How Archie Mafeje Deconstructs Eurocentrism in the Western Paradigm of Thought

Thabang Dladla
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7964-8082
University of Limpopo
dladlathabang@yahoo.com

Abstract

Western philosophy projects itself as possessing knowledge that is of universal relevance, emanating from no position in time and space, which denies the context within which its discourses arise. Such a claim rests on the assumption that European life is qualitatively superior to all other forms; hence, what they produce as knowledge is applicable to all other societies, regardless of what those particular societies presume to be knowledge, precisely because of the possession of this human quality that is exclusively European. This can be understood as the foundations of racism: the denial of the quality of being human of those nations that are not European. The exclusion of women, Africans and Amerindians from equal normative consideration by Western philosophers (such as Aristotle and Kant) can only serve the political interest of European male dominance. It is from such a realisation that a philosophy of resistance or liberation is born, which is also liberation of philosophy insofar as it challenges the oppressive, exploitative, patriarchal and colonial character of modern Western philosophy, which Archie Mafeje was particularly useful to delineate. This article grapples with the questions of racism and Eurocentrism in the Western paradigm of thought from the position of Africa through Mafeje's selected writings. It is argued that Mafeje's theoretical contribution demonstrates a liberatory practice of philosophy and the social sciences in Africa. Such an articulation recognises the inherently political nature of philosophical and social science discourse, something Western social science and philosophy have not been successful in obscuring.

Keywords: Archie Mafeje; Eurocentrism; African Philosophy; Liberation

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Introduction

This article is about Archie Mafeje's thought and practice on the issues concerning epistemic decolonisation and authentic liberation of the social sciences and philosophy in Africa. In pursuing this task, of thinking about the liberation of social sciences and philosophy from colonial presuppositions and Eurocentrism, it is not quite necessary to review all the materials that discuss this issue. An examination of some prominent texts by Mafeje suffices to demonstrate the extent of his contribution to the discourse of the decolonisation of the social sciences and philosophy in Africa. However, in the South African[1] academy, there is a resounding assumption that the subject of decolonising the disciplines is a new one, hence the supposed novelty of "decoloniality" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015; Sithole 2016; Zondi 2016). Nonetheless, when one closely examines the African archive and the debates that ensued from the earliest period of post-independence Africa, one would not be so eager to rely on Latin American theory to think about such possibilities. Mafeje is an instance of an African thinker whose work supports our thesis about the sufficiency of African theory. An examination of Mafeje's writings from the 70s, for example, demonstrates that Africans on the continent have long been preoccupied with the subject matter of their freedom from all colonial impositions, including those embedded in European-inspired social science and philosophical practices. Therefore, for the purposes of this article, and in the true spirit of Mafeje, the primary readings written by Mafeje and direct commentaries on them, as well as those preoccupied with the subject matter of decolonising knowledge, are examined. This is done to demonstrate how Western social science and philosophy proceed from an inherently racist and Eurocentric position of thought, of which Mafeje's works and contributions are an antidote. The argument is carried out in three parts: the first section deals with the negative conceptions of African experiences by European-inspired social sciences and philosophy. In the second section, African philosophy is identified as a critically reflexive liberatory discourse against Eurocentrism, with the aim of elucidating authentically African ontological narratives. Lastly, the liberatory character of such thinking is delineated as unbounded by the confines of what are identified as disciplines. Mafeje's thinking on transdisciplinarity is then exposited as containing a liberatory element beyond the confines of existing disciplines.

Against the Eurocentric understandings of African experiences

In the preface of *The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formations* (Mafeje (1991), the author expresses incredulity to both empiricism and erudition as markers of science (understood as a systematically organised body of knowledge on a particular subject, i.e., epistemology). According to Mafeje (1991), for one to have an understanding of a particular phenomenon, it is not necessary to read all the texts that have been written on it, precisely because for theory building the essence is not in the

1 https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/News-&-Media/Articles/Why-the-decoloniality-struggle-surprised-South-Africans

accumulation of facts but in their interpretation. This means that a selected few from recognised authorities in that particular field may be sufficient to derive a working understanding of the field and the contestations therein, as Mafeje (1991) puts it, "the essence is not the *number of texts* that one has read but how well one *understands* them" (my emphasis).

In his 1971 landmark essay, *The Ideology of Tribalism* (Mafeje 1971), he vehemently argues against European epistemological presuppositions in studying African societies as inherently tribal. Such an ideology was brought by the colonial authorities and was aided by their anthropologists, as Mafeje (1971, 254) shows using the case of South Africa: "In South Africa the indigenous population has no word for 'tribe'; only for 'nation', 'clan' and 'lineage' and, traditionally, people were identified by territory—' 'Whose [which Chief's] land do you come from?'" This aptly demonstrates that the notion of tribes is an imposition from the outside and not how people recognise themselves. To drive his point home, Mafeje (1971, 254) mobilises Marx's conceptualisation of relationships of domination in his 1845 *German Ideology*:

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (Marx, as quoted in Mafeje 1971, 254)

Indeed, the colonial domination of Africa by Europe did not articulate itself in material terms solely, but also in intellectual terms. According to Mkandawire (2005, 5):

> One task of ideas in both the enslavement and colonization of Africa was to dehumanize the enslaved and the colonized by denying their history and denigrating their achievements and capacities, which was done through the colonisers' claim to universality for their culture and values while relegating African values and culture to parochial particularities. Such disproportionate views were met with resistance and became the springboard of African intellectual endeavours, which were coterminous with movements of African nationalism and anti-colonialism. (Mkandawire 2005)

Such movements, for epistemological liberation circa 1960s, became the basis of rethinking the categories, which have heretofore incarcerated African social ontologies within the European epistemological paradigm and became the basis for African philosophy and African social science discourses. Mafeje, as Nyoka (2012b; 2017) has pertinently demonstrated, is located within this tradition against theoretical extraversion and alterity in the pursuit of endogeneity (Adesina 2008). The quest of endogenous knowledges about Africa is an ongoing task that African intellectuals are still engaged in, precisely because:

> Societies that have experienced colonization have suffered many ill effects, some psychological, some linguistic, and some intellectual. But none have perhaps been less

> studied than how colonization subjugates knowledge and marginalizes local epistemes. (Oyěwùmí 2015, 1).

According to Oyěwùmí (1997, ix), European colonialism occasioned an epistemological shift and imposed European categories, like gender, in understanding African social realities. Such superimpositions in understanding African social realities have continued to create, in discourses about Africa, non-existent realities precisely because of their imported categories. In both her groundbreaking works, *The Invention of Woman* (Oyěwùmí 1997) and *What Gender is Motherhood?* (Oyěwùmí 2015), the author has challenged European gender categories in understanding Oyo Yoruba society and articulated an endogenous understanding of that African society against extroversion.

Oyěwùmí is not alone in this struggle, and stands on the shoulders of giants such as Ifi Amadiume, who has also challenged Western patrilineal understandings of African societies (Adesina 2010). European imperialism has continued and has been maintained by some Africans who sought to speak for Africa but not for Africans, instead for their European audiences, as Nzegwu's (1996) *Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's "In My Father's House"*, has shown in the case of Kwame Appiah's claiming a patrilineage in an inherently matrilineal Asante society. This forms the bedrock of African intellectual activity as a critique of Eurocentrism, as identified by Serequeberhan's *The Critique of Eurocentrism and the Practice of African Philosophy* (1997). This is to say, part of African philosophical and intellectual activity involves this critical negative project of disarticulating misconceptions about Africa.

African Philosophy as an Inherently Liberatory Discourse

Mafeje (1992, 4) outlines the challenges of African philosophy, particularly the authenticity of its discourse. For Mafeje (1992, 4), while it can be generally agreed that the work of Father Placide Tempels (*Bantu Philosophy*, Tempels 1943) is foundational to the modern African philosophical discourse, followed by Alexis Kagame's *The Bantu-Rwandaise Philosophy of Being* (Kagame 1953) and has shaped the discourse of the post-independence philosophy. However, earlier anthropological works left an indelible negative representation of Africans, which impelled a radical response to refute their claims and negate that negation. Mafeje (2008), however, is against vindicationist approaches, precisely because they are "an extraverted attempt to justify ourselves to a purely European audience, and on terms best understood by them" (Hountondji 1983, 37). Those negative representations do, however, provide us with the opportunity to profoundly deliberate upon them and the impact they have on our situation. This affords us the opportunity to extricate ourselves from their tie, which also satisfies the demands of African philosophy as a critical negative project against Eurocentrism (Mafeje 2008; Serequeberhan 2007).

Mafeje (1992, 4) identifies the themes to be resolved by African philosophical discourses thus: "a) the philosophical status of ethnophilosophy or folk philosophy; b)

the universality of the Western criteria for judging whether or not a given discourse is philosophy; and c) whether there could be an equivalence between European and African philosophical status." Certainly, these concerns of the modern practice of African philosophy duly acknowledge Oruka's schematisation (in Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru 2013) of the identified four trends in African philosophy: ethnophilosophy, sagacity, national-ideological, and professional philosophy. The accentuation of professional philosophy over the other identified trends has negatively affected the status of ethnophilosophy, together with that of sagacity. However, Oruka's rejoinder to the dismissal of ethnophilosophy as collective philosophy is that such an approach tends to reinforce the Western condition for arbitrating the "philosophicality" of a discourse, which binds African philosophy to Western conceptions (Bodunrin 1981; Hountondji 1983, 33–34; Momoh 1989).

The pejorative meaning that ethnophilosophy has suffered is duly attributable to Hountondji (1983, 34), who has been mistakenly assumed to have invented the term. However, it is Kwame Nkrumah who is said to have been its proprietor in the 1940s in an unpublished doctorate he abandoned at the University of Pennsylvania (Ajei 2013, 131). The uncomplimentary conception of Hountondji (1983), contrasted with Nkrumah's (1964) fairly impartial use, is a result and confrontation of the domineering methods of anthropology, which was a handmaiden of colonialism, which tended to depict an inert representation of African societies and beliefs. Such approaches, reminiscent of Placide Tempels's *Bantu Philosophy* (1943), are, for Hountondji (1983, 34), "ethnological works with philosophic pretentions" addressing themselves to a particularly European audience.[2] Tempels's *Bantu Philosophy* (1943) can be understood as a reaction to the old-fashioned position of early anthropologists like Lucien Levy-Bruhl, "who devoted his entire life and career to the demonstration of the radical disparity between the nature and quality of mind of the European and what he called 'primitive mentality,' which he attributed essentially to non-Western peoples and cultures" (Irele 1983, 12).

The reaction is, however, still bound to the methods of ethnology and its presuppositions, which attribute a lessened conception of philosophy dissimilar to that of the Westerners (Hountondji 1983, 36). This is to say, Tempels has only nominally substituted "primitive" with Bantu and mentality with philosophy, which does not comment on what African philosophy could be. Hountondji (1983, 34) labours to demystify the anthropology-inspired narrative of ethnophilosophy that misconstrues African realities and presupposes unanimity. According to Hountondji (1983), African

2 "The Black man continues to be the very opposite of an interlocutor; he remains a topic, a voiceless face under private investigation, an object to be defined and not the subject of a possible discourse" (Hountondji 1983, 34).

philosophy can be described as an alienated literature: it is literature that is produced by Africans and defined by their authors as thus.[3]

Without hesitation, there are commonalities between Hountondji's approach and critique of ethnophilosophy with that of Mafeje's critique of anthropology: the incredulity to an extraverted discourse. Nevertheless, Hountondji's (1983) approach can be identified as confined to the preconceived Western idea that philosophy is an individual undertaking as opposed to the presented picture of collective philosophy that is presumed to be African. However, Mafeje (2008) is also concerned about the negative representations, but recognises the value of collective representation, however, emanating from the collective world sense and understanding of Africans themselves. Nevertheless, the discourse of anthropology is what both Hountondji and Mafeje address themselves to from both external (Hountondji 1983) and internal (Mafeje 2008) locations and perspectives attributable to their respective training as intellectuals—Hountondji in formal philosophy, while Mafeje in social anthropology. Their concern about Africa, however, provides common ground and situates them to a properly African philosophical practice that Keita (2011, 122) has acknowledged as "to help in the imparting of knowledge of the natural and social world and to assist in the constant discussion of the optimal set of value judgements and cultural assumptions that social man must make to take the fullest advantage of the sum of scientific knowledge available."

According to Keita (2011, 123):

> It would be an error, therefore, for the philosopher in the African context to assume that philosophy as it is practised in the Western world should serve as a model for the practice of philosophy. A useful approach, it seems, would be to regard philosophical activity as an engaging in theoretical analysis of issues and ideas of practical concern. But in modern society, it is the social and natural sciences that discuss ideas and issues relevant to practical concerns. Thus, the practice of philosophy in the African context should be concerned first with the analysis of the methodology and content of the social sciences, etc., for it is the methodology of paper of a given discipline that determines the orientation of paper in that discipline and the kinds of solutions to problems ultimately proposed. Furthermore, analysis of the methodology of the sciences of human behaviour would be constantly alert to the notion that the modes and objects of human thought are potentially value-laden.

3 According to Hountondji (1983, 45), "The African ethnophilosopher's discourse is not intended for Africans. It has not been produced for their benefit, and its authors understood that it would be challenged, if at all, not by Africans but by Europe alone. Unless, of course, the West expressed itself through Africans, as it knows how best to do. In short, the African ethnophilosopher made himself the spokesman of All-Africa facing All-Europe at the imaginary rendezvous of give and take—from which we observe that 'Africanist' particularism goes hand in glove, objectively, with an abstract universalism, since the African intellectual who adopts it thereby expounds it, over the heads of his own people, in a mythical dialogue with his European colleagues, for the constitution of a 'civilisation of the universal'."

Certainly, the conjecture of Mafeje's apprehension—and that of Hountondji—articulates the unique mode African philosophy must uphold to espouse in relation to the current postcolonial concerns, which diminishes the precincts of disciplines and inherited thought.

Notwithstanding the grounding of ethnophilosophy in anthropological discourses, which inspires Hountondji's critique of it, it is also its deployment by corrupt elites that is problematic in that it legitimates corruption under the guise of "returning to a glorified past." For Hountondji (1983, 97), philosophy is a scientific endeavour appropriate to its crude relationship to the development of modern sciences, as Hountondji's reliance on Althusser's *Lenin and Philosophy* (as cited in Hountondji 1983, 97) demonstrates:

> Philosophy has not always existed; it has been observed only in places where there is also what is called a science or sciences—science in the strict sense of theoretical discipline, i.e. ideating and demonstrative, not an aggregate of empirical results … for philosophy to be born or reborn, it is necessary that sciences be. That is why, perhaps, philosophy in the strict sense began only with Plato, goaded into being by the existence of Greek mathematics; was blown up by Descartes, roused into its modern revolution by Galilean physics; was recast by Kant, under the influence of the Newtonian discovery; was remodelled by Husserl, stung by the first axiomatic, etc.

This view of philosophy undoubtedly venerates a rather Eurocentric lineage of philosophy that overlooks erstwhile traditions that predate the Greek civilisation, which is presumed to be foundational to philosophy. Such an articulation also accentuates an enormously aristocratic idea of philosophy, which Marx and Engels (1846[1947]) contest in their critique of *German Ideology*. Hountondji's (1983) vision of African philosophy, in light of the aforementioned, is a theoretical discipline, which is the speciality of professionals, similar to other scientific undertakings. Moreover, such a conception of philosophy as purely literature predicated on scientificity can be understood to be limiting to the scope and function of it, as can be attested by Hountondji's (1983, 53–54) elaboration:

> Admit then that our philosophy is yet to come … African philosophy, like any other philosophy, cannot possibly be a collective worldview. It can exist as a philosophy only in the form of a confrontation between individual thoughts, a discussion, a debate … The Africanness of our philosophy will not necessarily reside in the themes but will depend above all on the geographical origins of those who produce it and their intellectual coming together. The best European Africanists remain Europeans, even (and above all) if they invent a Bantu "philosophy," whereas the African philosophers who think in terms of Plato or Marx and confidently take over the theoretical heritage of Western philosophy, assimilating and transcending it, are producing authentic African work.

Such a conception of African philosophy inadvertently excludes those works by scholars in the African diaspora, and thereby deteriorates endeavours to realise a

thematic meeting point on realities confronting the African continent and its peoples, as Serequeberhan (2007, 1) arbitrates:

> But if it is not "themes" that define the "Africanness" of our philosophy, what does? Around what will the "intellectual coming together" of those who "produce it" occur? For philosophers (African or otherwise) are human beings and, like everybody else, congregate or "come together" around issues, concerns, or celebrations focused on a common theme and/or a cluster of themes. Indeed, Hountondji is well aware of this as it pertains to the development and practice of modern European philosophy. What, then, of African philosophy? Is Hountondji's geographic and nonthematic conception a different "special" type of philosophy for Africa? Is he vying with the ethnographic conception, whose critique he initiated, for a "special-status philosophy" for Africa?

Undeniably, Hountondji's (1983) notion of both philosophy and African philosophy has received the attention of those African scholars engaged with the discourse of an authentic African philosophy, including that of Serequeberhan (2007, cited above), which has improved the progress of African philosophy up to the present. Towa (1998) and Yai (1977) do take issue with the scientistic depiction of philosophy and its theoreticism/epistemologism, not to talk about its individualistic focus on the segregation of any collectivistic outlook, albeit also having reservations about ethnophilosophy.

For Yai (1977, 9), it is insufficient to respond to the understood ethnophilosophy devoid of a thorough critical assessment of its underlying assumptions, precisely for the reason that "in philosophy, when we come to the collective and the individual, things are a tiny bit less straightforward than our pure philosophers would have us believe." According to Yai (1977, 9), "it is important here to distinguish between objective and subjective, or the material conditions that enable one or other philosophy and the vehicles for its expression to come into being." Indubitably, Yai, whom Mafeje (1992) cites, appropriately addresses the challenge of an African philosophy apprehensive of the present conditions and ignores the supposed legitimacy of the Western paradigm with its universal pretentions, as opposed to Hountondji. According to Yai (1977, 10):

> The vital point, in a debate about the existence or non-existence of a philosophy cannot, therefore, be (unless one is subjective) the emergence of individual philosophers. Rather, it must be "the material base." Philosophy, like history in general, cannot be conceived as the work of "geniuses." In any case, oral African tradition abounds in examples of individual philosophers, who are expounders of explicit philosophies.

The connection involving the individual and the collective cannot be well thought-out as a reciprocally exclusive one to the disadvantage of the other. They can, however, be viewed as mutually advantageous to counter the present reality confronted by the African collective.

Mafeje and the Quest for Authentic African Ontological Narratives: Towards Transdisciplinarity

The idea that African societies are inherently tribal is a function of a European ideology about African social realities, Mafeje (1971, 253) argues:

> Might not history, written, not by Europeans, but by Africans themselves, have employed different concepts and told a different story? If so, what would have been the theoretical explanation? Are things what they are called, or do they have an existence which is independent of the nomenclature that attaches to them?

It is suggestive from the above that Mafeje is critical of the conceptions of African social realities from the outside, and suggests an authentic engagement with African social realities from terms emanating from them. Mafeje's argument can best be understood from a sociology of knowledge viewpoint in that "objective reality is not easily distinguishable from subjective disposition," which means that social scientific categories cannot be easily separated "from the ideological baggage of their peddlers" (Nyoka 2017, 10). Indeed, Mafeje (1991, 2)—in *The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formations: The Case of the Interlacustrine Kingdoms,* his study on the Kingdoms of the Great Lakes Region—labours to reconceptualise the "social phenomena and social relations in Black Africa, which had been looked at through the lenses of non-Africans," which inevitably would lead to misconceptions. These misconceptions, Mafeje (1991, 2) attributes to the incongruence between the supposed "universal language" of the social sciences derived from the European historical experience, and the vernacular as understood by Africans themselves.

Mafeje (1991, 2) postulates that disciplines, such as history, anthropology and economics in Africa, and the social sciences broadly, have "failed to capture the totality of the social existence of the communities under study." Mafeje (1991, 2) continues:

> While their concepts were rigorously defined, they were so narrow and overladen with alien presuppositions … A prime example is the concept of "tribe." Were African social formations "tribal"? Was the history of pre-colonial Africa necessarily a history of "tribes"? Was there something called "tribal economy" or "communal property" in land?

To these interrogatives, Mafeje (1991, 2) cautions social scientific enquiry about African society to be critical of their approach and conceptualisations of the social phenomena therein. An example Mafeje (1991, 3) adduces is to question the applicability of concepts such as "caste, class, aristocracy and feudalism" in the study of African social realities, and avers that concepts ought to be used in their specific historical context to avoid misapplication. Another example Mafeje (1991, 103) adduces is that of African entrepreneurs, who often forgo opportunities of value maximisation for leisure or kinship considerations, unlike their European counterparts. In pre-colonial Buganda, according to Mafeje (1991, 108), landlord chiefs preferred

political followers to mere servile labour. This is to say, the same class category cannot behave the same way everywhere in the world.

The social sciences are, therefore, susceptible to their social and ideological environment, although the natural sciences also operate within the orbit of society, which thereby means that they are also susceptible, as argued by philosophers of science, like Kuhn (1962). Mafeje (1991, 1) stands cautious against the proponents of the view of a self-correcting science and that intellectual crises can be resolved internally (like Popper 1959), and acknowledges the role of the social environment in conditioning scientific enquiry. This is a view promulgated by the sociology of knowledge viewpoint, as exampled Frankfurt school theoreticians who developed Marxist ideas and concepts, which Mafeje (1991) has argued they sometimes became obtusely abstract. For Mafeje (1991, 2):

> Enduring thought categories are reflective of contemporary social existence. In other words, social scientific questions are put on the agenda by current social struggles.

This means social enquiry must be reflective of social existence and derive categories from within.

In the article elucidating *Africanity as a Combative Ontology,* Mafeje (2008, 106) postulates that "it is the historical juncture which defines us socially and intellectually," which means that history serves an important role in helping us understand contemporary social realities. According to Mafeje (2008, 106):

> The fashionable "free-floating signifier" is an illusion in a double sense. First, nobody can think and act outside historically determined circumstances and still hope to be a social signifier of any kind. In other words, while we are free to choose the role in which we cast ourselves as active agents of history, we do not put on the agenda the social issues to which we respond. These are imposed on us by history.

Indeed, history is a necessary complementary to study and understand social reality, as Mafeje (2008, 106) attests: "ahistoricity is a greater risk than historicity. To evolve lasting meanings, we must be 'rooted' in something." This is to dissuade the African social scientist from the lures of a deceitful language of universalism, as propagated in the social science disciplines themselves. As he attests about his intellectual contribution as an African to the deconstruction of anthropology as a discipline, he states:

> My piece on "The Ideology of Tribalism" (1970) … was an attack on European ethnocentrism and a spontaneous call for indigenisation of social scientific concepts. (Mafeje 2001, 34)

The indigenisation of social scientific concepts was Mafeje's chief preoccupation in his attempts to labour towards the decolonisation of the social sciences, particularly anthropology, which was his primary training.

Nyoka (2017, 4) has argued against the tendency to weaken Mafeje's work, limiting it to a critique of anthropology only. According to Nyoka (2017, 4), such a minimalist view makes a reformist out of Mafeje, whose work is best understood as "criticising all of the social sciences for being Eurocentric and imperialist." It is within this view that we appraise Mafeje's contribution, following Nyoka (2017), and as an African philosopher, following Ramose's (1999, 33) argument that:

> An indigenous African trained in philosophy as a discipline is not automatically doing African philosophy, whether he or she philosophises. In order to do African philosophy and acquire the appellation, it is essential that the professional philosopher concerned must base his/her philosophical reflections upon "the culture and experience of African peoples." Proceeding from this basis the African philosopher would, at the very minimum, be arguing implicitly for the liberation of African philosophy from the yoke of dominance and enslavement under the European (Western) epistemological paradigm.

Contrary to the view of Hountondji (1983) that the Africanness of African philosophy resides not so much in themed discussions but from the geographical origin of the authors and their coming together, Mafeje's intellectual journey as an African intellectual (opposed to Eurocentrism) offers us an attractive picture of what African philosophy should be in our contemporary world: engagement with reality.

Achieng (2015, 252) has noted the imperative in approaching Mafeje's (1991) work to outline two tendencies: "first, knowledge production for the generation of theory or for conceptualizations of society"; and secondly, "knowledge production to inform praxis." According to Achieng (2015, 252), such an appreciation, between knowledge for theory or for praxis, should, nevertheless, be that "whether it is knowledge for theory production or knowledge that is praxis oriented, how we approach our units of analysis (methodology) and the lenses with which we choose to analyse these units (epistemology) should be constants that have to be put under perpetual scrutiny." Indeed, such promulgations speak of the attentiveness to the materiality of situations away from possible idealisations, emanative of disciplinarity, as Achieng (2015, 254) attests:

> Mafeje questioned his own acquired discipline—anthropology—leading him to refract from it by adopting sociological lenses to his own study of anthropology. Such an interdisciplinary stance, one can comfortably assert, guided him to a superior conceptualization of the society he was studying.

However, in describing his own method, Mafeje (2001, 55) refrains from asserting any interdisciplinarity simply because every discipline has its own set of assumptions that

would require attentiveness to, or as Mafeje (2001, 55) puts it, it would have demanded its own "pound of flesh," which leads him to postulate his approach as non-disciplinary:

> 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).

Indeed such a discursive method is able to assist Mafeje (1991, 2) to decipher "social phenomena which had been examined through the lenses of non-Africans," simply because "in theory building significant differences do not occur at the level of 'facts' but characteristically at the level of interpretation of 'facts'"[4], which see Mafeje's (1991) critique erudition as valuable to theorising.

Without a doubt, Mafeje's outlook on the role of the social sciences in Africa speaks of a thematic methodological confrontation with Eurocentrism, as it emanates from the impositions of certain categories for the interpretation of African social phenomena, which consequently contrast with Hountondji's (1983) pronunciations about a "theme-less" African philosophy. Furthermore, Mafeje's theoretical promulgations speak of the imperative of a modern African philosophy.

Mafeje's (1971; 1991; 2001) confrontation with such methodical problems, particularly alterity in reference to anthropology, as they emanate from the study of African societies, speaks of an African philosophical practice concerned with liberation, both theoretical and practical. No doubt, such an articulation, although it diverges from Hountondji's (1983) concerning thematic focus, nonetheless converges with Hountondji's (1983) scientific focus. However, such a convergence can be explained with resort to the differences in focus and training of both Hountondji and Mafeje, with the latter having firm roots in the social sciences. Moreover, Hountondji's own training in Western philosophy and a particular focus on Hursellian thought (including Marxism) would afford him such a theoretical focus. Mafeje, on the other hand, is salvaged by his confrontation with such presuppositions and the demand to decolonise the social sciences in Africa. However, the theoreticism of any attempt to be scientific would prove limiting to decipher social categories that are purely imaginative, as African culture, and history, abound with such. This would necessitate an enhancement of Mafeje's own revolutionary outlook through a materialist ontological grounding of discourses, which guarantees universal acceptance only on the basis of particular exactitudes.

4 "This presupposes that every professional practitioner has an adequate stock of information from which sustainable propositions can be made. In normal scientific practice such information is standardised, only subject to individual emphases and refinement" Mafeje (1991, ii).

However, Mafeje's contribution to the liberation of the social sciences from Eurocentric negations has been hailed from all over the African continent, while his contribution remains unknown in his own country of birth, which still speaks of the need for Africanisation/decolonisation of the curriculum. Nyoka (2012b) has identified the particular importance of Mafeje's work and methods for the decolonisation of the sociology curriculum in South Africa.[5] In a defence of Mafeje's notion of authentic interlocution, which refers to approaching an object of enquiry from its own terms, Nyoka (2012a; 7) asserts:

> 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 paperers ought to take their objects of enquiry or units of analysis on their own terms. He argued that paperers' theoretical inclinations should not dictate to data. But rather, paperers ought to generate insights from the data itself.

However, as a critic of positivist science, Mafeje himself falls into the same trap by assuming that the data can speak for itself without the mediation of the paperer herself. Indeed, this also speaks of the epistemological focus of Mafeje's work that Nyoka (2012a&b) appraises. According to Adesina (2008, 133), "the meaning of Mafeje for generations of African scholars is found in his uncompromising aversion to the 'epistemology of alterity'—the 'othering' of Africa and Africans—and the advancement of scholarship grounded in the centring of African ontological experiences." Furthermore, for Adesina (2008), it is for the "aversion to alterity and pursuit of endogeneity" that Mafeje's lasting legacy for the new generations of African intellectuals is to be appreciated. For Adesina (2008, 134):

> Against the prevailing (mis)representations of Africa and the Africans, an important aspect of Mafeje's scholarship was devoted to a vigorous combating of what he referred to as the "epistemology of alterity." No discipline came up for harsher rebuke from Mafeje than Anthropology, the field of study in which he received much of his graduate education. Beyond "protest scholarship", however, Mafeje's works equally involve a resolute affirmation of endogeneity—a scholarship grounded in and driven by the affirmation of African experiences and ontological accounting for the self.

Indeed, this best articulates Mafeje's status as an African philosopher concerned with liberation from the tutelage of Europe, as demonstrated in his internal critique of anthropology, which he describes as "deconstructionist" (Mafeje 2001; 29). Such a deconstructionist approach would confront the problems of colonial anthropological

5 Nyoka, B. 2012b. *Sociology Curriculum in a South African University: A Case Study*. A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Sociology, University of the Western Cape.

categorisations and insist on what Adesina (2008) has identified as "endogeneity" contra Hountondji's notion of "extroversion" or alterity. It is noteworthy that although Hountondji (1983) is quick to dismiss anthropology as a colonial enterprise, Mafeje is not quick to do so, which would see his reconstruction of anthropology, as Adesina (2008, 140) apprises:

> Mafeje uses "anthropology" in at least two senses: anthropology as a conceptual concern with ontological discourses and anthropology as "a historically defined field of study." The former has to do with the origin of something—as in his discussion of the "anthropology of African literature." The latter has to do with a discipline rooted in the "epistemology of alterity." While Mafeje associates the latter with the discipline, it is equally as much a mode of thinking and writing that considers the "object" as the inferior or the exotic Other. It is the latter that one would classify as the "anthropologized" reasoning about Africa; a discursive mode that persists, which constitutes for me the curse of anthropology in the study of Africa. As a discipline, however, Mafeje was careful to distinguish between the works of Colonial Anthropology (most emblematic of British Anthropology) and works of practitioners such as Maurice Godelier and Claude Meillassoux. The former is more foundationally associated with anthropology "as a study of 'primitive' societies" … the latter, Mafeje insisted, must be taken seriously: "their deep idiographic knowledge, far from diminishing their capacity to produce nomothetic propositions, has helped them to generate new concepts." They approached the African societies on their own terms—without alterity. This is Mafeje's distinctive confrontation with colonialism at least at the level of ideas which should moreover inform praxis.

Conclusion

Mafeje (2008, 107) posits that to evolve lasting meanings, "we must be rooted in something" as opposed to the Western idea of a free-floating signifier that pretends neutrality and assumed universality. African philosophy is a context-based philosophy with an emancipatory mission to define itself, inspired, as it were, by the African struggle for independence and decolonisation. Philosophy and the social sciences in South Africa are still largely colonial; they continue to be prefixed on Euro-American models for philosophical justifiability. This is to say that South African philosophers and social scientists continue to mimic what their colleagues are doing in continental Europe and the Anglophone traditions, respectively. This is also to say that the underlying axiom generative of such a practice is that European existence and experience are qualitatively superior to all other forms. Philosophy, in South Africa, is Eurocentric. African philosophy remains marginal; it is not presented as the basis for philosophising but understood according to the European philosophical anthropology, and most practitioners remain wilfully ignorant of its existence while dismissively asking whether any such thing exists.

The question concerning the existence of African philosophy is an old question in African philosophy, which is distinct from the ignorant posing of such a question. The genealogy of the modern practice of African philosophy was outlined, showing the

inherently liberatory character of such a development. This is what Serequeberhan has identified as the critical negative project of African philosophy, what we can call unshackling ourselves from European epistemological dominance. Mafeje was presented as committed to this liberatory project that defines African philosophy through an exposition of several of his essays on the social sciences, intellectual discourse and anthropology. Mafeje was not a critique of anthropology only, as argued by Nyoka (2017), but a revolutionary intellectual committed to decolonising the social sciences in Africa.

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