

# JESSE MUGAMBI'S PEDIGREE: FORMATIVE FACTORS

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## *Abstract*

The article sets out to retrieve Jesse Mugambi's life history as it surveys the key concepts of liberation and reconstruction in his works. In so doing, the study acknowledges that he became a household name in the African theological fraternity after his presentation to the General Committee of All Africa Conference of Churches when the erstwhile President of the All Africa Conference of Churches, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and the General Secretary at the time, the Rev Jose B Chipenda invited him to reflect on the "Future of the Church and the Church of the Future in Africa"<sup>1</sup> in the Nairobi Meeting of 30 March 1990. This was a month after Nelson Mandela had been released on 2 February 1990 and Namibia had attained her independence on March 21 of the same year. And it is in this meeting that Mugambi suggested that the post-apartheid or the post-cold war African Christianity must shift her theological gear from the paradigm of liberation to that of reconstruction. To do this, the study will first attempt to trace his pedigree and then move on to survey his main theological thought. The material in this article is drawn from both the library research and the fieldwork research where certain individuals were consulted.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The call for a shift in theological paradigm, from liberation to reconstruction, is one of the most debated issues in African theology today. Tinyiko Maluleke (1994:245) admits the prominence of the debate when he notes that, "*Reconstruction, development, and democracy* are fast becoming as integral to South African political language as the notions of the *struggle, revolution* and *liberation* used to be." Robin Petersen (1991:18) captures these views when he says that; "the talk is all about reconstruction, about rebuilding, about new things ... from a theology of liberation to a theology of reconstruction, from Exodus to post-Exilic theology".

## 2 A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO JESSE MUGAMBI'S THEOLOGY OF RECONSTRUCTION

This debate was officially sparked after the Nairobi Meeting of 30 March 1990 when a Kenyan theologian, Jesse Mugambi, presented his paper on the 'Future of the church and the church of the future in Africa', to the General Committee of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) after the current President of the organisation, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the current General Secretary of AACC, the Rev Jose B Chipenda had invited him to make a reflection on the changing theological tune after the demise of Apartheid and the Cold War.

In this meeting Mugambi suggested that African Christianity should shift her theological gear from the paradigm of liberation to that of reconstruction. He suggested that:

Reconstruction is the new priority for African nations in the 1990s. The churches and their theologians will need to respond to this new priority in relevant fashion, to facilitate this process of reconstruction. The process will require considerable efforts of reconciliation and confidence-building. It will also require re-orientation and retraining (Mugambi 1991:36).

Mugambi contended that, in the New World Order,<sup>ii</sup> the figure of Nehemiah, unlike that of Moses, gives us the mirror through which we are enabled to spot our mission to remake Africa out of the ruins of the wars - "against racism, colonial domination and ideological branding" (Mugambi 2003:128; cf 1991, 1995). He further contended that the shift from liberation to reconstruction which, to him, began in the 1990s, and involves discerning alternative social structures, symbols, rituals, myths and interpretations of Africa's social reality by Africans themselves, "irrespective of what others have to say about the continent and its people" (Mugambi 1995:40). The resources for this re-interpretation, he argued, "are multi-disciplinary analyses involving social scientists, philosophers, creative writers and artists, biological and physical scientists" (Mugambi 1995:40).

Thus, it is in the above Nairobi Meeting, of 30 March 1990, that the concept of reconstruction was officially<sup>iii</sup> introduced, for the first time, in African theological studies - as a paradigm that also needs to be given its due attention. And it is here that Mugambi explained that the "the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be a century of reconstruction in Africa, building on old foundations which though strong, may have to be renovated" (Mugambi 1995:5). Since then, the debate on whether to shift our theological paradigm or not has been with us in African theology.

In particular, Musa Dube poured cold water on Mugambi's project of reconstruction when she asserted that she disagreed with him as he "naively responded joyfully to the collapse of the Berlin Wall and saw globalisation as ushering in a new time, a fair time, where all can walk, act, see and think freely" (e-mail interview with Musa Dube on 10 August 2004). Dube contended that Mugambi needed to have studied critically in order to understand the phenomenon of globalisation. Dube further explained that Mugambi's works, nonetheless

[R]emain quite blind to the superstructure of patriarchy, which must be deconstructed in order to reconstruct.<sup>iv</sup> Otherwise his theology of reconstruction is founded on sand as long as it does not address major oppressive issues of both globalisation and patriarchy (e-mail interview with Musa Dube on 10 August 2004).

A noted Kenyan theologian, Joseph Wandera, was also critical of Jesse Mugambi's work. He said:

There is still so much deconstruction to be done before reconstruction can start. There is a saying among the Africans that 'we should chase away the wild cat before we begin to warn the chicken against wandering carelessly'. Africa still suffers from marginalisation of all kinds, including its theology (Wandera 2002:23).

Likewise, Tinyiko Maluleke who, interestingly, refers Jesse Mugambi as "a passionate and committed African Churchman, theologian and continental patriot of our time", criticised Mugambi's works by saying that the shape of the reconstruction paradigm and its potential for effectively replacing the inculturation-liberation<sup>v</sup> paradigms remains unclear (Maluleke 1996c:473). Without taking the previous theologies seriously, Maluleke wondered, "How can we tell whether what he is proposing is either new or progressive?" (Maluleke 1996c:473). He contended that for Mugambi to have the authority or right to propound his theology of reconstruction, he needed to take seriously that which he wanted to replace, namely, African theologies and their inculturation and liberation paradigms.

Conversely, other leading theologians across the African continent who have fervently embraced the idea of paradigm shift from liberation to reconstruction, in the post-apartheid and post-Cold War Africa include: the Anglophone theologians such as Moiserale Prince Dibeela (2005), Ukachukwu Chris Manus (2003), Villa-Vicencio (1992), Brigalia Bam (1995), Valentin Dedji (2003), Robin Petersen (1991, 1995), Wilson Niwagila (1997), Hannah Kinoti (1997), Wilson Mande (1997), Hans Dieter Betz<sup>vi</sup> (2001); Francophone theologians such as Jean-Emmanuel Pondi (1997), Andrea Karamaga (1991, 1997), Kä Mana (1993, 1994, 2002) and Lusophone theologians such as Joe Chipenda (1991) among others.

In particular, Kä Mana (2002:90-91), best sums up the developmental trend in African theology that climaxes with the theology of reconstruction. In particular, he sees the quests for a theology of reconstruction as the fourth developmental stage (in African theology). An illustration on this: in the first stage of African theology, Kä Mana notes that we had the missionary theologies of *tabula rasa*. Interestingly, these theologies were instrumental in the founding or planting of the church in Africa. For it is through them that the relationship between Africa and the Christian faith was conceived.

The second stage in the development of African theology comprises the theologies of adaptation, indigenisation or inculturation. In this stage, the missionary theologies were challenged by the firm desire to develop an African Christianity - as experienced by the Africans themselves. The third stage consists of the theologies of liberation. These theologies laid the foundations for Africa to tackle the major economic and socio-political challenges of today, in order to build a future marked by dignity, freedom and prosperity.

The fourth developmental stage in African theology is the emerging theologies of reconstruction. These theologies advocate the end of colonialism and neo-colonialism, and the advent of free post-colonial African thought, devoid of all the problems of pessimism and defeatism, oriented towards the construction of a free and democratic society, nurtured by the big dreams of returning to historic initiative and propelled by a vigorous energy of responsibility and resourcefulness.

And this drives us to wonder: was his call timely, hence appropriate, to African theology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Whatever the outcome of the debate, Jesse Mugambi nevertheless stole our attention in the African theological fraternity; hence the need to retrieve his post-apartheid theological thought.

### 3 AFTER THE NAIROBI MEETING OF 30 MARCH 1990: WHICH PUBLICATIONS?

Nevertheless, Jesse Mugambi became the father of the theology of reconstruction in Africa after the Nairobi Meeting of 30 March 1990. And with J B Chipenda, A Karamaga and C K Omari, they published, *The church of Africa: Towards a theology of reconstruction*, in 1991. After the Nairobi Meeting, Charles Villa-Vicencio, a white South African published his article, 'Religion, revolution and reconstruction', in the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, in December 1990. Similarly, James R Cochrane and Gerald O West published their article, 'War, remembrance and reconstruction' in the *Journal of theology for Southern Africa*, in September 1993. Later, Villa-Vicencio published his book, *A theology of reconstruction*, 1992. Mugambi published his second book on reconstruction theology, now as the sole author, *From liberation to reconstruction*, in 1995. He later edited the book, *The church and reconstruction of Africa* (1997). Others who have published on a theology of reconstruction include: Ukuchukwu Chris Manus - *Intercultural hermeneutics in Africa: Methods and approaches* (2003); Valentin Dedji's *Reconstruction and renewal in African Christian theology*, 2003; Stein Villumstad's *Social reconstruction of Africa: Perspectives from within and without* (2005); and Aquiline Tarimo's *Applied ethics and Africa's social reconstruction* (2005). And the list is growing (see works consulted).

Similarly, there have been various postgraduate theses on this subject in various universities all over the world. They include Dedji's 'Reconstruction and renewal in African Christian theology', PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, England, (1999); Claudia Nolte's, 'The efficacy of a contextual theology of the cross for reconciliation and reconstruction in South Africa', at the Graduate Theological Union, MA thesis, Berkely, California (2000); Elelwani Bethuel Farisani's 'The use of Ezra-Nehemiah in a quest for a theology of renewal, transformation and reconstruction in the (South) African context', PhD thesis, University of Natal, Durban (2002); Tyro Tyni's 'Theology of reconstruction', at the University of Helsinki, MTh thesis 2002-4; George Fihavango's 'Theology of reconstruction', ThD thesis, University of Erlangen, 2002-5; Julius Mutugi Gathogo's 'Liberation and reconstruction in the works of J N K Mugambi: A critical analysis in African theology', PhD thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2004-2006. And while the list is obviously longer than this, it is essential to acknowledge that more researches on Jesse Mugambi's pet subject of reconstruction are going on.<sup>vii</sup> This now drives us to ask ourselves: Who is this man?

## 4 WHO IS JESSE MUGAMBI?

Jesse Mugambi was born on 6 February 1947 at Kiangoci, near St Mark's College, Kigari in Ngandori Location, Manyatta Division, Embu District in the Eastern Province of Kenya - East Africa. Kiangoci - his rural home - is near the famous centre of the Anglican Church Kigari, which was established by the 19<sup>th</sup> century English missionaries in 1909-1910. The Anglican Church, which was by then called the Church Missionary Society (CMS), established its mission station at Kigari and later it established St Mark's Teachers' College Kigari and in so doing changed the lifestyles of the local inhabitants.<sup>viii</sup>

Mugambi whose full name is Jesse Ndwiga Kanyua Mugambi is the second born in his father's family. In strict phonetic spelling, his name should be written as *Jesse Ndwega Kanywa Mogambe*.<sup>ix</sup> Jesse is the baptismal name that Mugambi got from the church. It refers to King David's father (see Ruth 4:17-22; 1 Samuel 16; 1Chronicles 2: 12-17). In this study, however, we are referring to him as Jesse Ndwiga Kanyua Mugambi, as he is widely called in various publications, rather than to the way his name should accurately be written – as *Jesse Ndwya Kanyua Mwgambi* or as *Jesse Ndwega Kanywa Mogambe*.<sup>x</sup> Obviously African names have meanings. In Mugambi's case, his second name *Ndwya* means giraffe or one who can see beyond what his contemporaries can see. His third name – Kanyua – means, ironically, 'The person who drinks a lot' – this may include a non-diligent person who prides himself in the leisure of the local African cultural brew. This is the actual name for Mugambi's father who died in 1996. His fourth and the final name – *Mwgambi* – means a prophet-like character who blows the trumpet of conscience when a need arises. Literally, it simply means a person who comments and doesn't keep quiet when he ought to. In other words, among the Embu (his ethnic community), the Kamba,<sup>xi</sup> the Gikuyu, the Meru and

many other Bantu (linguistic) communities, it has various meanings. For instance, among the Meru, the word *Mwgambi* carries social responsibilities such as those of a statesman, a counsellor, an advisor, an arbitrator and a mediator. Among his neighbouring Gikuyu community, the name Mugambi would also refer to a person who is assigned the responsibility of blowing the trumpet or beating the drum of caution during emergency cases. In Jesse Mugambi's specific case, it comes more from the Meru genealogy than from the Kamba or the Gikuyu.

In the light of this interpretation, *Mwgambi*, as a noun, means one who is not an ordinary person. He got this name from his grandfather after whom he was named – as culture (of the Embu people and some other Bantu linguistic communities living around the slopes of Mount Kenya) dictates that the first-born son must be named after his grandfather – a trend that continues today. Similarly, the first-born daughter is named after the grandmother on the father's side.

In considering the deep religiosity of the African people (cf. Mbiti 1969:1-2) and in taking into account that Mugambi's two African names are *Ndwyga* (meaning giraffe or a far-sighted person) and *Mwgambi* (meaning a counsellor, an advisor, an arbitrator or a mediator among the Meru and the Embu communities or as seen among the Gikuyu and the Kamba where it means a trumpet blower in case of need), one wonders: Were these names given prophetically with regard to his future role as an African theologian with great passion to speak for the changing theological tunes in Africa?<sup>xii</sup> Does it mean we should always listen to him? Could he be seeing something that we cannot fully comprehend?

## 5 SOME OF JESSE MUGAMBI'S EARLY ENCOUNTERS

With regard to his parentage, Jesse was brought up by his mother Jemimah Kori Kanyua and a well-informed father, Timothy Kanyua Mugambi, whom he describes as a person who was 'ahead of his time' – and who had, in those early days, travelled to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and in Burma, and India in 1941 to fight alongside the British soldiers in the Second World War (1939-1945). Equally, he was brought up by a well-informed paternal grandfather – Mzee Mugambi wa Nthigai – who was an elder statesman who arbitrated over disputes and provided advice and counsel to many people who came to consult him for advice. Jesse Mugambi's maternal grandfather was Njeru wa Kanyenje, who also greatly contributed to his nurture before he went to Sunday school and primary school. Mugambi's maternal grandfather had served in the Carrier Corps in what was then Tanganyika during the First World War (1914-18).<sup>xiii</sup>

And as regards his early encounters during his school days, he went to Kamama intermediate school - which was near his home village. Here, he met Nelson Kivuti, his teacher, who recalls that Jesse was

[Y]oung, keen, neat, and hardworking. He had a good handwriting and he had a good command of the English language. He dressed smartly and was also a keen scout. Academically speaking, he was a prospective candidate for high school; and we all looked forward to him making an academic career in his later life (interview with Nelson Kivuti on 5/7/2005).

Nelson's views on Jesse are echoed by Michael Nyaga Ngaruko, a fellow school mate - who later married his sister Eunice - when he says:

When Jesse and Eunice, my wife, were sitting for the Intermediate Examination at the end of the eight-year primary school education (*Standard Eight*) at Kamama in 1961, Jesse was the smallest boy (*referring to his body size*) in that class. He also appeared the youngest student in that class. But when Mr Nelson Kivuti asked them to spot out a certain place on the Map of West Africa, he was the only one who was able to indicate the specific place where the teacher was asking – while the others didn't know (interview with Michael Nyaga Ngaruko on 5/7/2005).

At Kangaru High School, 1962-1965 – which he joined after passing with a Grade A at Kamama intermediate school, his classmate, Peter Njiru Muriithi, recalls that Jesse Ndwyga, as he was then called, was a quiet, serious person and a non-controversial person who was good at both oral and written English. He was particularly good at English literature – a fact that is clearly exemplified by one of his first publications, *Carry it home*, being a poetry book. It is also evidenced by his publication of his *Critiques of Christianity in African literature* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1992). And indeed, he has also written more poetry and fiction than is already published. Coupled with this, Mugambi was also a good reader. This is a fact his girlfriend Elizabeth Nyathira who later became his wife in 1972 also noted later in 1966 when they met as both students of Machakos Teachers' Training College. Consequently, he won poetry recitations for two consecutive years at the college. He was not, however, outstanding at sports, save for scouts, probably because he was ever busy reading, coupled with the fact that he always occupied himself with other outdoor activities such as drama.

One singular experience greatly influenced Mugambi during his days at Kangaru High School. This was when young volunteer teachers from Britain wanted to hitchhike from Kenya to South Africa in one of the vacations in 1964. Mugambi and a few other Kenyan students were called upon to join them. But while preparing for the trip, they realised that the trip would not materialise owing to the racist system of *apartheid* in South Africa, which advocated separate development in socio-economic life. For by law, whites could not mix with the black people. This was the trend even in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). That meant that the trip could not pass through Zimbabwe, as the hitchhikers would have to contend with the racist laws – which were similar to those that were being used in South Africa. When the proposal was floated to Mugambi and others that the party should travel together as far as Zambia and then separate on entering the racist countries, their consciences could not allow them to go. As a result, this seemingly adventurous trip had to face this dark reality. They refused to subject themselves to such dehumanising and

racist terms. As a result, their teachers expressed their solidarity with their students and decided to cancel the trip.

Still in high school, Jesse Mugambi had another encounter with *apartheid* as it was practised in South Africa in the early 1960s. He says:

I became aware of apartheid in 1963 – the year of our national independence – when our racist High School Headmaster at Kangaru, Mr Cheadle, could not bear the prospect of being ruled by Kenyans, so he resigned his position and went to settle in South Africa ... Although we had racial discrimination in Kenya, I understood (as early as 1960s) that apartheid was worse than the Colour Bar – as Kenyan apartheid was called (Email interview with Jesse Mugambi on 12 March 2005).

After high school, Jesse Mugambi joined Machakos Teachers' Training College (MTTC), Kenya, in 1966. This was a two-year course leading to the award of a teaching certificate. It is here that he met his wife, Elizabeth Nyathira, who was also a student at the same college. Elizabeth recalls that he had already formed a reading culture by the time he joined the college; and as they engaged one another as boyfriend and girlfriend respectively – with the intention of marriage – one day, Elizabeth had already sensed from the very outset that her would-be husband would be a travelling and a reading person who would sometimes be out of the house and the country for several days at a time (interview with Mrs Elizabeth Nyathira Mugambi on 7/7/2005).

Thus Elizabeth was aware that her boyfriend was likely to be a 'travelling man'. In 1968 Jesse was admitted to Kenyatta College, Nairobi, to pursue further teacher training for a year, specialising in the teaching of religion and English at high-school level. His first research paper was written in 1968 while at the college. It is titled 'The traditional religion of the Embu people'. The paper was widely circulated the following year and, in 1971, it was published in the Makerere Journal *Dini na Mila* (Vol V, No 1, 1971), of which Professor John Mbiti was the editor. On completion of the course he was posted to teach Religion and English at Chania High School, Thika. This school was formally for Asian students, and the Asian headmaster did not allow Mugambi to teach Religion in the school despite the fact that the majority of students were by then Africans whose parents would have liked their children to take Religious Education. Mugambi obeyed the headmaster's orders to teach English, which he enjoyed, but he also volunteered privately to teach students who wished to offer Religion for the 'O Level' examination in 1969. He had a class of twenty students, whom he taught at his house in the evenings. All of them passed the subject, and some of them proceeded to do 'A Level' and joined public universities.

Later in 1969 Mugambi went to Westhill College, Selly Oak, Birmingham, UK for further studies, where he spent one academic year. He studied Contemporary Theology and read very widely. With his meagre resources he began to build his home library, by purchasing books, many of which he still uses. This began he came top of his class at the Machakos Teacher's Training College. He thus spent the vacations conducting research at the



Church Mission Society (CMS) archives at 157 Waterloo Road, London. The period he spent in the archives was pivotal to his future theological research. On his return to Kenya in 1970, he was posted to serve as tutor and lay chaplain at the Kagumo Teacher Training College, Nyeri. All these years Jesse and Elizabeth maintained their friendship. The travels of Jesse did not negatively affect their mature companionship. They were to get married in July 1972 while Jesse was studying at the University of Nairobi and Elizabeth was teaching in the city.

In 1971, Jesse joined the University of Nairobi as a mature student. His undergraduate courses included Education, Literature, History and Archaeology, Philosophy and Religious Studies. As an undergraduate, Jesse published another important paper, 'The African Experience of God', which was widely acclaimed (*Africa thought and practice*, Nairobi, vol 1, no 1, 1974). He qualified for BA honours in Education, and won a scholarship to study for the MA degree in Philosophy and Religious Studies that he completed in 1977. For two years after completing undergraduate studies (1974-1976) Jesse served as theology project secretary at the World Student Christian Federation, based in Nairobi. It was during this period that he consolidated his contextual theological reflection, particularly with regard to the theology of liberation. His third important paper was titled 'Liberation and theology', which was published in 1974 in Geneva. (*WSCF Dossier*, June 1974). He joined the staff of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies in September 1976 as a tutorial fellow. Immediately after completing his MA thesis he embarked on his PhD research, which he completed in 1983.

Subsequently, he rose through all the ranks to become Assistant Lecturer, Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor and Full Professor in 1993. During that period he served as chairman of his department (1986-90; Associate Dean of the Faculty of Arts (1990); and University Registrar, Academic Division (1990-94). He had taken sabbatical leave to take up the position of visiting scholar at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis (1982-83). In 1990-91, he was on another sabbatical leave as visiting Mellon Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at Rice University, Houston, Texas. Between 1994 and 1997, he took leave of absence to join the staff of the All Africa Conference of Churches as senior consultant for development and research. After his return to the University of Nairobi he continued to provide leadership in Theology and Religious Studies, accepting short-term visiting professorships during vacations and offering guest lectures and keynote addresses in various universities in Africa, Europe and North America. These short-term appointments included stints at The University of Copenhagen, Denmark (1997); Emmanuel College, University of Toronto (1999) and the University of South Africa (Unisa) (2000).

## 6 THE MAU MAU LIBERATION MOVEMENT AS A FORMATIVE FACTOR

An earlier climactic moment in Jesse Mugambi's life was the *Mau Mau* war of

liberation (1952-1960). The agitation for Kenya's national liberation gained momentum by 1947 – the year Jesse Mugambi was born – for it was the time when one group of fighters otherwise called the *Anake a forti* – literally meaning – the 'Forty Group' came into the limelight. It comprised of a high proportion of Gikuyu, Meru and Embu ex-servicemen, most of whom, were reputedly in the generation that had been initiated in 1940. Basically, the agitation had begun as a protest movement against colonial rule, oppression, exploitation, discrimination, dehumanisation and the grabbing of their land by the white settlers and, in general, the quest for cultural identity that had been suppressed (Elkins 2005). As Rosberg and Nottingham (1966:191) note, some 75 000 Kenyans had served in the British military during the Second World War. Upon their return, and having known the 'secrets' and 'weaknesses' of their colonisers, they found they had been dominated economically and socially by both the settlers and the black administrators and collaborators – who ironically did not want an end to colonial rule – as they were its puppet beneficiaries.

During the war period, the British government sanctioned the torture of *Mau Mau* suspects and sympathisers – something that greatly saddened the young Jesse. Speaking at an African National Congress (ANC) Conference on 21 September 1953, Mandela clearly describes the Kenya of Mugambi's childhood days. He wrote:

The massacre of the Kenyan people by Britain has aroused worldwide indignation and protest. Children are being burnt alive; women are raped, tortured, whipped and boiling water poured on their breasts to force confessions from them that Jomo Kenyatta had administered the *Mau Mau* oath to them. Men are being castrated and shot dead. In the Kikuyu country, there are some villages in which the population has been completely wiped out.

Mandela went on to say:

We are prisoners in our own country because we dared to raise our voices against those horrible atrocities and because we expressed our solidarity with the cause of the Kenyan people. You can see that there is no easy walk to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountain tops of our desires (Mandela 1994:42).

Mugambi comments on the events of the day, that is, during the climax of the war of liberation (1952-1960):

These events greatly shaped my childhood. I started school in the middle of the Emergency (1954), and spent eight years of my childhood in two concentration camps (Kigari and Kirigi in Embu). I have known oppression since my childhood! They confirm that what I went through was also experienced by a whole generation of Kenyans. Unfortunately, there has not been anything similar to the

South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission; so much of the experience of this generation remains unexpressed within the public domain (E-mail interview with Jesse Mugambi 12/10/2004).

Additionally Mugambi's childhood also experienced the missionary enterprise where suppression of the African culture was the order of the day even in the church. He says:

During that period, 1952 until 1962, the missionary agencies fully supported the colonial regime. In school and at the church they (as *citizens* of the empire) taught us to be docile *subjects* of Her Majesty the Queen. Yet they expected us to respect them. Rather than winning respect, they instilled fear in us. While accepting the Gospel, we rejected its ideological misappropriation by the missionary establishments. Thus, long before I began to study theology, I knew and understood the difference between oppression and liberation (E-mail interview with Jesse Mugambi 12/10/2004).

Through the war of liberation, the young Mugambi was able to reason out the views that were being expressed by the agitators for freedom and dignity. He could listen quietly as they discussed the injustices that were being perpetrated by the local colonial administration. He could then read some logic in their agitation – especially where the Africans decried racism, denial of full human dignity through tortures - some of which led to deaths – and the grabbing of huge chunks of land by the colonial authorities. Even if his zealous Christian father was not making political agitation as such, as he was busy preaching, he nonetheless was able to hear the concerns of the day from his father's contemporaries. He thus experienced the ensuing struggle for national self-determination.

## 7 NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE AS A FORMATIVE FACTOR

Another major experience that had an impact on Jesse Mugambi's life was the celebration of National Independence on 12 December 1963. This cheerful moment for the adolescent Jesse, and indeed for the rest of the country, began with the release of Jomo Kenyatta from the seven-year colonial detentions in 1961.<sup>xiv</sup> He admits that this was the beginning of the future filled with the buoyancy of hope. This release was climactic for two main reasons. First, Kenyatta was the darling of the black people in those dark days – and any attempt to isolate Kenyatta by attempting to divide the blacks, by the colonial government, had failed. Secondly, blacks had almost lost hope of ever seeing Kenyatta either dead or alive. For certainly, this release came barely a year after the erstwhile Governor, Sir Patrick Renison had ruled out the possibility of Kenyatta's release. Indeed, when he (the governor) returned from London and the Lancaster House talks in May 1960, he delivered, what is, perhaps the most famous denunciations of *Mau Mau* and its alleged

mastermind. In one of the widely circulated speeches, Renison said of Kenyatta:

Jomo Kenyatta was the recognized leader of the non-co-operation movement, which organised *Mau Mau ... Mau Mau*, with its foul oath and violent aims, had been declared an unlawful society. He was convicted of managing that unlawful society and being a member of it. He appealed to the Supreme Court and the Privy Council. In these three courts his guilt was established and confirmed. Here was the African leader to darkness and death (Elkins 2005:357).

About two years after his release, Kenyatta was reintroduced to the world; and as he stood on the podium of Nairobi's Uhuru Stadium on 12 December 1963, he delivered an electrifying speech to the crowd of about 50 000 ecstatic people - who were mainly Africans. He said, "This is the greatest day in Kenya's history and the happiest day in my life" (Elkins 2005:361). As a spellbinding speaker with unmatched oratorical prowess in the post independent Kenya's history, he refused to read his prepared address in English; and dramatically spoke extemporaneously to his eagerly awaiting people in Kiswahili (the popular language of the East and Central African countries). Interestingly, the strong-crowd was virtually uncontrollable - to the amazement of dignitaries from around the world who had all come to Kenya to witness Africa's thirty-fourth country to achieve its constitutional independence from European rule (Elkins 2005:359f).

After the euphoric day, 12 December 1963, Jesse Mugambi watched as Jomo Kenyatta played his post-colonial reconstruction role by telling his audience, *Na tusahau yaliyopita tujenge taifa* ('let us forget the past and build (read 'reconstruct') the nation!'). This was indeed, a reconciliatory approach that was meant to create a harmonious atmosphere that would enable development to thrive as opposed to merely seeking revenge amongst the two groups of people - that is - the former fighters of independence versus the colonial collaborators. As a young man, he watched Kenyatta (who is the current president), as he encouraged Kenyans to take destiny into their own hands and make a clear break with the colonial past ("*read, start reconstructing yourselves - you now have what it takes to do so!*").

And on the whole, Kenyatta, as a founding father of the Kenya nation, ushered in the post-colonial reconstruction of Kenya - as he sought to guide the country on a stable course. In particular, Mugambi recalls that the economy did well as did other sectors of the national fabric. He observed this unfolding scenario with keenness and appreciation - and probably wondered whether the whole of Africa would be engaged in the same process of social reconstruction! However, this economic growth went downwards some few years after Kenyatta's death in 1978 - as his successors did not sustain the momentum of social reconstruction that he had begun (Githiga 2001:44). And, by 1989, Kenyans were agitating again - in street battles with the police - as they demanded a 'second liberation'.<sup>xv</sup>

And as Jesse Mugambi writes on liberation and reconstruction in African

Christian theology, one cannot help but see a scholar who has literally lived with both concepts – throughout his life. He says:

My first paper on 'Liberation and theology' was written in 1973 and published in Geneva in June 1974. Such authors as James Cone, Desmond Tutu, Kwesi Dickson and others quoted it severally. A careful and critical study of the Exodus narrative raises serious questions about the beginning and the end of the exodus process. Too often scholars have focused on the process of liberation from Pharaoh's oppression to the freedom in Canaan. However, the Exodus narrative does not end with the invasion, siege, conquest and eventual occupation of Canaan. The narrative continues with the former slaves becoming invaders and oppressors themselves. They then adopt the norms and values of the people they conquered. They wanted to have a king, despite advice against that wish by Samuel (I Samuel 8). Saul, the first King, became a despot and they had to contend with a new form of oppression. There is great difference between oppression by Pharaoh and oppression by Saul. We find the same historical drama repeated in the New Testament. There is contrast between oppression by Caesar, and oppression by Herod. The rhetoric of liberation, especially in the in the 1970s and 1980s, focused on the former kind of oppression.

He goes on to say:

My earliest paper on Reconstruction was written in February 1990, shortly after the release of Nelson Mandela, and delivered to the AACC General Committee meeting on 30th March 1990. Reconstruction focuses on the problems that nations and cultures must deal with after foreign oppression has taken a back seat. In the 1970s I was in the forefront of the struggles for liberation in Africa. But after two decades of that line of thought I discovered that it is essential to move beyond the rhetoric of liberation. Liberation tends to be focused on the past. Reconstruction is focused on the future. The Exile Narratives provide another paradigm on the basis of which oppressed people can find encouragement. Ezra-Nehemiah provides a paradigm rather different from that of the Exodus. There is a great contrast between the leadership of Moses and Joshua in the Exodus narrative, and that of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Exile Narrative. The Leadership of John the Baptist and Jesus may also be contrasted with that of Caiaphas and Herod in the New Testament. We can also contrast the leadership of St Peter and St Paul. Studied in this way, the theme of Reconstruction stands high on a pedestal, focusing on the constructive future rather than on the destructive past (interview with Jesse Mugambi on 5 June 2005 in his rural home in Kenya).

## 8 SOCIO-SCHOLARLY INSPIRATION AS A FORMATIVE FACTOR

With regard to his scholarly inspiration, humanist theologians and philosophers such as Karl Rahner, Desmond Tutu, Jurgen Moltmann, Kwasi Wiredu (a Ghanaian philosopher), John S Mbiti, John Gatu, Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Stephen Neill, Emil Brunner, Soren Kierkegaard, John A T Robinson and Joseph Donders among others inspired Jesse Mugambi. For example: Reading from Søren Kierkegaard, 1834-1854, gave Mugambi a lot of pleasure in his early theological formation – as Kierkegaard was deeply concerned with clarity of expression. In particular, he was impressed by Kierkegaard's endeavour to clarify for himself the practical meaning of the sermons that he heard on Sundays in Copenhagen. He found himself identifying with Kierkegaard's disappointment with preachers - even the most respectable ones, who were in the habit of introducing complex ideas to their congregations without bothering to explain their practical applicability in daily living.

With regard to his ecumenical tutelage, Moderator John G Gatu, former Moderator of Presbyterian Church of East Africa, who became the first person to call for a moratorium, became his mentor when they served as the only Kenyan members of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Commission on Faith and Order, 1974-1984. At the Mission Festival in Milwaukee in 1971, Gatu argued that “the continuation of the present Missionary Movement is a hindrance to the selfhood of the Church” (Mutugi 2001:74). During his stint at the WCC Commission on Faith and Order, he reminded Mugambi of the necessity to root academic theology in the lives of Christians and churches at home and abroad.

In his early encounters with Archbishop Desmond Tutu – as far back as 1970s – Mugambi found a man who was full of wisdom and encouragement. As they became acquainted with each other, he later launched Mugambi's book, *From liberation to reconstruction: African Christian theology after the Cold War*, in Nairobi on 5 March 1995. And as noted earlier, the earliest paper on the theology of reconstruction had been written and delivered after Tutu invited Mugambi to the AACC General Committee Meeting on 30 March 1990 – by then, he was the President of AACC. This paper appears as one of the chapters in the above book (1995).

## 9 CONCLUSION

The paper has set out to retrieve Jesse Mugambi's life history as it surveys the key concepts in his works. These include Gospel and culture on one

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hand and liberation and reconstruction on the other. In so doing, the study has acknowledged that he became a household name in the African theological fraternity after his presentation to the General Committee of All Africa Conference of Churches when the President of the All Africa Conference of Churches, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and the General Secretary at the time, the Rev Jose B Chipenda invited him to reflect on the 'Future of the church and the church of the future in Africa',<sup>xvi</sup> at the Nairobi Meeting of 30 March 1990.

After reflecting on the backgrounds of his formative factors and his theology of reconstruction, his scholarly inspiration, his ecumenical appeal and his pedigree, the paper has clearly demonstrated that he has a pertinent contribution to make to the concepts of liberation and reconstruction. He thus deserves our attention in African theology. He is indeed, "a passionate and committed African Churchman, theologian and continental patriot of our times" (Maluleke 1996c:473). His theological reflection can best be understood by reading his published works.

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## END NOTES

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- 1 This article appears in the book, *The Church of Africa: Towards a theology of reconstruction*, 1991:29-50, which Mugambi edited jointly with J B Chipenda, A Karamaga & C K Omari. It also appears in his book, *From liberation to reconstruction: African Christian theology after the cold war*, 1995:160-180 - as chapter ten.
  - 2 That is, the world after the end of Cold War – which ended in 1989.
  - 3 The study insists on the word “officially” as it believes that the theology of reconstruction or the paradigm of reconstruction has always been with us in Africa – only that before Jesse Mugambi re-launched it on 30 March 1990, liberation has been the dominant paradigm while reconstruction has been a minor paradigm together with other minor paradigms such as inculturation.
  - 4 It is however significant to acknowledge that deconstruction of patriarchy is one of the fundamental concerns of theology of reconstruction.
  - 5 Jesse Mugambi holds that the two concepts of liberation and inculturation should not be seen as two separate paradigms for, according to him, they amount to one paradigm – a liberation-inculturation paradigm.
  - 6 Professor Hans Dieter Betz who remarkably sees the entire NT as all about a theology of reconstruction is however not an African. He teaches at Emory University in USA. His views, however, strike a chord with Kā Mana who sees Christ as the catalyst of

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reconstruction. To him, Christ is the breadth of radical renovation. Kä Mana's theology of reconstruction integrates the motifs of identity and liberation but moves then to the need to reconstruct Africa as well as the world in accord with humane requirements (2002:91).

- 7 It is no wonder that these researches are becoming part of the sources of theology of reconstruction in Africa. Other 'new' sources include the published works in the journals where different ideas are being published every now and then (see bibliography).
- 8 I am indebted to Jesse Mugambi's mother Jemimah Kori Kanyua, Mugambi's sister Eunice, Rev David Muriithi Ileri of the Anglican Church – Embu, Mzee Nelson Kibuti, Jesse Mugambi himself, Michael Nyaga Ngaruko, Mrs Elizabeth Mugambi and Mrs Daina Muthanje for this information - which they shared orally with me.
- 9 The source for these names is from the general interviews that were conducted in Embu District of Kenya in June and July 2005. It is also from my experience as a Kikuyu – a neighbouring and a cousin ethnic group to that of Jesse Mugambi's Embu community. Thus some Embu words and names have the same meanings as those of my Kikuyu community. I am however indebted to Jesse Mugambi's mother Jemimah Kori Kanyua, Mugambi's sister Eunice, Rev. David Muriithi Ileri of the Anglican church – Embu, Mzee Nelson Kivuti, Jesse Mugambi himself, Michael Nyaga Ngaruko, Mrs Elizabeth Mugambi and Mrs Daina Muthanje.
- 10 It is important to refer to him by using his commonly used names so as not to confuse the readers.
- 11 Among the Kamba community, Mugambi is written as *Muambi* – which refers to *Muvuvi wa nguli* – that is, the person who alerts the community in case of need or danger. According to my interviews with Bosco M Maingi, on 11 October 2005, *Muvuvi wa nguli* was the special person who alerted the people when the neighbouring Maasai tribe happened to come to take away their cattle – as the Maasai believed that all cattle belonged to them. Similarly, Mugambi is a special person among the Embu and the Kikuyu communities who will always alert the people to the contemporary areas that the society needs to focus on.
- 12 In combining his two names, Ndwiga Mugambi, we get the meaning of a far-sighted person (*Ndwiga*) who announces (Mugambi from the word *kugamba* or *kuuga*) the extraordinary 'revelations' that he or she has received – and who must speak to alert the community. This can either be good or bad news.
- 13 Tanzania refers to the United Republic of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, which was formed in 1964 under the leadership of President Julius Nyerere.
- 14 Jomo Kenyatta had been in the colonial detentions from the 20 October 1952.
- 15 Jesse Mugambi however does not believe in the idea of 'second liberation' – a phrase that was popularised by Prof Ali Mazrui. Rather, he holds that liberation takes place only once. For him, therefore, the so-called 'second liberation' was a mere consolidation of the gains of the liberation that came in the 1960s. In other words, it could also be a part of social reconstruction that began with the declaration of independence for Kenya on 12 December 1963.
- 16 This article appears in the book, *The Church of Africa: Towards a theology of reconstruction*, 1991:29-50, which Mugambi edited jointly with JB Chipenda, A Karamaga & C K Omari. It also appears in his book, *From liberation to reconstruction: African Christian theology after the Cold War*, 1995:160-180 – as chapter ten.