Debating Archie Mafeje and Wole Soyinka: Can Africa Colonize Itself?

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My most famous debates with fellow African intellectuals were, firstly, with Wole Soyinka, the Nobel Laureate in Literature and, secondly, with Archie Mafeje, the eminent South African anthropologist. The debates with both intellectual adversaries were brutal – almost no hods barred!

My personal relationship with Wole Soyinka was substantially mended when I invited him to a conference on my campus in Binghamton, New York, and he agreed to come unconditionally. I had also invited General Yakubu Gowon, former Head of State in Nigeria, who had once imprisoned Wole Soyinka during the Nigerian civil war. Both the General and the Nobel Laureate came to Binghamton, and we mended our fences.

With regard to my personal relationship with Archie Mafeje, we never really had a formal intellectual reconciliation. But I would like to believe that my tribute to him in my presentation at the CODESRIA conference on ' Pan Africanism and the Intellectuals' , in December 2003, was at least an olive branch from me.

But what did my two major debates with Wole Soyinka have in common with my single debate with Archie Mafeje? My first debate with Soyinka was conducted in the columns of *Transition* magazine (originally founded in Kampala but more recently based at Harvard under the editorship of Henry Louis Gates Jr). My single public debate with Archie Mafeje was conducted in the pages of *CODESRIA Bulletin*, based in Dakar, Senegal.

. My first debate with Soyinka arose out of his misinterpretation of my television series, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (BBC/PBS, 1986). Basically, Wole Soyinka interpreted my concept of ' Africa' s triple heritage' as an attempt to facilitate or legitimize a kind of Muslim colonization of Africa.

On the other hand, Archie Mafeje interpreted my concept of ' Africa' s self-colonization' as an attempt on my part to facilitate Europe' s recolonization of Africa. Soyinka regarded my ' triple heritage' as a Trojan Horse for a Muslim colonization of Africa. Mafeje denounced my concept of Africa' s recolonization of its own failed states as a Trojan Horse for the return of Pax Britannica and related European intrusions.

In reality, my concept of Africa' s triple heritage was about a convergence of three civilizations in contemporary African experience – Africanity, the penetration of Islam and the impact of Western civilization. In spite of Soyinka himself, Nigeria already had more Muslims than any Arab country. The size of the Nigerian population that was already Muslim was larger than the Muslim population of Egypt. My television series was trying to understand this triple heritage, rather than promoting it.

In fact, far from emphasizing the Islamic part of Nigeria when I issued invitations for my Binghamton conference on ' Glo-

balization and Dialogue of Civilizations' , in 2002, my most distinguished Nigerians were General Yakubu Gowon and Wole Soyinka, both of them of Christian African upbringing.

Although Archie Mafeje had spent a number of years in Egypt, and had even shown me around Cairo on one of my visits in the past, his quarrel with me had almost nothing to do with Islam in Africa. Partly through Egyptian newspapers, he had discovered that I was championing the recolonization of Africa. He wrongly assumed that I was urging the return of European colonial powers. He was therefore understandably outraged. In reality I was urging that stronger African states should temporarily ' recolonize' failed African neighbours, the way Tanganyika ' colonized' neighbouring Zanzibar in 1964 (permanently) or the way Tanzania occupied Idi Amin' s Uganda (temporarily) in 1979–80.

I do not think I came even close to convincing Archie Mafeje that inter-African colonization could ever be either benevolent (benefiting the weaker state more than the stronger), or *benign* (causing no harm on either side). Mafeje regarded any kind of colonization as decidedly *malignant* (beneficial mainly to the interventionist power).

I, on the other hand, regarded Tanzania' s ouster of Idi Amin from Uganda in 1979 as benevolent inter-African occupation – while Tanganyika' s union with Zanzibar in 1964 as a case of inter-African annexation that was more benign than malignant. It was more benign because, on balance, the terms of the union were disproportionately to the advantage of Zanzibar. The union was indeed a forced marriage – but the bride wealth to Zanzibar was truly generous in the powers allocated.

Archie Mafeje died before Ethiopia invaded Somalia in 2007 in the name of the so-called ' war on terror' . Somalia was indeed a failed state and would have gained from inter-African benevolent intervention in the interest of the Somali people. Unfortunately Ethiopia and Somalia had a long record of mutual hostility with periodic conflicts. Ethiopia' s motives for intervening in Somalia were inevitably suspect. Indeed, there was evidence that Ethiopia did it at the behest of the United States as part of America' s own war on terror. My own conclusion is that, while Ethiopia' s military role in Somalia does indeed include elements of *benevolence*, this particular kind of inter-African military occupation was on balance *malignant*.

I suspect the American connection would have aroused comparable suspicions in Archie Mafeje. While Archie did indeed misunderstand my own belief that inter-African colonization could at times be *benign* or even *benevolent*, he and I were united in our distrust *of Pax Americana*. Ethiopia' s participation as an ally of the United States in its ' war on terror' was bound to transform Ethiopia' s military intervention in Somalia into a case of *negative* occupation of one African country by another. I suspect Archie Mafeje would have shared my sense of outrage.

Archie would also have been outraged by the reported participation of Ethiopia, Egypt and Kenya in America' s scheme of *extraordinary rendition*. Egypt and Ethiopia are accused by human rights groups of accepting ' terror suspects' arrested or identified by the United States. Egypt and Ethiopia are Africa' s oldest states, with at least a thousand years of experience in forceful interrogation – otherwise known today as torture. The United States seems to have exploited that millennium of African forceful interrogation. Mwai Kibaki' s government in Kenya has been accused of exporting its own Muslim citizens for torture in Addis Ababa. These accusations have been made not only in the Kenyan media, but also on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in the United States. Since Archie Mafeje had spent so many years in Egypt, he would not have been surprised by allegations of torture in Egypt either for local reasons or at the behest of the United States.

While my own debate with Wole Soyinka in *Transition* was partly about Arab and Muslim factors in Africa' s triple heritage, my second debate with Soyinka was on the Internet following the showing of another television series about Africa – *Wonders of the African World* by Henry Louis Gates Jr (Skip Gates) of Harvard University, who also happened to be the latest editor of *Transition*. I was a critic of *Wonders of the African World*, partly because this television series blamed the Atlantic slave trade on Africans themselves. Henry Louis Gates virtually declared the white slaver as being off the hook, and got a series of Africans interviewed in West Africa to confess that the Atlantic slave trade was supply-driven rather than demand-driven, and would not have occurred but for the collaboration of African kingdoms like Ashanti.

Henry Louis Gates Jr is a very distinguished African American scholar and public intellectual. Why did Wole Soyinka defend him? Partly because Gates was Wole' s student at Cambridge University in England, and partly because Wole believed I was disqualified from criticizing a rival television series when I had produced an earlier TV series of my own. It was as if Wole Soyinka was arguing that anybody who had written a book on a particular topic was thereby disqualified from reviewing a book on the same subject by anybody else. Of course, I regarded such an argument as intellectually ridiculous, which made Wole Soyinka even angrier.

What did this second Soyinka–Mazrui debate have in common with the Mafeje–Mazrui debate? My disagreement with Mafeje was about whether Africans could colonize each other in the future if conditions were favourable and legitimate. My disagreement with Skip Gates and Wole Soyinka was about whether Africans had enslaved each other in the past when conditions were favourable and profitable. Mafeje and I debated prospects of Africa' s self-colonization in the future. Gates, Soyinka and I debated about whether there was a record of Africa' s self-enslavement in the past.

I happen to believe that inter-African colonization could be benign or even benevolent if the circumstances are self-fulfilling. But I do not believe inter-African enslavement during the Atlantic slave trade could ever have been either benign or benevolent. Whether Africans collaborated in enslaving each other, or were merely victims of European-instigated slave raids, the ultimate outcome was malignant and evil.

On the issue of Africa' s self-colonization I can try to understand why Archie Mafeje was angry with me. But on the issue of whether Africa was guilty of self-enslavement, I continue to be puzzled as to why Wole Soyinka was more angry with me than with his former student, Henry Louis Gates Jr.

However, I am relieved that Wole Soyinka and I are on our way towards intellectual reconciliation. I also hope Archie Mafeje is at last at peace with me wherever he is. Amen.