

## EDITORIAL

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### *A brief tribute to Archie Mafeje*

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Archie Mafeje, one of South Africa's legendary social scientists, has passed away. He was a respected scholar and deeply committed to the Pan-Africanist cause of political, economic and cultural emancipation. It is precisely this mixture of a normative concern for what is good for Africa together with his sharp analytical mind that made Archie Mafeje such a powerful intellect on the continent with an enduring influence on scholarship on and about Africa.

He had a doctorate in Anthropology from Cambridge University, but he was one of the fiercest critics of the role that this discipline had played as a handmaiden to colonialism. In response, Mafeje saw himself as liberated from the constraining boundaries of disciplines. His voice was unambiguously African and he brought his Western learning to bear on a profound understanding of the limits of decolonisation. He did this by deconstructing the essential concepts of Anthropology and revealing what lies hidden – its basis in alterity. But he did more than that. Since he was deeply concerned about African claims to study, understand and interpret their own reality, he exposed the manner in which the supposed makers of anthropological knowledge positioned 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. In contrast, 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.

After a short stay at the University of Fort Hare, Mafeje, along with many others, was expelled for political activities. He eventually started a degree in biological sciences at the University of Cape Town in 1957. After graduating in 1959, he immediately began a BA with anthropology as major. He achieved his Masters degree, cum laude, in Political Anthropology.

Archie Mafeje's illustrious career took him all over Africa. He held senior positions at the University of Dar es Salaam, the American University in Cairo and Makerere College. It was while he was in The Hague as a visiting professor at the Institute of Social Studies that he met his wife, the Egyptian scholar and activist Dr Shahida El Baz.

It is difficult to isolate important events in the life of such a complex and multi-faceted individual as Archie Mafeje, but there are four that stand out as crucial in shaping his life and his work:

Firstly, his experience at the University of Cape Town when in 1968, he was appointed to the position of senior lecturer in social anthropology but a combination of

the apartheid government's intransigence on the appointment of black staff members to white universities on the one hand and deceit and complicity on the part of the University of Cape Town on the other prevented him from taking up his post. There can be little doubt that this racist decision profoundly shaped Mafeje's intellectual trajectory. He concerned himself directly with the details of the social and economic challenges facing the newly independent countries and in the process he developed an encyclopaedic knowledge of Africa.

Secondly, in 1969, his appointment to the position as Head of Department of Sociology at the University of Tanzania was a vital homecoming for Mafeje. Unfortunately, it was also the scene of a horrific motor car accident in which he was involved.

Thirdly, his return to Namibia shortly after it became independent where he experienced the worst kind of racist abuse from his colleagues.

Fourthly, the sad finale of his return to South Africa.

If there is one constant in Mafeje's life then it is his lifetime involvement in the work of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). During the long years of his exile from South Africa, CODESRIA became Mafeje's home where he contributed in no small measure to charting an Afrocentric approach to the study of African issues. But he also had an enormous impact outside of Africa where he had many experiences as visiting researcher, fellow or professor at Cambridge University, at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, at the University of Copenhagen, at the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala, at Umeå University in Sweden and at North Western University in Chigaco.

He was undoubtedly the doyen of the emerging community of African social science scholars. During the 1970s he wrote a path-finding article, 'The Ideology of Tribalism', and entered numerous debates challenging the concept of a dual economy, on the nature of the agrarian and land questions in Africa, and on the significance of the Soweto uprising in South Africa. His most productive years were during the 1980s and 1990s, publishing widely on a diverse range of topics, including a major extended – and much cited – essay on anthropology in the inaugural issue of the *African Sociological Review*.

Mafeje was a principled scholar who made a great contribution to the development of the social sciences in Africa. He was persecuted for his political ideas by the apartheid regime in South Africa, being arrested while doing political work among rural dwellers in Pondoland. He, more than most, grappled with the issues of historical explanation, of how to relate science and ideology to development, how to understand the constraints that confront the neo-colonial state in Africa, how to combine social history with ethnographic experience and generally how to marry scholarly pursuits with political commitment.

Mafeje 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. His irreverence and his irrepressible spirit have inspired us and we have all benefitted enormously from his fertile mind. We will always have a very deep appreciation for his role in the social sciences in Africa as a whole.

Archie Mafeje described himself as being South African by birth, Dutch by citizenship, and Egyptian by domicile. His homecoming was intended to unite the spaces and places of his birthright, citizenship and domicile. Alas, it was not to be.