Speaking of Archie

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In 1957, fresh out of university, I left England for South Africa, looking to join the struggle there. I thought the revolution was imminent. Shortly disabused of this notion, I remained to be instructed from scratch in what that revolution entailed. Eventually, in the organization distinguished from all others in the liberatory movement for its uncompromising probity, non-collabora-tionist policy, non-negotiable programme of democratic demands, I found my instructors. This happened in Cape Town when I providentially picked up a job at the university, thereby acquiring at one and the same time a livelihood and an introduction to Unity Movement politics from an assortment of its junior members studying there. That was how I became acquainted with Archie.

Already a seasoned Unity cadre, lately arrived from the Eastern Cape to study (after a trial run in the biological sciences) for a degree in Social Anthropology, he was then in his early twenties, a tall, spare, loose-jointed young man, tastefully attired, however meagre his wardrobe. His face too, highly charged and singularly resolute, had its merits, but beauty wasn' t one of them. Years later, in his Dar-es-Salaam period, that face took the brunt of a head-on automobile collision that landed him in one hospital after another for months on end. Immediately upon hearing the grim news, I wrote him post-haste to say for his consolation what a mercy it was only his face, since he never had any looks to lose. But it wasn' t his looks he was worried about. From the hospital, in Copenhagen this time, where he was about to undergo highly specialized surgery on his jaw, he replied piteously, ' For two weeks my mouth will be sealed. Can you imagine?' It was indeed barely imaginable. I never knew anyone so terse in his speech who had so much to say, ' to discuss' , as he called it.

He was always at it, discussing, analyzing, synthesizing, everywhere on the campus, with the single exception of Blackies' Corner – so-named as the undisputed preserve of the non-whites. Archie denounced it as voluntary segregation. He wouldn' t be found dead at Blackies' Corner. Likewise at lectures, while the non-white students customarily occupied the back row, Archie sat right up in the front row, an admiring white girl on either side. Ever himself, how strenuously he safeguarded his autonomy was equally plain to all of us who knew him in the Unity Movement in those years. No respecter of persons, he kept a measured distance from the leadership, the better (as he gave out) to get his Movement work done.

In his first year at UCT he would sometimes drop in at my office, ' to discuss' between lectures. But thereafter, as our acquaintance progressed, he preferred to call at my lodgings (always transient in those days, since I had to decamp as often as either my landlady objected to black visitors, or scandalized neighbours called the police). He would stop by regularly on his way from the townships where he did his fieldwork, bringing me his insider's knowledge and meticulous observation of the township people, the multifarious African working class, whose as yet unconsolidated struggle, he, of all the comrades who contributed to my political education, best interpreted for me, because he was closest to the people whom it most closely concerned. He was my political touchstone in those years, and so he remained all the years of our life-long friendship.

Archie was one of those intellectuals who (as he described them), petit-bourgeois by definition, yet actively seeking to transform their society, have thrown in their lot with the worker/peasant constituency in their struggle towards socialism. Mindful of the inherent contradiction in this position, he proposes in one of his essays that ' the intellectual, like the samurai, should go armed with two swords – one for killing his enemies, the other for killing himself when he betrays his cause' . But the one sword was all Archie ever needed. The cause he served was the social, political and economic transformation of Africa, nothing less. In this comprehensive vision of a socialist Africa, his inexhaustible intellectual passion found its commensurate form and scope. Hence, (to quote one of the early CODESRIA tributes), ' he could not be shaken from his stand' .

Archie' s opposites in South Africa, the majority intellectuals of the petit-bourgeois constituency who share the spoils of the ANC' s negotiated settlement, not surprisingly foresaw his presence in their midst as a direct threat. That is why when – free to return to South Africa in the 1990s, an eminent scholar of international renown – he sought appropriate employment at his alma mater, the UCT administration, far from making due amends for their predecessors' craven withdrawal of his appointment in 1968, contrived by all manner of foul means to keep him out. Nor, when he returned to South Africa permanently in 2002 did they extend themselves further than to send him the following year an apology exclusively for the 1968 offence, with a similarly worthless offer of an honorary doctorate – both of which Archie, never a man to be messed with, studiously ignored. And there the matter rested till his death last year, whereupon the students came out in such clamorous and widely broadcast protest on his behalf that the administration, taking fright, forthwith reversed their position. With declared intent to ' bring closure to the Mafeje issue' , they dispatched their

emissary to Archie' s funeral with assurances that the UCT Council Executive Committee, recognizing ' the deep injustice done' , resolved that ' his impact as an extraordinarily gifted scholar be captured forever' , and promised ' to find a practical way' to that end.

As it now appears, the post-apartheid custodians of UCT who so assiduously kept Archie' s' impact' out of the curriculum, who closed their own ranks against him and, with the ready collusion of their sister universities, effectively ostracized him till the end of his life, have lately attempted to make amends. The new Vice-Chancellor, in his public apology for the University' s failure ' to bring a very significant African scholar home to UCT' , has gone so far as to say that the University ' did not make a committed effort … and that it may even have acted in a way that prejudiced Professor Mafeje a second time in the 1990s' . As regards further reparations, the first and most notable on the list is the University' s undertaking to open their archives to ' scholars wishing to research the events surrounding Archie Mafeje at UCT' . Archival research on the University Council' s withdrawal of Archie' s appointment in 1968 has already revealed that the Minister of Education, in his discussions with the Principal of UCT at that time, informed him of ' Mafeje' s record of subversive activity' . But it' s a safe bet that research into the motive for the post-apartheid Council' s equally unbefitting conduct in the 1990s won' t turn up any such telling material. Indeed, the University' s deafening silence on Archie' s politics casts serious doubt on its fitness to celebrate the memory of the man whose unshakable commitment to the interests of the disregarded majority of South Africa' s people so strongly discommended him to the university constituency of South Africa' s comprador government.

It remains for those of his family, colleagues, students, comrades and friends to whom he was dearest, and who best know the crucial importance to Africa' s future of his transformative, unremittingly honest and fearless life' s work, to keep his banner flying.