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# African Theologies of Identity and Community: The Contributions of John Mbiti, Jesse Mugambi, Vincent Mulago, and Kwame Bediako

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**Abstract:** This article examines four theologies of identity and community from Africa and their relevance in combating ethnocentrism in Africa. The article focuses on the works of Vincent Mulago, John S. Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, and J. N. K. Mugambi – the key proponents of the schools of thought that we examine. The themes of identity and community have practical implications. For example, a people’s perception of themselves and their communities (social identity) affects how they perceive and relate to others. Therefore, considering the challenge of ethnocentrism worldwide, the themes of identity and community must always be examined. This article has two major sections. Foremost, it explores the relationship of these concepts. Second, it examines and critiques African theologies of identity and community and their consequent theological implications for social cohesion of communities. Finally, it proposes a way forward utilizing contributions from each theologian.

**Keywords:** African theology; identity; community; ethnicity; reconstruction; liberation

## 1 Identity, community, and ethnic diversity

“Identity” is a popular term at present, but not always clearly used; at the same time, its prominence may indicate a growing interest in and concern about the topic. Yet how identity is construed is crucial: is it defined in ways that lead to separation, isolation, radicalism, or violence, or is it defined in ways that welcome others and treat the “outsider” with respect? From a Christian theological perspective too, identity is an important concept.<sup>1</sup> Christian theology should address identity’s individual and communal aspects, and ecclesiology specifically should inculcate a specific attitude towards the “other” both within and outside of the church. We will draw specific insights from Vincent Mulago, John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, and J. N. K. Mugambi to propose a way forward on the issue of identity and community amid difference and diversity.

Identity includes both individual and personal traits as well as social aspects acquired from the groups one belongs to. Thus, identity includes both similarity and difference in itself, and is composed of both individual and social facets. This article contends that African questions dealing with identity are often questions focusing on the social/communal components of identity. The term “community” entails the existence of people in a complex environment that includes their physical settings, past and future, and spirituality. However, the main challenge, especially in Africa where ethnocentrism is a serious problem,

<sup>1</sup> Identity refers to a person’s or a group’s self-understanding. This may include labels others have applied as well as ones the person/group have chosen themselves.

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is that the term “community” is often understood from a narrow perspective. Anthropological links to the global community are diminished when one focuses only on one’s local community, a clan, or ethnic group.

Several words capture the importance of community in Africa. The most prominent is the word “ubuntu,” which designates human beings as individuals-in-community. The term *ubuntu* is a Bantu, or more specifically, Nguni noun describing the essence of being human.<sup>2</sup> Other synonyms of *ubuntu* include *botho* in Setswana and Sesotho, *utu* in Swahili, and *unhu* in Shona. Elina Hankela explains the etymology of the term “ubuntu” as consisting “of a prefix *-ubu*, which is used in abstract words, and a root *-ntu*, which is the root for words referring to human (e.g. Zulu: *umuntu*/person; *abantu*/people).”<sup>3</sup> Hankela shows that although “*ntu*” designates variance between humans and non-humans, in African cosmologies attention is not placed on the difference but the interrelations between the categories.<sup>4</sup> Thus *ubuntu* extends beyond the human world to the non-human nature.

Furthermore, *ubuntu* is a global anthropological truth, in that humans are recognized as social creatures; to be human is to be with others. Thus, the concept of humans as individuals-strictly-in-community occurs in fields not directly linked to African studies. In sociology, the term “social identity” refers to the part of a person’s identity shaped by membership in a group. Membership gives an individual a sense of belonging as well as conferring norms of group behavior and values, which the individual will share and conform to, at least to some extent, to be accepted as part of the group. Thus, ethnicity is not a negative reality, but is, in fact, a positive force.

From a Christian theological perspective, ethnic diversity is part of the beautiful creation of God. Scripture establishes a trajectory, which moves from a mono-ethnic Garden of Eden to a multi-ethnic city of God, a place where a great multitude of people from all tribes and nations are brought together to worship the Lamb (Rev 7:9–12).<sup>5</sup> Ethnic diversity is not a postlapsarian reality. Before “the Fall” (widely interpreted as the expulsion of humans from the Garden due to their disobedience), God’s creation is depicted as an intricate world of vibrant diversity in which humans existed in an interdependent relationship with one another and with God’s other creation. The Fall greatly distorted this unique diversity but did not eradicate it. God told Abraham that he would be the father of many nations (Gen 15:5; 22:17–18) and reminded the Jews to treat the *aliens* as citizens (Lev 19:34), to love the stranger (Dt 10:18–19), and to be hospitable to the needy stranger (Lev 19:9–10; 23:22). Furthermore, the Jews were explicitly prohibited from oppressing the alien (Ex 23:9; Dt 24:14) or denying them justice (Dt 24:17–18). The prophets too emphasized justice, mercy, and compassion to the alien (e.g. Jer 7:6).<sup>6</sup>

Genesis 10 affirms that all human beings are all related. However, this story is immediately followed by the Tower of Babel (Gen 11), which shows how fallen humanity seeks an identity that is apart from God’s intended purpose. But the New Testament story of Pentecost reverses the curse of Babel. The Pentecost narrative affirms ethnic and linguistic diversity as part of the renewed people of God. The reversal of Babel was not about obliteration of ethnic identities but in fact was an affirmation and a renewal of them. In Acts 2, “God does not reverse Babel by removing ethnic or linguistic diversity. Rather Spirit-filling enables people to hear and declare God’s greatness in every language (a foretaste of heaven—Rev 5:9, 10).”<sup>7</sup> At Babel, people sought homogeneity outside God’s intended purpose; Pentecost restored unity-in-diversity as God intended. This restoration begins with the Church and culminates in the eschatological city of God, the

<sup>2</sup> The term “Bantu” is the plural of the term “muntu,” which means humanity. The Bantu are among the four major racial categories in Africa. The others are the Hamites, the Semites, and the Nilotes. The Nguni language group includes Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele, and Swati.

<sup>3</sup> Hankela, *Ubuntu, Migration, and Ministry*, 50.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>5</sup> Manickam, “Race, Racism, and Ethnicity,” 723.

<sup>6</sup> van Es, “Hosting a Stranger.”

<sup>7</sup> Rasmussen, “What Are We Going to Do about Them?”, 214. Similarly, Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 51 adds: “Conversion to Christ does not isolate the convert from his or her community; it begins the conversion of that community. Conversion to Christ does not produce a bland universal citizenship: it produces distinctive discipleships, as diverse and variegated as human life itself.” For the African context, the challenge is how to assist these “distinctive discipleships,” Christians from various ethnic communities to love one another and to not let their ethnicities and political identifications define how they relate with each other.

New Jerusalem, where God's creation is restored once again to the beauty of diversity.<sup>8</sup> The New Jerusalem bears close resemblance to the Garden of Eden. The only difference is that it is a sanctified city.<sup>9</sup> Thus in God's eschatological kingdom, all nationals (ethnic communities) are reconciled in Christ. Thus ethnicity, which is part of God's original creation, is not a negative reality but becomes negative when used as a marker of exclusion of people or to inspire physical or non-physical conflict between ethnic groups.

This negative nature of ethnicity is what is termed as "ethnocentrism," "tribalism," or "negative ethnicity." It is the viewpoint that one's ethnic group is better than another.<sup>10</sup> More precisely, "tribalism is the attitude and practice of harboring such a strong feeling of loyalty or bonds to one's tribe that one excludes or even demonizes those 'others' who do not belong to that group."<sup>11</sup> Some scholars especially from Africa have chosen the term "negative ethnicity" where others use the term "tribalism." This is because of the negative connotations that the term "tribalism" carries. However, ethnocentrism is not an African problem but a global reality; it is "a world-wide pandemonium" as Daniel P. Moynihan aptly puts.<sup>12</sup> Since identity questions persist in Africa, it is natural to ask how theologians in Africa have addressed this issue and what might be a way forward. The next section explores the insights of four theologians into the topic of communal identity.

## 2 Identity and community: An examination and critique of four African proposals

### 2.1 Historical roots

African theologies of identity emerged out of the search for identity and meaning in Africa. The need for a definition of what it means to be African (in Africa or in diaspora) arose out of the various facets of life in Africa such as the challenges of the missionary enterprise, the colonial experience especially the colonialists' ethnocentric attitudes toward Africans, the formation of new governments after colonialism ended (1954–1994), the post-colonial land resettlement programs, which uprooted some people from their ancestral lands; the reality of apartheid in South Africa, the challenges of modernization and globalization, rural to urban migrations, the embrace of foreign languages (English, French, Arabic, and Portuguese) at the expense of indigenous languages, the loss of tradition, and the various challenges of poverty and diseases that ravage the African continent.<sup>13</sup> As African intellectuals sought to rediscover authentic and valuable Africanness in the midst of demeaning experiences, African theologians sought to achieve this and more.<sup>14</sup> They understood identity as a theological matter which has serious implications for Christian life.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Manickam, "Race, Racism, and Ethnicity," 723. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 91. Yong, *The Missiological Spirit*, 42–47.

<sup>9</sup> Studebaker, "Servants of Christ, Servants of Caesar", 61.

<sup>10</sup> Tarus and Gathogo, "Conquering Africa's Second Devil," 8.

<sup>11</sup> Nothwehr, *That They May Be One*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Moynihan, *Pandemonium: Ethnicity and International Politics*, xiii.

<sup>13</sup> On this point, Mazrui, *The African Condition: A Political Diagnosis*, 68, asserts, "Christianity, Western liberal democracy, urbanization, Western capitalism, the rules of Western science and the rules of Western art have jointly exerted an unparalleled influence on the emergence of personalized identity in Africa." Similarly, Tiénou, ("The Right to Difference," 25) states, "The Africans' search for their past is the result of a reaction to Western domination and domestication." As to the missionary factor and its influence on African Christian identity, Tiénou (Ibid., 31) observes, "Wittingly or unwittingly, missions in Africa contributed to the making of the Black man into the White man. That is why the quest for African theology is also a quest for selfhood and emancipation."

<sup>14</sup> Appiah (*Africanness*, 6) explains that the term "Africanness" is best described as "the desire for authenticity and the struggle to redress the state of alienation that resulted from the historical experiences of cultural domination, slavery and colonialism in Africa. In this sense, Africanness directs our attention to the complex web of issues involved in the African struggle for the rehabilitation and integral liberation of Africans, as basic topics of African theology."

<sup>15</sup> Tiénou, "The Right to Difference," 31.; Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 6, 31–33.; Ferdinando, "Christian Identity in the African Context," 121.

## 2.2 Vincent Mulago

Vincent Mulago gwa Cikala Musharhamina (1924-2012) is one of the first published modern African theologians, but it is more than his place in a chronology that makes him important. Bénézet Bujo considers Mulago a “prerequisite” in African theology, “one of the precursors comparable to the Apostolic Fathers.”<sup>16</sup> Kwame Bediako likewise places Mulago among the pioneers of African theology. Born into the *Shi* ethnic group (hence a *Mushi*), his extensive education, and rare (at the time) doctorate from Rome, earned him the nickname *Mushi Wasomire*, meaning “the *Mushi* who has studied, the educated *Mushi*.”<sup>17</sup> He would go on to serve as a parish priest, teacher, director of a liturgical center, and founder of a centre for study of African religions and of the journal *Cahiers des religions africaines*. His most representative work, *Un Visage africain du christianisme* contains themes that Mulago returned to repeatedly throughout his career: the need to deeply root Christianity in Africa, to validate African Christian identity, and to identify “stepping stones” in Bantu culture, which were fulfilled by Christian doctrine and sacraments. He also addressed ethical issues,<sup>18</sup> the necessity of the adaptation method (and therefore also of African theology),<sup>19</sup> vital union as it relates to ecclesial unity,<sup>20</sup> sacraments,<sup>21</sup> and the place of the African cultural and religious heritage.<sup>22</sup>

Several of Mulago’s arguments bear on the theme of identity for Christians in Africa, particularly communal Christian identity (ecclesiology). Mulago explores the Bantu concept of “vital participation” in the life of the clan’s founder.<sup>23</sup> Mulago sees this central and unifying principle of Bantu thought as a “stepping stone” that God has placed in Bantu culture in order to point people to Christ and the Christian community.<sup>24</sup> In a much greater and transcendent way, Christians participate in the life of Christ, which sustains them.<sup>25</sup> If theology in the East African context emphasizes participation in Christ and his life — consistent with NT commands to abide in Christ and imitate him — then theology must clearly link these themes with Christ’s mission. In a context torn by ethnic strife, surely Christ’s welcoming embrace of all persons — Jew, Gentile, Jewish religious leaders like Nicodemus and outcasts like lepers and prostitutes — must challenge the church, which seeks to represent him on earth. Mulago emphasises that if African Christians do not embrace all persons, regardless of their background, then they fail to represent Christ on earth.

Mulago’s notion of God-given “stepping stones” from which to adapt and “graft on” the Christian message is important.<sup>26</sup> Mulago’s adaptation method relies on general revelation, highlighting that it is present in all cultures, places, and times. The means by which God reveals himself in one’s context are not things to despise but to treasure and bring into the church to enrich it.<sup>27</sup> By extension, to despise the cultural identity of another person would be to despise how God has made them and how he has revealed himself in that person’s location.

<sup>16</sup> Bujo, “Vincent Mulago: An Enthusiast of African Theology,” 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Mulago, “Mariage africain et mariage chrétien: Perspectives liturgico-pastorales,” 547–64; Mulago, “Le Mariage traditionnel bantu.”

<sup>19</sup> For example, “Nécessité de l’adaptation missionnaire chez les Bantu du Congo” and the preliminary chapter in *Un Visage africain* (15–34).

<sup>20</sup> His dissertation, later revised and published as *Un Visage africain du christianisme*; “L’union vitale Bantu”; “Le Pacte du sang et la communion alimentaire, pierres d’attente de la communion eucharistique”; “Vital Participation: The Cohesive Principle of the Bantu Community”; “Traditional African Religion and Christianity”; “Symbolisme dans les religions traditionnelles africaines et sacramentalisme”; “Solidarité africaine et coresponsabilité chrétienne à la lumière de Vatican II.”

<sup>21</sup> Again, “Le Pacte du sang et la communion alimentaire, pierres d’attente de la communion eucharistique”; “Dialectique existentielle des Bantu et sacramentalisme”; “Sauver la vérité des sacrements dans nos jeunes chrétientés”; “Le nouveau rituel de la pénitence.”

<sup>22</sup> For example, “La Théologie et ses responsabilités”; “Christianisme et culture africaine”; “Le problème d’une théologie africaine revu à la lumière de Vatican II.”

<sup>23</sup> Mulago, “Vital Participation,” 137.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>25</sup> Mulago, *Un Visage africain*, 161, 165–69.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–33, 37.

<sup>27</sup> See Mulago’s *Un Visage africain du christianisme*, 26ff, and his reference to Revelation 21:24-26 to support his argument about the necessity of contextualizing and people groups bringing their unique traits into God’s kingdom.

Yet there is also a cause for concern with how Mulago employs this adaptation method. He tends to emphasize the ways in which these stepping stones, inadequate though they are, are similar to scriptural truths. He is not as concerned to identify the discontinuity between stepping stones and fulfillment, or to address the misinterpretations to which a particular stepping stone is susceptible. Now, over half a century since Mulago began publishing, the results of downplaying discontinuity are clearer. When theology identifies a value or metaphor which is useful in explaining the gospel (or in this case ecclesial identity), it is necessary to carefully examine both the strengths and weaknesses of this foundation. For example, to claim that the church is like an African “clan” or “family” is problematic for it is to attach non-biblical associations to the church.<sup>28</sup> However, as long as it is clearly defined, the metaphors may provide fruitful and creative theological engagements. An example of this fruitful engagement, which has led to gender liberation, are the works of The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, particularly Mercy A. Oduyoye, that emphasize the metaphors of “household of God” and “relatives of Christ” as liberative metaphors.<sup>29</sup> Circle theologians build on the experience of African women as home-makers to reflect on church as community under God — God’s house where God is fully in charge and preventing all manner of oppressions.<sup>30</sup>

Intertwined with the previous point, is Mulago’s argument that universality and particularity are mutually dependent in Christianity and the church. Mulago’s works are consistently concerned with contextualizing Christian theology so that the church in each setting would have a local “face.”<sup>31</sup> He affirms that the “Church is not a unity resulting from parts, no! In her, it is the unity which *makes* the parts.”<sup>32</sup> He never wavers on this point: theology must be both universal and particular, both transcendent and rooted in one’s own context. It cannot be limited to one culture.<sup>33</sup> This means that if the church is not at home among each people group, it is not demonstrating the universality it claims. Consequently, theology and ecclesiology which deny universality-with-diversity are effectively denying the lordship of Christ over all peoples, as well as God’s final eschatological plan (Rev. 5:9 and Rev. 21:24–26). In a context where a focus on one’s own particular group has become toxic and indeed lethal, where ethnocentrism plagues the church, it may be time to emphasize anew Mulago’s affirmations that God values and seeks the “riches” of each church in its context, desiring that each particular church will contribute its own God-given traits to God’s kingdom.<sup>34</sup> Katongole agrees with Mulago when he avers that a new future for Africa greatly depends on the church’s ability to model a different way of being. For Katongole, this ecclesiological task calls for concrete physical embodiment of godly values in communities at the grassroots and in the ordinary realities of everyday life.<sup>35</sup>

Mulago specifically applies universality and particularity, which are part of God’s plan, to theology and the church. In other words, to reflect Christian identity, Christians must embody an identity that truly mirrors both particularity and universality. This dual nature of Christian identity is the main reason why Mulago’s likening of the church to a clan needs further clarification.<sup>36</sup> Mulago is correct to emphasize that unlike ethnic clans, this new Christian “clan” is a place of reconciliation, where divisions are healed.<sup>37</sup> It seems in line with Mulago’s thinking to pursue this point further, and recall that Christians are ambassadors of reconciliation — not just pointing people to reconciliation with Christ, but also with each other as a consequence of peace with God. In this regard, Mulago’s ecclesiology highlights a key difference between

<sup>28</sup> For example, Tite Tienou and Titre Ande are concerned that this model can lead to including non-Christian ancestors in the church. See Titre and Ande, *Leadership and Authority*, 114-124 for some of Ande’s concerns.

<sup>29</sup> See Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*; “The African Family as a Symbol of Ecumenism.”

<sup>30</sup> See Tarus, “Social Transformation in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.”

<sup>31</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 353.

<sup>32</sup> Mulago, *Un Visage africain*, 175, translation by Lowery.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 223–24.

<sup>34</sup> Mulago, “Nécessité de l’adaptation missionnaire,” 30–32, 38–39; “Christianisme et culture africaine,” 324; “Le problème d’une théologie africaine,” 119ff; and *Un Visage africain*, 227.

<sup>35</sup> Katongole, *Sacrifice of Africa*, 109.

<sup>36</sup> For example, Mulago, “Vital Participation,” 157.

<sup>37</sup> Mulago, *Un visage africain*, 185.

ethnic clans and the church. Pentecost is one example Mulago cites to show that the church is at home everywhere, among all people in their own languages and concepts, and to show how the church differs from ethnic groups.<sup>38</sup> Another biblical passage he references is Galatians 3:26–29, where Paul reminds God’s people that what formerly divided people should not divide them in the church.<sup>39</sup> These identities, while they remain, are of less importance than one’s in-Christ identity. The histories of Rahab and Achan could be employed to help convey this point. Their lives are a poignant reminder that ethnicity is less important to God than one’s faith commitment; an ethnic Israelite who disobeyed God became an outcast, while the ethnic outsider was incorporated into Israel (Josh. 2, 6). God’s people must embrace diversity. They must not allow ethnic and political identities to divide them and to cause enmity between themselves. Living in such a way, the church witnesses to the world about a God who loves all people and brings peace.

As a reflection of his era, Mulago is mainly concerned to justify the existence of African theologies; he acknowledges repeatedly that the “stepping stones,” such as vital participation in Bantu cultures, are incomplete, flawed pictures of what God’s truth teaches us. Yet overall, Mulago’s focus is understandably on providing a defence for African theology, and on criticizing theologies claiming to be universal that are actually merely theologies originating from Western cultures. Mulago does not, however, spend much time highlighting the ways in which “clan” can be a damaging and dangerous concept to apply to the church. Given how Westerners — Christians and non-Christians alike — denigrated Africa and Africans, it is easy to see why he might not want to provide fodder for further attacks by outsiders. However, now that the necessity and value of African theologies is (one hopes) no longer contended, African theology must address its shortcomings and flaws if it is to see the church grow in Christ-likeness, particularly in overcoming the problem of ethnocentrism.

As has been said, in understanding Mulago’s context, it is easy to see the reasons for his focus on continuities between African religio-cultures and Christianity. But theologians must also highlight the discontinuities and be clear that the gospel challenges all cultures where they fall short of God’s design. Also, all metaphors are limited. The metaphor of “clan” or “family” for the ecclesial identity aids in explaining the tight bond between God’s people and their dependence on their founder, Christ, but it falls far short of God’s plan when it becomes insular, represses or rejects differences, or in any way encourages ill treatment of those deemed “outsiders,” whether because of ethnicity, denomination, gender, etc. This type of message and resulting ecclesiology denies the gospel of Christ, which removes the barriers between people, erasing former divisions and uniting people in Christ (cf. Col. 3:11, Eph. 2:12–22). Indeed, this ecclesiology also denies the work of Christ and that all humans bear the *imago Dei*. Consequently, if we wish to describe the church as a “clan” or “family,” then we must be explicit about the ways in which Spirit-formed “in Christ” community differs from fallen human families, as well as about how the gospel is a message of reconciliation with God, and also with fellow human beings.

Ethnocentrism has implications for ecclesiology, Christology, and anthropology. Furthermore, ethnocentrism is not only a failure to grasp and obey the gospel message, it is also a rejection of the second of the two core commands of the Hebrew Bible: to love God and neighbor (Mt. 22:34–40; Mk. 12:28–34). If we refuse to treat all people, especially other Christians, as made in God’s image, how can we say that we are loving others? The next section examines the contribution of John S. Mbiti to a theology of identity and community. Like Mulago, Mbiti draws heavily upon the African indigenous-religious heritage, and focuses on the communal perspective of African peoples.

## 2.3 John Mbiti

John Samuel Mbiti was born on 30 November 1931 in Mulango, Ukambani, Kenya. He studied at Makerere University College in Uganda, Barrington College in the USA, and completed doctoral studies in New Testament at Cambridge University. Mbiti is hailed as “the father of modern African (Anglophone)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 32, 186, 193.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 193, 208.

theology,”<sup>40</sup> “the father of contemporary African theology,”<sup>41</sup> “the most productive African scholar in theology in our time,”<sup>42</sup> “the leading African theologian,”<sup>43</sup> “a pioneer in the systematic analysis of traditional African religious concepts,”<sup>44</sup> and a man with “the weightiest bibliography among modern African theologians.”<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, McVeigh Malcolm observes that Mbiti, along with others, exerted “a function for Africa equivalent to that of Barth, Tillich, Niebuhr, and Rahner in Europe and North America.”<sup>46</sup> Mbiti is a strong proponent of African theology deeply established in the African heritage, culture, and religiosity.<sup>47</sup> His major aim, throughout his varied publications, is to assert a form of Christianity that is “indigenous,” “traditional,” and “African,” for it is that form of Christianity, according to him, that “holds the greatest potentialities of meeting the dilemmas and challenges of modern Africa.”<sup>48</sup>

Mbiti’s understanding of African identity and community is derived from and rooted in Africa’s heritage. In “The Search for New Values, Identity and Security,” Mbiti critiques and rejects several ideological proposals such as Négritude, African Personality, African Unity, and Pan-Africanism as all insufficient to meet the needs of indigenous Africans.<sup>49</sup> Though he praises them for their contributions, he concludes, “All these political ideologies and economic attempts point to a progress being made in Africa. But it is a progress locked in search mode; it lacks concreteness, historical roots, and a clear and practical goal, at least for the individual to be able to find in it a sense of direction worthy of personal identification and dedication.”<sup>50</sup> One particular weakness of these ideologies, according to Mbiti, is their inability to permeate every department of life as religion can.

Instead of rooting his concept of identity and community on these ideologies, Mbiti roots them in indigeno-religious heritage. He argues that this traditional heritage is religious and bears a holistic outlook to all of reality. In traditional life, there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, between the natural world and the supernatural world, between the spiritual world and the material world.<sup>51</sup> This outlook defines all reality from a religious perspective. Consequently, indigenous Africans interpret reality from a religious perspective and also understand their identity to be tied to this religious orientation. In other words, indigenous Africans do not interpret their identity from either a secular or ideological perspective.<sup>52</sup> Because religion is part of their worldview, it forms a core part of their identity. Mbiti observes that though modern changes (urbanization, migration, technology) have undermined this outlook in significant ways, religion remains intact among Africans.<sup>53</sup> Religion comes to the surface during crisis and desperation and

<sup>40</sup> Heaney, *From Historical to Critical Post-Colonial Theology*, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Perkinson, “John S. Mbiti,” 455.

<sup>42</sup> Olupona, “A Biographical Sketch,” in *Religious Plurality in Africa*, 7.

<sup>43</sup> Hastings, *A History of African Christianity 1950-1975*, 232.

<sup>44</sup> Kinney, “The Theology of John Mbiti,” 65.

<sup>45</sup> Bediako, “John Mbiti’s Contribution to African Theology,” 367.

<sup>46</sup> Malcolm, “Sources for an African Christian Theology.”

<sup>47</sup> Bediako, “John Mbiti’s Contribution,” 367 argues that Mbiti critiques the Euro–American missionary enterprise for its failure to foster a form of Christianity rooted in the African heritage, “nevertheless, the subject of missionary errors and misconceptions concerning African religious life figures less prominently in Mbiti’s work than in the writings of some other African theologians.” Bediako’s observation is true. Mugambi’s theology of reconstruction also critiques mission Christianity. For a more detailed study of the comparison of the critique of mission Christianity in the theological writings of Mugambi and Mbiti, see Heaney, *Historical to Critical*, 31–50.

<sup>48</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 271. In Mbiti, “Christianity and African Culture,” 390, Mbiti observes, “The only lasting form of Christianity in this continent is that which results from a serious encounter of the Gospel with the indigenous African culture when the people voluntarily accept by faith the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

<sup>49</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 260–65.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>51</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 2nd ed., 2.

<sup>52</sup> Marxism gained ground in some African countries like Tanzania and Ghana through the works of Pan-Africanist scholars and liberators such as Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere. Though prominent and appealing to the ruling elites, these ideologies were foreign to Africa. This is the reason why even after reading Marx, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania proposed African socialism (*ujamaa* – familyhood) as the better ideology.

<sup>53</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 263.

also in moments of joy and celebration.<sup>54</sup> Thus it is clear that Mbiti treats religion as lived religion in contrast to an abstract understanding of it.

Mbiti also argues that although Africans value individual identity, the corporate (communal) identity surpasses the individual identity.<sup>55</sup> Even in religious matters traditional religious beliefs are corporately held because the community is the sole custodian of these beliefs. It is the role of the individual to automatically accept them and to assent to them by virtue of being a member of the community.<sup>56</sup> In this view, there is no purely private faith. A people's religious beliefs animate their actions and what they believe stems from their actions; belief and action are intertwined.<sup>57</sup> Everyone is born into a particular religious community and becomes part of that community through participation in the beliefs and rites of that community.<sup>58</sup> These beliefs and practices are not written but handed down from one generation to the next and exist in the heart of the individual; "each [individual] is himself a living creed of his own religion. Where the individual is, there is his religion, for he is a religious being. It is this that makes Africans so religious: religion is in their whole system of being."<sup>59</sup>

Mbiti also argues that African life is centered on community. He captures this communal orientation with the now famous dictum, "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."<sup>60</sup> For Mbiti, community manifests itself with reference to blood and marital kinship, land, tribal affiliation, clan roots, ritual celebrations, rites of passage and death, and shared oppression and suffering.<sup>61</sup> Community has both vertical and horizontal dimensions. The vertical aspect is the people's relationship with their Supreme Being and the spirit world. The horizontal dimensions include relationship between individuals and social groups i.e. clans, individual families, the departed, and the unborn.<sup>62</sup> Death does not destroy community but animates it.<sup>63</sup> One is related to the visible community as well as maintaining relationships with the invisible world. Furthermore, community also includes harmony with the non-human world because ideally, in the African worldview, nature is "sacred" and human beings have a priestly relationship with it.<sup>64</sup>

For Mbiti, this communal nature of African life has implications on how the Gospel must reach Africans. The Gospel must redeem African peoples within their cultures not apart from them.<sup>65</sup> In addition, the Gospel must be propagated in the context of African corporate community life. From this perspective, even conversion should not be seen as being limited to the individual believer. "While conversion follows personal decisions, we have to take note also of the corporate aspect of conversion in the African situation. The process of conversion involves other people."<sup>66</sup> Thus the Gospel should not sever African people from their communal (including ethnic) identities but should facilitate transferring one's primary allegiance to Christ. Thus, in Christ, ethnicities are not destroyed but redeemed. However, Mbiti does not say how Christians should deal with the problem of ethnicity within their congregations. It is a reality that many churches in Africa are divided along ethnic lines. Mbiti is correct that conversion is often envisaged as a corporate event but it is problematic when it is only limited to a particular corporate identity (one's ethnic community). How will African Christians see their conversion as a new identity in Christ, an identity

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>55</sup> Mbiti, "Man in African Religion."

<sup>56</sup> Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, 101.

<sup>57</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 2nd ed., 4.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>60</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 2nd Ed., 106.

<sup>61</sup> Mbiti, "The Bible in African Culture," 36; Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 171.; Mbiti, "Man in African Religion," 59.

<sup>62</sup> Mbiti, "Bible in African Culture," 36; Mbiti, "Hearts Cannot Be Lent!," 6-7; Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 171-72.

<sup>63</sup> Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, 127-39.

<sup>64</sup> Mbiti, "An African Answer," 89. See also Mbiti, "Bible in African Culture," 36; Mbiti, "Hearts Cannot Be Lent," 6-7; Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 171-72. Elsewhere ("Man in African Religion," 65), Mbiti opines, "African Religion recognizes clearly that, if man abuses nature, in return nature will strike back at him. In this case man is not a master over nature to treat it as he wishes. Instead, man is the priest towards nature—soliciting its kindness and expressing respect towards it."

<sup>65</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 237.

<sup>66</sup> Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 230.



that transcends ethnic affiliations? Considering that ethnicity is a salient reality in Africa, even among Christians, it is questionable whether religion is indeed the most important aspect of African identity as Mbiti posits. One wonders whether ethnicity instead of religion is the most important identity for many Africans.

Mbiti also contends that “the two religions [ATR and Christianity] speak a largely common language and undergird each other” and Jesus’s message “does not contravene the efforts of [African] traditional religion.”<sup>67</sup> On this point, we differ with Mbiti: there are many commonalities, but the message of Jesus is not the same as that of ATR, and Jesus’ message is for all peoples of the earth, not limited to a certain group or locality. At the same time, it is clear that Mbiti has some of the same concerns as Mulago. Both wish to thoroughly contextualize Christianity in Africa, by drawing on the African cultural-religious heritage and African communal perspectives, while emphasizing that Christian community differs in some ways from traditional African communities. Kwame Bediako adds more key pieces to this theology of communal identity.

## 2.4 Kwame Bediako

Kwame Bediako is described by some as a “colossus” among African theologians, with good reason.<sup>68</sup> His most substantial work, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*, is recommended as compulsory reading for those interested in African theology.<sup>69</sup> Bediako (1945-2008) grew up in Accra, Ghana. He did graduate studies in France where he completed masters and doctoral degrees at the University of Bordeaux, and during this time experienced a radical conversion from atheism to Christianity.

His conversion led him to pursue theological studies, during which he wrestled deeply with the question of whether embracing Christianity required an African to renounce their own culture, and with how Christianity addressed cultural concerns that Western theologies ignored. *Theology and Identity*, based on his doctoral dissertation, is a work of historical theology that has implications for theological method and foci. He contends that for second century theologians and modern theologians in Africa, identity is a theological issue that touches on fundamental aspects of Christianity.<sup>70</sup> Discussions of Christian identity are essential because they are a natural consequence of the Gospel, in that the Gospel is universally relevant and offered to all, but always meant to be inculturated, answering cultural questions.<sup>71</sup>

With regard to communal, and specifically ecclesial identity within broader African searches for identity, Bediako has much to contribute. Bediako was continually exploring the relationship of African cultural identities with the Christian gospel and Christian identity. This passion shaped his career. Like Mulago, Mbiti, and Mugambi, Bediako defended the need for Christians to thoroughly contextualize their faith, and insisted that the Gospel was by its very nature both universal and particular: it was intended to be “translated” into each context in which it found itself, hence Bediako’s choice of an indigenization approach in his theology.<sup>72</sup>

This belief also led to his argument that African theologians’ exploration of the shape of Christian identity in African contexts was a natural response to encountering the gospel. *Theology and Identity* demonstrates that just as second century Christians wrestled with how Christian and cultural-religious identities were related, African theologians face the same question. It is a question of how one social/communal identity — being African — relates to another social identity (being a Christian). Andrew Walls

<sup>67</sup> Mbiti, “Hearts Cannot Be Lent,” 12.

<sup>68</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, “Bediako of Africa,” 9.

<sup>69</sup> See John Parratt, “Review of *Theology and Identity*,” 171-72.

<sup>70</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 6, 31–33.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 48. Bediako’s emphasis on the necessity for theology to engage with contextual issues was made clear to his students, as Asamoah-Gyadu testifies (“Bediako of Africa,” 8).

<sup>72</sup> Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 54–56.

too sees this as a major concern of Bediako, who “labored so that generations of scholars, confident equally of their Christian and their African identity, might be formed in Africa.”<sup>73</sup>

Bediako explicitly states that the Christian identity is, at its foundation, religious; this foundation will affect all aspects of a person and their other identities.<sup>74</sup> More specifically, this requires that the Christian identity address cultural and religious aspects of a person’s background (their community of origin): Christianity meets people in their context and communities, and transforms them within and from that setting.<sup>75</sup> The aspects of that cultural-religious identity that are opposed to Christ are rejected, but the pointers to Christ in that context are redeemed and become part of the Christian identity in that setting.<sup>76</sup>

In discussing the nature of the Christian communal identity, Bediako does not explicitly address ecclesiology frequently; however, the implications for ecclesiology are clear. For Bediako, Christians are a new creation, a people group which move beyond old categories and divisions.<sup>77</sup> This Christian communal identity is rooted in Christ, and breaks down divisions to incorporate identities which previously separated people: Bediako is speaking of communal identities here.<sup>78</sup> He was quite aware that the Christian communal identity will at times conflict with these other communal identities which a Christian has, but that the Christian identity, properly understood, transcends these other identities: it is the first (foundational) and last or greatest identity.<sup>79</sup> Given the gospel message and the ultimate, transcendent nature of Christian identity, the Christian identity must welcome those who are “other”: the social identities they bear must not divide those who are a new people, carrying a Christian identity.

Bediako, like Mulago, Mbiti, and Mugambi, takes an apologetic defense regarding African theology and Christian identities becoming truly African. Because of his defensive approach to the issue, Bediako does not address the many differences within the broad category of “African identity.” He tends to speak of “African identity” in a broad way, in the singular, without much acknowledgement of all the diversity on the continent. This is appropriate for his own context, but it fails to meet the needs of today’s Africa for reasons previously mentioned. Also, both Mulago and Bediako represent an African man’s perspective, but Mercy Amba Oduyoye rejects the idea that their perspective is adequate for all of the continent.<sup>80</sup> African female theologians have also critiqued the lack of gender emphasis in the works of Mbiti and Mugambi. However, our concern in this paper is the pressing issue of ethnic identities and the way in which they often divide Christians. Bediako does not adequately deal with the way these communal identities often conflict with each other within the larger African identity, complicating the issue of Christian identity in Africa. Nonetheless, Bediako’s life and works are a powerful reminder to Christians that their identity, rooted in Christ and in the new creation, should incorporate and take precedence over other identities: it is indeed a gospel issue and one which affects the church’s witness and mission. We now move to J. N. K. Mugambi, who proposes moving from inculturation and liberation theologies to reconstruction; we will examine how his proposal affects a theology of communal identity.

## 2.5 Jesse Mugambi

J. N. K. (Jesse Ndwiga Kanyua) Mugambi was born on 6 February 1947 at Kiangoci in Eastern Kenya. He is the Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi from which he attained his BA in Education (1974), MA in Philosophy and Religious Studies (1977), and PhD in Philosophy and Religious

<sup>73</sup> Walls, “Kwame Bediako and Christian Scholarship in Africa,” 188.

<sup>74</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, xvii, 4, 36.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 427, 428, 431, 432, 434–36.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 237, 240.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 35, 41.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 252, 273.

<sup>79</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 441; Walls, “Kwame Bediako and Christian Scholarship in Africa,” 190.

<sup>80</sup> For example, a woman’s perspective may differ in many ways from the men’s perspectives. See Kwok, “Mercy Amba Oduyoye and African Women’s Theology,” 14.

Studies (1983).<sup>81</sup> Mugambi is an Anglican theologian whose specialties include religion, ecology, applied ethics, education, and communication policy. In addition to teaching, Mugambi has served as the Theology Secretary for Africa for the World Student Christian Fellowship (1974–1976), as a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (1974–1984), and as a founding member of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). In 2010, the President of Kenya conferred him the National Honor of the Order of Elder of the Burning Spear (EBS), the second highest commendation that the President can bestow upon a civilian. Mugambi has published more than forty books (as author, co-author, editor, and co-editor) and at least a hundred articles.<sup>82</sup> Mugambi is the key proponent of the African Theology of Reconstruction (ATOR).

Mugambi is well known for his African Theology of Reconstruction (ATOR) of which he is the pioneer and the key proponent.<sup>83</sup> Charles Villa-Vicencio from South Africa, Valentin Dedji from Benin, and Kä Mana from Congo are the other theologians of reconstruction theology in Africa. The basic thesis of Mugambi's reconstruction theology is that the biblical narrative of Nehemiah's reconstruction of the wall of Jerusalem provides the theological paradigm for the reconstruction and the social transformation of Africa after colonialism, apartheid, and the end of the Cold War. Beyond a mere celebration of the defeat of these ills, reconstruction theology challenges the church in Africa to actively promote human rights, social justice, peace, and reconciliation in the midst of the atrocities bedeviling the African continent.

Mugambi's reconstruction theology gained inspiration from Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana was the leading proponent of Pan-Africanism.<sup>84</sup> Ali Mazrui observes that Nkrumah's Pan-Africanist ideologies had roots in American politics, grassroots initiatives, and the writings of Afro-American scholars such as Marcus Garvey, William DuBois, and George Padmore, and Aimé Césaire from the West Indies.<sup>85</sup> Aimé Césaire was the first to coin the term "Négritude," a term which gained popularity in the works of Léopold Sédar Senghor, a Pan-Africanist poet and politician from Senegal.<sup>86</sup> Pan-Africanism as an ideology emphasizes the belief that the progress and development of Africa as a continent and Africans as a people wherever they live, greatly depends on African identity and unity. Thus, Africans in Africa and the diaspora, embracing their roots as African people, must come together to conquer marginalization, racism, and exploitation.<sup>87</sup> Due to this "collective self-reliance" ideology, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), now called African Union (AU), was constituted on 25 May 1963, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in part "to promote unity and development... [and] to promote unity and cooperation among all African states and to bring an end to colonialism."<sup>88</sup> Similar to Pan-Africanism, African Renaissance is the concept that African people can achieve cultural, scientific, and economic development without having to rely on external tutelage. It views authentic African art, music, language, cultures, and customs as necessary for achieving African renewal.<sup>89</sup>

ATOR began in Nairobi when Mugambi gave the keynote address at the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) meeting on 30 March 1990. His address, entitled "The Future of the Church and the Church of the

**81** Gathogo, "Jesse Mugambi's Pedigree: Formative Factors."

**82** Dedji, *Reconstruction and Renewal in African Christian Theology*, 88 f.n. 1; Heaney, *Historical to Critical*, 4–5.

**83** Gathogo ("Black Theology of South Africa," 328) observes that Mugambi is the "the undisputed founder of theology of reconstruction in Africa."

**84** Other Pan Africanists include Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya), Gamal Abdul Naser (Egypt), Ahmed Sékou Touré (Guinea), Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), and Muammar Gaddafi (Libya). Nkrumah's major publications on Pan-Africanism are *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonization and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution*, and *I Speak of Freedom: A Statement of African Ideology*.

**85** Mazrui, *Towards Pax Africana: A Study of Ideology and Ambition*, 51–61.

**86** Senghor (*Prose and Poetry*, 96) defines "Négritude" as "the awareness, defence and development of African cultural values... It is the awareness by a particular social group of people of its own situation in the world, and the expression of it by means of the concrete image."

**87** See Nkrumah, *I Speak of Freedom*, 133.

**88** African Union, "Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance," 1–2.

**89** *Ibid.*, 2.

Future in Africa,”<sup>90</sup> argued for a paradigm shift from the Exodus motif of liberation to the Ezra-Nehemiah motif of reconstruction, with reconstruction as the resultant theological axiom.<sup>91</sup> Prior to this conference and the subsequent emphasis on reconstruction theology, inculturation theology (indigenization/contextualization) and African liberation theology were dominant theologies in Africa. Mugambi observes that though inculturation theology incarnated the Christian faith, it was nonetheless a “one-way” theology because the faith being incarnated reflected the foreign (missionary) culture rather than the receiver’s culture.<sup>92</sup>

Mugambi proposed four levels of reconstruction. The first is personal reconstruction. According to him, a person must “continually reconstruct oneself in readiness for the tasks and challenges ahead.”<sup>93</sup> He argues that according to Jesus’ teachings, change must first occur in peoples’ motives and intentions. He references several New Testament writings, which include Luke 18:9–14, Matthew 23:1–13 and Luke 12–13.<sup>94</sup> According to Mugambi culture is the next element of reconstruction. He defines culture as “the cumulative product of people’s activities in all aspects of life, in their endeavor to cope with their social and natural environment.”<sup>95</sup> Mugambi argues that cultural reconstruction must touch on ways people are evangelized. Evangelism and missions, he argues, is not about uprooting people from their cultural and religious heritage, but about embedding the Gospel into their cultural and religious identity.<sup>96</sup>

The third component is ecclesial reconstruction. Religion is “that pillar of culture, which provides the presupposed world-view and the basic principles for the organization of society.”<sup>97</sup> Since Africans are “notoriously religious,”<sup>98</sup> Mugambi argues, the way forward is not to remove them from their religiosity but to ground them in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to allow them to express their faith in their own religious and cultural ways. Socio-economic reconstruction is the fourth component of reconstruction. While acknowledging relief and emergency programs, the most crucial challenge, for Mugambi, is for the church in Africa to “discern the *causes* and *contexts* which generate these crises.”<sup>99</sup> Such crises include “economic crisis, debt crisis, population crisis, technological crisis, knowledge crisis, and so on.”<sup>100</sup> Mugambi laments the irony that this vast continent which contains all the climates and vegetations of the world should also have the greatest food deficit in the world.<sup>101</sup>

Mugambi’s reconstruction theology gained support from several African theologians such as Brigalia Bam, Charles Villa-Vicencio, and Kā Mana. Bam, a South African, notes that the collapse of apartheid in South Africa and the move to democracy in the early 1990s when Mugambi called for a paradigm shift, necessitated a re-evaluation of African Christian engagement as well as African Christian theology.<sup>102</sup> In his *A Theology of Reconstruction* (1992), Villa-Vicencio, like Mugambi, argues that Africa, after colonialism and apartheid, calls for reconstruction or a shift from liberation (resistance) to nation building (a theology of home-coming and nation-building).<sup>103</sup>

Other scholars such as Valentin Dedji, Wilson Niwagilia, and Tinyiko Maluleke critiqued Mugambi’s reconstruction theology. They argued that Mugambi’s assumption that the end of the old order heralded a new world order free from “systems of oppression” such as “colonialism, racism, and ideological propaganda”

<sup>90</sup> This essay appears in Chipanda et al., *The Church of Africa*, 29–50 and it also appears in Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War*, as Chapter Ten.

<sup>91</sup> Mugambi, *From Liberation*, 5.

<sup>92</sup> Mugambi, “A Fresh Look at Evangelism in Africa,” 356.

<sup>93</sup> Katongole, ed., *African Theology Today*, 203; Mugambi, *From Liberation*, 15.

<sup>94</sup> Mugambi, “From Liberation to Reconstruction,” 203.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>96</sup> Mugambi, “A Fresh Look,” 359.

<sup>97</sup> Mugambi, “Social Reconstruction of Africa,” 19.

<sup>98</sup> A statement attributed to Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 2nd ed., 1.

<sup>99</sup> Mugambi, *From Liberation*, 72.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>102</sup> Bam, “Foreword,” in *Being the Church in South Africa Today*, xi–xii.

<sup>103</sup> Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction*, 32.

was problematic.<sup>104</sup> These scholars argue that such a belief offers false hope to the people of Africa because Africa can never be truly free of these “systems of oppression.”<sup>105</sup> For the common rural and urban poor of Africa, nothing much has changed. African politicians and power brokers have replaced the old colonial masters and in many African countries, ethnocentrism, nepotism, xenophobia, and sexism have replaced apartheid. Similarly, “The ‘Exodus to Freedom’ has turned to be an exodus to bewilderment; honey and milk have turned to be hunger and poverty, harmony, peace, joy and prosperity turned to be agony, killings and hatred. Many have been left in the wilderness to die as refugees and misplaced people.”<sup>106</sup> A quick look at Africa’s politics confirms these criticisms. Africa’s liberators became its oppressors.

Consider for example the February 2016 elections in Uganda where President Yoweri Museveni, a man praised many years ago as a pan-Africanist or “Uganda’s Moses,”<sup>107</sup> did all he could to curtail the election process, including sanctioning raiding of the opposition headquarters and arrest of the opposition leader, Kizza Besigye, only a day before the national polls. Because of such leaders, Africa lags behind in progress and development and it is difficult to imagine reconstruction of Africa without liberation; the two go hand in hand. However, the problems bedeviling the continent of Africa are not limited to power and politics. Oftentimes the major problem, as Emmanuel Katongole observes, is the failure to imagine and practise a different way of being.<sup>108</sup> Negative imaginings of Africa are part of the colonial heritage but Africa need not remain the way it is. A new future for Africa involves cultural deconstruction and interruption of negative imaginings of Africa thereby fostering an alternative way of being. For Katongole, the church must lead the way in fostering this alternative reality.<sup>109</sup>

Mugambi’s proposal includes reconstruction on various levels; in other words, it is not enough simply to look to one’s heritage and what was; it is also necessary to re-build something new out of past and present. The natural implication of this move to fashion the future is that communal identity will, and indeed must, undergo some changes. Re-building involves use of both old and new materials, entailing adaptation. This model would then apply to both culture as a whole, and to the church within that culture.

### 3 Conclusion

This article has examined theologies of identity and community in the theological works of four prominent African theologians, arranged chronologically. The article proposed that the theologians deal largely with communal identity. However, the theological implications of this need to be examined especially in regard to how they help conquer ethnocentrism in African churches. Consequently, there is a need to continually direct African theology towards the ongoing challenges of communal relationships. Mulago described Christ as the founder of the Christian community, and the ongoing source of its life; we propose that more exploration of how Christian community differs from the ethnic community is needed. From Mbiti, we can draw a reminder of the religious-based, communally-focused identity of Africans, though we argue that religious identity frequently comes second to ethnic identity; theology must address the positive and negative contributions of ethnic identity in an effort to properly prioritize Christian identity. Bediako highlighted the theological nature of identity, to which we agree, but, again, Christian identity needs to explicitly address how ethnic identities contribute to, but are subordinate to, its own nature. And, finally, Mugambi emphasizes the necessity of reconstructing African identities and cultures on a Christian basis. This raises the question of how Christian identity in Africa can both draw upon its past and adapt as it moves into the future and towards its eschatological goal. These theologians have valuable

<sup>104</sup> Mugambi, “Social Reconstruction,” 2. See also Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction*, 128; Gathogo, “A Survey of African Theology of Reconstruction,” 125.

<sup>105</sup> Maluleke, “Half a Century of African Christian Theologies,” 107. See also Dedji, *Reconstruction and Renewal*, 75.

<sup>106</sup> Niwagilia, “Our Struggle for Justice, Peace and Integrity,” 171.

<sup>107</sup> Mugambi, “Theology of Reconstruction,” 144 observes that the first generation of Africa’s leaders were invariably likened to Moses because of their role in liberating Africa from colonialism.

<sup>108</sup> Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*, 8.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

insights that can be redeemed and built upon, yet in the current context we must push further. How are their insights applied to ethnocentrism? How will the church teach and demonstrate the reconciled, diverse community that Christ desired? Perhaps it is time to recall Christ's teaching, hyperbolic though it is, that his followers must "hate" their father and mother, sister and brother (Lk. 14:26): compared to Christ, all our other relationships and identities are secondary. However, in Christ, individual and social identities are not obliterated — Paul describes himself as a Jew, for example — but these identities submit to, and are subsumed within, a Christian identity with a much larger scope and embrace. Until and unless churches address ecclesial identity and its relationship to all other identities — including ethnic identities — the body of Christ is blemished.

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