In May 1968, UCT Council unanimously approved the appointment of Archie Mafeje as a senior lecturer in social anthropology. A month later, after pressure from the apartheid government, Council withdrew the appointment, and made known “its future inability to appoint non-white persons to academic posts, unless allowed to do so in special circumstances”.

Archibald Monwabisi Mafeje was born in the Eastern Cape in 1937. He began his studies at Fort Hare and completed a BSc at UCT in 1959. His political activism led him to switch from the natural sciences to the social sciences, and he gained an MA in social anthropology at UCT in 1965 (*cum laude*).

He was studying for a PhD at Cambridge University in England when he was appointed at UCT in 1968—the first black lecturer to be appointed at UCT outside of African languages. Days after Mafeje’s appointment, the NP minister of education, Jan de Klerk, wrote to the Vice-Chancellor of UCT to object to the appointment of a “Bantu”. Mafeje’s appointment was not illegal, according to De Klerk, but it was “tantamount to flouting the accepted traditional outlook of South Africa”. De Klerk called on UCT to withdraw Mafeje’s appointment and “fill the vacancy suitably with a white person”. A month later, UCT Council complied.

The UCT Council decision was met by vehement protest from UCT student leaders and a number of UCT academic staff. In August 1968, about 600 UCT students began an occupation of Bremner Building, which lasted for nine days, demanding that Council reconsider its decision to withdraw Mafeje’s appointment. Instead, Council agreed to establish an Academic Freedom Research Award in honour of Mafeje and placed a plaque in the library recording that the government had taken away its right to appoint lecturers at its own discretion.

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**Lessons of the Mafeje Affair**

**Date & Time**
Monday 18 August 2008
17:30 for 18:00 (Snacks will be served)

**Venue**
Kramer LT1, Middle Campus, UCT

**RSVP**
Denise Benjamin
Email: Denise.Benjamin@uct.ac.za
Phone: 021 650 2187

Chairperson: Professor Andrew Nash
Associate Professor in Political Studies, UCT

**Speakers**

Fred Hendricks
Dean of Humanities, Rhodes University

Ken Hughes
Professor of Mathematics, UCT

Lungisile Ntsebeza
Professor of Sociology, UCT

Francis Wilson
Emeritus Professor of Economics, UCT

*Please note that seating is limited and guests will be accommodated on a first-come first-served basis.*
UCT AND MAFEJE AFTER 1990

After the withdrawal of his appointment at UCT, Mafeje’s overseas studies became political exile. He taught at the University of Dar es Salaam and later at the American University in Cairo, and held visiting positions in England, America and the Netherlands. He was an outspoken supporter of the liberation struggle in Southern Africa and his analytical work was consistently aimed at clarifying its tasks.

After the return of exiles in 1990, nothing prevented UCT from honouring its 1968 decision to appoint Mafeje. Apparently Mafeje wished to return to Cape Town and sympathetic colleagues at UCT urged the university to create a position for him. In 1991, UCT made Prof Mafeje an offer of a one-year senior research fellowship. This did not reflect Prof Mafeje’s academic seniority and he declined to take it up.

In 1994, Mafeje applied for an advertised chair. He was unsuccessful but there remain concerns about whether he was fairly treated.

Mafeje returned to South Africa in 2000 to take up a post at the University of South Africa. He died in March 2007.

FROM ACADEMIC APARTHEID TO ACADEMIC CAPITALISM?

The Mafeje Affair was a turning point for UCT, which bowed to pressure from the apartheid government, rather than standing up for the values essential to an authentic and thriving intellectual community. UCT did not make another black academic appointment until the 1980s.

The Academic Freedom Committee believes it is only by reflecting constantly on our history that we can learn its lessons for our own time. Even if no-one at UCT today would defend the withdrawal of Mafeje’s appointment forty years ago, the threat of the university compromising its essential values in deference to power still remains.

Upholding academic freedom at UCT today means ensuring that we do not sacrifice the values integral to a university community to the needs of power. The Mafeje Affair dramatised the costs of capitulation to the power of apartheid. In less dramatic ways, academic life today has to respond to new forms of power, including the power of the global marketplace and its ethos of managerialism. Critical enquiry into the workings of the university remains a condition for academic freedom.

LESSONS OF THE MAFEJE AFFAIR – 40 YEARS ON

UCT’s Academic Freedom Committee invites UCT students, staff and members of the public to a symposium to mark 40 years since UCT appointed and then withdrew the appointment of Professor Archie Mafeje. The symposium also forms part of the VC’s installation programme and is being co-hosted by the students who participated in the 1968 protest sit-in and will be gathering at UCT to commemorate the event.