

## Archie Mafeje, the African Intellectual and the Anti-imperialism in Social Science

**A**rchie Mafeje was a man marked from the beginning by the struggle against imperialism and all forms of injustice in which he was caught by birth and because of his convictions of being a free man and someone who also has to bring the flame of freedom to his people. A man well-versed in the social sciences, in flesh and in spirit, he embodied the aspirations of his people. He was involved in their sufferings while also sharing their dream for freedom.

Born during the spring of apartheid in South Africa, he later became one of its first intellectual victims and positioned himself on the frontline of the struggle against it, constantly supplying new intellectual weaponry to the freedom fighters at a time when others his age or even older engaged in armed struggle against the most horrible regime of oppression.

For Mafeje, apartheid was first and foremost an oppression ideology, and there was no more powerful weapon against the system than the weapon of intellectual reasoning. The system of apartheid was essentially that of repressing the minds, and the emancipation of the latter was a *sine qua non* condition for the total freedom claimed by millions of men and women. For the regime and the apartheid mechanism, this black intellectual was eventually one of the brains who must be combated at all costs if not physically taken out. He championed the academic and intellectual freedom that characterised his whole intellectual and scientific activity. Any intellectual conversation with him turned stormy. He had an incredible thrust of ideas and a convincing power while leaving his interlocutors the freedom and choice to think otherwise. Archie Mafeje was unquestionably one of the icons of African social science, adulated by some and hated by others but respected by all at home and abroad.

Meeting Mafeje and spending time with him was a privilege for people of my age. He wrote extensively and reflected on a wide range of themes, and one may even state that none of the subjects of concern to his generation and people left him untouched.

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It is impossible to summarise an intellectual work spanning four decades, but if there is a word constantly repeated in his writings and thought, just like in that of one of his friends, Issa Shivji, who retired recently and lost that retirement shortly after, it was probably the term ‘imperialism’. Mafeje considered ‘imperialism’ to be an evil, which must be combated at all costs in every domain including the social sciences. Claude Ake, another departed icon, noted that ‘imperialism’ did not spare the social sciences at all – as thought and transmitted to us from Europe – to the extent that it could also become or used as a vehicle of imperialism (Ake 1979).

My first meeting with Archie Mafeje was more ‘intellectual’ than physical. It dated back to the early 1990s and was largely facilitated by CODESRIA. In 1994 I was an Assistant in the Department of Public Law at the Law Faculty of the University of Kinshasa in what was then still called Republic of Zaire. For the first time, I learnt of the existence of CODESRIA through a poster calling for applications for the Summer Institute on Democratic Governance. I decided to try my luck. The fact that my candidacy was retained among the fifteen who were selected was certainly one of the best surprises ever in my intellectual and scientific career. I thus found myself in Dakar from August to September 1994. Luc Sindjoun and Peter Kagwanja were among my fellow participants at the Institute. It was during my various reading visits to the CODESRIA Library that I came across the writings of Archie Mafeje.

Two years later, I experienced my first shock with the scholar. It was through the *CODESRIA Bulletin* published in 1995 and 1996. Ali Mazrui, this other giant of African social science, had submitted his ideas on the *Pax Africana*. Faced with the risk of ‘disintegration’ threatening many African regions, Mazrui sug-

gested that the *Pax Africana* was going through a ‘self-colonisation’ or rather through a ‘mild colonisation’ of the African states in decaying or ‘disintegrating’ states like Somalia, Sierra Leone and Zaïre (Mazrui 1995). Mazrui felt that ‘key states’ like South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt and Ethiopia could be charged with ‘re-colonising’ those in a disintegrating state. Colonisation by some African states would be a form of ‘self-colonisation’ not affected by the vices associated with ‘conventional’ colonisation.

Ali Mazrui probably knew that his idea of colonisation whether mild or not, which is in-built in the imperialism ideology, was provocative and would not pass. The forceful reaction of Archie Mafeje was a tit-for-tat as he denounced ‘sly spirits at the service of imperialism’ (Mafeje 1995). The debate was thus ignited and involved all CODESRIA members. We wondered whether we should take the floor in the face of these two giants, who practically intimidated everyone, who keep silent for fear of being crushed on the battleground where the two wild cats of African social science were confronting each other cordially.

But I might have asked Shivji this question: between imperialism and anti-imperialism, do we really have the choice to remain silent? I then decided to sound my little voice even though it could not resonate in the middle of the heated exchanges and finesse shots between the two giants, all the more so as the debate was open to all (Mangu 1996). This was how I introduced myself to Archie Mafeje.

In 2001, I found myself teaching at the University of the North in South Africa, his home country. Five years had elapsed. Mafeje was invited to give a lecture at the university, and I was very happy to see him physically. He had a terrific memory: just mentioning the name of André Mbata was enough to remind him of the young and daring gentleman from former Zaire who then was ‘bold’ enough to intervene during his heated exchange with Mazrui. In 2003, I was a Professor at the College of Law, University of South Africa and Mafeje



was also there as a researcher emeritus. Since then, we met regularly and I continued benefiting from his relevant analyses. My lasting memory is that he was a model senior scholar, somewhat radical and not always conciliatory about certain ideas, a rigorous and non-complacent scientist who opposed any compromise solution.

He so much loved this Africa extending from Cairo, where he lived as a 'refugee', to Cape Town, where his appointment as the first black lecturer in a whites-only university, in accordance with the very logic of apartheid, had provoked a general outcry on the part of the racist government of Pretoria to the extent of

forcing him into exile forty years ago. He always dreamed of the greatness of the continent, which required mastering social science and challenging imperialism in all its forms insofar as it constituted a negation of the dream shared by several generations of CODESRIA members.