

Honouring a Giant

*A Note on the Archie Mafeje Special Panel of the CODESRIA 30th Anniversary
Grande Finale Conference, held in Dakar in December 2003*

'I would like to thank CODESRIA for the great honour, which is not to say that I am grateful. It might be that you are wishing me not an early death, but a death alright. When you honour people, you usually honour them after their death, and the glory comes after their death. But this glory comes before death. In fact, I was warned by the philosopher Hountondji, who said to me: 'be careful, do not accept this thing.'

True to form, Archie Mafeje's initial response to two hours of presentations and testimonies highlighting his contribution to African and global scholarship, and his extraordinary human qualities, was both to point out the ritual side to such practices and to remind us that he was born to a community of scholars, whose primary concern should be about how to give birth to and nurture more scholars like him.

Honouring people has indeed sometimes been a way of burying them. Not so with the CODESRIA panel, one could argue; for, as Adebayo Olukoshi, the Executive Secretary, explained in his opening remarks to the panel, the idea was to perpetuate a CODESRIA tradition, that of breaking, precisely, with a terrible habit of the African academy, which consists of acknowledging great African scholars only after they have been acknowledged by West, and after their death. The CODESRIA Charter provides for 'Lifelong Membership' to be conferred on some of the most illustrious African scholars, and CODESRIA's Twentieth Anniversary conference held in 1993 was an occasion for Samir Amin, Abdallah Bujra and Govan Mbeki to be awarded 'Lifelong Membership' of CODESRIA. The Tenth General Assembly of CODESRIA, held in Kampala in December 2002, also included a special panel on the work of Samir Amin.

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Mafeje's sarcasm and misgivings about him being honoured during his own lifetime was therefore more of a kind of reminder to us in the African academy that perhaps the best way of honouring people like him is not to make them look like extraordinary people, but to both preserve the conditions that enable the academy to give birth to more great scholars, and to highlight the principles, ethics, values and practices that younger generations of scholars should be encouraged to cherish, and portray people like him as living examples of what, with hard work, they (the younger generation) could seek to achieve. Mentoring young scholars was in fact one of Mafeje's main preoccupations. I return to this issue later.

The panel discussion and the many testimonies that followed were each a mix of personal recollections of encounters, intellectual and otherwise, with Mafeje, and a discussion of his contributions to scholarship on a broad range of issues such as democracy, academic freedom, land and agrarian issues, and the nature of scholarship itself. The presentations began with a portrait of Archie Mafeje, the man and the scholar (Ebrima Sall), followed by a presentation on Archie's style of scholarship: 'drawing swords in the social sciences' (Fred Hendricks). Sam Moyo, the third speaker, focused on Mafeje's work on land and agrarian issues. Eddy Maloka spoke about Archie's place in the South African community of scholars today, where he has remained a relatively unknown figure, particularly to the younger generation, a point that Jimi Adesina also made in his contribution to the general

debate. Maloka also discussed the slow pace of change in the tertiary education sector in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly in matters of curriculum reform, and Tandeka Nkiwane discussed Mafeje's contribution to the debate on democracy. Speakers from the floor included Helmi Sharawy, Samir Amin, Thandika Mkandawire, Jimi Adesina, Said Adejumobi, Kunle Amuwo, and Shahida El-Baz, the spouse, friend and colleague who shared 35 years of Mafeje's life.

Mafeje: The Man, and the Scholar

Participants were reminded that Mafeje was fond of saying that he was South African by birth, Dutch by nationality and Egyptian by adoption, for he lived in Cairo for 24 years. His childhood and adolescence were spent in apartheid South Africa. After a first degree in zoology and botanical sciences, Mafeje obtained a masters degree in social anthropology at the University of Cape Town. His MA thesis on leadership in Transkei was drafted in a monastery. He obtained a PhD in sociology and anthropology at the University of Cambridge, and went back to work in South Africa but was denied a job by the University of Cape Town (UCT), where he was going to be the first black African lecturer. Archie's life took a dramatic turn thereafter, for he then went into exile and returned to his native South Africa only recently. He has held senior positions in many universities in Africa, and Europe, including the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, the American University in Cairo, the University of South Africa in Pretoria and the Institute of Social Studies in The Netherlands. It was in The Netherlands that, in 1973, he became a Queen Juliana Professor of Anthropology and Sociology of Development by an act of Parliament, with the approval of all the 29 universities of The

Netherlands. The act was published in the prestigious Blue Pages of the Dutch government. That was one of the highest distinctions that a scholar could receive in The Netherlands. He was then only 34 years of age. His seminal papers and numerous other publications attested to the fact that he was arguably one of the most distinguished scholars produced by our continent. He was a member of the Scientific Committee of CODESRIA at the time of his passing.

There was unanimity among the panelists and general participants over what were seen as the main traits of Mafeje's personality. He was extremely rigorous, both as a scholar and in his personal attitude to life. 'Archie can't stand laziness'. And 'Mafeje can't stand sloppiness, wherever it comes from'. These phrases were repeated several times during the special CODESRIA panel. 'Mafeje detested the banal and platitudes, for he believed that people must demonstrate some independence of thought' (Hendricks). He had a high sense of integrity, and a high sense of social responsibility, and was ferociously independent in thinking, but also vis-à-vis structures such as political parties. 'Mafeje does not suffer fools'. He was 'utterly uncompromising' on matters of principle, and he 'never fought personal battles' (Shahida El-Baz). He was very direct, and sometimes brutal in his criticisms and rather aggressive, something that destabilised many a young scholar.

Several of his close friends, however, argued that behind the aggressive and ferociously critical Mafeje was a rather shy man. He was also very loyal to his friends, to CODESRIA, and to the African scholarly community in general. The complexity of his personality is probably best described in a very moving tribute to her father, written by Dana Mafeje a few days after his passing:

Most of you wrote about his academic prowess, genius mind, incomparable wit and endless struggle for his nation and greater Africa. Having acknowledged all these attributes at a very early age, I later realised that Papa was a 'giant' not only in the intellectual sense but as a human being.

My father was critical but humane, fierce but compassionate, sarcastic but gentle, silly, but brilliant, stubborn but loyal, but most of all he was passionate.

Behind the cynical façade, my father was one of the kindest, warmest and most giving men I ever met. I vividly remember him getting me dressed for school every day (militarily), asking me what I wanted to eat for lunch religiously (until I was 26!), never telling me to study because to him exams were for idiots, having serious chats with me without ever looking me in the eye (those of you who know him personally will relate), speaking to me logically in the most illogical situations, pushing me to excel just to be worthy of being his daughter and mostly for being my ultimate reference.

Shahida El-Baz, his spouse, gave a very moving account of how they met, and shared a whole life of struggle in mutual respect. She was a student at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, very active in the campaign against the UCT refusal to allow Archie to take up a teaching position to which he had been duly appointed. During his stint at the ISS, Mafeje became the guru of a small group of radical students, as he was later to be a key member of the Marxist and pan-African circles of Egypt. When they decided to get married, Dr El-Baz said he told her: 'I know you will make a lousy wife, but I don't like wives anyway'.

According to her, some of the episodes that left a lasting effect on Mafeje included his sojourn in Namibia, a sojourn that he actually shortened as a result of both his utter disappointment with the slow pace of transformation going on after the country's independence, and the endless fights he has had to fight against unrepentant racists desperately hanging on to a colonial mentality. Since for him going to work in Namibia was a first step on his journey back to South Africa, the unpleasant experience meant that his return to South Africa was going to be deferred by almost a whole decade.

Mafeje has mentored many African scholars, and many of those he mentored, including some of the panellists, found him to be hard with those he was mentoring, because his reference was the rigorous training he had himself been through, and the very high standards that he had set for himself as a scholar. As the Senegalese sociologist, Momar Coumba Diop once put it, Archie was what he would call a 'knowledge aristocrat' (*un aristocrate du savoir*), and a creative artist of sorts. Yet he was a very committed scholar as well, one whose mission was nothing

short of the liberation of Africans, and the building of a viable and self-sustaining scholarly community in Africa. His intellectual curiosity knew no bounds. I remember him explaining how he had spent six months underwater, observing the flora and fauna of the Atlantic Ocean in a Soviet submarine.

Crossing Swords in the Social Sciences

Fred Hendricks called Mafeje an 'academic warrior'. Mafeje saw argument as war, and explicitly talked about 'crossing swords' with Ali Mazrui, in the famous Mafeje-Mazrui debate that went on for two years in the columns of *CODESRIA Bulletin*. The powerful metaphor of argument as war could also be applied to the exchanges Mafeje had with Sally Falk Moore, following the review that he wrote of Moore's book on *Anthropology and Africa*. The review was published in the maiden issue of the *African Sociological Review* in 1997. 'His polemics are suffused with the metaphor of war' (Hendricks): 'One thing primitives can't do is to fight in the dark' (Mafeje).

In the view of most of the panellists and contributors to the general debate, Mafeje's scholarship was an extension of his battles for Africa, for he was 'totally immersed in the battle for Africa'. A good illustration of this is his seminal piece (published in 1971 in the *Journal of Modern African Studies*) on the ideology of tribalism, an ideology that, he argued,

brought with it certain ways of reconstructing the African reality. It regarded African societies as particularly tribal. This approach produced certain blinkers or ideological pre-dispositions which made it difficult for those associated with the system to view these societies in any other light. Hence certain modes of thought among European scholars in Africa and their African counterparts have persisted, despite the many important economic and political changes that have occurred in the continent over the last 75–100 years.

The ideology of alterity, which is so central to colonial anthropology, is suffused with deep-seated racism that Mafeje exposed with brio. Hence the questions that he asks in his monograph titled *Anthropology and Independent Africans: Suicide, Or the End of an Era?*: what is the epistemological basis of the discipline

[anthropology] in independent Africa? Given that it was founded on alterity, how can it survive when colonialism has been overcome? This monograph formed the core around which a symposium was organised in the maiden issue of the *African Sociological Review* in 1997. Deconstructing concepts inherited from colonial social science has actually been part of the search for autonomy that Archie Mafeje and Joseph Ki-Zerbo, both of whom were honoured during the CODESRIA 30th anniversary conference, and both of whom have moved on, were engaged in, along with many other distinguished African scholars.

Another good example is Mafeje's critique of the African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment (AAFSAP), published in *CODESRIA Bulletin* in 1990, in which he openly calls for 'an African recovery in thought'.

Other concepts that Mafeje subjected to a thorough critique include those of ethnicity (discussed by Hendricks), Africanity, and the peasantry. Sam Moyo's presentation was centred on Mafeje's work on the land and agrarian questions in Africa. In his critique of Dessalegn Rahmato's Green Book on *Peasant Organisations in Africa*, Mafeje challenged the assumption that peasants exist in Africa, and called for a much closer study of property relations in rural Africa, rather than transposing concepts borrowed from European sociology and anthropology. This was partly in response to Samir Amin's work on the tributary mode of production, and his characterisation of certain social relations as semi-feudal.

On the land question, according to Moyo, Mafeje has been arguing that apart from the settler colonies of Southern Africa, where there was massive expropriation of land and racial hegemony, there is no real land question in Africa.

Mafeje therefore crossed swords with a large number of African and non-African scholars. In addition to the Mazrui-Mafeje debate, examples cited by the various panellists include: the critical reviews of Sally Falk Moore's book, and Dessalegn Rahmato's Green Book that Sam Moyo discussed in his presentation, both of which enlisted critical responses from the authors, his debates with Samir Amin over the tributary mode of produc-

tion, but also with the Food and Agricultural Organisation, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and the World Bank. Mafeje was a member of the expert group that, in the late 1990s, was put together by the CROP, an organisation based in Bergen, Norway, to review the World Bank's work on poverty.

Mafeje's work, Hendricks argued, in some respects preceded what later came from the subaltern school. He saw colonialism as a debasement of Africans. Unfortunately, according to Mafeje, nationalism did not always end up as a negation of colonialism, but its imitation.

The legitimacy that Mafeje enjoyed in Africa and other parts of the world has been a source of discomfort for all those who, particularly outside Africa, wish to continue to write about our continent in ways that distort the reality. Mafeje represented the collective conscience of the African social science community, and his knowledge was encyclopaedic.

Criticisms

Mafeje was awarded a Lifelong Membership of CODESRIA, for a lifetime contribution to scholarship. In his acceptance speech, he said he was not worried that he would be subjected to severe criticism by the panellists, 'because I knew you will not denounce me as you are honouring me'. However, the panel was not about an uncritical celebration of Mafeje, but also critically engaging with his work. As Hendricks put it, in his contribution to the panel, he was answering Archie's invitation to the younger generation to draw swords, including with him. He therefore pointed out a couple of areas in which he felt Mafeje's positions were problematic.

One such area is North Africa, which is almost totally absent from Mafeje's work. Hendricks felt that this was a major omission, despite the fact that Mafeje had lived in Egypt for 24 years. This was rather difficult to comprehend. Was it a reflection of what his spouse Shahida called a 'refugee mentality', that is, some reluctance on his part to get himself deeply immersed in the social and intellectual life of Egypt?

'Mafeje was fighting a lonely battle' (Hendricks). To illustrate, Hendricks cited Mafeje's critique of the social sciences, one by one, in a Memorial Lecture he gave at Fort Hare in 2001, advocating, instead, for an 'afro-centric' approach.

Hendricks also argued that towards the end of his life, Mafeje had become 'an embittered man' (Hendricks), and that the bitterness occasionally crept into Mafeje's writings, although he offered no examples of how bitterness sometimes had clouded Mafeje's scholarship. There were certainly many things that Mafeje couldn't help being unhappy about. Besides the unpleasant Namibia experience, when he went back to South Africa itself, he was relatively unknown by the younger generation and isolated by those whose politics made them uncomfortable with someone like him. That great scholars like Archie Mafeje, Bernard Magubane and Cheikh Anta Diop are relatively unknown to the younger generation of South African scholars was a point made by several speakers, including Jimi Adesina, Kunle Amuwo, Eddy Maloka and Tandeka Nkiwane. Eddy Maloka explained how the Africa Institute of South Africa was, under his leadership, trying to deal with that problem by establishing an Archie Mafeje visiting fellowship, with support from the South African National Research Foundation. Although the problem of making great African scholars known to younger generations of scholars is particularly acute in South Africa, it is an Africa-wide problem, which is why CODESRIA has launched a Distinguished Lecture Series aimed at enabling people like Mafeje (who was a nominee of that programme) to travel and give lectures in different parts of the continent.

As for Mafeje's relative isolation in South Africa, in the conversations I was privileged to have with him during the last few years of his life, on many occasions he said some scholars began keeping away from him from the moment that he frankly expressed his views on some of their published work – which he found rather sloppy. It was also rather unfortunate that in post-apartheid South Africa, a scholar of the calibre of Archie Mafeje could be left without a proper pension scheme. Maloka also made the very important observation that no serious attempt is being made to encourage African scholars to study the history of the liberation movements, particularly those of Southern Africa – not even the history of the ANC is being seriously studied. His explanation was that South African scholarship has been constructed, and is constructing itself, as a sub-field of scholarship in Europe and the USA. Other major

gaps in South African scholarship highlighted by Maloka are those of the study of legal Marxism, and the study of Africa more generally.

Nkiwane, one of the panellists, and a few of the contributors from the floor (Samir Amin in particular) argued that the genius of Archie was not so much in the fact that he broke new ground, but because he revisited old questions, such as the question of democracy (Nkiwane), and the agrarian question (Amin). Yet his critique of the ideology of tribalism has been celebrated as a seminal contribution.

On the land question, according to Sam Moyo, Mafeje has been arguing that apart from the settler colonies of Southern Africa, where there was massive expropriation of land and racial hegemony, there is no real land question in Africa. To defend such a thesis, Moyo argued, was to fail to acknowledge the complexity of the land question in Africa today, particularly with urbanisation and migration, on the one hand, and on the other, the new ways in which land is being concentrated in few hands for use as tourist resorts. There are broader territorial issues involved, and much of the Southern African land mass (about 40 per cent), Moyo

further argued, is now more or less reserved for operations related to tourism, which is a massive expropriation carried out with the backing of state and global capital.

Archie Mafeje took African scholars very seriously, and read and engaged with as many of the scholarly writings of Africans as he could (Mkandawire). He was a fugitive scholar, who found a base in regional organisations like CODESRIA, OSSREA and SAPEs, and he was certainly one of those who contributed most to the building of these organisations. Mafeje was a committed Pan-Africanist, and a world-class scholar.

In a way, he seemed to have sensed that the end wasn't far away. As early as the year 2000, several of us heard him say, in his usual joking manner, that he had a 'rendezvous with death in three years...'. It was as if he could foretell when his life was going to end.

He was a man with multiple identities and he had many dimensions to him. Upon his passing, many of these dimensions were brought out. Part of Archie's journey ended in his village close to the city

of Umtata, in South Africa, where he was given a decent burial. But prayers were said for him in mosques and churches in Egypt, in the United Kingdom and in South Africa.

The special session organised to honour Mafeje ended on a very high note, with Archie, in his near-legendary humility, reminding everybody that he wasn't a lone star/scholar: there are other people, scholars he's been talking to over the years. Among those present at the sessions, he cited: Thandika Mkandawire, Samir Amin, Helmi Sharawy and Sam Moyo. And then there are all those he's been crossing swords with. The list is long. 'Youdon't make knowledge alone...' said Mafeje.

This was also an occasion for Mafeje to reiterate what he had always been saying: that CODESRIA should continue to encourage multi-disciplinarity. That was why when, as new members of the Scientific Committee of CODESRIA, 'we were asked to write state-of-the-discipline notes on our respective disciplines, we refused to do so'.

That was Professor Archibald Mafeje, or 'Mr Mafeje', as he preferred to be called.

À Dieu, Prof.!



Archie Mafeje with Suzane Nkomo and Jimmy Adesina at the 30th Anniversary Conference, December 2003, in Dakar, Senegal