

Archibald Monwabisi Mafeje: A Vignette

Introduction

Mafeje will be remembered by those who knew him for a million and one things, and those of us who had the privilege of knowing him in different situations and climes for three to four decades and more will recognize in his character a vibrant and sublime cosmopolitanism that was rare. It was not a feature of his make-up that jumped into the face of the observer. Indeed, it could easily be missed or underestimated. But any close and careful appreciation of the personality would not have failed to perceive his almost effortless worldliness. Most people knew him as Archie. Only few knew his second name Monwabisi (literally, one who makes others happy).

I would like to understand a cosmopolitan to be a 'citizen of the world' in the core meaning of the idea as expressed by the classical Greek cynic, Diogenes, in the 4th century BC. 'I am a citizen of the world' were his words. He was making this pronouncement in a world in which Greeks saw themselves as the centre of all things. From the fifteenth century onwards with the European voyages of expansion and the early beginnings of globalization, the world became increasingly one unit, with the West as the centre.

Cosmopolitanism has for long been seen as largely a western sentiment. Too

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smugly and too easily this heritage of expansion has been translated as 'we discovered the world'. That glib, self-adulatory assumption and all that it carries in train has provided an unspoken fillip for those who will argue that without appreciating where we all are and what we all have to offer, it is difficult to see how we can be world citizens. Can you be part of a world you do not know? Only by submitting yourself to a universalist morality and ethos – a cultural openness which celebrates all.

This moral dimension of cosmopolitanism has been eloquently and superbly argued by Kwame Anthony Appiah in his *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006). Today, it is as James Morris somewhere writes, 'contemporary orthodoxy. There are many who will argue that *Ubuntu* represents a localized traditional African expression of this ethos by those who, like Aimé Césaire, say: 'Hurrah for those who never invented anything, who never explored anything, who never discovered anything.' For Marx the opening up of societies by ex-

panding international capital has been crucial for the emergence of modern cosmopolitanism. Twentieth-century fascists associated cosmopolitanism with internationalism and hated every bit of it. Internationalism for them was anathema and a cruel term of abuse.

I met Mafeje during the opening of the 1970s when he was teaching at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. I was at that point based in Amsterdam but commuting to Heidelberg every fortnight to teach. We were, I believe, introduced by Ernst Feder who was a colleague of Archie's. After telephonic contact, Mafeje agreed to visit me in Amsterdam.

The rendezvous was *Reinders*, a so-called 'brown café' (a traditional looking wooden interior-décor Dutch café) in the heart of Amsterdam; on the Leidseplein to be exact. It was a popular haunt of the arty set and their regular meeting and 'watering hole'. My memory tells me that all the big names in the Amsterdam art world including Harry Mullisch the writer, Robert Jasper Grootveld the high priest of the anti-establishmentarian anarchist Provo Movement, Jan Telting the painter, Piet Leeuwaarden the arch-hippie, Art Veldhoon the painter and many others made it a regular stop in town. If you wanted to know 'the scene', you 'hung around'. It was a very cosmopolitan and 'free' place. These were years following

the heady 1960s when Amsterdam was regarded as the most libertarian city in Europe and when the old description of migrant Jews fleeing from the excesses of the Spanish inquisition in the closing decade of the fifteenth century found a new meaning in our times as *Mokkum* or 'Jerusalem of the North'.

It was a late summer afternoon, and I was sitting and waiting at the front of *Reinders*, looking in the direction of the tram-stop, which was within view and barely a few metres away. I did not have to wait too long. Almost at the appointed time a tallish, gaunt but ramrod African, carrying his head aloft, stepped out of one of the trams coming from the direction of the Central Station. He rolled forward with an easy and steady gait. I was looking in his direction, and he appeared to inquire from a newspaper seller the location of *Reinders*, because the two swung in our direction and the newspaper man pointed to *Reinders*. I immediately assumed that this was Mafeje, and I stood up to meet him. He had calmly penetrating and appraising eyes. He wore a vague straggling beard and had enough self-possession to carry a beautifully crafted handbag. The air about him was not macho but also not effeminate.

We exchanged greetings and initial pleasantries and took seats on the patio of the café. By his own account, Archie had settled well in The Hague but was not altogether happy about some of the attitudes he encountered at the institute. When the conversation drifted to the fact that we were literally a stone's throw from the Rijksmuseum he strongly expressed the wish to visit the museum in the not too distant future and went on to extol the excellence of the Dutch Masters. We also discussed the Van Gogh Museum and the eccentricities or rather madness of Van Gogh. It distinctly occurred to me that there were not many African academics who were at home in such subjects.

On another occasion, elsewhere, he displayed a sophisticated and totally uncommon knowledge of European wines. I am myself quite at home with such knowledge, but in the social science circles of Africa I have not come across anyone who could rival Archie in this respect. Archie's knowledge of the Western clas-

sical literature was equally not inconsiderable, although he hardly made a show of this.

In the Netherlands, I remember that I was invited to his rooms for dinner in The Hague with the Kenyan Paul Adhu Awiti. It was superb. I suspect that this culinary skill was one of Archie's accomplishments that not many people knew about. I have been informed that in his home in Cairo he was very often and easily in charge of the kitchen.

His robust intellect was particularly observable in debates where his often placid exterior belied a stridently combative spirit and expression. Sometimes this polemically acute approach came across as abrasive, but it was an abrasiveness that was measured and hardly licentious.

I was instrumental in getting Archie to Namibia during the very early years of Namibia's independence to work in developing an implementational strategy for the research wings of the new University of Namibia. I had, as a consultant for the new Vice Chancellor's office, produced the structural concepts and theoretical designations for the research wings of the university. However, I left shortly before he arrived. For some reason he could not hit it off with the interests on the ground and in the ensuing differences that emerged he was in some cases a casualty. Many of the interests on the ground in the then University of Namibia were not very welcoming to an African of Archie's calibre, and considerations they had, I suspect, for consultancies and other things probably made them fearful of a new and senior African presence in their midst. Archie returned to Cairo.

Later, after the collapse of apartheid in South Africa, he applied to be appointed to the new A.C. Jordan Chair at the University of Cape Town. Again, interests fearful of transformation and, I am recently informed, partly linked to elements from the Namibian scene, colluded to bar his entrance into the university. I had written a reference, on his request, which was politely acknowledged but carried little effective weight in the corridors of power and influence in the university. This was the second time the establishment of the University of Cape Town had visited shabby treatment on him. The first time

was during the 1960s, when they refused to offer him a lectureship.

Mafeje was a very kind and considerate person. He had a lively sense of humour, but his normal quietness often masked this quality. His kindness was equally matched by loyalty to his friends. He valued friendship and stood by his friends, but he did not suffer fools. Archie's cosmopolitanism was matched by a fervent Africanism, which was worn unobtrusively but staunchly. He was also outstandingly critical of political double-speak and other shortcomings of the African political elite. This did not endear him to many elements in the African National Congress of South Africa. His original political home had been in the Unity Movement in the Cape. It was from the philosophical inclinations of this grouping that his early appreciation of political Marxism and the intellectual rudiments of cosmopolitanism were possibly acquired.

All these multifaceted dimensions of his personality contributed to giving him a cosmopolitan make-up. He grew up in the Cape, in South Africa, and spent a good part of his life in Cairo. Our mutual friend, Helmi Sharawy, informed me that Archie held his own in the super-chaotic traffic of Cairo, in word and deed. I am not sure if Cecil Rhodes would have counted the successful migration of a 'native' from Cape Town to Cairo as part of his Cape to Cairo project, but Archie achieved much of Rhodes's project in more ways than one, and had a roaring family life in Cairo with his partner Shahida and daughter.

I was in Cairo when the news of his death arrived and had the opportunity to attend his funeral in the *Omar Makram* mosque in the heart of the city. It was extraordinarily moving to observe the wonderful crop of the Cairene intellectual class assembled to honour and pay homage to his life. They included Tayeb Saleh, the well-known Sudanese-Egyptian writer; Kamal Bahaa Eldeen, former Minister of Education; Prof. Hussam Issa, Politbureau Member of the Nasserist Party; A.G. Shukr, Politbureau Member of the Progressive Party; Ragaa el Naqash, critic of Arabic literature; Prof. I. el Esawy and Prof. Helmi Sharawy. Archie managed successfully to pack all these different strands and impulses into his life and character.