

# Third World Legacies: Debating the African Land Question with Archie Mafeje

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## Abstract

This article provides a synthesis of Archie Mafeje's views on the land and agrarian question in Africa, including land tenure and agrarian labour relations, technological change and agricultural productivity, agrarian class formation processes, and the politics of agrarian reform.<sup>1</sup> His enduring argument was that the fundamental land and labour relations of Africa's pre-capitalist modes of economic and political organization had persisted during and after colonialism and capitalist penetration in the former non-settler territories of Africa. And he also rejected the dominant view that agrarian transformation in Africa was constrained by alleged deficiencies in African land tenure systems. Mafeje's views had a unique impact on the debates on the land and agrarian questions, in both settler and non-settler Africa, as well as on my own intellectual development.

## Keywords

Africa, land and agrarian questions, land tenure, agricultural productivity, Archie Mafeje

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## Introduction

Archie Mafeje wrote extensively on the land and agrarian question in Africa, focusing on land tenure and agrarian labour relations, technological change and agricultural productivity, agrarian class formation processes, and the politics of agrarian reform (Mafeje, 1971, 1976, 1978, 1991, 1993, 1997, 2003). He rejected the dominant view that agrarian transformation in Africa was constrained by the alleged deficiencies of African land tenure systems, particularly with regard to investment (Mafeje, 2000, 2001), while lamenting the continent's failure to implement pan-African projects for agrarian transformation, such as the Lagos Plan of Action (OAU, 1980). Interestingly, although Mafeje hailed from settler Africa, his major writings on the land question and land tenure systems were focused on the experiences of non-settler Africa (Mafeje, 1991, 1999, 2003), probably due to his itinerary during his exile from South Africa.

His work was rooted in ethnographic and political economy approaches which were used to explore Africa's precolonial, colonial and post-independence social formations within their historically specific context, while searching for an alternate trajectory of agrarian transformation (Mafeje, 1991). He pioneered the comparative study of Africa's agrarian history, highlighting the continent's diverse contexts (ecologically, demographically and sociopolitically) and pinpointing the critical differences of its social formations in relation to capitalist penetration. He did so in terms of the varied trajectories of land and labour relations, agrarian class formation processes and the development of capitalist property relations.

Mafeje questioned the theoretical and empirical relevance of European epistemological traditions for the study of agrarian change in Africa and rejected the supposition that the classical agrarian transition and capitalist development were universally applicable to the transformation of African social formations. He lamented the uncritical use of Western concepts and theories on modes of political and economic organization and production in African studies. For Mafeje, European ethnographers.

...came with a given epistemology and an array of more or less taken-for-granted Marxist concepts such as mode of production, class, economic surplus, surplus value, capitalist relations of production, among others... [and] their intention was to demonstrate their pertinence, indeed the necessity for the application of concepts of historical materialism to the precolonial

history of Africa... with no wish to learn from African ethnographers, but rather to extract as many historical 'facts' as possible and interpret them according to certain pre-conceived categories. (Mafeje, 1991, p. 3)

Mafeje chose a 'discursive method', 'guided by the African ethnographers themselves', and found that 'all pre-existing concepts became suspect and were subject to review... [A] number of epistemological assumptions, including Marxist ones, ceased to be self-evident and became objects for intellectual labour...' (*ibid*). In this regard, following his rejection of Africanist anthropology (Mafeje, 1978), his work challenged dominant liberal and neoliberal Africanist perspectives, while critically engaging leftist African scholars (e.g., Amin, 1972, 1973; Mamdani, 1987).

Mafeje's underlying argument was that the fundamental land and labour relations of Africa's pre-capitalist modes of economic and political organization, which had persisted during and after colonialism and capitalist penetration in the former non-settler territories of Africa, had been misrepresented by scholars on the right and left (Mafeje, 1991). This led to a misreading of the sources of Africa's failed agrarian transition, in terms of its underdeveloped agricultural production forces (understood in technical and social organizational terms) and the related limited levels of internal accumulation. He argued that the absence of substantive forms of tributary modes of production, in most of precolonial Africa, as well as the failure of colonialism and capitalism to fully disrupt these pre-existing social formations, albeit their subjection to widespread political and economic domination, led to the persistence of autonomous household agricultural producers with full control over their land and labour. The exploitation of such households at the level of exchange had shaped the trajectory of limited accumulation in non-settler Africa.

Thus, although the system of petty commodity production which had been imposed under colonial rule through extroverted relations of exchange had promoted the production of new crops, this was based on rudimentary forces of production. This pattern had been reproduced after independence, despite limited attempts to create large-scale capitalist farmers in non-settler Africa. As such, unequal landholding, capitalist property and labour relations had not sufficiently altered the land tenure system, nor led to the rise of exploitative labour relations (Mafeje, 2003). This meant that agrarian transformation in non-settler Africa was not predestined to follow the European agrarian transition to capitalist development and that an alternative trajectory towards more egalitarian agrarian relations of production was possible, as, for instance, the Chinese experience suggested.

Mafeje specifically debunked the dominant misconceptualizations of Africa's land tenure system by pointing to the genealogy of land rights and elucidating its systemic basis in resilient household lineage systems of land and labour control, and their use. He also argued that African land tenure systems were not inherently deficient and insisted that it could not be logically argued, nor empirically substantiated, as was commonly alleged that such tenures constrained agricultural transformation. That the absence of landed property relations and land concentration was not the impediment to the transformation of the forces of production in agriculture or accumulation in non-settler Africa, was partially evidenced by the failure of post-independence experiments in promoting large-scale capitalist farming (Mafeje, 2003).

Rather, it was necessary to examine the broader obstacles to internal accumulation and investments into technological transformation and productivity growth on the continent. For Mafeje, it was the antagonism between the reactionary petty bourgeoisie and ruling elite classes on the one hand, and small agricultural producers on the other hand, which had enabled monopoly capital to excessively extract surplus value from household producers, thereby foreclosing internal accumulation and the prospect for investing in improved agricultural technological forces (Mafeje, 1978). The African petty bourgeoisie had failed to harness the state to promote the national development project, as Afrikaner nationalism, for instance, had controversially done (Mafeje, 1997), while the absence of a developed proletariat pre-empted social pressures towards inward-looking development (Mafeje, 1978, 1999).

Mafeje's writings, and my close association with him from the mid-1980s, greatly influenced my own work, as did colleagues such as Thandika Mkandawire. I was in full agreement with his thesis on the evolution of land and agrarian labour relations in Africa, including the differences that characterized settler and non-settler Africa. I shared his opposition to the claim that land tenure deficiencies constrained agrarian productivity growth and his views on the key agrarian questions facing Africa. This article provides an opportunity to synthesize Mafeje's key contributions to our understanding of the agrarian question in Africa.

Mafeje and I differed over the issue of whether or not unequal land distribution and land market relations in non-settler Africa had in fact been growing by the late 1990s, and if so, whether or not the trend was sufficient enough to warrant my assertion that a distributional land question had emerged there. When I presented this view in a draft paper done for the CODESRIA Green Book Series (Moyo, 2003) at a workshop in Gaborone,

in October 2003, Archie challenged me to substantiate this observation. I obliged through an extended revision of the final CODESRIA Green Book (Moyo, 2008). In fact, writing this article represents an elaboration of that debate and a reflection on wider discussions on the challenges of agrarian reform in Africa.

## **Is there a Land Question in Non-settler Africa?**

In addressing the nature of Africa's land questions and land tenure systems, Mafeje adopted Samir Amin's (1972) three-way categorization of the incorporation of African countries into the world capitalist system to explain the continent's different paths of agrarian transformation. This highlighted the fact that in the former settler colonies where large-scale land alienation had occurred, capitalist farming based on the exploitation of cheap labour had generated increased agrarian productivity and accumulation, albeit at a tremendous social cost (Mafeje, 2003). This was in contrast to the limited concession of land towards mining and plantation enclaves in parts of Central Africa, where natural resources plunder prevailed. Elsewhere, in non-settler East and West Africa, the land and agrarian question was shaped by the promotion of commodity export economies based on household labour and production activities, directed by foreign merchants with state support (*ibid.*).

In Southern Africa, labour migration towards large-scale capitalist farms and mines in South Africa and Zimbabwe was institutionalized throughout the subregion and undergirded by different degrees of substantive land alienation among the countries, although large segments of rural household producers were maintained but exposed to discriminatory markets (Moyo, 2002). Mafeje generally recognized that, even in former settler colonial Africa, a substantial peasantry with relatively autonomous control of limited amounts of land persisted, such as in Zimbabwe and Swaziland, although holding marginal lands under customary land tenure systems (Mafeje, 2003). As implied by Mamdani (1996), this had also created localized variants of indirect rule, within subnational ethno-regional 'reserves' or 'Bantustans'. The process in the settler economies and some enclaves in the region (Mhone, 2000) had transformed agricultural labour and technological relations largely in favour of large-scale capitalist production relations, and this led to an accumulation process which secured domestic consumption and productivity growth. However,

this system also created racially based marginalization and unemployment, and generated a land question which provoked widespread demands for land redistribution (Mafeje, 2003).

In contrast, absent extensive land expropriation in non-settler Africa, an agricultural system based on widespread household farming, had emerged on the back of pre-capitalist modes of political and economic organization which ensured relatively egalitarian land tenure systems and enabled the free use of family labour for own consumption and later cash cropping. Mafeje argued that the commercialization of agriculture under colonial rule in non-settler Africa, which introduced export crops, such as oil palm, cocoa, coffee and cotton into the household production system, was imposed without instituting private landed property, but through various colonial policies focused on extroverted exchange relations, including other extra-economic measures, and that this had restricted internal accumulation process (Mafeje, 1991). Thus, the stunted agricultural productivity in non-settler Africa had more to do with wider political and economic processes than the land tenure system *per se*. More generally, Mafeje concluded that there was no land question of note in those territories.

Central to Mafeje's contribution to the land tenure debate is the argument that the tributary mode of production was absent in most pre-capitalist social formations of non-settler Africa, and that, where variants of this existed, as in some of the Interlacustrine Kingdoms, these were of limited significance to agrarian class formation and land use intensification (Mafeje, 1991). Thus, African lineage household production and its tributary regimes did not lead to a social classification based on land concentration and tied labour (or tenancy) relations, as the experience of agrarian transformation elsewhere had shown.<sup>2</sup>

Amin (1972) had argued that some tributary pre-capitalist social formations had emerged before colonization in some parts of Africa, and that these had developed exploitative class-based relations that had led to some social differentiation and hierarchy in society, where power relations were legitimated through religion-based political-ideological systems. Accordingly, households contributed small parts of their labour product to the rulers and their social projects (e.g., the king's fields and granary reserves). These tributary systems were developing forms of land concentration and labour exploitation (or production relations akin to capitalist relations), despite the absence of full-scale feudal relations. Amin had argued that, since tribute was mainly exacted on the basis of ideological criteria, this system had restricted internal accumulation and

the development of productive forces, and that, at any rate, the nascent capitalist relations of production were undermined by colonial capitalist penetration (*ibid.*). For Amin, capitalism subordinated household production and labour processes and extracted surplus value through unequal exchange and political domination, thus undermining the relative 'freedom' of rural household labour relations (Amin, 1972).

Mafeje (1991) argued that, while some African social formations had developed tributary modes of production, this development had not led, in general, to significant social differentiation processes, let alone class formation based on capitalist property and exploitative land-labour relations. Instead, despite their broader political control of subjects and resources, the kings, chiefs and other bureaucratic elites received a limited range of 'perishable' goods and services as tribute, rather than assets which could form any basis for accumulation. Thus, there was no realization of 'surpluses' which could be invested in the intensification of land use through improved agricultural and processing techniques. Furthermore, colonial capitalism had failed to impose class-based landed property and labour relations in non-settler Africa, even in cases such as Buganda where it was wrongly assumed that there was feudalism before colonization and that after colonization, the 'landlords' became 'capitalist' producers, as implied by Mamdani (1987).

Consequently, African cultivators remained as autonomous producers which mainly used family labour on land that they controlled through a 'redistributive land tenure system', based on the household lineage clan system (Mafeje, 2003). In fact, the capitalist relations which did emerge were related mainly to the role of commercial and finance capital in exchange, suggesting the need to examine the 'specificities or anomalies of African modes of production under conditions of combined and uneven development' (Mafeje, 1991, p. 135). Although social formations in non-settler Africa had undergone some adaptation during and after colonialism, their basic social structures or modes of rural organization and agricultural production had not been substantively restructured, particularly in terms of land tenure and household labour relations.

The absence of colonial land alienation, internal land concentration and captive labour relations, therefore, had pre-empted the emergence of social differentiation derived from the extraction of surplus value and ground rents, or through primitive forms of land rental allotments, or through mandatory provision of different forms of 'unfree' labour services, sharecropping and other tributary exactions on the peasantry. Thus, the essential distinguishing feature of non-settler African social formations was the

resilience of the household lineage-based mode of rural social organization and production situated in sparse clan structures, with a few centralized political formations which regulated the social relations of production, throughout the colonial and post-independence period (Mafeje, 2003). Access to land was founded on recognized and universal usufruct rights allocated to family (both pastoral and sedentary) members of given lineage groupings (*ibid.*). Rural societies were structured around the political authority and social organization embedded within the lineage grouping, and households held land and mobilized labour relatively autonomously of ruling lineages and chiefs, while production was mainly for own consumption and secondarily for wider societal projects, such as small-scale long distance trade (Mafeje, 2003).

Mafeje recognized that exploitative land–labour relations, such as land rental and sharecropping arrangements, were emerging in various parts of non-settler Africa before independence (Mafeje, 1991), most notably in some West African countries, like those observed in Ghana (Amanor, 2008). However, his view was that this had not undermined substantially the lineage-based mode of social organization and production there, nor had it led to the extensive formation of a capitalist farming class. Moreover, he argued that even as forms of class differentiation emerged, these need not behave the same everywhere in the world. For the evidence showed that African entrepreneurs forewent opportunities to maximize value in favour of kinship considerations or leisure, just as the Buganda landlord chiefs had found greater value in political followers than servile labour (Mafeje, 1991, p. 9).

Although Mafeje recognized that ‘indirect colonial rule’ had altered various organizational aspects of rural society in non-settler Africa (as Mamdani, 1996, had argued), he insisted that lineage-based household landholding system remained dominant and secured relatively adequate land for small cultivators. The current land tenure system was a social relationship defining the control and use of land and labour, based on actually existing societal structures and institutions which had not been transformed wholesale. While Mafeje convincingly conceptualized the genealogy of most land tenure systems in non-settler Africa and showed that land concentration and agrarian class formation based on capitalist property relations and labour exploitation had been limited before and during colonization, it seems that he underestimated the processes of land alienation, concentration and commodification that were being consolidated after independence, particularly when neoliberalism was taking root in Africa from the 1980s.



## Changing Land Relations in Non-settler Africa

To understand the growing land alienation, concentration and land markets that emerged from the 1980s, it is critical to note that the legal basis for the creation of private property and new systems of land allocation and land administration had already been established during the last decade of colonialism, leading to a partial ouster of the relatively egalitarian and socially grounded household lineage-based land tenure system. Even in non-settler Africa, a dual unequal and hierarchical system of land tenure had been created by independence, which entailed a limited degree of freehold and leasehold land rights, and such tenures were treated as superior forms of land rights over customary land rights (Shivji, Moyo, Ncube & Gunby, 1998). The inauguration of state trusteeship over customary lands was extended into post-independence regimes, permitting the appropriation of larger units of land by lineage household heads, including nominal sales and leasing, while in some countries the individuation and privatization of some land were formally initiated, albeit with limited success (Okoth-Ogendo, 1996).

New notions and forms of land ownership rights and utilization, as well as the rights and responsibilities related to land and natural resources management, were being nurtured (Cheater, 1990). Contrary to indigenous land tenure rules, Africans living in areas under 'customary systems' of land tenure now occupied such lands through the legal permission of the state, which had become the ultimate owner, or the holder of radical title (URT, 1992). Such occupation and use of land was controlled by criminal law and sanctions, while occupiers had no legally entrenched rights *vis-à-vis* the state as the owner and those holding land under received law. Among themselves, households continued to relate to each other under the customary law that also governed their land relations, but, whenever the state so desired, the permission to occupy and use land could be withdrawn by administrative fiat, including forced removals (*ibid.*).

The definition of which customary authorities could exercise the right to allocate community land for household use now mixed ritual powers with proprietary rights, such that the community was now identified with the 'tribe', limiting the land rights of 'strangers' (Mamdani, 1996). Yet, in precolonial African societies, status and wealth accrued to those who could attract dependents or followers, and strangers were welcomed through various social relationships (e.g., marriage, settlement), which contributed to the prestige and often the labour force of heads of household, kin groups and multi-ethnic communities, with the customary

land tenure systems enabling livelihood support for diverse rural populations (*ibid.*). Instead, colonialism defined land as a communal and customary possession, and thus customary tenure was related to both personal relations (marriage, succession, movement) and access to productive resources (land), with custom not being voluntarily or socially sanctioned, but enforced by colonial governments seeking control of the natives (*ibid.*).

Yet these colonial state-led processes entailed collaboration with merchant capital, which sought to deepen household petty commodity production in non-settler Africa. Policies such as taxation were effected to compel labour migration and create tenant farmers, through sharecropping and land rentals, such that the land question increasingly became tied up with the labour question to maintain adequate labour supplies to create a modern monetary economy, public works and private enterprise in the export-oriented cash cropping and mining enclaves (Amanor, 2002). Moreover, heads of founding settlers and conquering warrior's lineages in many countries held relatively large tracts of land and retained overwhelming influence over land allocation, including non-lineage members (Alie, 2004). Moreover, they restricted land access and agricultural production among poorer rural householders, leading to incipient social differentiation.

After independence, many countries in non-settler Africa initiated schemes to develop large-scale capitalist farms, although these were limited in scale (Mkandawire & Bourenane, 1987). Mkandawire (1987) had suggested that this trend of large-scale landholding was growing during the late 1980s, as exemplified by bureaucrats in countries such as Nigeria seeking retirement 'livelihoods'.

During the 1980s, however, the incidence of 'informal' land sales and rentals was observed to be growing in non-settler Africa (Berry, 1984; Lawry, 1993). Such formal and informal land markets and non-market transfers initially tended to be associated with growing population pressures and expanded agricultural commercialization (André & Platteau, 1995; Migot-Adholla, Peter Hazell & Place, 1991; Place, 1995). Land purchases were even being considered to have a positive impact on individual household capacities to mobilize food for their survival, although the evidence also showed that land-selling households ended up being co-opted into labour markets and were unable to sustain their livelihoods (*ibid.*). The empirical evidence also suggested that land privatization did not necessarily result in greater land productivity and agricultural investment (Migot-Adholla, 1994).

The vogue of promoting rapid land privatization soon lost favour. Some scholars argued for customary land tenure systems in Africa to be permitted to evolve towards private landholding systems, and for land titling to be promoted where land tenure was already evolving towards individualized holdings (Platteau, 1996). Indigenous land tenure systems and livelihood strategies in harsh physical and economic environments were considered flexible and evolutionary (Bruce & Migot-Adholla, 1994). This led donors to shift their policies towards promoting the registration of customary land rights and the adoption of new land policies in non-settler Africa which enabled land sales and leasing during the 1990s (Manji, 2006; Moyo, 2008).

Such selective disposal of land between private persons only required the state to register and notify such transactions with some inter-mediatory and adjudicatory functions, proscribing the role of the household lineage-based system in customary tenure administration. Since the state in non-settler Africa had assumed greater powers of land ownership and other rights over customary lands, permitting its sale and leasing, customary land tenure became insecure and less recognized in society, as the land rights became open to alienation (DFID, 1999).

Land tenure reform over time thus enabled the state to continuously excise land in customary tenure areas and to allocate it to various state entities, foreign investors and local elites, expanding the capitalist production enclaves gradually, while allowing lineage leaders to procure larger land areas for themselves and their immediate constituencies. The legal basis of such land alienation was consolidated during the 1990s, when widespread land tenure reforms in non-settler Africa enabled decentralized land administration and greater land leasing (Moyo, 2008). Land alienation was gradually occurring through land enclosures initiated from below (based on local or internal social differentiation) and from above through state-led or externally driven land excisions (*ibid.*).

Land disputes between central governments and local communities over land allocations in the interest of various social classes and identity-based structures were on the rise (Geschiere & Nyamjoh, 2000). Exclusion from land, as a means of livelihood and local territorial autonomy, was found increasingly to limit national and local citizenship rights that are normally embedded in access to land within lineage-clan land tenure systems (Adetula, 2015). The resilience of unequal social power structures based on a patriarchy, grounded in the household lineage-clan structures, also meant that gender-based land inequalities were rising, as the rights of the youth and migrants became nebulous, especially from the 1990s.

Moreover, land scarcities and inequalities in access to land arising from natural calamities (droughts, floods) and displacements from civil wars and conflict were also on the rise (Moyo, 2008). Non-settler Africa was now facing socially significant land questions of unequal access to, and scarcity of, land, exacerbated by both demographic change and land alienation.

Mafeje (1999) recognized that some land alienation to create some capitalist farms was underway, but he considered this to be limited in scale. This neglected the wider basis of alienation, towards the creation of large-scale ecotourism ventures and large-scale farms owned by foreign 'investors' and local 'elites', as well as the accommodation of white South African farmers in countries such as Mozambique, Zambia, the Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as they relocated northward from the late 1990s (Moyo, 2002). As the landholding monopoly of Europeans settlers in Zimbabwe and Namibia was being further challenged, some Zimbabwean white farmers reinforced such relocation to Zambia, Mozambique and even Nigeria, from 2000 (Moyo, 2008).

As the world food price and financial crises escalated from 2005, a new scramble for land in Africa emerged, mainly to produce food and biofuels for export, using the large estate model (Moyo, 2010). At least 5 million hectares have been concessioned in over 20 African countries to 'foreign investors' from the USA, various European countries, China, South Korea, the Gulf States and Brazil (Cotula, Vermeulen, Leonard & Keeley, 2009; Grain, 2008; Von Braun & Meinzen-Dick, 2009). Such land alienation was enabled by the land tenure policy reforms initiated in the 1990s (Moyo, 2011). This has raised concerns not only over land concentration and commodification, but also over the recolonization of Africa.<sup>3</sup>

Mafeje later acknowledged these new trends of land concentration and commodification, but continued to question whether their scale was substantial enough to suggest that large-scale capitalist farming was significantly undermining the dominance of the household lineage-based farming system. Indeed, the significance of the degree of land concentration in countries such as Malawi, where 'smallholder' families were producing 'successfully', was also being queried by others (Eyolf & Mvula, 2008).

While it is true that, cumulatively, land concentration and commodification in non-settler Africa have grown substantially in scale, it is still not as extensive as it is in settler colonial Africa, where over 60 per cent of the land was alienated, nor has it created dominant large-scale capitalist farming classes. But it did set in motion a contested land alienation

process, which has consolidated the powers of the domestic ruling elites and bureaucrats to enable local and foreign land appropriation processes as part of the neoliberal land market reform agenda. This is facilitated by the decentralization of state administrative and legal structures in favour of the land demands of the market and the state, rather than the victims of past and present violations of land rights (Shivji et al., 1998).

The current scale of land alienation in non-settler Africa has indeed not led to extensive landlessness, let alone full-scale proletarianization, although it represents a diffuse but socially significant degree of land concentration which forebodes critical changes in the agrarian relations, despite the persistence of 'independent' household landholdings and production (Moyo, 2008). Thus, despite the fact that the land–property–wage labour relationship had not universally been extended throughout non-settler Africa, it has become evident that various forms of land inequalities and struggles over access to land are becoming politically significant enough to weaken the lineage-based household land tenure system (Moyo & Yeros, 2005). This warrants my conclusion that a land question, based upon unequal access to land and social marginalization, has emerged (Moyo, 2008).

## **Agricultural Productivity and Technological Change**

To further obviate the allegation by liberal African scholars and key constituencies in international agencies, such as the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), that African land tenure systems constrained agricultural growth in non-settler Africa, Mafeje wrote extensively on the nature of the agrarian question he considered critical to the development of that region (Mafeje, 2003). He insisted that land reform and agrarian reform could not be treated as coterminous in sub-Saharan Africa as was being done as a result of the Latin American and Asian experiences, or as could be applied to Southern African settler societies. Mafeje (1999) identified low agricultural productivity as the key agrarian question of concern, noting that this entailed not only changes in the production techniques, but also the production relations and the social institutions that sustain them.

For instance, he noted that the absence of the plough and animal traction, or spinning and weaving in the Interlacustrine Kingdoms (when some of these had been adopted elsewhere, such as in Ethiopia and Sudan), before colonial penetration, were not a result of ignorance or unwillingness

to change (Mafeje, 1991). Instead, the social development of these young societies was grounded in utility, rather than exchange values, and this served their 'perceived needs', which excluded the need to exploit labour, in a context where the crops adopted suited the specific land-labour relations of those kingdoms (*ibid.*). Accumulation and conversion of value did not occur in these kingdoms, despite some long-distance trade (in ivory and slaves), because these tributary systems did not develop class relations or transform from the utility values which underlay their stratified power relations, until colonialism imposed exchange values initially on a mandatory basis (*ibid.*). Thus, the persistence of kinship relations and the household economy were not a transient phenomenon, since the lineage and clan relations allowed families to retain effective occupation of land, while subordinating themselves to the demands of the territorial bureaucracy (of the chiefs and so on), rather than to onerous exactions from their production.

Mafeje argued that the choice of crops and livestock and agronomic practices tended to be adapted to the ecological and sociopolitical conditions, while land was extensively available to meet production for internal social needs. However, he argued that the persistence of extensive land use and low agricultural productivity after colonization, including the limited development of irrigated agriculture, became a critical problem, as the purpose of production shifted towards exports and the social needs grew (Mafeje, 2003). His assessment of the tendency for yields and inputs utilization to decline is well corroborated by numerous studies (see, for instance, International Food Policy Research Institute [IFPRI], 2004).

In examining the *longue durée* of African agricultural transformations since colonization, Mafeje argued that the introduction of new crops<sup>4</sup> and the diversification of farming systems in Africa depended on the resilience and adaptability of the predominantly lineage-based structures of agricultural production. However, the choice of crops within most African social formations had mainly been geared to optimizing household labour, and this, rather than ecological constraints, had mitigated against the intensification of production through changes in technique.<sup>5</sup> The fact that maize, cassava and potatoes had gradually replaced the small grain cereals (sorghum and millets) as a staple across Africa, and changed the household labour requirements (including the gender division of labour), meant that changes in the choice of crops and technique had altered the social and economic organization of production (Mafeje, 1999). However, wider institutional processes had provoked the agricultural productivity deficit (*ibid.*).

For instance, colonial fiat and finance capital had themselves limited investment into the production and rate of utilization of agricultural inputs, such as fertilizers, higher yielding crop varieties, improved live-stock breeds, and agricultural machinery and equipment. Indeed, Africa's fertilizer application per unit of cropped land and investment in research and development remain the lowest in the world (Dorward, Hazell & Poulton, 2007). Mafeje also lamented the fact that little of the cultivated land was irrigated, not necessarily because of the prohibitive costs but because of the mismatch of the location of water resources and high potential production soils (Mafeje, 2000). Furthermore, he noted that mechanization, including the use of the plough, had mainly penetrated Southern Africa, with much of non-settler Africa being reliant on extensive farming practices (Mafeje, 1999).

Mafeje (2003) thus argued that the key agrarian reforms required to enhance agrarian productivity were changes to those institutions which undermined the capacity of the state to promote agricultural productivity. Indeed, since 1980, state agricultural support towards productivity-enhancing technological change had been reduced (refer also Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999). Although Mafeje did not write extensively about the effects of unequal exchange on agricultural productivity, he argued that the African state had enabled excessive extraction of surpluses by monopoly capital. This reflected the absence of a clear national development project among petty-bourgeois African leaders (Mafeje, 2000).

Moreover, he argued that the state had promoted indigenous capitalist farmers who had failed to adjust to the negative terms of trade, and that structural adjustment programmes served further to undermine them (Mafeje, 2003), while highlighting the fact that it was the small- and middle-scale farmers who had been resilient and produced most of Africa's food, despite the harsh policy environment (*ibid.*). Indeed, per capita food production had declined by 2 per cent a year since 1980, and Africa's share of agricultural exports on the world market had fallen from 8 to 2 per cent over the past 40 years, while the continent had fallen from being a net food exporter to being a net food importer over the same period (The World Bank, 2008).

Mafeje recognized the negative effects of extroverted agricultural production and unequal trade relations on the transformation of techniques, as a consequence of Africa's subordination to monopoly finance capital, yet he was not impressed by the tendency of dependency theorists to subordinate social relations of production to exchange relations, and through this to underestimate the effects of actually evolving class relations explaining the problems of agrarian transformation in Africa

(Mafeje, 1978). Indeed, one of the lessons from the recent world financial and economic crisis, entangled with food shortages and price hikes from 2005, is that it highlighted Africa's agricultural productivity deficit and exposure to the vicissitudes of speculative world food markets, as a result of neoliberal policies (Moyo, 2010).

## **Class Relations and Agrarian Transformation**

Mafeje was therefore seized by the question regarding which agrarian class in sub-Saharan Africa could be the agent of agrarian transformation, in terms of output, productivity, employment and investment, and what state interventions would be appropriate. Mafeje derided large-scale indigenous capitalist farmers in non-settler Africa for failing to expand consistently agricultural output and their continued focus on export crop production, despite their inability to adapt to volatile world prices (Mafeje, 2003), even though they dominated public resource allocations and market protection, at the expense of smaller producers (Moyo, 2008).

He lamented the fact that the creation of indigenous capitalist farms had been justified on grounds that larger-sized farms and scale were presumed to be more conducive to investment in improved technologies, the use of large machinery and the better organization of market transactions (Mafeje, 2003). In practice, this tendency to place greater faith in the leadership of larger-scale farmers reflected an agricultural 'modernization' teleology based on mimicking the European 'model' of agrarian transition to capitalist development (*ibid.*), despite the fact that this model had relied on colonization and imperialist dominance over world markets (*ibid.*). Yet the African small producers, as a really existing social category, could not be wished away or shipped off to non-existent new colonies (Amin, 2010). Mafeje argued that the transformation of the productive forces among smaller-scale farmers arose from such marginalization vis-à-vis the dominant export-oriented farming enclaves (Mafeje, 1987; refer also Mhone, 2000), which exploited the labour of the small producers and the unemployed, including casual female and child labour.

Mafeje argued that a different epistemological and methodological approach would, for instance, find that the goals being set for larger-scale or capitalist African farmers were misplaced, since various other social relations and processes needed to be taken into account (Mafeje, 2003). He noted that large-scale farmers in non-settler Africa had failed to



develop appropriate managerial skills and tended to absent themselves from the farms, while using relatives to do their farming (Mafeje, 2000). Moreover, he argued that they tended to deploy the surpluses realized from farming into non-farm 'investments' (e.g., trade, other conspicuous consumption) and 'social investments' (on their relatives and kin), in order to enhance their personal standing, as members of 'corporate' lineage or kinship groups (*ibid.*).

Thus, the prospect for transforming agriculture through concerted support to small producers needed to be fully tested (Moyo 2010). According to Mafeje (1978), although state capitalism was necessary to create the basis for technological transformation and accumulation and to protect African small producers from monopoly capital, this had not been pursued effectively. Instead, the structural adjustment programmes, which in many countries had consolidated the export-oriented framework of African agricultural production, sharpened the class-based inequalities over access to agrarian resources, while weakening the relative capacities of small-scale farmers.

Mafeje argued that small-scale farmers and 'middle' peasants nonetheless contributed most of the marketed agricultural production in Africa, mainly through the mobilization of family and kinship labour resources and other local resources, and their use of a significant amount of their savings, even though such savings tended to be used for social reproduction and for risk insurance, rather than for investment in expanded capital formation (Mafeje, 2003). This process, however, had enabled some small producers (but not enough of them) to adopt new crops and technologies (including cheaper and locally adapted technologies), and to maintain some agricultural production, in spite of the reversal of state support and unfavourable terms of trade (*ibid.*).

Mafeje was also acutely concerned about the unequal and discriminatory gender dimensions of agrarian labour and relations embedded in the land tenure and land use relations of the lineage mode of social organization and its patriarchal basis (Mafeje, 1999). He highlighted how this system required women to provide farm labour under severely exploitative relations of production and reproduction (Mafeje, 1999), such that agrarian transformation was constrained by gender inequities in access to agrarian resources, particularly the smallholder sector. Indeed, women generally hold a peripheral position with regard to control and access to agricultural land, while being subjected to key agricultural labour activities, as well as reproducing children and maintaining family livelihoods in rural and urban areas (Tsikata, 2003).

Mafeje (1978) situated the failure of the agrarian reform project in Africa within the context of neocolonial class formation processes which promoted economic structures, subordinated to external capital and markets. Thus, internal social forces were unable to direct the accumulation process using the state as a central mechanism of 'primitive accumulation' in general, given the absence of a mature indigenous bourgeoisie that could mobilize capital, labour and markets towards articulated development (*ibid.*). Mafeje had earlier argued for the partial or complete nationalization of the commanding heights of the economy and the control of trade by government to protect it, as well as for state control over land since the bulk of national income depended on it, arguing that it could not be left to the vagaries of individual owners and producers (Mafeje, 1978, p. 16).

He saw the state as the 'sociopolitical subject' upon which the principal contradictions of foreign dominance rested, raising the legitimate question of what forms of state capitalism (other than the Soviet type) are required for the national democratic revolution to proceed (*ibid.*). In this context, the local bourgeoisie was too weak to be trusted to enforce economic priorities and ensure the provision of agricultural inputs (such as technology, infrastructure, credit and capital), and since there was 'popular disillusionment with the petty-bourgeois regimes', there was no alternative but to adopt state capitalism towards the transformation of agrarian societies (*ibid.*, p. 17).

Similarly, Mafeje was sceptical about the nature and role of new forms of peasant organization, such as peasant associations and cooperatives, in promoting agrarian reform (Mafeje, 1993). He argued that their importance and significance in leading agrarian struggles was exaggerated, given that the lineage household structure was the dominant basis of social and economic organization in peasant economies. However, it is fair to say that Mafeje did recognize that some forms of peasant movements, aggregating farming households across lineages, were emerging and that these resisted the unbridled exploitation by the state and markets and cooperated to enhance agricultural production (Romdhane & Moyo, 2002). Yet he viewed many of these farmers associations as tending not to represent majoritarian demands for agrarian reform, since their leaders were commonly co-opted into neoliberal reformism (Personal Communication, 1997).

Mafeje critiqued at length the agricultural development strategies prescribed by the Bretton Woods institutions, noting, in concurrence with Mkandawire and Saludo (1999), that neoliberal policies proposed one-sided measures which withdrew the state interventions required for

agrarian transformation. Mafeje was among a number of African scholars who saw the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (2001) of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) as circumventing the logic of internal 'accumulation from below', while deepening the external orientation of agriculture (Personal Communications, 2002). Lacking was a coherent programme to transform African agricultural productivity among small rural producers and a pan-African agenda for regional development and agrarian transformation.

## Conclusion

Mafeje sought to elucidate the basis of African agrarian structures and relations in terms of the continent's modes of political and economic organization before and after their encounter with capitalism and colonialism, and to propose an alternate development trajectory. He rejected economic determinism, which drew a link between lack of technological advance in black Africa and failure of development of capitalist property, based on the belief that capitalism is a necessary stage for the intensification of technological factors (Mafeje, 1991). His insistence on conceptual clarity and originality, and on empirical rigour based on sound historical and multidisciplinary analyses, has been critical to our understanding of the African household lineage-based forms of land tenure and agrarian labour relations, and of productivity as the fundamental challenge for agrarian transformation. His appeal to scholars to seek appropriate institutional and social interventions to advance the productivity of 'small producers' and internal accumulation, within the wider pan-African agenda that he cherished, is still to be answered.

The recent wave of 'land grabbing' in non-settler Africa, building on similar but less intense land alienation from the 1990s, suggests that the commodification of land and land concentration are being consolidated at the expense of small household producers, although popular resistances to this cannot be underestimated. Indeed, I would argue that in this conjuncture, of the recent crisis of neoliberalism, the prospect of land alienation is deepening in non-settler Africa. This suggests that there may be a degree of convergence within non-settler Africa towards the distributional land question that has bedeviled settler colonial Africa.

## Notes

1. This article was presented at the conference in honour of the late Professor Archie Mafeje organized by the NRF Research Chair in Land Reform and Democracy in South Africa, at the University of Cape Town, on 23–24 May 2011, and at the launch of the Archie Mafeje Institute for Social Policy Research (AMRI), University of South Africa, Pretoria, 4 May 2012.
2. See Patnaik (1999) regarding the feudal land and labour relations in India.
3. Ironically, in the 1990s, Mafeje (1995) had rebuked Ali Mazrui for proposing that Africa requires a benign recolonization to solve its problems.
4. These included maize, wheat, cassava, groundnuts, banana, cocoa, potatoes, beans, tea, cotton and rice, and livestock and poultry, which descend almost exclusively from exotic species.
5. It was commonly argued that Africa's soils and irrigation potential are poor, and this, together with endemic human, crop and animal diseases, constrained productivity.

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