

Introduction

AFRICAN THEOLOGIES AND THEOLOGIANS and those who hear the voice of God's judgment and grace through African theologizing are beginning to engage with post-colonial theory and theology.¹ However, just as Christian theology in Africa and beyond Africa begins to experience the transformative potential of disturbance and disruption brought by post-colonial theologizing, there lurk old dangers at the dawn of a purported new theological movement. For in a desire to unveil colonialisms and imperialisms, earlier theological works emerging from historic situations of colonialism can be marginalized. This book, in part, is an appeal to those writing contemporary critical post-colonial theologies not to write off those who have gone before. It will be argued that thought and practice emerging from historical situations of formal colonialism prior to the emergence of the discipline of post-colonial theory and theology must always be a central part of whatever becomes of post-colonial theology. One would hope that such an argument in relation to African Initiated Churches (AICs) and their attendant theologies could be made with some ease. A more difficult task would be to argue for the post-colonial significance of theology that emerges from within a Church long associated with British expansionism and imperialism. That, however, is precisely the task of the present book. I begin by arguing for a

1. Lartey, *Postcolonializing God*; Ezigbo and Williams, "Converting a Colonialist Christ," 88–101. In terms of the broader development of post- or anti-colonialist African thought, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o charts its rise as beginning with the foundational moment of Haitian independence (1804), the 1900 Pan-African Congress in London, the foundation of the African National Congress (1912), Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (1914), the Manchester Conference (1945), and other political parties and philosophies for independence and nationalism always in fruitful exchange between the African diaspora and Africa herself. See wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn*, 72–98. See wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*; Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*; Nkrumah, *Speak of Freedom*; Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism*; Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*; Nyerere, *Ujamaa*; Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea*; Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*; Eze, *Postcolonial African*; Young, R., *Postcolonialism: Historical Intro*, 217–92.

clear definition and task for post-colonial theology. In light of this definition, major themes in the writings of Kenyan Anglican theologians John S. Mbiti and Jesse N. K. Mugambi are identified towards assessing to what extent their work can be considered critically post-colonial or a source for critically post-colonial theology.

Practical Post-Colonial Theology

Critical post-colonial theologians and theologies, often indebted to post-modern deconstructionism, can tend toward levels of abstraction that make their work less accessible. However, such apparent abstraction and acontextualism may evidence a pluriformity of reflection that is too often mistaken for abstruseness. Post-colonial theology refers not simply to theology emerging from post-independence contexts. It refers to a critical way of doing theology. Such theologizing, at its best, begins with experiences of colonial or proto-colonial subjugation, identifies how such subjugation impacts theological disciples and doctrines, and seeks to move toward a more just (decolonized) practice of theology.² That is to say, a postcolonial theology is a practical theology. The present study emerges from particular experiences in East Africa. It emerges from conversations with scholars and community leaders on the nature of contextual African theology and its relation to colonial history, enduring colonial influences, and national aspirations. Such conversations and theologizing by these Christians evidence a commitment to Jesus Christ and reverence for African cultures and traditions, but criticism towards the modern missionary movement and disdain for the colonial past and its ongoing subjugating effects. Amidst these discussions, it remained unclear how such experiences, strong feelings, and reflections might be related and considered theologically significant. This is the primary motivation for the present work as a study of theology which seeks an African contextualism beyond so-called Western theology and beyond experiences of oppression and suppression. This book seeks to answer the question: what is the ongoing significance of the work developed by first generation African theologians, emerging from experiences of colonialism and coloniality?

As already noted, a very obvious place to investigate African contextualism and its attendant critique of foreign subjugation is amongst AICs. However, AICs represent but a small part of the African Christian

2. See chapter 7 of the present book and Heaney, "Coloniality and Theological Method," 55–65.

experience.³ To neglect theological developments within the historical or mission churches can result in an oversimplified dichotomy. On the one hand, African Christians belonging to mission churches, such as Anglicanism, are then depicted as acquiescent to European domination. On the other hand, Africans without mission Christianity are depicted as independent in both ecclesiastical and theological terms. The present study will present a more complex situation through a consideration of the writings of Kenya's most innovative Anglican theologians. As a result, it will be argued that the theological contextualizing of Mbiti and Mugambi has significance hitherto unrecognized. It will further be submitted that such fresh perspective does indeed provide theological significance to the experiences, strong feelings, and reflections of those who continue to practice contextual theologies in the face of ongoing marginalization.

A study of the writings of Mbiti and Mugambi is not only undertaken because they are theologians who dominated the conversations the present writer had in Kenya and subsequently in other East African contexts. Nor is an examination of their writings undertaken simply because a comparative and thematic approach such as this has yet to be done. The contribution and significance of Mbiti's and Mugambi's work, emerging from the same context, is worthy of study in its own right.

Mbiti and Mugambi

John Samuel Mbiti, born in 1931, is at times regarded as the father of modern African (Anglophone) theology.⁴ He is described as being in the "vanguard of intellectual innovation" when he brought "aspects of African thought into the global stadium of ideas."⁵ Emerging in a post-independent Africa, Adrian Hastings adjudged Mbiti to be "the leading African theologian."⁶ While his writing may not now seem particularly distinct or contentious, it is important to note that in the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of African theology remained vague, ambiguous, and even controversial.⁷ Mbiti is a leading innovator amongst the first generation of African theologians and continues to be a significant figure in the field of African theology. For example, his work on African eschatology and African traditional understandings

3. Spear, "Towards the History," 3.

4. For the emergence of Francophone African theology, see, for example, Clark, "Against Invisibility," 71–92; Abble, *Prêtres Noirs*. See also Kinkupu, et al., *Prêtres Noirs*.

5. Mazrui, "Cultural (Re)Construction," 130.

6. Hastings, *History of African Christianity*, 232. See Ray, *African Religions*, xi–xii.

7. Mugambi, *ACT*, iv.

of God is still considered inventive and foundational to African Christian theology. Little work on African Christianity or African theology can be done without reference to him. However, Mbiti is not just a theologian with experience of the Kenyan context. His scholarship emerges also from studies and experiences outside Kenya. In the 1950s and early 1960s, he studied at Makerere University (Uganda), Barrington College (Rhode Island, USA), and Cambridge University (UK). As well as parish ministry in the UK and in Switzerland, Mbiti has significant research and teaching experience. After completing his PhD he joined Makerere University, where he stayed for ten years rising to the rank of professor. In 1974, he left Uganda to work at the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Institute in Bossey (Switzerland) where he eventually became its Director. He has had visiting professorships at Union Theological Seminary (USA), Harvard University (USA), several Swiss universities, the University of Bayreuth (Germany), and the University of Hamburg (Germany).⁸

Both Mbiti and Mugambi are Kenyans and Anglicans. Mbiti was born, educated, and taught for some time in Kenya. Mugambi, like Mbiti, is Kenyan born, but unlike Mbiti he has remained in Kenya. Some see him as the Kenyan scholar most obviously continuing and building on the work of Mbiti.⁹ Jesse Ndwiga Kanyua Mugambi, born in 1947, is considered a “major African voice” credited with introducing a new (reconstructionist) paradigm to African theology.¹⁰ In the mid 1960s, he attended the Machakos Teachers’ College and Kenyatta College before, in the late 1960s, travelling to the UK for studies at Westhill College of Education in Birmingham (1969–70). In 1971, he joined the University of Nairobi as a student and eventually rose to the rank of Professor of Religious Studies in 1993. He remains proud of the fact that his BA, MA, and PhD were all gained in Kenya. Though gaining his PhD only in 1984, he associates the genesis of his formal theological work with Mbiti. For in 1968, Mbiti invited him to submit a paper on the African heritage in a publication of the Department of Religious Studies at Makerere.¹¹

As well as being a Professor at the University of Nairobi, he has been a visiting professor at the University of South Africa; Emmanuel College,

8. See Olupona, “Biographical Sketch,” 6–9; Pobee, “African Theology Revisited,” 135–43; Kinney, “Theology of Mbiti,” 65–68; Aguilar, “Postcolonial African,” 303. Both Mbiti and Mugambi attended the first exploratory consultation between African and African American theologians at Union Theological Seminary, New York. See Mugambi, *ACT*, v; Hopkins, “Transatlantic Comparison,” 103–9.

9. See Mwase, “Critical Evaluation,” 1.

10. Mwase, Review of *FLTR*, 909–11. See Mwase, “Critical Evaluation,” 46–48.

11. Mugambi, “Traditional Religion,” 1–58.

Toronto (Canada); University of Copenhagen (Denmark); and Rice University, Texas (USA). He is a founding member of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). As well as working for the All Africa Conference of Churches, he has served the cause of worldwide ecumenism particularly through the World Council of Churches (WCC).¹² Mugambi was on the staff of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) as the Theology Secretary for Africa (1974–76), spent ten years as a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC (1974–84), was a member of the WCC Sub-Unit of Church and Society (1984–94), was Senior Consultant for Development and Research at the All Africa Conference of Churches (Nairobi, 1994–97), and since 1994, he has been a member of the WCC Working Group on Climate Change.¹³

As has been seen, in the 1960s and 1970s, African theology was a term which sounded awkward and offensive to some. Yet, Mbiti sees his writing and theologizing emerging from his Christian upbringing and Christian commitment. He does not consider his theological scholarship as “something completely new upon which I . . . embark[ed].”¹⁴ In the 1970s, Mugambi’s task as Theology Secretary of the WSCF Africa Region was to “stimulate discussion and reflection” on African theology and “highlight the significant features of African Christian theological reflection in distinction from other brands of Christian theologizing.”¹⁵ Mugambi’s early theologizing begins self-consciously within a context where, along with thinkers like Mbiti, Harry Sawyerr (Sierra Leone), E. B. Idowu (Nigeria), Charles Nyamiti (Tanzania), C. G. Baeta (Ghana), and theological conferences at Kampala (1972) and Accra (1974), he contributes to the first wave of African theology.¹⁶ In sum, the writings of Mbiti and Mugambi together provide a resource for African theology and, it will be argued, a much broader field of post-colonial theology, which spans at least five decades.

12. See Mugambi and Guy, *CTAC*, 41–42.

13. See Dedji, *Reconstruction and Renewal*, 88 f.n. 1; Mwase, “Critical Evaluation,” 37–57; Mugambi, *RSCR*, 2–4.

14. Mbiti, Interview by Heaney, April 7.

15. Mugambi, *ACT*, iv.

16. Mugambi, “Some Perspectives,” 174–98; Mugambi, *ACT*, 11. He specifically refers to Sawyerr, “Basis of a Theology for Africa,” 266–78; Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*; Mbiti, *ARAP*; Mbiti, *NTEAB*. See also Nyamiti, *African Theology*; Nyamiti, *Scope of African Theology*. For the conferences in Kampala (1972) on “African Theology and Church Life” and the Accra Consultation on African and Black Theology (1974), see, for example, Wilmore, *Pragmatic Spirituality*, 214–22; Hopkins, “Transatlantic Comparison,” 103–9; Fasholé-Luke, “Quest for an African Theology,” 259–69.

A Fresh Perspective

This book argues for a fresh perspective on the writings of Mbiti and Mugambi, which will provide both opportunity for demonstrating the ongoing significance of their work and opportunity to further build on their innovative contributions. Despite the importance of both scholars in the field of African theology, engagement with the writings of Mbiti and Mugambi remain inadequate.¹⁷ This is the case for at least four reasons. First, scholarly work on both Mbiti and Mugambi has failed to provide a significant study of their work together. This is despite the fact that, for example, both scholars belong to the same Kenyan context, both are Anglicans, both have worked for the World Council of Churches, both have contributed to East African institutions of higher learning, both have submitted innovations in African theology, and Mugambi is seen as continuing the work begun by Mbiti.

Second, no study has yet identified what amounts to a methodological shift in the work of Mbiti subsequent to his Cambridge PhD. A discernible shift is here identified as a move from the particular to a more generalized understanding of African theology. This shift takes his theologizing away from the particular as the locus for African theology in favor of a more generalized understanding of African tradition. Because of Mbiti's influence, this shift may well have repercussions for African theology more broadly. For the purposes of this study, its repercussions are certainly evident in the writing of Mugambi.

Third, Mugambi's theology of reconstruction is innovative. This innovation has been received critically and the present study will not be uncritical of it. However, the literature fails to recognize, because of a lack of comparative work between the two theologians, that this is but the culmination of a methodological shift instigated by Mbiti thirty years prior. It is only as a result of taking the work of the two theologians together that such an insight becomes apparent, thus creating space not only for an emphasis on its shortcomings but also in recognizing its contribution to theology.

Fourth, both the writings of Mbiti and Mugambi emerge from a context of colonialism. The recent emergence of post-colonial theology, at its

17. Scholarly engagement with both Mbiti and Mugambi is seen in numerous works referenced throughout this book and include p'Bitek, *African Religions*; Kato, "Theological Trends"; Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*; Kato, "Black Theology"; Kinney, "Theology of John Mbiti"; Olupona and Sulayman, *Religious Plurality*; Mwase, "Critical Evaluation"; Ritchie, "African Theology"; Musopole, *Being Human*; Farisani, "Theology of Reconstruction"; Dedji, *Reconstruction and Renewal*; Farisani, "Use of Ezra-Nehemiah"; Gathogo, *Liberation and Reconstruction*; Mwase and Kamaara, *Theologies of Liberation*.

best, brings to the theological fore such experience and seeks some sort of theological decolonization. Despite the fact that Mbiti's and Mugambi's theologizing emerges from a context of brutal colonialism and despite the fact that, in recent times, a stream of theological work has emerged addressing just these issues, no attempt has been made to engage their writings with the emergence of post-colonial theology. This study will redress that situation, beginning with a clear definition of post-colonial theology in chapter 1.

The writings of Mbiti and Mugambi signify an exercise in contextual theology. That is to say, they seek to understand the revelation of God in conversation with specific and explicitly stated African settings and questions. The Kenyan context they begin their theologizing in is dominated by mission Christianity. It might appear that this is the point of departure for their theology (chapter 2). It will be argued, however, that a gradual shift away from the particular is evident in their work. Though not recognized until now, a comparison between Mbiti's PhD dissertation with subsequent published work evidences a methodological shift. The locus for African theology becomes not the particularism of an African context, but the more generalized concept of African tradition (chapter 4). It is the discovery of this methodological shift, which can be seen as the unifying factor, or heuristic lens, for the present study. Thus, the subsequent chapters are structured in such a way as to illustrate this gradual move away from the particularism of context (chapter 3—eschatological issues and context), experience (chapter 4—religio-cultural experience), community (chapter 5—christ & symbol in African community), and coloniality (chapter 6—coloniality and reconstruction).

In response to such trends away from the particular, a series of constructive moves will be proposed. Such constructive moves, it will be argued, counter the unintended acontextuality in their work, weaken the most serious criticisms of their work, and begin to point to the ongoing significance of their work. The constructive moves, evoked by the writings of Mbiti and Mugambi, are fourfold. First, it is argued that Mbiti's eschatology be read according to his own initial method (chapter 3). Second, experiential dialogue is proposed resulting in criticism of African theology also (chapter 4). Third, a christology that integrates the importance of symbol and christopraxis is envisaged (chapter 5). Fourth, the need for power analysis is established (chapter 6) and the means to power analysis is identified through a thoroughgoing comparison of Mbiti's and Mugambi's work with post-colonial theology (chapter 7).

Conspectus

The writings of Mbiti and Mugambi emerge from experiences of a British colony (Kenya) and a British (Anglican) church. Indeed, Mbiti's PhD is completed in the year that Kenya gains her independence. In historical terms, their work is post-colonial. To what extent it is critically post-colonial is at the heart of the present work. Chapter 1 defines post-colonial theology as emerging from experiences of subjugation (coloniality), contending for marginalized agency, theologically hybridizing, and resisting hegemony. The experience of coloniality¹⁸ in Kenya cannot be considered independent of mission Christianity.¹⁹ Chapter 2 examines the ways in which they react to Christian mission and seek to articulate a theology which they believe more authentically relates to their context.

Chapter 3 examines how Mbiti moves away from the specificity of context in his examination of African temporality and eschatology.²⁰ It will be argued that reading Mbiti according to his own initial method will counter a move toward a more generalized, and therefore less contextualized, understanding of African theology. Such a reading recovers the innovative contextualism of his work while, at the same time, disarming much of the criticism of his eschatology. It foregrounds the subjugation at work in the specific context that his PhD thesis examines, thereby opening up space for a more thorough comparison of this African theologizing with the more recently emerging post-colonial theology, which also begins with contexts of subjugation or coloniality.

The move away from the specificity of context seems clear in Mbiti's work on eschatology. In chapters 4 and 5, this tendency is seen to be at work further in Mugambi's work as well as Mbiti's other work. It will be found that a shift to African Traditional Religions (ATRs) as the locus for the ongoing emergence for African theology creates tensions for the christology of Mbiti and Mugambi. They move away from the primacy of experience

18. *Coloniality* can be understood as a process subjugating culture and/or agency by incursive cultural and, in this case, theological discourse. For a fuller treatment of the term and its potential significance for theology see Heaney, "Conversion to Coloniality."

19. See Mugambi, "History of the Church"; Ng'eny, *Rabai to Mumias*, 29; Temu, *British Protestant*; Strayer, *Making Mission*, 10–11, 87; Oliver, *Missionary Factor*; Reed, *Founded in Faith*; Anderson, W., *Church in East Africa*; Reed, *Pastors, Partners*. Mbiti grew up in the African Inland Mission. For its history, see, for example, Mbiti, "Christian Eschatology," 37–40; Morad and Arensen, "The Spreading Tree." Strong, *Anglicanism and British Empire*, 108–10, 135–97, 217–23, 263, 283–94. See Frere, *Eastern Africa*, 120–21.

20. See Mbiti, *ARAP*, 21.

by defining the God of ATRs in reference to metaphysical categories such as omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, transcendence, immutability, and immanence. What I will call “experiential dialogue” is proposed as one way of countering such a shift. It will be argued that experiential dialogue is a distinct move, but one which is in continuity with the thought of Mbiti and Mugambi. That is to say, an approach is anticipated that proposes reading Christian tradition and text within the experience of traditional practice.

In chapter 5, the not uncommon assumption that African christology is “latent” because of a preoccupation with what I will call theistic contextualization, is noted.²¹ It will be argued that the supposed latent nature of African christology oversimplifies the issues. For there is no inherent theological necessity that Mbiti and Mugambi develop a systematic christology. However, even in their more practical and communitarian intent, the approach evidences a move away from the particularisms of both traditional and Christian faith communities in Kenya. For while they seek to establish a relationship between traditional experience and theism, this is not extended to christology, and their hesitancy over further engagement and development on ontological issues is not congruent with a Kenyan church that displays much less hesitancy in this regard. A further constructive move is proposed by identifying the contextual potency of a symbolic approach to christology and the identification of christopraxis. A symbolic approach to christology will move their work back towards the practice of African traditional religionists. Christopraxis will move their work back towards the Christian faith community in a practical christologizing, which does not need to eschew or avoid questions about the nature of Christ.

Chapter 6 deals with Mugambi’s most recent attempt at theologically addressing coloniality. He does this with the innovation of a theology of reconstruction. It appears that this reappraisal of the context might result in a theology that moves back to the immediate context and, therefore, remedies the continued shift away from the particular towards generalized understandings of African theology identified in this study. This, unfortunately, is not the case. Rather, beyond movement away from context (chapter 3), experience (chapter 4), and community (chapter 5), his intimations toward a reconstructionist theology constitutes a movement away from coloniality. A constructive move that can provide a means to analyze power relations within theological discourse, therefore, becomes urgent. This constructive step is recognized as necessary in chapter 6 and developed in chapter 7.

In chapter 7, it is argued that within a critically post-colonial framework, the work of Mbiti and Mugambi demonstrates post-colonial

21. See Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 4–9, 16–18.

characteristics. From this comparison of the writings of both scholars with post-colonial theology, a means to power analysis emerges. However, just as the work of Mbiti and Mugambi can be compared positively to post-colonial theology, it can also be contrasted with post-colonial theology. This contrast must not be avoided.

A Fresh Appreciation

Despite the criticisms that a post-colonial perspective might bring to the work of Mbiti and Mugambi, and the criticisms that they would in turn undoubtedly have of post-colonial theology, such dialogue exemplifies post-colonial discourse. Consequently, it will be argued that their work should be considered part of a broad body of post-colonial literature. Their work should no longer be marginalized by post-colonial theologians. Rather, in bringing their writings into the discourses on post-colonialism, through critical and constructive responses, a new appreciation for their work emerges. Even if it may be claiming too much to say that they anticipated later post-colonial theology, it is not claiming too much to argue that they should now be considered part of the antecedents of post-colonial theology. This is a new way of reading their work, which provides fresh significance for their contribution and a means to practice power analysis in the particularism of context, experience, community, and coloniality. Contextualism is more than inter-cultural relatedness. It is a means to decolonization. To what extent such conclusions can be sustained is the task of the remainder of this study.