

Archie Mafeje

I came across Archie Mafeje's name and fame in the late 1960s during my student days at the University of Dar es Salaam, then a college of the University of East Africa. I do not remember having met him personally then. My memory may be failing and, regrettably, Archie is no longer with us to confirm. But Archie's ideas were so powerful that you instinctively felt you knew the man from time immemorial.

The first thing I remember of Archie Mafeje is a story, then making the rounds of the student body and young tutorial assistants. Archie was the head of the Department of Sociology. He was the supervisor of one of the first PhD students in that department. The student went on to become the Head of Sociology in the 1970s and was an influential person in the corridors of power at the university. Archie failed him. The thesis, Archie said, without mincing words, was not passable. He stood by his decision in spite of the usual pressures. So long as Archie was in the department, the man did not get his doctorate. I came to learn later that the thesis was passed after Archie left the university. The students told and retold this story with great admiration. For us, then, Archie's stand symbolised his great intellectual rigour and integrity. On ideas, he would not compromise.

Personally, I adore and respect Archie for his great and incisive intellectual insights, his uncompromising stand on matters of principle and his steadfastness on rigour and unwavering commitment to national liberation and social emancipation. He refused to be taken in by the fashions and fads among intellectuals – usually spawned by Western academia and mimicked by us in Africa. I marvelled at and enjoyed his think pieces in the *CODESRIA Bulletin*. I read and zealously circulated his sharp rejoinders to Achille Mbembe's postmodernist writings on Africanity. I quote and requote his excellent piece reviewing the debate on democracy between Thandika Mkandawire and Anyang' Nyong'o. He did not pull punches in his analysis of his colleagues whom he nevertheless respected and engaged with. Little did I realise before I read this piece that Archie had read my short

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piece on the debate. Even while agreeing with my basic thesis, Archie did not spare me for my loose formulations. He deployed his usual razor-sharpness. I will quote him extensively because it illustrates all I am saying about Archie's style, rigour, theoretical sweep and utter forthrightness. Using Gramsci's idea of the 'philosophy of praxis' as a peg on which to hang his arguments, Mafeje says:

From the point of view of 'philosophy of praxis', there is always an underlying tension between determinism and voluntarism. Intended or not, this manifested itself in the exchange between Shivji and Mandaza (1990). Mandaza was inclined to accuse Shivji of determinism or 'waiting for Godot' in his academic and theoretical tower (unkind words, perhaps communicated as a sign of respect and appreciation), while not only reserving the latter for himself but advocating it for others on the basis of his experience in Zimbabwe, without acknowledging that it is a mixed one. He also chastised Shivji for 'caricaturism'. Perhaps Shivji deserves what he got. He trivialised his own problematique by presenting it in a Charlie Chaplain fashion. (One wonders why but also one recalls that in his prison notes Gramsci affected certain verbal postures; so it could be with anybody.) But, as is known, Charlie Chaplin's message was always very profound to the disquiet of the Americans who found it necessary to deport him back to his native England.

Irrespective of the reaction Shivji elicited from his colleagues (irritation from Mandaza and disgust from Anyang' Nyong'o if only with his 'hackneyed terms'), his diagnosis is more correct than most and, theoretically, is better founded than that of his detractors. For instance, on liberalism and imperialism or 'fashionable bandwagons' of the West, his observations are valid

and Mandaza could not help granting this. His concept of 'compradorial democracy' might be etymologically vulgar and theoretically undeveloped but, as a shorthand for what is happening or likely to happen in Africa under the current *pax Americana*, it hits the nail on the head.¹

This wonderful piece, tantalisingly subtitled 'Breaking Bread with my Fellow-travellers', was written sometime in 1992, during the transition in Africa from the one-party to multi-party. It stood out as a singularly enlightening piece and an incisive review of the debate on democracy among African intellectuals. In my view, it remains so to this day. Almost fifteen years into the so-called multi-party democracy, we are now in a better position to understand and appreciate Archie Mafeje's great insights and analysis of the struggle for democracy. I would like to invite my fellow African intellectuals to revisit that debate and Archie's great contribution.

Archie's remarks cut sharply, but I never felt the pangs of hurt. Rather, my respect and admiration for him increased. Archie read his fellow African intellectuals, took them seriously, and engaged with them without being patronising. Unlike many of our colleagues, who embellish their references with writers from the global North, to prove their intellectualness, Archie's references were African, rooted in Africa yet fully aware and critically appreciative of intellectual discourses elsewhere.² He refused intellectual hegemonies, in particular those that proclaim universal truth and wisdom regardless of time or space. He detested racism but appreciated the 'anti-racist racism' (Senghor's phrase) of African nationalism as an assertion of African humanity against centuries of oppression and humiliation. He was clear of the bourgeois nature of anti-colonial and post-independence African nationalism but appreciated and celebrated the historical role of national independence as 'the greatest political achievement by Africans'. He called it 'an unprecedented collective fulfilment'.³

As a person, Archie was modest but proud. In relation to those with whom he disagreed, he did not bicker behind their

backs but told them to their face. I occasionally met him at Thandika's place in Dakar. It was a great intellectual treat. From Thandika you got intellectual provocations, references to great progressive movies, tips on the use of a computer. From Archie you got controversies and heresies accompanied by choice wines. One could never predict Archie's position on intellectual and political controversies. But one could always be sure that it would be from the class standpoint of the oppressed and exploited. Archie was not ashamed of his Marxist outlook. Even during the heyday of neo-liberalism when many former African Marxist scholars uncritically turned postmodernists or subalterns or culturalists, Archie indefatiga-

bly defended historical materialism and used it with great originality to understand the burning issues of the continent.

Archie's oral and written interventions were short, simple, sharp, witty and pithy but never 'sweet' in the sense of being flattery. He rarely called a spade a spade or an instrument to cut with but used it to illustrate its sharpness. Reading him, you could never fail to recognise a spade when you saw one. I always wished I could emulate his style, at least the brevity and clarity, if not the sharpness, but never succeeded.

In memory of Archie Mafeje, the giant of an African intellectual, I keep this tribute short.

Notes

1. 'Theory of Democracy and the African Discourse; Breaking Bread with my Fellow-travellers', in Chole, Eshetu and Jibrin Ibrahim (eds) (1995). *Democratisation Processes in Africa: Problems and Prospects*, Dakar: CODESRIA.
2. Out of curiosity, I counted the author entries in Archie Mafeje's 1992 book of essays (*In Search of An Alternative: A Collection of Essays on Revolutionary Theory and Politics*, Harare: SAPES) and unsurprisingly found three-fourth of the entries were African.
2. 'African Philosophical Projections and Prospects for the Indigenisation of Political and Intellectual Discourse', in 'In Search of an Alternative', pp .9-10.