Ideology of Tribalism'. Unfortunately, his stay there, from 1969 to 1971, was cut short as a result of a 31 January 1971 horrific accident which, through the help of what he referred to as 'a Good Samaritan', saw him having to endure eleven – very expensive – operations for facial reconstruction in Denmark (personal conversations with Professor Mafeje in Pretoria, 2006). Following his recuperation, the ISS invited him as a visiting researcher and he spent the period 1972–1975 at the Institute. According to Professor Mafeje, lack of facilities in Tanzania at the time made him accept the gracious invitation (personal conversations with Professor Mafeje in Cairo, Eypt, 1986). In 1973, at the age of 34, the ISS appointed him Professor of Anthropology and Sociology of Development (and Chairman of the Rural Development, Urban Development and Labour Studies Program) by an Act of Parliament and with the approval of all the Dutch universities. Professor Mafeje therefore became one of the only two African scholars to be so distinguished in The Netherlands. That appointment bestowed on him the honour of being a Queen Juliana Professor and one of her Lords. His name appears in the prestigious blue pages of the Dutch National Library. He also received Dutch citizenship and the key to The Hague. It was during his time at the ISS that he met his wife and life-long companion, the Egyptian scholar and activist, Dr Shahida El Baz.

As Professor of Anthropology and Sociology of Development in The Hague, he worked on African systems of land tenure and on agricultural and rural development. Between 1976 and 1978, Professor Mafeje worked as a full-time consultant at the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in Italy, Rome and he continued to work on these issues. He subsequently joined the AUC, as Professor of Sociology and Anthropology but retained strong research and teaching links with the ISS. He returned to southern Africa in 1991 after another four-year stint at the FAO. He took up the post of Professor of Sociology and Anthropology and Director of the Multidisciplinary Research Centre at the University of Namibia from 1992 to 1994. After colonial-apartheid collapsed in 1994, the UCT offered Professor Mafeje a research post, but he declined it. When he finally applied for a chair at the university, he was once more rejected as being unsuitable for the position.

At the retirement age of 65, several years after the end of apartheid, Professor Mafeje returned to South Africa. He was appointed a Research Fellow by the National Research Foundation (NRF) working at the African Renaissance Centre at UNISA. In 2001, Professor Mafeje became a member of the Scientific Committee of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and in 2003 was awarded the Honorary Life Membership of the Council. In 2005, Professor Mafeje was appointed a CODESRIA Distinguished Fellow in conjunction with the Africa Institute of South Africa, in Pretoria.

His Contributions and Intellectual Legacy

Professor Mafeje's oeuvre provides a rich canvass for his intellectual portrait. His personal reverence, political principle and theoretical acumen have combined into a formidable intellectual in the true sense of the word. Professor Mafeje was a gentle but revolutionary intellectual giant who lent his intelligence, grace and imagination to the deconstruction of western historiography and ethnography on Africa.

He held that European colonisation brought with it certain ways of reconstructing the African reality. Therefore, his analytical point of departure was that the European enslavement and colonisation of Africa was also about the control of knowledge about Africa. In this respect, he provided a counter-narrative to the dominant tradition of Western scholarship which presented conquest, dispossession and exploitation as a civilising mission. He was an anti-alterity scholar in that he opposed the images of Africa as presented by Western scholars. These images were of a pathological continent which desperately needed therapeutic treatment from outside. Moreover, he held that development paradigms on and about Africa were heavily Western-oriented as they were fundamentally steeped in the concept of assimilation and integration. For him, the missing link was culture. In this regard, he left behind his trademark of critical and engaged scholarship in support of progressive agendas. Throughout his academic life, he inspired the wider community of African scholars to pursue independent and critical approaches to knowledge production, to contribute towards Africa's renewal agenda and global peace. However, as a scholar, he was neither an ideologue nor a demagogue.

Professor Mafeje began to doubt the validity of colonial anthropology categorisations when he was doing fieldwork in the urban and rural areas of South Africa in the mid-sixties. This doubt was further heightened when he went to Uganda (1965 – 1967) and to Tanzania (1969 – 1971) when he realised that the ideology of tribalism was pervasive in colonial as well as post-colonial Africa. By the time he reached Tanzania at the end of the 1960s, his work had become more thematic, less ethnographic and consciously deconstructive. From then, he embarked on a long deconstructionist journey with respect to colonial anthropology. Herein lies Professor Mafeje's most striking and enduring legacy (see Mafeje 2001a).

His seminal paper on the subject of tribalism which was published in 1971 led to a turn-around in the thinking of African social scientists about the bogey of tribalism. This article, hailed as a conceptual *tour-de-force* that unlocked our understanding of the concept of tribalism, was essentially an Africanist reaction to Western cultural and intellectual imperialism. It was a frontal attack on European ethnocentrism and a spontaneous call for indigenisation of social scientific concepts. Professor Mafeje was not an essentialist and, as such, did not object to Western influence on African social science, but rather, to its assumed intellectual hegemony.

Professor Mafeje also ventured into more theoretical and methodological fields, such as state capitalism and primitive accumulation, science and ideology, technology and development, sociology of sociology, the fallacy of dual economies, demography and economy, historical explanation, philosophical representations. Familiarity with Professor Mafeje's work points to some of these publications being simply intellectual explorations and were not necessarily sustained. He concedes as such in his written testimony about what he considers to be his intellectual legacy (Mafeje 2001a).

The subject matter of his writings was closely tied to the political struggles taking place in Africa in general, and Southern Africa in particular. As such, his search for indigenisation was not a mere academic rebellion but a political, ideological and philosophical affirmation of Africanness. It is noteworthy that the impact of Professor Mafeje's writings does not lie in the volume of his work but in its quality. His courage, insatiable curiosity, caring and keen intellect contextualized and revolutionized the thinking of generations of scholars. Historically, Professor Mafeje did not blaze the path of deconstructing alterity and affirming African identity. Many scholars had done that before him. What he did was to do so more eloquently, elegantly, convincingly, excitingly, exceptionally and authentically without being burdened by political affiliations and being ordained by political organisations. It is, therefore, bewildering that there was so much deafening silence on this legendary social scientist's works in South African institutions of higher learning. This has been a travesty of intellectual justice and violence of memory as such untenable situation continued to deny South African scholars and students of an appreciation of the contributions and legacy of this internationally acclaimed scholar.

I once asked him why he did not, for purposes of broader readership, contribute to newspapers to stimulate and respond to the discourse on various issues. His response was that he did not want to take liberties not appropriate for a scholar. Notwithstanding this, Professor Mafeje considered the role of African intellectuals to be creation, through critical intellect, of socially and politically relevant ideas. His analytical work was consistently aimed at this, as seen in his characteristic forthrightness, unsparing candour and intellectual intensity when dealing with friends and foes alike – hence the major bruising intellectual encounters he was involved in.

The shame is that, internationally, he was recognised as both iconic and a giant. To that extend, during the 30th anniversary celebrations of CODESRIA held in Dakar, Senegal in 2003, a plenary session was held to honour his enduring contributions and legacy to the social sciences and humanities.

The Continued Relevance of Professor Mafeje in South Africa

While with the ISS, Prof. Mafeje published a totalising critique of the social sciences and humanities (Mafeje 1976). It is clear that he did not find takers from South Africa regarding the problems of the social sciences and humanities. As recent as 2011, two reports by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) and the Charter for the Humanities and Social Sciences (CHCC) respectively, were released on the decline of the social sciences and humanities in South Africa. The two reports, appearing within a month of each other, pointed to a crisis in the disciplines and alarming declining rates of student numbers in these subjects.

In essence, the ASSAf report worryingly expressed concern about the 'intellectual stagnation' in the social sciences and humanities over the last fifteen years, posing the single most important threat to the growth of intellectual vibrant scholarship in the social sciences and humanities. The CHCC report noted extremely worrying signs of decline that need to be arrested and reversed as a matter of urgency, given the important role the social sciences and humanities have to play in our society. These disciplines, as taught in the South African universities, are thereby becoming liabilities rather than assets.

Clearly, the academic landscape in the social sciences and humanities need an infusion of relevance, conceived as a function of how these disciplines respond to the national concerns and global imperatives. As such, the crisis in the disciplines presents an opportunity to engage with Professor Mafeje's insightful works. To commemorate, to celebrate, to give honor to the legacy of this bona fide intellectual giant, South Africans need to explore his legacy and acknowledge his work rather than ignore and marginalise it. The challenge for universities in South Africa is to begin to introduce learners to his works. Anything less is a travesty of and a dishonor to scholarship in the context of the knowledge struggles raging on in the South African academia.

In a country lacking in a contemporary pool of credible cadre of intellectual role models, recent efforts to acknowledge Professor Mafeje is a welcome and encouraging step. As alluded to earlier, before passing away, Professor Mafeje had already compiled a testimony of what he considers to have been his contribution to the social sciences in general, and the subject of anthropology in particular. What emerges is that unless we indigenise the social sciences and humanities, these disciplines will always be in crisis as informers of social policy.

The two reports mentioned should, willy-nilly, return us South African social scientists to indigenisation fundamentals as Professor Mafeje tirelessly advocated.

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