ARCHIE MAFEJE

For many people, the name of Archie Mafeje will be known best for the fact that he never returned to UCT to take up the Senior Lectureship to which he was duly appointed by the University Council, forty years ago. We shall return to that appointment in a moment but, first it is important to state clearly that we honour him today, not for what he did not do but for who he was and for his achievements as one of Africa’s greatest social scientists.

Who then was Archie Mafeje? Born in 1936 in Engcobo where his father was headmaster of the primary school. His mother also was a teacher and Archie was sent to Healdtown which educated many of the country’s most important leaders including both Robert Sobukwe and Nelson Mandela before it was destroyed by apartheid’s Bantu Education policies. At Healdtown Archie was particularly influenced by the legendary history teacher, Livingstone Mqotsi.

After a year at Fort Hare he moved to UCT in 1956 where he started studying Zoology but soon moved across the campus to major in Social Anthropology in which he obtained a 1st class Honours before going on the write his Master’s thesis. But he also learned a lot outside the classroom for in those years -----of imposition of Bantu & Coloured education; segregation of Universities & the battle for academic freedom; Sharpeville; Langa march; banning of the ANC & PAC; and armed response from at least four different political groupings---- UCT was a cauldron of political discussion much of it centred on Freedom Square, the patch of lawn just outside this hall, next to the Arts block. There, the theoreticians of the left----- Africanists; Marxists; Trotskyists; Communists; even a few Liberals, one or two hardy Conservatives and all sorts in-between---- honed their analytical skills in fierce debate with each other.

Archie emerged from all this not only with two solid degrees but also with a passionate concern for politics. His Unity Movement background gave him a life-long capacity for incisive analysis; a deep suspicion of the state, particularly of the Stalinist variety; and a cheerful willingness to be politically incorrect and to be a trenchant critic of anybody, whom he suspected of any kind of racist or imperialist thinking.

Nor did he suffer fools gladly. This meant that he was not always appreciated in the liberation movement (or by academic colleagues at the receiving end of his sharp criticism) despite always seeing himself as revolutionary intellectual. He was always a free-thinking spirit: never a party-man. As a student he was also hounded by the Security Police and in August 1963 was arrested and sent in handcuffs, by train, to Flagstaff to be tried for addressing an illegal gathering there. Fortunately he was only fined & thus able to return to Cape Town, although under the ever watchful eyes of the police.
From UCT Archie Mafeje went to Cambridge to write a Ph.D. based on field work in rural Uganda. Then, instead of coming back to UCT, as he hoped, he had to spend the next 30 years in exile. Three of his most important bases were at universities in Dar Es Salaam and Cairo and at CODESRIA in Dakar. In addition he spent time as a visiting scholar in Zambia, Zimbabwe (SAPES) and Namibia. Beyond Africa his main base was at the Institute for Social Studies in the Hague where he held a chair for some years; with further links at the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies in Uppsala and CROP in Bergen. His deep knowledge of agriculture in Africa also meant that he worked extensively for the FAO in Rome.

As a teacher, he was more interested in students learning to think for themselves than in passing exams. Young students in Cairo could be asked, as their first assignment, to write an essay on “Cattle and Class in Botswana”. He himself was widely read in a number of disciplines and wrote extremely well. Books, articles and pamphlets flowed from his pen for nearly forty years, starting in 1963 with a book, co-authored with Monica Wilson, on Langa. In the same year he handed in his MA Thesis on Leadership and Change in the Transkei (a Bantustan in the making) out of which came an article on a Chief Visits Town. This was followed, in 1967, by The Role of the Bard in a Contemporary African Community. The empirical work continued. His Ph.D. research yielded, in 1969, a study of Large-Scale Farming in Buganda.

A highly influential critique, The Ideology of Tribalism, was followed in 1971 by two articles on The Fallacy of Dual Economies and What is Historical Explanation. Then, in the mid-1970s, came three chapters in books: one on The Land Question and Agrarian Revolution in Buganda and one on Religion, Class

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3 Council for the Development of Social Research in Africa
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6 The Comparative Research Programme on Poverty
7 Food & Agricultural Organisation
9 Monica Wilson & Archie Mafeje, Langa, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1963
12 Society for Applied Anthropology, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1969
14 East African Journal, v.7, no.9, 1971
and Ideology in South Africa. The third ranged more widely and focused on Neo-Colonialism, State Capitalism or Revolution. At the same time he was beginning to worry more about his own discipline and in the Canadian Journal of African Studies he published, The Problem of Anthropology in Historical Perspective. It was a theme that he was to pursue for the rest of his life: sixteen years later he was writing on the problems of the indigenisation of the social sciences in Africa and then eventually a monograph on Anthropology and Independent Africans. Mafeje relished nothing so much as stirring debate and this was followed by Debates & Rejoiners: Conversations and Confrontations with my Reviewers. Meanwhile he was writing across a range of topics beyond anthropology: Science Ideology and Development was followed by three articles on agriculture and rural poverty in Africa whilst at the political end of the spectrum came Studies in Imperialism and essays, In search of an alternative, on Revolutionary Theory and Politics. Also in the 1990s came a definitive analysis of Tribalism in the Oxford Companion to Politics of the World and a book, co-edited with Samir Radwan, on Economic and Demographic Change in Africa.

After 1994 Mafeje turned his mind to democracy. Papers on the theory of democracy and on the national question were followed, by reflections on the role of the state in poverty reduction. “In reality”, he wrote, “what the African peoples, poor or not so poor, are faced with is a predatory state which is preoccupied with its own

17 M. West & M. Whisson (eds.), Religion and Social Change in Southern Africa, David Philip, Cape Town, 1975
21 Codesria Monograph Series 4/96, 1996
26 Sapes, Harare, 1992
survival. Therefore, any amelioration or transformation of the conditions of life in Africa presupposes the emergence of a democratic state.”

Archie Mafeje was deeply respected by scholars across the continent and beyond. Hailed, when he died, by South Africa’s Minister of Arts & Culture as “A pioneering intellectual powerhouse”, he was described by the Institute for Social Studies in the Hague as “One of the outstanding social scientists whom ISS has been honoured to have counted on its staff.” For the Executive Secretary of CODESRIA he was “A great pan-African, an outstanding scientist, a first rate debater, a frontline partisan in the struggle for social justice, and a gentleman of great humanitarian principles.”

This then is the man, armed with a Cambridge Ph.D and a classic published urban study, whose appointment as a Senior Lecturer was rescinded by the university council after pressure from the apartheid government in 1968. This is also the man for whom in the early 1990’s we [& I include myself] at UCT all failed to provide the appropriate space to enable him to come home to teach and write as he so badly wanted to do.

Today the University of Cape Town has apologised for these sins of commission and omission with regard to Archie Mafeje whose family has graciously accepted the apology. In 1991 Archie Mafeje dedicated his pioneering book on Central Africa to his wife Shahida and his son Xolani and his daughter Dana with these words: “for our tribulations, triumphs and emancipation”.

Shahida El Baz and Dana (and her baby, Archie’s youngest grandson, Yassin) are with us from Cairo today and Xolani is here with his mother Nokwezi and his two sons, Lumko and Lungisa. So too are Archie’s two sisters Vuyiswa and Nandipha; his brother & sister-in-law, Mzwandile and Nomthunzi, and his brother-in-law, Marshall Swana. Also his landlady for many years in District Six, Mrs. Hendricks & her son Ganief who, as a youngster, took food to Archie in jail. We welcome the whole family, most warmly. It is a privilege for UCT to be able to share with you all the triumph of Archie Mafeje’s life and work; and to celebrate his huge intellectual contribution to emancipation in Africa.

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30 Chimurenga Online #12-13
31 Institute of Social Studies. News. www.iss.nl
32 Adebayo Olukoshi, Executive Secretary of CODESRIA