Mongameli Mabona

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CHAPTER 4

ITALY

Mongameli Mabona was working as priest at Qoqodala when, one day, something life-changing happened:

And then, what happened was, after three or four years in the field, the apostolic delegate, who was at that time Damiano¹ [...] came down to say to me ‘you should go to Rome’. He did not even ask me whether I wanted to go or not. He simply said ‘You should go to Rome. People have tried to talk to you that you should go to Rome and you think you are not ready or something, I don’t know. Do you think that you are wiser than all these people? Now, I give you an order, go to Rome! Prepare and go. Prepare and when you’re prepared, come to me.’ So, I prepared and went to Pretoria where he was and then he said: ‘now next thing, he said, you take a plane and you go to Rome.’ You know, that’s how I went to Rome.²

To be sure, he was not the only African from South Africa to be sent to Rome to complete his studies. The first four Zulu priests (ordained between 1898 and 1907) received training from missionaries in South Africa before being directed to Rome.³ However, my impression is that these first four were the exception rather than the rule.

² Interview 3.
³ Denis, The Dominican Friars, p. 203; Dischl, Transkei for Christ, p. 136.
1. Italian society after World War II

When Mabona arrived in Italy, that country had barely had a decade to rebuild itself from the disorder left behind by Fascism and the Second World War. By the middle of the 1950s, Italy could still be described as largely underdeveloped, with “oases of modernity” in the car, steel, and chemical industries concentrated in the north. On average, Italians had a much lower standard of living than their European neighbours. Few houses had amenities or electricity, and illiteracy was high. The disposable income of people in the south was about half that of their northern compatriots. In fact, poverty, unemployment, and landlessness characterised social life in the south.

Dramatic socio-economic changes were to change this picture over the decade (the mid 50s to mid 60s) during which Mabona was in the country. This Italian “miracle” saw enormous industrialisation, a booming economy, and a rapid increase in personal wealth. American funding and the possibilities opened by Italy’s membership of the European Economic Community played no mean role in these changes, but the availability of cheap new sources of energy (gas and oil) helped too. Finally, as can be expected, the abundant availability of cheap labour was indispensable to this “miracle”.

However, the north-south divide remained and even increased. The continued concentration of wealth in the north and the difficulties of a transition from a predominantly agrarian society to an industrialised one in the south remained major factors that shaped Italy’s sociopolitical landscape of the time. Major politics of agrarian reform and land redistribution were implemented, but this was a limited success. Where it was inadequate, it could be considered a factor contributing to the increasing urbanisation during that time. Furthermore,

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combined with industrialisation, it created the impetus for enormous intra-Italian migration\textsuperscript{12} and international emigration.\textsuperscript{13}

Urbanisation led to sociopolitical tensions, but also to developments away from the traditional lifestyle.\textsuperscript{14} New products of industry infiltrated people’s everyday lives – a notable example is the shifting prevalence from the 1950s to the 1970s from the use of bicycles to scooters and, later, cars.\textsuperscript{15} Increased availability of appliances such as vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, and washing machines enabled many women to move from home-centred lives to professional careers, while opening homes for professional cleaning, etc.\textsuperscript{16} Regional traditional culture and dialects became less prominent.\textsuperscript{17} Despite a steady decline in church attendance, there was still high formal support for the Church, much of which was motivated by cultural or political considerations. But there was a strong trend towards gradual secularisation.\textsuperscript{18}

There is general agreement that the social fibre of life in Italy at that time worked on patronage (“state clientelism”).\textsuperscript{19} This was subtended by remnants of the “traditional feudal ethos of the [s]outh”,\textsuperscript{20} but this was not limited to the south. Another contributing factor was the Christian emphasis on the value of the family, which could easily be extended from close relatives to more remote relatives and friends at the expense of state-mediated relations and obligations.\textsuperscript{21} Clark describes this as “a curious mixture of faction networks and a quest for efficiency, of financing party politics and a genuine concern for welfare, of jobs for supporters and moral crusade”.\textsuperscript{22} Whether one calls this corruption or \textit{sottogoverno} does not change the outcome much: aside from the everyday politics of patronage in institutions, state bureaucracy grew excessively.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{13} Romano, \textit{Histoire de l’Italie}, p. 244.
\bibitem{14} Duggan, \textit{A concise history of Italy}, p. 265.
\bibitem{15} Clark, \textit{Modern Italy}, p. 368.
\bibitem{17} Clark, \textit{Modern Italy}, p. 369.
\bibitem{18} Clark, \textit{Modern Italy}, pp. 370–371.
\bibitem{19} Duggan, \textit{A concise history of Italy}, p. 260.
\bibitem{20} Duggan, \textit{A concise history of Italy}, p. 260.
\bibitem{21} Duggan, \textit{A concise history of Italy}, p. 260.
\bibitem{22} Clark, \textit{Modern Italy}, p. 335.
\end{thebibliography}
In politics, the Christian Democrats consolidated their power in the 1940s, but from the 1950s, they had to rely on coalitions to retain power.\textsuperscript{23} The post-Stalin revelations and Soviet politics of the 1950s put the formerly strong Italian Communist Party under severe pressure, and the Italian Socialist Party moved to the centre, which soon facilitated its entry into government in coalition with the Christian Democrats.\textsuperscript{24} However, this did not mean that the sociopolitical system depended any less on patronage.\textsuperscript{25}

2. Everyday life in Rome

It is difficult to say how a priest from South Africa would fit into this picture. In a sense, coming from a distant world, he did not fit in – he was neither particularly welcomed, nor aggressively ostracised. It seems that Italy’s short-lived colonial history reflected racial categories back in the Italian peninsula.\textsuperscript{26} There is also reason to believe that some of the Fascist ideology of eugenics survived in popular prejudices.\textsuperscript{27} However, it is not easy to imagine how significant a role this would have played in interpersonal exchanges in post-war Rome, where African immigrants were still quite rare. At the same time, Mabona’s position as a Catholic, and more importantly as an ordained priest, would have enabled him to score some social points.\textsuperscript{28} According to his own recollection, only very few black people were to be seen in the city and his impression was that the Italians did not feel awkward about contact with Africans (I take this to mean that he did not experience encounters with Italian strangers as typically humiliating).

However, one may suppose that he soon noticed that his confrères were not all welcomed in Rome in the same way: those who fell administratively directly under the Vatican (those from Europe and North and South America) mostly studied at the Gregorian University and were housed by it; those who came from the newer mission fields of Asia and Africa fell under the authority of \textit{Propaganda Fide} even in Rome, and studied at the Urbaniana, the Pontifical Urban University,

\textsuperscript{23} Clark, \textit{Modern Italy}, pp. 327–329.
\textsuperscript{24} Romano, \textit{Histoire de l’Italie}, p. 246.
\textsuperscript{25} Clark, \textit{Modern Italy}, pp. 333–334.
\textsuperscript{26} Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop, \textit{Bianco e nero}, pp. 99, 117.
\textsuperscript{27} Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop, \textit{Bianco e nero}, p. 126.
\textsuperscript{28} See, for instance, the opportunity to contribute to public debate (under §4, pp. 86-87).
and were housed by it. However, it is worth mentioning that Damiano, who sent Mabona to Rome, was himself an alumnus of the Urbaniana. Mabona and his fellow students could not have missed the differences in prestige, even course material, and patterns of socialisation. While Mabona confirms this pattern, he also mentions exceptions, for example, of African students studying at the Gregorian University. The Jesuit lecturers at the Gregoriana were reputed to be better than those at the Urbaniana. To Mabona’s recollection, the lecturers at the Urbaniana were mostly Dominicans, lecturers from other orders, and secular priests. Furthermore, he remembers the reputation of the Gregoriana as the institution with better students and he recalls being mocked by students from the Gregoriana on the basis of the supposed inferiority to students from the Urbaniana.

It has not been possible to find out much about Mabona’s life in Rome as a student. He probably received accommodation and financial support from the Pontifical Society of St. Peter Apostle. This accommodation would have included meals. However, in practice, this also meant that his private life was framed by that of the institution and that he would not have had many opportunities to pursue a private life outside the institution. He remembers that there were a good number of African students, for instance, from Ghana, the Congo, and Tanzania, but none from South Africa other than himself. Since the student body was comprised of people from Asia, Africa, and Europe, the institution’s solution to facilitate communication was to expect students to communicate in Latin among themselves when they were together, for example, in the dining room. This practice was later changed, and besides, the authorities at the college spoke to the students in Italian. Mabona recounts that many students were proficient in Latin (citing the Chinese students as a prime example), but many students struggled to follow when the professors lectured in Latin. He says he “enjoyed it”, adding that he “always liked Latin”, and he remembers professors expressing surprise at his level of proficiency. He also sang in a conservatory choir.

This leads us to three major experiences of Mabona’s life in Rome: his studies, the Second Congress of black writers and artists, and preparations for the Second Vatican Council.

30 Interview 6, 35”.
31 Mabona, De statu catechistarum, p. VI; Interview 6, 31”. 
3. Mabona, the student and researcher

It seems likely\textsuperscript{32} that he received a bursary from \textit{Propaganda Fide}, which had directed him to study at the Urbaniana. However, he points out that he sometimes also attended lectures at the Gregoriana.\textsuperscript{33} It is probable that he had to do some course work (exegesis, dogmatics, moral philosophy, and spirituality) and that he wrote a first paper, probably in Canon Law, since this had to serve as preparation for his thesis.\textsuperscript{34}

It was his own choice to stay on in Rome and to start a doctorate in theology.\textsuperscript{35} The introduction to his thesis provides us with valuable information about this aspect of his life.\textsuperscript{36} He preferred to specialise in canon law. His decision was motivated, on the one hand, by the fact that he found the other theological disciplines too speculative.\textsuperscript{37} Besides, the other theological disciplines seemed more suitable as a preparation for teaching, which Mabona at that stage did not imagine would be his future.\textsuperscript{38} On the other hand, he anticipated that a solid background in canon law would help him to deal with the practical problems that might arise from his priestly duties at the missions. But the field of canon law offers a wide range of possible themes. The first sentence of the introduction to the thesis justifies his choice in a scholarly way: while there were already many works on catechism, he identified a lacuna in studies on the catechist.\textsuperscript{39} I was at first perplexed by this choice of theme, but then came to suspect that it was linked to his father’s work. Mabona confirms this.\textsuperscript{40}

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\textsuperscript{32} The information in this paragraph was provided to me by Jan Dumon.
\textsuperscript{33} Mabona thinks for some reason he was exempt from this (Interview 6, 36\textdegree{}). However, the French version of his 1962 article (i.e. before the completion of his doctorate), “Éléments de culture africaine”, introduces him as “Antoine Mabona: Originaire du Cap, Afrique du Sud. Licencié en Droit canon” (p. 150). The English version does not give this information (p. 114).
\textsuperscript{34} However, he did so with agreement from his bishop, Rosenthal, and the “bishop of Rome”, cf. Mabona, \textit{De statu catechistarum}, p. VII.
\textsuperscript{35} I thank Jos Lievens for preparing a Dutch translation of this introduction for me.
\textsuperscript{36} Interview 3.
\textsuperscript{37} Interview 6, 46\textdegree{}. In the interview, the example of the “everyday” utility of this discipline was in “hearing cases”, e.g. marriages (between people of different religious persuasions). For preaching, seminary theology sufficed.
\textsuperscript{38} Mabona, \textit{De statu catechistarum}, p. I.
\textsuperscript{39} Interview 6, 53\textdegree{}.
cites his own background and that of the “people [he] lived with”. Most were not Christian and had “nothing to do with the Catholic Church”. His grandfather (paternal, if I follow correctly) was not a Christian, and his father converted only in his adult life. On his mother’s side, his grandmother was a convert. Christian faith remained something new. This social context instilled “something that is deep within” him, as he describes it. He identifies this “something” as traditional Xhosa culture, which remained with him, even though he was Catholic from his childhood on. At the same time, he recognises that Catholicism had also “grown into his background”. Thus, in his childhood, people coupled traditional practices with Catholic ceremonies and, in a way, he did something similar in his life in general.

Much of his research was carried out in libraries. However, he had the opportunity to consult with specialists at different institutions. At the Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich, he consulted with Klaus Mörsdorf and Michael Schmaus. The family of Ludwig Späth received him there and Mabona thanks them as his friends. From the interviews, it seems he may have made several such visits to Munich. In Brussels, Mabona was received by Fr. Georges Delcuve, S.J. of the Lumen Vitae Institute. Finally, Canon Brien, director of the Institut supérieur de Pastorale catéchétique, and P. Honoret, director of the Service de l’Institution religieuse, were his interlocutors in Paris.

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41 Mabona, De statu catechistarum, p. V.
42 They acted as his “consultants” (Interview 7, 8”). Michael Schmaus (1897–1993), was professor of systematic and medieval theology, first in Münster from 1933, then in Munich from 1946 until his retirement in 1965. He is the author of many authoritative studies, including Katholische Dogmatik (5 volumes) and Der Glaube der Kirche (6 volumes) and many works of historical investigations. Cf. Leo Kardinal Scheffczyk, "Schmaus, Michael" in Neue Deutsche Biographie 23, 2007, pp. 123–124. Klaus Mörsdorf (1909–1989), from 1946 until retirement in the 1980s, was professor of canon law in Munich. Considered one of the leading authorities of this discipline in Germany at the time, he published a number of authoritative studies, among which updated versions of Eduard Eichmann’s Lehrbuch des Kirchenrechts auf Grund des Codex Iuris Canonici. Mörsdorf was also co-founder and for years co-editor of the Münchener Theologische Studien. Cf. Winfried Aymans, “Mörsdorf, Klaus”, in Neue Deutsche Biographie 17, 1994, p. 683f. Both Schmaus and Mörsdorf served as advisors at the Second Vatican Council during the last part of Mabona’s period in Rome. Cf. Karin Nußbaum, “Klaus Mörsdorf und Michael Schmaus als Konzilsberater des Münchener Erzbischofs Kardinal Julius Döpfner auf dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil. Eine Untersuchung aufgrund des Konzilsnachlasses Kardinal Döpfners”, Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift 55, 2004, pp. 132–150.
43 Cf. Interview 3.
Cyrillus Papali of the Order of Carmel Discalced (born in Cochin, Kerala, India, in 1902) acted as his supervisor for the study. Mabona indicates that Papali was professor of catechetics; I observed that it is elsewhere claimed that he was appointed as professor of missiology and tasked to teach Hinduism. His bibliography does indeed contain a substantial list of publications on Hinduism.

Mabona praises Papali and his other lecturers in theology, but he reserves a special mention of Fr. Emilio Springhetti, S.J., because of their friendship and because of his admiration for him. Springhetti taught Latin in Rome for many years and published numerous books. For two years, Mabona studied with him at the Schola Superior Litterarum Latinarum at the Gregorian University.

The title of the thesis, then, is *De statu catechistarum in ecclesia* (‘On the position of the catechists in the Church’). Commenting on the fact that he wrote it in Latin, Mabona remarked:

I was the only one who wrote my thesis in Latin because we were allowed to write in English and in our own mother-tongue, whatever it was, though of course there... if I had written this thing in Xhosa, they would not have understood.

I think, strictly speaking, this still left English as a viable option. Perhaps Latin was just easier... As far as my research has been able to establish at the time of my writing this biography, Mabona is the only living South African with a doctorate written in Latin to his name.

Looking back at his university experience as a whole, Mabona comments as follows: “All I can say is that I felt in Rome that I was really... advancing intellectually [...] especially at the Propaganda, at the University”. In fact, in his assessment, Urbaniana was a good university to the point of his being “excited” when he thinks back to it.

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44 Confirmed in Interview 7, 7”.
47 Jos Lievens, who helped me by translating the Introduction of the thesis, commented on Mabona’s “Ciceronian Latin” (correspondence 1 July 2018); Mabona described it as “church Latin”.
48 Interview 3.
49 Interview 3.
And what did he finally think of his abrupt call to go to Rome? We read the following in the Introduction to his thesis:

The Most Reverend and famous Celestinus Damianus, who was once the Apostolic Delegate for southern Africa, encouraged me most to go to Rome to continue my studies there. Words are not enough to express my gratitude to him. This very passionate shepherd will therefore know that my heart will always be very grateful to him.50

Pure compliance with formal rhetoric? Perhaps not – if one takes into consideration the whole scope of experiences he had in Rome, of which more will follow.

4. Further intellectual work

Mongameli Mabona's intellectual work as apprentice theologian was not restricted to research for his thesis. At some stage in the late 1950s, he started to collaborate with students of the African Association of St. Augustine. The annual review of this Association was named *Lux*, and Mabona was the editor of the journal for some years. His very first publications appeared in this review: “Africa's true position and destiny” and “African mentality in a world frame” (both appeared in the 1958–1959 edition). In this issue, he is also indicated as the president of the Association.

It is probable that Mabona participated in the 1963 All African Students Conference in London.51 A radio broadcast reported on the event on 17 April 1963 as follows:


Some 200 delegates attended the opening today of the second pan-African congress of African students in Europe and in the United States to discuss African unity. The conference was organized by four African associations in Europe and the United States: The Committee of African Organizations of Britain, the Federation of Students from Black Africa and France, the Union of African students in Europe, and the Union of African students in America. Among those seated on the platform were the Ghana High Commissioner in London, Kwezi Armah, Congo Leopoldville chargé d'affaires Thomas Kanza, and the Yosgoslov ambassador, Mr. Prica.\(^{52}\)

Mabona’s presentation at the conference was published in the *Ghanaian Times*\(^ {53}\) and was hailed by the journal’s editor as a “revolutionary address on African culture and World Revolution”.\(^ {54}\) Following Danquah’s reading, the presentation dealt with the “traditional European mentality” and the African view of the universe as a “system of forces”. Mabona advocated a personalist-realist view on reality and an approach to African unity in all dimensions of human existence (for instance, cultural unity and unity with the whole world).

Of a completely different nature is his participation in the conference on “The use of audio-visual equipment for education in Africa”, held in Milan on 26 and 27 April 1962.\(^ {55}\) A collection of papers was selected from this event for publication in *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell’Istituto italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente*. The introduction to this collection of papers describes the event in the following terms (my translation):

On 26 and 27 April, the First International Congress on the Use of Audiovisual Media for Education and Vocational Training in Africa was held in Milan, in the halls of MIFED. The congress was the initiative of the MIFED [Mercato Internazionale del Film e del Documentario] and

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53 To date I have not been able to get a copy of this.


of the International Committee for the Development of Educational and Cultural Activities in Africa (CIDAECA). It was attended by delegates and observers from the Governments of 21 African countries and numerous specialized Italian, European and international organizations. In four intense working sessions, problems, projects and experiences were exposed and discussed and some practical conclusions were drawn which, on the one hand commit CIDAECA to carry out certain actions, which are currently underway, on the other hand urge MIFED to convene a second conference as soon as possible (as will be effectively convened in April), in which the Italian and world industry that is interested in the production of audiovisual media is also called to participate. The complex problems of education and professional training in Africa and of the possibilities and methods of use of audiovisual media were the subject of interesting contributions from the speeches and presentations delivered at the conference last April, of which we give a selection.

Mabona’s contribution, of which an extract was published, revolves around the untapped human and economic potential of the African continent. He emphasises the need for mass education based on intercontinental collaboration in a spirit of shared humanism. He acknowledges the role that radio and cinema could play. Incidentally, he probably gave the presentation in Italian – his years in Rome enabled him to acquire a significant proficiency in Italian to the point that he recalls once being asked if he came from Libya, and another time someone exclaiming not knowing that there were black Italians.56

These three examples of work beyond his theological research open a window to another significant part of his life in Italy. For, as significant as it was for him to study in Rome and to overcome the enormous obstacles to complete his doctorate, Mabona was also exposed to an entirely different (but not unrelated) set of influences. The exact order in which events unfolded is not clear, but the fact that they took place is of central importance for the life and work of Mabona.

56 Interview 6, 29"
5. Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists:
Alioune Diop and Présence Africaine

It just so happened that the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists took place in Rome in 1959 when Mabona lived there. To appreciate why this could be such a significant experience for him, we have to take a step back by speaking about its organiser: Alioune Diop.

Diop was born in 1910 in Saint-Louis, Sénégal, where he grew up. After his initial studies at the University of Algiers, he advanced his education in Paris. There, he joined approximately five thousand peers from Africa (of whom, in 1940, only about a hundred were students), the Antilles, and Guyanne (most of whom were, like Diop, French citizens at that time). This proved to be an extraordinary milieu for networking between people of African descent – as much for Diop as for many of his fellow students – Senghor, Césaire, Rabemananjara, Damas, and others. But Diop also made the acquaintance of many French peers: Camus (whom he knew from Algiers), Gide, Breton, Griaule, Picasso, Sartre, Mounier, Leiris, Balandier, and others. Many of these people would support his work throughout his life.

Diop thus took part in the growth of the intellectual climate that saw the emergence of négritude. At the same time, he built close ties with Fr. Maydieu and other Christians and converted to Catholicism. From associates such as Sartre, Mounier, and Maydieu, he learned about the value and potential of intellectual journals, such as Les temps modernes, Esprit, and La vie intellectuelle. Additionally, in formal and informal ways, Diop continued to make connections with younger students – including Cheikh Anta Diop and Abdoulaye Wade – as a mentor. Soon after the war, he also married and started a family.

The apparent disparate statements of the last paragraph represent the most important lines of development of his life narrative; these dimensions often converged in a number of highly significant events, some of which extended

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58 Verdin, Alioune Diop, pp. 50, 129.
60 Verdin, Alioune Diop, p. 100.
over decades, related to his promotion of African culture. Culture should be understood here in the broadest sense, to include (but not to be reduced to) politics, intellectual life, the arts, etc. The general orientation of Diop’s work, at least in the late 1940s, can be summarised in the following theses:

The originality of African civilization, the need for cultural exchanges between the two continents [Africa and Europe, including the African diaspora], the veiled criticism of exploitative colonialism and the mediocrity of settlers, the appeal to the forces of the mind, the concern for the regeneration of Europe and the original development of Africa.\textsuperscript{61}

This also corresponds with the foundation of the journal \textit{Présence Africaine}, which he launched with the support of many of his associates, named above. The first edition appeared at the end of 1947. From the beginning, it contained contributions on a wide variety of themes on African culture, dialogue with Europe, and also poetry and literature. In practice, \textit{Présence Africaine} extended its publication activities to include books by Africans and/or on African issues. The first book published by Diop was a re-edition of an obscure tome formerly published by Lovania Press in Elizabethville, under the name \textit{La philosophie bantoue} by Placide Tempels.\textsuperscript{62} The combined effect of publishing influential works, plus work from the \textit{négritude} movement (e.g. a second publication of Césaire’s \textit{Discourse on colonialism}) and later the entire oeuvre of Cheikh Anta Diop, was to establish the reputation of \textit{Présence Africaine}. In a sense, the names of Césaire and Anta Diop symbolically represent two dimensions of the mission of \textit{Présence Africaine} as a publisher: the advancement of African literature and arts,\textsuperscript{63} and the desire to make scientific contributions, in particular in historiography.\textsuperscript{64} These two dimensions overlap, insofar as they both are also forms of politics pursued by other means.

**Excursion: The journal \textit{Présence Africaine}**

But before we return to the life work of Alioune Diop, it is necessary to zoom in on the journal he founded. What is of interest here is the general ideological

\textsuperscript{61} Verdin, \textit{Alioune Diop}, p. 149.

\textsuperscript{62} Verdin, \textit{Alioune Diop}, pp. 147, 199–208


\textsuperscript{64} On historiography in \textit{Présence Africaine} (especially Anta Diop and Joseph Ki-Zerbo), cf. Howlett and Fonkoua, “La maison \textit{Présence Africaine}”115-121.
orientation from which the journal started and the first changes this orientation underwent in response to world events. The journal *Présence Africaine* aimed to ensure greater recognition of African culture and to be a space in which African culture could find public expression. Gradually, this cultural agenda espoused the bigger aim of African independence. Diop was convinced that the best way for a journal to contribute to these objectives was to create a forum for the plurality of voices and views; that is to say, the journal had to refrain as much as possible from imposing its own ideology and to allow encounters between Africans and Europeans, between people of the most divergent persuasions, to express the full scale of their correspondence and disagreements. Clearly, such an enterprise still presupposed a view. Diop wanted to celebrate African history and transmit knowledge of its cultures, but this was always linked to contemporary creation, study, and political engagement. This is not a nostalgic culturalism, but a view of Africa as “the place of a history in the making.” As much as the history of defeat, deprivation, and exploitation remained part of present reality, the project was to assume this present in creative and reflective engagement with the modern world.

But this general orientation of the journal was more than a mere direction. One could identify the substance of this orientation in two steps. First, while the journal had to be representative of diversity and contestation, Diop believed in the constructive outcomes of such oppositions. This conviction was based on his own humanism, as Hewlett and Fonkoua explain:

> In the name of a humanist vision of history, Alioune Diop has taken up the challenge to think both Senghor’s ‘civilisational’ universalism and Césaire’s political radicality. Two universalisms confronted each other: one ‘ecumenical’ (‘the civilization of the universal’) and the other more oriented towards an approach largely inspired by Marxism.

Second, this approximation of the journal’s ideology can be unpacked by a more historical view of its gradual change. According to Salah Hassan, a significant shift in general (cultural)political orientation can be observed over the first decade of the journal’s editions. Hence the initial plural orientation to liberal

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65 Howlett and Fonkoua, “La maison Présence Africaine” 108.

66 Cf. Howlett and Fonkoua, “La maison Présence Africaine”, p. 112. The whole *Présence Africaine* 2010/1–2 (N° 181-182) is devoted to the work and heritage of Alioune Diop: it contains the contributions to the International Symposium Alioune Diop, the Man and his Work Facing Modern Challenges.


In 1947, liberal humanism, based on the projection of a universal civilization and informed by European philosophical and ethnographic modes of thought, dominated the journal’s editorial line. The inaugural issue of 1947 testifies unequivocally to the hegemony of these cultural values. The appearance of the new series marked the shift in power relations within \textit{Présence Africaine} resulting from the emergence outside the journal of newly hegemonic sources of cultural legitimation on the periphery: political Pan-Africanism, nation-statism, African socialism, and nonalignment. The shift is apparent not only in the stated anticolonialism and antiracism of the new editorial collective in 1955, but also in a reorganization of the division of intellectual labor and the political engagement of the literary contributions, confirming the decisive – although not uncontested – triumph of Pan-African forces associated with the journal.\footnote{Hassan, “Inaugural Issues...”, pp. 194–195.}

This change in ideological orientation can be attributed to an appropriation of the Bandung Conference (April 1955), the beginning of the Algerian uprising, and the spread of the effects of the “Cold War” to the colonies as a fairly late response of radicalisation to these events.\footnote{Cf. Hassan, “Inaugural Issues...”, p. 198.} The net effect was a tendency to leave the more optimistic view of an African reconciliation within a universal humanism, for a more articulate contestation of geopolitical inequalities, exploitation, etc. “Tendency”, because this change is not to be construed as a break, but rather as a shift in general emphasis.\footnote{Mudimbe’s qualified endorsement of Hassan’s analysis emphasises the importance of noticing the later emphasis present in earlier editions, just like the earlier emphasis remained present in the later (Valentin Mudimbe, “À la naissance de \textit{Présence Africaine}: La nuit de foi pourtant’. Lettre à Éric Van Grasdorff”, \textit{Rue Descartes} 83/4, 2014, pp. 117–136). The volume, \textit{The surreptitious speech. \textit{Présence Africaine} and the politics of otherness 1947 – 1987}, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992, edited by Mudimbe, remains an invaluable collection of studies on \textit{Présence Africaine}.}

This description of the journal’s orientation is of great significance for us, since, with its continuities and shifts, it maps the objectives and ambitions for which the journal stood, but also the different stances that were taken up in it. In
short, it sketches a milieu of intellectual and artistic work with which the student Mongameli Mabona was to be confronted and in which he was going to be taken up, as we will see later.

But the importance of his years in Rome for Mabona’s life is premised on still another dimension of the journal’s project. It intended not only to publish ideas that could in turn be sharpened through debate, but also to contribute to the circulation and exchange of ideas beyond the immediate circle of intellectuals. Its ambition was also a broader one of sensitisation and education. This objective had an impact on the medium of expression. At its inception, the journal was French, but sometimes articles were published in English too. Then, from 1960, a complete English edition was published. This is in keeping with the journal’s policy of African unification and the broad dissemination of ideas. However, if I interpret the evidence correctly, this was to have a significant consequence, in that authors who wrote in English could gain much easier access to publication and their essays would be translated. To this point too, we will soon return (see p. 97).

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After this detour on the journal *Présence Africaine*, we can now resume the discussion of Alioune Diop’s work and the events surrounding it.

It has been noted that many of the contributors to the journal and books printed by this publisher were penned by African expatriates. This fact reflects a larger phenomenon of the growing dynamism of African intellectual, artistic, and cultural life as concentrated in the former colonial powers (the same can be said for some political movements). Diop certainly used the networks and institutional platforms available to him to establish and institute means by which to further African cultural politics as he understood it. This is most eloquently demonstrated by the first and second Congress for Black Writers and Artists, held respectively in Paris (1956) and Rome (1959).

Unfolding the logic of his cultural politics, but also in response to the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung (April 1955), Diop, with collaborators from

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72 Information received from KU Leuven librarian Stefan Derouck on 5 October 2018.
Africa, the Antilles, the United States, and the people around him, organised the first Congress for Black Writers and Artists that took place in Paris at the Sorbonne in 1956. It brought together an impressive line-up of writers, intellectuals, and artists from Africa and the African diaspora, both anglophone and francophone. Among them was one South African-born artist and musician: Gerard Sekoto. Other notables were Mercer Cook, Richard Wright, R.P. Bisanthe, Jacques Rabemananjara, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, Boubou Hama, Mamadou Dia, Cheikh Anta Diop, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Abdoulaye Wade, and Amadou Hampâté Bâ. Unexpected tensions emerged during the Congress: the views of many of the Africans and the Afro-Americans diverged, and there was political friction among participants (partially due to outside intervention). But overall, the Congress was an enormous success. It confirmed the importance of Pan-African intellectual and artistic collaboration, and forcefully reaffirmed the condemnation of racism and colonialism. As a contribution to coordinate the different aspirations of Africans, Antilleans, and Afro-Americans, and as collective cultural and intellectual self-affirmation, the Paris Congress was a historical event of the highest international importance.

The presentations of the Congress were published in Présence Africaine in an English and a French volume and were widely disseminated. The success of the Congress and the subsequent standing that its organiser enjoyed facilitated the establishment an institution that could channel and augment the momentum created by the Congress. In the very same year, 1956, Alioune Diop founded the Société africaine de culture (SAC), following to some extent the model of the Société européenne de la culture, in which he had participated for a number of years. The objectives of the SAC would be furthered by conferences and other meetings, on themes such as underdevelopment, religion, women in Africa, African cinema, and apartheid. Of all of its activities, only one is of concern for our purposes.

Without this background, it is hard to grasp the significance of the Congress that Mabona happened to be able to attend in Rome, where it took place from

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76 According to the list provided by the UNESCO website for the fiftieth anniversary of the conference: http://portal.unesco.org/ev.php-URL_ID=34700&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (last accessed 8 November 2018).
77 The English version is 1959/1–2 (N° XXIV-XXV) and the French one is 1959/4–5 (N° XXVII-XXVIII).
78 A critical view on the SAC is offered by Frantz Fanon, Les damnés de la terre, Paris: La Découverte, 2002, pp. 204–206.
79 Verdin, Alioune Diop, p. 274.
26 March to 1 April 1959. Its theme was “Unity and responsibility of/for the black African culture”.80

In the three years separating the two conferences, the geopolitical climate had changed considerably. For francophone Africa, the 1958 Constitution of the French Union opened the difficult path to the end of the French imperial project and to the different national situations from which participants spoke. Sékou Touré, who defiantly rejected the Constitution, and by 1959 was the head of state of an independent Guinea, gave a presentation in absentia.81 Franz Fanon also participated while he was allied to the *Front de libération nationale* (FLN) in the Algerian war of independence which was being waged at that time. Another participant, Senghor, who would become the first president of independent Senegal in 1960, supported the Constitution, for a variety of pragmatic and principled reasons. Furthermore, while some delegates wanted to remain true to the geopolitical alternative of the non-aligned movement, others openly stated their loyalty to communism. The question of unity, figuring in the conference theme, was highly topical.

At the same time, whereas the first Congress relied very strongly on private initiative, the second took place in Rome at the invitation of (amongst others) the Italian government and the mayor of Rome, and enjoyed support and financial aid from UNESCO. They thus enjoyed the moral support of the Italian head of state and the Pope.82

I could not ascertain whom Mabona met at the conference or confirm which sessions he may have attended. He may have met compatriots Sekoto and Mphahlele. At the conference he may have attended presentations reflected in the two volumes of proceedings – I select those whose themes were subsequently echoed in his own later work.83

- From the first volume:
  - Cheick Anta Diop, “African cultural unity (I)” (pp. 66–72);
  - Aimé Césaire, “The man of culture and his responsibilities” (pp. 125–132);


81 Cf. also Lock, *Identité africaine*, 113.


83 Following the conference, proceedings were published in two volumes of *Présence Africaine* in 1959. The principle behind the distribution of articles, sometimes translated, into a French and an English volume is not clear to me.
— Robert Sastre, “Theology and African culture” (pp. 142–152);
— Es’kia Mphahlele, “Negro culture in a multi-racial society in Africa” (pp. 221–227);
— Léopold Senghor, “Constructive elements of a civilization of African Negro inspiration” (pp. 262–294); and finally
— Pope John XXIII’s response at the “Audience granted by His Holiness to The Society of African Culture” (pp. 469 à 470).\(^{84}\)

• From the second volume:

— Taita Towet, “The role of an African philosopher” ("Le rôle d’un philosophe africain", pp. 108–128);
— Vincent Mulago, “Theology and its responsibilities” ("La théologie et ses responsabilités", pp. 188–205); and
— Gerard Sekoto, “Responsibility and solidarity in African culture” ("La responsabilité et la solidarité dans la culture africaine", pp. 263–267).\(^{85}\)

Not in the conference proceedings is the paper “Culture and nation” ("Culture et nation")\(^{86}\) read by Fanon, subsequently published as “Fondements réciproques de la culture nationale et des luttes de Liberation” (the second half of Chapter IV of *Les damnés de la terre*).\(^{87}\)

Finally, having access to these editions of *Présence Africaine*, Mabona would have been gladdened and encouraged by the motion condemning

notably in Algeria, Kenya, Nyassaland, the Congo, Angola and Rhodesia, and particularly in the Union of South Africa, violence in the most diverse forms and segregation in its most intolerable aspects, continue to be exercised against the peoples, in violation of the fundamental right of peoples to dispose of themselves, and of the fundamental rights of the individual, threatening to disunite the natural and human elements which are indispensable to the flourishing of culture.\(^{88}\)

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\(^{84}\) *Présence Africaine* 1959/1–2 (N° XXIV-XXV) Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists.


\(^{88}\) “Motions”, *Présence Africaine* 1959/1 (N° XXIV-XXV), pp. 461–463, citation 463.
This is in line with the continued engagement for the South African cause, by both *Présence Africaine* and the SAC.

Major recurrent themes throughout the conference proceedings are interdisciplinary study, the unity of African culture globally, the possible coordination of promoting African culture and (Catholic) theology, the critique of all forms of oppression and exploitation, and some tendencies to human universalism, but with cultural pluralism and the embrace of African culture, without sacrificing modernity or progress. Moreover, the significance of the Congress for philosophy can be measured by a reflection by Jean Kinyongo:

> It was only in 1959 that the expression African philosophy, already used in 1958 by Janheinz Jahn in his famous book Muntu, was definitively adopted. The resolution of the Subcommittee on Philosophy at the 2nd Congress of Black Writers and Artists – the first true charter of African philosophy – emphasises the name African philosophy, which thus became part of current practice and usage.

The opportunity to attend this conference would leave an enormous impression on the student Mongameli Mabona. In fact, one can trace this impact in his publications from right after the event. However, one may, with equal confidence, claim that the most significant encounter for Mabona was with the person of Alioune Diop, his welcoming personality, his indefatigable work for the cause of African culture, and perhaps also his faith. In any case, it is about him that Mabona exclaimed: “I was very close to that man.”

Henceforth, Diop and *Présence Africaine* were to be a major point of orientation in his work: “[...] whenever I had holidays I went to France to work with him.” But it is not clear when exactly this happened. Only two periods appear to be plausible: 1959–1963 (the time between their first encounter and Mabona’s leaving Rome) and 1972–1980 (between Mabona’s arrival in London and Diop’s death). On the basis of Mabona’s contributions to *Présence Africaine* publications, I assume that the two men were in relatively frequent contact during the first period; from the “Gratitude” section in *Diviners and prophets*, we know

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91 Interview 3.

92 Interview 3.
that they already met in London early on during the second period and several times after that in Paris.

Diop prompted Mabona to work on the relation between the European thought he was exposed to at university and African thought, for instance, on African philosophical terms. Mabona remembers that some Africans with whom he had contact at that time were afraid that *Présence Africaine* would “take things too far” and explore directions that the Church would not approve of (and that they should instead bow to church authority). However, Mabona dismisses the view that the journal’s work had this implication. Diop’s objective, and Mabona’s too, was finding forms of thinking in agreement with traditional expression.

The first tangible outcome of this encounter is a series of publications submitted by Mabona to *Présence Africaine*. The first of these was a republication of the article “Towards an African philosophy”, initially the third and last of his contributions to *Lux* (namely in the 1959 edition). Except for the short contribution to “Impiego degli audiovisivi per l’educazione in Africa” (cited above), all of Mabona’s remaining publications of the 1960s were presented in *Présence Africaine*:

— five articles, including “Towards an African philosophy”, all of which appeared in both French and English;
— one chapter, “The depths of African philosophy”, published in *Personnalité africaine et catholicisme* and drawn from his book manuscript (see below pp. 100-101); and
— eight poems (the first in 1965, the others in 1970).

Later, in 1996, a series of his texts were again published by *Présence Africaine*:

— three on South African liberation history;
— two short interviews; and
— two short reviews on South African literature.

One cannot miss that already, formally, the array of contributions correspond with the range of objectives of *Présence Africaine*: intellectual, scientific, and artistic.

But the influence goes deeper than this, because during his time as a doctoral student, Mabona also completed a book manuscript entitled *The outlines of...*

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93 Interview 6, 1:12”.
94 In fact, according to the interview, up to the present, Mabona considers the question of the relation between the Church and tradition to remain unresolved.
95 This poem, “The sea”, was also published in *New Coin* in the same year.
African philosophy in 1962.\(^{96}\) He wrote the book in one year and intended it as a sketch; he wanted to see whether people would be interested in it (and indeed, to raise interest in it), before resuming the task of writing African philosophy. However, the feedback of his first readers was discouraging; the argument of the book required a much deeper competence in mathematics and physics, which Mabona readily concedes he did not have. Thus the book remained unpublished. However, part of its content is reflected in the chapter “The depths of African philosophy”, evoked above. Years later, he would still comment on it: “In 1962 I wrote a manuscript of 155 pages based on a model of the three-step motion I have described in connection with the concept of *Ithuba*. The title of the script was rather wistful: The Outlines of African Philosophy.”\(^{97}\)

Thus, on the surface, we find a young priest studying theology and researching for his doctorate, and all indications are that he took this seriously. At the same time, we have the bulk of the second strand of his intellectual work produced in this time. However, he did not see any contradiction between this work and this new endeavour of philosophy.\(^{98}\) This mutual accommodation was facilitated by his view of philosophy as an inborn human ability, a kind of reasoning, rather than something one learns (in the first place) at school.

A second outcome of Mabona’s encounter with Diop had less spectacular results. To present this, we have to turn to another major event of the time: the Second Vatican Council.

### 6. Preparing for Vatican II

It just so happened that one of the most important events in the long history of the Catholic Church took place in Rome while Mongameli Mabona lived there: the Second Vatican Council. The Pope who received a delegation from the SAC at the Vatican during the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists,\(^{99}\) John XXIII, initiated Vatican II. Preparations for the Council started in different

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\(^{96}\) Interview 6, 15:10.  
\(^{97}\) DP, p. 400.  
\(^{98}\) Interview 6, 1:05.  
forms, basically from after his inauguration in 1958, but the formal preparations began in mid 1960, after advice was gathered from Catholic theologians from all over the world. The Council itself was to start in October 1962 and to last until the end of 1965 (even though John XXIII died mid 1963). One would expect that these events would make an impression on a Catholic priest working in Rome at that time. And this is indeed true for Mabona, but not for the most obvious reasons. Quite the contrary: the Council itself was of much less significance to him than a part of the preparatory work in which he was involved. To appreciate this fact, one has to know the initiatives of one lay member of the Catholic Church, Alioune Diop.

During the preparatory phase preceding Vatican II, an opportunity was given to the Catholic members to express their views on the important themes to be discussed during the Council. The African Catholic churches eagerly responded to this invitation. But independently from the Church structures, Diop mobilised the SAC to prepare a submission too. More precisely, he initiated a broad consultation with African Catholics to study this question. He was assisted particularly by the Cameroonian Jesuit Meinrad Hebga.

The consultation was launched through an open letter, “De la contribution de la personnalité africaine à la vitalité du catholicisme” (“On the contribution of African personhood to the vitality of Catholicism”), dated February 1962. Consolidating contributions and other initiatives, including a study meeting (26–27 May 1962), a working document “Les questions considérées comme particulièrement importantes et urgentes” (“Questions considered to be

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102 “This is how the incarnation of theology calls that of the Catholic Church; and it is understandable that the Congress [of black writers and artists] of Rome thus reaffirmed the inescapable reality of an African Catholic Church, making Alioune Diop, who was its inspirer and organiser, an important figure in the advent of a Christianity transformed in accordance with the aspirations of Africans. His role is therefore truly foundational, because the process of the 1959 Rome Congress will almost unceasingly feed into the discourse on the Catholic Church in post-colonial Africa.” Lock, *Identité africaine*, p. 123 (my translation).
particularly important and urgent”) was issued in June 1962. The justification for the SAC’s initiative to get involved in the pre-conciliar discussions resides in its own mission, namely “to seek, formulate, and defend the African presence in the Universal culture: Art, history, literature, philosophy, etc...” Hence the SAC considers it an obligation “to reflect on culture through religious life” and in this case very specifically the life of African Catholics. Hence the call on all African Catholics to contribute to a collective reflection in the service of the gradual consideration, in the very fabric of Catholic life, of the categories and values of our civilizations, the emergence of new African experiences and concepts on man, religious sensitivity, piety, holiness, the invention of African institutions (born of our situation, our trials, our initiatives and the fervour of our faith).

This is the spirit in which the SAC then offered a working document in which the following themes were addressed: spirituality, liturgy, theology, ecumenism, the laity, and social problems (including issues such as family, education, economics, dowry [dot], and polygamy).

I have indicated that this initiative was presented as continuous with the mission of the SAC. But the continuity stretches further back: one can read in these documents an explicit continuation of thought from the second Congress of Black Writers and Artists, in particular its subcommission for theology. Also, this continuity stretched into the future: in direct continuation of the spirit of the open letter “On the contribution of African personhood to the vitality of Catholicism”, a volume of studies was prepared and published early on during Vatican II, under the title *Personnalité africaine et catholicisme* (“African personhood and catholicism”).

The idea was not simply to collect a number of suggestions for the Council, rather

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109 Cf. its declaration in *Présence Africaine* and in Tshiba Tshibangu, *Le concile Vatican II*, pp. 20, 24 respectively. This is confirmed by Tshibangu, *Le concile Vatican II*, p. 83.
We thought it was our duty to express our point of view, after having been silent and passive for centuries. Africans and Christians, proud of both backgrounds [appartenance], we want to speak out loud and clear, with the freedom of the children of God as Meinrad Hebga wrote in the introduction to the book. Interestingly, he also explains how the contributions were obtained: “Our Secretariat in Paris has sent more than two thousand letters, leaflets and circulars to hundreds of bishops, priests and laity of both sexes, requesting articles, advice and suggestions”. To his own admission, the response was disappointing, however, one person who did respond was Mabona. His is the only English chapter in the book, which contains articles by authors such as Ela, Lufuluabo, and Mveng, and a postscript by Senghor.

The broader ambition was to make of this volume a worthy sequel to the book event, Les prêtres noirs s’interrogent (“Black priests are questioning”), sometimes referred to as the founding volume of African Christian theology. This is reflected in the title of Senghor’s contribution: “Des prêtres noirs s’interrogent et suggèrent” (“The black priests are questioning and offering suggestions”).

This volume and Mabona’s contribution in particular will interest us again later (cf. Part 2, §3). Now, I want to complete the picture of his contribution to SAC’s initiative in respect to Vatican II. Or rather, his views on the whole event. Not involved in the Council itself, his position is that of an outside observer. Initially, he followed reports on the event. He also recounts having met his Queenstown bishop, Rosenthal, who was in Rome for the Council. However, Mabona lost interest, especially because of what seemed to him to be the complete failure of the SAC group to find receptive ears for its proposals. He highlights especially propositions that were critical of capitalism and that were pro-ecological. Regrettably, I have not been able to find any trace of these propositions.

111 Hebga, “Un malaise grave”, p. 15.
113 Interview 3.
These were, then, the most intense experiences of Mabona’s life during his time in Italy. But it was also the time of the greatest wave of independence of African colonies. Indeed it was an exceptional place for a South African to be, for instance at the time of the Sharpeville massacre on 21 March 1960 (about which he heard and which affected him greatly). The brooding apartheid to which he was to return now has to be examined.

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114 Interview 5: “Sharpeville happened when I was in Italy. [...] it doesn’t seem to me because I was so involved in it. I was involved, spiritually involved, I must say.”