Mongameli Mabona

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Mongameli Mabona: His Life and Work.

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After the Second World War, as most African countries were struggling through the turbulence which led to their independence from the erstwhile colonial powers, South Africa increased and strengthened the mechanisms of oppression and exploitation of its African population. Apartheid was never designed to give any recognition to – let alone support the flourishing of – black talent. In the dust of social and political turmoil thrown up by the strife of the following decades, it was often difficult to notice some of the remarkable achievements that were realised despite all adversity. Thus, it was possible that exceptional individuals could simply disappear from public view.

At the end of the 1920s in a remote rural area in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, Mongameli Mabona was born. To a great extent, the most probable path that his life would take was set by the major forces of his time. Like many of his family and peers, he would have herded cattle as a child and received a few years of primary school education (if any), before entering the labour market at a young age, either as a manual worker on a farm or as a miner far away from home. He would have married, lived mostly separate from his wife and children as a migrant labourer, and then he would have died an early death, poor and exhausted. But this is not what happened.

Through a stroke of luck, and obsessive attention to footnotes, I stumbled across the life and work of Mabona. Over the span of four years I had the opportunity to gradually discover his writings, conduct interviews with him and elaborate a historical contextualisation of his life and publications. This book documents the fruit of this exploration and is the first study of any kind on this remarkable figure.

The book consists of two parts. Part 1 brings together two elements. On the one hand, there is the first-person account of his life that Mongameli Mabona so generously entrusted to me during two series of long interviews on 15 and 16 January 2016, and on 18 and 19 September 2018 (a list of these interviews is presented as an Addendum). These interviews were augmented by information given by his
wife, Marta, and stimulating interventions in some of the interviews both by her, and their son, Themba. On the other hand, I embarked on a broad historical study to situate this extraordinary narrative. This work of contextualisation covers a very unlikely set of historical situations, as a sneak preview of the table of contents would reveal. By combining these two elements, I hope to offer a coherent and historically situated presentation of Mabona’s account of his life. While the first part of the book includes accounts of Mabona’s work in the wide sense of his divergent occupations, professions, and pursuits, Part 2 is devoted to his work in the narrower sense, namely to his complete writings. It was a daunting task to compile a complete list of his writings, and I remain haunted by the fear that I may have missed something. Nevertheless, the result is the very first examination of his entire body of writings. The objectives of this examination will be explained in the introduction to Part 2. The two parts of the book may be read separately, but they are intended to complement each other.

My first aim is to present a book that would be compelling to academics. It should be of value to those who study South African intellectual history (specifically philosophy, theology, and anthropology) and poetry, but also aspects of struggle history (the role of Christianity or of Black Consciousness). The book should also be relevant to scholars of African diaspora studies and indeed to anybody who takes an interest in Présence Africaine and the work of Alioune Diop. Finally, part of the discussion is so intertwined with events in Europe that it may also be of interest to some scholars of specialised areas of European history and intellectual life.

However, my second aim was to write this book in such a way that it would be as accessible as possible to the broader public. For this reason, I tried to keep the text relatively short. Where I engage with the development of Mabona as an author, the text is inevitably more specialised, but I hope that my decision to present the material by means of a broad review will give reasonable access to those readers who want it. I wrote the book in the conviction that many people, from very different situations in the world, may take an interest in it. Therefore the historical setting also serves to ensure that the divergent contexts discussed in the book become comprehensible to readers who are not acquainted with them. This is my rationale for including information or insights that may already be familiar to some readers.

Undertaking such a project in the absence of scholarly precedents is a perilous venture. I freely acknowledge that some avenues of exploration remain unexhausted. For this reason, the material had to be presented within a well-delimited framework. I avoided inflating the significance of the findings and qualified the conclusions. At the same time, the whole book implicitly reflects my conviction that Mabona’s name should henceforth be familiar to scholars and
students in the fields of academic study mentioned above. On the whole, I offer a wealth of fascinating and remarkable material, but refrain from prescribing to the reader how to assess it. That is for each reader to decide. The ambition of this study is rather to clear the terrain, to introduce its main protagonist and to give tools to others for further study. This is not the definitive work on Mabona. I hope, instead, that the book will be a useful first step to whatever else scholars may deem appropriate to do with this heritage. Indeed, in a spirit congenial to some of Mabona’s writings, I call on my readers to consider this an invitation to take this exploration further, in directions that their concerns and competences will show them.

Perhaps the most pressing objective of this project was to have the book completed during Mabona’s lifetime. At the time this manuscript goes to press, this is still possible.

I would like to thank to so many people who have helped me in this project. Among them are Rachel Mahlangu (University of Pretoria) and Stefan Derouck (KU Leuven) and their colleagues who helped me to obtain Mabona’s writings. Aretha Roux produced a very accurate and useful transcription of the January 2016 interviews. Jos Lievens assisted me to work through Mabona’s first doctoral dissertation by preparing a Dutch translation of its preface. I had the fortunate opportunity to work through Mabona’s poems in the perceptive and erudite company of Pol Peeters. Idette Noomé shouldered the burden of editing the manuscript, as she has for many of my texts over many years. Mirjam Truwant and her colleagues at Leuven University Press worked through all the difficulties to accompany the manuscript to its publication.

Enormous gratitude is due to the Mabona family: Marta Mabona and Themba Mabona for their practical help and generous hospitality, Mongameli Mabona for patiently sharing his life narrative.

Finally, while working through the material that became this book, I was impressed all over again by the chance I have had in life to have parents who strove to instill the desire for fairness and justice in their children, even at a time when it was far from the evident thing to do. While I know that there must be shortcomings in this book, it is evident to me that without these parents, most of what I have written about here might simply have remained invisible to me.

Ernst Wolff
Leuven, October 2019