

# Mafeje and 'Authentic Interlocutors': an appraisal of his epistemology

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## **Abstract**

*Very little is known in the South African academy about Archie Mafeje's theoretical writings. When those who knew him, or those who knew of him, do write, they very often focus on matters that have little to do with his work. This paper seeks to remedy this deficiency in the said writings by attempting to grapple with his epistemological and methodological approach to the social sciences – his notions of 'authentic interlocutors' and the 'discursive method'. The paper affirms no unique position as such; its contribution consists, for the most part, in its exposition of Mafeje's work.*

**Keywords:** *Archie Mafeje, authentic interlocutors, epistemology, methodology, the discursive method*

## **Introduction**

Mafeje is presented as a victim of apartheid in some of the few writings about him. He was the black South African scholar who was denied an academic post by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 1968, an event, referred to as the 'Mafeje Affair'. He is also presented as a success in that he co-published a book with his master's supervisor while he was still pursuing his MA degree, earned a PhD from the University of Cambridge and became a full professor at the age of 34. In effect, Mafeje is presented as nothing more than a precocious African scholar. Further, there is an image of him as a 'fierce' critic who offered a 'trenchant' critique of anthropology. On this view, Mafeje was nothing more than a 'bitter' 'polemicist' and 'debater'. Finally, there is a picture of him as a 'politically-engaged' and 'marginalised' African scholar. Here Mafeje is presented as nothing more than an 'activist'. Taken together, these images constitute what one might call the 'politicisation of Mafeje'. None of them, regrettably, focus on what Mafeje actually wrote and the significance thereof. It is his colleagues from outside of South Africa who have, following his death, attempted seriously to grapple with his work (see Armin 2008; Nabudere 2011; Sharawy 2008). The Egyptian scholar, Helmi Sharawy, has taken the trouble to translate Mafeje's book, *The Theory and Ethnography*

of African Social Formations, into Arabic. The late Dani Nabudere (2011) has written a book-length monograph, *Archie Mafeje: Scholar, Activist and Thinker*, on the works of Mafeje. In the South African academy, only Adesina (2008a, 2008b) and Sharp (2008) have, following his death, actually engaged Mafeje's writings.<sup>1</sup>

Quite rightly, Mafeje has been honoured as due him, yet the focus has been more on peripheral issues such as the ones outlined above. This is analogous to the post-1994 trend in the South African academy where scholars extol the virtues of 'indigenous knowledge systems' but never actually proceed to produce such systems; producing 'IKS' always seems to be some kind of an agenda for the future. Connected to this is the dropping of names of 'African scholars' – by some South African intellectuals – whose works are never really read and whose epistemological inclinations are not really known. Two examples will suffice.

In a paper on the role of think-tanks and the need for endogenous knowledge production, Mbadlanyana, Sibalukhulu and Cilliers (2011: 64) observe: 'The Dakar School of Thought and the Dar Es Salaam School of Thought, over the last decades, have been vocal in critiquing modes of knowledge generation in Africa...' In a footnote to this statement, the authors declare: 'The prominent scholars associated with these schools of thought include but are not limited to Archie Mafeje, Kwesi Prah Appiah [sic], Paulin Hountondji, Cheikh Anta Diop, Claude Ake, Thandika Mkandawire, Jimi Adesina, Issa Shivji and others' (Mbadlanyana *et al* 2011: 81fn2). Far from showing an appreciation of African scholarship, this mistaken footnote confirms the assiduous avoidance and ignorance of African scholarship in the South African academy.

Especially worrying, however, are these words: 'What is not clear in Professor Mafeje's work is whether his deep Afrocentric approaches drew from the work of Professor Molefi Kete Asante (2007) who is considered the father of Afrocentric thought and remains its key exponent' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012: 17). That these words come from a booklet compiled by the Archie Mafeje Research Institute (AMRI) is sufficient to cause one great discomfort, if not embarrassment. Anybody who has read Mafeje's work beginning with his 1963 article, 'A Chief Visits Town', would know that he is not in any way indebted to Asante. Such a suggestion only serves to discredit Mafeje, who has been writing Africa-centred works since he was a postgraduate student. Mafeje's (2000, 2001a) two write-ups on Africanity must be viewed in the context of the 'Africanity' debate, which took place at CODESRIA in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Other than that, as evidenced by his *oeuvre*, the concept of Afrocentricity or Afrocentrism was not, in all fairness, part of Mafeje's vocabulary. It is primarily because of dissatisfaction with the foregoing inaccuracies (apart from on-going research on Mafeje's work) that this

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1 One is aware of the conference organised by UCT in 2011 in honour of Mafeje and the forthcoming *gedenkschrift* which is a compilation of papers read at the said conference. The issue here is that these papers are not yet in the public domain.

paper has been written. This paper attempts to highlight the fact that there is more to Mafeje than the simplistic and needless politicisation of his life. In the main, the paper transcends such undue focus on Mafeje's life by critically engaging his work. In particular, this paper focuses on Mafeje's epistemological and methodological approach to the social sciences and the way in which it bears on his more substantive writings – such as land and agrarian issues.

## I

The significance of Mafeje's *oeuvre* lies in his argument that 'ideographic enquiry yields deeper insights than nomothetic enquiry' (1981: 123). To the extent that this is so, Mafeje holds that knowledge is first local before it can be said to be universal. This, it should be noted, is no invitation to parochialism. Nor is it refusal to endorse universally upheld standards of analytical rigour, logical precision and clarity of expression. Mafeje had in mind the view that researchers ought to take their objects of enquiry or units of analysis on their own terms. He argued that researchers' theoretical inclinations should not dictate to data. But rather, researchers ought to generate insights from the data itself. If, Mafeje argues, data contrasts with established views, what we encounter is an 'epistemological rapture', and therefore new theories, not an epiphenomenon or an aberration. Mafeje's approach, then, is such that in enriching existing knowledge, it does not make data conform to theory, but makes theory give way to data – assuming that the two are in conflict. Some might argue that to the extent that this has the feature that it is inductive, it is 'grounded theory'. That may well be the case. However a significant distinction ought to be made. Contra grounded theory Mafeje's approach is not purely about building theory from the ground up in that it has the feature that it is both Africa-centred and 'emotive' with 'exclusivist' connotations – hence talk of Africanity as a combative ontology (2000). Though one might wonder how this is to be reconciled with an assertion he had made elsewhere, 'it is a mistake to endow concepts with ontological meanings' (Mafeje 1995: 158). Consistent with this logic, would it not be a mistake to view Africanity in ontological terms? This question may very well be unfair in that Mafeje made that statement in a paper published in 1995 while the Africanity piece was published in the year 2000. He may have changed his mind.

The epistemological issues just mentioned have profound political implication insofar as the question of self-determination (on the part of Africans generally and the working classes in particular) is concerned. The significance of this point is discussed in subsequent sections of this paper. Indeed, our attempt is, among other things, to show the extent to which Mafeje was consistent in taking units of analysis on their own terms. Mafeje would argue that researchers are 'authentic interlocutors' if they take their objects of enquiry on their own terms. He never developed this idea into a formal doctrine. It is largely taken for granted though it is manifestly a theme running through his writings on epistemological

issues in the social sciences generally and land/agrarian issues in particular. It is not the object of this paper to test the extent to which he did the same in his writings on state, democracy and development.

Authentic interlocution is expressed at two levels: analytic/conceptual and empirical/methodological. First, one ought to take the argument of his interlocutor on its own merits before one can present a counter-argument in an attempt to expose its fallacies. Two prominent cases in which Mafeje did this are amply worth mentioning. In his seminal paper, 'The Ideology of Tribalism', while arguing that the term 'tribe', and therefore 'tribalism', does not exist in Africa, he first met his opponents on their own turf and showed internal inconsistencies in their theoretical scheme. He showed that conceptually, colonial and liberal anthropologists who deployed the concept could not use it without contradicting themselves. As Adesina (2008: 136) puts it, 'conceptually, those deploying the concept are unable to sustain it on the basis of their own definitions of tribe(s), (hence tribalism).' Empirically, he argued that there are no such entities as tribes in on the African continent – although they existed prior to 'modern conditions' (Mafeje 1971: 258). In addition, the term has no equivalent in African languages – it emerges only when English is spoken. Adesina (2008a, 2008b) points out, correctly, that the weakness in Mafeje's argument is that it conceded that there were tribes in Africa at an earlier time. Yet such a view is neither borne out by history nor archaeology. Writing in his autobiography about the context in which he wrote his paper on tribalism, Magubane had this to say:

Mafeje's paper covers a number of issues that I also deal with, including tribalism as used politically and by anthropologists and administrators. He sees in the concept a tool for dividing Africans – you know, the divide and rule ploy of colonialists. I thought that mine was slightly better than Mafeje's! The key for me in understanding Urban Sociology, Political Economy and these subjects, and explaining these matters sensibly and meaningfully to my students was not the Manchester School or Chicago School, but good old-fashioned Marx and Engels. (Magubane 2010: 167)

Quite apart from highlighting the strength of his paper, Magubane inadvertently highlights the genius of Mafeje's discourse. The issue for Mafeje was precisely to show internal inconsistencies within the theories of Manchester School of anthropology before providing an alternative. In superimposing Marxism on the issue, Magubane was, as Mafeje (1976) pointed out elsewhere, though in a slightly different context, engaging in polemics. The problem with Magubane's (see 2000) version lies in the failure to show internal problems in the arguments of his interlocutors – taking them on their own terms – before mounting a critique of their views. This, however, is not the platform to discuss the merits and demerits of their respective papers.

The second compelling example which may be enumerated comes from Mafeje's 1981

*tour de force*, 'On the Articulation of Modes of Production'. In this paper, Mafeje took on South African Marxists, particularly Harold Wolpe, who superimposed on local data Marxian categories. Wolpe deployed Etienne Balibar's notion of 'articulation of modes of production' without due regard to history and context as if the concept was applicable across space and time. Mafeje argued that Wolpe's claim to the effect that African land tenure system is 'communally' owned was not based on good understanding of the ethnography and social geography of what were then known as the 'reserves' – rural areas. This we shall pursue in the third section of this paper. Mafeje's argument was that in their attempt to conduct class analysis, Wolpe and others ignored the fact that not all societies can be understood in class terms. Mafeje (1981: 130) would object that 'to conduct class analysis we do not have to invent classes, but rather to be alert to possible mediations in the process of class formation.' Adesina (2012, Private Communication) submits that Mafeje said this at the cost of admitting that there were classes (or class analysis to conduct) to begin with. Here Cabral's objection to Marx and Engels' slogan, the history of humankind is the history of class struggle, looms very large. Cabral observes:

Does history begin only from the moment of class and, consequently, of class struggle? To reply in the affirmative would be to place outside history the whole period of life of human groups from the discovery of hunting, and later sedentary and nomadic agriculture, to cattle raising and to the private appropriation of land. It would also be to consider – and this we refuse to accept – that various human groups in Africa, Asia and Latin America were living without history or outside history at the moment they were subjected to the yoke of imperialism. (Cabral 1979: 124-5)

This squares with Mafeje's thesis that social science is ideographic rather than nomothetic. A sound understanding of local data, on the part of Wolpe and others, would entail taking conditions of the people in the 'reserves' on its own merits rather than seeing it in preconceived Marxian terms. The lesson to be learned from these Mafejean insights is that even the seemingly emancipatory social science can, at times, be as bad as its reactionary counterpart. This is even more so when such emancipatory scholarship relies on transcontinental analogies. Elsewhere, Mafeje (2003: 17) observes: 'It is thus apposite to warn that in social analysis analogies can be very misleading, especially when drawn across continents.' Earlier on he had insisted that 'Africans have partly created problems for themselves by not learning from their own experiences but instead rely on European analogies' (Mafeje 1995: 154). It appears then that rootedness in the local, and therefore finding African solutions to Africa's problems, is a theme that permeates Mafeje's work.

## II

In his provocative piece, 'Africanity: A Combative Ontology', Mafeje (2000: 66) would argue, invoking Mao Zedong, 'if what we say and do has relevance for our humanity, its

international relevance is guaranteed.' Methodologically, being an authentic interlocutor entails adopting what Mafeje (1991, 1996, 2001b) calls a 'discursive method'. When guided by the discursive method, the researcher conducts fieldwork 'without any strict strictures'. This entails infidelity to epistemology. Mafeje tells us:

By the time I reached Dar es Salaam at the end of the 1960s my work had become more thematic, less ethnographic, and more consciously deconstructionist... What is of interest to us in the present context is that all what is said above was not anthropological, although it might have benefited from my anthropological background. Nor was it interdisciplinary, except the work I did in Uganda, which was more frustrating than anything else. It was *non-disciplinary* but drew from the insights of researchers in the different social sciences in Africa specifically sociologists, economists, historians, political scientists, social geographers, lawyers (especially those interested in land tenure), philosophers, and literary critics. If I had attempted to be interdisciplinary, instead of simply learning from others, I would have got bogged down in intractable methodological problems, as each discipline would have demanded its pound of flesh. To avoid all this, I simply used the discursive method (not in its unflattering English sense but its original sense of *discursus* meaning a reasoned discussion or exposition)... I preferred to let my work speak for me... This as it may, dispensing with existing epistemologies does not solve methodological problems in the intermediate term and the long run. What it does is to create space for the emergence of new styles of thinking. (Mafeje 2001b: 55-6)

This quote best illustrates Mafeje's approach to the social sciences. The problem, however, is that while it 'deconstructs' and purports to part ways with pre-existing knowledge, particularly positivism, it was itself predicated on positivism. In claiming that his work was not predicated on any epistemology, Mafeje thought he be the proverbial fly on the wall. Such a *tabula rasa* pathway is not, however, open to him. In making this assumption, he was not doing anything different from his positivist interlocutors (Moore 1998; Nabudere 2008, 2011; Sharp 1998). Nabudere's objection is worth reproducing:

But Mafeje operates as a neutral researcher or scholar standing outside the new epistemology because he informs us that in discarding the old concepts and approaches he also adopted a 'discursive method', which was not predicated on any epistemology but was 'reflective of a certain style of thinking'. It is with this 'style of thinking' that he is able to study the peoples' texts so that he can decode them and make them understandable to the other scholars as systemised interpretations of existing but 'hidden knowledge'. But in such a case how different is he from the colonial scholar who claims to be 'neutral' and 'objective'? (Nabudere 2008: 10)

In this regard, Mafeje criticised his interlocutors while he was guilty of the same offence. As such, in claiming that his approach was not guided by 'strict strictures', Mafeje came close to conceding, albeit unintentionally, that he could not provide an

alternative to existing epistemologies, and therefore to hoisting his argument by its own petard. Let us put this thought in abeyance and focus on the substantive issues Mafeje wanted discussed.

Accordingly, his 'starting point is that in theory-building significant differences do not occur at the level of "facts" but characteristically at the level of interpretation of "facts"' (Mafeje 1991: i). From this, it appears that Mafeje was not willing to leave issues 'hanging'. Although one lets data 'speak for itself', one still needs to interpret it. In this regard, while it may appear that Mafeje was a 'neutral' interlocutor, he was not so neutral after all – insofar as he still had to interpret his data and formulate a conclusion. It should be noted, too, that an 'authentic interlocution' is not necessarily the same as empathy. Even if it is, for Mafeje empathy is not in conflict with being critical. Indeed empathy only sharpens one's analysis. Mafeje (1991: iii) declared that he was 'quite prepared to subject African societies, writers and leaders to a scorching critique.' The critical issue for Mafeje is to learn from African societies themselves – to study them from 'inside outwards' – as opposed to extracting facts. As such, he declared that:

Using a discursive method, I allowed myself to be guided by the African ethnographies themselves. In trying to decode them, all pre-existing concepts became suspect and were subject to review. In the process a number of epistemological assumptions, including Marxist ones, ceased to be self-evident and became objects for intellectual labour... (Mafeje 1991: iii)

Elsewhere he tells us:

As I conceive it, ethnography is the end product of social texts authored by the people themselves. All I do is to study the texts so that I can decode them, make their meaning apparent or understandable to me as an interlocutor or the "other". What I convey to my fellow-social scientists is studied and systematised interpretations of existing but hidden knowledge. In my view, this was a definite break with the European epistemology of subject/object... It was simply a recognition of the other not as a partner in knowledge-making, but as a knowledge-maker in her/his own right. Whether I discover this through conversations as Griaule and Dumont, through interviews, recordings, participant observation, oral traditions, artistic expressions, or written accounts, it is immaterial. Because all these are so many different ways of reaching the same objective, namely, understanding the other. (Mafeje 1996: 35)

As a result of this quote, Mafeje came under harsh criticism from his detractors. Not unfairly, his critics pointed out that this was no different from what he was criticising – i.e. positivist social science (see Moore 1998; Laville 1998; Nabudere 2008, 2011; Sharp 1998). There is merit in what Mafeje's critics were saying, however their criticism succeed only in questioning the novelty of the idea rather than its substance. In this regard, their criticisms are largely formal or procedural as opposed to being substantive –

or both. We say this not to deny the conceptually flawed position in which Mafeje found himself in. Much as he tried, he could not criticise positivism for hypocrisy and still take it upon himself to engage in the same 'value-free' hypocrisy. It is interesting to note, though, that in one of his earlier writings Mafeje had said, critiquing 'action-research':

Action-research is an intellectual form of protest against iniquities of bourgeois society, without being a negation of bourgeois society. Its supposition that knowledge could develop spontaneously as a result of inter-subjective discourse between the researcher and the voiceless is an abdication of responsibility which is confirmed by the need on the part of the researcher to bring from outside knowledge that is not given to the actors. What is the source of such knowledge, it may be asked? Pretences aside, it is apparent that the work of action-researchers is anchored in logical-positivism. Its treatment of the subjective views of the 'conscientised' actors as a substitute for or as on a par with scientific knowledge is simply an unrecognised confusion of scientific with socially found knowledge. (Mafeje 1984: 25)

Precisely what caused Mafeje to change this position is an empirical question which cannot be answered here.

In his 2001 monograph, *Anthropology in post-independence Africa*, wherein Mafeje takes stock of his contribution to the social sciences generally, and his critique of anthropology in particular, he attempted to remedy the flaw pointed by his critics by arguing thus:

One's intellectual work becomes part of current social struggles. In other words, it dissolves the traditional anthropological epistemology of subjects and objects and solves the problem of alterity, which was the hallmark of colonial anthropology. It transpires, therefore, that inter-subjective communication, like all social communication, does not imply agreement or consensus. (Mafeje 2001b: 64)

This is not convincing. One might object to this *ad hoc* argument by pointing out that it is so loosely formulated as to permit even reactionary scholarship to use it as its defence for erroneous views. What would prevent adherents of colonial anthropology from claiming that their scholarship, too, is part of a 'struggle' to preserve white supremacy? This is necessarily so because their scholarship, too, is part of *their* social struggle – however reactionary. In this regard, the problem of alterity does not disappear. Such an objection, however, can only be countered by appealing to Mafeje's *oeuvre*. That is, one would have to point out to that given Mafeje's partiality to Africans and the working-class generally, such a reading of his objection is not contextual – let alone being scrupulously fair. Mafeje committed himself irrevocably to emancipatory scholarship and was a staunch advocate of self-determination on the part of Africans.

To see this, we need to consider his notion of 'negation'. He uses the concept in at least two ways: (i) it refers to the Othering and misrepresentation of Africans in social scientific writings. This is what he calls 'alterity' when writing about

anthropology in particular. (ii) The concept is also used to mean, import for the present argument, the undoing or critique of the said misrepresentations – what he calls, in a somewhat post-modernist mood, ‘deconstruction’ (1996, 2001b). Hence the phrase, ‘a determined negation of negations’ (2000: 66), the point of which is ‘affirmation’ or what he calls, at other times, ‘reconstruction’ (1996, 2001b). Adesina (2006: 242), on the other hand, prefers to talk about the ‘recovery of intellectual and political nerve’. From here one gets the sense that Mafeje’s scholarship did not remain at the level of ideas, it was very much engaged. This was a twin-project of nuanced scholarship with political implications.

To test his ‘deconstructionist ideas’, Mafeje (1991, 1996, 2001b) used the Interlacustrine Kingdoms of the Great Lakes. Mafeje (1996: 33) argued that he set out deliberately to use the site ‘as a testing ground for my deconstructionist ideas’. Here we get the sense that Mafeje’s *tabula rasa* approach or the ‘discursive method’ had more internal inconsistencies than he was willing to allow. Note that earlier on it had been stated that Mafeje preferred to learn from the data as opposed to superimposing preconceived schemata. Yet in his ethnographic research in the Great Lakes he used the site as a ‘testing ground’ for ‘deconstructionist ideas’. It transpires from this, surely, that Mafeje’s discursive method was, in fact, predicated on a preconceived epistemology. In setting out to test ‘ideas’ Mafeje was guided by an epistemology proper.

To achieve his deconstructionist goals, Mafeje laid groundwork by sharpening his concepts, freeing them of any loose every day, even academic, usages. He substituted, respectively, the concepts of culture and society for ‘ethnography’ and ‘social formations’ (1991, 1996, 2001b). Mafeje (1996: 33) did so because the ‘Interlacustrine showed more or less the same cultural and linguistic heritage’. He argued that the concept of culture is so diffuse and nebulous that it is difficult to handle analytically. This is apart from the fact that it can be used to ‘draw invidious distinctions among people.’ For similar reasons, he chose to speak not of societies but of ‘social formations’. Mafeje held the view that talk of societies lead to infinite regression in that there are societies within societies.

For example, there is the “the Nigerian society”, the “Yoruba society” from within, and the “West African society” over and above all... (Mafeje 1996: 33) His use of social formation departed from that associated with Balibar or Samir Amin. This is so because Mafeje did not use the term to mean an ‘articulation of modes of production’. Instead, he used it to mean an ‘articulation of the economic instance’ and ‘the instance of power’ (1991, 1996, 2001b). He avoided Balibar’s and Amin’s use of the term on logical grounds. Logically, Mafeje (1996: 33) maintained, ‘we could not use an articulation of abstract concepts such as “modes of production” to designate the same concrete social reality they are meant to explain.’ To wit, *explanans* cannot at once be an *explanandum*. One cannot define a concept and still have the very same concept in its definition. That would be to move in circles. Mafeje’s justification for the

revision of the definition was that the concept of “social formation” has an organisational referent in which economics and politics are determinant. Politics refers to a myriad of activities which can be subsumed under the concept of “power”. To balance the well-known Marxist concept of the “economic instance”, I invented what would have been “power instance”, but this proved too awkward linguistically. So I settled for “instance of power” which is actually consistent with the Marxist demarcation between the “infrastructure” and “superstructure”. (Mafeje 1996: 33-4)

From this formulation, we see Mafeje’s willingness to repudiate established, even sacred, concepts which do not adequately address issues they are meant to address. For Mafeje, context is crucial in the process of knowledge production. He would often state ‘there are no texts without context’ (1991, 1996, 2001b). The significance of this saying will become clearer when the paper briefly explores later on Mafeje’s work on land and agrarian issues.

One of Mafeje’s critics, Herbert Vilakazi, has questioned the usefulness of substituting culture and society for ethnography and social formations. Vilakazi observes:

Very simply, the concept of “society” is bound up with the existence of the “nation-state”. It arose in the eighteenth century, in the Enlightenment discourse, and reached final crystallisation as a social science concept in the nineteenth century. “The concept of society itself, however, was formulated only in the course of the rise of the modern bourgeoisie as “society” proper in contrast to the court” (The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research 1966: 7). The “boundaries” of society, as a concept, are the boundaries of the “nation-state”, which were being drawn and finalised in Western Europe from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. It is an “ideal type”, like the “state” or “capitalism”, in the works of Weber or Marx... The nation-state is a phenomenon of the twentieth century in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe; that is why boundaries of nation-states and of “culture” clash so loudly in these regions of the world. The boundaries of nation-states were drawn very arbitrarily by the imperialist powers... Regarding Mafeje’s preference for the concept of “social formation” rather than the concept of “society”, I wonder whether Mafeje is fighting over something important. Marx had absolutely no problem in using the concept of society; in fact, more often than not, he used “society” more than he used “social formation”. Mafeje may have his choice, but I do not see any problem with the use of the concept of society, provided one is aware of its historical nature, as I have indicated. (Vilakazi 1998: 78-9)

Now if, as Vilakazi himself admits, ‘society’ is a concept bound up to the peculiarly European construct of a nation-state, which, as he tells us, clashes with the concept of ‘culture’ in Africa and elsewhere, is Mafeje not justified in his rejection of the concept? Vilakazi’s argument generally has two logical fallacies: it is marred both by *petitio principii* ‘circular reasoning’ and an appeal to authority. As an aside, the argument that

the concept of society is peculiarly bourgeois and Eurocentric is sufficient to reject the concept – *a fortiori* in the context of Mafeje's thesis and epistemological decolonisation. Vilakazi (1989: 47 cited in Vilakazi 1998: 79) argues that 'there was throughout the world a constant movement and migration of whole communities, peoples, and ethnic groups from place to place, and continent to continent. There is absolutely nothing comparable to it in our time.' This is precisely Mafeje's point. There have over time been 'societies' within societies so that the concept of 'society', as is conventionally known, is no longer clear. As such, it has become so nebulous that it is hard to handle analytically. Seen from this perspective, it becomes clear that Vilakazi's argument proceeds in circularity. This is necessarily so because he presupposes the very point at issue in attempting to argue for it. In the second instance, the claim that Marx had no problem 'in using the concept of society' is an appeal to authority. There is absolutely no reason why one should accept a flawed argument X because a well-known professor Y happened to endorse it. Mafeje had, for that matter, argued that he was willing to part ways with conventional concepts if they did adequately explain what they are meant to explain. That he replaced culture with ethnography and society with social formation is the very point at issue. Vilakazi cannot then appeal to Marx when Mafeje stated quite clearly that he was parting ways with conventional Marxian parlance.

Regarding Mafeje's rejection of the concept of culture, Vilakazi had this to say:

While Mafeje's discarding of the concept of society in favour of the concept of "social formation" is not, to my mind, so important, his discarding of the concept of culture is significant, and causes me considerable intellectual discomfort. Is this a great advance over Anthropology and sociology? It has been said that the greatest advance and most unique contribution of Anthropology to the study of human society by social scientists, in general, is the concept of culture. By culture, of course, we have in mind all those things, material and non-material, which are created by human beings. These creations are passed on from generation to generation, significantly through the learning process. The purpose of culture is to help human beings adapt to nature, to one another and even to themselves as parts of nature... What is Mafeje's problem with the concept of 'culture'? (Vilakazi 1998: 79-80)

Mafeje's (1996: 35) problem with culture is that 'it has no boundaries and can be diffuse widely in space especially under conditions of improved communication. For this reason, it cannot be used as a designating systematic category – perhaps as a general unbounded point of reference.'

### III

Mafeje's theoretical scheme, authentic interlocution, and his methodological approach, the 'discursive method', which reflect a 'style of thinking' as opposed to relying on epistemology, lay solid groundwork for his more substantive writings on land and agrarian issues. This very brief section of the paper, as promised earlier on, is devoted to an exposition of Mafeje's conceptualisation of land and agrarian issues in sub-Saharan Africa. Mafeje (2003) tells us that sub-Saharan Africa has unique systems of land tenure and systems of organisation for production. Acknowledging this fact has far-reaching implications just in terms of how agrarian and land transformation is to be conceptualised. Mafeje argues that this highly important issue has been overlooked by many theorists and policy-makers working on land and agrarian issues today.

In an excellent passage, one which captures the essence of his views on this issue, Mafeje comments thus:

Traditional African community did not conceive of land in terms of ownership but in terms of *dominium eminens* within which use-rights were guaranteed. These were activated through family units and could get entrenched, depending on demographic pressure and the use to which different types of soil were put. The fact that individual families were units of production as well as of appropriation and could hold their plots of land in perpetuity as long as they were under use casts doubt on the supposition by liberal economists and Marxists alike that the so-called communal land tenure necessarily militated against the development material forces in Africa. It is important to note that capitalist production has occurred in black Africa since the introduction of cash crops, without any significant changes in land tenure systems but more in land use. We are also reminded of the fact that in the Orient production increased and great technological innovations occurred over a very long time, without the development of individual property rights. The same is true of the great, pre-Columbian empires of Latin America. In the light of all this, individual property rights, as necessary condition for development, must remain an attribute of European natural theology. (Mafeje 1991: 109)

Elsewhere, Mafeje (2003) argues that for a long time agrarian studies in sub-Saharan Africa have relied on analogies derived from Asia, Europe and Latin America. Even though 'African researchers have not found any relevance of the concept of "land reform" outside the Southern African settler societies, it became a major preoccupation of European scholars working on agriculture in Africa' (Mafeje 2003: 1). Mafeje argues that this tendency has been reinforced by organisations such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Bank. This remains the case in spite of the fact that sub-Saharan Africa, unlike Europe, had endured no landlordship, had supply of land in abundance, and producers, married woman included, and

had guaranteed access to land for cultivation (Mafeje 2003).

In spite of the above, African systems of land tenure are said to be a major barrier to agricultural development. Mafeje argues:

The underlying Eurocentric supposition was and still is that lack of exclusive individual rights to land gives rise to insecurity of tenure and, therefore, inhibits permanent investment in land. This is based on the mistaken idea that African land tenure systems are “communal” and as such any and every individual can lay claim on any piece of land or be granted access at will. This is a basic misconception. (Mafeje 2003: 2)

Mafeje goes on to point out that the concepts used to characterise African land tenure systems were drawn from European jurisprudence. Some of these concepts include notions of ‘ownership’ of land and land as ‘property’. As such, these concepts refer to a portion of land over which a holder has exclusive control.

In contradistinction, however, in sub-Saharan Africa the holder could be anything from territorial authority to, the clan, the lineage, the household or production unit and never the individual (Mafeje 2003). For this reason, a distinction ought to be made between repository and user-rights. Holders of land are ‘vertically organised groups with corporate rights and not the community as whole’ (Mafeje 2003: 2). Unlike in continents such as Asia and Europe, African social formations were not organised into economic units but rather in socio-political units who were held together by kinship ties and neighbourliness. Though use and allocation of arable land were determined by membership in the groups just mentioned, it is a serious misconception to suppose that African systems of land tenure are ‘communal’. ‘On the contrary, although collective, land rights in sub-Saharan Africa were narrowly defined and controlled than would be implied by the notion of “communal tenure”’ (Mafeje 2003: 2).

The point which Mafeje sought to drive home here is that in supposing that African systems of land tenure are communal, ‘bourgeois theorists’ came to the conclusion that land is ‘free-for-all’ and hence difficult to manage and therefore develop. This basic flaw, however, pervades the writings of theorists both of liberal and Marxist persuasion in land and agrarian studies. This should be the best place to end our discussion on this issue. Mafeje’s conceptual basis on land and agrarian issues, which is informed by his epistemological scheme, authentic interlocution, and the methodological approach, the discursive method, should be the starting point for African scholars working in this field of study. The attempt, in this section, was not to grapple with empirical questions about whether Mafeje’s conceptualisation of land and agrarian issues holds true in all sub-Saharan countries. Nor, for that matter, was this section concerned to show whether or not what Mafeje is saying is still true in post-independence Africa. He may well be wrong. Nothing diminishes, however, in his approach or conceptual framework in that the message, ultimately, is that African societies – or social formations as he would have

it – should be understood on their own terms. Space forbids a full exploration of his writings on this issue. The main concern was at the conceptual level not necessarily at the empirical level.

#### IV

The paper affirmed no unique position as such; its main purpose, generally speaking, was a careful exposition of Mafeje's work. In particular, this paper focused on Mafeje's epistemological and methodological approach to the social sciences and how that bears on his more substantive writings – such as land and agrarian issues. It proceeded as follows: the first section dealt with Mafeje's epistemological or theoretical approach – the notion of 'authentic interlocutors', taking objects of enquiry on their own terms. The second section focused on this methodological approach, which, as he claimed, is not predicated on any epistemology – the 'discursive method' – though it is apparent that it is premised on his epistemology of 'authentic interlocution'. The final section sought to demonstrate how Mafeje's theoretical and methodological approach bears on his more substantive writings – in this case land/agrarian issues.

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