

Concerning Archie Mafeje's Reinvention of Anthropology and Africa*

Apparently *Anthropology and Africa* irritates Archie Mafeje. It does so to the point of provoking him to say, 'the whole book could be described as a lie intelligently told. This does not reside so much in what the book says but in not saying what it means' (Mafeje, p. 7) Mafeje then takes it upon himself to say what it means. In fact, he presents *Anthropology and Africa* as meaning just the opposite of what it says. He seems to think I am hiding something. He says that there is a concealed subtext that he intends to make explicit (p. 7). I can only react by protesting that he misrepresents *Anthropology and Africa* for his own purposes by pretending that the book and anthropology in general fit a stereotype he wants to knock down.

I wonder how much current anthropological work he has read. He certainly has read my book rather carelessly. Thus he rebukes me (Mafeje, p. 9) for not referring to Talal Asad's *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. But, in fact, I refer to three of the articles in that book that deal with Africa, those by Brown, James and Lackner. Similarly, on the same page, Mafeje says 'she does not refer to any African authors except Mudimbe'. A little more care and he would have noticed references to Busia, Danquah, Deng, Dike, Diop, Hountondji, Mabogunje, Obbo, Oppong and Kenyatta. Could it be that he means that I do not refer to him? Mafeje also says of the qualifications of anthropologists that one becomes an anthropologist by 'declaring oneself an anthropologist' (page 9). And where, I wonder, is that the way it is done?

Anthropology today does not resemble the entity Mafeje seems to have in mind. It is a very diverse field encompassing

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many sub-specializations, geographical, topical, and theoretical. Mafeje's arguments attack an outdated vision of the discipline. He needs to prop up that vision to legitimize his hostility. The preoccupations of the colonial period are not representative of current thinking.

In *Anthropology and Africa* I say that, 'The subspecializations of anthropology have proliferated to the point where they often have more in common with parallel topics in other disciplines than with other sectors within anthropology' (Moore, p. 122). Mafeje echoes my statement but treats it as an assertion of his own which like most of his commentary turns into a complaint. He says, 'There is no observable theoretical framework at the moment which characterizes anthropology as a discipline nor are there emerging paradigms at least in Africa which distinguish what passes as anthropology from other social science disciplines' (Mafeje, p. 9). And how much does that add to what I said?

The common ground within social anthropology is the basic commitment to fieldwork as a major form of knowledge production. Such research is not only informed by a background knowledge of earlier and comparative work, it is infused with the habit of problematizing cultural and theoretical concepts and categories.

The topics and sites of recent anthropological fieldwork in Africa are very diverse, as diverse as the African scene itself. Recent ethnographic studies look at

everything from local systems of land tenure to refugee camps, from ritual practice to legal ideas, from the economy of rural households to the nature of the tourist art market, from population issues to gender ideology. Many of these studies are of very high quality. The topical diversity with regard to work in Africa reflects a more general state of affairs in the discipline. A look at the themes addressed in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* over the past ten years shows that this breadth of topical and theoretical interest is manifest whether the anthropologists are working in Europe, the Middle East, in Malaysia, China, Peru, Mexico, Africa or Texas. This is not a question of my 'taking refuge in thematic questions' nor is the intersection with many disciplines something I must 'admit' because 'there is no place to hide' (Mafeje, 12). This is a description of the multiple preoccupations of the discipline today.

Like all other Africanist anthropologists I hope that there will soon be many more Africans in the profession (Moore, p. 133). Their absence in recent decades is not due to exclusion by 'Europeans', but to the fact that for political reasons formal training in anthropology has not been available in many African universities for a long while. There is no longer any political reason to treat anthropology as a form of knowledge to be avoided by African intellectuals. Books that give an overview of a discipline, its history and current debates should help to open up the arena of discourse to many more entrants.

The history of the division of intellectual labour in the academy is of intellectual interest in itself. A critical understanding of the past of a discipline exposes present academic practise to similar critical inspec-

tion. A central point in *Anthropology and Africa* is that there are many critical debates current in anthropology today. These debates centre around at least five critiques. I describe them this way:

The first critique is the attack on colonialism, no longer, of course, in its old political form because that is in fact long since over, but in the form of neo-colonial relationships and ideas or metaphoric frameworks of 'recolonization'. The second is the global economy critique, which has many different versions and subversions, including classical economic, dependency oriented, Marxist, world system, and other. The third is the gender critique, which prescribes a re-understanding of the literature, a recasting of ethnographic observation, and a redesign of the ethnographic imagination to repair the distortions of the past and prevent their repetition? The fourth argues that all reading and discussion should be re-thought in light of the Foucaultian discourse of power. The fifth is the post-modern, literary-critical understanding of the problematic of meaning, which for the anthropologist is associated with all the many dilemmas of dialogue, translation, representation, and textual reading ...' (Moore p. 86-87).

Mafeje not only has nothing to add to this, he wants to reduce the debate to one theme, the colonial mentality argument. He says that I 'pour scorn' on this critique (Mafeje p 12). I do nothing of the sort. I say:

The colonial mentality argument was one of the earliest themes in a series of major post-1960s attack on anthropology from within. These attacks found much the same audience as did the contention that independence had not delivered what it had seemed to promise, that post-colonial African economies were neo-colonial i.e. instances of continued economic domination without formal administrative control. Thus, as one looks at subsequent critiques it becomes clear that the colonial mentality attack had implications that went far beyond its initial focus. It gave relative weight to the power of frameworks of thought over the appearance of facts. It was a statement about the nonautonomy of intellection. Some of the elaboration of Antonio Gramsci's ideas about hegemony and about domination

through cultural supremacy also percolated into anthropology. The unwilling and unwitting captivity of consciousness has also recently engaged Africanists interested in the historical products of the European-African 'dialogue' for example, John and Jean Comaroff (1991), (*Anthropology and Africa* p.79).

Mafeje asks on page 7. Why 'Anthropology and Africa' and not 'Anthropology and Europe or America'? In fact, there is a great deal of anthropological fieldwork being done currently in Europe and in America and indeed, all over the world. Along with this world-wide ethnographic work, there also has been a good deal of interest in the distinctive histories of anthropological work in different regions (Fardon, R *Localizing Strategies*, 1990) Surely Africa should not be left out of this kind of review.

But back to Mafeje's essay and its invidious comments. He opens by saying on page 6 'it came as a surprise, at least to me, that of all the anthropologists who have worked in Africa she was the one who elected to make the final pronouncement on anthropology and Africa. The book is not offered as a final pronouncement. As I say very clearly in the preface. 'Other authors might have written different versions of the story, and no doubt they will' (vii). Mafeje is as much at liberty to write his own version as is any one else. His comment that for me to write this book was foolhardy both professionally and politically (Mafeje, p 7) moves me to tell your readers how this book happened to be written.

Some time in 1990 or early 1991 I was asked by V.Y. Mudimbe, Robert Bates and Jean O' Barr to contribute a chapter a book they were going to edit to be called *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993), I was asked to write the chapter on anthropology. The idea behind the book was that such a volume might persuade colleges and universities in the United States to maintain the study of Africa on their campuses. There has been some anxiety about the future of such studies in American universities. Downsizing of faculties and spiralling costs have obliged administrators to choose in which disciplines and in which areas instruction and training will be offered and which to drop. The editors of *Africa and the Disciplines* wanted the in-

tellectual importance of Africa to many disciplines brought home to those who would be making such choices.

Anyone interested in the current institutional state of affairs in the US should have a look at Jane I. Guyer's *African Studies in the United States: A Perspective* (African Studies Association Press 1966). African Studies encompasses all the disciplines that offer instruction relevant to Africa from agriculture to urban planning. Anthropology is only one of them. The preface to Guyer's report says that 'the African continent risks becoming increasingly marginalized in (American) academic life' (1966: vii), were the contributors to and the editors of *Africa and the Disciplines* wrong in wanting this *not* to happen?

When I had nearly finished the chapter Mudimbe and his colleagues had requested, I happened to be asked what I was working on by a publisher visiting Harvard. This is a common experience of faculty members in many American universities, since publishers are always soliciting manuscripts. I explained what I had been writing. They asked to see it. Since no bibliographical book of this kind existed, they thought the anthropology material might be of interest outside the multidisciplinary volume, standing by itself in a slightly enlarged version. I requested permission of the editors of the interdisciplinary volume to publish a spin-off book and I was granted it.

Now, to turn to the more substantive issues of anthropological history discussed in the CODESRIA essay. One of the histories traced in *Anthropology and Africa* is the story of how, by the 1960s, many anthropologists had moved away from using 'the tribe' either as a descriptor or as an analytic concept. Not only what was 'the tribe' understood as a construct of colonial administration, but the 'tribes-and-traditions' anthropology that was preoccupied with 'custom' was gradually replaced by an anthropology preoccupied with change and social transformation. In the discipline as a whole (i.e. not just in African studies) the structural-functional paradigm went under.

Anthropology and Africa shows that one of the early shifts away from the 'tribes-and-traditions' model was the result of the challenge of urban fieldwork, the study of African labour migrants in towns and cities. This urban fieldwork began well before 1950, began to alter the question anthropology was asking and the methods

it used to try to find answers. Some 'tribes-and-traditions' anthropology continued alongside of this advance, and there were some curious theoretical contradictions and mixtures. But 'tribes-and-traditions' anthropology was on the way out. By the early 1960s the achievement of African independence radically shifted the intellectual ground. Political and economic change in Africa altered the basic terms of academic analysis.

Mafeje pretends that I offer justification for the continued use of the idea of the 'tribe' (Mafeje, p. 12). That is not so. He imputes to me the opinions of persons whose views I describe. He goes so far as to misplace a quotation mark to make me appear to be agreeing with Gulliver in a sentence in which I was in fact criticizing him for not emphasizing the colonial context of tribe (Mafeje, p. 12 citing page 92 of *Anthropology and Africa*) Mafeje also alleges that I do not take note of the historical transformations associated with decolonization (Mafeje, p. 9). Mafeje may have reasons of personal vanity for making these allegations. He states without modest that *he* was responsible for the alteration of anthropological thinking, for the backing off from the idea of tribes and tribalism. He says, alluding to the social anthropologists, 'Despite Sally Moore's Euro-centric pretensions, they did not deconstruct the concept of "tribe" in anthropological discourse. The Africans did in my person in 1971 when I published my article on the ideology of Tribalism' (Mafeje p.12).

This claim Mafeje makes about his influence is exaggerated, to say the least. The critique of the idea of tribalism had been on the table for at least a decade before Mafeje wrote his article. This was true inside and outside of academic circles, inside and outside of Africa I call Mafeje's attention to Joan Vincent's remarks in her history of political anthropology when she says, 'By 1968 political anthropology's stance was almost wholly revisionist... The politics of ethnicity emerged and began to replace what had previously been called tribalism (1990:334). For a cogent example, one has only to look at *Pluralism in Africa*, edited by Leo Kuper and M. G. Smith (1969) to see how engaged with colonialism and the ethnic issue the contributing scholars were in the sixties. Without the benefit of instruction from Mafeje's very brief 1971 articles.

The intellectual history of anthropology has always been connected with its political context and historical moment. That is a central argument in *Anthropology and Africa*. That is why I have periodized the history of the discipline in colonial and post-colonial chunks. I agree with Mafeje that academic thought is a historically determined process (Mafeje, p. 9, see my statement from p. 79 quoted above about the non-autonomy of intellection). But by definition, political contexts change and historical moments succeed one another. A great deal has happened in Africa since the nineteen sixties. Some obviously wish to relive the glory of their youth when they protested the anthropology of the colonial era in the Oxbridge seminars of the late 1960s. Mafeje has every right to continue reliving that happy moment when he and his friends joined many others in expressing their critique of the anthropology of the colonial period and some (such as Mafeje) conceived themselves not only to be instructing their elders but changing the field. Never mind that the field was already changing radically and that he and his friends were getting on a bandwagon that was already occupied by many others. In transitional periods old and new paradigms overlap. That fact and the way various anthropologists dealt with the logical inconsistencies between and among their models, was one of the point I was making in my historical account of the discipline. This is not something that happened then (and only then) and only in anthropology. It was (and is) true of all the social sciences, and of many other disciplines. It was something that surfaced in many countries, not just in Africa, but in France the United States and elsewhere. A great wave of self-consciousness about paradigmatic change was under way. It was surely not an accident that Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was published in 1961. Today, in 1996, must there be only one orthodoxy, one acceptable social science paradigm? What kind of conception of open academic discourse is that?

By creatively misrepresenting *Anthropology and Africa* Mafeje manufactures an opportunity to credential himself. He lists for us the names of many of the anthropologists he has known and not only refers to his collaboration with Monica Wilson on a 1963 book on Langa township in South Africa, but alleges that he

changed her mind, too (about what I wonder). The Preface to Monica Wilson's book acknowledges the fieldwork Archie Mafeje did but says, 'The formulation of the problems, the direction of the field work, and the writing of the book was done by professor Monica Wilson' (p. viii). As far as I can tell (from their titles and catalogue notes in the library) since the Langa study, Mafeje's books have concerned political theory and development, and have not involved any ethnographic fieldwork of his own. His most recent book, *The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formation* (London, CODESRIA, 1991), is a rereading and reinterpretation of classical, colonial period, anthropological texts on the interlacustrine kingdoms. The issues he raises in that book are very interesting. He obviously thinks the history of anthropology is important and that reanalysing the old classics can be turned to present purposes. I agree. His book could be an advertisement for *Anthropology and Africa* had he read mine without so much animus.

Mafeje chides me for omitting various articles and books I did not cite. I can only reply that I had to make choices. Several hundred entries are not enough to be all-inclusive I focussed on books rather than on the periodical literature, and on ethnographies and fieldwork monographs rather than on commentary. No doubt I left out as many interesting pieces of work as I included. A short book cannot include everything.

I should add that I am saddened by the fact that Mafeje's tone is so insulting. I realise that there are audiences for which one has only to shout 'colonialist, racist, Eurocentrist' as he does referring to me, and it is like shouting fire in a crowded theatre. There are some people who respond instantly to this kind of name-calling and many namecallers who legitimate themselves by doing the labelling. I believe that the social science community represented by CODESRIA is more sober in its judgments than that. Surely this undignified display does not pass for scholarly disagreement. There is so much work to be done, there are so many research themes to be explored, so much current history to be recorded, so many serious questions about methods and models to be debated, so many difficulties in the way of open communication, it is a pity to have to waste time on crude invective.