African Studies in Africa in the aftermath of the "Fallist" Moment: prospects and challenges

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Introduction

The focus of this keynote address is on African Studies in Africa in the aftermath of the "Fallist" moment and to consider prospects and challenges that this moment gave rise to.

I want to argue that the issues raised by students, although not clearly articulated, as could be expected, presented academics, students and intellectuals outside the academy with research questions about how Africa and its people have been and must/should be studied. These are, of course, not new questions, but questions that had been sidelined and ignored largely as a result of heavy repression in most parts of the Continent soon after the dawn of independence in the late 1950s and the 1960s, as well as the effects of the Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed by the Bretton Wood Institutions. This historical background will form the context within which African Studies in the current period will be presented. I will wrap up the presentation by reflecting on opportunities and prospects for African Studies within the Continent, as well as challenges.

The Fallist Moment

What I refer to as the "Fallist Moment" can be traced to the entry of university-based students into the political life of South Africa. This manifested itself in the open on 9 March 2015, when a University of Cape Town (UCT) student activist flung "poo" onto the imposing statue of arch-imperialist and capitalist Cecil John Rhodes, which was mounted on UCT grounds. Soon thereafter students, who organized themselves under the #RhodesMustFall

movement, demanded the removal of the statue. They alleged that the statue signified deep-rooted links between UCT and colonialism or, in the words of UCT Emeritus Associate Professor Dave Cooper, “colonial capitalism” (Cooper 2015). Within a month, the statue was removed, making this a significant victory for the student-led effort.

By this time, students had added more demands, notably the “decolonization of the curriculum”. They were opposed to what they loosely referred to as “Euro-centrism” and were in favour of what they expressed as “Afro-centric” approaches to teaching and research. Of major significance is students and academics at a number of universities in South Africa, as well as elite American and British universities such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Cambridge and Oxford, had pledged support for the campaign. This clearly demonstrated that the protest was the proverbial spark that started the prairie fire, highlighting as it did the urgency of problematizing the African colonial past, not merely as a national issue, but as a continental and global phenomenon.

It soon became clear to some of us that, while this was a period of great excitement, offering opportunities for institutions of higher education in South Africa and elsewhere to interrogate their past as they considered their future options, there was an urgent need to stand back, reflect and harness the energies into a sustained intellectual project that would bring clarity and critical analysis to the student demands, most of which were expressed in the form of slogans. This is a call similar to the one Archie Mafeje (1978) posed to students in his assessment of the 1976 Soweto Student Revolts. For him, “militant action” and “simple slogans”, important as they are, are no substitute for a programme of action, whose task it is to come up with clear, informed and well justified demands and policies.

Worth noting is that the issues and questions raised by the students were not new. Part of what I want to do in this address is to highlight critical moments of this history up to the eruption of 2015.

Historical context

I use as my point of departure Archie Mafeje, sadly marginalized in the world of scholarship (I'm currently doing research on his intellectual and political history). He raised, among others two critical points that are still pertinent to current debates. First, according to him, colonial historiography purported to show that before colonial intrusion, the indigenous people neither had a history, culture, nor modes of social existence in the Continent. This view of a people without a past of their own was re-inforced by Anthropologists whose point of departure was that Africa was a continent of "tribes". This colonial way of viewing Africa and its people was blind to what recent research, largely based on archaeological excavations, is adducing, namely, that the indigenous people could have lived in various parts of the African continent for thousands years and that those living on the African continent have always been heterogeneous with levels of development of their social formations. Mafeje did his fieldwork for his doctoral research on the Kingdoms of Uganda and used his experience with kingdoms and empires to make his point about social formations in Africa. Samir Amin makes a similar point as Mafeje about the heterogeneous nature of African society prior to and at the point of colonial plunder.

This colonial way of thinking emerged quite formidably in Britain and Europe and spread from there. It was to be joined by America, where the study of Africa falls under "Area Studies" – also coming out as the study of "the other".

These notions, centring as they did on the study and understanding of the "Native" were challenged as early as the turn of the 20th century not by Africans based on the continent,

but the descendants of slaves who traced their roots from Africa. It is this movement that would influence a large number of Africans who studied in England, Europe and America and ended up playing leading roles in the struggle for independence in their countries. Khwame Nkrumah of Ghana (Gold Coast), Julius Nyerere (Tanganyika/Tanzania) and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya were some of these leaders. At independence, these leaders saw universities as spaces where the study of Africa and its people could be rethought and re-written – see Nkhrumah's speech when he opened the Institute of African Studies in Ghana in 1962.

The relationship between political leaders and intellectuals proved to be of short duration. The honey moon was over by the mid-1960s, barely a decade after the independence of the first African country, Ghana in 1957. Thandika, Mafeje and Mamdani cover this repressive moment in Africa, leading to a serious braindrain.

The introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme in Africa spearheaded by the Bretton Wood institutions affected research in many African universities. Mamdani's book is arguably the most devastating account.

My own experience of the state of African universities derives from efforts we made to set up an Association for African Studies in Africa (ASAA) going back to 2012. To my surprise, I discovered that there were in 2012 about five active university based Centres or Institutes of African Studies that were based on the Continent: two in South Africa, one in each of the following countries: Ghana, Nigeria and Morocco. The Association was formally launched in Ghana in 2013 and I was elected its inaugural President. Since then has the Association has held conferences in Ibadan, Nigeria (2015); Ghana (2017) and Kenya (2019). It is commendable that the Association has managed to sustain their biennial conferences, but the going is not easy, to say the least.

My other experience is UCT where the idea of studying Africa and its people was on the spot light in the late the second half of the 1990s, when Mamdani was the Director of the Centre for Afrian Studies at UCT.

It is no exaggeration to say that on the even of the eruption of the student-led campaign at the beginning of 2015, the study of Africa and its people was not on the agenda and it was largely business as usual in many universities on the Continent. Only the Dakar based CODESRIA kept the flag high.

With the eruption of student-led protests following the event of 7 March 2015 at UCT, with its criticism that the curricula is deeply comprised and colonial, the study of Africa and its people was put squarely on the agenda. Missing, I argue, was a clarification of the slogans that were deployed. Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism, Decolonization, etc, on the one hand and articulation an agenda for the study of Africa and its people in the aftermath of the "Fallist" moment.

African Studies in the aftermath of the "fallist" moment

In the first instance, any serious attempt to formulate a new agenda for African Studies must anchor itself in the history of African Studies to date. In other words, the "new" must emerge from, ala Karl Marx, the "womb of the old", in all its formulations – Eurocentric or otherwise. This is the approach, I observe, that Mafeje adopted.

Applying for an advertised post for the A.C. Jordan Chair in African Studies in 1993, Archie Mafeje's key motivation was that he had vast international academic and research experience and that he was aware of the limits of the South African white academic and intellectual establishment. He reasoned that the system of apartheid in South Africa in particular, underdeveloped the educational landscape both philosophically and socially.

While at first glance it could be assumed that this would only affect black intellectuals and scholars, Mafeje argued that whites who used social sciences as tools for degrading or oppressing the other could not have avoided under-developing themselves.

For Mafeje, one of the departure points would be to demystify white social science with the intent not only to liberate young black academics from unjustified intellectual domination by white intellectuals but **also to discern more clearly the intellectual distortions and perversions of the past.** According to him, this would give the **young black intellectuals a good starting point for deconstructing knowledge developed by white scholars, paving ways for generating new research protocols and more liberating forms of generating knowledge.**

This would entail a systematic review of "North" dominated scholarship, as a critical step to any serious de-colonization effort, leading to re-writing the history of Africa and its people. This initiative, according to Mafeje would throw into relief processes of social integration and the development of common citizenship rather than "otherness" and evolving more inclusive semantic categories rather than the invention of "tribes" and perpetuation of ethnic identities. It is this that scholars such as Mafeje have in mind when they refer to an Afrocentric approach. It is an approach that should give greater intellectual content to the meaning of Africanity and to calls for an "African renaissance". Mafeje was forever against slogans and sloganeering and consistently argued and campaigned for scholarship that is backed up by serious social historical and ethnographic research relying on authentic African cosmologies and social concepts such as *Ubuntu*, concepts that should not be allowed to be buried under the debris of Eurocentric transpositions.

It is not surprising that scholars such as Mafeje and Samir Amin championed "pluralism" (Mafeje in particular) and a multi-polar world as an antidote to imperialistic impulses which impose a uni-polar model on the rest of the world.

For African Studies, this would entail a **desire to define the field and subject of African Studies as a decolonial one in which** Africans, particularly those based on the continent, define and redefine the intellectual project for themselves.

It is on this basis, and this basis alone that collaborations and relations with Africanists outside the African Continent can be forged on the basis of equality, mutual respect and fairness.

Is this a plea to avoid dealing with contentious and tough issues? Not at all, nothing should be swept under the carpet, pretending that there are no problems. It should be at the core of any serious intellectual and scholarly endeavour to confront and deal with problems. Nothing should be taken for granted and all assumptions and arguments should b**e scrutinized and re-thought.** No one should be excluded from the debates and discussions. But there must be ground rules, and these entail dealing with ideas, not the people expressing them. We should learn to listen to and engage with arguments and demonstrate preparedness to present counter-arguments of our own.

Challenges

I go back to Archie Mafeje who, in my humble opinion, has given a great deal of thought to these matter is acknowledged by intellectuals and scholars. The central theme of his 1992 booklet, *In Search of an Alternative*, is the "quest for an *African identity* in the world of scholarship", what he refers to as "*the search for a lost identity or the attempt to affirm an inner self*" (1992: 3). At the time, Mafeje had concluded that "a *true community of African*

scholarship" had not been achieved, largely as result of "three fronts" on which African intellectuals and their organisations had to struggle:

1. The adverse effects on intellectual life arising out of the malaise of the post-colonial state in Africa: bannings and imprisonment of intellectuals.
2. The role of donors who are "invariably politically and ideologically motivated", and "are hostile to, or at best suspicious of, independent-minded African scholars and often accuse them of "ideological bias" … According to him, African scholars are dependent for their research on donations from the North – they are caught in a serious dilemma … their pride is hurt and the realization of the power of veto of the North is hard to swallow … [leading] to bitter arguments among African scholars."
3. The attitude of intellectuals in the *Northern hemisphere*, who continue to "rationalise their own desire to control and dominate by imputing that most of the research proposals by African radicals or non-conformists are unscientific or "below standard". This forces Mafeje to ask the question that "Given the fact that in such cases the criteria for judgements are themselves in dispute, rationally, who is to say?" For Mafeje: The issue [is] not scientific; it ha[s] to do with racial super-ordination and subordination in an age of imperialism." (1992: 20-21)

After his experience at the University of Namibia and having failed in his bid to get a job at UCT, both in the early 1990s, Mafeje had little confidence that historically white institutions would transform themselves for as long as the "white intellectual establishment" held sway in terms of knowledge production. They would not, according to Mafeje, be willing to allow themselves to objects of the implicit African intellectual revolution. They, as Mafeje saw things, avoided any serious self-criticism and would not allow anybody to criticize them. He himself tried in Namibia and ended up being

frustrating and went to Cairo, only returning home in 2001. He also did not see any prospects of reviving and reinforcing the former black colleges due to limited material and human resources. He eventually opted for what he thought was autonomous national institutions such as the National Research Foundation and the Africa Research Institute whose purported mandate was to promote new research programmes in collaboration with the academic community at large. Unlike single universities, he saw these institutions as allowing a great scope for freedom of action and make possible comparative analysis of African experiences beyond the South African borders. Mafeje was committed to what he saw as a self-imposing imperative to develop pan-African intellectual and political perspectives as against the laager mentality that is being exhibited by white South Africans.

In the end, when the NRF appointed him, they were forced to appoint Mafeje as a member of the UNISA academic staff which in practice meant that Mafeje was formally employed by UNISA and had to follow its rules and regulations. The experiment never worked and Mafeje died a very lonely and painfully death in 2007.

I have chosen Mafeje's experience for illustration of the kinds of challenges confronting African Studies in Africa.