

Homage to Archie Mafeje

In this paper intended to pay homage to our late friend and comrade Archie Mafeje, I would like to cite two of his most recent contributions:

- (i) The book titled *The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formations: The Case of the Interlacustrine Kingdoms*, Dakar: CODESRIA, 1991, translated into Arabic by AARC, Cairo, 2005;
- (ii) the paper titled *The Agrarian Question: Access to Land and Peasant Responses in Sub Saharan Africa*, UNRISD Papers, 2004.

I consider these two contributions to be quite exceptional in terms of the quality of information provided and the rigour of their analysis. They provide passionate reading, and I believe it is essential they be known by whoever is seriously interested in understanding the region surveyed (the Great Lakes), in particular and rural and sub-Saharan Africa in general.

I believe my judgment is not biased by my strong sympathy for the method and theories advocated by the author. I therefore want it known that I share the same line of thought in terms of how you join economy and politics; in other words, the reading of historical materialism, which some of us share in common (cf. Preface to Mafeje's book), but not all who would claim to be Marxists. The method, notably the author's criticism of the economy-world, which makes an abusive use of analogy instead of concept-deepening (cf. Introduction, and compare with my article 'Capitalisme et système Monde', *Sociologie et Sociétés*, Montréal University, XXIV, 2, 1992). I, of course, particularly appreciated his discussion of the tributary mode of production theory that I proposed and the validity of its use to understand the region surveyed by the author. I personally learnt a lot from it about this region.

On my side, I wish to cite:

- (i) my book, commented on by Mafeje, *Classe et Nation*, Paris: Minuit, 1979, and 'L' Eurocentrisme', *Anthropos*, 1988, but also a book to be published by Paragon, titled *Modernité, Reli-*

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gion, Démocratie, Critique de l'eurocentrisme, critique des culturalismes.

- (ii) my article 'Les réformes des régimes fonciers souhaitables en Afrique et en Asie', which was presented at the Conference of African Farmers' Organisation, Dakar Agricole, 2005, to be published in India under the English title *Desirable Land Tenure Reforms in Africa and Asia*.

Both of us have followed parallel paths and as a result, our dialogue, both oral and written, has always been fruitful. Our divergences if any have always incited me to deepen my reflection, and I believe the same applies to Mafeje.

We were to pursue this dialogue in the coming months on the issue of the future of African peasantry that both of us deemed fundamental. Our primary conclusions coincided; in other words, first we both acknowledged that the way to enter the global capitalist system, inevitably as a periphery of the centre, was a dead end; and secondly, that accordingly the only way to offer African peoples a better future was through a national and popular reconstruction within the long view of twenty-first century socialism.

Alas, since the voice of our friend is never to be heard again, and the dialogue has become a monologue. I nonetheless want to pay deserved homage to Mafeje for his intellectual and political contribution.

1. However, I think it is important for me to indicate that I did not base the tributary mode production of theory on the African Great Lakes societies nor on sub-Saharan Africa in general, but first on my reflection on the societies that I believe I know best, those of Egypt and the Arab and Islamic world. I then focused my attention on the history of the most advanced oriental societies (China, in particular) and the ethnography of Tropical Africa, through systematic readings. Like

Mafeje, I believe in scientific rigour but neither in learnedness nor empiricism. Indeed, it appears to me that the history of the Arab and Islamic world is quite badly comprehended by the Arabs themselves, caught in the shackles of religious mythologies about nature and the role of Islam in their history or nationalistic mythologies. The lack of a genuine critical bourgeois thought in our region – whether it has remained embryonic or nipped in the bud, notably by nationalistic populism – is certainly responsible for the dire poverty of not only Arab and Muslim historiography but the common dogmatic nature of dominant Marxism as well. This is certainly the reason why a different reading, which departs from the prevailing dominant mythologies (and even reinforced by the decline of rational and critical thinking of the past few decades), is often unwelcome when understood.

The theory that I named the tributary mode of production was suggested to me by a few of the major conclusions that I drew from my reinterpretation of the history of Ancient Orient and the Arab and Islamic world. It was later further confirmed by my readings on China and a few other societies. I then felt comfortable enough to make a different reading of European history, freed from dominant Eurocentrism and capable of placing feudal specificity within the context of the general evolution of tributary forms.

The critical reading of the Africanist ethnography that I was leading in parallel helped me considerably in understanding the genesis of this tributary mode of production, the general form of pre-capitalistic advanced class formations. I did say genesis because it is clear that the society of classes was preceded by a very long period when neither those classes nor the exploitation associated with them existed. I therefore described that period as a 'community' era without reducing it at any time to a single form but instead underscoring the diversity of these organisational modes while looking for their common denominator. I believe this should be found in the dominance of 'the parenthood ideology', the basis for diversity in the organisation of social power

(as distinct from the state). Going from there, it is easy to grasp the extremely slow pace of evolution of the passage to tributary formations. In the case of many societies of Tropical Africa, it seems I could detect some of the mechanisms of the long transition; and I sensed intuitively that it was at quite an advanced stage in the societies of the Great Lakes region of East Africa. The reading of Mafeje's work confirmed my intuition and taught me much on the subject.

In fact, Mafeje demonstrated that the societies in question were in transition to the tributary mode of production, which made my theory on the issue appear generally user-friendly to him. I therefore need not repeat here what Mafeje wrote on that subject, regarding economic-political articulation in the societies surveyed, rejecting – as I did – the theories put forth by some Marxists who were mindful of describing as exploitation and classes all forms of hierarchy and inequality – putting the emphasis on political domination to the very exclusion of any form of economic exploitation or coagulation of social classes. Please refer to the extraordinarily clear-sighted elaboration of these issues (pages 39, 42, 58, 60–3, 67–9, 72–9 and subsequently pages 87, 119 and 120 of his book).

2. My proposal in which the capitalist mode is opposed to the tributary mode, the general form of all pre-capitalistic advanced class societies, is clearly expressed, in my opinion, by the contrast between the predominance of the economy in the former ('wealth is a source of power') and of politics in the latter ('power is a source of wealth'). This radical inversion reflects a qualitative transformation of the system, which does not allow an analysis of the infrastructure/superstructure relationship using the same method in both systems.

Incidentally, I believe this fundamental distinction later erased by common Marxism to be the very base of Marx's analysis of capitalism specificity (merchandising). Identified by Karl Polanyi, who insisted on this qualitative difference opposing all pre-capitalistic formations to capitalism, this distinction has, however, often been overlooked in many analyses of Africa (and elsewhere) by historians or Marxist ethnologists.

Mafeje shares my view on this issue, which I believe to be a cardinal one, and expressed it in very clear terms. I person-

ally drew a few conclusions on the differences between the mechanisms commanding the development of productive forces in capitalism (viz. that this development is the result of an in-built and immanent economic law in the capitalist mode) as opposed to those explaining progress in anterior societies (which is not commanded by an economic law immanent in the system). And yet, this progress is a reality, even if precisely as I explained it, it has always been slow, making these systems to appear as 'stagnating'. I then suggested several plausible explanatory hypotheses including class struggle or the greed of dominant classes on which examples abound. Mafeje has expressed reservations about these hypotheses (pages 95-96 and 113 of his book).

3. My description of feudalism as 'peripheral' follows the same logic. The predominance of the political realm in the tributary mode (which Mafeje admits) implies that the 'central' (elaborate) or 'peripheral' (non-elaborate) character of this social form should be measured by the strength of this realm. In this sense, the dispersion of power in European feudalism justifies my description of it by comparison to centralisation, which is found, for example, in China, Byzantium or the Muslim Caliphate, which then constituted elaborate tributary forms. On the other hand, the predominance of the economy implies, in capitalism, that the central-peripheral opposition should be founded precisely based on considerations pertaining to this realm ('central capitalist economies' and 'peripheral capitalist economies').

I explain this peripheral nature of feudalism by the fact that medieval Europe was formed by grafting barbaric community societies on to the Roman tributary empire. From this distinction between the elaborate tributary forms and its peripheral feudal form, I drew a few conclusions that I believe to be important.

The first one is that the centre/periphery contrast, which is marked in the political realm, is not necessarily so at the economic base level, which was not less developed in the European Middle Ages than it was, for example, in the Arab world.

The second conclusion is that precisely this peripheral nature of feudalism explains the 'European miracle', that is, the precocious birth of capitalism on the

ground. Rejecting the Eurocentric explanations attributing this miracle to cultural specificities, acknowledging that the similar contradictions at work in all tributary systems (no matter whether they are central or peripheral) can only be solved through shifting to capitalism (thereby restoring the universal dimension of history), I can observe that the peripheral nature of feudalism gave it some degree of elasticity leading to a rapid passage to capitalism, while the power of the tributary political realm in the central forms represented an obstacle slowing down this evolution.

The third conclusion relates to the issue of the ideological forms accompanying the tributary mode. It was on this subject that I spoke of state religions, which replace here the parenthood ideology specific to anterior community modes, and clashes with the economist alienation ideology specific to subsequent capitalism. Whichever way you look at it, in my opinion this general theory appears to be the only one that can explain why Christianity in medieval Europe and Islam played the same role but through different means: in Europe, the Church substitutes for the shortcomings of the state (which then and later, when it grew stronger in parallel with the birth of capitalism, during the mercantilist era, distanced itself from the Church and even sometimes opposed it); in the Islamic world, religion remains submitted to power. This distinction, which is factually unquestionable, is generally attributed in the Muslim world to the 'in-built characters' specific to each of the religions. The struggle in which I engage, to explain that the problem does not lie there but rather in the social use of religions, is still unwelcome to those who cannot rid themselves of the religious mythologies that I mentioned earlier on.

4. In his book, Mafeje studied the pre- and post-colonial history of the Great Lakes region. I must confess that I am perfectly and completely convinced by what he says on these subjects.

My opinion is that Mafeje's theories on these issues are strengthened by the fact that the societies of the region surveyed were, prior to colonisation, still in transition to the tributary mode. These are embryonic forms of the tributary mode (beware: the term 'embryonic' should not be confused with the term 'peripheral'). Mafeje provided clear proofs in this mat-

ter and highlighted them very convincingly; he analysed using these terms the persistence of a kinship ideology to point out that it is dulled and does not confer on the societies in question a 'tribal' character as alleged by ethnography (the bad one); he noted in parallel that there was no religious phenomenon similar to the one I mentioned regarding tributary societies (cf. pages 97–101, 120–4 of his book). What does this mean if not that the societies in question were in transition from community forms to those of a tributary mode?

The nuances and perhaps divergences in views should be put back into context, that of the confusions created in some cases by the possible telescoping of pre- and post-colonial periods.

5. Mafeje also proposes in his book a different reading of the changes that colonisation inflicted upon the organisational forms of the region and an interpretation of the conflict between what he called the 'small bourgeoisie' of independent Africa (which I prefer to call compradore state-bourgeoisie) and the 'aristocracy' of the old regime. I am convinced altogether by these brilliant developments (cf. notably page 131 and subsequent pages of the book) and, like Mafeje, I never considered that a 'bourgeoisie revolution' could have developed in the region (or anywhere else in the peripheral capitalist world). Like Mafeje, I have always believed that it was essential to make a distinction between the capitalist revolution and integration into the global capitalist system.

Neither Mafeje nor I have ever considered the 'unavoidable necessity of going through the capitalist stage', but have always advocated a socialist approach to development as the only way to pull African peoples out of destitution.

I claimed that all advanced tributary systems, *before being colonised* by capitalist Europe and submitted to the imperialist expansion logic, could find a solution to their contradiction only by moving towards an invention of capitalism and subsequently some forms of ownership that it requires to develop. Of course, this proposition is questionable and Mafeje may not have shared the same view. Alas, he is no longer around to answer this question that I intended to ask him. But I have always written that the formation of

the global capitalist system and the capitalist peripherisation of the formations submitted to its expansion had modified this problematic root and branch. Today in the countries concerned, the capitalist approach can no longer be but that of a peripheral capitalism. As a result, a new approach is necessary, and on this Mafeje and I totally agree.

6. I think Mafeje's criticism of 'the articulation of modes of production' theory should be somewhat put into perspective.

I agree with Mafeje's definition of social formations as a bloc covering the economic and political realms (p. 16). But it does not fully and necessarily substitute for the structuring of specific and differing modes of production. Mafeje and I are both critical of the abuses that have been committed in the use of this modes of production theory (p. 127). I personally limited its significance by making three clarifications:

- (i) not 'all modes' and any modes can be structured in a complex formation. However, this does not exclude co-existence, for example in capitalism, of a small merchant production mode (which is frequent in agriculture and service economies) and the capitalist mode;
- (ii) in this case (when distinct modes can actually be identified), their structure plays out through predominance over the other. In the previous example, the small merchant mode is submitted to the logic of accumulation (specific to the capitalist mode), which dominates the social formation in question as a whole. There are even submitted modes that have been actually 'fabricated' by the predominant mode. As an example, I cited slavery in America, at the service of mercantilist capitalism, which was neither original nor specific to the previous conquered systems but was established by the conquerors.
- (iii) articulation-submission is not the only form characteristic of complex formations. The distortion of pre-capitalist forms (whether tributary or communal) through their submission is more frequent and marks all societies of peripheral capitalism. Mafeje, by the way, said nothing different on this

point and brilliantly illustrated it in the case he was studying (p. 147).

7. The question about the future of African peasantries is at the core of the cited two papers by Mafeje and me. In my view, these two papers complement each other in a very happy way, and the conclusions that both of us draw from our analyses coincide.

In my view – which is also Mafeje's – not only colonisation (and the post-colonial system so far) perfectly 'adjusted' to 'the absence' of private land ownership in most of sub-Saharan Africa but even reaped some additional benefit from it. We both share the view that integration into global capitalism does not necessarily require the adoption, in the dominated peripheries, of capitalist organisational forms of production.

But what does the situation look like today? My proposed theory is that in the prospect of the expansion of contemporary imperialistic capitalism the question about land privatisation has now to be raised. My paper is sufficiently explicit on this point so it is not necessary to explain it any further. Fractions – though a minority but politically powerful – of the African peasantry are now playing this game. The majority of the peasants are resisting. Mafeje, who put the focus on these forms of resistance, has made a useful contribution. On my side, I tried to analyse the different possible and necessary resistance strategies at work under many and various extreme conditions, from that perspective, from one region to another in the South, since in many of the Asian and Latin American regions land privatisation is already a *fait accompli* (which is not the case in sub-Saharan Africa or otherwise an exception), and in Asian countries where a socialist revolution occurred (China and Vietnam), access to land ownership is still managed by the state and the peasant communities without privatisation.

It is now more necessary than ever to pursue the discussion of alternative strategies for pulling out of the dead end reached by globalised capitalism. In the absence of late Archie Mafeje, let us live up to the challenge. This is the best way to pay him homage.