

Archie Mafeje and the Social Sciences in Africa

The death of Archie Mafeje in March 2007 was a great shock to many African scholars and political activists. There is no doubt that Mafeje was one of the leading African social scientists who tried to deconstruct anthropology while trying to construct a new research methodology that was free from these colonially inspired disciplines within wider social science discourses to explain the African context. On the political side, there is also no doubt that Mafeje was a committed pan-Africanist who was dedicated to African emancipation and liberation, and a great teacher and crusader for African political, intellectual and cultural freedom. His achievements remain great landmarks upon which young African scholars can build to establish that new approach that he fought to set in motion in African knowledge production, intellectual freedom and social responsibility.

I met Archie Mafeje in the heyday of the struggle for African liberation at the University of Dar es Salaam, where he was a professor of sociology, from 1969 and later in Harare. At each of these places, he was a vibrant progressive debater and a defender of the interests of the working people. He did not take an open political position in favour of any political party or liberation movement in South Africa, the country of his birth, although he was known to take a Trotskyite activist position that operated under the Unity Movement of South Africa, which had a number of student organisations. But in academia, he took a broad position, which enabled him to maintain contact with the general intellectual community.

Mafeje's early contribution as a young anthropologist was a path-breaking article he wrote in 1970 for the *Journal of Modern African Studies* entitled 'The Ideology of Tribalism', which stimulated wide-ranging debate challenging the anthropological concept of 'a dual economy' and the alleged static nature of African society that the concepts of 'tribe' and 'tribalism' implied. Throughout this early period, Mafeje argued that African society was composed of social classes just like any other society by introducing Marxist concepts of class and class formation. He became one of the African

Dani W. Nabudere
Makerere University
Kampala, Uganda

anthropologists who challenged the discipline of colonial anthropology, which was regarded as the 'handmaiden of colonialism.' At the eighth General Assembly of CODESRIA held in Dakar, Senegal, in 1995, he even dared to declare anthropology a 'dead' discipline in Africa. Indeed, he went ahead to write a monograph, which CODESRIA published as Monograph Series 4/96, to make good his claims and to give his African fellow-anthropologists an opportunity to 'disabuse' him.¹

Mafeje went further to demonstrate that the ultimate concern for writing his essay was to interrogate anthropology as a discipline and challenge its credentials for claiming to study 'the other' as a 'thing of the past' as well as its claim to deal with the present 'without making invidious distinction between the Third World subjects and those of the imperialist countries' (Mafeje 1996:1). The problematic he set for himself in the essay was to explore the deconstruction of anthropology 'with reference to the ex-colonial world' and as this emanated from the North and place the deconstruction debate within the African context. This enabled him to commit himself 'irrevocably' to adopting a different paradigm in the application of ethnography in Africa. He did so with the writing of his book: *The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formations: The Case of the Interlacustrine Kingdoms*, which he wrote in 1986 but which was published in 1991. Indeed, this book can be taken as Mafeje's *magnus opus* in that it laid out the research approach that he recommended for Africa, and therefore his contribution has to be judged from here.

Mafeje explains that he used the interlacustrine 'social formation' both as a synthesis of his previous theoretical and ideological explorations and as a testing ground for his deconstructionist ideas, first by moving a way from the concept 'culture' as an analytical category that was used in anthropology. The reason he

did this was that the concept had no boundaries because it was widely diffused in space, especially in conditions of improved communication; and for this reason it could not be used as a designating category in social analysis. Secondly, he also declined to use the concept 'society' for the same reasons in developing the theory of analysing interlacustrine kingdoms of East Africa because there could be 'societies' within societies.

In many ways, therefore, it can be said that Prof. Mafeje made a real break with the anthropological past in writing this book for it enabled him to problematise both anthropological and Marxist concepts in trying to develop a new understanding of analysing dynamic changes in African 'social formations'. His analysis of the ethnography of the interlacustrine kingdoms established a theory of 'social formations' of these kingdoms by relying on a discursive method that built on local histories with a strong interpretive force emanating from the local peoples' epistemologies and 'hidden knowledge'. Based on this theory, he argued that the pastoralists in the ten kingdoms of the interlacustrine region, which had both segmentary and centralising tendencies, challenged the notion that these kingdoms were 'invaded' by the empire-building Hamitic pastoralists from pre-dynastic Egypt. Instead he reconstructed a history of their 'social formation' that built on local processes of political action based on a detailed ethnography in which both the pastoralists and sedentary communities converged (Mafeje, 1991:20).²

From this, Professor Mafeje was able to challenge the whole notion of a particular pastoral community that came down from the north with longhorn cattle associated with the Hima/Tutsi people as a racial group with any special political characteristics for introducing a new political system. His research proved that such cattle could be found in Sierra Leone, and along the River Niger and as far south as Namibia. He pointed out that the indigenous Bantu agriculturalists and the Nilotic Babiito peoples had a pastoral history and therefore the process of state formation in the Bunyoro Empire could

only be understood in terms of dialectical social relations and interactions, which evolved between the two modes of production and existence. He pointed out:

The Bairu provided the agricultural base and services and the pastoralists, relieved of any onerous duties but in control of prestige goods, indulged themselves, turned the latter into a mechanism for political control and ritual mystification. This phenomenon, involving the same social categories, got repeated in five other kingdoms in the interlacustrine regions of Ankore, Burundi, Rwanda, Buhaya and Buzinza (Mafeje 1991:22).

The British anthropologist John Beattie had argued that when the Babiito dynasty took over from the Chwezi dynasty in the Bunyoro Kitara empire, these new rulers 'appeared strange and uncouth to the inhabitants' and had to be instructed in the manners appropriate to rulers of cattle-keeping and milk drinking. From the ethnographical evidence he collected from the people, Mafeje found that the Babiito were by tradition pastoralists and could not have been 'ignorant of cattle-keeping' although it was likely that they were 'ignorant of the kingship institutions, which in Bunyoro centred on sacred herds and milk diet for the kings'.

Mafeje's analysis and that of Peter Rigby, who investigated the Masaai of Tanzania using a phenomenological Marxist approach, demonstrated that the organic relationship between people of different modes of existence and culture must inform any analysis of society as a dialectical process of social and economic relationships. The social formation that arises historically must be demonstrated to arise out of these organic social relations and political actions. This can only be arrived at by use of a detailed ethnographic investigation instead of hypothetical *a priori* constructions based on one's ideological convictions.

In arriving at this method of conceptualisation, Mafeje tried to discard old anthropological concepts as well as polishing Marxist concepts by choosing 'social formation' as his unit of analysis and discarding the concepts 'culture' and 'society'. By interrogating the use of the concept 'ethnography' by the Comaroffs,³ he adopted 'social formation' and his own notion of 'ethnography' as 'key concepts' in writing his book. In doing this, he departed from Balibar and Samir Amin

in their use of 'social formation' as meaning an 'articulation of modes of production'. Instead he preferred the use of 'social formation' as meaning 'the articulation of the economic instance and the instance of power'.

The counter-argument for this departure was that one could not use an articulation of an abstract concept such as 'mode of production' to designate 'the same concrete social reality they are meant to explain'. The other counter-argument was that Balibar's and Amin's use of the concept 'mode of production' had an organisational referent in which economics and politics were determinant, which could be subsumed under the concept of 'power'. Therefore in order to 'balance' the Marxist concept of economic instance: 'I invented what would have been "power instance"' but this proved, according to Mafeje, to be too awkward linguistically. So, instead he settled for the 'instance of power', which was actually inconsistent with the Marxist demarcation between 'structure' and 'superstructure'. Having made up his mind, he adopted 'social formation' as his unit of analysis *par excellence*. This is how the study of the interlacustrine kingdoms, became a series of 'social formations-in-the-making', which interbred with each other in such a way that the study explained how these independent kingdoms would have become one social formation or state had it not been for the colonial intervention. This proved that 'social formations', according to Mafeje, had 'extendable instances depending on the nature of intervening social and political forces whether internal or external'.

Professor Mafeje continued to develop his theory and ethnography of African social formations by clarifying that as units of analysis his 'social formations' were not defined according to their ethnography but according to their 'modes of organisation', so it did not matter which people belonged to a particular social formation, but rather 'what they were actually doing in their attempts to assert themselves':

It struck me that in the ensuing social struggles people try to justify themselves and not so much their causes which remain hidden. They do this by authoring particular texts which give them and others certain identities which in turn become the grammar of the same texts, the rules of the game, or, if you like, the *modus operandi*, in a social discourse in which individu-

als by virtue of their ascribed identities are assigned categorical statuses and roles (Ibid.).

Having clarified his second 'key concept' of 'ethnography', Mafeje declared it to be 'radically different from that of the Northern theorists or conventional anthropologists'. Referring to the results of his investigation of the interlacustrine kingdoms, he states:

It is these texts that I refer to as ethnography. They are socially and historically determined, i.e. they can be authored and altered by the same people over time or similar ones could be authored by people with a different cultural background under similar conditions. Therefore 'context' is most critical for their codification (Mafeje 1996:34).

If Professor Mafeje is therefore to be credited or discredited with the claim of having made a leap from the discipline of anthropology as a 'handmaiden of colonialism' to 'ethnography' as defined by him above, it is in the attempt he made in developing a thesis based on these 'texts' as an approach that was suitable for explaining African conditions. Mafeje sums up this attempt when he concludes:

The final methodological lesson that can be drawn from the study is that detailed ethnographic knowledge helps us to avoid mechanistic interpretations. Far from opening the way to relativism or particularism, it enables us to decode what might strike us at first sight as so many different things and, thus, puts us in a position where we can discover hidden unities. For instance, we discovered that 'tribal' names were used, not to identify tribes, but to designate status-categories in non-tribal formations, for example, 'Bairu', 'Batutsi'. Furthermore, ethnographic detail showed that contrary to stereotypes that pastoralists were the founders of the kingdoms in the interlacustrine region, neither the pastoralists nor the agriculturalists can take credit for this. Likewise ethnographic detail forbids us to treat pastoralism and cultivation as things apart. The kingdoms were a result of a dynamic synthesis of social elements that were drawn from both traditions and the prevailing modes of existence within them served as politically controlled alternatives. ... These discoveries enable us to generate more objective codes and to put into proper perspective the his-

torical and ethnographic intricacies of African societies. (Mafeje 1991:128–9)

Mafeje's claim here is epistemic, if indeed it is true, for it destroys the way colonial anthropology and imperial ethnology were used to classify human societies according to their basic characteristics. These approaches denied the colonised 'objects' knowledge of themselves since they were regarded as 'primitive' and 'backward'. On the other hand, 'ethnography' as used by Mafeje here was an end product of social texts that were authored by the people themselves as knowledge-makers. In this approach, all that a scholar does is to study the peoples' texts so that he/she can decode them and make them understandable to other scholars as systemised interpretations of existing but 'hidden knowledge'. According to Mafeje, his approach 'marked a definite break with the European epistemology of subject/object'.

So with Mafeje's approach, we have achieved a philosophic break with the

dualistic 'dialectical opposites' inherent in colonial anthropology, so that instead of the 'subject/object' epistemology of the coloniser, 'us' and 'them', we have a 'synthesis' or a 'convergence' of social elements that are drawn, in the case of the interlacustrine kingdoms, from both traditions of the pastoralists and agriculturalists, into an interrelated whole expressed in the existence of the kingdom. This means Mafeje had discovered a new epistemology behind the 'hidden knowledge', which he was able to retrieve through the 'ethnological' approach or what he calls 'ethnological knowledge' of the colonial 'object' who now becomes the subject.

But Mafeje operates as a neutral researcher or scholar standing outside the new epistemology because he informs us that in discarding the old concepts and approaches he also adopted a 'discursive method', which was not predicated on any epistemology but was 'reflective of a certain style of thinking'. It is with this 'style of thinking' that he is able to study

the peoples' texts so that he can decode them and make them understandable to the other scholars as systemised interpretations of existing but 'hidden knowledge'. But in such a case how different is he from the colonial scholar who claims to be 'neutral' and 'objective'? This is perhaps the legacy that young scholars must grapple with. But it is clear that Professor Mafeje made a definite contribution in his lifetime in developing a new social science and philosophy in discarding colonial anthropology.

Notes

1. A. Mafeje (1996), *Anthropology and Independent Africans: Suicide or End of an Era?* CODESRIA Monograph Series 4/96, Dakar: CODESRIA.
2. A. Mafeje (1998), *The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formations: The Case of the Interlacustrine Kingdoms*, Dakar: CODESRIA. 3 J. & J. Comaroff (1972), *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*, Boulder: Westview Press,