

STORYTELLING AS A METHODOLOGY IN DEVELOPING A THEOLOGY OF RECONSTRUCTION

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Abstract

The article sets out to explore the problem statement: “How significant is storytelling as one of the methodologies for developing a theology of reconstruction in post-Cold War Africa?” It is based on the premise that, with post-Cold War Africa being characterised by calls for a reconstruction of African society in all fronts, storytelling will no doubt provide a rich resource. To achieve its objective, the article will revisit the historical background of the theology of reconstruction; and attempt to survey a sample of the Gikuyu (African) traditional understanding of the concept of reconstruction, and the case of some African traditional forms of communication. Afterwards, it will attempt to survey some of the approaches to developing a theology of reconstruction - alongside storytelling.

1 INTRODUCTION

In attempting a definition of reconstruction, the late Hannah Wangeci Kinoti explained that the idea of reconstruction assumes that there is a framework which was previously there. She went on to say that “a cluster of words associated with the verb reconstruct should quicken our vision of asking the Church in Africa to rise up and do more purposefully and decisively”.¹ She suggested that the concept of reconstruction implies a process in which we should “review and then move” – to create something more suitable to the prevailing environment.² Other terminological parallels are: rebuild, reassemble, re-establish, recreate, reform, renovate, regenerate, remake, remodel, restore, or re-organise.³ In turn, the concept can also be compared with: rethink, re-examine, re-do, or rebirth (cf. Nicodemus in John 3). Kinoti attempts to explain the urgency of reconstruction in the Africa of the twenty-first century when she says:

We may be inspired by the Biblical narrative of Nehemiah’s reconstruction of the wall of Jerusalem. We may be motivated by the urgent need to pick up pieces of our individual lives. We may be desirous to restore the image of the corporate life of our communities as we visualize that image to be. Some may even be

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literally in the middle of reconstructing their houses recently or currently burnt down by arsonists for political reasons. Whatever our individual circumstances here and now in Africa, the cry is ... *restore!*⁴

Kinoti's view on the urgency of reconstruction in Africa had previously been captured by Robin Petersen, who expressed the view 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 (Petersen 1991:18).

In arguing that the cry for modern Africa is reconstruction, Kinoti and Petersen appear to be drawing a comparison between pre-Cold War Africa and post-Cold War Africa. As a result, it becomes evident that there is an open possibility of not only doing a theology of reconstruction but, more importantly, reconstructing the entire continent, for now and for the future of its people. As Stein Villumstad (2005) wonders: "Do we see major conceptual and fundamental dynamics in current Africa that indicate a shift into a new era?" As he further says:

The main watershed was the end of colonialism. The next major shift started with the downfall of Communist Soviet Union and the collapse of the bipolar strategic politics in Africa. The second shift facilitated the end of Apartheid and the wars in Mozambique and Angola.⁵

Villumstad's concerns agree with those of Moiseraele Prince Dibeela when he says:

The post cold war Africa has seen steady democratisation, with the continent generally embracing the multi-party political system. Prior to that, Africa was characterized by military dictatorships, life presidents, one party systems, coup d'états and assassinations of political leaders, corruption, ravaged economies and wars. The fall of the century long ideological struggle between the West and the East coincidentally ended the new scramble for Africa.

Dibeela goes on to say that:

During the intensity of the cold war in the 1970s and 1960s the main victim was the continent of Africa as the then Soviet Union and Western countries scrambled for the domination of Africa over and against each other. Consequently, some of the longest wars that raged in Africa were fuelled by the ideological polarity that was at the heart of the cold war. Often a so-called communist rebel would be sponsored by an overseas communist government to fight against a capitalist government sponsored by a Western government, or the other way round. Countries like Angola, Mozambique, South Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo had political conflicts that went into decades, because of this stranglehold over Africa. However, since the demise of the Soviet Union interest in Africa changed, at least from that of political control. Meanwhile many progressive forces have pushed for political change across many African countries, and the climax of this has been the democratisation of

South Africa in 1994. It is my contention that what stood on the way of Africa's political and economic freedom was the interface of external forces that had no interest in the development of the continent. Much of the damage to our economies and resources took place during the successive periods of formal and informal colonization. However, the demise of the cold war opened doors for the possibility of reconstruction.⁶

2 ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THEOLOGY OF RECONSTRUCTION

The theology and the concept of reconstruction gained prominence in African Church history after the end of apartheid and the Cold War in the early part of the 1990s. The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), under Archbishop Tutu as its President and Rev Dr Jose Chipenda as its General Secretary, provided a fertile ground that saw its birth. Since then, a number of leading theologians across the continent of Africa have fervently embraced the idea of a paradigm shift from liberation to reconstruction in post-Cold War Africa. These include Anglophone theologians such as Moiserale Prince Dibeela (2005); Isaac Mwase (1993, 1997), Chris Ukachukwu Manus (2003); Charles Villa-Vicencio (1992); Brigalia Bam (1995); Valentin Dedji (2003); Robin Petersen (1991; 1995); Wilson Niwagila (1997); Hannah Kinoti (1997); and Wilson Mande (1997). Francophone theologians include Jean-Emmanuel Pondi (1997); Andrea Karamaga (1991; 1997); and Kä Mana (1993; 1994; 2002). Lusophone theologians include Joe Chipenda (1991).

As one of its chief architects, Jesse Mugambi, recalls, his earliest paper on Reconstruction, which was entitled "Future of the Church and the Church of the Future in Africa,"⁷ was written in February 1990, shortly after the release of Nelson Mandela, and delivered to the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) General Committee meeting on 30 March 1990. And in that paper he suggested that:

Reconstruction is the new priority for African nations in the 1990s (and beyond). 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.⁸

As a post-exilic concept, he argued that reconstruction focuses on the problems that nations and cultures must deal with after foreign oppression has taken a back seat.⁹ For his part, Charles Villa-Vicencio, who wrote in 1992, suggested that reconstruction theology ought to engage in serious dialogue on human rights, legal reforms, nation building, economic empowerment and democracy.¹⁰ This appears to agree with Robert Schreiter's contention that reconstruction is "a different kind of liberating theology, because the opportunity for it is so rare".¹¹ For whether we are "in South Africa, Eastern Europe, Chile, Argentina," Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, Angola,

Mozambique, Liberia, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Uganda, or the Democratic Republic of Congo – it is a “moment of grace that should not be bypassed.”¹² After two decades of being at the forefront of the struggles for liberation in Africa, Jesse Mugambi discovered that it is essential to move beyond the rhetoric of liberation. Why?

Liberation tends to be focused on the past. (While) 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.¹³

In this Mugambi appears to have been affirming the words of Søren Kierkegaard, 1834-1854,¹⁴ who, interestingly, is one of the humanist theologians and philosophers who inspired his scholarly formation. This Danish philosopher is credited with the dictum: “Life must be understood backwards, but must be lived forwards”.¹⁵ Indeed, living forwards means having to face the psycho-social changes that are needed to create the desired future. In any case, as individuals or as societies, we cannot move backwards into history even though histories have formed us as individuals and societies.

Likewise, Brigalia Hlophe Bam in 1995 saw African Christianity as a sure way of enabling the success of the social reconstruction of post-apartheid South Africa. In particular, Brigalia Bam contended that with the February 1990 top-down political reforms, impelled by the maturation of the crisis of legitimacy of the white minority regime, the church (referring to the South African Council of Churches – SACC) had “an opportunity to share in the reconstruction of the nation”.¹⁶ She articulated the new direction that the SACC ought to take in the “new situation”, observing that since its inception the SACC had been involved in resistance. When the decade of the 1980s drew to a dramatic close, the situation in South Africa changed drastically. She says:

The next move came with the inevitable question - what now? Resistance was no longer sufficient. We were obliged to ask how we could best share in rebuilding the nation. The new context demanded a new message.¹⁷

Bam notices the changes that have taken place in post-apartheid South Africa, which include the integration of different apartheid educational departments into one single Ministry of Education. She also acknowledges the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission - for the sake of “healing of our broken nation.” According to her, “this amounts to reconstruction of our history, social relations and Christian spirituality of people’s edification”.¹⁸ She cautions that while the theological challenge facing the church is to know

when to say “yes” to meaningful change, it must learn afresh when to say “no” to such acts of commission or omission by the state.

As Kä Mana sums up the developmental trend in African theology, it is the concept of reconstruction that now climaxes it.¹⁹ As he says, the first stage of African theology can be associated with the missionary theologies of *tabula rasa*. Interestingly, these theologies were involved in the planting of the church in Africa. The second stage of African theology consists of the theologies of adaptation, indigenisation or enculturation. In this stage, the missionary theologies were challenged by the firm desire to develop an African Christianity, as experienced by Africans themselves. The third stage in the development of African theology is the theology of liberation, which stressed the Exodus motif, and which laid the foundations for Africa to tackle the major economic and socio-political challenges of today, towards establishing a future marked by dignity, freedom and prosperity. The fourth stage is the theologies of reconstruction which not only advocate the end of neo-colonialism; but which also see the advent of a free post-colonial African world view, devoid of all the problems of pessimism and defeatism, oriented towards the construction of a free and democratic society, and nurtured by dreams of returning to historic initiatives such as the African renaissance of the Pan-Africanists. These theologies of reconstruction, which are future sensitive as opposed to past sensitive, are propelled by vigorous energies of responsibility and resourcefulness. They call on the people of Africa to take full charge of their destinies and thereby create hope for Africa by fully participating in the renewal of the Africa of the twenty-first century.

Kä Mana’s view parallels that of Gwinyai Muzorewa in his contention that most African theologians see the presence of Christianity in Africa in three stages:

- The infant Jesus as a refugee in Egypt
- Christianity in Africa under the Portuguese prowess of the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries
- The dramatic nineteenth century awakening²⁰

Perhaps what Muzorewa fails to identify is the brand of Christianity that was propagated by the likes of Augustine, Tertullian and Cyprian, among others, as the real second stage of Christianity in Africa. His *third stage*, however, is the one which made a real impact on Africa, as modern Christianity proceeded from it. It is from this that African theologians are working out an authentic Christian theology in Africa.

3 RECONSTRUCTION IN AFRICAN INDIGENOUS SOCIETY

In view of the above, one wonders: Was there any indigenous understanding of the concept of reconstruction? And how was it communicated in view of the fact that the so-called modern forms of communication were miles and miles away? In other words, how can the concept of reconstruction be explained in African religiosity?

As a matter of fact, the concept of reconstruction is attuned to African traditional society - where rebuilding and re-examination are seen as crucial

elements for the African person (*Muntu*). And indeed, the main task of the ancestor was to reconstruct the society from time to time. That is, to work in harmony with God and the living person to improve upon it; hence, make it better. In particular, communion with the ancestors ensured that a re-examination leading to rebuilding or reconstruction was guaranteed. It is no wonder that as far back as 1938, when Jomo Kenyatta published his quasi-religious book, *Facing Mount Kenya: The tribal life of the Gikuyu*, he dedicated it to his by then departed parents - Muigai (father) and Wambui (mother) – and “all the dispossessed youth of Africa: for perpetuation of communion with ancestral spirits through the fight for African freedom, and in the firm faith that the dead, the living, and the unborn will unite to rebuild [*reconstruct*] the destroyed shrines”.²¹

In his *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta introduces *Itwika* as the climax of the revolution that would take place from time to time.²² *Itwika*, which is derived from the word *twika*, meaning “to break away from”, signified a break from the particular paradigm of socio-cultural dispensation in the society.²³ It can, for instance, mean a break away from autocracy to democracy.²⁴ It can also mean a paradigm shift – from one way of conducting cultural affairs to another – which includes a change from one age-set to another, among other things.²⁵

Nyambura Njoroge explains that *Itwika* was “a ceremony that was held after every twenty-five years to mark the handing over of power from one generation to another, before colonialism”.²⁶ It was at the same time “a communal renewal of people’s commitment to a struggle against tyrants”, following in the footsteps of their foreparents – the *Iregi* generation.²⁷ This raises, however, several concerns.

Firstly, Nyambura does not explain how she arrived at the period of twenty-five years, considering that paradigm shifts are needs- or situation-driven rather than calendar-driven. (In any case, her contention differs from that of Godfrey Muriuki, who says that *Itwika* “took place [*after*] every thirty to forty years, during which one generation [*riika*] handed over to its successor the reins of power to conduct the political, judicial and religious functions”.²⁸) Secondly, how did a community that did not use the “modern” mode of calculating arrive at the figure of twenty-five (or forty, according to Muriuki)? Thirdly, further researches would show that *Itwika* – as a generational (*riika*) shift – meant that the society was given a new *conversion* in all sectors of life – in that the particular generation would shift holistically: economically, socially and politically.

Thus the argument that it was “to mark the handing over of power from one generation to another”²⁹ gives the wrong impression, that it was simply a political event in which society inaugurated a new King and the story ended there. But as researches have shown, *Itwika* was an all-embracing socio-historical landmark as far as the society was concerned – a phenomenon that was experienced from the perspective of societal continuity, rather than from the perspective of a radical shift that caught the nation like a sudden bush fire.

Fourthly, it was not just a “people’s commitment to a struggle against tyrants”,³⁰ though the most publicised *Itwika* ceremony was basically political,

for *Itwika*, as a concept or as a philosophy of the people, was there even before the *Itwika* revolution that brought about good governance in the community.

Accordingly, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o argues that it was the *Iregi* – “a generation of revolutionary rebels, who had overthrown the corrupt dictatorial regime of King Gikuyu, established ruling councils and set up the procedure for handing over power, an event commemorated in the *Itwika* festival of music, dance, poetry and theatre”³¹ – that marked the first ceremonial *Itwika* among the members of Kikuyu community.

Kenyatta explains that the spirit of *Itwika*, namely, the changing of socio-political structures in rotation through a peaceful and constitutional revolution, is still ingrained in the minds of the *Agikuyu* people.³² He cites the case of around 1925-1928, as the time when the *Itwika* ceremony was to take place, corresponding to the last great *Itwika* ceremony, which had been celebrated in about 1890-1898. Accordingly,

The Irungu or Maina generation, whose turn it is [*was*] to take over the government from the Mwangi generation, organised in 1925 and began singing and dancing *Itwika* ceremonial songs and dances to mark the termination of rule by the Mwangi generation. But after a short time the *Itwika* ceremonial dances and songs were declared illegal, or in other words, “seditious”, by the British [*Colonial*] Government.³³

Kenyatta goes on to explain that the cancellation of *Itwika* festivities³⁴ by the British colonial government, who then ruled Kenya, denied the *Irungu* generation their birthright of perpetuating their “national pride and enjoyment in the peaceful institution which afforded their forebears the most harmonious participation in the social, political, economic and religious organisations of the tribe”.³⁵

Ngugi wa Thiong'o notes that apart from suppressing the *Itwika* ceremonies, the colonial government generally limited all open-air performances within their territorial space. He says:

After the 1922 Harry Thuku massacre, women devised a song and dance sequence called *Kanyegenyuri*. It needed no permanently defined ground on which it could be performed. The song-poem-dance was banned by the colonial regime: it could not be sung or danced or recited anywhere on Kenyan soil. The colonial state treated another dance sequence, *Muthirigu*, developed after the Second World War, in the same manner. And in 1952 the colonial regime once again acted against the nation-wide upsurge of anti-colonial dances and songs, banning all open-air performances in any part of the country, whatever the performance at a particular moment. Every performance, even a simple gathering for prayers, had to be authorized. Communication between one space and the next had to be authorized. The entire territory was one vast performance space full of threatening motions of innumerable

magic spheres. Similarly, in the era of apartheid in South Africa, an elaborate pass system regulated the entire territory as a space for daily performance.³⁶

Thus under the colonialist state, there was a fear of the uncontrolled space - a fear which had been dramatised long before by Euripides in his depiction of the disagreement between maenads and the state in his play *The Bacchae*. In the play Pentheus, King of the Theban state, cannot understand how women can be out there in the woods and mountains, beyond the control of the city, even though all they are doing is honouring Dionysus, the god of wine, whose gifts, as depicted in this play, are joy and the union of the soul with dancing.³⁷ Interestingly, King Pentheus claims that darkness in open space is dangerous to women, and he vows to use force to bring them back to “convenient” space within the city. And to do this, he orders the arrest of Dionysus, and imprisonment in a dark stable, where he has to experience “all the darkness that he wants. You can dance in there! As for these women whom you have brought to aid and abet you, I shall either send them into the slave market, or retain them in my household to work at the looms; that will keep their hands from drumming on the tambourines”.³⁸ And in his contempt of women, Pentheus thus used force against the Bacchantes (his own people - the people whom he should have cared for).

The parallels with authoritarian colonial and post-colonial Africa, before the end of Cold War, are very striking; and this is one of the reasons that may have prompted Wole Soyinka to write an adaptation of Euripides’ play, in a post-colonial African setting, under the title *The Bacchae of Euripides*.

In view of the above, the socio-cultural reconstruction of the *Agikuyu* community was not possible as long as the nation remained a colony of the British or any other colonial power. Equally, a social reconstruction of Africa was not possible as long as all African countries were not, at least constitutionally, free from colonialism/apartheid and from the shackles of the Cold War. And to a large extent, it implies that there is a need for caution with the external and the internal environmental factors that oppress the people of Africa – as they could weigh down the process of theo-cultural growth of Africa, however well intentioned they might be.

In view of these analyses, it is clear that there were various types of *Itwika* ceremonies. These ranged from leadership transfer to generational change and cultural reorientation, among others. Moreover, this most widely publicised *Gikuyu* cultural paradigm shift - *itwika* – not only brought down the dictatorship of King Gikuyu, who was ruling the community, but also helped the revolutionaries or the liberators (*Iregi*) to usher in the *ndemi* (the land cultivation) paradigm among the Gikuyu community.³⁹ Remarkably, the *ndemi* paradigm is still one of the most important paradigms in the *Gikuyu* nation, as are others such as the trading paradigm. Previously, the community had practised hunting and gathering, livestock rearing, pastoralism and barter trading,⁴⁰ among others, but with the major paradigm shift of *itwika*, which was initially a political revolution, minor but relevant shifts also followed suit.⁴¹

On the whole, a shift in societal orientation was meant to energise the incoming generation or group to work hand in hand with the ancestors so as to

reconstruct the society. This therefore implies that traditional African society assumed that the society would always be in ruin after a certain period of time; and hence be in need of reconstruction – which was always a process and not a mere event. In particular, through the *Itwika* ceremonies that would take place, the society would re-examine itself and assess what needed to be improved upon.

4 COMMUNICATING THE CONCEPT OF RECONSTRUCTION IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

Thus the concept of reconstruction is compatible with African indigenous society, as the idea of rebuilding and re-examination was seen as a crucial element of being a *Muntu* (the African person); it was therefore communicated in various ways (some of which are still practised today). Media of communication include dance, myths, musical instruments, proverbs and riddles, the wisdom sayings, acts of hospitality/*Ubuntu*, and oral narratives (read storytelling). Of course communication in general, in African society, can be said to have employed the above forms of communication. In this article, we survey some of them.

4.1 African traditional dance

In African traditional society, dance was used to express more than just entertainment. When accompanied by song, it became a manifestation of the feeling of the individual or group, thus communicating their inner sentiments, expectations and aspirations. Movements, gestures and externals such as costume and decorations gave it lively expression. These might also be used for symbolic reasons; as part of a religious or social ceremony.

4.2 African traditional songs

Song plays such an important role in African society that it cannot be separated from the major aspects of traditional life. This parallels Kwesi Dickson's contention that every Christian theologises. For theology is experienced on more than one level. It can be reflected in song, prayer, in action (drama), or meditation.⁴² As Bolaji Idowu notes,

Songs constitute a rich heritage for the whole of Africa. For Africans are always singing and in their singing and poetry, they express themselves. In this way, all their joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears about the future, find an outlet. Singing is always a vehicle conveying certain sentiments or truths. When songs are connected with rituals they convey the faith of worshippers from the heart-faith in the Deity, belief in and about divinities, assurance and hopes about the present and with regard to the hereafter.⁴³

In his theology of reconstruction, Jesse Mugambi cites four “revival” songs that point to the shape of his proposal for what he calls “individual reconstruction.” They include, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me”; “Teach me thy way, O Lord”; “Take my life and let it be Consecrated, Lord, to thee”; and “Just I am, without one plea...”⁴⁴ In assessing the above songs, one realises that it is the individual who is pleading to God (as in Psalms 138, 139, 140, 141-143) or praising God (as in Psalms 145-150) at a personal level – as opposed to communal praise and worship of God. In other words, these songs are both a prayer and a thanksgiving to God – directly affecting the individual who wants to achieve fellowship with the maker. For example, in “Amazing Grace”, I, the singer, describe myself as a former wretch; one who was previously lost, a blind person who could not see. I had no vision and no hope. But after the sweet sound of God’s “amazing grace”, I encountered peace in God, who reconstructed my life. It is from here that the individual can now move out to reconstruct the rest of the society when the plank in his or her eyes has already been removed. For as Jesus asked,

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye (Matthew 7:3-5).

At this stage, it is important to acknowledge that Mugambi’s use of hymns to drive home his theme of reconstruction is a continuation of his earlier works, in his book, *African Christian theology: An introduction*⁴⁵ in which he uses the same Hymn-Biblical text method to drive home the theme of liberation.

Interestingly, Elelwani Bethuel Farisani is critical of Mugambi’s use of the above hymns. He says, “It seems to me that Mugambi uses these hymns in the same way he uses the Biblical texts above, namely in a literal way, without addressing the context out of which they emerge.”⁴⁶ This argument, however, fails to acknowledge that Mugambi uses both the texts and the hymns appropriately with regard to his methodology. For he approaches theology from systematic theological and philosophical perspectives, while Farisani approaches theology from the perspective of Biblical scholarship (Old Testament) – hence their differing points of departure. In any case, even Farisani’s analysis does not rule out the applicability of the cited hymns in building on a theology of reconstruction. Nor does he suggest an alternative hymn whose context would agree or disagree with Mugambi’s contention.

However, Farisani’s reservation is worth considering, in view of the fact that there are some fundamentalists who do not examine the historical contexts of the Bible, and in neglecting this aspect, they run the risk of diluting Christianity in Africa. This points to the danger of “Biblicism” – a phenomenon in which some take the Bible literally, discarding exegesis, as it is “the word of God accessed to us directly”.⁴⁷ Obviously, Mugambi, an African theologian and a scholar of no mean repute, does not belong to that category, and I believe Farisani is conscious of that. Equally, our over-emphasis on Biblical exegesis

and the surveying of historical contexts may at times undermine our capacity to respect the Bible as “scripture”⁴⁸ or Bible as “sacred text”.⁴⁹ For indeed, Mugambi, in my considered opinion, approaches the Bible from a “believer reader” perspective.⁵⁰

Additionally, Mugambi’s approach of driving home his points by using the above method is within the framework of the African ethos, in which important issues (or sometimes people who are considered as dignified members of society) must be “escorted” or heralded with a memorable and/or relevant song. This gives authenticity to his works, considering that his primary audience is the African one. For whether in the church, in politics, in education or in social life, songs have not lost their value in Africa.⁵¹ Chima stresses this point when he says, “whether songs are used in rites of passage (birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, etc) or in the various human activities (work, hunting, harvesting etc) and whether their contents refer to birds, animals, seasons or humans, songs have human life, behaviour and relationships as their main interest”.⁵² Songs (or hymns), in Africa, are not just a concordance of notes and voices, but each song expresses the general mood and meaning of a given situation.

Thorpe introduces another element of singing in Africa, in which drama and dance accompany the art of music.⁵³ This further builds on the importance of the use of songs in developing a theology of reconstruction in African theology. Thorpe further says that Africans dance to celebrate every

imaginable situation - joy, grief, love, hate, to bring prosperity, to avert calamity. In addition, singing and joyful conversation enable African people to minimise tensions within the enclosed community.⁵⁴

While we acknowledge the value of Mugambi’s suggestion of introducing songs as a vehicle for communicating a theology of reconstruction, we cannot fail to be critical over his failure to use African traditional songs as examples. In fact, all the four samples of hymns that he has outlined were composed before the twentieth century by the revivalists in Europe. A reference to Charlotte Elliot’s song, “Just as I am, without one plea But that thy blood was shed for me, And that thou bidd’st me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come”, as quoted in *Christian Praise* (London: Tyndale Press, 1957), Hymn 204, does not help matters.

This points to the dangers of getting into a theology of reconstruction without considering some sensitive elements in African theology, such as the role of dance, songs, drama, musical instruments, oral narratives (read “storytelling”), myths, proverbs, sayings and riddles. These elements are crucial in any emerging theology in African Christianity. Surprisingly, all proponents of theology of reconstruction such as Kinoti, Bam, Villa-Vicencio, Karamaga, Chipenda, and Manus among others have all failed to show sensitivity to the above elements. Even those who were critical of the theology of reconstruction, such as Sam Maluleke and Musa Dube, did not criticise with reference to the above contextual elements that are pivotal in crafting any emerging theological trajectory in Africa.

5 SOME METHODOLOGIES FOR DEVELOPING A THEOLOGY OF RECONSTRUCTION

First, the method for developing a theology of reconstruction will require *an all-inclusive approach*. This means that theology will need to recognise the ecumenical movement in Africa as “an indispensable institution whose existence is not only necessary due to the problems posed by denominationalism, but whose presence certainly would consolidate the theological resources of the different translations of the same message of Jesus Christ to Africa”.⁵⁵ According to Samuel Kobia, this will help in safeguarding against religious exploitation “by politicians who take advantage of the fragmentation within the church”.⁵⁶ His view thus is in line with Mugambi’s quests for an “all inclusive theology”.⁵⁷

It is crucial to acknowledge that an all-inclusive approach calls the practitioners of theology (of reconstruction) to put more emphasis on developmental issues that concern the society of faith where it is being articulated. This therefore means that theology in Africa will have to put more emphasis on repairing environmental degradation,⁵⁸ reconciliation, healing domestic violence, solving gender disparities, and using the power of love,⁵⁹ hence building a sustainable society.⁶⁰

Secondly, the methodology will require *a multi-disciplinary approach*. This means that the theology of reconstruction will have to borrow heavily from other related disciplines, especially on matters that concern the development of the people of Africa. This means that theology will have to institute dialogue with social sciences such as Sociology, Anthropology, and the environmental sciences among others. For as Mugambi says, reconstruction

is a concept within the social sciences, which should be of interest to sociologists, economists and political scientists. The multi-disciplinary appeal of reconstruction makes the concept functionally useful as a thematic focus for reflection in Africa during the coming decades.⁶¹

As an integrative enterprise, the theology of reconstruction will draw its resources from multi-disciplinary expertise “involving social scientists, theologians, philosophers, creative writers and artists, biological and physical scientists, builders and architects”.⁶² In view of this, Valentin Dedji sees the theology of reconstruction as “an inter-faith and inter-denominational enterprise”.⁶³ And in a continent where wars, drought, famine, landmines and other destructive effects of political instability chaotically affect men, women and children, the reconstruction assignment cannot be accomplished in seclusion.⁶⁴ This reconstruction paradigm thus implies “enabling theologians as well as Christians in places of public responsibility to contribute to the urgent reconstruction task, from perspectives informed by Christian faith and critique”.⁶⁵

Thirdly, the methodology in developing a theology of reconstruction will involve *a critical re-evaluation of Biblical themes of liberation and salvation –*

and especially as seen in the Exodus story. In so doing, we realise that our actual historical experience of liberation from colonial dominance is being called in question. For what do we mean when we speak of “liberation from oppression” in our own context?⁶⁶ For who is Pharaoh (the coloniser) in our respective situations, and who are the people in need of being “let to go” in our context; and where would they be expected to go?

The need to critically re-evaluate the biblical paradigms of liberation-salvation has to be done from a conscious realisation that “those who claim to have liberated us from the yoke of colonialism are today our oppressors”.⁶⁷ They have simply taken over the yoke of oppression from their colonial master and “are using the same apparatus of divide and rule to manipulate and exploit our people”.⁶⁸ They used popular themes of liberation to arouse our people against the colonial master, “but today they are using the same tactics of shrewd politics to destroy our people”.⁶⁹

Fourth, *contextual theologising* as a method in developing a theology of reconstruction ought to be employed under the premise that the social, ecclesiastical, historical or geographical contexts or the environment consciously or unconsciously influence theological articulation. The motive for emphasising the context is “the fundamental understanding that there is no neutral or absolute meaning of a text or, for that matter, of any human communication”.⁷⁰ That naturally calls us to seek to understand the historical settings of a given situation in history. Similarly, we will “need to be aware of the way in which our common assumptions about society distort our ability to hear a message from another society”.⁷¹ This will form part of understanding and consciously utilising context in the process of theologising. A study of the theology of reconstruction ought to, therefore, utilise the hermeneutical keys of liberation and reconstruction that are refined by a reading of African theology from the point of view of what Bediako calls “the hermeneutic of identity”.⁷²

6 STORYTELLING (ORAL NARRATIVES)

Of great significance is storytelling as one of the methodologies in developing a theology of reconstruction.⁷³ As a phenomenon that is rooted in the African indigenous religion, storytelling is also a means of communication that links the history of a people from their origins to the present. It is also one of the major forms of informal education in Africa, and is indispensable as a means of illustrating an important message in the context of Africa.⁷⁴ As a traditional art, storytelling creates, above all, a deep sense of friendship and community. This finds a parallel in the Bible, which is a collection of stories told about a people, namely, the Israelites and the disciples of Jesus.⁷⁵ As a reconstructionist, Jesus illustrated his sermons with relevant stories such as the parables of the sower (Luke 8:1ff), and the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25f).

Storytelling as a methodology in developing a theology of reconstruction gains credence in Anthony Balcomb’s categorisation of stories and especially in what he calls “utopian stories”.⁷⁶ He says:

We construct them in our minds as possible ideal ways of existence in society. They act as dreams to inspire us, maps to guide us, horizons that we head

towards. These are stories like democracy, liberation, freedom, prosperity, reconciliation, civilisation and African Renaissance. Sometimes these stories compete for our allegiance - like capitalism and communism. Some of them fail to inspire certain people as they inspire others. Sometimes they are imposed on us at enormous cost. Sometimes we buy into them because we see no other way of building *[read reconstructing]* our societies. But we are always constructing them. They are always there.⁷⁷

He goes on to say:

So stories are not just the domain of skilled or professional storytellers who brighten our lives with their gift of storytelling. Stories are the domain of all human beings who want not only to make sense of life but to open up all sorts of possibilities in life. This is because we do not only tell stories about what does happen but also about what could happen. We challenge ourselves to greater possibilities, unknown in practice but known in the imagination by asking ourselves the question "What if"? What if we could all live together in peace? What if everyone could have a say in government? What if we could find a cure for AIDS? What if we could solve the crime question? Without narrative we could not only not do history but we could not do law, we could not do science, we could not do politics and we could not do theology.⁷⁸

Through storytelling, Africans can confess their experiences in order to obtain healing for the individual and society. Hence, storytelling can aid in the reconstruction of a community. A good example of this can be found in Isabel Apawo Phiri's publishing of her life history. She explains that her intention was to document her experiences in her journey of faith as lived in different settings among African societies. It was aimed at, "empowering myself and my African sisters".⁷⁹ She goes on to say that she realises that given the odds faced by women in Africa, her life might serve "as a model for other African women who are grappling with issues of their identity, spirituality and theological education in the context of Africa".⁸⁰ Thus, in storytelling, we confess our "sins" of commission and omission for both our individual misdeeds and those of our ancestors, and thereby seek a genuine healing of our society.

And in their book, *Her-stories: Hidden histories of women of faith in Africa*, African women's theologians have narrated their stories - their contacts with patriarchal society; and in so doing, they have sought to deconstruct the patriarchal system that has continued to define the African society for generations and generations.⁸¹ In other words, they are calling upon the entire society of men and women to "come now, let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:18) and consequently reconstruct our common heritage - for the betterment of us all.

With regard to post-apartheid South Africa and post Cold War Africa, Hantie P Kotzé demonstrates the importance of storytelling as a methodology in doing a theology of reconstruction when she confesses that she needs "to listen to all the stories of the different cultures" and then see to it that her identity integrates her own "specific culture in the face of the bigger diverse picture".⁸² She says:

It is in brokenness and vulnerability that I take the time to tell my story and to wait for the water of forgiveness and healing to come to me. I start receiving water by dealing with my identity, spirituality and context, thus slowly discovering the secret well of humanness. As an Afrikaner, I start this lifelong process by embracing my own roots and critically dealing with the structures and securities of my upbringing. This means that I appreciate the value of the community, which forms part of my identity as an Afrikaner, but since the past has given me new insights, I am dedicated to breaking down the ethnic walls in which I found my identity. The breaking of these walls means that I acknowledge the horror of isolation and the heresies that it gave birth to. In both my Afrikaner culture and Dutch Reformed Church tradition, I want to value my interdependence on and connectedness to all South Africans and to all people of faith. This then leads to my own humility in realizing that I can only journey the road to inclusion through the hands of those to whom I grew up feeling superior. This means that I as an Afrikaner should learn anew that it is in relating to others that the seeds of the Gospel will grow and bear fruits of love, grace and healing.⁸³

She goes on to say:

In taking part in rebuilding and reshaping this country [*referring to the reconstruction of post apartheid South Africa*], people will be empowered to find new meaning for our co-existence in a pluralistic South Africa. It is finally Christ's words of comfort in the Bible that urges me to stop fearing and to trust that the Holy Spirit will be my guide in realizing the love and grace of my confession.⁸⁴

It is clear therefore that the importance of storytelling as a method in developing a theology of reconstruction cannot be downplayed. For men, women and children naturally love stories; and seldom does a person grow so old as not to enjoy a story. In any case, Church history is replete with stories of great preachers who rose to prominence through careful use of oral illustrations of their environments. They include people like John Chrysostom, Augustine, Ambrose, Spurgeon, Sangster, John Wesley, and Francis of Assisi. These oral illustrations "transform the abstract into the concrete, the ancient into the modern, the unfamiliar into the familiar, the general into the particular, the vague into the precise and the unreal into the real, and the invisible into visible".⁸⁵ Clearly, any form of communication is aided by concrete imagery. This methodology of confessing stories of life experiences was used successfully during South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which was led by Desmond Tutu. It will no doubt help in the social reconstruction of the whole of Africa in the twenty-first century.

Accepting that storytelling has a critical role in developing a theology of reconstruction leads us to several concerns: Since the elders in traditional African society were the ones who told stories around the fire camps, who in the Africa of the twenty-first century should carry out the task with a view to reconstructing society? Secondly, where and when should the stories be narrated? Third, if a confessional story is told by a person who was involved

in, say, the injustices of the past, how can one verify the authenticity of the story?

In Africa today a theology of reconstruction that is an all-inclusive entity will have to involve both young and old narrating their stories. These reconstructive stories will have to find their places in the churches, mosques, schools and colleges, in the fields, conferences and all social gatherings - while taking into consideration the respective audiences. While the question of discerning authentic from inauthentic stories remains a challenge, as most people speak from their own perspective, there is need to establish a clear framework which would address this test.

7 CONCLUSION

On the whole, since Africa is rich in oral narratives, especially those featuring personified animals, the contribution of storytelling as a methodology in developing a theology of reconstruction will be clearly evident in the Africa of the twenty-first century. For with various countries (such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ghana) borrowing from the South African model of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the post-Cold War reconstruction of African society will no doubt find storytelling a rich resource. In any case, the need for talking pictorially, through storytelling, is a psychological necessity in our picture-minded generation. For how is it possible to pierce the mentality of an age that is film-fed, radio-glutted, and jazz-intoxicated unless we master the art of vivid presentation and succeed in turning the ear into the eye? In doing theology in the age of HIV/Aids, breaking the silence through individuals speaking their own stories will be crucial in the Africa of our time – as it will in turn break the stigma that is attached to the pandemic. Whether we are communicating the Christian message or merely socialising, Africa will have to make use of storytelling for the sake of this generation and the ones to come. Thus, even though storytelling is not the only methodology for developing a theology of reconstruction, it is nevertheless essential, especially because of its predominantly oral and narrative approach in a continent where oral (and narrative) communication is highly valued. In view of this, everyone has a chance to reconstruct Africa. Indeed, “come, let us start rebuilding” (Nehemiah 2: 18)!

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- 11 Robert J Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the global and the local* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 110.
- 12 Robert J Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the global and the local*. 110-111.
- 13 Interview with Jesse Mugambi on 5th June 2005 in his rural home in Kenya.
- 14 Other humanist theologians and philosophers who inspired Jesse Mugambi in his early days as a theologian include: Karl Rahner, Desmond Tutu, Jurgen Moltmann, Kwasi Wiredu, John S Mbiti, John Gatu, Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Stephen Neill, Emil Brunner, John A T Robinson and Joseph Donders.
- 15 Stein Villumstad, *Social reconstruction of Africa: Perspectives from within and without* (Nairobi: Acton, 2005), 136.
- 16 B H Bam, "The Church in South Africa," in Pityana, B N and C Villa-Vicencio (eds), *Being the church in South Africa today* (Johannesburg: SACC, 1995), xi.
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- 18 B H Bam, "The church in South Africa": xi
- 19 See Kä Mana 2002. *Christians and churches of Africa envisioning the future: Salvation in Jesus Christ and the building of a new African society* (Oxford: Regnum, 2002), 90-

- 20 G H Muzorewa, *The origins and development of African theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 22.
- 21 Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (London: Heinemann, 1938).
- 22 It is also the same as the *Ameru Ntuiko*. In turn, both the *Agikuyu Itwika* and the *Ameru Ntuiko* have a significant parallel with the *eunoto* ceremony of their Maasai counterparts. This *eunoto* ceremony by the Maasai, like the Kikuyu *Itwika* and the Meru *ntuiko*, had "the junior warriors taking over" from the previous ones - among other things.
- 23 Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (London: Heinemann, 1938), 186-187.
- 24 Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*: 187.
- 25 According to Gakuu Mathenge, *Itwika* goes beyond the mere idea of leadership succession; rather it refers to a change in the whole pattern of communal life (see Gakuu Mathenge, "Central Kenya MPs battle fluid political situation," *Sunday Nation*, January 22, 2006, p.13. Available: <http://www.nationmedia.com/dailynation/nmgnews.asp?categoryid=56>
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- 28 Godfrey Muriuki, *A history of the Kikuyu: 1500 - 1900* (Nairobi, London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 117.
- 29 J Nyambura Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian feminist ethic of resistance and transformation*: 142.
- 30 J Nyambura Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian feminist ethic of resistance and transformation*: 142.
- 31 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Barrel of a pen: Resistance to repression in neo-colonial Kenya* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1983), 65.
- 32 Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*: 196.
- 33 Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*: 196.
- 34 These festivities that were stopped by the colonial regime were taking place thirty years after the British colonial state was established in about 1895. Thys, around the year 1925, the *Agikuyu* community was involved in a flurry of activities to celebrate the *Itwika* ceremony that was disappointingly stopped, for the performance of the *Itwika* was taken as a challenge to the government of the day. Consequently, the annual parade of the British military might at the opening of the new sessions of the legislative assembly replaced *Itwika*-type performances (See Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, gunpoints, and dreams: Towards a critical theory of the arts and the state in Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 39.
- 35 Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*: 197.
- 36 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, gunpoints, and dreams: Towards a critical theory of the arts and the state in Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 64-65.
- 37 Euripides, *The Bacchae and other plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 197.
- 38 Euripides, *The Bacchae and other plays*: 197.
- 39 Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*: 186-187. cf. J Nyambura Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian feminist ethic of resistance and transformation* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 2001).
- 40 See Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*: 67-68.
- 41 See Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Barrel of a pen: Resistance to repression in neo-colonial Kenya* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1983).
- 42 See Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (New York: Orbis books, 1984), 13.
- 43 Bolaji Idowu, *African traditional religion: A definition* (London: S.C.M Press, 1973), 84.

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- 44 J N K Mugambi, *From liberation to reconstruction*: 15f.
- 45 J N K Mugambi, *African Christian theology: An Introduction* ((Nairobi: Heinemann, 1989), 10-11)
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