

Crossing Swords and Drawing Blood : Archie Mafeje – A Warrior in a Double Battle

Introduction

Archie Mafeje thrived on debate. He clarified his own positions as he marshalled his arguments in his many frontal attacks. He revelled in a genuine difference of opinion, informed by evidence and commitment, because these permitted him to pursue his purpose with a rare single-mindedness. ‘ You are either stupid or intellectually dishonest’ , he barked at a young Rhodes University lecturer at a dinner party at my house in Grahamstown a few years ago. The other guests were somewhat astounded by his brazenness, but it cannot be said of Mafeje that his bark was worse than his bite. He could also bite with considerable force and his eloquence together with his erudite manner never failed him in his many intellectual battles. Ali Mazrui felt the full ferocity of his bite in the pages of the *CODESRIA Bulletin* (1995:16) when Mafeje made the following remark, which has stuck in my mind as a powerful metaphor of argument as war:

I am prepared to cross swords with Ali Mazrui. If in the process real blood is drawn, it might be an overdue sacrifice to the African gods or an invitation to young African warriors.

I don’ t regard myself as young but I am taking up the invitation extended by Mafeje. It is a double-edged and hazardous invitation. Knowing just how much he detested the banal, I have to be extremely careful not to be platitudinous, because that would be an affront to his abiding spirit. Irrespective of the fact that Mafeje has now departed from our world I can’ t help the sense of awe that I have

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in the presence of his intellect. He is still very much with us in his work, in his words and in our many memories of him. So, on the one hand, I am driven to pay tribute to his inestimable contribution, but at the same time if only in respect to Mafeje, I try to do this in ways that demonstrate a critical engagement with a small part of his corpus. Having known Archie Mafeje as a person imposes a particular constraint on any engagement with his work. He did not suffer fools. He was an enormously complex and multi-faceted individual who has helped us in constructing a unique approach to understanding our continent. Here, I refer to only two of the very many sides of the man. Firstly, I use his style of debate to symbolise how, in his many years of scholarship, he has tried to enjoin epistemological, theoretical and empirical issues in the process of generating knowledge about, on and of Africa. Secondly, I illustrate how he changed the way in which we think about Anthropology in Africa.

Argument as War: Mafeje’s Double Battle

In his later years Mafeje started to violate some of the basic principles of epistemology. He did this consciously, realising the importance of the subject of inquiry as a research problem rather than as a predetermined area of specialisation or disci-

pline. But his interests did not end with being a mere maker of knowledge. His other side radiates a deep political commitment to the pan-Africanist ideal of proper political, economic and cultural emancipation for Africans. It is precisely this mixture of a normative concern for what is good for Africa with his sharp analytical mind that made Archie Mafeje such a formidable intellect on the continent.

I wish to use the conceptual metaphor ‘ argument is war’ as analysed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980:4) in their book, *Metaphors We Live By*, to provide some backdrop to Mafeje’ s style of debate and to ensure that the battle of ideas as conceived and practised by Mafeje is placed in a reasonable framework. Lakoff and Johnson (1980:4) state their case very clearly:

It is important to see that we don’ t just talk about arguments in terms of war. We actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we do in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. Though there is no physical battle, there is verbal battle and the structure of an argument – attack, defence, counterattack, etc. reflects this.

Their definition of a metaphor is captivatingly simple, ‘ ...understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another’ (1980:5). I’ m using the metaphor of argument as war in order to demon-

strate one aspect of Mafeje in debate. It is obvious that verbal discourse and the conduct of war are two entirely different things, but the one is understood in precisely the same terms as the other. Mafeje's discourse fits this metaphorical concept perfectly. His polemics are suffused with the metaphors of war: to take one choice example, '(F)or an Anthropologist,' says Mafeje, 'it is well to remember that one thing "primitives" do not know is how to fight in the dark.' I use this example to show the linkages between the combative style in Mafeje's writing, the various representations of actual ethnographic experiences and his struggle to understand how he understands his own encounters with history.

Mafeje committed himself to combating the distorted images produced and reproduced about Africa from the outside, by reference to the notion of authenticity in his ethnographic practices. His polemic is thus not only metaphorically warlike, it is an extension of a battle over how Africa may be conceived and how African claims over those conceptions may be framed.

Mafeje is a warrior in a double battle. He is totally immersed in the struggle for ideas about Africa to be produced by Africans for themselves and he connects this endeavour to a profound commitment to the political and economic liberation of Africans. His armour as well as his arguments have to be scrutinised very closely for an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses so that we can collectively engage with ways in which this double struggle can be advanced. Mafeje's clearest asset is his incisive mind and his ability to translate the complexity of his thought into compelling and elegant prose. He is almost intrinsically combative. And it is through these intellectual debates that he has revealed his encyclopaedic knowledge of Africa.

The major chink in his armour was the fact that he fought alone. He never co-authored any significant work and he only collaborated with others in rather esoteric areas where the outcome did not really matter. As a warrior of the social sciences in Africa, Mafeje chose his battleground very carefully. One of the major gaps in his considerable repertoire of writings on Africa is North Africa. Being married to an Egyptian with a daughter from the marriage, Mafeje spent a considerable period of time in Cairo. Yet, almost as part of the syndrome of his exile, he chose not

to accept Egypt as his home, and he certainly did not regard it as part of his social laboratory. This remains an abiding problem in his pan-Africanism. Since he paid no scholarly attention to the cultural and political milieu of North Africa he inadvertently reproduced ideas about a disaggregated and dismembered Africa. While he lived in North Africa for those years, his intellectual gaze remained fixed and confined to Sub-Saharan Africa.

As much as I respected his intellect, admired his brilliant turn of phrase and cherished his company, I also appreciated that Archie Mafeje was a deeply embittered man. 'What's wrong with being bitter?' he would frequently ask in conversation. As a retort, I would point to the lack of bitterness in Nelson Mandela, after spending almost three decades in apartheid jails. But Mafeje was, as with almost everything else, assured in his bitterness, or at least he managed to give the impression of being so self-assured. The consequences of his bitterness were beneficial because when it crept into his analysis it sharpened the terms of the debate and it permitted him to utilise his penchant for pushing the arguments to and even beyond their logical conclusions. Balance is clearly a casualty of this form of polemic, but it served the very important purpose of extending the boundaries of our understanding. Mafeje was obviously aware of the consequences of his style of debate. In his polemics, he gave at least as good as and often much more than he got. He was prepared to expose himself to personal abuse and attack, and he was often bruised in the process, sometimes very severely, but this did not make him waver from his pan-Africanist ideals and objectives of building a viable community of social science scholars on the continent.

Mafeje's voice is unambiguously African. He brings his Western learning to bear on a profound understanding of the limits of decolonisation. In many ways, his work precedes and pre-empted the kind of analyses that have emerged from the 'subaltern' school of history in India on the relation between the struggle for national independence and colonialism. There is simple realisation permeating this school concerning the way in which nationalism did not end up being the antithesis of colonialism but instead its most grotesque imitation. Mafeje tries to avoid this kind of stricture in his writing by ensuring that his project was genuinely eman-

atory and not compromised by association with colonialism and oppression.

Anthropology in Africa: Who are its makers and its subjects?

As a protagonist in the debate about Anthropology in Africa, Mafeje reveals the full range of his analytical thinking, his incisive mind and his unwavering commitment to the continent. He made us think about Africa in different ways. There is little doubt that his acerbic engagement stems from a steadfast dedication to a pan-Africanist ideal as the negation of a Eurocentric discourse. The point of Africanity, Mafeje would argue, is a very simple one indeed. Africans should speak for themselves, they should nurture ideas about themselves, they should understand themselves through their own intellectual efforts, they should make their own representations about themselves, and they have to ensure that they have a monopoly over the images that are made of and about them. Mafeje has played a central role in the legitimate African claims to write about and understand themselves, and the Anthropology debate can be firmly anchored within this overarching Africanist impulse.

The debate represents a turbulent mixture of Mafeje's passion for and encyclopaedic knowledge of the continent and his grasp of the intricate details of the political passing parade in Africa.

All students of African Anthropology cannot avoid encountering Mafeje's debate with a range of scholars and anthropologists. The debate was appropriately published in the very first issue of the *African Sociological Review* in 1997, which in itself represents an effort to establish a community of self-referring African social scientists. Mafeje's wide-ranging review of Sally Falk Moore's book, *Anthropology and Africa* is a frontal attack on the manner in which the discipline is constructed and structured around metropolitan interests. He deconstructs the essential concepts of Anthropology and reveals what lies hidden – its basis in alterity. But he does more than that. Since he is concerned about African claims to study, understand and interpret their own reality, he exposes the manner in which the supposed makers of anthropological knowledge position themselves vis-à-vis the assumed objects. Invariably, given its history as well as its political and ideological importance in Africa, especially around the concept of 'tribe' the makers

were suffused, according to Mafeje, with deep-seated white racism. Mafeje challenges the conventional division of the social sciences and links the historiography of Anthropology directly to the colonial experience. He issues an abiding challenge to all African anthropologists to become makers rather than mere objects of knowledge. He also insists that they should be centrally involved in a project to produce images, understandings and analyses of and for themselves rather than merely consuming what is produced for them by others outside the continent. For Mafeje, Anthropology is necessarily a discipline founded on alterity, on the colonial settlers studying the native other. For this reason it is intrinsically limited and therefore was driven underground by the decolonisation process in Africa. While the anthropologists did not suddenly disappear, they had to be content with operating under the rubric of joint academic departments, invariably with Sociology. It was really only in Southern Africa that the discipline of Anthropology survived as a separate entity, and that in itself reveals very much about both the discipline and the colonial history of the region.

A question that lies at the heart of Mafeje's efforts is the epistemological basis of the discipline of Anthropology in a postcolonial Africa. Since tribe was such a central organising concept in colonial Anthropology, it is important to emphasise how Mafeje was deconstructing this notion.

'It is interesting to note', wrote Mafeje in his highly influential article, 'The Ideology of Tribalism', 'that the word for tribe does not exist in indigenous languages of South Africa'. As he became more familiar with anti-colonial struggles across the continent, and more fully conversant with social and political realities in other African countries, he extended this formulation to the rest of the continent:

How often must it be pointed out that in African languages there is no equivalent for the term 'tribe' and that the concept 'tribe' is a colonial imposition in Africa? What is ethnographically known is that Africans, like everybody else, are conscious of the linguistic and ethnic group to which they belong.

About his own ethnic affiliation, Mafeje said the following,

I don't care about being Xhosa, I am a South African black. It does not mat-

ter to me if I'm Xhosa or Zulu or Tswana or anything else. I am just comfortable. If I had a choice, I would probably go along more with the Sothos than with the Xhosas. Just in terms of temperament and the way they do things. I am certainly not committed to something called Xhosa.

Mafeje's views are consistent with his explanation for ethnic politics and conflict. He scolds Ntoli and others for not providing an analysis of ethnicity and for treating ethnic groups as things in themselves, following the empiricism rife in American Political Science. Instead he dispels the idea that there are discrete naturally occurring entities of belonging that may be called ethnic groups in Africa. He draws a distinction between social groups and social categories, where the former are characterised by inevitable patterns of social interaction, for example, lineages or associations, and the latter does not imply such regular interaction at all but is rather defined by common identity, such as membership of the same religion. Mafeje's argument is that ethnicity is related to the national competition for scarce resources in response to the centralisation of power rather than to local particularistic conflicts. In this sense, ethnicity has a recent derivation since it refers to an ideological ploy used by political elites to yield the benefits of power and wealth. On this view, ethnicity does not represent some pre-existing African cultural essence but a convenient means of political mobilisation for elites.

The Embattled Warrior

In 2003 Archie Mafeje delivered the third annual Z.K. Mathews memorial lecture at the University of Fort Hare, in the little village of Alice in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. It was an auspicious occasion indeed. The first of these lectures was delivered in 2001 by the president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, and the second lecture was given by Quett Masire, the former president of Botswana. Archie Mafeje followed a formidable lineup. He did not disappoint the audience. The warrior took on the role of performance rather than actual battle since the formality of the occasion prevented any retort, debate or even discussion. In his lecture Mafeje singlehandedly took on each of the social science disciplines as they are practised in Africa. He flattened all of History with a single strike to the head. He demolished Anthropology with

a vicious body blow. He proceeded to bash Economics, Sociology, Political Science and Philosophy. Even Psychology was not spared his assault. After his performance, Mafeje stood alone among the ruins of the disciplines that he had annihilated.

I thought that there was a profound contradiction in all of this. While he was singularly scathing about anything that had emerged from Africa in the field of social science, Mafeje continued to argue for an Afrocentric approach to our subject of investigation. He was also against anything that smacked of Euro-centrism. It appeared to me that Mafeje the warrior was fighting a very lonely battle indeed, since he was the only one worthy of its lofty heights.

In Praise of Mafeje

We all realise that developing an African social science discourse through the promotion of an African social science community of scholars is an extremely difficult exercise against the background of the parlous state of African universities. Mafeje reminded us just how structural adjustment and a range of other factors have conspired to wreck these universities. Under these circumstances and within this context it is to be expected that African social scientists would be quite happy to apply metropolitan ideas and concepts without subjecting them to critical scrutiny, and certainly not developing concepts appropriate to the study of African societies. Attempts to indigenise social science in Africa have been inchoate, unsystematic and anecdotal. In this respect, there can be little doubt that the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the Organization for Social Science Research in East and Southern Africa (OSSREA) stand out as important beacons of hope for the future of the social sciences in Africa. Yet, their reach cannot stretch far enough to the nooks and crannies of intellectual poverty on the continent.

Mafeje has more than most enriched our intellectual landscape by grappling with the issues of historical explanation, of how to relate science and ideology to development, how to understand the constraints that confront the neocolonial state in Africa, how to combine social history with ethnographic experience and generally how to marry scholarly pursuits with political commitment. He represents



the collective conscience of African social science, and because of his widespread legitimacy and credibility across the continent it is not surprising that he is not liked by those outside who wish to

write about Africa in ways that distort and harm the interests of people here.

It is well that we honour Mafeje as an intellectual warrior so that younger gen-

erations can appreciate the depth and breadth of his contribution and so that they can also be inspired by his irreverence and his irrepressible spirit.