Mongameli Mabona

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PART 2 – WORK
From his life narrative, we have come to know Mongameli Mabona’s explorative temperament and his unceasing reflection. It is therefore appropriate that we turn from his life and work in general to take a closer look at his intellectual work, insofar as the extant texts allow.

Regrettably, the sources are not readily available. One needs access to the facilities of a university library even to find some of his texts. For others, even that will not suffice if the library concerned does not have a very strong international network to borrow material. I have gone to great lengths to establish Mabona’s full bibliography – which is added as an addendum – but even so, there may be some more texts yet to be discovered. Because of the difficulty of accessing his texts, my primary objective in this part of the book is to provide a survey of the content of Mabona’s written work – principally theology, philosophy, anthropology, and poetry – for the wider scholarly and interested public. Here and there, I will allow myself some critical comments, but the emphasis in this section is to highlight the lines of development and the conjunctions and discontinuities in his thought. To give an impression of the reception of his publications, I also note secondary literature devoted to or citing Mabona’s texts, as far as I could locate any. Finally, I punctuate the discussion with a few sections of general appraisal regarding the character of parts of his work.

Together, the biographical and sociopolitical contextualisation of Mabona’s biography (Part 1) and the survey of texts (Part 2), offer a starting point and a tool for those scholars who would like to continue this exploration, for instance by comparisons of Mabona’s writings to that of his contemporaries or by advanced critical examinations.
1. **Lux: The first impetus**

Mongameli Mabona’s first three published articles appeared in the annual journal of the African Association of St. Augustine, *Lux* (see Part 1, Chapter 4, §4). These publications provide a clear view on the young writer’s first intellectual experimentations and the blooming of his concerns and interests.

His very first published venture into the world of independent thinking is an attempt to situate Africa historically and culturally, in his article “Africa’s true position and destiny” (1958–1959). He typifies the contemporary period as a time of “spiritual reawakening” of the whole of humanity (p. 14). He argues that the present was also a significant moment in history for the African continent, since it was the “judgement hour of Europe” (pp. 13, 14). Both the spiritual and material aspects of the broader Western civilisation stand to be judged. In Mabona’s appraisal, Europe can claim on the side of its spiritual achievements the foundation of vibrant Christian communities in Asia and Africa. He reserves his critical indictment for the West’s material developments, notably Western military technology – the development of nuclear weapons in particular weighs on his mind. He posits that what underlies the negative aspects of the West’s material development is its “lack of charity” (p. 15). Africa in particular has been on the receiving end of what he refers to as “harassment” from Europe.

This ambiguous state of affairs under the dominance of the West results in a crisis for the whole of humanity, and it is not possible to see where this is heading. However, Mabona cites Pope Pius XII’s view that humanity is at the brink of a springtime in which the good is bound to gain in strength. This springtime holds the promise of progressive integration of Africa into the greater human family (p. 17) – an integration not in the sense of improved connectivity by means of new transport and communication technologies, but in the sense of an “awakening of man’s awareness of his kinship with and need of his fellow-men” (p. 18).

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1. The existence of these articles came to my attention in a bibliographical report published in *Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell’Istituto italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente*, 15/1, January–February, pp. 43–49.
2. However, Mabona asserts that Asia is protecting Africa (partially) from this harassment. Since he does not give any geopolitical specification for these intercontinental relations, his claim remains highly speculative.
3. In fact, Mabona cites the Pope’s own word, “primavera” (Italian for springtime), but renders it repeatedly with “springtide”, which is a different, but not unrelated, image. I therefore replace “springtide” with “springtime”.
Following the Pope on this point, Mabona senses in this integration the growth of the Mystic Body of Christ, and indeed of the Kingdom of God.

Such is the situation in which he sees Africa emerging on the world scene (at the time when he wrote his article). Although the continent boasts considerable material resources, he argues that its “spiritual progress” is of more significance, and he advances the permanence and growth of Christianity as the central point of this progress.

The article is both argumentative and speculative. Mabona supports his main points with reference, indeed, with deference, to the teachings and writings of Pope Pius XII and to Bishop Fulton Sheen, a member of the Catholic hierarchy. One may describe the article as a theological cultural critique on a global scale. Its basic assumption is that, in order to address the issues he raises, theology is an appropriate, indeed the most appropriate, form of questioning and reflection. It is noteworthy that the central concern of all these articles is the African continent. Furthermore, from his first article onwards, for many years to come, Mabona holds that such a critique of global tendencies needs to proceed by means of a comparison of cultures or blocks of humanity on a scale for which continents are the appropriate unit of comparison.

This article is an invaluable vantage point from which to obtain a perspective on the nature and extent of the subsequent development of Mabona’s thought.

“African mentality in a world frame” (1958–1959), Mabona’s second Lux article, continues his argument and perspective on the formation of humanity as a “World Community” and the laborious and painful, but inevitable, dawn of a spiritual springtime. The “universal struggles” of humanity in this period are divergent:

Ideological, Political, Ethnic. Expressed in simpler terms, this means that there is tension between the Theistic and Atheistic outlooks in the world, there is tension in the Master-and-Servant relations among peoples, and lastly there is tension in the different mental outlooks of the various Ethnic Complexes of the globe. (p. 32)

How is one to deal with these tensions? By tackling, first of all, the last of the three: divergent ethnic-mental outlooks. Mutual fear, distrust, and ignorance can be overcome by gaining insight into one another’s “deepest mental structures” (p. 32). If that can be achieved, pressure regarding the other two points will also be released. One can hope to make headway in this respect by turning to anthropology. To be sure, Mabona rejects all theories which categorise “cultural
outlooks or mentality” (p. 33) from a universal historical perspective, on the basis of the supposition that there is one humanity where some are more, and others less, advanced. But this rejection obliges Mabona to face two difficult problems at the same time. First, how does one reject the idea of progress without rejecting the historical formation of cultures? Second, how does one describe cultural differences without sacrificing the idea of one humanity?

His attempt to resolve these dilemmas consists of affirming the simultaneous differences between cultures in respect to their myths, legends, and folklore, and taking them as expressions of the deepest aspirations of each cultural group. Working his way through the complex debates on the nature of myths, Mabona concludes that a sympathetic reading of these tales is invaluable as a way to access the thought of people of different cultural origins.

Having thus determined the general approach, he suggests that one can proceed to study different families of myths – Indian, Latin, Nordic, Japanese, Chinese, etc. – by comparing them, or, as the article’s title says, placing them, in a world frame. He does not argue for a comparison of the minute details, but rather of the most general traits, perhaps one could say the essence, of each collection of myths. Hence, the European collection would be typified primarily by reason and intellect, the Indian by mysticism and desire, the Chinese and Japanese by beauty, etc. These broad classifications then allow for further specification of the typical temperaments, for instance, of English, German, Italian, or Slavonic Europeans, each with their own typical forms of manifestation.

This points the way to consider the specificity of Africa. Mabona describes African mythology as monotheistically inclined, and he claims that discourse on divinity is restricted to myths (it does not infuse everyday history). Furthermore, this form of discourse is linked to a cult of ancestor worship. The sources which Mabona reviews critically include the works of Willoughby, Smith and Frobenius. Likewise, he reviews the “French school” (p. 41) (mainly Tempels, Lefrou, Aujoulat, although he also includes Westerman, Driberg, and Young) and the central place this trend of enquiry accords to the life force in the African view of reality. Note that, at this stage, the approach Mabona adopts – the form of thinking he considers appropriate for dealing with the stated problem – is still anthropological. This is evident when he concedes the viability of a philosophical

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Although the essentialising thrust of the argument is undeniable, Mabona qualifies it by specifying that the characteristics he identifies “are found predominantly in the one system and are comparatively lacking in the other” (p. 42, my emphasis).
reading of culture, while insisting that this metaphysics of the vital force would not be a philosophy in the strictest sense. Subsequently, rather than entertaining the philosophical import of myths, he presents, in detail, one “African” myth: the Xhosa tale of the brides coming to the kraal of the dragon, Namba. Humanitý, figured in the myth by a bride, faces obstacles and has to assume an appropriately virtuous attitude to overcome life’s difficulties. However, following Eliade, Mabona insists on the plurality of the layers of meaning on which such a symbolic narration may be understood, in turn or at the same time.

But Mabona also applies the same symbolic reading to customs, taking initiation as his primary example. He argues that initiation should be viewed, and participated in, as a part of biological life, a beat of the rhythm of life, as an event of regeneration and a concentration of wisdom, a catching up, etc. At the same time, the entire rite is enveloped in symbols. In all, such symbolic thinking is more dialectical than expressive of strict, mutually exclusive, and non-contradictory categories. At the same time, Mabona contends that the work of Griaule and Dieterlen on the Dogon people testifies to the “metaphysics, sociology and psychology” (p. 48) advanced by symbolic thought.

With this detour through a detailed exploration of a myth and a cultural practice, Mabona returns to the broader characterisations of cultural families: the European intellectualist bent, the Eastern axiological bent, and the African symbolic bent (p. 50). In more elaborate terms, Mabona ventures to capture the essence of the African mode of thought as follows:

The African sees life as a mystery, and his characteristic expression of that primal intuition is Rhythm. MYSTERY and RHYTHM…. I think that is the formula for the African mind: the vision of being as the Unum – the One. Rhythm has always been the classic expression of mystery as can be seen in the rituals, dances, music, and poetry. The symbol is the intellectual mode for the expression of the mystery of the reconciliation of opposites because logic refuses to oblige. (p. 50)

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5 “The French thinkers have done a world of good in bringing systematic philosophical thought to bear on the apparently unpromising field of African Metaphysical speculation” (p. 42).

6 Mabona refers to A.C. Jordan’s reworking of this myth in The wrath of the ancestors (1940). Originally published in Xhosa as Ingqumbo Yeminyanya, it “deals with history and the changing traditions of the Mpondomise people, and with the familiar themes of conflict between the new and the old, between Westernized ‘school’ and traditional ‘red ochre’ people, and between mission religion and traditional belief”, according to the synthesis by Patricia Handley in Eugene Benson and L.W. Conolly (eds.), Encyclopedia of post-colonial literatures in English (second edition), London and New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 742.
But this essence is not without ambiguity – quite the contrary. Mabona claims that such a general orientation has its strengths and weaknesses, which he identifies in the case for the African bent, as characterised by spontaneity and humour, but also “slowness, indecision, and duplicity” (p. 50).

When people from one cultural group use their own frame of reference to assess the acts and thoughts of people from other cultural groups, this may easily lead to the identification of insufficiencies in the others. A more prudent approach, Mabona suggests, would be to consider all viewpoints as complementary: “[A]ll ethnic complexes are equidistant from the centre of the Fullness of Being, though at definitely diverse starting points or angles from it” (p. 52). He even ventures the lyrical speculation that there is “a secret love affair between Europe and Africa” – which accounts in his mind for the “lovers’ quarrels between these two Continents” (p. 52).

From his first to his second article, Mabona clearly gained confidence. The second article reflects a much broader intellectual orientation. The bibliography reveals his readings in theory regarding myth and anthropology, which are amply reviewed in the article; he reviews works by Lévy-Bruhl, Cassirer, Malinowski, Singer, Bergson, Rosenberg, Boas, MacIver, and Otto. Apart from the first paragraph, which evokes the earlier essay, and an oddly inserted paragraph with practical advice on religious representations in catechism in Africa at the end, there is hardly anything left of the Christian theological perspective of his first article. The argument is now conducted in a much more social-scientific way. He does not mention Senghor, but Mabona’s idea of universal human civilisations, the complementary cultural essences, corresponds with the Senghorian view.⁷

Undoubtedly the most salient change brought about by the third and last of Mabona’s Lux articles – “Towards an African philosophy”⁸ (1959) – is its...

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⁷ In a later chapter, “The depths of African philosophy” (reviewed below), he includes Senghor explicitly in his list of authors who gave him direction and claims that this influence stretches as far back as the date of his first publications: “In a former article which I wrote for the Lux Magazine in 1958 and which I later passed on to Présence Africaine I made it clear that my point of departure in the subject of African Philosophy was constituted by the masterly analyses of such men as Leopold Sedar Senghor, Father Tempels, Father Alexis Kagame, Aimé Césaire and the researches of Marcel Griaule and Miss Dieterlen. To this I must also add the most valuable reading of the Book of the Dead of the Ancient Egyptians and other works on Egyptology” (pp. 31–32). However, it is not clear to which article Mabona refers in this citation.

⁸ There are references to this article (in any of its three publications) in the following secondary literature: L.V. Thomas, “Un système philosophique sénégalais: la cosmologie des Diola”,...
philosophical intention. As the citation from “The depths of African philosophy” (in the previous footnote) demonstrates, Mabona himself traces his work in African philosophy back as early as 1958, in particular in connection with his study of the “ethnosophists”, nègritude authors, and the anthropologists Griaule and Dieterlen (and probably also Cheikh Anta Diop in the same years). If “an African philosophy” is the essay’s aim, what does it take as its starting point?

Seemingly, this starting point is an observation about the enduring hegemony of the Western view on the world and a declaration of Mabona’s counter-hegemonic ideal: “[W]hat the world really needs is the complete image of humanity patterned on the various ways of thought and forms of culture of the diverse ethnic complexes composing the human family” (p. 56).9 The utopian imagery of a global family is carried over from the first article (“Africa’s true position and destiny”), and the vision of complementary ethnic and cultural groups from the second (“African mentality in a world frame”). Instead of looking for a solution to global conflict and violence in the direction of universal similarities among people, Mabona advocates a view that puts human diversity at the centre. For only through insight into one’s own weaknesses and understanding of another can one hope to recognise “human interdependence and solidarity” (p. 57). From such a perspective, each group has a contribution to make.

And his point is about groups – relatively uniform cultural groups, like those of Africa.10 Following the work of Gabriel Hanotaux, Cheikh Anta Diop, E.A. Wallis Budge, and Eugene Guernier, Mabona not only includes ancient Egyptian

9 The page numbers follow the Présence Africaine edition.

10 “This Civilisation was made of a complex of cultures which in their structure showed a marvelous formal and thematic uniformity as attested by their artefacts, literature, and mythologies” (p. 57).
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culture in African culture, but affirms the Africanness of the ancient Egyptians and the role ancient Egypt played as a source of Greco-Roman culture (pp. 57, 59). In the same breath, the ancient kingdoms of West Africa, Congo-Angola and Zimbabwe,\textsuperscript{11} are evoked, presumably to pre-empt any objection by an ignorant reader about the very existence of African civilisations.

Next, the “values” and “philosophical basis” (p. 61) of such big cultural units must be studied. Again, Mabona first applies this procedure to European culture. This is a significant point because Mabona is at pains to convince his readers that the reconstructive procedure by which he will identify the values and philosophical basis of African culture is not determined by that specific object of study, but could, and should, be applied equally to all vast cultural spheres. Thus, with reference to literature and religions, European culture is again presented as deeply imprinted by the “search for final illumination” (p. 61), to which are added the “belief in a multiplicity of gods” and the “belief in the divine origin of (their) race” (p. 62). Mabona speculates in a theological register that the Occident’s striving for clarity, logic, and truth is an indication that it was not for nothing that the gospel of incarnation was entrusted to Europe. Similarly, Mabona subsequently surveys Indian, Chinese, and Japanese culture (pp. 63–71).

As for Africa, its cultural life has had to deal with enormous setbacks, particularly military defeat and subjugation, but also purposeful misrepresentation of its history (pp. 60, 71). Yet, the extant sources, written or oral, art or dance, suffice for the attentive observer to extract the continent’s cultural essence – just as Mabona has done in “African mentality in a world frame”, when he stated: “Symbolism is the natural expression of the African mind” (p. 72). Whereas the ethnophilosophers would focus on linguistic sources, Mabona focuses in the first place on figurative symbols, “the circle and semicircle and the triangle and cone” (p. 72). Subsequently, he attempts to demonstrate that the “use of [these] symbol[s] is too consistently and widely diffused among Africans to be compared to the casual manifestations of a similar usage by members of other racial groups” (p. 72). He refers to Frobenius, Griaule/Ogotemmeli, Egyptian writings, and Hampâté Bâ\textsuperscript{12} to support his claim of the general use and regular recurrence

\textsuperscript{11} At this point, Mabona diverges into a historical reconstruction of the name Zimbabwe (relying on the oldest Portuguese travel sources and linguistic argumentation) and a demonstration that the inhabitants and rulers of the kingdom of Zimbabwe were African (with reference to the sources of African historiography at his disposal), as was still his practice in DP.

\textsuperscript{12} Mabona may have been present when Hampâté Bâ presented his study on animism at the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists, a study which Mabona cites in this article.
of these symbols. Once these recurrent symbols have been described, Mabona traces the corresponding references from the symbolic level to the biological, social, religious, and metaphysical levels (following the precepts of Eliade, already alluded to in Mabona’s second article). Likewise, he examines animal symbols (the bird, snake, ram, and lion) and colour symbols (red, yellow, white, and black). His basic conclusion relates the major symbols to an intricate system of references:

the circle and the triangle, and the confrontation of bird and snake or woman and dragon – do not only refer to linear or biological realities, but signify at the same time the contrast between death and life, the confrontation of humanity and reality of the irrational element and the rational, and the mutual transformations of these realities one into the other. (p. 77)

Ultimately, this study of symbols leads to the following conclusion:

[T]he African [is] symbolistic, universalist or transcendentalist in his mentality. His basic tendency or orientation is towards Being as One. We say he is transcendentalist, because he does not take the principle of contradiction or identity, with their sequel of almost infinite distinctions, as the starting point of his thought, but adopts rather the dialectical and polyvalent principle of the Oneness of Being. This principle is not arrived at logically, otherwise it could have been just another form of monism. This principle is arrived at by extrapolation from the attentively observed vital rhythm of the world. (p. 78)

And, thus, Mabona arrives at the connection between Africa and rhythm – a cherished topic for Senghor, whom Mabona takes as his guide here.13 Mabona, in fact, accords rhythm equal status in African culture to that of symbolism. But how did he make the leap from symbolism to rhythm? First, one has to understand Mabona’s very specific understanding of rhythm: he sees it as generative and not merely as repetitive. Once this premise has been established, it becomes possible to relate the core symbols of the circle and triangle with this view of rhythm, as the circle is rhythmically generated by a succession of triangle-like segments. Rhythm itself is the articulation of the relatedness between things in general.

13 He cites Senghor’s contributions to both of the Congresses for Black Writers and Artists.
If I follow the argument correctly, it is this layered symbolism and the rhythmic relatedness which Mabona considers the metaphysical foundation of African culture (p. 79). Abstraction of an aspect of one’s existence from the whole (which he also calls “objectivization”) is foreign to this mode of existence. It is more spontaneous to live the tension between the person and the world, between different layers of meaning, as one is confronted by them. How one understands life, law, society, religion, nature, etc. is mediated by this basic attitude. One may conclude that the ideal of humanity as a family and the complementarity of cultures, evoked at the beginning of the article, reflect this cultural stance towards the “oneness of being”, despite its inherent tensions.

But that is not all. Mabona concludes his article by offering a short “scheme of being” on the basis of “two principles of African thought” (p. 82). Here, I take “principle” to mean a basic structuring element of thought as transmitted in African culture, since the first principle is “generative repetition” (i.e. repetition). The second is the “vibrational principle of Sudanese philosophy” – referring to “contained or internal movement as opposed to local external movement”, p. 83 – and the construct is introduced without any indication of how it had been derived or how the Sudanese particularity is to be related to African culture in general. It is also not clear how Mabona presents the metaphysical claims that follow from these principles as logical implications of them, or as his own philosophical development permitted by following these principles.

His metaphysical schema of being maintains that being is continuous self-assertion of beings. Such self-assertion is an act of vibration, which allows for a series of four modifications: interiorisation (or self-preservation), externalisation (or growth), return to self as an object (or consciousness), and self-exteriorisation as an object (or expression). Mabona envisages that the whole range of classical philosophical questions can be rethought from this culturally specific vantage point. He describes this as work in progress and expresses the hope “that African young men will examine more and more deeply the thought-structure which underlies African culture in the whole extent of its millennial history and of its area of diffusion” (p. 85). Such a metaphysics, developed from cultural anthropology, I take to be what Mabona aimed “toward”, as he formulated it in the title of his article. In fact, this suspicion will be confirmed by “The depths of African philosophy”, in which the metaphysics of four modifications of being are expanded (see p. 162 below).

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14 The term “Sudanese” is to be understood here in the old, geographic sense of the wide region south of the Sahara from West to Central Africa.
This grand programmatic article is the first published consolidation of Mabona’s independent reflection. One way to gain a perspective on this project is to recall that, at the time of writing, the author was on a mission in Rome to further his competence in Catholic theology and to specialise in canon law. While the first article clearly shows how the young Mabona absorbed what the theological milieu in Rome could offer, his energetic study of anthropology and history is striking. Clearly, a second agenda was already forming in his mind, one that was more focused on the African continent than on the kingdom of God. Mabona allows himself some grand theorising, but one also senses that, at this point, he was still searching for the exact form that his intellectual engagement had to take. His contact with other African students and the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists stimulated his process.

The vibrancy of his new intellectual project caught the eye of others. “Towards an African philosophy” was republished by *Présence Africaine* the next year (1960) and subsequently elsewhere. As late as 1975, A.J. Smet included this article in the first volume of his anthology *Philosophie africaine. Textes choisis*. A survey of the reception of this article in other publications (see p. 147n8) testifies to the fact that Mabona was subsequently identified as a philosopher and a social scientist who was to be taken seriously in this respect.

However, although it may have been clear to his readers that he had something philosophical to offer, he does not seem to have made a final decision in favour of philosophy. On the one hand, he did indeed continue to call part of his work “philosophy”. On the other hand, a lot of it rather fell into the ambit of anthropology, and, in his later work, he simply left the philosophical aspirations by the wayside. Furthermore, his theological ink had not yet dried up.

2. *Présence Africaine*: Writing for a wide public

Including the republication of “Towards an African philosophy”, Mabona’s next six works were all published by *Présence Africaine* (except for the short intervention on film and education in Africa, discussed below). With the exception of the chapter “The depths of African philosophy”, the journal also made these texts available in French. All of these studies continue the work described thus far, but build on it in different directions. For the sake of continuity, I discuss the five articles first and then discuss the chapter which, as we will see, holds quite a singular place in Mabona’s work.
In his short paper “Elements of African culture”\(^\text{15}\) (1962), Mabona returns to the question of ancient African civilisations. He references the state of research and affirms again the Africanness of different African kingdoms, as well as of Ancient Egypt. Whereas previously he strongly affirmed the unity of African culture, he now concedes that the idea of the development of a variety of African cultures is not entirely implausible (even while he insists that, in distant pre-history, culture must have been fairly homogenous). At the same time, he considers almost the opposite argument in respect to world cultures: despite the superficial similarity of myths and rites in the cultures of different continents, there are underlying differences between them – differences allowing us to group together large cultural regions. This is illustrated in the case of African culture with the same reference to symbols, arts, and rites as in “African mentality in a world frame” and “Towards an African philosophy”, but this time he also evokes social organisation as illustration. He describes African morality as anthropocentric; adult individuals are considered free, but they “yield” freely to the interests of the group. “At this level”, he explains, “no disorder is tolerated” (p. 111). He argues that this traditional schema is co-opted in contemporary politics, where the governing party is responsible for legislation and the opposition represents the freedom of individuals. Thus, society holds individual freedom and duty towards the collective in a dialectical balance. However, this tension is often internalised by individuals and brought to expression as “coreponsibility” or solidarity. This was typical of traditional African societies, according to Mabona.

African religion typically affirms a supreme creator God to whom people pray, but who is not the object of adoration (strangely, Mabona concedes that this was different in ancient Egyptian religion, without commenting on the significance of this difference). The ancestors and natural spirits populate the invisible realm. The desire for mystic or post-life unification with God is foreign to African religion (again, in contradistinction to Egyptian religion). However, in this life, people may be possessed by spirits, allowing for a vision of continuity between everyday human existence and the realm of spirits.

In conclusion, Mabona reiterates the importance of symbolism and rhythm in African culture. He also has a word of advice for those who communicate the Christian gospel to Africans on how to take African culture into account (pp. 112, 114).

\(^\text{15}\) This article is cited by Henri Maurier, *Philosophie de l’Afrique noire*, Sankt Augustin: Verlag des Anthropos-Instituts, 1976, p. 38.
At first sight, “The vocation and presence of Africa in modern scientific life” (1963) adopts a completely different line of exploration. Yet, in fact, Mabona just sets the bar higher for the relevance of his ongoing research programme. Playing devil’s advocate, he concedes that it may seem presumptuous to speak of an African vocation in relation to modern science when nuclear arms, global communication technologies, and space vessels have been developed without a need for African collaboration. His rebuttal consists, first, of a simple observation, namely about the presence of Africa in the world of technology: current technology is the outcome of a history of human technological inventions all over the globe. Second, he notes that the contemporary advanced technologies have been produced by a small segment of the world’s societies. But he advances the thesis that there is no evidence to support the view that the current state of technological progress is at its highest point; in fact, one may assume that technological invention would progress much further if a much bigger segment of the world’s population, with their various backgrounds and experiences, were included in the process. In a spurt of optimism, Mabona also evokes the rich material resources of the African continent, resources without which technological and industrial developments are impossible.

The second component of his argumentation is based on Mabona’s distinction between a reductive view of intelligence as mere knowledge (which he sees as prevalent in contemporary technology and science) and intelligence as a broader wisdom or understanding of human life. Once it is divorced from such wisdom, science remains a superficial and dangerous kind of knowledge. Wastage of resources serves as an illustration of this. Curiously, Mabona sees the beginning of such an abstract knowledge in Socrates. Socrates’ misanthropism and critique of myths set the tone for an irresponsible detachment of human beings from the cosmos. Only ironically could one call this attitude the “love for wisdom” (“philosophy”) (p. 72). In opposition to this view of “wisdom,” Mabona advocates a broader or deeper understanding of human reason – true wisdom – which would accord scientific abstraction as we know it its rightful place as an abstraction, in order to adopt a more holistic, integrated, and responsible view of wisdom.

If Mabona’s call is heeded, it may well turn out that the scientific progress of modern times is only an interlude. Subsequently, he argues,

\[\text{the next step will consist in a diffusion of wisdom and a close study of the fundamental natural laws. I will define wisdom in terms of the concept of human values like the sense of responsibility, human dignity and brotherhood; and I will define fundamental natural laws as those laws implied in the operation of the natural forces of vibration.} \ (p. 73)\]
One cannot fail to observe how the metaphysical principle of vibration (presented at the end of “Towards an African philosophy”) is remobilized here in an ambitious redesign of science as a component of a much vaster wisdom regarding the responsible interrelation between people and nature. How precisely this plea for a reinterpretation of the laws of nature in terms of a principle of vibration is to be undertaken remains undeveloped. Moreover, the prediction that other scientific laws will be discovered along this path is surely somewhat hasty. But the broader intention is clear: to call for rigorously approaching science as a human undertaking. And since humans are of different cultures, Mabona can venture a bold prediction or wish:

The vanguard of the scientific progress of to-morrow will be formed by those countries or peoples who will have bent their necks to the laws of wisdom by accepting sincerely the human values of responsibility, human dignity, human brotherhood, etc...; countries or peoples, moreover, that will make a close study of the fundamental laws of energy. (p. 73).

In this utopian vision, there is ample room for Africa.

In all, Mabona’s position is much like that of his contemporaries, Senghor, Alioune, Diop, or, in a different way, that of Fanon: Africa’s contribution to the contemporary world is that of a rehumanization. In a way, this is still an affirmation of the complementarity of different cultures, where the current excellence of the West in matters of science and technology is recognised, but not without postulating Africa’s normative excellence.

This is perhaps the best place to evoke again Mabona’s contribution to the “First international congress on the use of audiovisual media for vocational education and training in Africa” (1962) (cf. Part 1, Chapter 4, §4). In a different way, this speech also deals with what is required for Africa to play its role in global science. Mabona frames his speech as an invitation to Italy to engage in mass education in Africa.

In his opinion, Africa enjoys a significant geographical position in relation to the other continents. Despite the frail economic state of the continent, it has wealth in the form of water, minerals, and agricultural production. It is only a “lack of training and expertise” (mancanza di preparazione, p. 197) that obstructs the continent from reaping the benefits of its real wealth. The continent cannot provide in this need without help from others. However, the painful reality is that the recent history of interaction between Africa and a number of European countries is an impediment to such exchange.
Yet, in Mabona’s view, Italy is in a singular situation: for a long time, it was not involved in colonisation and then it made a speedy end to its short colonial ambitions. This instils confidence in Italy on the African continent. Furthermore, Italy is geographically relatively close to Africa and has a long history of ties with Africa. Mabona encourages Italians to overcome their shame regarding the recent past in order to get involved in Africa. He considers it perfectly realistic that a new cooperation based on friendship could be established. Besides, the world has entered a new era of “global awareness” (coscienza mondiale, p. 198) that humanity’s problems cannot be dealt with in a piecemeal, local way alone. He cites Pope John XXIII’s encyclical “Mater et magister” as a valuable guide in this respect.

As valuable as traditional schools are, the time has come, according to Mabona, to step up the education of the masses. A number of practical difficulties could be overcome by deploying audiovisual technologies. He lends his unambiguous support for the initiatives of the International Committee for the Development of Educational and Cultural Activities in Africa (CIDAECa) in this domain.

The framework for Mabona’s brief meditation on “African spirituality” (1964) is his identification of a global, ideological conflict, but this time in terms different from those with which he opened “African mentality in a world frame”. The two opposing camps of this conflict are the personalist view (misnamed spiritualist by its adherents and idealist by its adversaries) and the impersonalist or mechanistic view (misnamed realist by its adherents and materialist by its adversaries). This tense opposition is due to the fact that each camp identifies the root of nihilism in the other. Yet the contingent historical developments that, in a specific era, accord one culture centre stage while relegating another to the wings, makes it hard to see and appreciate this ideological conflict for what it is.

If Mabona, then, claims that all people have “a spiritual outlook”, this is not to be understood (or at least not primarily) in religious terms, but in terms of these basic ideological orientations. It may therefore strike as odd, initially, when Mabona gives us not two but three major types of spirituality: personalist-individualistic, realist-collectivistic, and anthropocentric-animistic (p. 159). This apparent anomaly is dispersed when Mabona comments on the apparent void that separates the two major ideological positions – everything happens

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as if no communication, no relation, is possible. And it is in this space that he situates “man and his interests” (p. 159). This “man” is the human of the anthropocentric-animistic spirituality of African culture which was “never much engrossed in conceptual views of the universe”, but should essentially be typified as “anthropocentric, rhythmic and symbolic” (p. 159) – not as exclusively African but as predominantly characteristic of this cultural family. By this time, we are well acquainted with this portrayal of African culture by Mabona. But how does he fit this description into his view of the ideological conflict? By virtue of emphasising the “generative power” of language over its “noetic” capability, he sees the predominant position of African culture as between these two camps. The human being, speech, symbols, and rhythm all share a dialectical constitution of aspects of the two major orientations, yet, without their anxious self-elevation to a single absolute (even rendering the ultimate ideological determinations “immaterial”, p. 161).

The obverse of not aspiring to the absolute (as in religion, aspiring to mystical unity with God), is a view on human reality as fundamentally in communion – communion with other humans and with the environment. Correspondingly, truth, as a function of language, consists much less in the utterance of claims that correspond with reality and much more with the real generation of a positive relation between people. Emanating from this communion with others is an ethics of community and of human dignity. “African spirituality” explores in detail how these major orientations fan out into more detailed virtues, and the cultural institutions by which they were instilled in people.

In the final conclusions of the article, Mabona claims that African spirituality is the most appropriate for the African context, and certainly preferable to either of the two dominant ideologies offered to the world at that time. Without evoking the complementarity of cultures (as he did in earlier writings), he suggests that the world has much to learn from this African spirituality.

A footnote to “The religious concepts of the Nguni” (1965) describes the article as “A follow-up to the author’s ‘African Spirituality’ in P.A. [Présence Africaine] No. 52. This was originally written as a letter to an Englishman” (p. 12). The last part of the article explicitly takes over this correspondence, but without naming the interlocutor.

There are different motivations for looking at Africa’s past and present, in view of anticipating its future. One of them is the desire to prove that there is no real African future, but that Europe, having achieved universality, already holds the image of what Africa will become. In response to such an attitude, Mabona
retorts that one has to at least entertain the possibility that Africans may want to respond to modernity in a different way than Europeans, that such differences could be accounted for by the differences in cultural starting points and that modern civilisation has itself become the object of critique due to its destructive potential, a realisation which prompts people to reconsider their deepest values.

What the question ultimately comes down to, for Mabona, is how people assess their relation to others – not so much relatives and friends, but strangers. Here Mabona points out that modern society devalues the significance of strangers through the density of communication, the density of habitation, the formalisation of the economy, the spread of “mechanistic values” (p. 178), and secularisation.

However, Mabona also seeks to approach the question from another angle. All people have an awareness of being an “I”, but this is not to be separated from an awareness of being part of a “we” (at least in the sense of having the same attributes as others, for example, being African, or being a man). Hence, feeling part of a “we” means to self-identify while identifying with others. This identification can stretch as far as the whole of humanity. Still, African modes of self-awareness or self-consciousness go even further to embrace identification with animals, plants, and stones: the self-awareness “has a kind of instinctive attention to, and spontaneous sympathy with, all elements of the universe and this not in a superficial, condescending manner but in a deep and earnest search for communion” (pp. 179–180). Hence, by another route, we again come across this fundamental communal “matrix” or “situation” (p. 180) from which people are considered to live. Again, Mabona is willing to translate this cultural fact into metaphysical parlance, but now, instead of reverting to “personalist” and “impersonalist” as the main categories, he simply rejects dualism and monism in favour of “relative dualism and dynamic pluralism” (p. 180). As we might expect by now, Mabona considers the layeredness of symbolism to be the most appropriate way to articulate this human situation.

One would anticipate that Mabona would comment on the ways in which the traumatic history of Africa has adversely affected the transmission of this cultural view. However, he claims that the “universal conspiracy on its very existence” (the existence of the “African race”, p. 180) has strengthened the lived reality of community. And, according to Mabona, since African resistance leads to revolt and revolution, Africans will forever side with the oppressed of this world.

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17 In fact, he is willing to accept “analogical imagery” and “convertibility of categories” as equivalents for “symbolism” (p. 180).
On the theme of revolution, Mabona clarifies that the revolution of Africans he has in mind is more than the resistance of one class – “Africa is revolting in terms of the oppression of a whole race!” (p. 181). The “Revolution of the Poor” would only be a smaller component of this. Ultimately, his target is the “scandalous perversion constituted by the fundamental denial in theoretical or practical terms of the humanity of a whole section of mankind” (p. 181) – having in mind, perhaps, first of all his native South Africa, to which he must have returned by the time this article appeared in print.

At this point, Mabona addresses his original English correspondent explicitly, to explain his research project on Nguni culture. He wants to explore the “attitudes, positions, things” which are “suggested” by this culture, without these ever being expressed “in absolute, clear-cut lines” (p. 182). In this context, he responds to his interlocutor’s questions about the future of Nguni religion and its concepts. Rather than a direct response, Mabona’s long-term research aims to explore the inevitable change of Nguni convictions and attitudes (p. 183). Apart from a few general observations about cultural change in general, Mabona’s only pointer is a vague anticipation of a more Africanised Christianity in which Nguni norms and customs will probably play a significant role.

Readers who expect an exposition on Nguni religious concepts will thus be frustrated by this article. It has much more to say about general cultural and philosophical concerns. Whatever his attitude to the question of his interlocutor may have been at the time, it is worth noting that the question of Nguni religion is the central theme of both his Master’s dissertation at SOAS and his doctoral dissertation at Bern (see §7 below). Two other themes in this article need to be highlighted: first, the minor but persistent reference to African Christianity; second, political resistance against global racism. These two themes apparently belong (together) to Mabona’s anticipation of the continent’s future.


In the biographical part of this book, we saw how Alioune Diop launched a broad consultation with African Catholics in preparation for the second Vatican council (cf. Chapter 4, §6). A major outcome of the open letter “On the contribution of African personhood to the vitality of Catholicism” was the publication of
the volume *Personnalité africaine et catholicisme* (“African personhood and Catholicism”), which appeared in 1963. As one of the contributors, Mabona gained splendid international visibility and some formal recognition by his peers as an important new African intellectual voice.

Meinrad Hebga’s introductory contribution, “A severe malaise”, set the tone for the volume by forcefully evoking the accumulated historical burden of the African continent, citing “[c]enturies of slavery and deportations, the Afrikanders [sic], racism and segregation, the subjection of Black Peoples, the history of Africa humiliated by self-assured peoples and their ‘Christianity’” (p. 8). It is this history of injustice and the question of the ambiguous relation of Christianity to it – an ideology of oppression or the gospel aiming at the liberation of the oppressed? – which the volume intended to bring to the heart of debates at the Second Vatican Council: “As we approach the Ecumenical Council, the essential problem for us African Christians is this: what is, what will henceforth be the status of African Christians in universal Christianity? What is, what will be Christianity’s attitude towards non-European cultures?” (p. 11) The titles of various contributions speak to this theme: “A council for Africa’s moment” (Sastre), “The church, the black world and the council” (Ela), “God and Africa” (Tchouanga), “Malagasy wisdom and Christian theology” (Rahajarizafy), “The bantu view of reality vis-à-vis Christianity” (Lufuluabo), “Liturgical language and catholicity” (Ngango), “Fundamental structures of black-African prayer” (Mveng), “For a church of the poor” (Souffrant), “Catechism and preaching” (Nioka), “The church of Africa: economic and social development” (Obama), and finally “The black priests are questioning and offering suggestions” (Senghor).

Furthermore, the volume was conceived as a follow-up from *Le prêtres noirs s’interrogent* – the groundbreaking volume on African theology published in 1956.\(^\text{18}\)

The nature of Mabona’s chapter in it, “The depths of African philosophy”, is easier to appreciate within the big picture of the whole volume. From this perspective, it is startlingly evident that his chapter does not in any direct way contribute to the objectives of Diop’s overarching project or to the theme of the book (an impression which is reinforced by the fact that it is the only chapter written in English). It is left to the readers to conjecture how this chapter could

be reconstrued as a contribution. One may glimpse part of the reason for this odd fact, as well as some of the backstage events that accompanied the submission of the chapter, in its last paragraph:

I beg readers to pardon the diffuse form of this short treatise. For certain reasons and especially on account of insistent demands from my distinguished friend, Alioune Diop, conclusions drawn over a number of years of thought and study were put together in a hurry. I hope that final publication of the work in book form could be done in two or three years. (p. 58)

The citation also invites the reader to follow up reading the chapter by studying the book, which, as we have seen, was written, but never published. However, I had the opportunity to make a duplicate of Mabona’s own copy during a visit to Lucerne in September 2018. Although the epilogue of the book is signed 28 August 1962 and the chapter was published only in 1963, the chapter is to be read as a preparation for the book (as the last citation confirms). Indeed, the content of the two texts overlaps substantially.¹⁹

But let us turn from the formal considerations to the content. The reader quickly discovers that this is Mabona’s first attempt to fulfil his promise to write an African metaphysics compatible with science, a promise initially formulated in “Towards an African philosophy”. These two texts are the concrete manifestation of his first labours to build on his working hypothesis, with the hope of stimulating others to join the exploration. Here I focus on the content of the chapter, but I still give some impression of the further developments in the unpublished The outlines of African philosophy.

The first section of “The depths of African philosophy”²⁰ is devoted to an apologetic preamble. Somewhat grudgingly, Mabona grants that, at the time of writing, it was still unavoidable for an author to defend the very idea of African

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¹⁹ The chapter is published on pp. 29–58 of Personnalité africaine et catholicisme. Of these, pp. 29–44 correspond with the Introduction and first chapter of Part I (i.e. pp. 1–30) of the book manuscript. Pages 44–53 of the chapter do not seem to have a counterpart in the book. Then, Part II, Chapter 4, pp. 146–153 of the book manuscript is inserted as pp. 53–56 of the chapter. Finally, the conclusions of pp. 56–58 of the chapter are unique again.

philosophy. His basic point is to remind the reader of the cultural embeddedness and roots of philosophy in Greek culture, and he asks just the same for African philosophy: if philosophy can be Greek, so can it be African. Following Cheikh Anta Diop, he insists on the functional dimension of culture—a means by which to master a specific environment. Without claiming to be able to cover the whole range of African cultural phenomena, the material available to him suffices to launch his exploration and in this way invigorate African thought in all disciplines. Not that he is reinventing the wheel—his declared orientation draws from the early “ethnophilsophers”, négritude authors, African ethnography, and studies on ancient Egypt. According to his self-presentation, these authors provided the principles that he applies in this study. Most of what follows represents only the outcome of this study and not a running commentary on the ways by which he appropriated the work of these predecessors or his own for the material it is applied to.

According to Mabona, the study of African thought should be pursued on two levels: first, that of symbolism which functions as a sort of language and logic; second, the analogical extension of the first level, which allows for mythology and metaphysics.

African ontology understands being as dynamic, rather than static, namely as a vital force or vibration (the internal movement of self-repetition of being). We recognise the terrain opened three years earlier by Mabona. He elaborates on the four basic modalities of vibration: (1) interiorisation or self-preservation, (2) growth or outward movement (presupposing the former), (3) consciousness (returning to self as an object), and (4) self-exteriorisation or expression (of an “I”). But now Mabona adds two more dimensions to this discussion. For each form of vibration, he adds and elaborates on a diagrammatic representation. Thereafter, the diagrammatic representation is used as support for a quantification of all the movement possibilities, on the basis of which calculations of the units of different forms of movement may be undertaken. Later (p. 50), we learn that

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21 As mentioned in the citation in the footnote above.
22 This argumentative procedure is attributed to the Dogon people in the preface to Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, *Signes grafiques soudanais*, Paris: Hermann, 1951, Mabona’s reference work for all his claims on Sudanese thought and symbols. The ethnographic account of this book gathers information from Dogon, Bambara, and Bozo people from Mali.
23 Among all the elaborate diagrams presented by Mabona in “The depths of African philosophy” and *The outlines of African philosophy*, I could find only one that corresponds with the Sudanese diagrams documented by Griaule and Dieterlen (see *Signes grafiques soudanais*, p. 21, figure 40).
the four modalities of vibrational movement are responsible for four degrees of autonomy: autodynamism, passive autonomy, active autonomy, and an unnamed, more radical form of autonomy on the fourth level. Although Mabona does not seem to be concerned with illustrative examples, we could relate the first form of movement with that of dead matter, the second with vegetative life, the third with animal life, and the fourth with human existence (cf. p. 49).

Finally, this ontological speculation is extended briefly up to a tenth order of being (p. 56), which would be the place of a unique, supreme being (p. 58).

The basic objective of “The depths of African philosophy” was to discuss and develop the “general principles of African Philosophy” (p. 32), so it remains in The outlines of African philosophy (p. 95). Although this is a more substantive study, its author is nonetheless aware of the limits of his enterprise. The epilogue starts with a disclaimer:

In this work I have tried to give in a summary and shortened form what I consider to be the main lines of development of philosophical concepts starting from principles of African thought. The work is naturally incomplete and far from mature. (p. 154)

Taking the metaphysics of the four modalities of being as his foundation, Mabona’s exposition elaborates on the relations between units of existence, between their core and periphery. This involves developments on energy and the relative force or velocity of different energies too (e.g. p. 124). Natural phenomena such as gravity, magnetism, electricity, heat and light, sound and odour are accounted for in this theoretical frame. He ponders geography and meteorology (pp. 84–85). Life and death (p. 68), the foundation of the universe, and the origin and genesis of matter (pp. 67, 69, 121–122) are expounded on and there is even a calculation of the time it took for the universe to bring forth life (p. 98). All of these discussions together represent the “first stage” or “order” of being, and this spans Part 1 of his book.

The second part, a kind of “appendix” to the first, gives a condensed overview over the “other orders of being” (p. 99). The most significant aspects of these are certainly the emergence of consciousness (p. 140ff) and imagination (p. 142ff).

In some places (for example, pp. 46–47), Mabona discusses the parallels between aspects of his metaphysical account and documented forms of African thought: the Egyptian Book of the Dead, or Sudanese thought. However, 24 But note that, in the Epilogue (p. 154), he states that he purposefully limited references to The Book of the Dead and to Dogon/Sudanese symbolism to the minimum.
overall, the specific Africanness claimed for these thoughts remain under-clarified – which is even more surprising in light of Mabona’s own immersion in an anthropology or ethnomethodological paradigm.

Formally, this book (and the chapter) could be typified as a metaphysical speculation of the rationalist type (in the sense of not working from observation to abstraction, but starting from pure ideas and constructing a schema on them). The author hardly makes any attempt to apply these principles to reality. Rather, he sometimes evokes similarities between his schemas and cultural artefacts from different localities in Africa. Although there is some reference to African cultural and historical points of orientation, the general thrust is clearly philosophical, and more specifically metaphysical, and not anthropological. My current set of competences allows me no reason to conclude that Mabona succeeded in pulling off his ambitious project. As reported in the biographical account, he himself is rather sceptical about its success.

3.1 General appraisal: South Africa’s first African philosopher?

Looking back now at all Mabona’s writings discussed thus far, we can make a number of more general observations. Except for the first article and a few references to Christianity in Africa in later ones, none of the above would intimate that we are dealing with an author whose first preoccupation must have been finishing his PhD in Canon Law. To this we will turn later. We see the emergence of an active interest in anthropology (coupled with historical studies) and a specific type of early African philosophy – “ethnophilosophy” as it has become known since Hountondji.

There is another intriguing detail to be derived from this. Whatever one’s assessment of Mabona’s work may be, one cannot deny that he was contributing to African philosophy, at the very least to a level sufficient to convince some of his philosophical contemporaries that he was a serious interlocutor. Is Mabona, then, South Africa’s first African philosopher? For the sake of caution, let it be stated that the answer to this question depends on one’s understanding of what philosophy is, and, in particular, of what African philosophy is. African philosophy can be traced back as far as the thought of ancient Egypt or, indeed, to the oral traditions spanning centuries. But one may also be interested in the history of the written thought, presented to the world as philosophy, published for an academic or intellectual readership, after a process of review by scholarly peers. If this is the definition in mind, Anton Muziwakhe Lembede is certainly
relevant.\textsuperscript{25} However, his writings are more political debate,\textsuperscript{26} and his 1945 Master’s thesis is a historical exploration in Western philosophy.\textsuperscript{27} As far as I could establish, Mabona is indeed South Africa’s first African philosopher. It may be that future research will disprove my claim, but at the time of writing, I have not been able to find any specialist of South African philosophy who could cite a text of African philosophy from a South African author dating before the mid 1970s. To this, I should add what I have argued in the biographical part of this work, namely that Mabona was possibly the second non-white lecturer of philosophy at a South African institution of tertiary education.

The fact that the South African scholarly community has never known about this work, and indeed about Mabona himself (except for a few rare exceptions),\textsuperscript{28} does not invalidate the facts. The numerous citations of his articles from this period demonstrate that he was recognised as a philosopher of African philosophy by his scholarly contemporaries.

4. Dissertatio ad lauream in Facultate Juris Canonici apud Pontificiam Universitatem Urbanianam

If one considers the energy and enthusiasm with which Mabona threw himself into studying African history, culture, and philosophy during his years in Rome, it is surprising that he still had the time or the desire to complete his doctoral thesis in theology. Yet, he did not merely complete his thesis – the study reflects a long


\textsuperscript{26} A limited case may perhaps be the article “Know thyself” (1945), Freedom in our lifetime, pp. 86–88, but even this article is not presented to the reader as a philosophical meditation.

\textsuperscript{27} It was entitled “The conception of God as expounded by or as it emerges from the writings of great philosophers – from Descartes to the present day”, cf. Freedom in our lifetime, pp. 104–105.

\textsuperscript{28} In Part 1, I have cited studies such as those of Mukuka, Denis, and Motlhabi, who discuss Mabona in the context of SPOBA and the Black Priests’ Manifesto. The only reference to Mabona as philosopher I could find thus far is in Mogobe Ramose’s article, “I doubt, therefore African philosophy exists” (South African Journal of Philosophy 22/2, 2003, pp. 113–127), but this is limited to the generic claim “that many African philosophers such as Abanda Ndengue, Abiola Irele, Alexis Kagame, Mulago gwa Cikala Musharhamina, Lufuluabo, Chiri, Ntumba, Towet, Mongamelli [sic] Mabona, N’daw, Nkrumah, Nyerere and many others have contributed to the already existing edifice of African philosophy” (p. 120).
and serious engagement with the scholarly community relevant to his study (as described in the biographical section, Part I, Chapter 4, §3), as well as with the complex methodology and material of the dissertation itself. It is admittedly a fairly short document (VII + 131 pages). The bibliography of eighty-one items consists of ecclesiastical and scholarly works, most in the domain of canon law and the lay apostolate, the bulk of which spans the last four centuries. Apart from a handful of publications in English, German, and French, the majority are in Latin. The complete absence of any apparent trace of his other lively research interests of that period is conspicuous. Does this reflect implicit or explicit institutional censorship? Or did he want to demonstrate that he could master the discipline on its own terms to the required level of perfection? Or were the two domains of research simply separate in his mind? The answer to these questions will remain pure speculation.

The thesis is designed as an exploration of the gradual transformations of the juridical status of catechists, an ecclesiastical function which has always existed in the Western and Eastern Church (p. II). The approach is thus theoretical rather than practical (p. IV). This general design fans out into five chapters (see outline, p. IV). First, the earliest tradition of the institution of lecturer-catechist is traced from its inception in the life work of Christ, through the time of the apostolic fathers and through the middle ages to demonstrate that the institution has an uninterrupted existence up to the Council of Trent (p. 1) in the middle of the sixteenth century. Then, in two separate chapters, the specific functions of the catechist and the “universality” of this institution are examined. The spread of this institution, as witnessed in authoritative ecclesiastical documents, stretched from Africa (in the historical sense, before the modern invention of “Africa”) and Europe (France/Gallia, Spain, England, Germany) to the East (Constantinople, Edessa, Antioch, Armenia, Hungary, Russia). However, especially in the period after the Council of Trent, there was a temporary suspension of the office of the catechist, as is documented in Chapter 4 of Mabona’s thesis. In conclusion, the fifth chapter argues in favour of a rehabilitation of this neglected institution. To do so, Mabona has to work his way through a number of relevant obstacles: tradition, canonical law, the Church’s understanding of ordination, and prescriptions in respect of celibacy.

Considering this thesis in conjunction with Mabona’s other scholarly work during his period in Rome, one may safely claim that, by the time Mabona went back to South Africa, he had laid a solid foundation for a life of study and writing. Was philosophy going to be his primary orientation? Or rather anthropology or theology? Or would he prefer to follow all three lines of enquiry at the same time?
For some years, this question remained unsettled, while an entirely different mode of expression came to the fore: poetry.

5. “The nuclear blast of spring”: Poetry

Since there is something quite inappropriate in trying to summarise the expressiveness of poetry, I will limit this discussion to a short rendering of the themes that occupied Mabona in his poems and provide a number of illustrative citations.29

In “The sea”, a stand-alone poem from 1965, the poet reproaches the sea for its treacherous duplicity. What appeared at first to be a depiction of a scene of nature turns out to be a recollection of past trauma:

I saw your burning gold –
Yesterday,
As the sun rose
But was not deceived.
For I have tasted
Your bitter brine,
Cold grave of my fathers,
As they were brought
In galleyfuls
To far-off hells.

The poet is left with a confusing ambiguity between the attraction and repulsion towards the oceans.

Let us now turn to the six poems published in 1970. Addressed to an unidentified reader, “Chrysalis” is a call to a change of mind. The reader is urged not to remain locked into a moribund repetition of past ideas (like an eternal chrysalis); the reader is instead invited to give passions and thought free rein to participate in the creative rhythm of the universe (like an escaping butterfly).

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29 I have benefited greatly from the opportunity to work through these poems together with Pol Peeters, emeritus professor of French literature.
As a note indicates, the title “Gazer-at-the-dawn” was a praise name of the Xhosa king Maqoma, who led the last significant military campaign against British troops before he was caught and sent to Robben Island, where he died.\(^\text{30}\) The Amathola Mountains, where King Maqoma fought the colonial attack still brave the elements today. With the rains, blowing in from the sea, come the whispered messages from another place surrounded by the sea: Robben Island. But now the wind blows inland from these mountains, carrying the battle cries of the Amatholas to “cities, homestead, guts and men’s hearts”. The end of the poem evokes the dawn of liberation which King Maqoma may not have seen, but which is bound to arrive one day.

The unsettling question which the next poem, “The answer”, ponders is the “legitimacy of genocide”. This answer – or its counterargument, rather – is only subtly suggested: in a fundamentally obscure world, only life itself can provide the light of living intensity. Genocide, depriving humanity of that light, is self-defeating.

“Dead freedom-fighter”\(^\text{31}\) is addressed to an unnamed fallen “comrade brother”, and reflects remorse for not being present to do anything to prevent his death (“Oh, where was I?”). Such a wound to the survivor’s conscience is, however, not entirely futile:

You fought  
For mother Africa  
And your atrocious death  
Is the keen lash wherewith  
She’ll whip her enemies  
To cowering shame  
And her sons to redeem her name.

In “Contestation”, the narrator stands up in a posture of defiance to the “slanderous universe”. This stance for truth, or truthfulness, against overpowering defamation (one may assume the situation of the poet in South Africa) counts on the same universe’s responsiveness to truth.\(^\text{32}\)


\(^{31}\) This poem is cited in Stephen Finn, “Poets oppressed, poets of protest: a comparison of pre-Israel Hebrew poets and pre-Azania black poets”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 30/1, 1990, pp. 103–131, here p. 112.

\(^{32}\) It is possible that the confrontation between the women and the snake, discussed in “Towards an African philosophy”, forms the symbolic key to this poem.
The previous poem was addressed to the universe; the next is entitled “Prayer”. The first part of this prayer expresses grief, while the second part calls on “fury and laughter”. The grief is evoked by the foundation of the world which is depicted as “monstrous” and “aged with quarrels”. But through fury and laughter, this world can be reshaped

To the seething rhythm
Of our flicking
Hands
And the restless beat
Of our bouncing
Feet.

Whether this dance is religious, whether the dance is a preparation to restorative action, is left to the reader to decide.

Is “Futility” a come-down from the celebration of the ability to change the world in “Prayer”? The scene is set for a breakdown, when the poet starts with an evocation of autumn which dies too young. Under such autumn-like circumstances of life

Man holds the coiling rope of life
As if it were a serpent whose fangs he dreads,
Should he lose his tightened grip.

But are humans the mere objects of forces greater than themselves? So it seems, and thus life seems futile. However, the same universe which plays with and mocks people’s “passion for life’s precarious flame” has more in store than inevitable winter, death, and decay: “the nuclear blast of spring”.

If this predominantly natural imagery has a political meaning, then, it turns out, it is resistance to the coming resurgence that is futile.


Someone, looking up in search of signs by which to get a grip on pressing questions, is disappointed and withdraws into the night. Like an otter chasing after prey, he darts in pursuit of dreams. Here he obtains a “Rich harvest” of seeds left by “his sleeping ancestors”.

One may recall here that the image of an unstoppable spring was already used in Mabona’s first Lux articles.
“Black theology” calls on a Jesus who, according to the proclamation, rose from the dead and in doing so broke through the natural order of things. But the poet has no intention to play along with this message:

Well, leave our shores, Lazarus-Jesus
We want none of your reversals. Go away

The poet objects to the unnatural thrust of the gospel message and pleads for exorcism from the corresponding “mind therapy”.

Yet in a surprising about-turn, the poem ends in Xhosa and Tswana/Sepedi, by pleading with “Buth’ Yesu” (brother Jesus) rather to stay, even expressing affection for him.

Looking back at these poems, one notices the recurrent descriptions of natural phenomena (mountain, sea, seasons, etc.), animals (especially snakes, but also otters, birds, insects, etc.), and plants. The question of historical injustice or the trauma inflicted by the sociopolitical conditions in South Africa at the time seem to be nearly always present – sometimes very explicitly and at other times under the surface. Often, the poems sketch a troubled present which had been in the making through a history of confrontations, a present which may (or may not) open into a future. What the role of people is in bringing about a new future remains undecided – at stake – in these poems.

6. Writings of a South African priest

Of Mabona’s intellectual work as a priest and seminary lecturer only a fragmentary picture remains. If one considers his theological specialisation in canon law and the theme of catechism – after all, the consummation of his formal education – in a narrow sense, the texts that he wrote later seem to present a clean break. And indeed, the abrupt change of his form of argumentation and presentation is striking. However, following my suggestion that the interest in the role of the catechist was, for him, the location of mediation between two cultural worlds, it becomes possible to notice a concealed continuity. The tension between worlds is thematised in the essay “Black people and white worship” ([1966] 1972).

34 Echoes of his own contribution, “Black people and white worship”, to Essays in Black Theology (see discussion above) are evident.
35 I thank Ms. Rose Kgwete and Dr. Mpho Tshivhase for helping me translate these phrases.
Mabona’s approach is, in the first place, anthropological: worship is a phenomenon of human culture which engages the whole person. Second, it has a specific character, in that worship belongs to religious practice with a transcendent or eschatological dimension. He rejects the idea that Christian faith is centred on divine intervention to compensate for the remaining limits of human mastery over the world. Rather, the core of this faith is a divine calling to establish a family of all humankind – a unity which still transcends contemporary reality. This perspective allows Mabona to consider liturgy “an expression of family relationships with a cosmic dimension” (p. 82). But instead of portraying worship then as a kind of investment in the afterlife, he explicitly downplays the significance of death and the afterlife as a point of orientation in worship: worship is a “function of life” (p. 82), not an attempt to step out of it.

And since this is the case, the form of worship is important: mystification through obsolete symbols contradicts the very idea of worship. His plea is for a radical and persistent reform. He rejects worship as a spiritual exercise in “cringing” in favour of one that aims at the generation of “freedom” (p. 83). In particular, he considers the existing spiritual training of the clergy to be “foreign to our traditions” (p. 84). But why strike at the exercises striving at moral excellence? Because it promotes the idea of self-perfection by “entering into oneself” (p. 84). At this point, the orientation of African tradition is deployed as a counter-model:

A sensible person in our society was supposed to be one who knew and performed his or her duties towards ancestors and members of the community. [...] It was supposed to make a person a sensible and well-adjusted member of society and the universe. (p. 84)

Hence his concluding advocacy is a call to resist sterile exercises in spirituality and rather to promote relations of communion between individuals, humanity, and nature.

In direct continuity with this line of thought is the “Black Priests’ Manifesto”, which Mabona wrote with Mkhathsha, Moetapele, Louwfant, and Mokoka (see pp. 126-127). This piece, which appeared on 23 January 1970 in the *Rand Daily Mail* was entitled “Our church has let us down”. For its republication in the same year in *African Ecclesiastical Review*, it was entitled “Africanisation in South Africa”. Partly a list of grievances, partly an outcry (“ENOUGH! ENOUGH!”, p. 424), this article was an unprecedented gesture by the black clergy, taking recourse to

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36 Cited from the Karis and Gerhardt republication.
public media in the hope of finally being heard by the Church. Yet, reading the text today, the collegial, albeit firm, expression of the points of dispute and the authors’ explicit loyalty and devotion to the Church and the Gospel is striking.

Their plea is presented from the perspective of a desire for the well-being of the Church. Their plea for the Africanisation of the Church in South Africa echoes the contemporary views of the Catholic hierarchy, notably that of Pope Paul VI (who declared during his visit to Uganda in 1969 that there was a need for the Church to embrace the contribution of “negritude”) (cf. p. 424). Such views were affirmed by Cardinal Paul Zoungrana, at that time Archbishop of Ouagadougou, who insisted on the need to accord the “African soul” its rightful place in the Church – as the authors also point out (cf. p. 424).

Although the Catholic Church in South Africa claimed to reject apartheid, the five signatories complain that its clergy was divided on the subject. Its institutions (“seminaries, convents, hospitals, schools, monasteries, associations and churches”, p. 425) often followed the lines of racial segregation. This is the core of the problem, in their assessment:

The Whites would never accept a Black or multi-racial government. Whites in South Africa are not prepared to serve under Africans in any capacity. Socially, culturally and intellectually, the Whites consider themselves quite different from the Blacks. The obvious conclusion is that most Whites have opted out of the concept of integration. (p. 425)

These five authors not only oppose this attitude but also express their view on the true Christian alternative: “As Christians we believe in a multiracial society. We feel this is the only way in which real Christianity can be practised” (p. 425).

They are painfully aware of the limitations this policy imposes on black people’s aspirations in all dimensions of life. Yet, for the time being, they do not realistically see an end to apartheid. Given this context, the signatories list eight points of detailed grievances, aimed to improve the conditions for black members and clergy. Negatively, these points deal with the racially profiled inequalities and knock-on effects of apartheid in the Church; positively, they call for the Africanisation of the Church’s practice and governance.

In response to this Rand Daily Mail publication, Pro Veritate invited Mabona to further his reflection and to stimulate debate on the “Africanisation of the Church” (1970), as his article was entitled.

In general, Mabona recommends that Africanisation be understood as “a ‘taking over’ of authority, responsibility and initiative by people of native African
origin in the political and cultural life of their nations or communities” (p. 3). Under the name “indigenisation” or “adaptation”, this idea has been used in churches too, but Mabona feared that these attempts had steered discussions to that date in a more theoretical direction and lacked the urgency transmitted by the term “Africanisation”. Although he granted some understanding of the real issues among some missionaries, the churches in general seemed unwilling to deal with this question. Instead through “moral or physical violence” (p. 3) they maintained the authority of whites over blacks when the blacks had long known that they did not need such guardianship any longer, if they ever did.

Mabona justifies his position on the basis of principled theological argumentation:

As for adaptation or indigenisation, it has been realized that it is not the Word of God which has to be adapted to a culture or religion but it is the cultural-religious idiom of a people that has to be penetrated by the Word of God and hence imbued with His Spirit. It is bad theology to use Scripture to prove theses posed by the human mind; rather Scriptural themes are hermeneutically interpreted to enlighten a certain question or critical situation suggested or constructed by concrete historical circumstances. (p. 3)

The Western robe in which the Gospel arrived in Africa is not essential to its message.

Africanisation would obviously have an impact on narrowly cultural forms of religious life, such as the music of celebrations. But it would penetrate deeper, for instance, in cultivating the spiritual dimension of people’s interaction with objects of everyday usage (as it used to be in earlier African societies). Likewise, Africanisation would entail a recognition of the ancestor cult, the essence of which is the feeling of “gratitude, solidarity, and human dependence” (p. 4).

Westernisation was an inevitable fact of history, but had to be undone in the African context. This, Mabona advocated, had to be done through a broad process of intra-Church dialogue.

Whereas dialogue is certainly preferred to violence, Mabona is compelled to think about violence and counter-violence when the World Council of Churches

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announced its support for movements of antiracist “guerrilla movements”. His contribution to the debate, “God and violence” (prepared in response to an invitation from the *South African Outlook*) sets two big principles. First, racialism is “arrant nonsense” (p. 186); second, separation imposed on “adult, free, and responsible persons, violates the freedom of those persons and is an insult to their dignity as responsible individuals” (p. 186). Where such violence reigns, counter-violence cannot simply be rejected. At the same time, Mabona acknowledges the complexity of historically conditioned relations which makes it hard to guarantee that counter-violence effectively targets a real aggressor (rather than a potential or real ally). For this reason, even legitimate recourse to violence should never brush aside all dialogue, without which no lasting relations can be established.

7. Anthropology and religion

Mabona’s most important remaining studies are strictly academic dissertations. The first of these, the “long essay”, prepared at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, was indeed submitted as a “Religious studies essay” in 1973. On the basis of its contents, it may also be considered a study in historical anthropology, focused principally on the world described above, in Part 2, Chapter 1. The dissertation’s full title gives an impression of the wide, interdisciplinary dimensions of the study: “The interaction and development of different religions in the Eastern Cape in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with special reference to the first two Xhosa prophets”.38

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If one merely pages through the essay, one’s first impression is that it starts without any announcement of the theme, a problem statement, a demarcation of its scope or subtitles – relying only on the lengthy title to orient the reader. However, the text (consisting of 16 pages of exposition, followed by 15 more pages with endnotes) is very well-structured (paragraphs are tagged with major and sub-numbers) and the argument unfolds very neatly.

The essay starts with a reference to the first documented case of interethnic marriage between Xhosa and San (in the 13th century) and the formation of Xhosa-Khoi communities in the 16th and 18th centuries. To this, he adds evidence to the linguistic sedimentation in the Xhosa language of their appreciation for the Khoi. These facts serve as a lively illustration of his point that “Khoisan-Xhosa interaction took place at a deep cultural level” (p. 2). Once this has been put on the agenda, Mabona can launch the orientation of the whole essay:

The upshot of this long-lasting interaction between the two cultures was the emergence of a Xhosa religious system of such vitality that it threw up, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a counter-challenge of remarkable strength to missionary Christianity and colonial invasion. This challenge was embodied especially in the two prophetic figures who arose about this time amongst the Xhosa: Makhanda, better known as Makana, and Ntsikana. (p. 2)

The reader cannot overlook that Mabona has exchanged the exploration of quite static continent-wide essences of African culture (in his earlier articles) for a much more historically sensitive description of the formation of cultural variations in interactions between groups, irrespective of whether that interaction was more collaborative or more confrontational.

The dissertation aims at providing a profile of the convergences and divergences of Xhosa and Khoisan elements in Xhosa religious views and practices as a point from which missions and colonisation were engaged with and resisted. Whereas attention to Khoi and San culture and history was a new theme for Mabona, we recognise his earlier interest in the study of myths (albeit now with a significantly different approach) and of Xhosa religious concepts as part of a broader Nguni cultural landscape. But true to his new dynamic view on human interaction, the relation between Xhosa and Christian beliefs among Xhosa prophets is studied. The varied mixtures resulted in what he describes as “a bedrock of ideology both for resistance and for a process of controlled accommodation in a new situation of cultural alienation” (p. 3).
Hence, he presents mythological personae and animal, plant, and stone symbolism as they are represented in the myths of the different groups. Views on cosmogony, life and death, and the formation of peoples are also described. His painstaking accumulation of historical and ethnographic detail is evident – gone is the metaphysical speculation detached from any application which we encountered in “The depths of African philosophy”. Since the “emergent Khoisan-Xhosa religious system was the launching pad of the prophets” (p. 10), Mabona can proceed by focusing on prophets, while always viewing them as a part of broader social trends.

For the period under consideration in this dissertation and from the point of view of the study of religion, the major event is the Xhosa people’s encounter with Christianity. The latter differed markedly in theology, rites, and ethics from the religious complex described thus far. In Mabona’s view, the most significant difference was between two respective views of humanity. So important was this difference that Makana\(^{39}\) made the case for taking them as reflecting two different kinds of human reality, a black and a white one, each with its own divinity (Mabona insists on the political dimension of Makana’s views) (pp. 12–13). However, this also meant that Makana accorded a place to the Christian deity, albeit in a relation of separation and subordination to the Xhosa one (pp. 14–15).

However, this conflictual instrumentalisation of salient differences between the two religious complexes was contemporaneous with other, contrary, developments. In Mabona’s view, “[w]hen this Khoisan-Xhosa ‘religious cocktail’ came into contact with Christianity, its piquancy was increased by the absorption of congenial elements from the new religion” (p. 11). This tension between the tendency to willing appropriation and the accentuation of differences together resulted in a range of cultural and religious strategies, each with its own political roots and consequences. Hence the position of Makana represented only one alternative; that of Ntsikana represented another notable one. Ntsikana preached the existence of a single deity, which he presented as a composition of Khoisan, Xhosa, and Christian ideas (pp. 13–14).\(^{40}\)

Whereas the prophets, who also acted as diviners, should be understood against the backdrop of their sociocultural environment, one should also note the significant influence they in their turn exercised on that environment. Thus, the

\(^{39}\) Also called Mak(h)anda or Nxele – as referred to in the biographical part of this book (see p. 33).

\(^{40}\) However, elsewhere, Mabona places more emphasis on the Christian dimension of his message: “Ntsikana was advising the adoption of the Christian message and warning against social and cultural alienation bound up with money economy” (p. 13).
tension between Makana and Ntsikana led to the polarisation of the Xhosa people. This then led to two opposing political strategies: Mabona typifies Makana’s strategy as a politics of “resistance” and that of Ntsikana as “collaborationist and accommodationist” (p. 14). Makana’s view was characterised by his hard refusal to mix Khoisan-Xhosa religious views with Christian ones, but Mabona is reluctant to construe this view as merely conservative. In Mabona’s opinion, this stance, as much as that of Ntsikana, demonstrated the “ability to adapt and to innovate” (p. 14). Mabona attributes the very emergence of prophets to this ability. In fact, his definition of prophets as “traditional royal diviners who had learned from their contact with Christianity the importance of having a message of salvation” (p. 14) applies to Makana too.

Mabona’s appreciation for the Makana option is attested by the pages of careful description of the strategic composition of Makana’s religious outlook from pre-existing elements of the three religious families. The echo of the scholar’s personal situation at that time and that of the South Africa he had left is unavoidably audible when he concludes his study as follows:

Makana’s doctrine was repeated by Mlanjeni, Nongqause, and Mhlakaza and lost its force only in 1890, when Xhosa national resistance finally collapsed. It was in this year as well that Makana’s personal effects were at last buried by his relatives who had given up the hope of his return. He himself had died in 1820 in the ocean after an unsuccessful attempt to escape from Robben Island where he had been brought after the disastrous defeat at Grahamstown. Ntsikana died of natural causes in 1821. (p. 16)

It is quite evident that the cultural politics of Makana and Ntsikana resonates with the question on the relation between the different population groups in South Africa (particularly the debates between the PAC/BC or ANC views, described in the bibliographical part, Chapter 5). Or, to put it differently, working through the historical material of religious responses to the colonial reality in the early nineteenth century, may well be – for Mongameli Mabona, but also for others – a means by which to contemplate the pressing issues of the apartheid years (and beyond, as we will see in §9, below).
8. Interlude: The publication spurt of 1996

As far as publications go, the “long essay” would be the last the world would see from Mabona for more than twenty years (and even then, its submission would have to be considered a publication). Then, in 1996, he came out again with a bouquet of articles. The democratic turn in South African history clearly forms the background for this burst of writing. Another part of the justification for this collection of texts is given in the second one, which I will present below:

At the request of the staff of the magazine Présence Africaine, made at its offices in Paris on 10-10-95, I visited the Transkei in the first half of November 1995 to find out who were the recipients of the copies of Présence Africaine sent to the Transkei in 1964 and to assess the influence which the magazine exercised on the political struggle of the Blacks in South Africa at that critical juncture. (p. 77)

The common thread running through these texts is the attempt to recall some of the smaller histories that led to the fall of the “granite wall” that apartheid was supposed to be, as Mabona states in the article “Présence Africaine’ and South African freedom” (1996). The historical perspective on the liberation presented in this article serves as a background for the other articles too.

Mabona sets apartheid in a longer and broader history of the European Enlightenment, technological development, and the spread of Christianity – which he reads critically. Subsequently, the history of colonisation and of racial segregation is portrayed as outgrowths of these three components. But he also passes in review a history of divergent strategies of resistance: Ntsikana is evoked, as are important historical figures of the ANC, PAC, and BCM. To this, he adds initiatives of cultural resistance, the mobilisation of women, and initiatives by some black members of the clergy and students. Then he turns to the real theme of his article:

Into this buzzing and humming situation of political high tension a bombshell was dropped. In 1964, copies of Présence Africaine, a

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41 While the text was not published in the ordinary sense, it is in the public domain as a submission for an advanced degree.

42 Mabona does not specify which copies and how many copies were sent. His argument does not require this specification. However, one may mention that the second 1964 edition of Présence Africaine included a dossier on apartheid in South Africa.
Cultural Review of the Black World published in Paris, made a surprising and sudden appearance in the Transkei. [...] The late Mr. Alioune Diop, the Editor of this prestigious review, could not have chosen a more strategic moment to administer this shot in the arm for the black struggle in South Africa. The news of this literary bonanza went round like wild fire. But it was all hushed because all kinds of ‘communist’ literature were banned and forbidden. (p. 60)

Interviews with two recipients of copies (a clerk and a teacher) were conducted by Mabona and included in his 1996 dossier.

Mabona claims a direct link between the influence of these missives and the emergence of Black Consciousness (pp. 61, 62). The fact that Biko and Pityana drew on Fanon and Césaire – both linked with Présence Africaine – is cited as an example of this. Long citations from these authors and a prison letter from Mandela serve to illustrate the spirit of defiance. The article closes with a celebration of all the heroes who contributed to the struggle against apartheid.

His next, shorter, article continues the discussion under the title “Présence Africaine’ in Transkei, 1964: Report”. The report reflects the conditions under which Mabona, after decades of exile, found his native Transkei and, on top of that, attempted to accomplish a relatively specific information-gathering mission. The two interviewees were old acquaintances of his: a school teacher and a relative who had worked at the Revenue Office. In the 1960s, both were in Idutywa. Bear in mind that the moment when the copies of Présence Africaine arrived in that area corresponds with Mabona’s personal contact with these individuals (it was just after his return from Rome and just before he left that area; in other words, 1964–1965). The verbatim transcriptions, in the form of two page-long testimonies, echo Mabona’s views, outlined above.

In line with his objective of highlighting liberation narratives, Mabona subsequently turns to “Women’s role in the South African struggle for freedom” and the role of literature in two separate articles. In the form of a testimony, Mabona recounts the emergence of women’s music groups in townships and their ability to articulate people’s frustrations and ambitions.43 He also hails the role women played to encourage disheartened exiles – as he saw in London from 1971 to 1977. Finally, he acclaims the help and support given to exiles in Germany, not by the state, but particularly by young German women.

43 On this point, Mabona cites an earlier article of his, apparently dated 7 October 1979, which I have not been able to locate.
The next article is a review of *Littérature d’Afrique du Sud* (two volumes), which was prepared by the journal *Notre Librairie* on South African literature and which appeared in April and September of 1995. Covering the whole period from the mid seventeenth century to the date of publication, the emphasis in these volumes is the role of literature as a means of resistance and liberation. The works presented excel as literary achievements, but also as expositions of the violence of oppression. Mabona typifies this literature in terms of its “politics of human dignity and freedom” (p. 210). He critiques the work, first, as an oversimplified presentation of South African literature, as either in English or Afrikaans – underestimating the “Bantu” voice, even when it is expressed in English. Indeed, Mabona declares that “[t]he essence of the South African voice is Bantu-English-Afrikaans. This voice of the new rainbow nation is now free to sound its clarion call of human dignity and freedom” (p. 210). A second point of critique is that the volumes’ focus resulted in the exclusion of a number of important authors. Thirdly, he reminds the reader of the wealth of oral literature that is not reflected in this work.

In continuation of this review, Mabona submitted another, entitled “Le regard de l’antilope” (“The antelope’s gaze”). This is the title given to the French translation of James Gregory’s autobiographical account *Good bye Bafana*. The review consists mainly of a summary of Gregory’s developing relationship with Mandela while Gregory was a prison warden.

### 9. Diviners and prophets: The last, incomplete, work

As the ultimate accomplishment of his desire to study diviners among the Xhosa in 1965 and in explicit continuation of his SOAS “long essay”, the full name of Mabona’s doctoral dissertation in anthropology is *Diviners and Prophets among the Xhosa (1593–1856). A study in Xhosa cultural history* (2000). In monograph

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44 Cf. DP, Introduction, no page numbers.

format, published by LIT-Verlag in 2004, the text (from the acknowledgments to the bibliography) spans 463 pages.

The first chapter is devoted to a description of the physical and natural landscape of Xhosaland – not only as a substrate which impacted on patterns of movement, settlement, and interaction (p. 40), but also from the perspective of the cultural appropriation of that environment.

In Chapter Two, Mabona takes up the question of Khoisan-Xhosa cultural interaction and devotes particular attention to a reconstruction of the earliest reconstructable origins of proto-Bantu and Khoisan migrations from East Africa (pp. 45, 83, 100–101). He defends as probable the thesis that these two groups have a common origin (p. 56). Hence, he takes up the hypothesis, merely suggested in the “long essay”, that Khoisan-Xhosa interaction had millennial historical roots (pp. 96, 163). Thereafter, he traces the subsequent migrations of the ancestors of the “southeastern African Bantu” (p. 124) from these old localities, and in particular from the region of Lake Chad (pp. 107–109), via what is now Angola (p. 128ff), turning past Lake Malawi and moving southward via what is now Mozambique (p. 141) to the south-eastern part of present-day South Africa, where Xhosaland is situated (p. 105ff).46

Chapter Three is again devoted to background issues.47 The first of these is a discussion of euphony48 and polysynthesis49 as structuring principles of the Xhosa language. In his exposition of euphony, Mabona includes a reflection on the logical possibilities opened by similarities (homology) of opposites and

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46 Conclusions summarised pp. 152–153, 162.
47 With the following words, Mabona summarises the scope of Chapters 2 and 3: “Whereas in the second chapter I tried to study the cultural history of the Xhosa speaking peoples in synthesis from pre-historic times on through the iron age to historical times, in this chapter my intention has been to disclose the inner structures of that culture at all its stages. Neither the historical aperçu in the second chapter nor the efforts at socio-linguistic analysis in this chapter were pursued as ends in themselves and must, therefore, remain in their highly tentative and summary form. My hope is, however, that as summary as they are, these studies will be helpful in understanding the background and nature of the cultural forces at work in the profession and practices of diviners.” (DP, p. 265)
48 Shaping of words and phrases to sound more pleasing.
49 Integrating divergent elements of meaning into a single word.
contrasts: \(^{50}\) whereas formal logics works with the principles of identity and the exclusion of the third. \(^{51}\) Homological expressions allow for both contradictory things to be valid. The former logic presupposes an immutable state of affairs; the latter gives expression to a dynamic, changing world (pp. 167–169, see also p. 286). \(^{52}\) Furthermore, Mabona discusses the formative influence of the social lifeworld and cultural practices on language by examining ritualisation (the layering of concrete terms with ritual significance), as well as oaths, adages, and verses. The contribution of this detour into Xhosa linguistics for the book seems to be captured by Mabona’s observation that “when I examined the inner structure and the roots of Xhosa linguistic formations I found myself face to face with Xhosa cultural themes and elements of the Xhosa worldview” (p. 198).

The second major theme of Chapter Three is mythology. Mabona explains that these “intšomi” are essentially tales of wisdom, which also convey cosmological and ethnographic ideas (p. 214), and he proceeds with a narration of and commentary on three examples: the story of Mbulukazi, the story of the five heads, and the story of Ironside and his sister.

Thereafter, Xhosa iconography is passed in review. Numerous pages of photos of symbolic figures, animals, human and mythological depictions, and sculptures are commented on. Together, they open a panoramic view on the depiction of recurrent symbols and ideas in traditional Xhosa culture. While focusing here on the culture of one group, the iconography in particular is a testimony to “how widely cultural universals are spread over the Continent”. \(^{53}\) At least superficially, there is some continuation with the themes of study that occupied Mabona during his time in Rome.

Finally, considering the long Xhosa history, Mabona feels himself rather inclined to insist on the changes: the formation and receding of cultural elements. He documents changes in Xhosa culture over five phases (“the prehistoric stage, the West African stage, the Angolan Sojourn, and the East African stage”, and the present\(^{54}\)) focusing on phenomena such as burial practices, initiation

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\(^{50}\) E.g. *vala* (“shut”) – *vula* (“open”), DP, p. 169, but according to Mabona, this phenomenon abounds in the Xhosa language to such an extent as to warrant considering it a structural principle of the language.

\(^{51}\) The principle of identity determines that A is always identical to itself (*A = A*), and the exclusion of the third states that A is either B or non-B; there is no third possibility.

\(^{52}\) This discussion is anticipated by a similar one on logic in the *Lux* article “African mentality in a world frame”.

\(^{53}\) DP, “Introduction”.

\(^{54}\) DP, “Introduction”.
rites, means of transport, terminology, religious practices, the transmission of customs, customary law, and others.\textsuperscript{55} However, despite his focus on the broad changes, Mabona still finds it appropriate to identify the salient, long-term stable tendencies or “thought structures” of Xhosa culture. In this respect, Mabona describes the values attributed to colours, conceptions of time and space, religious representations, counting, etc.\textsuperscript{56}

Only in the fourth chapter does the discussion of diviners and prophets really start. Diviners are presented as the original guardians of cultural transmission. Whereas prophetism is associated with the arrival of Christianity in southern Africa and thus is a fairly recent phenomenon, divinerhood dates back to times immemorial; in fact, Mabona considers it “coeval with Bantu society” (p. 292, likewise p. 314). Mabona’s basic stance on the relation between these major social roles is that “[p]rophetism can justly be regarded as a [C]hristian epiphenomenon of the office and functions of a diviner among the Bantu. There is admittedly a basic continuity between the two roles in the historical process of development and self-adaptation” (p. 265). In order to shed light on these twin phenomena, he provides an overview of significant historical instances, covering the period demarcated in the title of his book, 1593 to 1856. The first of these dates corresponds with the first instance of a diviner recorded in writing.\textsuperscript{57} As an example of the workings of divinerhood in precolonial times, Mabona describes the dependency of King Tshiwó (born 1675, DP, Introduction) on diviners, both in his personal and family concerns and in matters of diplomatic and military strategy (p. 298).

For the institution of divinerhood, a major turning point came with the arrival of Europeans in Xhosaland (that is, during the period described in Part 1, Chapter 1). Within this broader context, Mabona considers the arrival of (British) missionaries (which he established as 1816) to have been a “massive and direct confrontation with an alien culture that caused in the Xhosa polity an acute crisis of identity” (p. 300). Mabona’s objective is to describe the responses, adaptations, and inventions of diviners in response to this situation. For this

\textsuperscript{55} Cf. DP, p. 264: “To sum up, therefore, it seems that central east Africa is the area in which the Bantu, with the Xhosa-speaking peoples included, increased and broadened the ritual and conceptual framework on which their agricultural and pastoral activities were based. But the centre of gravity for survival and further achievement was based on cattle culture.”

\textsuperscript{56} Not shying away from making comparative observations with ancient Greek philosophy (cf. DP, pp. 282–283, 284–285).

\textsuperscript{57} However, Mabona also cites a reference from the year 922 to a diviner who was not Xhosa (DP, p. 295).
purpose, he reconstructs the approaches of Makhanda/Makan(n)a and Ntsikana – both of whom were directly involved in the first encounters and confrontations with missionaries and the colonial powers.\(^{58}\) As in the “long essay”, Mabona describes the differences between Makana and Ntsikana. Makana was a properly trained diviner, who, despite initial rapprochement to Christianity, remained within the ambit of traditional Xhosa culture, albeit in his specific, innovative way. Ntsikana was a borderline case for this study, since he was never trained as a diviner and his public action and the role he played depended much more on an individual experience of vocation. He was also not a real Christian convert, refusing baptism. However, Mabona also highlights their similarities, which make for interesting comparisons: “The two social factors that established the legitimacy of both Makana's and Ntsikana's roles were the authority of the chief and popular consensus. The personal factors, on the other hand, were their divinerhood and prophets' messages of national salvation” (p. 304). Both died in the early 1820s. The implicit, but tangible, preference for Makana in the “long essay” seems to have made room for a more equal, descriptive, presentation of these two figures.\(^{59}\)

Mlanjeni, born in 1833, represented a new generation of diviners. His specialisation seems to have been his opposition to witchcraft. His objective was to cure people of witchcraft, in the sense of changing their “inner disposition” (p. 306), rather than merely stopping the external ceremonies. He won the esteem of chiefs and exerted some influence on them, but also attracted the suspicion of the colonial powers. It is not very clear from the discussion what the particularity of his short active life as a diviner was.

The last two figures singled out by Mabona are Mhlakaza, probably a trained diviner, perhaps a specialist, and his (adoptive?) daughter and apprentice, Nongqawuse (p. 309). A lot of the difficulty in grasping their work resides in the conflicting traditions of interpretation: “while the Xhosa disown and reject Nongqawuse and Mhlakaza, colonial history seeks to ennoble them and attach them onto Xhosa society – it depicts them as an endogenous and worthy product of this society” (p. 309, cf. p. 310f). It is not the disastrous consequences of their prophecy (in the case of Nongqawuse, the infamous cattle killings of 1856–1857) on which the Xhosa rejection is based, since the other figures discussed were not exempt from failure. It is rather that their work was and is disowned as fake.

\(^{58}\) However, Mabona mentions that both Makana and Ntsikana had been followers of the Dutch missionary Van der Kemp years earlier (DP, pp. 301, 303).

\(^{59}\) However, Mabona's wording still reflects a soft spot for Makana.
Mabona’s reading of the history of their public work puts them neatly in the pocket of the British colonial powers. In conclusion, he declares the obvious futility to engage in the exercise of analysing the ideas contained in their ‘prophecies’ from a religious point of view. In fact their ‘prophecies’ were nothing but green ivy and blue death, they were a macabre and deadly charade of both the Xhosa and [C]hristian religions. (p. 312)

After this overview of major historical figures, Mabona considers divinerhood on its own with a more descriptive intention. Issuing from a vocation, diviners needed training (traditionally, among the Xhosa, five years) and the authorisation of a chief to practise. They were consecrated by a public ceremony. Their varied social functions stretched from healing people to offering strategic advice to chiefs. The whole practice was situated in a larger context of a particular view on life, the ancestors, animals, the cosmos – much of what had been described earlier in Diviners and prophets. The phenomenon of trances is specifically treated, in the form of a comparison with similar phenomena in Europe (pre-Christian and Christian mystic forms) and in Asia (in Hinduism and Buddhism). The comparison of metaphysical presuppositions of the respective practices is somewhat reminiscent of similar comparisons as far back as Mabona’s early articles “African mentality in a world frame” and “Towards an African philosophy”. An overview of the symbolism used by Xhosa diviners rounds off the chapter. According to Mabona’s interpretation, the “over-arching ideal trajectories or modalities connecting this whole system of comprehension and organisation are homology, analogy, and symbology” (p. 382). All three of these salient features, which are typical of Xhosa culture in general, have been discussed already, either earlier in Diviners and prophets or in “The depths of African philosophy”. But the metaphysical speculations of the early texts are absent, and analogy and symbolism are now discussed with a view to anthropological description (there is even a short theory of symbolism, pp. 387–390).

The main text of the book finally, and surprisingly, stops abruptly with the following declaration:

The underlying idea for me in undertaking this study was to show how, when armed resistance against colonial invasion was flagging, the diviner prophets of the last century among the Xhosa stepped into the frontline of leadership. The prophet diviners, benefiting from the training for their office, fashioned an ideology drawn mostly from
traditional sources, and used it as an effective weapon to mobilise the flagging forces of resistance and help save the cultural identity of the Xhosa. Their power was based upon their dependence on the ancestors. They made the people feel that when they were going back to their ancestors they were going back to their future and when they were going forward towards their ancestors, they were going forward to their real healing past. (pp. 400–401)

This declaration has the great advantage of revealing the author’s overarching objective. At the same time, one cannot fail to notice that despite the laborious research that went into it and the already bulky text, the book still has not arrived at what it set out to accomplish. This would be part of the justification for Mabona’s own reservations about this book.

9.1 Final appraisal

This overview suffices to demonstrate that there are numerous continuities between Mabona’s earlier and later work: logic, symbolism, the focus on Xhosa culture, the emphasis of religious ideas. In this sense, Mabona’s final book had been long in the making. However, he does not seem to have been consciously concerned with rounding off projects in *Diviners and prophets*; except for the “long essay” to which he returns numerous times, he does not refer to any of his own previous publications.

This axis of his work, which links the “long essay” to *Diviners and prophets*, points to arguably the single most striking feature of *Diviners and prophets*: the turn to anthropology. Traces of the competence he built up as a student of theology are found in the text; issues of African philosophy are touched on here and there. But both of these remain quite marginal. It is in anthropology that Mabona seems to have found his voice. Or rather, after having left behind both Italy and South Africa, this seems to have been the form of scholarly work that best suited his intellectual quest under the conditions of exile. Still, this point should not be exaggerated, since the bibliography\(^{60}\) of his book reflects, amongst other things, ample readings in both African and European philosophy.

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\(^{60}\) Since not all of the works listed in the bibliography are cited or discussed in the book, Mabona’s readers are led to understand it as a broader view on both the sources cited and publications that were useful in shaping the author’s mind during the course of compiling the study.
These more formal considerations aside, one needs to ponder the overall theme of the book. In Part 1 of this book, I have already hinted at an implicit continuity that links a lot of his work: the question of how to cope with cultural and religious traditions in contexts of social and political turmoil and uncertainty. The pearls of this string link his father as a catechist, his personal experience as a Xhosa Christian and later as a Xhosa Catholic priest, the figure of the catechist in the centre of his dissertation in theology, the major figures of Makana and Ntsikana, and finally the other major diviners and prophets of the nineteenth century. I do not want to reduce the content and significance of each text to self-analyses, as if Mabona always wrote in front of a mirror. But I do maintain that the question of cultural improvisation, coupled with both fidelity and critique of tradition, seems to be a major means by which to confront difficult sociopolitical questions. In this respect, one may recall his exclamation: “[P]ersonally, I find nothing wrong with miscegenation. Shades of ‘bastard tribes!’” (DP, p. 55) This reflects his view not only on crude biological racism but also on artificial cultural purity. In my view, his last text took the constituent parts of his own personal complexity to the extreme: writing about the religious-intellectual phenomena of a previous century in a distant region of Xhosaland – in English, while sitting in Lucerne, reading for a dissertation at the University of Bern. Mabona is not one or the other, but both: his most loyal embrace of Xhosa tradition is by means of European practices of excellence.

However, a caveat should be raised by mentioning an idea Mabona insisted upon in his writings on black theology – a kind of allergy to channelling the good life to the interior. One might rephrase his position as the axiom that health is with others, with a world. If this is taken as a guide to his orientation, one should resist reading his anthropological work as no more than projections of the internal conflict of a tormented soul. I would rather read it as a point of entry – albeit an oblique or uncertain entry – to his political engagement, or at least to his social and political commentary. It is a more studious and indirect approach – but undertaken in the hope of contributing to real and lasting solutions. As much as the quest for solutions is tangible in his work, one has the impression of an unfinished project, leaving the reader to take on the fulfilment of the task, despite the confusion of the high stakes in the present.