Mongameli Mabona

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Sometime during 1963, Mongameli Mabona returned to South Africa. He was to stay only nine years before permanently leaving the country. The sociopolitical conditions under which this period of his life were spent need to be sketched briefly to understand the kinds of activity in which he engaged and the conditions which finally compelled him to leave.

1. Apartheid

In 1948, the National Party came into power in the Union of South Africa, with a programme of minority rule and advanced segregation called apartheid. The history of apartheid can be divided into three parts. The middle part, which covers the 1960s to the mid 1970s, “was a far more ambitious and unyielding phase of apartheid than the first rendition during the 1950s, when a somewhat more pragmatic and cautious approach to racial social and economic engineering was taken.”¹ This is the context to which Mabona came back from Italy. I will not

see the story of apartheid through to its end in this biography, since he left the country again early in the 1970s.²

At the time that the rest of Africa was gaining independence from colonial rule,³ South Africa was shifting apartheid into higher gear. True, the neighbouring countries opposed the policy, but they did not have the power to do much to counteract it.⁴ Moreover, events in southern Africa at this time unfolded in response to the global political and military context misleadingly named the “Cold War”.⁵ South Africa shared with many states, including newly independent African ones, the vision of strong state intervention in modelling the internal social and economic order⁶ and widespread recourse to a rhetoric of nationalism to mobilise and consolidate power.⁷

The apartheid state inherited a segregated state and society, and endeavoured to build it systematically, starting with a set of laws implementing the policy of separate development or apartheid.⁸ Initially driven by Afrikaner ideals and symbols, it was strongly bent on spreading Afrikaners’ presence in and control of major institutions.⁹ Remnants of political representation of groups other than the white population were systematically dismantled. Reserves were transformed one by one into self-governing territories from the 1960s onwards. (Some of them were destined to become independent states from the mid 1970s, but none of

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⁶ Posel, "The apartheid project...", pp. 319, 330.
⁹ Posel, "The apartheid project...", p. 354.
these “Bantustans” were ever recognised by the international community.)¹⁰ The peculiar meaning of self-governing states (and independence) in relation to the South African state is to be understood against the backdrop of so-called “separate development”. Separate development, Deborah Posel concludes, was

a strategy of reinvigorating, refashioning and rewarding ‘traditional’ African notions of authority and political culture – indeed, reinventing, bureaucratising and disciplining tradition as part of the wider project of creating political ‘order’ – at the same time as fragmenting African peoples into discrete ethnic components.¹¹

This logic was partially duplicated in the townships. In the entire country, urban life was subject to a series of fanatical attempts to separate all facilities, or at least the use thereof, according to racial classification. However, this display of power only intensified the existing irony: while blacks were stripped of their South African citizenship and many were forced to live in homelands, the conditions of life there compelled people to migrate for employment, which was the only justification to enter white South Africa, but then the apartheid state needed labour from the beginning.¹²

The apartheid state was willing to accommodate the labourers without which its economy could not function – but only in increasingly populated separate townships¹³ or on farms. The rest follows from there: massive forced removals,¹⁴ increasing joblessness, high infant mortality and low life expectancy, limited public services, and poverty, not to mention endless personal trauma, for the black population (and the conditions for Indians and Coloured people were often similar).¹⁵ For the white segment of the population, there was not only economic growth of the country and systematic elimination of most white poverty, but also the increasing need to police the state, to conscript young men to the army, and to deploy strategies of misinformation to manipulate the white citizenry. Even if one admits that a small minority of black people found their way through the system

to enter university, achieved a better standard of living, received formal housing in townships,\(^{16}\) or engaged in commerce, the general picture of discrimination and exploitation remains intact.

By the time South Africa became a Republic and withdrew from the Commonwealth in 1961, international criticism was already mounting.\(^ {17}\) Still, the National Party’s power increased, later also supported by English-speaking voters.\(^ {18}\) In fact, from the 1970s, the government’s policy transformed itself from an ethnic nationalism with a racist programme to a race-based nationalism.\(^ {19}\)

2. Apartheid education

Education was a major stake for the apartheid state. An important early objective was to gain control of the entire education system: where formerly missionaries and members of the black elite played a role in directing education for the black majority, white professionals took over.\(^ {20}\) The mission schools were undermined since they were seen to convey dangerous ideas to black children (which is not to say that mission education was itself without problems).\(^ {21}\) The state considerably increased schooling for Africans, but the entire school system was underfunded and underdeveloped. In fact, state subsidy for black schooling fell sharply from the 1950s to 1960s, maintaining severe infrastructural shortages and worsening teaching staff shortages.\(^ {22}\)

The 1953 Bantu Education Act established the framework for teaching to black children. Most of them would leave school with little more than basic


\(^{17}\) Thompson, *A history of South Africa*, pp. 188–191.

\(^{18}\) Thompson, *A history of South Africa*, p. 188.


\(^{22}\) All of this from Mager and Muludzi, “Popular responses...”, pp. 384–385.
literacy. Academic learning content for school children and teachers was simplified. Male teachers were removed from primary education, and severely underqualified women were employed as teachers. English and Afrikaans were to be the only languages of instruction in high school. Part of the educational content for the older pupils in subjects such as languages and history, as well as in the natural sciences, lent itself to the transmission (at least at a rudimentary level) of a Western or indeed a white South African view of the world and its concomitant interests. Overall, the system was designed to prepare black people for life in the labour force with minimal potential progress.

A few statistics may help to explain this situation and to understand the advent of student politics and protest in schools and universities in the 1970s:

Data on the distribution of African pupils in 1964 showed that 72 per cent were in lower primary classes (the first four years), 25 per cent in higher primary classes (the next four years), and only 3 per cent in secondary classes.

Moreover, “[i]n 1970, 34.8 per cent of economically active Africans resident in urban areas and 63.4 per cent in rural areas had no formal education. Less than 1 per cent had a degree or diploma.” These were important dimensions of the society in which Mongameli Mabona was to become a lecturer. At the same time, these statistics should account for the curious fact that Bantu Education also prepared its foremost opponents, as we will see below.

3. The South African economy in the 1960s

In the post-World War II period, and particularly in the 1960s, the South African economy grew very rapidly. The pre-war economy was constructed around commercial farming and the gold mines; the post-war economy saw a

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27 Hlatshwayo, Education and independence, p. 2.
progressive rise in industry and a relative decline in agriculture and, to a lesser extent, in mining.\textsuperscript{28} In this period, the country was an attractive proposition for foreign investors. While the symbolic gestures opposing apartheid (e.g. sports sanctions) increased, the big Western countries took no initiatives in the period under question to advance economic sanctions.\textsuperscript{29} This ambivalent position was maintained by most countries, with the exception of a few that lent clear support to the anti-apartheid movement, notably the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries.\textsuperscript{30} Since South Africa was the regional economic power (including in technical expertise) and, at the time, a collaborator with independent Rhodesia, possible economic pressure or aid that could be offered to the anti-apartheid movement by bordering countries remained very restricted.

The growing economy was hungry for skilled and semi-skilled labour beyond what the white population could offer, which opened a narrow space for some people other than whites to rise socially and economically.\textsuperscript{31} In this way, in accordance with an irony that would remain with the apartheid state until its eventual demise, economic dictates interfered with neat political schemes. One may indeed ask what the relation was between the policy of apartheid and the pursuit of economic growth. Whereas liberal economic analysts claimed that the apartheid social order and labour policies would be detrimental to economic growth, the more radical sides of the political spectrum (for and against) were both convinced that apartheid furthered economic growth. On the one hand, the advocates of apartheid argued that “separate development” was compatible with the objective of economic growth; on the other hand, Marxist critics of apartheid also affirmed this compatibility, but they argued that the exploitative ends of the capitalist state required the cheap labour provided by apartheid policies.\textsuperscript{32} Perhaps the economic statistics available at that time of the period that concerns us (up to 1972, when Mabona left the country) could be read as corroborating these views of the compatibility of apartheid policies and economic growth, but the statistics over a longer period of time rather support the liberal view.\textsuperscript{33}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Feinstein, \textit{An economic history}, pp. 143–144.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Karis and Gerhart, \textit{Nadir and resurgence}, p. 8.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Karis and Gerhart, \textit{Nadir and resurgence}, p. 9.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Karis and Gerhart, \textit{Nadir and resurgence}, p. 10.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Feinstein, \textit{An economic history}, pp. 146, 161–164, 247.
\item \textsuperscript{33} It is worth mentioning that a larger historical perspective paints a different picture. Pointing at the sharply declining growth rate of the real GDP from the beginning of the 1970s, Feinstein seems to confirm the earlier liberal interpretation. He concludes the following: Low levels of skill, inadequate nutrition, poor health, bad housing, social instability and insecurity, weak motivation, denial of industrial and political rights, the disruptive effects of migrant labour,
As in the past, the growing need for labour, and, seen from the other side, the persistent need for income, brought many people to the cities. On the law books, black labourers were in the white cities of a white country – they were migrant labourers, regulated by the pass laws.\textsuperscript{34} In the urban environment, contexts of varying cultural mixing emerged, relativising traditional backgrounds of language and culture; at the same time, new commonalities of interest took shape, among which the conditions of life in informal housing settlements and labour stand out.\textsuperscript{35} Mutual support – material and psychological – was found in family ties, stokvels, funeral groups, and religious meetings.\textsuperscript{36} More will be said about some aspects of religious life below.

4. Resistance

Black resistance to encroaching white power has been discussed above\textsuperscript{37} and continued in the period that is of interest to us here. All forms of resistance had to
respond to the brute facts of military defeat and loss of land during the bygone era. Subsequently, reformist strategies of opposition were considered and practised. Hence, despite the events through which land ownership took the shape it did — and for diverging combinations of principled and strategic reasons — groups of resistance pursued strategies of opposition to the laws underpinning apartheid and continued to struggle for a country belonging equally to all, and governed by representatives of the people as a whole.\(^{38}\) However, the more reformist strategies also provoked counter-reactions, resulting in a variety of responses, which I will outline briefly. Apartheid had to reckon with opposition from some white groups: in Parliament, from liberals; outside of Parliament, from the English-speaking churches (with some qualifications which I will discuss later\(^ {39}\)).\(^ {40}\) There were also smaller groups and individuals who could be named in a more comprehensive overview. However, here I will focus only on the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), and, a bit later, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). The aim is to outline the general development and orientation of each group and, in doing so, to give an impression of the range of views and strategies of resistance that people adopted.

### 4.1 The ANC and the PAC

As might be expected, the continuation of the political situation described above and its intensification after 1948 provoked increasing internal resistance in South Africa. This was also the era when the ANC (and then the PAC) made some headway with campaigns, before they turned to armed resistance.

Determined to affirm South Africa as a country for blacks/Africans, the ANC still advocated a nationalism inclusive of all population groups.\(^ {41}\) In the 1940s it was energised by the formation of its Youth League (ANCYL), whose decidedly more radical ideas were to inspire the PAC and, later, the BCM. When the Communist Party was banned in 1950, some of its members founded the White Congress of Democrats (COD), which was not destined to participate in Parliament; together with the ANC, the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), and the Coloured People’s Organization (SACPO), the COD formed

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\(^{39}\) See pp. 126-127.


\(^{41}\) Motlhabi, *The theory and practice*, pp. 41–42.
the Congress Alliance, pursuing the aim of truly universal enfranchisement.\textsuperscript{42} The classical formulation of this vision of a multiracial, democratic future was captured in the 1955 Freedom Charter.\textsuperscript{43} Very practically, the ANC tackled issues of voting rights, pass laws, land ownership, labour relations, and education.\textsuperscript{44} This was translated into mass boycotts and civil disobedience initiatives in the 1950s.

In the late 1950s, the PAC broke away from the ANC on the basis of an Africanism understood as requiring more insistence on the difference between black, Coloured, and Indian people in the political context, and thus in respect of the liberation struggle, than was usually conceded by the ANC (or was formulated in the Freedom Charter). It also placed more emphasis on a pan-Africanist vision of South Africa’s present and future.\textsuperscript{45} The role played by the Communist Party in the ANC was another bone of contention, as would be any alliance with groups with white members as long as the specific interests of such allies were not properly accounted for – at least, under the prevailing conditions of institutionalised racial inequality.\textsuperscript{46} Yet, since the PAC insisted on eradicating the root cause of oppression – minority rule in general – in practice, it was opposed to the same specific issues instituted by the apartheid legislation as the ANC was.\textsuperscript{47}

The authorities did not look kindly on initiatives that opposed the state. In addition to the laws mentioned above by which the apartheid policy was given legal force, the state increased restrictive laws\textsuperscript{48} to extinguish opposition.\textsuperscript{49} Informants were activated.\textsuperscript{50} Resistance was repressed by banning individuals and organisations, detention (with or without trial), and later also torture and killing. The single most brutal response to peaceful resistance was the events of Sharpeville in 1960; the police killed or injured unarmed protestors in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{42} Cf. Motlhabi, \textit{The theory and practice}, pp. 16, 46.
\item \textsuperscript{43} But following up from the ANC’s “African Claims in South Africa” (1943), cf. Motlhabi, \textit{The theory and practice}, p. 26.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Motlhabi, \textit{The theory and practice}, pp. 50–55.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Cf. Motlhabi, \textit{The theory and practice}, p. 81.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Motlhabi, \textit{The theory and practice}, pp. 75, 77, 89–91.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Cf. Motlhabi, \textit{The theory and practice}, pp. 84–88, 102.
\item \textsuperscript{48} These are the Suppression of Communism Act (1950), Riotous Assemblies Act (1956), the Unlawful Organizations Act (1960), the Sabotage Act (1962), the Criminal Procedure Amendment Act (1965), the General Law Amendment Act (1966), the Terrorism Act (1967), the Prohibition of Political Interference Act (1968), and, after the period that concerns us, the Internal Security Act (1976). Thompson, \textit{A history of South Africa}, pp. 198–199; Chanaiwa, “Southern Africa since 1945”, p. 275.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Cf. Motlhabi, \textit{The theory and practice}, Chapter 1.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Karis and Gerhart, \textit{Nadir and resurgence}, p. 17.
\end{itemize}
a PAC-initiated march against passbooks. Subsequently, both the PAC and the ANC were banned.\(^{51}\) This incident dramatically confirmed the warnings of those who were convinced that peaceful opposition was going nowhere and argued that it was time to transition to violent responses (although taking recourse to violent means never was an obvious decision because of both principled and strategic considerations).\(^{52}\)

Both the ANC and PAC developed underground armed movements. The ANC founded Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), and the PAC instituted Poqo (later the Azanian People’s Liberation Army, APLA). According to Mandela, MK had a strategy of progressively increasing violence, starting with acts of sabotage.\(^{53}\) While Poqo planned acts of sabotage, it had fewer qualms about killing civilians.\(^{54}\) The Rivonia trial of 1963–1964 is the most important historical marker for the suppression of the ANC’s new initiative (and, by implication, that of the PAC). The apartheid state demonstrated its determination to render resistance futile. The military movements moved their bases outside of South Africa, first to Tanzania, then to Zambia and Botswana,\(^{55}\) where they also enjoyed some support from the communist bloc countries. However, during the whole period under consideration, MK launched no attack worth mentioning on South Africa,\(^{56}\) and Poqo hardly fared better.\(^{57}\) The Communist Party, ANC, and PAC were neutralised – most of their leadership was imprisoned or in exile.\(^{58}\) Among whites of all social groups, forms of criticism started to mount,\(^{59}\) but before 1975 these dissenting voices remained a small group, with little influence.

The early part of the resistance history evoked here corresponds with Mabona’s years as a seminarian and young priest. He was absent from the country during much of the intensification of the struggle, but these changes are important to the lifeworld of the country to which he returned and where he resumed his work. These political formations also represent a variety of stances on cultural politics, an issue prevalent in Mabona’s work.


\(^{52}\) Mabona refers to these dilemmas in Interview 5.


\(^{59}\) See also the formation of the African Resistance Movement (Karis & Gerhart, *Nadir and resurgence*, 21–24), the Christian Institute, etc.
5. Life back in South Africa

I rebelled against the spirit of [apartheid]... when I came back. I rebelled entirely. And it led to the fact that I simply disregarded many of the things – disregarded them absolutely. I simply disregarded and went when I wanted to go where I wanted to go and did what I wanted to do. It took a long time before I came back to the... by the way, [...] if you are fighting all the time and you see that your fight doesn’t, you know, produce any ... [...] you sort of give up, you know? But giving up simply meant that I couldn’t do anything directly, but I never accepted it again, the situation in South Africa, after coming back from Italy, never, I never accepted it.  

In these words, Mongameli Mabona captures his reaction to the country to which he returned. This fluctuation between defiance and despondency/dejection probably characterised his life in general. But more specifically, what were his activities during these years? Since all of these gaps can no longer be filled, I will look at some of his work for the diocese, his amateur ethnography, his poetry, and his later appointment as a lecturer.

5.1 Lumko

As before, Mabona worked in frequent consultation with his bishop. From Dischl we know that Mabona also worked with Fr. Weber at Idutywa in 1964. In the meantime, since the 1950s, the Catechetical school (also called the Catechists’ Training Centre and Missiological Institute) at Lumko was established, 30 km north-east of Queenstown, and 20 km south-east of Lady Frere. It was to serve as institute for anthropology and South African languages.

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60 Interview 5.
61 Interview 7, 27”.
62 Dischl, Transkei for Christ, p. 301. Also mentioned in Interview 3. Mabona was not sure that he was ever a full-time parish priest (Interview 7, 18”).
63 The chronology is to be verified. Elsewhere, Dischl (Transkei for Christ, p. 294) sets the date for the opening in 1958.
64 Dischl, Transkei for Christ, pp. 219, 283.
65 One may consult two dissimilar versions of the history of this institution: Dischl, Transkei for Christ, pp. 294–295; http://lumko.org/history (last consulted on 12 December 2016). Neither mentions Mabona.
By 1965, it presented two-year courses. At the time, there were around thirty catechists in training. Mabona worked there for about one year, although I have not been able to determine his exact responsibilities. An anecdote from *Diviners and prophets*, however, again gives us a window on this part of his life:

[...] in 1965 to be exact – I was teaching at a catechist school [this could only have been Lumko]. As I found that many of the men attending had had very little formal education, I tried to supplement wherever I could. One day I gave an elementary lesson in the geography of the world. I spoke about America, Australia etc. In the evening we were standing outside with a group and happened to be surveying the sky. The southern sky in the evening is a thing of beauty. One of the catechists then remarked ‘Who knows if one of those stars in the west is not America and one of those stars in the east is not Australia?’ I felt strangely vexed by this remark and rather testily asserted that those were merely stars and not parts of the earth. The catechist tried to defend his point of view by pointing out that the stars were surrounded by blue, and those could be the oceans I had been talking about in the lesson. My reply must have been less patient as I pointed out that the stars were in the sky and America and Australia were parts of the earth. He was not convinced, but merely said, ‘Oh, they are so far away they could be up there.’ I understood the meaning of this remark much later on, but my vexed embarrassment at that moment must have been some subconscious stirring or echo of that other irritating debate years ago with the two young Xhosa traditionalists [cited above, see pp. 64-65]. The concept of water as a factor separating two worlds in Xhosa cosmology seems to derive from a synchronic interpretation of reality as observed. On the other hand the perception of above and below is basically presumed to depend on distance and the position of the observer. There is a perceptual shift (*ingqondo iyaguquleleka; ingqondo iyaphenduleleka*), so that what is up may at one time be down and what is down may at one time be up. There is fundamentally a diachronic relativistic determination. Here polarity is not only a mental element but is also considered to be a physical ontological category.

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But working at the Institute was not just about stimulating exchanges with students. He devoted himself energetically to this work and tried to develop the institution, among other things by introducing music and art to the syllabus.\footnote{68} He also developed the garden by planting fruit trees.\footnote{69} Apparently, there were some tensions with the missionaries, but this seems not to have been the rule. Mabona recalls an occasion when the priests at Lumko wanted him to go with him to the cinema; in the end, this excursion did not work out because there was a risk that the police could see him and he had to wait in the car. Several times they “disguised” him as a chauffeur or servant, or they would hide him between them in the car, to overcome the restrictive legislation imposed on the freedom of movement of black people.

Also, for whatever reason, an informant (or even two)\footnote{70} was placed (or recruited) to “spy” on Mabona and report his initiatives and teaching to the police. This is how Mabona looks back on it:

> The bishop wanted me to teach there at the catechist school. Eh, I didn’t stay very long. One of the difficulties there was... the government came in and said, that man there... in fact, they said that I should not be in contact with people because I always talk politics and I poison the mind of the people. So they didn’t want me in Lumko. I don’t know whether the bishop minded that, their talks [...].\footnote{71}

There was even question of a high-ranking official who came to Lumko with orders, including that Mabona was to be prohibited from teaching in Xhosa.\footnote{72} Asked whether he shared his views on the state in his preaching, Mabona responded: “Yes, I had to because, you know, in the sermons, you’re talking to the people you want them to go in certain ways, in certain directions. And the most interesting interactions were against government and it had to be like that.”\footnote{73} While he confirmed that the police knew what he was saying, he also declares that the police did not interfere in his preaching the Transkei.

It has not been possible to confirm the exact chronology, but it was probably at this time – after he had worked at the Catechetical school for about one year\footnote{74}...
– that a restriction was imposed on Mabona and that he was confined to the St. Theresa mission.\footnote{Interview 7, 21”; Interview 5. The curious fact that a black person was confined to a white residential area is explained by Marta Mabona (correspondence of 10 January 2019) as a measure to prevent him from having contact with other black people.} He was prohibited from going to the Queenstown “location”, and people were not allowed to come to him. He was considered “a bad influence” and was accused of being a “communist”. Once this restriction was imposed, the bishop apparently left it open to him how to spend his time. Mabona later recalled that Queenstown was home to many people who resisted the system and were imprisoned for it. He also testifies that the threat of imprisonment curbed his own initiative.\footnote{Interview 5.} At least in that region he distinguishes between a more political resistance in the town, with its aspiration to achieve a “modern” lifestyle, and the cultural striving for a return to traditional Xhosa life in the countryside.

Of Mabona’s priestly activities during this period I could discover little, except that it was from St. Theresa’s that his precious box with poems, articles, and anthropological notes was stolen.\footnote{“Jugend Mongameli”, Interview 0.} However, the anecdote about his conversation with students (above) puts us on another trail. In fact, it seems he was walking two paths at the same time.

\section*{5.2 Independent ethnographic studies}

It would have been odd if the enthusiastic author on African culture and philosophy returned to South Africa and did not pursue these enquiries. From this perspective, returning to South Africa would have been rather an excellent opportunity to advance his research. Although he never states it in these terms, there is sufficient confirmation of this view from numerous references in \textit{Diviners and prophets}. Thus, in the Introduction, he writes: “Chronologically, the idea of doing research on the diviner phenomenon in connection with the study of Xhosa culture took shape in my mind in 1965”\footnote{DP, Introduction.}. He may even have begun to gather information informally earlier:

When, in the early sixties, I asked a group of diviners what was the first step in treating a person who had \textit{ukuthwasa}, a senior man replied that he first applied \textit{iyeza elimnyama} (black medicine) in order to free
the patient from ordinary disease and in order to lay a foundation of strength before applying *amayeza anomlohe* (white medicines).  

To get an impression of how he translated this idea into practice, we can refer to a number of anecdotes he documented.

In some places, he gives an idea of how he proceeded. Speaking about testing the correctness of local perspectives on certain cosmic phenomena, he writes: “In 1966 I started a series of systematic observations carried out during the day whenever I had the time.” Yet, most often, he recounts rather informal interaction with people, who, three decades later, were retroactively designated as anthropological “instructors”, to be connected with the information reported from other instructors. Hence, the priest-anthropologist could observe:

The bottom decorations of the women’s blankets have a theme or story which I never succeeded to obtain. Once, when she had come to town in Idutywa I appealed about the decorations to my instructor […]. She said there was a great deal to say about these decorations but that she did not have the time there and then. I should visit her at her home and she would explain fully their meaning and give me the stories connected with them. Not very long after this I was assigned to another job in far-off Thembuland and I never had the opportunity to get the explanation. I considered it important, though, that I now knew that the decoration in the middle area is a tree called *umthiwemfene* (tree of the baboon). Since I failed to get the information about the tree from my lady instructor, I consider myself justified in bringing here information about it from another lady instructor, namely Rrasebe, Adrien Boshier’s instructor.

We get to know Mabona’s keen interest in fine detail:

Thirty years ago, when I worked there, every traditionalist woman in Gcalekaland and in Thembuland had special decorations on the outer blanket which she carried around her shoulders if her hands and arms were free and which she wrapped around her waist when busy. The decorations were divided into roughly three areas: the right, the left and a middle area. The symbols on the right and the left sides were identical.

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79 DP, p. 341.  
80 DP, p. 186.  
81 DP, p. 216.
and consisted of black upright columns e.g. III, and then this sign: H, also in black. When I asked what these were I was told that the upright strokes were staves or sticks [...].

Apparently he did not isolate his anthropological “fieldwork” from his work as a priest – but not all colleagues shared his enthusiasm:

When I visited a hut in which girls were undergoing initiation, the recurring signs I saw on the wall were small circles and upright strokes of about 3 cm. But one would have thought the missionary I was in company of wanted to burn the whole place down. Though the hut was very well kept, he called the place filthy, especially the drawings whose meaning he did not know. This neurotic behaviour, due probably to some deep insecurity moral or ideological, made the situation finally intolerable and an uneasy silence fell or people just went away.

It was only years later that Mabona was in a position to consolidate his years of observation in writing, in the form of an anthropological study.

5.3 Poetry

It was Fr. Schimlek at Ixopo who “opened his eyes” for English literature. During Mabona’s time as a student in the Major Seminary at Pevensey, he “wrote a lot of articles and poems” and sent them to be published, among other places, to the Mariannhill-based newspaper UmAfrika. Today, ten of his poems composed in this period are available – one published in 1965, seven in 1970, and two from 1974 and 1977, respectively – but the interviews lead one to understand that he wrote much more. It is not known when exactly the published poems were written or how it came about that they were published by Présence Africaine and in New Coin.

Apparently there was a time when he was extremely taken up by poetry. He explains that when he was writing poems, he could not pay proper attention to anything else, so much did the poems occupy his mind. He seems to have sought

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82 DP, p. 215.
83 DP, p. 253. It is likely, but not certain, that this anecdote belongs to this period.
84 “Jugend Mongameli”.
85 “Jugend Mongameli”. I have not been able to establish whether any of these submissions were published.
86 Interview 7, 1:41:30".
the company of like-minded people. In a way that I was not able to determine, Mabona was connected with the South African Poetry Society, since his name is listed alongside those of Guy Butler, André de Villiers, and others in the first edition of the first issue of the society’s journal, *New Coin*, in 1965. The Society’s headquarters was Butler’s office at Rhodes University, and he and Ruth Harnett were the editors of the journal from 1965 to 1977. During this period, a number of Mabona’s poems were published in *New Coin* (one each in 1965 and 1974 and three in 1977; two of these poems were also published in *Présence Africaine*). While the last publication takes us well into the 1970s, it is hard to imagine how any form of personal contact between Mabona and Rhodes University would have been practicable at any stage other than between 1963 and 1967. During the interviews, Marta Mabona read to me from a folder with correspondence a letter from Guy Butler to “Dear Fr. Mabona”, dated 20 May 1973, regarding some of Mabona’s poems that he was considering for publication.

Finally, he felt that writing poetry monopolised his mind too much and he decided to abandon it to devote his attention to other things. Nonetheless, I note that, between the time he must have written the first poem published in *Présence Africaine* and the last poems published in *New Coin*, more than a decade has passed. The decision must have been difficult to make.

### 5.4 Lecturer at St. Peter’s in Hammanskraal

In 1957, St. Peter’s Seminary at Pevensey (where Mabona received his theological education, cf. Chapter 3, §5) was handed over to be run by the English Dominicans under the rectorship of Oswin Magrath. Philippe Denis describes him as a person of progressive missionary orientation, who insisted on quality theological education for black students, advocated a stronger black clergy with more responsibilities and more representation in the church hierarchy, and who later promoted the view that black theologians and administrators had to be educated to take over their own teaching – views not commonly shared by his brethren at the time. For a number of strategic reasons, the seminary was

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87 I stumbled across this fact in a one-page advertisement for a nameless publication (thanks to Sabinet).


89 Interviews 7; 1, 45”.

90 As mentioned before, see p. 73. Denis, *The Dominican Friars*, pp. 218–219.

91 Denis, *The Dominican Friars*, pp. 220–221, 226; confirmed by George Sombe Mukuka, *The
relocated to Hammanskraal to the north of Pretoria, where lectures resumed from 1963.  

In line with these developments, Magrath wrote to the Bishop of Queenstown to request the appointment of Mongameli Mabona to St. Peter’s. Although he started there in 1967, the link goes back earlier, since Mabona participated in the founding conference of the St. Peter’s Old Boy Association (SPOBA – more about this in the next section) in July 1966, when he was still working in the Queenstown diocese. Mabona considered it a big opportunity to be transferred so far away. 

At St. Peter’s, he enjoyed good relations with his colleagues; he “had no difficulty whatsoever”. In 1969, there were nine lecturers – Mabona and eight white Dominicans – for fifty-nine students. To his regret, he did not have any contact with professional philosophers from other institutions. His task was to teach canon law and philosophy. For philosophy, he had to rely on an old, outdated handbook (unfortunately, he could not recall the title), but he did not restrict himself to this textbook. He also wanted to introduce students to modern philosophy – he specifically mentioned Kant. I cannot confirm it with absolute certainty, but it may well be that Mabona was the first black lecturer of philosophy at an institution of tertiary education in South Africa (provided that one uses “black” here according to the apartheid categorisation, because Adam Small, officially “Coloured”, was appointed as a lecturer of philosophy at Fort Hare in 1959, and then at the University of the Western Cape from 1960 to 1973).

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**impact of Black Consciousness on the black Catholic clergy and their training from 1965-1981.**


93 This is to be confirmed – I am not sure how it could have been possible to appoint someone under restriction orders to another part of the country.

94 Mukuka, *The impact*, p. 60.

95 Cf. Denis, *The Dominican Friars*, p. 225, who states that, at that point in time, Mabona “was in the process of joining the staff”.

96 Interview 7, 20”

97 Interview 7, 44”. Mukuka, *The impact*, p. 55 describes them as follows: “most of whom came from the house of Studies at Oxford and other universities. They were very progressive, broadminded and far ahead of their time”.

98 Mukuka, *The impact*, p. 60.

99 Mukuka, *The impact*, p. 60 adds Psychology.

100 Interview 7, 34”.
Mabona gives different views on his teaching. On the one hand he ascribes the problems he met with later to the fact that he was “talking freely”; he shared his views with students that the government was illegitimate and that no obedience was due to it. He adds that Rector Magrath was also strongly opposed to the apartheid system.\footnote{Interview 5.} On the other hand, he affirms that he had to be careful because of the threat of informers.\footnote{Interview 7, 34".} One possibility is that he became more prudent as the years passed. He reports that the police came to the seminary several times. Once, he discovered a “listening device” at a window (one may assume of a lecture hall or office), presumably placed by a student “agent”. Another time, he was confronted with a bullet, left for him to see in the window of his room, and later yet another placed conspicuously on his desk.\footnote{Interview 7, 47".}

These were eventful times at the seminary. Of the circumstances of his rectorate that were ultimately to lead to Magrath’s forced resignation, two interrelated ones are of importance to us: the formation of SPOBA and the Black Priests’ Manifesto.

**SPOBA**

One of Magrath’s initiatives was to facilitate the formation of an association of former students, which held its inaugural conference on 4–7 July 1966 at Hammanskraal,\footnote{For the prehistory of SPOBA, cf. Mukuka, *The impact*, pp. 52–53.} the year before Mabona joined the St. Peter’s staff. Mabona also delivered one of the papers at this conference, under the title “White worship and black people”. The body that was formed at the convention was named St. Peter’s Old Boy Association (SPOBA). Combining the views of Mukuka and Mabona, I conclude that the decision to found this body came from the black participants.\footnote{Mukuka, *The other side*, pp. 177–178; Interview 5.} SPOBA was to become the “black caucus group” of the Roman Catholic Church.\footnote{Cf. Mukuka, *The impact*, p. 56.} According to Gobi Clement Mokoka, SPOBA was “an organised platform to challenge and oppose the [Church] hierarchy’s predilection to support the settler regime actively at the expense of the indigenous clergy, laity and the oppressed and exploited community at large.”\footnote{Cited in Mukuka, *The impact*, p. 56.} In practice, SPOBA started off pursuing this goal by means of written petitions to the Catholic
Church hierarchy, but without eliciting much of a response. At the same time, it had an influence on St. Peter’s Seminary by means of the frequent contact SPOBA members had with seminary students and, one should add, one of its members was a member of staff, Dr. Mabona.

In this regard, Mabona remembers that students approached him (and perhaps other members of SPOBA) at St. Peter’s to discuss their frustrations with the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). They complained that the latter organisation was not addressing their problems, that they did not share the same concerns as the white students, and that they were still finding themselves discussing these separately. In practice, SPOBA extended its activities to include the student body. Mabona recounts discussions with Hammanskraal students (often while strolling together between the gates and the buildings); there were also students who came to consult with him from other institutions (he mentions the University of the North). Pityana was there twice; Biko also came at least twice or thrice, but at times when Mabona was not there. Mabona advised students to form an independent union as a forum for discussing their most pressing concerns; he did not see NUSAS as conducive to this. He held up SPOBA as an example of a black forum to the students.

And so it came that “it was from SPOBA that SASO was formed”, or the new organisation “copied” SPOBA, and that the “BCM started flowing into

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110 Interview 5. The exact chronology of events cannot be reconstructed from the different interviews with absolute certainty.

111 Since 2005, incorporated into the new University of Limpopo.

112 Interview 7, 51”. However, the exact dates when this took place could not be determined. Mabona seems to have in mind consultations that took place between him and unnamed students before the foundation of SASO, but the interviews do not give an indication of when precisely Pityana and Biko would have been at St. Peter’s. Note, in this respect, Denis, “Seminary networks...”, p. 168: “An information leaflet mentioned visits of the SASO president and vice-president to St. Peter’s, Hammanskraal, Umphomulo and Fedsem in March 1971. A year later the same three seminaries were still receiving visits from the SASO leadership, according to the minutes of the meeting of the Executive Council.”

113 Interview 5.

114 Interview 5.

115 Interview 7, 54”
SPOBA from about 1969 onwards”116 (I understand these claims to apply only to developments at St. Peter’s). But to appreciate these conclusions, let us zoom out from Hammanskraal, to present BCM and SASO as national movements.

BCM

In a national context of political near-defeat, outlined in the first sections of this chapter, a movement of action and thought emerged among black students. Such a release of political energy among students was not new in the broader African landscape,117 but it seemed to have come quite unexpectedly in the case of South Africa. At the end of 1968,118 the South African Student Organization (SASO) was formed to consolidate and stimulate black solidarity. It was to articulate and promote the views of black students across the country – independently of white “liberals”.119 Hence, SASO was formed as different from, and opposed to, the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), a non-racial and liberal movement, which at the time was not able to live up to its own principles and ideals.120 Whereas SASO’s work and legacy is indeed to be found on the level of ideas (Black Consciousness, Black Theology), its aims and activities also included development projects for students and communities.121 SASO was instrumental in the foundation of the Black People’s Convention, tasked with widening the reach of its mission beyond the university milieu. However, by the time of its foundation in 1972, Mabona had already left the country.

Understanding “black” as inclusive of the groups discriminated against as “non-whites”,122 the central tenet of the BCM is the affirmation of black people’s

118 But see Mukuka, The impact, p. 58n111: “Actually SASO was formed in December 1968 at Mariannhill, its inauguration was at Turfloop in July of 1969. That is when it entered the seminary when the students were moving from Natal to the Transvaal.”
122 “We define Black people as those who are by law or tradition, politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realization of their aspirations”. SASO (South
dignity as human beings and the worth of black people’s culture and activities (language, history, ideas, music, etc.). Black Consciousness expounds the insight that oppression is not merely political and economic, but penetrates all aspects of black people’s lives. Its claim of dignity is also a claim for autonomy, first in respect to the project of liberation, but then also to cultural life in general, including the vision of a future African-styled country. Its rejection of Bantu Education, its advocacy of citizen rights based on original African ownership of the country (and rejection of the Bantustan system), a non-racial democratic state, and a socialist or communitarian approach to economics, coupled with a critique of politically insensitive foreign investment, follow directly from this.\textsuperscript{123} Its non-racial basis has exposed it to conflicting claims about the status of people of other than African descent.\textsuperscript{124}

But let us come back again to the origins of the BCM. Above, I described BCM as a movement, as the name indeed indicates. Its major vehicle was SASO, but other organisations and personal interactions fed into this movement too, of which the Christian sources are of interest here.\textsuperscript{125} Focusing on the Christian roots (both in ideology and institutionally) of the movement, Denis claims that the University Christian Movement, SPROCAS,\textsuperscript{126} and St. Peter’s Old Boys Association (SPOBA) “played a direct role in the foundation and growth of BC”, particularly through the intermediary role of black seminaries, “the Federal Theological Seminary (of the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches), the Lutheran Theological College (of the Lutheran Churches) and St. Peter’s Seminary at Hammanskraal (of the Roman Catholic Church)”.\textsuperscript{127} Thus, the period when Mabona was lecturing at St. Peter’s was also the time which saw the emergence of the BCM among students, as described above.

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\textsuperscript{123} Motlhabi, The theory and practice, pp. 115–121, 123–128, 130–132.
\textsuperscript{124} Motlhabi, The theory and practice, pp. 116–117.
\textsuperscript{126} Supported by the Christian Institute and the South African Council of Churches, it was first the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid South Africa, then the Special Project for Christian Action in Society. The latter is relevant here (cf. Denis, “Seminary networks...”, p. 172).
\textsuperscript{127} Denis, “Seminary networks...”, pp. 167, 163.
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Black Theology

The broader movement of Black Consciousness in turn also had an impact on the social sphere of religion. In the University Christian Movement (UCM), a Black Theology Project was launched – the beginning of Black Theology in South Africa. The aim of Black Theology was understood to be a reconsideration of the Christian heritage and practice in light of this history and experience of oppression. The seminal first publication was *Essays on Black Theology* of 1972, edited by Mokgethi Mothlhabi, who was probably once one of Mabona’s students. Contributors included the theologians Mothlhabi, Manas Butbelezi, and Mongameli Mabona; the poet Adam Small; and the SASO activists Steve Biko and Nyameko Pityana.

To be sure, it is not clear how Mabona was connected to the Black Theology Project. His chapter, which is well known and relatively often cited, has the same title as the paper he read at the founding convention of SPOBA in July 1966 (mentioned above, p. 121). According to Denis, “Mongameli Mabona, while still a lecturer at St. Peter’s, gave a paper on ‘white worship and black people’ at the national seminar on black theology organised by UCM at the Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre in March 1971.” Since I have not been able to find the original paper, I surmise that it is the same paper, presented a second time, and that the editor obtained permission to include it in the volume. In this sense, one should say that his contribution to the Black Theology Project pre-dated both the project and the larger BCM.

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131 Mokgethi Mothlabi, “Black theology in South Africa: an autobiographical reflection”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XXXI/2, 2005, pp. 37–62, §2. In the same article, he describes Mabona as a member of SPOBA: “Perhaps the most prominent among them and one who was to be a strong advocate of black theology was Dr Mongameli Mabona. He had a Doctor of Canon Law degree from Rome, one of a few blacks in this country to have reached that level of theological education at the time.”
132 Mabona himself had no recollection of his relation to this project and was probably already out of the country by the time the volume appeared.
133 Cf. Mukuka, *The other side*, p. 177. To be precise, the same text is published in *Essays in Black Theology* as “Black people and white worship”, but in *Pro V eritate* as “White worship and black people”.
Black Priests’ Manifesto

The last event of importance in the current context is the publication of the so-called “Black Priests’ Manifesto”. On 23 January 1970, the *Rand Daily Mail* published a text under the title “Our Church has let us down”. The authors were all SPOBA members, one of whom was lecturing at St. Peter’s Seminary. That was Anthony Mabona. The other authors were David Moetapele, John Louwfant, Clement Mokoka, and Smangaliso Mkhatshwa. I note that Lebamang John Sebidi (later head of St. Peter’s Seminary), in speaking about Mabona’s role in the Manifesto, stated: “I think he was the moving spirit behind that”. Yet, according to Mabona, the authors discussed the content in several meetings before it was written by all of the signatories together. The aims of this Manifesto are straightforward: it denounces racial asymmetries in the Catholic Church in South Africa and calls this Church to abide by its own commitment to Africanisation in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (see full discussion in Part 2, §6). Furthermore, although it is factual and argumentative, the Manifesto articulates an unambiguous rejection of this state of affairs and calls for equal respect. The aim was not to write against the Church but to “set things right”.

As might be expected, this initiative provoked a response. Recounting his personal impressions, Mabona recalls that they were accused of being overly critical, that they were breaking away from the Church, and instigating dissent among students – they were labelled “rebel priests”. In fact, he sketches a general picture of a lack of understanding, which he also experienced from black laypeople. He had the impression that nobody was listening to them and that some people started to avoid them.

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137 Interview 7:46”; Interview 3.

138 Interview 7:46”.

139 Interview 3.
A different view on the consequences of the Manifesto is outlined by Mukuka. First, a discussion between the signatories of the Manifesto and the Administrative Board of the Bishop’s Conference took place. Apparently, this was presented as a concession: initially, it was claimed that the Manifesto was not representative of black views in the Church, but when thousands of parishioners heeded the call by SPOBA’s executive to show their support in person at the SACBC’s offices, the bishops granted that discussion was needed. Then an array of responses appeared in the Catholic newspaper, the *Southern Cross*, ranging between embracing and rejecting the Manifesto. Eventually, some promotions and institutional reforms were undertaken by the Catholic Church.

In the aftermath of these events, but also due to other tensions at St. Peter’s Seminary and between the seminary and other Church structures, Magrath was asked to resign. He was replaced by Dominic Scholten, and responsibility for the seminary was transferred from the Dominicans to the South African Bishop’s Conference. Scholten, although he was not simply adverse to the issues of black students and priests, set a much higher premium on re-establishing the “normal” functioning of the seminary. In May 1972, a year and a half after Scholten’s appointment, Mabona’s request to be relieved of his functions was granted.

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142 Cf. Denis, *The Dominican Friars*, p. 228.