

The Mafeje and UCT saga: unfinished business?

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Background

Archie Mafeje began his distinguished academic career at the University of Cape Town (UCT). After completing his Masters degree at UCT in 1963 and having co-authored a book with his supervisor and mentor, Monica Wilson, Mafeje went on to further his studies and registered for a PhD degree at Cambridge University in England. He was destined to return to UCT and pursue an academic career at this University upon completion of his studies. As it turned out, Mafeje never returned to UCT. This was despite attempts on his part to return to his *alma mater*. Later attempts by UCT to reconcile with Mafeje were not successful. This was in the form of the award of an honorary doctorate in 2003, as well as a formal apology in the same year in which the University Council offered its sincere regret and apologies. Mafeje treated these overtures with disdain, not even replying to the various communications. At the time of his death in March 2007, Mafeje was still angry and bitter with UCT.

The thorny and vexed relationship between Mafeje and UCT has popularity become known as the “Mafeje affair”. To most, this relates to the events of 1968. As will be seen in the next section, Mafeje was appointed on merit in 1968 as Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at UCT, but the UCT Council rescinded the appointment allegedly due to the apartheid government’s pressure. The Council decision was taken despite strong opposition from within the University, particularly from students who protested by occupying the University administration building for nine days. Little known, though, is what happened after 1968, especially after the demise of official apartheid beginning with the political negotiation process in 1990.

It is noteworthy that since the death of Mafeje, UCT has made strenuous efforts to reconcile with the Mafeje family. Following detailed research that I conducted on the relationship between Mafeje and UCT from 1968 to his death, the University brought together 11 members of the Mafeje family over three days in August 2008. Some of the highlights included the holding of a symposium on Mafeje where a second apology to the Mafeje family was publicly read. On the following day, an Honorary Doctorate was posthumously awarded to Archie Mafeje alongside the installation of the new Vice Chancellor at UCT, Dr Max Price. These events were meant to close this particular chapter in the history of UCT. As will be seen later, the second apology was much more comprehensive and accepting of responsibility on the part of UCT than the 2003 apology. It is on the strength of the second

apology that the Mafeje family agreed to overrule Archie Mafeje and accept an apology on his behalf.

My contribution attempts to give an account of the relationship between Mafeje and UCT, on the one hand and to pose questions about the meaning of the recent (2008) agreement between UCT and the Mafeje family. Here are some key questions this contribution seeks to address: Why did Mafeje refuse to accept the two important gestures made in 2003? Was he angry or bitter about the withdrawal of his appointment in 1968? Or was it a case of too little, too late? What is the significance of the recent agreement with the family?

I argue that it is the manner in which UCT treated Mafeje in the 1990s, more than the 1968 episode that can help us understand Mafeje's behaviour in 2003 and his anger and bitterness towards UCT at the time of his death. This must not be seen as downplaying the significance of the 1968 event. My contention is that a case can always be made that in the context of 1968, a threat by the apartheid government could not be taken idly, given how vicious the system was. However, the context of the 1990s, the advent of democracy, was fundamentally different. There was no external pressure to hide behind. With regard to recent developments involving the second apology and the posthumous award of the honorary doctorate, my point is that while this undoubtedly marks a major step forward and opens up space to debate the Mafeje affair within the context of transforming universities in post-1994 South Africa, it is still an open question whether the chapter on the relationship between Mafeje and UCT can be declared closed. I will expand on this later.

The Mafeje Affair: the events of 1968

Fred Hendricks (forthcoming) has arguably written the most comprehensive and provocative account of the 1968 events so far. For current purposes, focus will be devoted to the selection process, the decision to rescind the appointment, the reaction to the decision to withdraw the appointment and how the Mafeje issue was finally resolved until it re-emerged in the 1990s.

As noted in the background section above, the UCT Council appointed, on merit, Archie Mafeje to the position of Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology on 1 May 1968. It is clear from records that the process of appointing the senior lecturer in Social Anthropology was protracted, the first advert coming out in September 1966.¹ Mafeje applied in 1967 in the second round. After an involved process, Mafeje was deemed to be the best candidate for the job. In recommending him, Professor Monica Wilson, head of department and Mafeje's former supervisor and mentor, argued that Mafeje was "the ablest anthropologist of the three and much the best teacher". She disclosed that she knew this "both from students in Cambridge and from Professor Fortes", who pointed out "that there was competition" on the part of students "to get into (Mafeje's) tutorial group there". According to Wilson, Mafeje "was equally popular when taking tutorials here (UCT)". She concluded: "As a person Mr.

¹ See file 12.2.5 – "Senior Lecturer/Lecturer in Social Anthropology", *Administrative Archives*, UCT. I could not establish from the records whether Mafeje applied.

Mafeje is very much liked both by fellow students and staff, wherever he works".² Most of what Wilson had to say was echoed by the three referees of Mafeje.

It must be said, though, that there was one objection from a member of Senate, Mr D.C. Robertson. His objection was based on the qualifications of the candidates, particularly the fact that the other two candidates had doctorates and had a far better teaching record than Mafeje who was completing his Phd. However, Robertson's objection was unsuccessful. The Committee of Selectors, "after full discussion", resolved "that the unanimous recommendation of the Board of Electors that Mr. A. Mafeje be appointed, be upheld".³ This recommendation was accepted by Council on 1 May 1968. On the same day, the registrar wrote a letter to Mafeje in Cambridge.

This letter was never sent to Mafeje. The Principal, Sir Richard Luyt, reported that subsequent to Council's decision at its meeting on 1st May, 1968, he received a letter from the Minister of National Education urging that the appointment be re-considered. According to Luyt, there was a clear warning that if the Council disregarded the request of the Minister, the Government "would not hesitate to take such steps as it may deem fit to ensure that the accepted traditional outlook of South Africa was observed".⁴ Luyt read out the Minister's letter and "also outlined discussions which he had had with the Minister and with the Director of Higher Education".⁵

In the end, the UCT council resolved on 5 June 1968 to rescind its decision to appoint Mafeje. The motion was put to a vote, with a close outcome of 12 for and 8 against. An addendum to the motion to the effect that the Council "express dismay and regret that its decision in this matter of the appointment of Mr. Mafeje should have been challenged by the Minister" recorded a vote of 14 in favour and 7 against. Subsequently, Senate "noted" the Council's decision to rescind its appointment of Mafeje and associated themselves with the addendum of the Council cited above.

Following a report from the Academic Freedom Committee, Council adopted the following resolution by 11 for and 2 against votes:

In protesting against being deprived in this manner of the right to appoint the staff deemed most fit by normal University criteria, the University Council must make known publicly its future inability, as a consequence of the Government's intervention, to appoint non-white persons to academic posts, unless allowed to do so in special circumstances.

² See File 12.2.5 – "Senior Lecturer or Lecturer in Social Anthropology", *Administrative Archives*, UCT.

³ "Personal file", Location 4.3.3, Box No. 366. *Administrative Archives*, UCT

⁴ Minutes of a meeting of the University Council held at 3 pm on Wednesday, 5th June, 1968. Personal file", Location 4.3.3, Box No. 366. *Administrative Archives*, UCT.

⁵ See Fred Hendricks' forthcoming article for a detailed account of the interaction between the UCT administration and the Minister of National Education and his employees between 2 May 1968 and the Council meeting on 5 June 1968. The report that Luyt presented to Council in June was based on this interaction.

On 1st August 1968, almost the same letter that was written to Mafeje was sent to Dr. M.C. Whisson. There were only two alterations: the date of commencement, from 1st July to 1st September, 1968 and the deletion of the paragraph referring to the need to obtain “the necessary permission to teach and reside in Cape Town ...” On 13 August 1968, the Registrar notified Mafeje that “the vacancy (had) ... been filled”.

The Council decision to rescind the appointment of Mafeje provoked debate even within Council. Some saw it as unduly succumbing to government pressure. After all, there was no law that stopped UCT from employing a black academic outside African languages. Others, on the other hand, feared that a refusal to heed the warning of the Minister of National Education could backfire in the event government were to introduce a law with a retroactive effect. Such a law would affect black academics who were already in the university system. Geoff Budlender, a student at UCT in 1968 recalled in an interview with me that this was one of the arguments adduced by some members of Council justifying their decision to cave in to government pressure.

Another sector of the University that became involved in the Mafeje affair was the student population. In terms of world history, the Mafeje affair took place against the backdrop of protests that involved thousands of students in France, Germany and the United States of America. The decision by the UCT Council provided ammunition for students in South Africa to become part of these global developments. Students, not only from UCT but from other liberal campuses in South Africa emphatically rejected Council’s decision to withdraw its appointment of Mafeje.⁶ The Mafeje affair got attention at the June 1968 congress of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), held at the University of Witwatersrand. A resolution on the Mafeje affair read as follows:

This student assembly regrets that the UCT council has, in capitulating to the Minister’s threats, been guilty of a betrayal of the university’s principles of academic freedom and university autonomy (Resolution 80, NUSAS Congress, 1968:25, as quoted in Hendricks unpublished paper).

Resolution 83 urged the UCT Students Representative Council “to do the utmost in its power to organise effective and significant protest against the treatment meted out to Mr Mafeje and furthermore urges all university and training college staff and students at other centres to give such protests their fullest support”.

This set the scene for students’ protests soon after their return from the mid-year vacation. A mass-meeting was held in the Jameson Hall on 7 August to discuss Council’s decision. Students attending the meeting supported Raphael Kaplinsky’s call to Council not to do the Government’s dirty job. When this call did not elicit any positive response, the students organised another mass meeting on 13 August 1968. This, it must be noted, is the

⁶ It is notable that the historically black universities such as Fort Hare do not seem to have been involved in the Mafeje affair.

same day that the Registrar wrote a letter of regret to Mafeje. Following this meeting, about 600 students marched to the Bremner Administration building, demanding an emergency meeting of Council. When their call was rejected, the students resolved to occupy the building, including the Senate room until such time that Council conceded to their demand for an emergency meeting to discuss the Mafeje affair. As Hendricks has noted, the sit-in “was the start of the first student occupation of a university building in South Africa in 1968”. There were solidarity protests at the Wits and Natal universities.⁷

The sit-in came to an end after nine days. Those involved succumbed to all round pressure: from the state, students from the then conservative pro-government Stellenbosch University, Council’s refusal to bow to students’ pressure, not to forget considerations of their future careers. To show its resolve, Council passed a final resolution on 26 August 1968 reaffirming that “an offer to Mr Mafeje of appointment to the post of Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology cannot in all circumstances be made” (Minutes of the Special Meeting of Council, 26 August 1968).

In the end, the University embarked on what Hendricks correctly, in my opinion, refers to as “face-saving measures” and “create an aura of respect for academic freedom and for institutional autonomy at the very moment when the University was responsible for the denial of these principles”. Students became part of this exercise. Their proposal for an Academic Freedom Research Award in honour of Archie Mafeje received the approval of all sectors of UCT. However, the Senate rejected a critical aspect of the students’ proposal that a levy be imposed so as to finance the Award. The University never had a plan of financing the Award other than that it would be funded on a voluntary basis. Not surprising, nothing came of this exercise.

A somewhat successful venture was the erection of a plaque in remembrance of the Mafeje affair in the UCT Heritage Trail alongside the steps leading to the Chancellor Oppenheimer Library. The plaque is next to an earlier one commemorating academic freedom following the extension of Bantu Education to universities in 1959 as a result of the enactment of the Extension of Universities Act.

By the end of the 1960s, the Mafeje affair had escaped the memory of virtually all sectors of UCT, students and staff who sat-in at Bremner building included. It is interesting to note that almost all the students of 1968 that I interviewed in 2008 not only claimed that they never met Mafeje, they never made attempts to find out what happened to him, a clear suggestion that the Mafeje affair was, in the eyes of the students, not about Mafeje, the person, but about themselves and at best, the principle, in this case, academic freedom and the autonomy of universities.

The manner in which the UCT Council responded to government pressure is likely to be debated for a long time. There are no easy answers to the issue. With hindsight, it is easy to condemn the actions of Council. Yet, it is important to remember the political context at the time and the viciousness of the apartheid state with Prime Minister John Vorster and security chief

⁷ *Celebrated scholar dies*, in Monday Paper, volume 26#05, April 23 – May 6, 2007, p. 5

Hendrik van den Bergh at the helm. The dilemma facing the UCT Council is best captured in Ndebele's letter to the Mafeje family when Mafeje passed away:

It was a different era then. The threat of the then Minister of Arts and Science (responsible for Education) to the UCT Council may not have been an idle one and going against it could have had significant negative consequences. Yet – we should have been brave enough, should have resisted the pressure and remained principled. Regrettably, in this instance, we did not.⁸

Mrs Swana, Archie Mafeje's sister has recently recalled how the police harassed her. According to her, the police detained her, took her correspondence with her brother and told her that they would detain Mafeje were he to return to South Africa. Mrs Swana's story ties up with Richard Luyt's account of his meeting with Minister de Klerk on the Mafeje affair. The Minister claimed that the South African Minister of Police and Internal Affairs showed him "a paper setting out the record of Mr Mafeje in regard to subversive activity". The Minister, according to Luyt went on to tell him that "the record was so adverse that he (Minister) doubted whether Mr Mafeje would be allowed back in South Africa let alone at the University of Cape Town". As far as the Minister was concerned, "the University was extremely fortunate not to have been allowed to appoint Mr Mafeje to its staff...he was not free to give details of Mr Mafeje's record of subversive activities but he could assure us that it was serious" (Richard Luyt Papers, Aide Memoir, The Mafeje Affair, 23 April - 6 September 1968, as quoted in Hendricks' paper).

Luyt's account must be read in the context of a person who was trying to justify the position of Council. But there is a sense in which one can read the above accounts as some indication of the determination of the state to ensure that Mafeje was not employed. Whether being principled by defying these threats under the prevailing conditions was a viable option is debatable.

Hendricks' forthcoming publication deals with these issues and takes a hard and critical line, arguing that there was complicity between the UCT Council and the apartheid state in the Mafeje case. His stance will most likely provoke healthy debates about how to interpret the decision of the UCT Council in 1968. My position is that controversial as the 1968 UCT Council decision was, we must look beyond 1968 to understand why Mafeje never reconciled with UCT. Whenever Mafeje reflected about the events of 1968, he seems to have understood the pressure UCT was under. This does not mean that he condoned the position of Council. In fact, it is arguable whether Mafeje would have taken up the position. According to his sister, Mrs Swana, she advised him not to return to South Africa when the police started harassing her.

Mafeje and UCT in democratic South Africa

⁸ Copy of the letter with the author – I attended the funeral and delivered the letter to the family on behalf of UCT.

Ordinary sense suggests that if UCT could not in the 1960s employ Mafeje because of government interference, the early 1990s created conditions for UCT to make amends and offer Mafeje the job that he was given on merit in 1968. There is little doubt that Mafeje would have welcomed the occasion. According to his friend, Kwesi Prah, Mafeje was always looking for opportunities to be close to South Africa in the late 1980s and to return to South Africa as soon as it became possible for exiles to return.⁹ In the early years of the political negotiation process in South Africa, Mafeje was in 1990 and 1991, doing research under the Visiting Fellowship Programme of the SAPES Trust in Zimbabwe. This research was published in 1992 as collection of essays under the telling title: *In Search of an Alternative: a collection of essays on revolutionary theory and politics*. This seems to suggest that he was sharpening his intellectual tools for a return to South Africa. Most important, by 1990, Mafeje was a far cry in scholarly terms from the one who was appointed Senior Lecturer in 1968. He had by this time established himself as an internationally acclaimed scholar – see his *curriculum vitae* CV¹⁰.

It is well known by now that UCT did not make any approaches to Mafeje. This seems to bear testimony to the notion that for this institution Mafeje, the person, never mattered. In 1968 he was used merely as a ladder or a taxi to pursue certain principles and arguably also to feather the nests of some individuals. As indicated, hardly anyone was ever keen to enquire about the whereabouts of Mafeje, particularly as some at UCT claim that at the time the University was in search of black academics. Mafeje found himself in a situation where he had to take the initiative and explore opportunities of returning to UCT. It is difficult to imagine why a highly principled and proud scholar such as Mafeje would subject himself to re-applying for a job he was offered on merit. It can only mean that for him, coming back to South Africa to pursue an academic career meant returning to UCT, his *alma mater*.

Archival records suggest that Mafeje made investigations through a friend about the possibility of returning to UCT in 1990, the same year that political organisations were unbanned and the political negotiation process was set to be underway. His friend took up the issue with the leadership at UCT. The response was that UCT could not “make any commitment to Mafeje”. This again was an indication that, despite the treatment Mafeje received in 1968, the leadership of UCT did not want to take responsibility and create a job for Mafeje.

Following “many discussions” Mafeje’s ‘champion’ suggested “that Archie Mafeje be a visiting” Senior Research Fellow on a one-year contract. The University leadership found this acceptable. However, when Mafeje’s friend conveyed this to him, he was not keen to accept such a compromise. Mafeje clearly deserved more than this. He reasoned with his friend that “as much as I appreciate the gesture ... (o)ne year is too short for me to move my whole family and take my daughter out of the British International School here in Cairo”. He firmly pointed out that his family was “dead against the idea of

⁹ Numerous conversations with the author.

¹⁰ See file “Prof. Archie Mafeje (SocSch/9 Anthropology)”, Location 21.1.4 Box No. 111, *Administrative Archives, UCT*.

moving on the strength of one year. They would rather wait until more posts for which I could apply come up”.¹¹

Mafeje’s champion agreed with Mafeje that a year was “rather too short to uproot” an entire family “in order to come home.” He informed Mafeje that he had been trying to get a three year contract at UCT, but this was not possible due to “the current financial circumstances”. His hope was if Mafeje came, it would be possible “to raise funds or to find a job that could continue beyond the present one”. He told Mafeje that there were jobs which were coming up, including the Chair of Anthropology at UCT and the Director for the Centre of African Studies, also at UCT.¹²

Despite Mafeje’s reservations about the one-year contract, UCT went on to make him the offer and placed his salary at the bracket of a Senior Lecturer. Upon receipt of the letter, Mafeje was quick to point out that he found the offer “most demeaning”. He reasoned:

I fail to see how after 18 years of being a professor internationally I could be offered a research fellowship at the rank of senior lecturer at the University of Cape Town. This becomes even more incomprehensible when one recalls that one had been offered an appointment at the same rank by the same university as far back as 1968 ... After 27 years in exile I do not intend to return to South Africa under any conditions. Some of the senior staff at the University of Cape Town should have understood this.

He concluded:

Also, I cannot imagine what sort of research I could do in South Africa in such a short space of time after nearly 30 years in exile. One of my main research interests in coming back to South Africa would be to undertake a comprehensive study of South African historiography ... seeing that somehow we all have to rediscover ourselves in the wake of the current changes in the country. This would probably be one of my last major professional undertakings and I cannot do it outside South Africa.¹³

Mafeje’s reply left UCT unmoved. Its response was restricted to explaining the title of a Senior Research Fellow and why Mafeje was, despite his vast experience and qualifications, offered remuneration at the scale of a senior lecturer. With regard to the latter, the explanation was that this was due to limited resources as the posts concerned “are funded with `soft money”.

The claim that UCT did not have financial resources to offer Mafeje a permanent job is of course laughable and must be rejected. Why UCT treated Mafeje in this manner is a matter that calls for careful research and may throw light on UCT’s attitude towards black scholars.

¹¹ See file “Prof. Archie Mafeje (SocSch/9 Anthropology)”, Location 21.1.4 Box No. 111, *Administrative Archives, UCT*.

¹² See file “Prof. Archie Mafeje (SocSch/9 Anthropology)”, Location 21.1.4 Box No. 111, *Administrative Archives, UCT*.

¹³ As already stated, Mafeje was in 1990 and 1991 doing research in Zimbabwe.

It is noteworthy that as the leadership of UCT was discussing their response to Mafeje's letter, a senior member who drafted the offer to Mafeje wrote an internal memorandum in which he, amongst others, indicated that he was

not convinced that Prof Mafeje is a suitable candidate for a senior permanent position at this university, given his poor publication and research record for the past 10 years. Thus, I would not be enthusiastic about extending the offer beyond one year, which will give him some time to hunt around for a suitable position in South Africa.

This quote raises two issues. In the first place, it casts doubts about the UCT claim that the reason they offered Mafeje a one-year contract at the scale of a senior lecturer was as a result of financial constraints. The above quote strongly suggests that a senior permanent appointment was not beyond the capacity of UCT. Secondly, it is interesting to note that in his letter to Mafeje, this honourable person indicated that members of his department had "enthusiastically endorsed" the invitation.¹⁴ However, in private, when Mafeje cannot defend himself, the enthusiasm evaporates and Mafeje is no longer good enough for a senior permanent position. When I interviewed this esteemed scholar at the beginning of this year (2008), he could not remember why he made this damning remark about Mafeje's scholarship. He promised to get back to me. I'm still waiting.

In 1993, close friends of Mafeje urged him to apply for the AC Jordan Chair in African Studies at UCT. Reluctantly, Mafeje applied and was on the short-list as an "A" candidate.¹⁵ In his letter, Mafeje had confidently declared:

I believe that I am eminently qualified for the post. Not only did I have the privilege of working with the late A.C. Jordan as a research student at the University of Cape Town and abroad but also I can claim that among African scholars specialised in African Studies I probably have the widest experience and recognition throughout the continent, including Arab-speaking Africa.¹⁶

After providing details of his achievements and extensive contacts with "pan-African and regional organisations", he ended his letter on a somewhat personal note:

It would ... be a great pleasure for me to bring all this intellectual capital to the University of Cape Town (my alma mater) and in general to African studies in South Africa. To impart some of this knowledge to South African graduate students who have been isolated from the rest of Africa for so many years would be the greatest contribution I could make after thirty years in exile.

¹⁴ See file "Prof. Archie Mafeje (SocSch/9 Anthropology)", Location 21.1.4 Box No. 111, *Administrative Archives, UCT*.

¹⁵ This is the category of candidates that deserve to be interviewed.

¹⁶ AC Jordan W/Os, File 300, No. 2, *Administrative Archives, UCT*.

A substantial amount of time was devoted to a discussion of Mafeje's application.¹⁷ Critical to note is that the chairperson argued that Mafeje's application be turned down. This was despite the fact that Mafeje was rated among the top candidates during the short listing stage. The reasons offered by the chairperson were largely based on Mafeje's personality and had very little to do about his scholarship. After making reference to the 1968 UCT decision to rescind the appointment of Mafeje, the chairperson raised three critical issues that were severely damaging. First, the chairperson divulged that "a colleague" at the University of Namibia " , where Mafeje was based, divulged that Mafeje had negative things to say about UCT and "if offered the post will turn it down". Secondly, the chairperson brought to the attention of the selection committee correspondence between the two regarding Mafeje's refusal to submit copies of his publications as demonstration of Mafeje's "character" and to show how difficult it is to work with Mafeje. In response to the request, Mafeje had opined that he did "not see how they would gain greater wisdom from reading randomly and subjectively selected texts by contending candidates".¹⁸ The third issue was that Mafeje had "a drinking problem". The authority in this regard was a "UCT colleague who had spoken to (Mafeje) recently." Lastly, it was alleged that Mafeje was "very opposed to the women's centre being set up at UCT."

No decision was taken at this meeting largely because those attending did not make up a quorum. The matter was to be formalised in the next meeting.

It is not clear what happened in the period leading to the next meeting to make the chairperson appear to have softened his stance on Mafeje. Having argued in the previous meeting for the rejection of the Mafeje candidature, the chairperson changed his mind and persuaded the committee to grant Mafeje an interview. It is clear from records that the main reason why the chairperson changed his mind was to put Mafeje on the spot and make him not only to state his case, but also to give the committee a chance to assess his personality. Ultimately, a decision was taken to interview Mafeje.

At its next meeting, the chairperson reported that since the last meeting "he had subsequently learnt that Mafeje had left the University of Namibia and had gone to the American University in Cairo". He noted that Mafeje had not advised the Appointments Office of his change of address. This seems to have given the chairperson an excuse to exclude Mafeje. According to the *aide memoirs*, the chairperson indicated that "as he had reservations about Mafeje, and as it was a marginal decision to invite him for interview at the last meeting, he felt at this stage, Mafeje not be invited for interview". If the committee felt differently, this could be discussed after the interview of the other candidate for the job.¹⁹

¹⁷ Information about the proceedings of the meetings of the selection committee is from *aide memoirs*, whose status is not the same as minutes. The latter are approved by those attending. However, the *aide memoirs* were signed by the chairperson. It was difficult to get information through interviews. Most of the members of the committee who were approached claimed that they could not remember the discussions.

¹⁸ Letter to the Appointment Office, University of Cape Town, dated 14 April 1994. AC Jordan W/Os, File 300, No. 2, *Administrative Archives, UCT*.

¹⁹ I'm not at liberty to mention the candidate, but it was not Mahmood Mamdani, who was appointed in a separate process in 1996.

As it turned out, this strategy had the effect of successfully excluding Mafeje from contention. When the other candidate was interviewed, all the members of the committee had to decide whether the candidate was appointable or not. At the end of the interview, there was a unanimous decision that the candidate was appointable. As soon as the candidate accepted the UCT offer, the chairperson wrote a letter of regret to Mafeje, thus ending the latter's dream of returning to UCT.

I have not the least doubt, on available evidence, that the selection process for the AC Jordan Chair was fundamentally flawed. In the first place, the chairperson had already demonstrated that he was highly prejudiced against Mafeje. This goes back to Mafeje's attempt to return to UCT in 1990. At the time, the chairperson wrote to the leadership at UCT pointing out that a department that he was associated with would not house Mafeje if he accepted the one-year contract discussed above. Later, when one colleague at UCT recommended Mafeje when the post for the AC Jordan Chair became available, the chairperson indicated that Mafeje was not what they were looking for. Records show that the chairperson was influential in tarnishing the image of Mafeje.

Secondly, the information or evidence that was used against Mafeje about his activities in Namibia was hearsay, based, as indicated, on what the chairperson heard from a colleague in Namibia. The information was never tested. Why a selection committee made up of senior members of the University accepted this is puzzling, except to say that the seniority of the chairperson is a factor that must be taken into account when considering why members of the committee allowed themselves to be influenced by an individual. Additionally, I could not come across evidence to show that reference was ever made to the reports of Mafeje's referees. This raises questions about the purpose behind asking candidates for these reports.

Upon receipt of the letter of regret, Mafeje wrote a lengthy letter to the chairperson which he ended with these words:

In 1968 it was an honour to be offered a post at UCT but in 1994 it is a heavy burden which only the politically naïve or the unimaginative can face, without some uneasy doubts. I might be wrong but only time will tell.

This was arguably Mafeje's last official letter to UCT. The letter of regret from UCT was, as far as I know, the last communication with Mafeje until nine years later when UCT offered Mafeje an honorary doctorate and a formal apology as indicated at the outset. This suggests that in the interim, no efforts were made by UCT to attract Mafeje. This is despite hopes that under a black leadership, some attempts to recruit Mafeje would be made. Efforts made by friends and sympathisers of Mafeje to the black leadership at UCT in the mid-to-late 1990s were never taken seriously. It is only in 2002 that the Mafeje affair was re-opened for discussion at UCT.

UCT's attempts to make amends

As pointed out at the beginning of this contribution, in 2003, UCT tried to make amends with Mafeje. This came in two forms. First, following a motivation in 2002, Vice Chancellor Ndebele wrote a letter to Mafeje, inviting the latter to accept an honorary doctorate at the UCT June graduation ceremony. As the June graduation was approaching and Mafeje had not replied to the letter, a second letter inviting him to the December graduation was issued. On the same day, the University Council offered its sincere regret and apologies for the University's role in the events of 1968. As indicated, Mafeje did not even reply to the various letters, something that some people saw as impolite.

But we have to ask ourselves why Mafeje behaved in this manner. Was he angry or bitter about the withdrawal of his appointment in 1968? Or was there more to it than the events of 1968? As will be seen below, Mafeje felt the honorary doctorate was too little, too late and that it did not address broader political issues. Of more interest for our purposes is the apology, which is discussed in some detail below.

In his letter dated 17 June 2003, Vice Chancellor Ndebele informed Mafeje about “a unanimous decision of the University Council ... to apologise to you formally for withdrawing an offer of appointment to you in 1968, following severe pressure from the government of the day”.²⁰ Ndebele concluded with these words:

This apology is part of our process of reviewing and redressing aspects of our past. It is a matter of personal satisfaction to me that Council has taken this decision.

We hope that you will be able to accept this apology in the spirit in which it is offered.²¹

With regard to the UCT Council resolution, this is how it reads:

The Council of the University of Cape Town recognises that there remain many who are critical of the 1968 decision of the Council to rescind its decision to offer an appointment of senior lecturer in social anthropology to Mr A Mafeje. The Council has reviewed this, expresses its sincere regret for this, and apologises to Dr Mafeje.

The resolution that was adopted by Council shows a slight amendment of an earlier draft whose last sentence read: “The Council has reviewed this, **accepts that this was wrong and apologises to Dr Mafeje for having done so**” (my emphasis).

As can be seen, the apology is about the 1968 decision to rescind the appointment of Mafeje. There is not even a slight reference to the treatment meted out to Mafeje in the 1990s as discussed above. While the events of 1968 are important and cannot be swept under the carpet or justified in terms of a repressive apartheid regime, I argue that it is developments in the 1990s

²⁰ Hon Degree Corres – 2003, Dec Grad 2003, *Administrative files, UCT*

²¹ Ibid

which lie at the heart of Mafeje's resentment, anger and bitterness towards UCT. That the 2003 apology did not refer to the 1990s casts doubts about the seriousness of UCT in extending the apology.

In conversations with former Vice Chancellor Ndebele, he pointed out that he only heard about the developments of the 1990s when I reported to him in 2008. He joined UCT in 2000. What is important to note though is that some of the people who were associated with the Council decision were not only aware of the events of 1990s, but were directly involved. They cannot claim ignorance.

When Mafeje understandably did not reply to the letters sent to him, Council sent an emissary. This is her account:

Archie (Mafeje) was very bitter and resentful about UCT's late recognition of what had happened; that under the black leadership ... no approaches had been made and by the time I approached him he had made up his mind that UCT was compromised about his situation ...When I asked him why he would not accept the nomination and the apology, it was clear that he had closed his heart towards UCT in a big way. He liked talking to me and enjoyed telling me about his pain and resentment, and for him UCT failed and took far too long to acknowledge what they had done. He also had a sense that they thought he was a third rate scholar and not good enough for them. I think he would have liked being offered an Extraordinary or Emeritus position, the use of an office and UCT's resources, etc. For him an apology, coming from UCT at the time that it was done, seemed to him more like the politically correct thing to do rather than one of real contrition.²²

There is little doubt that the letters to Mafeje must have forced him to close the UCT chapter in dramatic fashion. In March 2004, he wrote in his will that all his books be donated to the Walter Sisulu University in the Eastern Cape. The message seems loud and clear that Mafeje wanted to distance himself from UCT.

It appears as if the issue of reconciliation was not pursued with any sense of vigour and hardly anything was being done by the time Mafeje passed away.

Since the death of Mafeje, UCT has made giant strides to bring closure to the Mafeje saga. This process began under the leadership of the previous Vice Chancellor, Njabulo Ndebele. It was, it must be said, under his leadership that the Mafeje affair was re-opened for discussion in 2002. In the letter to the Mafeje family referred to earlier, Ndebele had this to say to the family:

The UCT Council Executive Committee in this week stood in silence in honour of Prof Mafeje. It recognized again the deep injustice done. It acknowledged his extraordinary contributions. The Committee has

²² E-mail correspondence dated 10 February 2008.

instructed that his impact as an extraordinarily gifted scholar be captured forever. UCT will find a practical way to do this.²³

In September 2007, just on six months after the death of Mafeje, Ndebele re-stated his commitment to resolving the Mafeje affair before his retirement in June 2008. He told me in a conversation that he would not like his successor to inherit this problem, as was the case with him. He wanted to establish whether I was willing to be part of the solution. I told him, as I did when I agreed to be UCT emissary at the funeral, that it would be an honour for me to part of solving this complex but extremely important issue.

Towards the end of 2007, Ndebele formalised the process by appointing Deputy Vice Chancellor Thandabantu Nhlapo and me to apply our minds as to the most appropriate way of resolving the Mafeje affair, as well as how best to honour him. We agreed with Deputy Vice Chancellor Nhlapo at the end of 2007, that I should conduct the research on the relationship between Mafeje and UCT in order to base whatever steps would be followed on sound knowledge and understanding of what precisely happened in this relationship.

A working paper based on research on the Mafeje affair which contained some recommendations was made available to the then outgoing Vice Chancellor Ndebele. Given the limited time at his disposal, the new Vice Chancellor, Dr Max Price, picked up the threads. It is under his leadership that the Mafeje family was brought to UCT, a second apology offered and an honorary doctorate posthumously awarded to Archie Mafeje.

Regarding the apology²⁴, UCT acknowledged that it “has become clear that the University did not do nearly enough in the 1990s to make it possible for Professor Mafeje to return to UCT, and that this remained an obstacle to his reconciliation with his alma mater”. It goes on:

We record therefore that significant opportunities were lost during the period of South Africa's transition to democracy to bring a very significant African scholar home to UCT. In this the University showed a serious lack of sensitivity, and it is a matter of profound regret that Professor Mafeje's life ended with these matters unresolved. The University now wishes to apologise to Professor Mafeje's family that it did not make a committed effort to secure a place for Professor Mafeje at UCT, and that it may even have acted in a way that prejudiced Prof. Mafeje a second time in the 1990's. UCT also reiterates its regret regarding the Council's decision under government pressure to withdraw the appointment as senior lecturer in 1968.

With regard to how UCT would honour Mafeje and ensure that justice is done, the University committed itself “to finding tangible ways in which the memory of a fine scholar of Africa might be acceptably and indelibly enshrined both at the University of Cape Town, and in the wider scholarly community”. These tangible ways entail the following:

²³ Letter to “members of the Mafeje family” dated 5 April 2007. A copy of this letter was made available to the author and is kept in his files.

²⁴ Copy of the apology is with the author. The apology was read aloud at the symposium and at a press conference on 17 August 2008

- The University undertakes firstly, to permit access to scholars wishing to research the events surrounding Archie Mafeje at UCT to all relevant archival material without waiting the normal proscribed period, and to allow publication of any research resulting from this. However no individuals still living may be named or identified without their permission.
- UCT will fund and promote a festschrift to honour Professor Mafeje's life long body of scholarly work.
- UCT will create a post-graduate scholarship in the name of Archie Mafeje for a black South African scholar in the field of African Studies.
- UCT will rename the Senate Room in which the 1968 sit-in took place as the Archie Mafeje Room and erect an appropriate plaque recalling the history of the Mafeje affair.
- UCT will confer on Archie Mafeje posthumously the degree Doctor of Literature, Honouris Causa.

On 17 August 2008, the first of the above undertakings was fulfilled when it was formally announced at the symposium that the Senate Room would be re-named the Archie Mafeje Room and the plaque to this effect unveiled by Mafeje's son, Xolani. On the following day, along with the installation of the new Vice Chancellor, an honorary doctorate was posthumously conferred on Archie Mafeje. The certificate was received by Mafeje's daughter, Dana.

At the time of writing this contribution at the end of August 2008, nothing concrete had been done regarding the remaining three undertakings.

Unfinished business?: Concluding remarks

UCT is attempting to bring closure to the Mafeje saga in circumstances where earlier attempts to reconcile with Mafeje failed rather dismally. This immediately raises questions about how UCT's current attempts to make amends with the Mafeje family will be viewed. There is a real danger that efforts on the part of UCT to resolve the Mafeje affair, however genuine, may be seen as opportunistic. Vice Chancellor Ndebele made it clear to us that he would not be happy with that impression. It is precisely this awareness and the importance of demonstrating that UCT's attempts are not an exercise riddled with opportunism that I agreed to be involved in this process of reconciliation. As can be seen in this contribution, UCT has reconciled with the immediate family of Archie Mafeje. They have overruled him and accepted an apology and honorary doctorate on his behalf.

The question that imposes itself on us is whether this marks the end of the Mafeje affair. A related question is whether any lessons can be learnt from this experience. Or was it one unfortunate isolated experience? These are difficult questions to respond to precisely because of their concreteness. One may be tempted to take the easier route and leave these questions to time. But it is also possible to respond in a suggestive, rather than definitive way to these questions. I propose to do the latter.

It can be argued that one of the main reasons why Mafeje was so angry and contemptuous of UCT's efforts in 2003, particularly the apology, was that he felt that the University was not open enough about the nature of the Mafeje affair. As has been shown, for UCT in 2003, it was about the events of 1968. It is apparent that apologising for what happened in 1968 was an easy option for UCT for the simple reason that blame could always be apportioned to the apartheid state. More difficult for UCT, it seems, was an acceptance of responsibility, which is what the treatment meted out to Mafeje in the 1990s demanded. It is, I would argue, this acknowledgement and acceptance of responsibility that makes the 2008 apology more acceptable and respectable. This is a major step that must be applauded.

The 2008 apology makes another important breakthrough by permitting opening access to archival material to "scholars wishing to research the events surrounding Archie Mafeje at UCT ... without waiting the normal proscribed period and to allow publication of any research resulting from this". What this section of the clause in the apology also points to is recognition that Mafeje was a scholar and that in making an apology, it is critical to consider not only Mafeje's immediate, biological family, but his wider family of scholars and activists. They are as concerned about the Mafeje affair as his immediate family. Inviting scholars to do research is one way of extending the apology to Mafeje bigger family.

Worrying though is the qualification in the above clause. In terms of this qualification, "no individuals still living may be named or identified without their permission". If this was all the qualification was about there would be no problems. After all, this is standard practice in research. It is, however, the footnote that raises concern. According to this footnote, "scholars wishing to access material still within the 30 year archival protection period must first obtain the permission of the Vice-Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor will have to approve how any information obtained may be published or shared with third parties". This requirement, in terms of the footnote, is meant to "ensure public confidence in the confidentiality and integrity of selection committee processes past and future".

How are we to interpret this qualification? What does it mean to say that the Vice Chancellor "will have to approve" how information obtain may be published or shared with third parties". What does this mean in practice? Are scholars expected to submit whatever they write to the Vice Chancellor for approval before they submit for publication? Is this going to be a form of censorship? With regard to the rationale given about ensuring public confidence and integrity of selection committee processes, it can be argued that the very process of keeping records closed for 30 years makes these committees uncountable to the broader University constituency and beyond. This protection may be a recipe for abuse and irresponsible behaviour. Indeed, the 30 year embargo on records is something that must be put on the agenda of transforming Higher Education institutions. This is arguably one important lesson we can draw from the Mafeje affair.

In a nutshell, it is important for the credibility of the 2008 apology and for an everlasting solution of the Mafeje affair that the truth about the relationship

between Mafeje and UCT be known. Whatever is done for Mafeje will be meaningless if UCT will be seen to be suppressing the truth. On a personal note, this would amount to a betrayal of Mafeje. Until such time that the qualification is clarified in terms of how it will affect telling the truth about what happened in the 1990s, the Mafeje affair may well be an unfinished business.