

BOOK REVIEW

Ernst Wolff. *Mongameli Mabona: His Life and Work*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020. Distributed in North America by Cornell University Press; also open access. 202 pp. References. \$25.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-9462702554.

In this short but nuanced book aimed at both African studies readers and a broader public, *Mongameli Mabona: His Life and Work*, philosopher Ernst Wolff retrieves a neglected African intellectual, philosopher, and priest, Mongameli Anthony Mabona, who contributed to theological, black consciousness, and anthropological thinking.

Born in the rural Eastern Cape in 1929 to a Catholic catechist, Mabona studied at St. Peter's seminary there before completing a doctorate in canon law at Rome in 1963, which was an unusual achievement for Black Africans of the day. He wrote and published on African philosophy and theology. Returning to teach in South Africa, he emerged as a prominent theologian, co-authoring the 1970 Black Priests' Manifesto, which urged church Africanization, and addressing Black Theology seminars. His role in the Black Consciousness movement attracted police attention and he went into exile in 1972, first in London, where he earned a SOAS M.A. for a study of Xhosa prophets and also rendered solidarity to the anti-apartheid movement. Then, after leaving the priesthood in 1975, he received in Berne his second doctorate, this one in anthropology; his thesis was published as *Diviners and Prophets among the Xhosa (1593–1856)* (Munster, 2004).

Mabona's ideas attracted little sustained attention from scholars, but they were not totally ignored. He was occasionally cited in theology and African history writings (for example, by Terence Ranger and Daniel Magaziner); his Manifesto and essay on Africans using forms of worship set by white people were included in Tom Karis and Gail Gerhart's book, *From Protest to Challenge* (Bloomington, 1997). Philosophers paid him more attention, and a note on his work by Paulin Hountondji piqued Wolff's interest and led to interviews which, with an interrogation of his oeuvre, form the basis of this "first study of any kind on this remarkable figure" (11).

Wolff stresses that this is not the definitive work on Mabona. He has "neither the time nor the means" for more rigorous archival or oral history, but he invites others to "complete it" (196), in part due to his haste to publish

while his subject is still alive. This and the appeal to a broad readership explain an initial three chapters of rather basic background, but later original chapters skilfully—despite scant sources—recover Mabona’s ancestry, childhood, education, career as priest and lecturer, and his moves into Black Consciousness, exile, and scholarship.

In detailing Mabona’s education in seminaries and his career as a priest, Wolff sensitively shows how Mabona combined African culture with Catholicism, how he became dissatisfied with abstract theology, and the fact that, despite encyclical missives, Black African students continued to suffer inferior conditions. Equally insightful is a chapter on Mabona’s decade in Rome studying for a doctorate that he wrote in Latin. Wolff adds useful context on life in Italy and Mabona’s attendance at the 1959 Second Congress for Black Writers and Artists that began his long association with *Présence Africaine* and its editor Alioune Diop. Subsequent chapters weave insights drawn from his publications onto the bare bones of what is known of his life in exile to round off the biographical Part I.

In Part II, Wolff clearly outlines and analyzes Mabona’s diverse works published between 1959 and 2004. Interestingly, a 1996 article requested by *Présence Africaine* includes interviews with two Transkeian residents who received copies of the journal. From this, Mabona exaggeratedly argues for the journal’s impact there by way of content on Césaire and Fanon, yet their influence on major figures such as Steve Biko is more likely to have come from later translations. Of the influence of Mabona’s oeuvre, Wolff prefers to say little, declining “to assess” it (13), but he does underline its significance, demonstrating Mabona’s place in intellectual currents as deserving of consideration, as well as noting the shift to anthropology as well as a certain continuity in his use of logic and Xhosa symbolism.

To complete the book, Wolff distills biographical elements into a timeline and adds a useful annotated list of Mabona’s works. Oddly, a separate bibliography inexplicably references only the citations in Part I; this should be corrected if the book is revised, as should a number of typographical errors such as “Jabavo” for Jabavu (50), “Budny” for Bundy (53), “Rivonia trail” for “trial” (51, 200), “Ghandi” (52), the profusion of long quotes in the opening chapters, and an inexact reference to “white labourers” (42) in South Africa.

This introduction to the life and ideas of a (mostly) forgotten thinker will be of considerable interest and use to religious, philosophical, anthropological, intellectual, and Black Consciousness studies, with Wolff laying bedrock for further research, including, we hope, a more detailed tome. If today Mabona may seem marginal in the big scheme of things, with his broader impact and his audience in South Africa (especially for his writings in Francophone journals that are little read there) limited, this interesting book reminds us that history consists in the lives, thoughts, and actions of innumerable such people deserving of attention.

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