

BABA MAGESA: IN MEMORIAM?

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The news of his death came as no surprise. The man of God had lived in his body and mind the passion of Christ. He was prepared to meet not the end but the Jesus whom he knew, loved and followed until death. He was going where Life is endless. We had accompanied him to the threshold of his final resting place.

Indeed, on Wednesday August 17, we left Nairobi at 5am and arrived in Musoma at 5pm. From the cathedral where the funeral took place, songs of praise rose to heaven. At the entrance of the religious building was placed an effigy of the theologian and a book for tributes. I took the pen to write the words of goodbye, and never the sentences of farewell. In Africa, the dead are not dead. The following day, Thursday August 18, the mass was celebrated by the bishop of the diocese of Musoma assisted by two bishops and more than sixty priests from different backgrounds. During the speeches of homage, all the speakers praised the humility of the theologian of abundant life. The learned theologian was humble as the earth, ahead of his time, often misunderstood but always patient and affable. The main celebrant admired this evangelic attitude by evoking this African saying: the calf is born with ears before acquiring horns. The virtue of listening, the empathy of the Baba Magesa was prior to all these honors to the extent of his intellectual stature.

But surely the moment will come when memories fade into the night of the past. Oblivion is the emblem of our mortality. In evoking this passage of Baba Magesa from the Land of the Living to the village of the Ancients, we are consoled to hear the praises of the greatness of the deceased. In the kingdom of courtesy, there is no exception to this decent habit of praising the one who is gone. However, we must not remain deaf at the peripheral voices which question our way of doing this African theology always on the move. It prompts us to question.

1. **Ecclesiastical authority and the theologian.** We marvel at the abundant production of this great theologian. But this admiration should not make us forget the setbacks of misunderstanding he experienced. Upon his death, praise was heard from the universities where he taught and from the international episcopal structures with which he collaborated. This somewhat belated recognition invites us to reflect: what is the degree of openness of the Ecclesiastical Authority to the ideas of creative theologians? Very quickly, she condemns before listening and understanding. As formerly Msgr Etienne Tempier (bishop of Paris) attacked the one who would later become the angelic doctor. Honoring Baba Magesa may also mean converting our way of welcoming alterity.
2. **The contradictory debate in African theology.** True science does not disdain dialectics, contradiction in the rigorous quest for truth. The objectivity it presupposes requires distinguishing the production from the producer. But very easily, one quickly flatters the author without giving time to study deeply and extensively what is written. Intellectual work in Africa is reduced to the spoken word, published then flattered in a concert of praise to the glory of the ego which rebels at the slightest criticism falsely perceived as a personal attack. We are not fully into science with its spaces for free discussion and this demand for truth to be discovered; rather we are immersed in the religion where each author pontificates in his

chapel, surrounded by a few faithful devotees. To publish has become an end in itself, rather than a starting point for a fruitful debate with a visible impact in our society.

3. **Collaboration between African theologians.** In this dogmatic situation of oversized egos where *thought* has given way to *egodicea*, it becomes almost impossible to work together. They are a long way from creating a school like the Saulchoir (confrontation, community, exchanges, etc. Cfr M-D Chenu, *Une école de théologie, le Saulchoir*). Rather, in general, they are fatalist heirs to political, ideological, linguistic, and historical western divisions that imprison them in infertile empiricism. Between English-speaking theologians and those of the French-speaking world, there is still room for a dialogue of fruitful sterility. Baba Magesa speaks of Africa as a cultural unity following Diop and others who show us in their own way the continent's path to redemption.
4. **African theology within the training of the African priest.** For thirteen years, Baba Magesa taught at Hekima College. In 2013, he published a seminal book on African spirituality (*What is not sacred? African spirituality*, Orbis Book, 2013, 256 p). Seven years later, he taught in this school an elective course on African theology. One would expect students to flock there to discuss these issues of their daily lives. It was not the case. So, we ask the question: in theological scholasticates, seminaries and faculties of theology in Africa, what type of African priest is formed theologically and for what type of community? Future priests are still being formatted in a Western way of doing theology as a scientific and universal discipline. They are led to believe that other theologies are mere folklore, ethnography, or the like. Such a mental enslavement does not make the African priest a well-integrated leader in his community whose challenges he takes up, even in his theological reflection; it is just a dressage that assimilates him to the character of Samba Dialo in *L'aventure Ambigue* of Cheik Hamidou Kane or to the fascinating character of Pierre Landu in *Entre les eaux* of V.Y. Mudimbe. It may not be enough to get bogged down in evoking the exotic ancestry of Magesa; it is necessary to understand the substance and the purpose of studying a theology of the ancestors.