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## MUGAMBI: "A PROPHET OF HOPE FOR THE UPROOTED PEOPLE OF AFRICA"

### Introduction

In the context of Africa's uprooted heritage, pastors need to manifest health and wholeness, not only in their spiritual walk, but also in relationship with their flock. A spirituality reflecting health and wholeness recognizes the rich heritage of Africa's past, which acknowledges dependence on God as well as connectedness with one's fellow human beings. One person who has profoundly exemplified this lifestyle is J.N.K. Mugambi, a prophet of hope. Mugambi not only provides a diagnosis for Africa's ailments but demonstrates a spirituality for the African church of the future.

A prophet in ancient times not only foretold the future, that person also analyzed the signs of the time, made a thorough diagnosis of the societal issues and charted the way forward in the light of the sometimes grim situations. Many a prophet having seen such a diagnosis would prophesy only doom for the people. However, Mugambi has not only been a thorough critic of the tradition that reared him—Christian theology arising out of a white missionary heritage—but has shown the way forward. In his theology of reconstruction, which he sees as a fitting paradigm for a theology for the church in Africa in the twenty-first century,

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he not only foretells “a future for the church” but also forth-tells how “the church of the future” in Africa will look.

This essay affirms Mugambi’s contribution to the spirituality of health and wholeness of the church in Africa especially with respect to the motif of reconstruction: highlighting issues that qualify him as a prophet of hope, especially his emphasis on the recovery of the African traditional heritage and the unity of the church; responding to marginalized groups—specifically, the refugees who depict the story of uprooted Africa more than anyone. Though Mugambi’s theology of reconstruction provides a stimulating theological reflection of the problems affecting the church in Africa, there is still much work to be done, seeing that it transforms the lives of uprooted people. This can only be done by theologians, who are also practitioners, a role that Mugambi has played well. The writer’s research among the refugees illustrates how the church in Kenya is responding to this problem.

### Africa’s Long History of Uprootedness

It is evident from Mugambi’s work that the problems of Africa do not stem just in the missionary past but from a long legacy of European interference. He says, “Africa has been in crisis for the last five hundred years—since Europe started to penetrate its hills and valleys, mountains and plains, deserts and forests.”<sup>1</sup> Our task is twofold: to honor Mugambi in tracing the landmarks of Africa’s uprooted heritage and to demonstrate that his theology of reconstruction

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<sup>1</sup>J.N.K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995), 220.

provides both theological and practical resources to manage this problem. We now direct our attention to the causes of Africa's uprootedness.

### Slave Trade

The plunder of the human resources of Africa occurred for over five hundred years. How many slaves left Africa? It is most tragic that the populations taken were between fifteen - thirty years in the prime of life. They were the able-bodied—the hope of Africa's future—cut off before their prime. Slave trade was a great loss to Africa in several ways. Basil Davidson says, "It deprived a large number of African societies of many of their best producers, the youngest and the strongest of their men and women; and it did this not spasmodically but continuously over several centuries."<sup>2</sup> The constant raids and disruption of the population meant that stable and viable economies could not be established. Many lives were lost through wars waged to capture the slaves. Due to this disruption, agriculture, industry, and all other forms of the economy were diverted into the trade in human beings.

### Colonialism

Since it was not possible to sustain a slave economy, there was the onslaught of colonialism. In 1884, Africa was partitioned. Mugambi says, "On a continental scale, the crisis reached the peak at the Berlin Conference (1884-1885), when the continent was partitioned between the powerful nations of

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<sup>2</sup>Basil Davidson, *Africa in History: Themes and Outlines*, rev. and exp. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 221.

Europe without regard for the cultural, religious and political institutions evolved by African peoples for millennia.”<sup>3</sup>

Most of Africa was under colonial rule for almost 150 years. Populations were moved to make room for the white settlers to occupy their lands. In Kenya, the Masaai were divided into half when the British carved a corridor of land—literally tearing them into two sections and confined in reserves. The Nandi fought with the British for seven years. In 2005, the Nandi celebrated 100 years of their leader Koitalel Arap Samoei who was killed for resisting the British. The Nandi were moved into reserves. In order to cross from one section of the country to another they had to carry a pass; otherwise, they would not be allowed.<sup>4</sup>

The British introduced cash crops grown to benefit the empire for European industries. To force the Africans onto these farms, a hut and poll tax were introduced. Africans were separated from their families. This was especially so in places that had minerals such as South Africa. They were forced to work in mines and lived in congested rooms. This began the disruption of the African family system so that presently Africans have two homes: one where they work and the other in the city. They not only suffered physical uprootedness, but they were socially and psychologically displaced.

### Introduction of Christianity

Then Christianity was introduced, and missionaries came earlier than the colonialists. For example, the first missionaries<sup>5</sup> were two Germans, Krapf and Rebman, who

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<sup>3</sup>Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, 200.

<sup>4</sup>The writer's father said that due to the high-handed way of the British, they had no hope of ever overcoming them.

<sup>5</sup>The Portuguese came to the coast of East Africa in the fourteenth century, but they were interested in trade and never bothered to spread Christianity.

came under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society in 1844. They never made any converts. Krapf's wife and child died of malaria. But he wrote the first dictionary in Kiswahili and translated the Bible into Swahili. Most the missionaries had the mentality that Africans had no religion and were animists. Mugambi argues:

More often than not, the Christian missionary enterprise in Africa has failed because the African cultural and religious heritage was dismissed as heathenism and paganism. When you dismiss the cultural and religious heritage of a people, you have no right to convert that community. . . .Some arrogant and ignorant anthropologists describe African religious heritage as animism. Animism is the belief that the universe is inhabited by numerous spirits, and that everything is animated by spirits. Animism is regarded as an elementary belief system which comes before pantheism, polytheism, and monotheism. According to this anthropological theory, the animist is not yet civilized enough to have the concept of God. How then can animists be converted to Christianity? How can the Bible be translated into the language of the people whose religion is animism?. . . .The fact that there is a word for God in most African languages, confirms it is a serious error to describe Africans as animists.<sup>6</sup>

In agreement with Mugambi, one other African theologian, Kwame Bediako of Akrofi-Christaller, in Ghana, has said, "The missionaries did not bring Jesus to Africa; Jesus

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<sup>6</sup>Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, 21.

brought the missionaries to Africa.”<sup>7</sup>

Colonialists occupied locations in Africa because of the missionaries. Hence the saying: “The flag followed the cross.” Mugambi notes: “Every missionary society regarded its respective metropolitan government as its temporal defender, and operated in the colonies as the spiritual conqueror of the African Soul.”<sup>8</sup> These missionaries did not treat the people any better than the white settlers. There is this saying in one of the Kenyan languages *Gutiri ngurani ya Mubia na Muthungu*.<sup>9</sup> Missionaries were elected to serve the interests of the Africans in the Legislative Council; some like Archdeacon Owen spoke against land alienation and forced labor in Western Kenya. He was nicknamed “the archdemon” by his white counterparts. Education in Africa is a lifelong process, preparing one to be effective in one’s community. At present, we have a generation of young people with book knowledge, but they do not know how to relate to others in the community. When the missionaries introduced Christianity, they condemned all the traditional African beliefs and practices as demonic and barbaric. This further deepened Africa’s alienation of the mind and was worse than the physical colonization.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Kwame Bediako, “Missionaries Did Not Bring Jesus to Africa: Jesus Brought the Missionaries to Africa,” a paper presented at the 6th Annual School of Theology at African Institute of Contemporary Mission and Research (Butere, Kenya: The Institute, August 23, 2006).

<sup>8</sup>J.N.K. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 2003), 12.

<sup>9</sup>The saying means literally that there is no difference between settler and missionary.

<sup>10</sup>See Nahashon Ndungu, “Towards the Recovery of African Identity, in *Theology of Reconstruction: Exploratory Essays*, ed. M.N. Getui and E.A. Obeng (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1999), 258-265.

### Independence

The legacy of colonialism fueled refugee influxes immediately after independence. This explains the situation between North and Northern Sudan; Algeria; Nigeria and the Biafra War; the War in Congo and the Katanga region; the Hutu-Tutsi problem in Rwanda, Burundi; Ethiopia and Eritrea. Mugambi observes:

Decolonization after World War II was implemented faster than many African nationalists would have expected, and this occasioned another crisis—the crisis of taking over from colonial administrators. The transition was nowhere smooth. African governments found themselves in power without the resources necessary for efficient governance. Thus, they were potentially unstable from their beginnings, and so remained, several decades thereafter.<sup>11</sup>

Some countries remained under colonial rule: Mozambique, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and South Africa. Colonialists used the method of divide and rule. Isolating one group from another encouraged exploitation, e.g., dividing Southern and Northern Sudan and Southern and Southern Nigeria. Africans had to literally jump hurdles to unite. Colonialism was ironical in the sense of alienating people from their land and traditions. Then they were taught English. This served to unite Africans in their fight for independence. Kiswahili<sup>12</sup> (Bantu

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<sup>11</sup>Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, 220.

<sup>12</sup>Mugambi says Kwame Nkrumah suggested Kiswahili as the language that should be taught in all African universities. See Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Construction*, 40.

language originating in the East Coast of Africa from inter-marriage of Arabs and Africans) was extended through colonialism and the advance of the Kenya-Uganda Railway.<sup>13</sup>

### Ill-Conceived Political Policies and a Legacy of Poor Leaders

At independence the Kenyan government identified three ills to eradicate: poverty, disease, and illiteracy. Unfortunately, most of the spending was used for military equipment so that the administration could remain in power. The money was invested in ill-conceived projects, e.g., the Tana River irrigation scheme displaced about 20,000 people in the mid-70s and then failed. Mugambi argues that the liberation motif was emphasized at independence with no one asking what kind of liberation was desired and after liberation, then what? After independence, existing colonial structures though unchanged were inherited. Mugambi notes:

In the anti-colonial literature of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s there are many arguments to justify the self-determination of colonized peoples, but hardly any indications of the kind of society that those peoples should build. Hence, at independence most colonies inherited the same social and economic structures that the colonial establishment had erected. Apparently it was assumed, by most African secular and religious leaders, that the withdrawal of the colonial structures would

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<sup>13</sup>Building of the Kenya-Uganda Railway is an interesting story. Many African prophets/seers predicted the coming of "a long snake" that would come from the East and quench its thirst in Lake Victoria in the West.



automatically lead to new social structures and that the colonial structures needed no reform, provided they were taken over, intact, by Africans.<sup>14</sup>

One of the inherited structures was the focus on our export-oriented economy. The main exports are tea and coffee. This means the best arable land is devoted to growing these two crops. The irony of this is a lack of rainfall prevents a good yield of these crops; we, however, cannot eat the berries or the tea leaves. There has been great resistance to change this economy due to most of the huge tea plantations being owned by multinational corporations such as Unilever, Dole, etc. When the prices of these products fall in the world market, economies are affected. Tariffs restrict goods from the Southern countries from entering into market; yet we are asked to liberalize our economies. This was the requirement of the Structural Adjustment Programs, imposed on the developing countries by the World Bank, to ensure their being debt free. African countries had to devalue their currencies, liberalize the economy, and introduce political reforms—most of which have had a devastating effect on Africa.

### The End of the Cold War

The Cold War was another major cause of refugee influx in the countries. After independence, there was short-lived civilian rule in African nations. Most of them became military dictatorships who supported either the West or the East. Mugambi says “. . . civil strife is funded

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<sup>14</sup>Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, 39-40.

and armed by external bodies which are keen to test new weapons and dump obsolete ones in Africa. . . . Thus Africa has become the battleground of the big powers which, ironically, have vested in themselves the responsibility to maintain the peace in the world. How can there be peace in the world when the peace-keepers are the leading exporters of war and weapons."<sup>15</sup>

One of the World Bank's requirements was that we had to move into multi-party democracies. This call came because it was the end of the Cold War, and the military dictatorships that had been propped up by US were suddenly not useful anymore. This fall caused disruption and the ripple effect in many countries in the Horn of Africa and beyond such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, etc. Among them were Mobutu Sese Seko of Congo and Siad Barre of Somalia. This is when Kenya had the greatest influx of refugees. As a result, in 1992 there were about ten refugee camps throughout the country. The most affected were the Kikuyu who live in the central part of Kenya near Nairobi. At independence, the political climate allowed them to acquire land in other parts of Kenya—the Rift Valley and the Coast Province. During the campaigns for multi-party elections, hostilities were exacerbated based on the land issue. People who had lived together for a long time were suddenly hostile with one another. The Kikuyu were told to return to their former area; they were literally hounded out of their farms. Thus, in addition to hosting large numbers of refugees, Kenya had to deal with her own internally-displaced peoples—the result of tribal clashes.

### Natural Disasters

Natural disasters, e.g., famine and hunger have affected the countries of the Horn of Africa. That there has been

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 164.

war continually here has prevented time for meaningful activity to focus on agriculture. Mugambi rightly argues that “[i]n Africa, it can be shown that natural disasters are much less significant than social instability as causes of food deficits.”<sup>16</sup> War disallows time to concentrate on such activities. These countries have really been devastated by the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”<sup>17</sup>—hunger, disease, famine, and war.

### HIV/AIDS and Poverty

In recent years, the HIV/AIDS pandemic is having devastating consequences in Africa. Ten percent of the world’s population lives in Africa, and they contribute sixty-four percent of those living with HIV/AIDS.<sup>18</sup> HIV/AIDS is a heterosexual disease in Africa, clearing whole villages. Those who remain are old people and children. These old people are unable to work, but they care for the young ones. Most of are child-headed homes; older siblings care for the younger children. Such orphans are not able to go to school because they cannot afford to pay school fees.<sup>19</sup> It is the story of slave trade once again when the able-bodied are diminished between the ages of fifteen – forty-nine. Most of the national funds are spent treating HIV/AIDS and not focusing on other diseases such as malaria or measles.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>17</sup>John Markakis, *Resource Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 7; see also E.A. Obeng, “Healing the Groaning of Creation in Africa,” in *Christian Theology*, 11.

<sup>18</sup>UNAIDS, “Overview of the Global Aids Epidemic,” *Report on the Global Aids Epidemic* (Geneva: UNAIDS, 2006), 15.

<sup>19</sup>Kenya has universal free primary education but there is overcrowding. Some classes have as many as 100 students. One wonders about the quality of the education in this situation. Teachers must be paid by the government, and this is a great strain on the economy. In high school, students pay an exorbitant fee to attend school.

Prolonged patients' illness strains both the national and family resources. We are speaking of millions of persons; we need to do something urgently. The plight of women is great. They are caregivers in the home, and if the head of the household or a member of the household is sick, they take care of them. They, therefore, drop out of school. In situations of poverty, they are driven to a life of prostitution so that they can earn a living for their family. Young girls are also targeted by older men because of the myth that if you have sex with a virgin you will be cured. This is compounded by African traditional beliefs which expose women to HIV/AIDS, e.g., widow inheritance, female circumcision, and women not expected to negotiate for sex or to refuse sex especially in a marriage relationship. The man may be unfaithful but the woman might not be able to say no. To be married is to be at a great risk of getting HIV/AIDS.<sup>20</sup>

The situation has eased with the introduction of Anti-Retroviral (ARV) Treatment, but this also has complications; one has to undergo treatment for the rest of one's life. Does it do any good to introduce ARVs to people who are hungry and cannot afford to buy a meal? HIV/AIDS is more than a medical problem, having social, economic, and political components. And, we have to look at it from all perspectives if we are to provide wholesome interventions. Widespread dissemination of information about HIV/AIDS has also reduced stigmatization and marginalization of those living with the disease. Churches are really doing wonderful things in responding to HIV/AIDS prevention

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<sup>20</sup>One of the writer's married colleagues fears to go for Voluntary Counseling and Testing since she would not enforce on herself the status of the test—whatever it might be. This person is highly educated; one cannot imagine how it is for women dependent on their spouses for livelihood.

and education, the treatment, and also caring for those who have been affected—especially the widows, grandparents, and orphans.

Uprootedness in African is multifaceted: political, geographical, and cultural. One cannot imagine the trauma of refugees who move from country to country not only to face the loss of home, but also the loss of all they consider valuable—culture, identity, roots, a sense of belonging. One cannot imagine a community which moved from literally a hunter-gatherer mode of production to the age of cell-phones, by-passing all the stages in between. Africans have learned to live in two worlds. They are bilingual both literally and conceptually. In these two-worlds, one has to negotiate between buying credit for the cell phone and buying food for the family. Mugambi notes: “This becomes obvious when comparing the modern lifestyles of African youth with the lifestyles of their parents and their children. African is torn between sustaining its own cultural heritage and embracing European values as promoted in the market place.”<sup>21</sup>

### A Prophet of Hope for the Uprooted People

One needs to ask what has sustained Africans in this perpetual state of uprootedness? How have we survived to tell the story? Two thrusts are evident: roots in our rich African heritage which is anchored in God and the focus on hospitality. Mugambi expresses our hope thus:

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<sup>21</sup>J.N.K. Nugambi, ed., *The Church and the Future in Africa: Problems and Promises* (Nairobi: AACC, 1997), 7.

Africa, which in the 1990s is in a pitiable condition as a result of natural disasters, and the collapse of its social institutions, may emerge as the most influential continent in the 21st century. But this hope must be accompanied by determination to utilize the available and potential resources for the welfare of the people and its nations. The Church has the responsibility to prepare the people for this immense task, and proclaim that with faith, hope and love, God makes possible what to human beings appears an impossibility.<sup>22</sup>

The writer pays tribute to the prophets who gives us hope and helps us to recover some our African heritage and relate it to biblical heritage.<sup>23</sup> They help us to counteract the lies of the oppressors that Africa was a dark continent, that we did not have history until the white people came. They help us to piece together our shattered story and tell it to the world. They help us rewrite the history of our people. Among them are great church leaders and theologians. Particularly, tribute is given to Mugambi, "who has emerged as one of the most articulate theologians in the African continent. His reflections deserve a much broader audience."<sup>24</sup> Let us now examine some of the contributions Mugambi has made to Africa.

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<sup>22</sup>Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, 51.

<sup>23</sup>See Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 48, 64. He notes that those who have deep belief in God are able to survive in time of violence.

<sup>24</sup>See Isaac M.T. Mwase, "Kuona: An African Perspective on Religions: J.N.K. Mugambi's Contribution" (paper presented at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, Boston, MA, August 10-15, 1998).

### The Theology of Reconstruction

Mugambi's great contribution is advancing theological discussion. When conversation was at a stalemate with the theology of liberation, like a true prophet, he read the signs of the times and propelled the deliberations in a new direction. The discourse on liberation theology had degenerated into the false dichotomy between individual salvation and social transformation. The reconstruction theme, drawn from the period after the exile, was more appropriate for rebuilding African fallen structures after the end of the Cold War. This is an apt biblical metaphor resonating with the inspiration to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem by Nehemiah after the exile. Liberation was reactive and not proactive since scholars were defining themselves against such paradigms as "Third World," which for Mugambi carried the connotation "Third Rate" theologians.<sup>25</sup> These continued to be used long after the Cold War ended. The liberationists focused on being liberated, but did not ask liberated into what? Thus, Mugambi not only asked the question but also provided the solution—the theology of reconstruction. The word "reconstruction" carries a multidisciplinary ring with its connection to engineering as well as social reconstruction. Indeed, it invites much flexibility and a variety of participation engaging the personal, social, ecclesial, cultural etc. Mugambi argues that "[r]econstruction is done when an existing complex becomes dysfunctional, for whatever reason, and the user [is] still required to [utilize] it. New specification may be made in the new designs, while some aspects of the old complex are still retained in the new."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 12.

The failure to ask questions led to many problems. Schreiter notes: "There have been seventy coups against African governments in the first thirty years of independence."<sup>27</sup> He also warns against the shortsightedness of liberation without changing the structures of oppression. He says, "Liberation is not just liberation from the violent situation, but also liberation from the structures and processes that permit and promote violence."<sup>28</sup> Thus, Mugambi issued this challenge: "The church in Africa with support and encouragement from partners abroad is challenged to prepare itself for the task of reconstruction by restructuring and reorienting itself in such a way as to contribute its gifts and resources human and otherwise for the welfare of Africa's peoples."<sup>29</sup>

### Africa's Religious Heritage

When in high school, the writer took the course "Luke's Gospel for Africa Today." Reading the infancy narratives in Luke, especially the naming ceremonies, were fascinating since we could compare them with the African-naming ceremonies from our various communities. It was wonderful to hear how neighbors named their children, bringing us closer together. Circumcision was a hot topic also for discussion. There are communities in Kenya that do not circumcise. How did African circumcision compare with the Jewish practice? Ours occurred at puberty and theirs at eight days old. The meanings are similar—the rites of entry into the community. Thus, these stories were close to us; they were not about people far away but mirrored ourselves. In fact, at that

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<sup>27</sup>Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 9.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>29</sup>Mugambi, *Church and the Future of Africa*, 2.



young age we begin to theologize. Thanks to Mugambi and the writers of the syllabus for giving us back our heritage. These syllabi were ecumenical. The particular one mentioned above was written by Mugambi and Nicodemus Kirima, a Catholic priest who later became a Bishop of Nyeri. We began to see ourselves as one people—not different denominations—but as one community, the people of God.

### Ecumenical

The missionaries divided the lands of Kenya among themselves; one did not choose the denomination to which one belonged. Where you belonged was really an accident of birth. If you came from the central part of Kenya, you were a Presbyterian; if from near Mt. Kenya, a Methodist; if from the Coast of Kenya and the Western part, an Anglican. These are the rough divisions though the locations may have shifted due to migrations. Mugambi in recognition of the unity of the body of Christ has worked in ecumenical associations. He has constantly lamented the fragmentation of the church, always trying to get us to think and act ecumenically. He shows how denominational divisions do not make sense to Africans, referring to a village of two thousand people with twenty-seven denominations.<sup>30</sup> He says:

Africans neither understand nor care about the denominational 'tribalism' of the various missionary agencies. It is for this reason that African Christians have no hesitation to interact with groups. . . in Europe or North America are totally opposed to one another.

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<sup>30</sup>Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, 47.

We have been told, for example, that the evangelicals are opposed to the Catholics, and those two are opposed to the ecumenical movement. To African Christians, such exclusiveness sounds much worse than tribalism. Thus, many African leaders will pass through Geneva on their way to an evangelical convention at Lausanne without the slightest hesitation, then return through Lambeth, Hanover, or Edinburgh, to meet their respective denominational mentors, without any sense of betrayal or reservation. From an African perspective, this is healthy, and indicates the way of the church of the future. Christians ought to manifest their identity as Christians in unity, not in disunity.<sup>31</sup>

Mugambi's outstanding legacy is that he has worked with ecumenical associations throughout his life. Even in his university years, he worked with a student ecumenical association known as Christian Students' Council.<sup>32</sup> Mugambi helped to found The Ecumenical Symposium of East Africa Theologians which stimulated theological discussions and empowered the theological movement.<sup>33</sup> The theology for reconstruction is truly ecumenical and multidisciplinary. Topics range from political, ecclesial, the role of women, AIDS, poverty, etc. It also has a multireligious dimension, including Islam and African religion. It is gender inclusive, with Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a Ghanaian woman, forming the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 239-240.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 190.

<sup>33</sup>Returning to Kenya in 2004, the writer was invited to join a group of scholars and church leaders. Symposiums are held each year, the weekend before Holy Week. Discussions are rich, coming from all perspectives of the Christian spectrum.

## A Christian Response to the Refugee Problem

### Theological Resources

The work of Mugambi provided the writer with a wealth of theological resources when she had to reflect on refugees. Some of the first articles about the refugee problem were written under the auspices of Mugambi. In a volume that he edited, *Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity*, the article by Peter Kayandogo, "Who is my neighbor? A Christian Response to Refugees and the Displaced in Africa," was the first seen. Then in another title, *From Violence to Peace: A Challenge to African Christianity*, edited by M. N. Getui and P. Kayandogo, an article by professor Obeng of Ghana, "Religious Dimensions of Refugee Suffering," was also useful. Another book edited by Mugambi, *The Church and the Future in Africa: Problems and Promises*, "A Theological Reflection on the Ministry of Churches to Refugees in Africa," by Ankrah Kwodwo, provided further reading. Reflecting on the refugee problem in Africa was easier because of initial work. Thanks to professor Mugambi and his colleagues for pioneer work. The writer carried the torch further by delving into our biblical roots, using the pilgrim/exile motif and as well the African rich heritage of hospitality.

### Hospitality

This African practice of hospitality motivates a concern for the refugee populations in Africa. For a long time, Africa produced the largest numbers of refugees most of whom were also hosted in African countries; namely,

Tanzania, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Congo and Kenya.<sup>34</sup> The interesting thing is that these localities were both refugee-sending as well refugee-receiving countries. When there was turmoil in all the countries, the refugees suffered. When war broke out in Ethiopia, the Sudanese boys who had taken refuge in Ethiopia had to migrate to Kenya because there was war now in Sudan as well. It has been a great challenge to host these numbers in the midst of the suffering in host countries. How can we respond when even our own populations are suffering?

Hospitality has faced challenges since colonialism. The African system had checks and balances but they were disrupted. Mazrui says it so:

Before colonization indigenous cultures had their own checks and balances between ethnic solidarity and hospitality on one side and the tendency towards parasitism on the other. Then came colonialism. By its very nature colonial rule was a supreme form of economic parasitism—Europeans living off others. No longer were the Africans able to obey the traditional wisdom in the Swahili adage *mgeni siku ya pili, siku ya tatu mpe jembe* [‘Treat your guest as guest for two days: but on the third day give him a hoe.’] The colonial white man was an invited guest in Africa, but alas his African hosts were in no position to force a hoe on him.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Emily J. Choge, “An Ethic for Refugees: The Pilgrim Motif and the Refugee Problem in Kenya” (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2004), 2.

<sup>35</sup>Ali Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1986), 234-235.

Some scholars doubt whether hospitality is really applicable in this situation. Gaim Kibreab is one of the greatest critics of the practice. Hospitality in a situation of poverty is really difficult.<sup>36</sup> However, this practice is central to our African heritage and our Christian tradition; we have to find ways of negotiating within this tight rope. The Swahili saying, *Mgeni Siku ya pili siku ya tatu mpe jembe* really helped to regulate hospitality because guests were not kept dependent but became contributors of the household. The Kenya government has not applied that wisdom, and we have left the refugees to depend on handouts for over ten years in the refugee camps in the North and Eastern part of Kenya.

Mugambi suggests that we as the "church of the future [are] challenged to be an agent of reconciliation between all peoples, so that co-existence and mutual support prevail rather than the disease of prejudice which has eroded confidence and mutual respect."<sup>37</sup> He says further that "[t]o effectively meet this challenge, the church of the future will have need to launch long-term programme for conflict-resolution within and between denominations, and also in the context of national and international conflicts."<sup>38</sup> This seems to have borne fruit during negotiations for the peace agreement with Sudan; the churches participated in the process. Churches are called to do much more in this area. He even makes a bold assertion about a "borderless Africa,"<sup>39</sup> bringing an end to the problem of refugees and uprooted people.

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<sup>36</sup>Gaim Kibreab, *African Refugees: Reflections on the African Refugee Problem* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1985), 67-83.

<sup>37</sup>Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, 177.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup>Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction*, 58.

### Conclusion

We have discussed Africa's uprootedness and how this phenomenon has affected its spirituality of health and wholeness. Mugambi, as our prophet of hope, has assisted us in the analysis of the root causes of this alienation and provided the theological framework of reconstruction. Through all this, he has shown that there is hope for Africa. There are tangible solutions to our problems if the theologians will participate fully not only in theoretical analysis but involvement in a grass-roots movement to effect change. If we do this, we will really turn the image of Africa from being one of uprootedness to one rooted within the rich heritage of the gospel, well-embedded in the African culture. We will be as Mugambi says, "truly Christian and truly African."<sup>40</sup> Then the myth of Africa as a vanishing, desperate people will be replaced with a "people of hope,"<sup>41</sup> rising above all odds.

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 130.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 38.