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Restoring Relationship: How the Methodologies of Wangari Maathai and the Green
Belt Movement in Post-Colonial Kenya Achieve Environmental Healing
and Women's Empowerment

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Liberal Studies
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

by
Casey Lawhon Wagner
December 2016

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ABSTRACT

Restoring Relationship: How the Methodologies of Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement in Post-Colonial Kenya Achieve Environmental Healing and Women's Empowerment

by

Casey Lawhon Wagner

The effects of the colonial project in Kenya created multi-faceted damages to the land and indigenous people-groups. Using the lens of ecofeminism, this study examines the undergirding structures that produce systems such as colonization that oppress and destroy land, people, and other beings. By highlighting the experience of the Kikuyu people within the Kenyan colonial program, the innovative and ingenious response of Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement proves to be a relevant and effective counter to women's disempowerment and environmental devastation in a post-colonial nation. The approach of the Green Belt Movement offers a unique and accessible method for empowering women, restoring the land, and addressing loss of cultural identity, while also contributing a theoretical template for addressing climate change.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my daughter, Lily Mae Walker, who inspires me to finish so that she will be proud.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Jill LeRoy-Frazier, thank you for your constant support and encouragement over the course of the program. Thank you Dr. Phyllis Thompson, for Feminist Pedagogy—my favorite class—and for providing the impetus for me to complete this work. Much gratitude is due to Dr. Marie Tedesco and Dr. Keith Green, who served as support and thesis committee members. And, to Holly, Bo, Ava, and Lily – I'm so grateful for the most supportive and loving family, without which I could not succeed.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The relationship of human beings to the environment can be examined in many ways and also viewed through a variety of lenses. Environmental scientists and activists declare that our planet is on the verge of catastrophic instability, while “climate deniers” and industrialists who profit from a mentality of earth-as-commodity repudiate the notion that Western versions of progress and development are damaging to the natural world. According to NASA, ninety-seven percent of climate scientists agree that “climate-warming trends over the past century are very likely due to human activities.”¹ Although naysayers of this reality exist, individuals with scientific awareness and knowledge widely accept that this stance is a denial of basic and thorough scientific evidence. Within this thesis, the scientific research and evidence of climate change is acknowledged and assumed to be valid and that the existence of this global crisis is reality and carries an imperative for immediate and drastic action.

The consequences of Climate Change are wide, deep, and far-reaching. From warming oceans and rising sea levels, shrinking ice sheets, and glacial retreat to ocean acidification and increasing global temperatures, human beings are disturbing the condition of this planet to the extent that the effects may be irreversible. Many plant and animal species already have become extinct due to local temperature increase, destruction of their natural habitats—or other Climate Change-related factors—while numerous other species are facing complete rapid erasure. Along with the deep impact these climate phenomena impose on plant and animal specials

1. National Aeronautics and Space Administration, “Consensus: 97% of Climate Scientists Agree,” <http://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus/> (accessed April 27, 2015).

which are vital to local ecosystems and people-groups, these alterations also affect the stability and flourishing of human life. The amount of land available for subsistence farming has declined and necessary resources for daily living (potable water, edible plants, animals as a food source, and forests to supply wood for cooking fires and building supplies) are less accessible for people living close to the Earth. Judith Plant states, “As many learned people have said, if the planet is sick, so are the people.”² Indeed, global poverty and the epidemic of hunger and starvation due to lack of resources represent some of the most readily-visible effects of Climate change.

The statistics are staggering, as the links between Climate Change and the welfare of humanity demonstrate: “According to UNICEF, 22,000 children [under the age of 5] die each day due to poverty.”³ These astonishing numbers will only increase, as land capable of providing food and daily necessities deteriorates further and disappears. In her book *Soil Not Oil* Vandana Shiva writes, “the emerging food crisis will add another billion people to the billion who are already denied their right to food and condemned to hunger and malnutrition.”⁴ Although human poverty and hunger are framed by some as the most visible and urgent issues requiring attention, other effects of ill-treatment and abuse of the environment, both for human beings and non-human species, are prevalent.

The industrialization of agriculture is a significant origin of the global changes which increased poverty and damaged the environment, especially (but not limited to) in the Global South. Shiva asserts, “Agriculture—the care of the land, the culture of growing food—is being

² “Learning to Live with Differences: The Challenge of Ecofeminist Community,” in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 126.

³ Anup Shah, “Poverty Facts and Stats,” Global Issues, <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats.html> (accessed September 16, 2015).

⁴ *Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an Age of Crisis* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2008), 4.

transformed into a corporate, industrial activity.”⁵ Because of this transition from subsistence farming to large-scale industry, the land once available as “commons”⁶ (unowned land used for hunting and growing food) is sequestered and used for monoculture crops for the purpose of corporate profit, while workers are removed from traditional roles of growing food, hunting, or producing necessary goods made from local materials. The focus moves from providing local needs to exporting goods, because the aim of industry is profit. Meanwhile, the meaning and purpose of food (when produced on a large-scale) changes from nutrition and sustenance to commodity.⁷ Shiva asserts, “The industrialization of agriculture marks a shift from internal inputs to purchased, external inputs, from ecological to chemical, from biodiversity to monocultures.”⁸

One result of this shift in food production from small/local to large/global is poverty and hunger. Monoculture crops replace subsistence farms, while farmers essentially turn into factory workers, which is problematic for many reasons. Shiva explains the severe repercussions of the transition from small/local to large/single-crop agriculture: “It is based on costly external outputs such as purchased and non-renewable seeds, synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. Peasants incur huge debts to purchase these inputs; to pay them back they must sell their entire crop, thus depriving themselves of food.”⁹ Moreover, if the farmers cannot repay what they owe from the initial investment, they often lose their land and the result is an endless cycle of debt.¹⁰ The impact on the land of monoculture/large-scale farms is severe and detrimental. Erosion impacts soil fertility, while pesticide usage, chemicals, and genetically

⁵ Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (Brooklyn: South End Press, 2010), xxii.

⁶ The notion and existence of the “commons” will be explored in more depth in Chapter 4.

⁷ Shiva, *Staying Alive*, xxii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xxii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

modified seeds compromise the balance of local ecosystems.

Along with recognizing the negative impact of corporate agriculture on subsistence farming and subsequent impoverishment, it is important to understand the structures that cause and perpetuate poverty. A study of language provides an indication of the shift regarding views of nature. Before the late twentieth and early twenty-first century expansion of global economic forces, human beings interacted most commonly with the Earth by utilizing only what was needed for daily necessities: food, clothing, and shelter. The Enlightenment-era transition into describing nature as “natural resources” signifies the change in ethos from localized, subsistence economies to the current neo-liberal economic system, in which nature is considered to be “resources,” a commodity available to be thoughtlessly removed and sold for profit. Susan Hawthorne states, “In the dominant global capitalist system, the land is more and more disconnected from the people . . . the distinction is between Western property ownership rules—disconnected, purchased with money, located anywhere—and indigenous perspectives on property, where an intimate relationship between land and people is maintained by personal presence, ritual maintenance, and responsibility.”¹¹ This distinction between resource and relationship signifies the detached, disjointed mentality that leads to wanton misuse and maltreatment of the land and also other forms of life. The fragmentation perpetuated by hierarchical thinking that disconnects human beings from all other life forms leads to the mental capacity to deny the ramifications of this irresponsible utilization of Nature. When human beings are able to disassociate from an acknowledgment of embeddedness within Nature, destruction of land and abuse of people follows.

¹¹ “The Diversity Matrix: Relationship and Complexity” in *Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice*, ed. Ariel Sallah (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 94.

Particularly susceptible to this abuse are women, who absorb most of the impacts of Climate Change on daily life. The commodification and fragmentation of nature into resources represents the patriarchal ideologies set forth in the ethos born out of the Enlightenment. In fact, within the Western paradigm of “Man over Nature,” women who are considered “closer to Nature¹²” are considered a resource to be used and abused, and in some extreme cases are bought and sold. Women's roles as providers in daily life in general are undervalued in the realm of economic productivity as well as by patriarchal cultures around the world, both in the Global South, as well as in the Global North. Shiva states, “Women produce and reproduce life not merely biologically, but also through their social role in providing sustenance.”¹³ Recognizing the work of women whose daily labor is often unpaid is a crucial element within the discourse regarding the feminization of poverty.

Because traditional “women's work” (e.g., reproduction and care of offspring, growing food, retrieving water, facilitating provision of daily necessities) consists of purportedly unskilled duties, patriarchal measures of economic productivity devalue the labor of women, particularly in comparison to men, who within an agro-industrial system leave the house and earn a wage. Moreover, women's work in the Global South typically does not produce profit; therefore, within a patriarchal model of production for the purpose of capital, this work holds no value. Shiva articulates, “Productive man, producing commodities, using some of nature's wealth and women's work as raw materials and dispensing with the rest as waste, becomes the only legitimate category of work, wealth and production.”¹⁴ Not only is women's work consistently undervalued, but as a result of the changing climate, it is becoming more difficult to

¹² The concept of women as “closer to Nature” will be explored in more depth in Chapter 2.

¹³ *Staying Alive*, 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

undertake. Daily duties for the benefit of the household are generally omitted as economic contributions, because they serve the community as opposed to the market economy.

Hawthorne clarifies, “Globalisation pulls women into international trade, into the market economy, into the privatized and commodified world of capital, and in the process women's labour is appropriated not in ways that benefit them, but in ways that benefit markets.”¹⁵

Western profiteers or national governments who are influenced by capitalist development models claimed and sold lands that were once considered commons, which belonged to everyone while also belonging legally to no one,. Often, these lands are “developed” according to a Western model, in order to produce *something* for a profit for *someone* other than the people who originally used the land for daily needs. The results of development look like progress in that *someone somewhere* is reaping a profit, but the question is, whom does this progress benefit? For indigenous people dependent on land for subsistence, these natural spaces cleared for monoculture crops for export along with the forests felled is an enormous and significant loss, as it decreases the availability of food and water sources. Hawthorne states, “By indigenous reasoning, land cannot be purchased and it has a pre-determined location. Water cannot be purchased either.”¹⁶ The ideologies represented by the commodification of nature directly conflict with indigenous philosophies of ownership.

Women's roles in providing daily essentials suffer the most from application of Western development models. As a result of clear-cutting forests for timber profits, water sources dry up leading to greater time and energy expenditures. Women must focus more on travel, often walking many miles to retrieve potable water and firewood for cooking, for example.

¹⁵ Hawthorne, “The Diversity Matrix” in *Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice*, 96.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

Additionally, forests provide a source of sustenance by providing habitat for animals and plants which are edible or medicinal. Loss of trees negatively affects the availability of food, water, and daily necessities and women's lives are made increasingly difficult; the ensuing poverty from lack of attainable sources is most harmful to marginalized groups: people of color, the elderly, and especially women. Meike Spitzner states, “In developing countries, environmental degradation caused by climate change will affect poor women disproportionately, since as a gendered reproductive labour force, they are primary, hands-on, natural resource users.”¹⁷ Climate change caused by unchecked, imperialist-rooted globalization creates a gendered poverty in the Global South.

A plethora of opinions and possible solutions offered by scientific experts and activists exists regarding how Climate Change can be addressed and, ideally, reversed. The focus of this thesis is on the advent of colonization in Kenya—exposing the ramifications of imperialism for indigenous people and their land—followed by exploration of a women-led environmental and social movement which provides an original and region-specific approach to environmental restoration, while offering a new paradigm for human relationship to environment combined with an examination of the unique components of this movement which lead to its prodigious success. Specifically, it is shown that the emphasis towards and inclusion of indigenous spirituality and culture-specific knowledge enable this movement to be particularly effective. This women-led social and environmental movement in the Global South is uniquely successful and efficient because of the methodologies that encourage the promotion of indigenous spirituality and traditional cultural practices.

¹⁷ Meike Spitzner, “How Global Warming is Gendered: A View from the EU” in *Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 223.

A one-size-fits-all approach to method and organization is not effective, as exemplified by the failed attempts of governments and non-governmental organizations¹⁸ (in the Global North) to provide aid to Global South people. Instead, the individualized, region-specific response of Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement to poverty, hunger, environmental healing, and (subsequently) Climate Change is tailored to location, situation, and local people-groups, while providing holistic cultural and planetary remediation and rejuvenation. It is argued that the ways the Green Belt Movement organized on a grassroots level with an emphasis on local culture and knowledge including people, animals, plants, trees, and land offer a more sustainable means for human beings to be in relationship with the Earth. This new paradigm does not offer a “business model” that can be adopted by anyone, anywhere. Conversely, it begins with a shift in the ways that “man”¹⁹ *views* Nature and leads to a new practice in the ways that human beings can choose to exist in the world. The ability of women to offer unique knowledge and skills to such work will be explored, as colonialism, the life and experiences of Wangari Maathai, and the Green Belt Movement are analyzed in the following chapters.

Before the effect of environmental and cultural desecration on indigenous people-groups by colonizing forces can be addressed, it is important to examine the ideologies and subsequent practices that produce cultural, religious and spiritual, and environmental destruction. Analyzing and deconstructing the currents and patterns of thought that uphold the common public discourse about the environment is essential in order to progress into a new way of being in the world, a way that will sustain all forms of life. Until the Scientific Revolution of the

¹⁸ Henceforth, “NGO” will be used to represent “non-governmental organizations.”

¹⁹ Here, “Man” is a reference to the common representation of “human being.” Although inherently patriarchal in connotation, I will choose to utilize this term to denote a more traditional view of humankind, one that places man above woman and nature

sixteenth century, most academic scholarship acknowledges groups of people were able to maintain healthy co-relationships with other beings and the land they depended on for survival. In many cultures, women were holders of special, unique knowledge as primary nurturers of their families.

Carolyn Merchant asserts, “women and nature have an age-old association—an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language, and history.”²⁰ Even though human relationship with Nature varied among people-groups, in general, they considered nature to encompass all life, including human beings, plants, and other animals. Within this ideology, respect and reverence were supplied to the whole collection of all beings as interdependent life, and within many cultures worldwide, language gendered nature as female. A widespread understanding promoted a belief that nature provided all necessities for daily living (food, shelter, and all forms of sustenance); because of this provision, people utilized the image and language of Mother in the time period before the Enlightenment. Merchant continues, “the ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother links women's history with the history of the environment and ecological change.”²¹ Because of the nurturing mother archetype, Mother Nature often led to an incurring of spiritual value and anthropomorphizing of the Earth. The term Mother Nature is still familiar in this modern era, but holds less meaning, in general.

Many ancient civilizations revered nature as spirit or a form of god; relationship between human beings, the land, and all living beings was vital to survival. Within many cultures, a mutual respect existed between human beings and Nature—a respect based on interdependence. Shiva illustrates this connection in her description of one Indian cosmology, in which the

²⁰ *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 75.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

essence of energy, the feminine *Prakriti*, creates the world and becomes the mother of all life.²² According to this Indian cosmology and similar creation myths in other cultures, the created world and the creative force are ontologically inseparable. Shiva explains, “Nature as a creative expression of the feminine principle is both in ontological continuity with humans as well as above them. Ontologically, there is no divide between man and nature, or between man and woman, because life in all its forms arises from the feminine principle.”²³

Shiva's description of *Prakriti* illustrates the value placed on the gendered aspects of the Divine as well as points to the ways that Nature was associated with the feminine before the influence of western culture and therefore connected with women. Characteristics of the life-giving feminine were revered along with the daily work performed by women because of their association with the divine. Thus, many pre-Enlightenment societies ascribed to women the attributes of creators and affirmers of life. This paradigm of honor and respect for the feminine in the divine, nature, and women was common in many indigenous cultures in the Global South, as well as with First Peoples in the Global North before the modern era. In recent centuries, these cosmologies and their spiritual practices, such as animism, a belief system that recognizes spirits and deity in all beings, began to be replaced by dualistic mindsets introduced by Western influences and propagated by patriarchal economic and political development models. Within this new system, nature, as a form of the feminine, was to be conquered and subdued, as were women and all other beings.

The mentality necessary to connect women with the Nature as Divine (the Nurturing Mother paradigm) largely has been replaced by a rational- masculine mindset that designates

²² Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 38-9.

²³ *Ibid.*, 40.

Nature as a detached entity available for consumption, as opposed to a familial relationship. A shift in which the mind (representative of noesis) separates completely and elevates in value above the spirit or soul creates a divide between species and establishes a fragmented interaction with the natural world. In Western culture, the dominant mode of human existence does not acknowledge interconnectedness, while religion/spirituality is considered separate from nature.²⁴ Andy Smith states, “In my view, mainstream society has very little understanding of spirituality. Our individualist, capitalist society tends to destroy our sense of meaningful connectedness with nature, with all creatures and all people, and to replace these relationships with commodities.”²⁵ It is not the argument of this paper that every human being must be spiritual/religious in order to combat Climate Change. Instead, the emphasis is that the transition from *relationship* to *commodity* changes the way we interact with all beings and with the Earth as a whole.

This thesis will analyze the spiritual component of the Green Belt Movement to demonstrate that transforming its methodologies of activism create long-term, holistic changes, as opposed to immediate, but only temporary relief. Using the vocabulary of relationship, a true healing of people-groups and of environment can and does occur when participants, organizers, and observers pay attention to the *way* the work is enacted, not just the outcome of the work. The subaltern women of the Green Belt Movement protect and return to indigenous ways through acknowledging both the spiritual connection to Earth and cultural practice. They are creating their own post-colonial narrative, as they navigate how to exist in a culture and environment damaged by Western imperialism. It is important to note that the Green Belt

²⁴ Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 193-216.

²⁵ Andy Smith, “Ecofeminism through an Anticolonial Framework,” in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 31.

Movement is a grassroots, women-led movement and is a self-led coalition. The leadership has not taken instructions from Global North organizations nor have they been largely funded by Global North resources. Instead, they are designing their own success and, utilizing the metaphor of new growth, they began small and grew up and out as community involvement and support increased.

The voices of these workers are getting louder as they re-join the cycles of nature and as such, return to better ways of growing food and healing the Earth. Shiva writes, “These voices, muted by subjugation, are now quietly but firmly suggesting that the western male has produced only one culture, and that there are other ways of structuring the world.”²⁶ By explicitly denouncing the culture that has been imposed upon through the colonial process, Wangari Maathai is enabling Kenyan women to utilize their voices and indigenous knowledge to shift away from the ideals that led to the conquest and destruction of land and native people-groups. The colonizers acted out of a system that was, and still is, widely accepted that emerged from the Scientific Revolution. Merchant states, “The metaphor of the earth as a nurturing mother gradually vanished as a dominant image as the Scientific Revolution proceeded to mechanize and rationalize the world view.”²⁷

The Scientific Revolution triggered a massive shift in Western public thought toward a view of nature as resource, by those with power (the elite, white, Western male and their male Kenyan collaborators). In this paradigm, plants, animals, and “lesser” humans (those deemed “uncivilized” by Western man) are within nature and as such are regarded as less important than the white, elite, Western male and exist(ed) for the sole purpose of profit in the market economy.

²⁶ *Staying Alive*, 223.

²⁷ *Earthcare*, 76.

The ability to reason was the characteristic that distinguished Western males from other beings. White women and all people of color were considered to be emotional creatures, as opposed to possessing capabilities for noesis. Though a tendency towards this way of thinking began and dominated in previous eras, a societal-level paradigmatic shift occurred in the Western world. This Enlightenment-era alteration led to hierarchical thinking which established (white, European) male human beings on top of all forms of life and became part of the common understanding and public discourse regarding the innate value of living things. “Man *over* Nature”—versus Man *within* Nature—became the dominant paradigm. Anne Primavesi states, “Hierarchy assumes that the 'highest' value of all is ascribed to God's Being, which, through a type of 'top-down causation', is taken as the source of all value. By implication, whatever is placed furthest away, in the 'lowest' states of being, is furthest from God, and so of 'lesser' value.”²⁸ In this system of logic, beings considered void of rational thought or spiritual capabilities are below God and man.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, philosopher and scientist Francis Bacon asserted that human relationship to Nature was complex; specifically, Bacon's contribution to the methodologies of knowledge access regarding the “nature of things” had a massive impact on the way that men began to commodify and utilize natural resources.²⁹ Shiva writes, “In Bacon's experimental method, which was central to this masculine project, there was a dichotomising between male and female, mind and matter, objective and subjective, rational and emotional, and conjunction of masculine and scientific dominating over nature, women and the

²⁸ Anne Primavesi. “Ecology and Christian Hierarchy,” in *Women as Sacred Custodians of the Earth?: Women, Spirituality and the Environment*, eds. Elaine Low and Soraya Tremayne (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 127.

²⁹ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (New York: P.F. Collier, 1905), 5-290.

non-West.”³⁰ Along with other prominent figures, Bacon's influence signified a major contribution in the shift that altered the way that human beings viewed and positioned themselves in regards to Nature.

Bacon introduced and promoted the mindset that designated Nature as a scientific entity—an object—as opposed to a creative, imaginative, nurturing one. This change in attitude enables natural *resources* to be over-used and exploited with little concern for short or long term consequences. Many ecofeminist³¹ scholars propose that Bacon's emphasis on gendering Nature into the feminine contributed to man's placement into the top tier of hierarchical value over the natural realm. Warren points out the power of language; in her essay “Taking Empirical Data Seriously: An Ecofeminist Philosophical Perspective,” she states, “when language is sexist or naturist, it mirrors and reflects conceptions of women and nonhuman nature as inferior to, having less prestige or status than, that which is identified as male, masculine, or 'human' (i.e., male).”³² If the ideology of “man over woman” is the dominant paradigm in public discourse (beginning during Bacon's era and currently enduring), this ethos places man over the feminine Nature. Shiva explains, “for Bacon, nature was no longer Mother Nature, but a female nature, conquered by an aggressive masculine mind.”³³

The shift in language is notable and clear here – a transition from the familial (Mother) *relationship* to the detached vocabulary of the subject-object connection. In *Earthcare*, Merchant writes, “From the obscure origin of our species, human beings have lived in daily,

³⁰ *Staying Alive*, 16.

³¹ Ecofeminism is explored in Chapter 2 in detail.

³² Karen J. Warren, “Taking Empirical Data Seriously: An Ecofeminist Philosophical Perspective,” in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 12.

³³ Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 17.

immediate, organic relation with the natural order for their sustenance.”³⁴ The result of Bacon's influence on public discourse marks a transition from understanding Nature as an actual entity which human beings reside within (while co-existing with other beings) to a mechanistic, scientific view of Nature. In this more detached model, human beings exist outside of nature and consequently, consider all other life as resources, existing solely for human usage and profit. The mentality of relationship shifted into produce/consumer, master/slave, subject/object dualisms. Nature exists for man to conquer and the land exists to be tamed and shaped.

In Bacon's schema, knowledge and discoveries were available for “mankind” which in his view was the white, elite, European male. According to Mukti Barton's analysis, Bacon believed others were unworthy of receiving knowledge.³⁵ Led by Bacon and other male elites, the Scientific Revolution changed the public discourse around the relationship between human beings and nature. According to Shiva, this represented a shift “from the older science, represented as female (passive and weak) to a new masculine science of the scientific revolution which Bacon saw himself as heralding.”³⁶ Devaluing the feminine aspects of nature enabled a detached, violent approach to science and to Global South people-groups, who are viewed as closer to nature by Western men. This aligns with Bacon's contributions to the discourse in which nature became the Other to the (assumed) superior race of Western man

Creating an “Other,” or those who are designated as different (lesser) in order to establish our own position, is an enticement present in many facets of life. By establishing an Other (a “someone else”) people are able to distinguish and promote what they are and are not.

³⁴ *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*, 76.

³⁵ Mukti Barton, “Race, Gender, Class and the Theology of Empowerment: An Indian Perspective,” in *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Ursula King and Tina Beattie (London: Continuum, 2005), 225.

³⁶ *Staying Alive*, 16.

Within academia, “othering” can be a tool used to separate and elevate our own voice versus the positions of the privileged academic elite and/or opposing viewpoints. Othering can also occur when we study people or people-groups, apply a critical lens to their lives, and offer our own opinions (albeit educated!) about their lives. An Other becomes the object of study, while the studier places her/himself in a position above the object in order to view the subject from a locus of superior knowledge and power, thus establishing another form of hierarchy.

Morny Joy describes this Subject/Object relationship in regards to the terms orientalism and postcolonialism; she states,

...what they all focus on is the tendency in western thinking and cultural attitudes to a dualist division between the unified subject who is the scholarly enquirer, traveller, colonizer and the object/other (whether person, sex or society) that is the recipient of imposed categories – whether idealized projections or simplified reductions to a predetermined system of classification values.³⁷

Barton refers to these “imposed categories” as the “epistemological violence of the dominant academic paradigm.”³⁸ Even within the contemporary community of scholars, enacting research, and revealing new information to the world can perpetuate negative post-colonial discourse.

Within this thesis, it will be an enticement to (inadvertently, in my case) perpetrate this very epistemological violence to which Barton refers and speak about the work of African women while making them objects of my own study, in the same manner in which Francis Bacon (and many other prominent voices) introduced and promoted methodologies and ways of thinking that objectified nature and First People groups. The very hierarchies that I wish to point out and to participate in leveling, those that allow for abuses of women, people of color,

³⁷ “Postcolonial and Gendered Reflections: Challenges for Religious Studies,” 28.

³⁸ Barton, “Race, Gender, Class and the Theology of Empowerment: An Indian Perspective,” 225.

and nature, are in danger of being assembled and bolstered in my own work. Without careful intention, purpose, and self-reflection, I could fall prey to the same imperialist bias that marginalizes indigenous people-groups in the Global South and upholds systems of oppression.

By acknowledging, analyzing, and deconstructing these power structures and being self-reflective regarding the ones to which I am either intentionally or unintentionally complicit, my goal involves maintaining a healthy, balanced approach to research and presentation—one which honors and respects the unique experiences of Kenyan women in their work with the GBM.³⁹ Additionally, since I am not a woman of color living in Africa, it is my duty and intention carefully to avoid creating a “homogeneous Third World woman,” a mistake which would negate and fail properly to describe the diverse realities and daily lives of millions of women. Chandra Mohanty's powerful critique “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” is sharply aimed towards Western feminist scholarship and calls attention to “the production of the 'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject.”⁴⁰ Within this exploration of colonialism, its effect on Kenya, and the unique responses to it by Kikuyu women of the GBM, I seek to interrogate my own work in all its stages (research, points, my phrasing, and the meanings behind the way I assemble words) in order genuinely to attempt to avoid participation in the imperial story.

In addition, I intend to let Maathai speak for herself, by using her own words. By doing so, I hope to avoid the trap of speaking about the experiences and lives of women as if I am in a position to speak about Others knowledgeably. Although a plethora of scholarship is available regarding Maathai and the work of the Green Belt Movement, I attempt to consistently allow

³⁹ Henceforth, the Green Belt Movement is referred to as the GBM.

⁴⁰ Chandra Mohanty. “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30 (Autumn, 1988): 61.

her voice to be heard above the voice of others, including my own.

Within her memoir *Unbowed*, Maathai provides the narrative of her own family history, childhood, education, and work, while providing historical context of the Kikuyu within her own experiences. Before colonization, Kikuyu history was conveyed orally, as were most tribes in Africa.⁴¹ As a result, Maathai transmits the story of her people as described by her parents, grandparents, and other elders. These experiences as well as her own are filtered through her own context as a black, Kikuyu, educated woman and as such, it must be acknowledged that her position affects her interpretation of historical events. As Ellen W. Gorsevski notes, “Maathai used historical facts to convey narratives of Western influenced and inequitable social structures and practices that were put in place to harm most Africans while enriching only elites.”⁴² Importantly, many historical accounts consulted for this thesis verify the events and repercussions of the colonial project described by Maathai; these are referenced in Chapters 3 and 4.

Because I am not black and Kikuyu and cannot and should not speak about the experience of women who are black and Kikuyu, I attempt to rely on Maathai's words to tell the story of her people and their experience with colonization in Kenya. In addition, I position myself as a reader of Maathai's words in *Unbowed*, *Replenishing the Earth*, and *The Green Belt Movement*.⁴³ Awareness of my position as a reader of Maathai's texts allows me to question the

⁴¹ Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed: A Memoir* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 9.

⁴² Ellen W. Gorsevski, “Wangari Maathai's Emplaced Rhetoric: Greening Global Peacebuilding,” *Environmental Communication* 6, No. 3 (September 2012): 301.

⁴³ Here, it is important to acknowledge the position of other scholarly readers of Maathai's texts, along with their own interpretations. Gorsevski (cited above) analyzes the “emplaced rhetoric” within *Unbowed*, which she presents as an apt tool for mobilizing (post-colonial) citizens towards environmental activism. Though she does not explicitly situate herself as a reader, her article points to Maathai's narrative as an important example of post-colonial narrative. In Florence Ebila's article, “‘A Proper Woman, in the African Tradition:’ The Construction of Gender and Nationalism in Wangari Maathai's autobiography *Unbowed*,” the author analyzes Maathai's presentation of her gender in her memoir. Ebila approaches Maathai's text in such a way that allows

tension between understanding her story through my own stance, as opposed to experiencing the colonial/post-colonial realities by the Kikuyu and Maathai. By situating myself as white Western woman reading and promoting the work of an African woman, it is my intention to interrogate my own position while avoiding what Mohanty terms “the global hegemony of western scholarship.”⁴⁴

In order to speak about the accomplishments by women leading this social and environmental movement, it is necessary for me to acknowledge, own, and be consistently conscious about my own White/Western privilege. Growing up in a stable, middle-class environment in the United States in which I was offered nearly every opportunity to succeed could be considered (and allowed to be) a deterrent to my ability to speak about the work of marginalized people in the “third world.” Even by utilizing the term “third world,” I establish my own position within the “first world.” I designate a “them” because of where/who I am. I choose to claim the fluidity of interpretation, because everything I read and write is filtered through the lens of my situation, whether intentionally or otherwise. Deliberate awareness of this reality enables me to be thoughtful and respectful regarding the experiences of other human beings.

Instead of ignoring my situatedness and pretending that my white, Western privilege doesn't exist, it is my intention to interrogate my position in each step of the academic process, as I research and then present my findings and argument within this thesis. One of the themes in this paper is power. Through no work or merit of my own, I have inherent power because of where I was born, the color of my skin, and the family into which I was born. It is my

Maathai to speak for herself, often quoting Maathai's own words throughout the article. John Madelay's brief article, “Trees and Poverty” references *Unbowed* as a source for factual evidence of Climate Change, revealing that the author views Maathai's text as historically accurate.

⁴⁴ “Under Western Eyes,” 64.

conscious decision and effort to use this power *with* Global South women, as opposed to *over*, and to avoid the assumption that the “homogeneous Third World woman” begins and ends without power. The women of the Green Belt Movement I describe have harnessed and created a subversive and effective ability to initiate a paradigm shift from which those of us with assumed power should learn and which we should emulate.

It is imperative to clarify, I do not intend to give “voice” to anyone, as such an assumption contributes to the imperial story from which I wish to remain separate. As Val Plumwood states, “Taking the place of others and speaking instead of them when the others are perfectly capable of and best placed to speak for themselves, is, of course, insufferably arrogant, and is typical of the mindset of the colonizing groups.”⁴⁵ It is probable that my European ancestors participated in colonization in various forms, and instead of complicity, I intend to be an active participant in dismantling power structures by contributing to the conversation that Wangari Maathai and the GBM women began through their activism. These women already possess voice; my purpose involves engaging what they already said in their words and actions and to promote the ways that they are utilizing the power they already have. I make no claim to speak for the oppressed. Again, Plumwood is useful; she states, “As reformed colonizers, as the oppressors who have begun so decolonize our minds, we speak as critics of our own culture or group and as supporters of the other, in the same way as the white antiracist and the male feminist.”⁴⁶

Forward-moving change must include interrogating power and dismantling power structures. Religion and spirituality seem to be less practiced and more studied. As a woman

⁴⁵ “Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism: Parallels and Politics,” in *Ecofeminism: Women Culture Nature*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 350.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

who is a descendant of white Europeans and also inclined towards both religion and spirituality, it is difficult to imagine how to navigate conducting research on indigenous spirituality and presenting the body of my work—which promotes spirituality and cultural practice—as a resolution to Climate Change. Tina Beattie articulates these sentiments succinctly; in her essay, “Religious Identity and the Ethics of Representation,” she states “The inclusion of religious desire or questioning in to the scholar's own language is a vulnerable and open gesture, signalling that it is in her own unknowing before the mystery of the infinite that she seeks to exchange wisdom and understanding.”⁴⁷ As a multi-faceted scholar who is also a spiritual woman, I seek to exchange this wisdom and understanding that Beattie describes with the women of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya. Additionally, I wish to exchange wisdom and understanding with anyone who reads this thesis. I do not mean to imply that I associate with the powerless or that I lack power because of my spiritual beliefs and practices, only that I find it difficult to maneuver how to talk about belief systems in a real and practical way within academia.

It is necessary to take the time to state purpose and intention, as I have done in the last third of this chapter. Doing so not only informs the reader, but also is a reminder to me to remain thoughtful and reflective about how I write about women in Africa. Because I respect and admire the accomplishments of this woman-led social/environmental movement, I desire to contribute to a healthy, egalitarian discourse around the current environmental crisis and will seek to avoid a subject/object relationship with the movements I am promoting. Throughout this thesis, I put forth my best effort to continue to lend an affirming and respectful argument

⁴⁷ Tina Beattie, “Religious Identity and the Ethics of Representation: The Study of Religion and Gender in the Secular Academy,” in *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, eds. Ursula King and Tina Beattie (London: Continuum Press, 2005), 75.

towards shifting the paradigm, following the lead of Wangari Maathai.

CHAPTER 2

ECOFEMINISM: AN ALTERNATIVE LENS

The effects of Climate Change are felt deep and wide. Although many human beings choose not to see the damage to the natural world and approaching catastrophe, the scientific evidence and data are readily available. Based on these studies,¹ as well as on research-based predictions for the future of the environment, the forecast appears to be bleak for human beings and many other forms of life; yet, many reject the option to see and accept this truth. When one has known and participated in only a singular discourse (that in which humans are positioned hierarchically above Nature), it is hard to imagine that considering all of the human capabilities for rationality and intelligence the Earth could be destroyed by the beings with the highest level of consciousness.

Yet, this scientific data is easily obtained. The official website of NASA includes statistics that verify and present to the public unparalleled changes in the environment. Regarding rising sea levels, NASA states, “Global sea level rose about 17 centimeters (6.7 inches) in the last century. The rate in the last decade, however, is nearly double that of the last century.”² Additionally, NASA provides data about the rising global temperature: “All three major global surface temperature reconstructions show that the Earth has warmed since 1880. Most of this warming has occurred since the 1970s, with the 20 warmest years having occurred since 1981 and with all 10 of the warmest years occurring in the past 12 years.”³ Statistics and information detailing further evidence of Climate Change (such as warming oceans, shrinking

¹ See www.climate.nasa.gov for current statistics, information, and other resources regarding climate change.

² The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, “Climate Change: How Do We Know?,” www.climate.nasa.gov/evidence/ (accessed July 18, 2016).

³ Ibid.

ice sheets, declining Arctic sea ice, glacial retreat, extreme events, ocean acidification, and decreased snow cover) are available,⁴ and provide similar accounts, all indicating that although the climate has changed in other eras, these current transitions are monumental and possibly devastating. NASA attributes the current warming trends to human activity and states, “Most climate scientists agree that the main cause of the current global warming trends is human expansion of the 'greenhouse effect.’”⁵

The paradox contained within the notion of self-destruction (the deterioration of planetary stability and, therefore, its ability to sustain human life, as well as other forms of life) exists because of a cultural refusal to acknowledge and accept the available scientific data. Such acceptance would indicate validation of science (scientific fact) over the paradigm of assumed superiority of human beings over other beings, and requires a recognition that the ideology of hierarchy does not provide a sustainable way of thinking and being in the world. This acknowledgment requires subsequent changes in the ways that humans exercise their power over other beings. Unfortunately, many human beings, especially those who profit from human domination of the Earth, choose not to accept the data which proves that transformations are necessary regarding human interaction with Nature. This is the paradox of self-destruction: human beings, by choosing not to see, will be destroyed as a result of destroying other beings and the land.

Yet, an alternative lens presents itself, while offering a better path for human beings. These alternatives allow for a different and healthier relationship between human beings and the rest of the natural world. Adopting this lens and shifting the trajectory away from imminent

⁴ The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, “Climate Change: How Do We Know?,” NASA, www.climate.nasa.gov/evidence/ (accessed July 18, 2016).

⁵ The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, “A Blanket Around the Earth,” NASA, www.climate.nasa.gov/causes/ (accessed October 31, 2016).

planetary destruction could alter the way that human beings exist in the world and provide a hue to all human activity, in shades of green, the color of life. To utilize such a lens would first necessitate willingness and a certain humility – a volunteering, to first: pick up this new lens, second: to use it, and third: create and allow the openness to be changed by new sight. The lens provides a new way of seeing the world; just as many wear glasses to aid with sight, choosing an alternative lens can provide clarity, insight, and an opportunity for a different ontological presence in the world.

This thesis holds that ecofeminism provides an essential lens through which to educate and to provide the impetus for changing the manner in which “Man” is in relationship with Nature. Ecofeminism points to and names the dualistic ethos that pervades Western culture. Dualisms provide a support for hierarchies, because establishing what one *is* by what one *is not* (either/or thinking) means that both implicit and explicit rankings are established. Because of the inherent nature of privilege, these binaries enable privileged human beings to cast themselves outside of and over Nature. Privilege, in this case, is the ability for noesis and rational thought, which situate human beings upon the top level (directly under God) of the hierarchy of value.⁶ Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow state, “When male culture-creating groups appropriated the positive side of each of these dualisms for themselves, the age-old male-female polarity was given a newly oppressive significance.”⁷

In contrast to ideologies that reinforce hierarchical dichotomies between male/female, human being/not human, and spirit/matter, ecofeminism seeks to draw attention to the patriarchal attitudes that create systems that oppress women and exploit nature. According to

⁶ Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 24.

⁷ “The Essential Challenge: Does Theology Speak to Women’s Experience?” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (HarperOne: New York, 1979), 21.

Adams, “Ecofeminism identifies the twin dominations of women and the rest of nature . . . Ecofeminism argues that the connections between the oppression of women and the rest of nature must be recognized to understand adequately both oppressions.”⁸ By resisting the culturally dominant paradigm of binaries (separating spirituality and politics, for example, and human beings from nature) ecofeminism seeks to overcome these patriarchal dualisms that undergird and perpetuate systems of oppression.⁹ These dualisms create a structural paradigm in which it is acceptable for humans to enter other countries, conquer the land and people, and extract “products” from the environment.

Although women (and men) have operated in a syncretic relationship to the rhythms of the earth in varying degrees for millennia, the term “ecofeminism” (connecting women and nature) entered academic parlance recently. Warren states, “As a political movement, ecological feminism began in the 1970s. French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne coined the term 'ecological feminisme' in 1974 to call attention to women's potential to bring about an ecological revolution.”¹⁰ Although this specific, designated word for ecological feminists recently established usage, Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein point out that ecofeminism represents “a new term for ancient wisdom.”¹¹ This idea of “ancient wisdom” poses complex and multifaceted questions, such as: Whose wisdom? What kind of wisdom? Were only women privy to this wisdom?¹² This thesis does not promote the idea of women as bearers of innate knowledge and connection to the natural world; instead, it argues that the process of exchange, dialogue, and discourse around cultural and ancestral wisdom and knowledge pertaining to

⁸ “Introduction,” in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 21.

¹¹ “Introduction,” in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, eds. Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), xv.

¹² These questions will be explored within this chapter.

Nature facilitates greater co-existence between all beings and constitutes a key component of healthy relationships between human beings and the natural world.

Just as many versions of feminism exist, so exist many types of ecofeminists with a variety of views on promoting equality, peace, justice, and sustainability for all forms of life. Adams explains the unifying objective between most ecofeminists; she states, “We reject an either-or approach; we do not believe that we must decide between working to help human beings or working to stop environmental abuses, between politics and spirituality, between humans and the rest of nature.”¹³ Instead, highlighting the links between the twin issues of women’s empowerment and the environment represents the imperative of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism seeks to show the connections between these issues, and to propose illuminating solutions that are holistic in their methodology.

Acknowledging and denouncing either/or and binary thinking begins the task of disassembling hierarchies. Instead of stratified ladders of value, an image of a multidimensional web illustrates the way that ecofeminists represent the value of all beings. It is important to clarify that ecofeminists also do not position human beings—women *or* men—at the center of the web. Alternatively, the web represents relationship and interconnectedness between all beings. Ecofeminist theologian Carol P. Christ states, “The preservation of the Earth requires a profound shift in consciousness: a recovery of more ancient and traditional views that revere the profound connection of all beings in the web of life and a rethinking of the relation of both humanity and divinity to nature.”¹⁴ In this paradigm, humans represent a single juncture on the web—necessary to hold the strands together, but also dependent on all the other points of

¹³ “Introduction,” 4.

¹⁴ “Rethinking Theology and Nature,” in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, eds. Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 58.

connection.

Contrasting the (two-dimensional) hierarchy-ladder with the (multi-dimensional) web of interconnection is significant: the ladder places greater importance and value on the beings that occupy the top rungs, which decrease in worth in descending order. Conversely, the web links all beings to each other, and shows that each strand is dependent on the others to form a complete and healthy system. Considering the concept of an ecosystem is helpful here. A simplified explanation of the interdependent components of a forest ecosystem, for example, can be similar to this: the trees drop their leaves onto the ground; tiny microbes, earthworms, and other small beings in the soil break down the components of the leaves, creating a nutrient-rich layer of humus from which new green growth can emerge—mosses, grasses, understory plants, and the great canopy trees; birds and other small animals feed on the worms and berries from the plants, while deer feed on new green growth emerging from the enriched soil; larger predatory mammals depend on the birds, deer, and small animals for food and rely on the trees and understory growth for protection. When these larger predatory animals die, they return to the earth and are broken down by the microbes and other tiny beings that create a rich layer of soil from which more green growth emerges. In this way, an ecosystem illustrates the dependency all beings have on each other – the tiniest microbes are necessary in order for the largest mammals to eat and sustain their existence.

The image of a mandala offers another visual representation of the relationship between all beings. Gary Snyder states, “An ecosystem is a kind of mandala in which there are multiple relations that are all powerful and instructive. Each figure in the mandala—a little mouse or

bird...has an important position and a role to play.”¹⁵ It is essential to understand the strands linking the various points on the web that are representative of specific species and the purposes they serve. Understanding that all beings are linked, leads to an awareness that if one strand breaks, the rest of the web weakens. Within the web, human beings exist as a single strand. In a 1848 speech attributed to Chief Seattle of the Suquamish tribe, he states, “All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”¹⁶ The contrast between the hierarchy of the ladder (descending levels of value based on power and position on the ladder) contrasts with the multi-connectional relationships within the network of the web. Depicting “man” standing at the top of the ladder (closest to God) with all other beings underneath him offers a helpful visual representation of this hierarchy. Man stands alone in his power, unaware that beneath him, all other forms of life support him.

Using the word *relationship* is crucial; it signifies familial and/or platonic interactions and connections as well as carries feminine connotations, because women associate so strongly with home and family. However, I do not intend to point or to relegate ecofeminism to the female realm only. Adams states, “Ecofeminism stresses relationship, not solely because it has been women's domain, but because it is a more viable ethical framework than autonomy for transforming structures that are environmentally destructive.”¹⁷ The relationship paradigm leads to an immediate inquiry as to why humans would want to harm or destroy someone or something with whom they have a relationship. By shifting to a relationship/web model in

¹⁵ Gary Snyder, “Ecology, Place, and the Awakening of Compassion,” in *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*, eds. Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inoue (North Atlantic Books: Berkeley, 1995), 238.

¹⁶ Quoted in- Shiva, *Earth Democracy*, 1.

¹⁷ Adams, “Introduction,” 5.

contrast to a dominance one, it becomes possible to move away from the dichotomous mindsets that designate nature as an object and resource to be studied and utilized. Again, Adams clarifies, “These dualisms represent dichotomy rather than continuity, enacting exclusion rather than inclusion.”¹⁸ Here it is important to reiterate that there is not a singular version of ecofeminism which dictates how to exist in the world, nor one way in which ecofeminism exemplifies relationship. The wide varieties of species on this planet, as well as the diverse groups of people with unique ways of being human beings, mirror by one of the central tenets of ecofeminism. Relationship and interconnectedness are essential, and the manner in which this mindset converts to praxis is varied, complex, and multidimensional. Ecofeminism is enacted in many ways in order to honor this unity in diversity.

Diversity is promoted by emphasizing respect and honor for cultural differences and unique religious and spiritual practices among people-groups. Ecofeminists acknowledge the value and wisdom found in the varied cultural practices and spiritualities found in different communities, all over the globe. This concept is linked to the “ancient wisdom”¹⁹ referred to by Diamond and Orenstein that promotes an existence in *harmony with* (as opposed to an existence which harnesses) Nature. In fact, many Western ecofeminists choose to adopt varied forms of indigenous spirituality, because of their (typical) focus on Earth-based spiritualism. Diamond and Orenstein state, “In their hope for the creation of new cultures that would live *with* the Earth, many women in the West were inspired by the myths and symbols of ancient Goddess cultures in which creation was imaged as female and the Earth was revered as sacred.”²⁰ It is important to clarify that not all ecofeminists embrace a specific version of spirituality or

¹⁸ Adams, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁹ “Introduction,” xv.

²⁰ “Introduction,” xi.

religion; instead, ecofeminism provides an open space within which to practice spirituality in many different forms, in a way that honors the land and all beings. Starhawk explains, “To say that ecofeminism is a spiritual movement, in an earth-rooted sense, means that it encompasses a dimension that profoundly challenges our ordinary sense of value, that counters the root stories of [Western] culture and attempts to shift them.”²¹

The “root stories of our culture”²² to which Starhawk refers are built on the framework of the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, which changed the common discourse surrounding the way human beings view and relate to nature. The dominant religion(s) (primarily Christianity) also played a role in the shift; within Western Christianity, a white, male God was considered to reign from atop a hierarchy of value, under which the white, European male resided, followed by white women, non-Western people, people of color, and then all other birds, beasts, and beings, according to sentience level. Considering his hierarchical positioning right underneath God, the white male positioned himself as having dominion over all other beings. Within this mindset, the practice of taking resources from the earth with no consciousness of the ramifications was acceptable and promoted; the gift of rational thought is given to man by god, which bestows onto him the unchecked power to dominate and exploit nature. Rosemary Radford Ruether notes, “This system not only contradicts the finitude of Nature but is carried out under the conditions of social domination and exploitation.”²³ The ethos of colonialism produces social domination and exploitation. Ecofeminists seek to draw attention to the ways that the dominant religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism) are utilized to

²¹ Starhawk. “Feminist, Earth-based Spirituality and Ecofeminism,” in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989), 174.

²² Ibid.

²³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 84.

undergird the exploitation of people of color, other beings, and land.

In contrast to the domination upheld by Christianity, Starhawk's description of ecofeminism captures the essence of an ecofeminist spirituality: "earth-rooted."²⁴ This rootedness reflects the way that indigenous people-groups model a way to live in harmony with the Earth. Starhawk continues, "Earth-based spiritualities celebrate the cycle of life: birth, growth, decay, death, and regeneration as it appears in the seasonal round of the year, in the moon's phases, in human, plant and animal life, always with the goal of establishing balance among all the different communities that comprise the living body of earth."²⁵ Balance represents the foundation of harmony and signifies another connection to the interdependent web of life. Using the image of the web, each string attaches in viable tension in order to remain fixed and stable. The web illustrates the relationship between all beings; if one joint of the network sustains damage or breaks, it effects the stability of the entire system.

The Green Belt Movement created and led by Wangari Maathai overtly demonstrates the characteristics of an Earth-based spirituality, even though it is not explicitly a spirituality-based organization. Moreover, this woman-led movement advocates for a return to traditional cultural practices that are life-affirming to the web of interconnection, instead of hierarchical and life-destroying. The emphasis promotes the specific methodologies and praxis of Kenyan women within this movement and centers on the importance of how these grassroots-level coalitions are carried out and why the promotion of indigenous ways is important, while offering a model for healing the earth. This thesis does not argue that each unique version of ecofeminism along with all ecofeminists must ascribe to a specific form of spirituality. To do so would be to

²⁴ "Feminist, Earth-based Spirituality and Ecofeminism," 174.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

perpetuate the ideology of Western-based systems of thought that promote the view there is only one way to be in the world; instead, by endorsing the benefits of an Earth-based spirituality, a healthier and syncretic relationship between human beings and nature becomes possible.

Ecofeminism also provides an essential lens for how women view their bodies. This is important not only on a micro and personal level, but also on a much larger scale: the manner in which women's bodies are represented in the dominant cultural paradigm mirrors the governing discourse regarding the Earth. As previously mentioned, many cultures characterized the identity of the Earth with nurturing Mother imagery, a locus and source from which basic necessities are provided and new life springs forth. Ruether states, "The material world itself is then seen as something separated from males and symbolically linked with women. The earth, as the place from which plant and animal life arises, became linked with the bodies of women, from which babies emerge."²⁶ Because of this connection between women and earth, and the established hierarchy of value (which places men atop all other beings), the dominations of women and nature are intertwined.

The power of language is again key here. It is an age-old practice in indigenous cultures to associate women with nature. Warren explains:

language that feminizes nature *in a patriarchal culture*, where women are viewed as subordinate and inferior, reinforces and authorizes the domination of nature. Mother Nature (not Father Nature) is raped, mastered, controlled, conquered, mined. Her (not his) secrets are penetrated, and her womb (men don't have one) is put into the service of the man of science (not woman of science, or simply scientist). Virgin timber is felled, cut down. Fertile (not potent) soil is tilled, and land that lies fallow is useless or barren, like a woman unable to conceive a child.²⁷

The connection between human interaction with nature and common treatment of women is

²⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature," in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams. (New York: Continuum, 1993), 16.

²⁷ *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 27.

clear: women are linked to the Earth and thus men can use them as a resource. The undervaluation of women's work and unpaid labor is an example of this.

Many indigenous cultures held the work of women in high esteem as a consequence of the close association of women and nature. Mirroring the concept of nature as mother, women provide the essentials for daily life. As primary nurturers and cultivators of the home space, bestowing the characteristics of deity on women was not uncommon. This paradigm of a female-gendered nature and the resultant respect for typical duties of women disintegrated with the arrival of the Scientific Revolution. The new model replaced the old model, in terms of valuing the traditional duties and work of women. Merchant states, "The metaphor of the earth as a nurturing mother was gradually to vanish as a dominant image as the Scientific Revolution proceeded to mechanize and to rationalize the world view...two new ideas, those of mechanism and of the domination and mastery of nature, became core concepts of the modern world."²⁸ As the image of Mother Nature disappeared, the ideology of man outside and above nature became the prevalent discourse as a new culture emerged. Plumwood asserts, "Western culture has typically denied that humanity is included in nature, and combating this denial, based on human-centeredness, is at the heart of the ecological challenge."²⁹

Indeed, the "ecological challenge" arises because of the perceived disconnection of humans as outside and over nature, when in reality, the existence of human life is dependent on the stability of all other beings. The metaphor of the interconnected web of all life provides a helpful image for this interdependent relationship. Ruether agrees, "The very word "nature" in this formula is part of the problem, because it defines nature as a reality below and separated

²⁸ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, (New York: HarperOne, 1980), 2.

²⁹ "Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism: Parallels and Politics" in *Ecofeminism: Women Culture Nature*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 349.

from 'man,' rather than one nexus in which humanity itself is inseparably embedded.”³⁰ One crucial task requires a change in the manner in which human beings view their role on this earth: from hierarchy to an awareness of embeddedness in the web. This transformation directly affects how women are viewed. Because they are associated with nature, they are “separated from man”³¹ and subsequently are devalued.

A transformation of this mindset—from above nature to within nature—will not only modify the course of Climate Change, but enables many human abuses, particularly towards women, to be identified and eliminated. Ecofeminists call attention to the way men exploit and commodify women's bodies, in much the same way that they exploit and commodify nature. Within the hierarchy of all beings, women and nature fall below males – specifically, the White, European male. Everything below white, male status is considered “Other.” Plumwood states, “The Other is not an individual but is related to as a member of a class of interchangeable items which are treated as resources to be managed to satisfy the center's need.”³² The needs of the center—specifically, the elite, white male—are met by the most vulnerable and those beings with the least rights and power: women, people of color, children, and Nature. These oppressions take the form of slavery, colonization, the international sex trade, and the abuse of the natural realm, to name just a few of the larger problems.

In particular, the bodies and work of women are exploited for profit. Because of the close association of women to Nature, these oppressive systems commodify women's bodies, designate them as expendable. In its worst practice, men (and, in usual cases, women) buy, sell, and trade women within the international sex trade. Again, the dualisms which are so prevalent

³⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature,” in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, 14.

³¹ Ibid.

³² “Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism: Parallels and Politics,” 337.

in modern Western culture underlie this horrific human rights abuse: male/female, mind/body, reason/emotion, and spirit/matter, to name a few. In these specific dualisms, women link with the lesser—to the body and matter—while men, who are (self-declared) more rational and closer to God, rank higher because of their essential characteristics which enable their supposed superiority and abilities. Warren declares, “Although all human beings, as animals themselves, are embodied and embedded in a natural environment, men and women stand in a different relationship to the natural world. The difference in human embodiment is a gendered, material, and historical phenomenon – one involving power relations around the allocation of resources.”³³

Within this model of women as closer to Nature, the whole fragments into unequal parts and stratifies into layers of value. Men with religious and political power created a God imagined in their own likeness, while women retain the status of closer to the earth and therefore, more “natural.” Susan Griffin explains, “One of the more profound ways through which we fragment wholeness is through the categories of masculine and feminine. We assign to the masculine the province of the soul, the spirit, or the transcendent, and we read the feminine as representing nature and the Earth.”³⁴ Griffin elaborates, by pointing to the ways that identifying women with the earthly realm designates them, along with people of color for home caretaking, and the dirty work. She states, “To some degree, it's a system that functions because if you don't have somebody who is earthly, who's going to make the dinner? There have to be some people in the society to do the 'dirty,' material work. If you look at hierarchies in society, it's not only women, but people defined as 'other,' people of color, Jews in European

³³ *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 26-27.

³⁴ Susan Griffin. “Curves Along the Road” in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, ed. Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 88.

tradition, who carry the burden of nature.”³⁵ In this way, the male/female, mind/body, spirit/matter dualisms benefit those who created them and create strongholds around systems of oppression. Judith Plant points to the relation of dualism to spirituality; she states, “Ecofeminist spirituality, like the traditions of Native Americans and other tribal peoples, sees the spiritual as alive in us, where spirit and matter, mind and body, are all part of the same living organism.”³⁶ This illustrates an example of utilizing the alternative lens that ecofeminism provides—the ability to see with new eyes the interconnection between imposed dualisms. Acknowledging these dualisms enables an understanding of the devaluation of the bodies and work of women.

Ecofeminists also seek to address the issue of the singular god within major religions (Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, for example), created and fashioned in the likeness of men with power. The images of both the white, blond, blue-eyed Jesus or a muscular bearded God with white skin for example, are far too common and illustrate a misrepresentation of how a Middle Eastern Jew might appear. Yet, this modified appearance is crucial, because if God or Jesus the Savior looks like those with power, that power enables domination of others. Spiritual ecofeminists work towards promoting a re-imagining of God or Spirit in the form of Woman, or Mother, or as a deity (and/or multiple deities) with both feminine and masculine attributes.

It is important to reiterate that not all ecofeminists see spirituality as essential; the focus here aims toward the ways that ecofeminists who practice an ecofeminist spirituality are shifting and re-imagining the attributes of God, and in doing so, disassembling hierarchies and dualisms which perpetuate systems of oppression. It is possible to be a secular ecofeminist and not endorse any sort of deity within religion or spirituality; on the other hand, it is also possible to

³⁵ “Curves Along the Road,” 88.

³⁶ “She is Alive in You: Ecofeminist Spirituality” in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989), 113.

adhere to fervent belief in divine presence in the world. All points between these two poles are represented by ecofeminists. In *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, Warren states, “Still others like myself claim that ecofeminist spiritualities occupy an important place in ecofeminism, even if they are not necessary to theory and practice.”³⁷ Spirituality serves as a central component of the exploration of the Green Belt Movement. The ecofeminist work of Wangari Maathai demonstrates the importance of incorporating spiritual awareness into movements that seek to restore the environment and empower women. Adams explains, “In answer to those who depict ecofeminist spirituality as escapist, we see our environmental actions as deeply related to our idea of the sacred.”³⁸

For the purposes of an examination of ecofeminism, it is important to emphasize the way that a patriarchal, dualistically-minded culture imagines God in the likeness of those with power. This structuring of religions (such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) enables hierarchies to be maintained and strengthened, while human beings commodify and abuse those non-human beings occupying the lower rungs of hierarchy. Religions that created this white and also conveniently capitalist God are forced onto native cultures in colonized regions, replacing spiritualities that demonstrate a greater understanding of interconnection and the feminine Divine, and therefore a reverence towards the environment. When the British colonizers forced their version of deity (white, male) on indigenous people in Kenya, they forced the Kikuyu to reconcile and, in some cases, replace their spiritual practice with Christianity.

A close examination of ecofeminism reveals several temptations which—if indulged—

³⁷ *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 193.

³⁸ “Introduction,” 4.

could invalidate the worth of this ideology. One problematic of ecofeminism lies within the enticement towards gender essentialism, a framework that implicitly (and, in some instances, explicitly) suggests that all women are the same and all men are the same, in ways physiological, biological, and psychological. This becomes precarious because it creates a monolithic woman (or man) – one who exists as the same across time, space, cultures, borders, and experiences. Alaine Low and Soraya Tremayne assert, “Social relations are dynamic, flexible, and subject to change, and the ideologies which serve as the basis for these relations undergo major reinterpretations in different cultural contexts.”³⁹ Essentializing African women, for example, discredits their unique, tribal identities. The GBM is a women’s and environmental movement that provides space for unique identities.

Another potential tension within ecofeminism lies in the temptation to advocate for women to assume the power that men currently hold. Ecofeminism concerns itself with highlighting the problem of promoting the masculine over the feminine and points to the ways that androcentric ideologies create negative repercussions. It remains important—instead of creating another imbalance by establishing the feminine over the masculine—to create, develop, and aim for a balance between both ends of the spectrum. Although masculinist ideology in the form of domination creates many problems, it does not provide a solution to promote the feminine over the masculine. Instead, the key lies in equity. Lastly, it is important to clarify that not all non-Western religions and spiritualities offer a harmonious view of human beings and Nature. The emphasis here demonstrates that indigenous spirituality and cultural practice, in general, and specifically within the Green Belt Movement, promote a better way of existing

³⁹ “Introduction” in *Women as Sacred Custodians of the Earth?: Women, Spirituality, and the Environment*, eds. Alaine Low and Soraya Tremayne (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 9.

in the world. The knowledge and abilities that women who participate in the GBM demonstrate contribute to a paradigm which integrates holistic principles that nurture (as opposed to destroy) the Earth.

Using ecofeminist theory as a tool for analyzing the Green Belt Movement incorporates the lens of other theoretical frameworks. Although some scholars view post-colonial theory as a separate category of analysis, it partners with ecofeminism for the purposes of this argument. In *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin state, “The environment, and attendant topics such as ecofeminism, ecological imperialism, environmentalism, speciesism have all taken an increasingly prominent place in post-colonial thought because it has become clear that there is a direct connection between colonialist treatment of indigenous flora and fauna and treatment of colonized and otherwise dominated subjects and societies.”⁴⁰ The position held within this paper situates post-colonial theory as a branch of an image of an “ecofeminist tree” and as such, post-colonial theory is employed and implied by using the framework of ecofeminist theory.

Another branch represented on the tree of ecofeminism indicates an ecofeminist ethics. Although a thorough exploration of ecofeminist ethics requires an entirely separate inquiry, the concept of “ethics of care” or Warren's description of “care-sensitive ethics”⁴¹ best describe an ecofeminist ethical model. Both models emphasize relationship and compassion, as opposed to a Kantian ethical model that dominates Western ethical ideals. Carol J. Adams states, “Ecofeminism stresses relationship, not solely because it has been women's domain, but because it is a more viable ethical framework than autonomy for transforming structures that are

⁴⁰ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, viii.

⁴¹ *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 97-123.

environmentally destructive.”⁴² Post-colonial theory and ecofeminist ethics represent two branches on the ecofeminist tree and many other frameworks, ideologies, and models represent other branches. Ecofeminism provides an overarching canopy which serves as the framework for multiple models and strategies employed in order to analyze the methodologies of the GBM.

Ecofeminism, as explained throughout this chapter, offers a lens through which to view the world that provides a more just and sustainable way of being a citizen of the Earth. In fact, it offers the option to assume the posture of citizenship with, as opposed to “lordship” over all other beings. The central tenets of ecofeminism provide a philosophy and praxis that enables human beings to participate in a healthy relationship with the Earth, while resisting the power structures that oppress women, people of color, and other beings which are commodified and abused. In her essay, “Towards an Ecological-Feminist Theology of Nature,” Ruether succinctly defines the imperative for humans; she states, “The privilege of intelligence, then, is not a privilege to alienate and dominate the world without concern for the welfare of all other forms of life. On the contrary, it is the responsibility to become the caretaker and cultivator of the welfare of the whole ecological community upon which our whole existence depends.”⁴³ Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement provide a model for how to cultivate and nurture an ecological community.

⁴² “Introduction,” 5.

⁴³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Toward an Ecological-Feminist Theology of Nature,” in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989) , 147.

CHAPTER 3

THE KIKUYU PEOPLE IN COLONIAL KENYA

In Europe, the arrival of the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions brought changes in the basic belief system of how human beings relate to the earth. Moreover, the interpretation of Scripture and practice of Christianity reshaped the ways that human beings manage and utilize land and resources. Many Europeans believed in the Christian concept of dominion,⁴⁴ which enabled human beings to exercise command and authority over the earth, including all forms of life and the land. In this new, dominant paradigm, human beings view themselves as outside of nature, as opposed to interactive and dependent parts of the community of life. Additionally, man ceased to imagine nature as a whole; instead, man viewed nature as composed of singular entities (or “resources”) which may be removed from the whole for the purpose of development and profit. Merchant explains, “this view assumes that nature can be divided into parts and that the parts can be extracted from the environmental context and rearranged according to a set of rules based on logical and mathematical operations.”⁴⁵

Consider the components of an ecosystem, which involves a wide variety of plants and animals, most of which are each dependent on the other for survival; the web provides a helpful image here, in that it signifies the links among different species, as well as represents an ontology of interconnection. The opposing stance to an understanding of interrelated points on the web leads to the over-extraction (i.e., exploitation) of parts of the whole and leads to denigration of the natural world. Ignorance or lack of concern regarding the importance of

⁴⁴ The Christian concept of “dominion” will be explored in greater detail in this chapter, as well as chapter 4.

⁴⁵ *Earthcare*, 86.

biodiversity and conservation, combined with the emphasis on the capitalist endeavors of mass production and profit, are factors that result in the general transition from subsistence farming to monoculture agriculture.

Along with the paradigm of man outside/over nature, the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions also produced a major shift in agricultural technology that provided the tools necessary to subdue, clear, and utilize significantly larger areas of land, while commodifying the production of food. This transition altered the common paradigm of food production as a subsistence endeavor.⁴⁶ Instead of planting and harvesting for local consumption, the economy shifted to growing for export profits. Within non-European cultures that saved seeds from previous plantings, cultivated multi-species crops, and consumed the harvests locally, the introduction of a European system of food as commodity created a significant economic and cultural shift in what at present scholars refer to as the Global South. It is important to clarify that prior to the introduction of industrialized agriculture, the emphasis is people grew *most* food for local consumption, not that people grew crops *exclusively* for local consumption.⁴⁷ The massive shift to production for export, introduced to the continent of Africa by colonization, created a crisis of food security.⁴⁸

Additionally, within this paradigm, environmental consequences are inevitable, as agricultural producers eliminate multi-crop plantings and crop rotation methods to make space for single-planting products for export. Transitions of this magnitude result in lasting impacts that affect people, land, economic systems, and the environment as a whole. Colonization

⁴⁶ The transition from agriculture as a subsistence project to an industrial endeavor is indicated in general terms here. It is not meant to convey that surplus for the purposes of market sale/trade was non-existent before the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions. Instead, the intention is to represent a general shift in food production, from subsistence agriculture to global market production.

⁴⁷ Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 113.

⁴⁸ Shiva, *Soil Not Oil*, 119.

provided the catalyst for enormous shifts in the Global South. This chapter focuses on the practice and consequences of colonialism, using the example of the Kikuyu people in Kenya.

Colonialism indicates the practical application of imperialism, which assumes global dominance and superiority, while exerting power and ownership over other people-groups and lands. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin state, “Edward Said offers the following distinction: 'imperialism' means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; 'colonialism,' which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory.”⁴⁹ In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Europe and England experienced the type of “progress”⁵⁰ which enabled specific nations to reach far around the globe. England, France, Spain, Belgium, and other countries on a lesser scale flexed their muscles in other regions of the world, claiming possession and control of regions in the Global South. Along with advances in large-scale food production capabilities, increased industrial-technological advancements further enabled international exploration that exceeded that of the great age of exploration and commerce beginning in the fifteenth century.

The prevalent Western discourse designated the white, European male as highest on the hierarchy of value. Subsequently, Europeans viewed the Global South and its natural resources as lesser and as an area which they designated as prime for development; the developments in transportation enabled Europeans to relocate and conquer distant area. This movement set the stage for “New Worlds” that were, in fact, old worlds long inhabited by indigenous people to be colonized. In *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, this era is also described as the

⁴⁹ *Post-Colonial Studies*, 40.

⁵⁰ Here, “progress” is used to denote increased abundance and prosperity for some, while the cost of this increase is carried by others, whose standard of living is affected negatively. In this case, “progress” is a reference to people-groups in the Global South, as affected by stripped resources and resultant denigrated environment.

“Europeanization” of the globe; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin explain, “Europeanization was chiefly effected not by governments and states, but rather by those hundreds and thousands of colonists, merchants, missionaries and adventurers who permeated the non-European world . . . it is important to understand the extent to which European imperialism is grounded on this diaspora of ordinary travelers, explorers, missionaries, fortune hunters and settlers over many centuries.”⁵¹

Colonization, the functional form of imperialism, rose to its peak intensity during the late 1800s and early 1900s. A mass exodus occurred: explorers, entrepreneurs, armies, missionaries and other types of travelers/settlers saw the regions of the world beneath the equator as undeveloped, underutilized, and inhabited by uncivilized “savages,” so they relocated in order to promote religion, increase territory, produce mass crops for export, and proclaim ownership of spaces previously shared by native people, along with their natural resources. The “scramble for Africa” in the late 1800s shows an example of these colonizing efforts, as European nations fought over and attempted to divide up the continent of Africa, while laying claim to its people and environment.⁵² Although colonizers invaded and claimed areas on the continents of Asia, Australia, South America, and Africa, within this chapter, the focus will be on the colonization of Africa, and specifically of what is currently known as the nation of Kenya.

The British settlement of Kenya peaked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They considered the land and its people an open space available for development and production and accomplished this by coercion and by force. The settlers recognized the central

⁵¹ *Post-Colonial Studies*, 112.

⁵² *Ibid.*

highland region near Mount Kenya known as the Great Rift Valley for its fertile soil and ideal climate for plantation crops. By partitioning the land, the British divided this fertile region among the settlers, while resettling most of the Kikuyu in native reserves.

Wangari Maathai, a native Kikuyu-Kenyan woman, states, “In Kenya, the British, perhaps because they did not want local people to receive competing Christian messages from denominations that were already contesting fiercely in Europe, subdivided the country and apportioned different areas to different denominations.”⁵³ While Maathai explains the division of Kenya in terms of religion, in his article “The Origins of the Kikuyu Land Problem: Land Alienation and Land Use in Kiambu, Kenya, 1895-1920” John Overton describes land seizure by British settlers as an agricultural and economic campaign. In his view, the onset of land alienation in Kenya denotes a process that occurred gradually and somewhat haphazardly, in such a manner that the Kikuyu people of Central Kenya found themselves largely landless over the course of several decades.⁵⁴

According to Overton, “Settlers would select land for themselves, usually a homestead plot, and apply to the Land Office for a deed. African rights to the land would then be checked by overworked district officials, who were supposed to ensure that there were no African occupants or, if there were, they were compensated by the settler.”⁵⁵ This process was grossly inefficient and often inaccurate⁵⁶ as the primarily agriculturalist Kikuyus utilized much of the land in the Kiambu district for grazing for their livestock. During the early colonial period, the Kiambu district refers to a large area of land in Kenya partitioned by the British that included

⁵³ *Unbowed*, 8.

⁵⁴ John Overton, “The Origins of the Kikuyu Land Problem: Land Alienation and Land Use in Kiambu, Kenya, 1895-1920,” in *African Studies Review* 31, No. 2 (September, 1988), 109-126.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

dense forests in the highlands surrounding Mt. Kenya. Kiambu district stretched East into the fertile grasslands of central Kenya. Kikuyus were the primary inhabitants of this area, but a fluid boundary signified some overlap with the pastoralist Maasai people.

In this way, Europeans Africa divided and subdivided Africa many times, both its resources and its people. Whether segmented into parts by countries competing for colonies, or by denominations competing for converts, this segmentation clearly exemplifies the fragmentary mindset held by European colonizers who viewed Africa and its people as a frontier filled with primitives needing to be tamed and overflowing with untapped resources. As Timothy Parsons describes it, “Conveniently, they assumed that tribes were less advanced than nations, and thus the British form of imperialism was moral and defensible because primitive tribesmen could not govern themselves.”⁵⁷

In a 1911 article, C.W. Hobley conveys his observations of the native people of Kenya in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, by offering a clear picture of the ways in which the British viewed native people. His report contains descriptions of Kikuyu people using phrases such as “lower planes of culture,” critiques Kikuyu spirituality as “quite suited to people at this stage of culture,” and describes those who are willing to respond to European inquiries about their spirituality as “more intelligent elders.”⁵⁸ Hobley suggests that the Kikuyus be allowed to continue to practice their own spirituality (which he consistently degrades and which he invalidates by implicating the absurdity of their beliefs throughout his article), because their beliefs “act as moral restraints, and perform the

⁵⁷ Timothy Parsons, “Being Kikuyu in Meru: Challenging the Tribal Geography of Colonial Kenya” *Journal of African History* 53 (2012), 67.

⁵⁸ C.W. Hobley, “Further Researches Into Kikuyu and Kamba Religious Beliefs and Customs,” in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 41 (Jul-Dec., 1911), 407- 432.

functions which a religion fulfills among people of a higher culture.”⁵⁹ Although Hobley's article purports to be objective, on the whole it reveals the prevailing attitude of Europeans about the “primitive” Kenyan people, whose existence necessitates improvement by European standards. Consequently, it follows that if the people are uncivilized, the land upon which they live is underutilized and mismanaged, according to conventional European measures.

The act of colonization reflects the psyche of the colonizers. Either implicit or explicit in motivation, the Europeans who invaded Africa believed themselves to be a superior race with superior knowledge, in possession of the unique ability for noesis and religious truth. In direct contrast, the colonizers believed the people-groups in Africa to be ignorant savages, who required civilizing, education, and conversion to Christianity. Shiva asserts, “In the phases of colonization, the white man's burden consisted of the need to 'civilize' the non-white peoples of the world—this meant, above all, depriving them of their resources and rights.”⁶⁰ Essentially, because of their self-perceived superiority, the colonizers sought to change the identity of the African people into their own.

In order to achieve this objective, colonizers criticized and devalued the culture and identities of the previously existing tribes, while introducing the notions of progress and development, which they defined as reshaping the various tribal cultures into a mimicry of whichever version of European societal model the colonizers brought with them. Using the example of themselves, the settlers demonstrated a Western representation of wealth to indigenous people as a framework for progress and abundance. The Community Development Department provides an example of the coercive cultural assimilation experienced by the

⁵⁹ “Further Researches Into Kikuyu and Kamba Religious Beliefs and Customs, 432.

⁶⁰ Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993), 264.

Kikuyu. The colonial government formed this organization to encourage Kenyan women to adapt to and adopt a European lifestyle; the incentives to join included access to food (which held special appeal during times of famine) and other resources.⁶¹ Cora Ann Presley explains, “One of the goals of the Community Development Department was to train Africans to be good citizens according to British standards.”⁶²

Cultural devaluation entailed a deliberate, methodical attempt by colonizing forces to demoralize and subdue native African people. Maria Mies states, “this process of acceptance of the values, lifestyle, and standard of living of 'those on top' is invariably accompanied by a devaluation of one's own: one's own culture, work, technology, lifestyle and often also philosophy of life and social institutions.”⁶³ At the same time colonizers devalued and criticized the local, indigenous cultures, they claimed, bought, and sold the land native land while removing native people or forcing them to purchase or rent what was previously owned or considered commons and shared for hunting, gathering, and subsistence cultivation.⁶⁴

Land alienation reached its full force in the mid to late 1800s, as Europeans began to arrive in Africa and see the potential for a booming export trade. Tabitha Kanogo notes that, “The territory that came to be known as Kenya became a British Protectorate in 1895. In 1920, the region was declared a colony, a status it retained till December 12, 1963 when Kenya gained its independence from Britain.”⁶⁵ Moreover, the Crown Lands Ordinance enabled British settlers to claim Kikuyu lands. Presley explains, “The enactment of the Crown Lands Ordinance of 1902 resulted in a huge expropriation of African lands by European settlers in the

⁶¹ Cora Ann Presley, “The Mau Mau Rebellion, Kikuyu Women, and Social Change,” in *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 22, No. 3 (1988), 520.

⁶² Ibid., 521.

⁶³ Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, in *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993), 56.

⁶⁴ Overton, “The Origins of the Kikuyu Land Problem,” 114.

⁶⁵ Tabitha Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya: 1900-50* (James Currey: Oxford, 2005), 2.

Kenya Protectorate: 220,000 acres by 1904; by 1912 60,000 acres had been alienated from the Kikuyu of Kiambu district.”⁶⁶ An additional Crown Lands Ordinance in 1915, she explains, “contained a provision for setting aside reserves for the exclusive use of particular tribes, but in defining where Africans could reside, the legislation's real purpose was to mark out the spaces where they could not.”⁶⁷ These demarcations created hostility—not only between settlers and tribal people, but also between the native people-groups themselves, as the reserves became overcrowded, overworked, and overgrazed. Timothy Parsons states, “Having reserved the most fertile region of the highlands for European settlers, the Kenyan government struggled to find room for an expanding, highly-entrepreneurial, Kikuyu population that had outgrown its 'native reserves'.”⁶⁸

The colonial government relocated uprooted Kikuyu to reserves. British authorities set aside this land for native people and designated them “unavailable” for taking by settlers. Eventually these regions became overcrowded and the land overused, creating a plethora of problems for and between the inhabitants. Parsons states, “Here the explosive combination of European land expropriation, privatization of reserve land for commercial agriculture, and rapid population growth raised tensions and led kinsmen to turn on each other for the same piece of land.”⁶⁹ Additionally, although the British authorities demarcated the native reserves according to tribes, as Parsons further explains, they were never “coherent tribal homelands, because their British designers could not standardize or simplify the complex mosaic of highland

⁶⁶ Cora Ann Presley, “Labor Unrest Among Kikuyu Women in Colonial Kenya” in *Women and Class in Africa*, eds. Claire Robertson and Iris Berger (Africana Publishing Company: New York, 1986), 270.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ “Being Kikuyu in Meru,” 65.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 69.

identities.”⁷⁰ The lens of the colonizer rendered British colonial leadership incapable of understanding tribal complexities, amongst many other issues.

In his article about the Kikuyu land problem, Overton also notes that prior to settlement by British agricultural entrepreneurs, very little idle and unused land existed. He states, “Land that was sought by settlers in Kiambu – not surprisingly given its fertility and recent Kikuyu expansion—was already occupied in most cases by Africans practicing bush fallowing and grazing. It was thickly cultivated in some parts and elsewhere rarely unoccupied.”⁷¹ During the early phase of colonization (1895-1920), the practice of Kaffir farming became “a common and complimentary practice on alienated land.”⁷² This model “involved cash rents paid by Africans to the landholder in return for residence, cultivation, grazing rights, and firewood.”⁷³ In this way, settlers allowed some original people to remain on the land they previously occupied, even though the common practice involved eventually relocating the native people to a reserve. Kaffir farming became the slow method of removing the land from its original inhabitants. Overton clarifies, “Thus it was possible for Africans in residence before the coming of the settlers to lose their land, though being allowed to stay (without compensation), but then to find themselves liable for “rents” to stay on land they considered their own!”⁷⁴ A mentality that views people of color as unsuitable for land ownership provides justification for uprooting the Kikuyu.

The Kaffir system continued in the early part of the twentieth century in Kiambu district and reached a breaking point when settler-owned cattle imported from Britain began to contract

⁷⁰ “Being Kikuyu in Meru,” 69.

⁷¹ Overton, “Origins of the Kikuyu Land Problem,” 111.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 113.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

diseases from African stock.⁷⁵ As a result, the settlers demanded that Africans cease grazing their cattle on “their” land. This movement began to break down the Kaffir farming system, as many Kikuyu found themselves in a position of true displacement. Overton purports, “Land was vital; land was the resource most in demand to support agriculture and pastoral expansion; but it was land that was increasingly closed off in Kiambu.”⁷⁶ The transition from Kaffir farming to landlessness was slow and confusing for the Kikuyu,⁷⁷ Ownership philosophies practiced by Europeans did not resonate within their culture. Consequently, when the British removed the Kikuyu and denied them rights to their own land it was too late, because “settlers had become entrenched, the state was firm, and the new political, economic and social order was in place.”⁷⁸ As a result of land alienation, many Kikuyu found themselves in a position of inability to produce food and obtain other necessities; subsequently, this situation compelled them to work on settler plantations.

Colonialism encouraged and promoted the disintegration of indigenous economies. A cash nexus replaced subsistence methods of food production. Purchasing food required monetary transactions, replacing a system primarily based on subsistence, as well as barter and trade. After colonizers removed land from native peoples, they required them to purchase their own land or to grow crops for export for the benefit of the British landholder. In *Unbowed*, Wangari Maathai describes how colonization affected her own family; she writes, “My father was also part of the first generation in Kenya to leave their homes and families behind to find jobs and accumulate money, which could be found only in the cash economy the British established. He, like approximately 150,000 other young Kikuyu men, migrated from the

⁷⁵ Overton, “Origins of the Kikuyu Land Problem,” 119.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Kikuyu native reserves to white-owned farms.”⁷⁹ The transition from producing food for their families to working for British landowners marked a significant transformation in the cultures of native tribes, including the Kikuyu.

The rich soil in the Kiambu district appealed to British entrepreneurs who sought to establish coffee plantations, although plantation owners also grew tea and other products for export. Overton asserts, “land here was much sought after as the fertile soils and mild, humid climate were to prove ideal for coffee and other plantation crops.”⁸⁰ The Kaffir system benefited European settlers in many ways; large swaths of forests required clearing to make room for these agricultural projects, and Kaffir (Kikuyu, in this case) farmers cleared the land upon which they were allowed to settle.⁸¹ In addition, as production expanded, the need for plantation workers increased and Kaffir farmers provided just such a workforce. As Hopley's 1911 report verifies, “The Kikuyu people form the bulk of the labour supply of the upland colonists in British East Africa.”⁸² As a result, many Kikuyus migrated to pay taxes which Claire C. Robertson states “were imposed precisely to supply the requisite labor for colonial plantations, farms, and mines.”⁸³ The land necessary to create large plantations not only required massive forest felling and a significant native labor force, but also signaled a momentous transition in economics, labor, and culture.

Colonization in Africa initiated a massive operation by European settlers described as enclosure of the commons, a concept and practice that consisted of seizure and declaration of

⁷⁹ Maathai, *Unbowed*, 13.

⁸⁰ “Origins of the Kikuyu Land Problem,” 111.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁸² “Further Researches Into Kikuyu and Kamba Religious Beliefs and Customs,” 456.

⁸³ Claire C. Robertson, “Age, Gender, and Knowledge Revolutions in Africa and the United States,” in *Journal of Women's History* 12, No. 4 (Winter 2001), 176.

rights over previously unowned lands.⁸⁴ Shiva states, “The very notion of the commons implies a resource is owned, managed, and used by the community.”⁸⁵ In some cases, indigenous people-groups shared these lands and utilized it for growing food, hunting, and grazing, while they also served as a habitat for diverse plant and animal species. The Kikuyu people in the Kiambu district provide a singularly noteworthy example of this operation. European colonizers, often with the assistance of military muscle from their country of origin, claimed ownership of these commons, demonstrating a posture of dominion and entitlement in regards to people of color and nature.⁸⁶ Shiva explains, “the word *enclosure* describes the physical exclusion of the community from their commons by 'surrounding a piece of land with hedges, ditches, or other barriers to the free passage of men and animals.’”⁸⁷ These new borders not only prevented access to essential resources by local people, but these demarcations also contributed to the disintegration of a way of life that was based on relationship: less on ownership and profit, and more on sharing and co-existence with all beings, an ontological presence demonstrated by many indigenous cultures. The British settlers exploited land, animals, and people which demonstrates a mindset which dismisses native value systems regarding land.⁸⁸ Shiva's use of the word “community” within her definition of “commons” illustrates the relational manner in which indigenous people managed resources.⁸⁹

European land-grabbing in Africa benefited the already-elite Europeans (and in some

⁸⁴ Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 83-86.

⁸⁵ Shiva, *Earth Democracy*, 21.

⁸⁶ Overton, “Origins of the Kikuyu Land Problem,” 109-126.

⁸⁷ Shiva, *Earth Democracy*, 19.

⁸⁸ It is important to note that use of the word “commons” bears similarities to the concept of “frontier” in the western United States, where indigenous North Americans resided and utilized the land. Western men viewed this frontier as open and available, displacing the Native Americans who lived on the land. Therefore, it is imperative to use the word “commons” with great intention and with attention to the cultural and historical implications of referring to a space inhabited by First People.

⁸⁹ Shiva, *Earth Democracy*, 21.

cases Africans, who benefited from assimilation to European culture), while harming and ultimately *creating* the poor. Shiva expounds, “Productivity was defined from the perspective of the rich and powerful, not from that of the commoner, and valued only profits and the benefit to the market, not nature's sustainability or people's sustenance.”⁹⁰ As Europeans assumed ownership of common areas and the numbers of native people displaced from their homes surged, their ability to provide fundamental daily necessities for their families diminished. Shiva continues, “The more the powerful gained economic and political power from the growing market economy, the more they dispossessed the poor and enclosed their common property. And the more the poor were dispossessed of their means to provide their own sustenance, the more they had to turn to the market to buy what they had formerly produced themselves.”⁹¹ In summary, the colonizers took Kikuyu land and forced the inhabitants to live on crowded reserves while working for cash on settler plantations, in order to pay the colonial taxes imposed upon them and in order to purchase food.

In addition to the negative repercussions pertaining to indigenous peoples' ability to provide food, shelter, and other daily essentials for their families and livestock, the enclosure of the commons also produced negative effects within the sphere of nature: land, plants, and animals. The imposition of the agricultural methods of the colonizers created a situation in which monoculture crops grown for export replaced subsistence farming. In order to “create space” for non-native crops of tea, coffee, cocoa, rubber, eucalyptus, and other products for foreign markets, the colonizers clear-cut or burned massive areas of land. Landowners leveled

⁹⁰ *Earth Democracy*, 20.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

forests and converted grasslands into plantations.⁹² Andy Smith explains, “land which formerly supported local subsistence has been appropriated by imperialist countries to produce export crops for the First World.”⁹³ This economic transition resulting in native people increasingly working for low wages forces laborers to purchase food which was formerly self-produced. The outcome is hunger, malnourishment, and poverty.

Colonial land alienation, forest clear-cutting, the removal of native people from access to grazing lands, and large-scale monoculture agricultural practices spawned difficulties in obtaining daily essentials—not only food, but also timber for construction and firewood.⁹⁴ Warren asserts, “Blatant disregard for the culture and health of indigenous peoples is intimately connected with the destruction of the forests and land that constitute their homes.”⁹⁵ The Kikuyu illustrate the link between the eviction of people dependent on their land and scarcity and impoverishment. This tribe found their way of being in the world segmented, along with their land.

The denigration of culture and the imposition of religion by foreign missionaries shows another way colonialism affected native. The introduction of Christianity, a religion based on the representation of a single white, male deity, to people-groups of color who previously practiced earth-based spiritualities demonstrates another distinct form of destruction. Again, the self-perceived superiority of European missionaries motivated them to demand conversions to Christianity. The enticement of education presents one method used to draw native Africans into a setting in which colonizers promoted religion. Missionaries operated schools provided for

⁹² Overton, “Origins of the Kikuyu Land Problem,” 114.

⁹³ Andy Smith, “Ecofeminism Through An Anticolonial Framework,” in *Ecofeminism: Women Culture Nature*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 27.

⁹⁴ Overton, “Origins of the Kikuyu Land Problem,” 120.

⁹⁵ *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 6.

Africans, thus linking education and religion. In his article “Religious Conversion in Africa,” Nathan Nunn writes, “The provision of education soon became the main reward used by missionaries to lure Africans into the Christian sphere, and so much so that even by the late colonial period, nearly all education was still provided by missionaries.”⁹⁶

The primary intentions of these missionary schools were not to provide schooling equivalent to a European education model. Instead, colonial education sought to shape Africans into who the colonizers wanted them to be: Christian workers who served the purpose of colonial Europeans. Theodore Natsoulas asserts, “The philosophical foundation for British educational policy in Kenya in the 1920s was . . . to create a small semi-literate indigenous population of ‘good’ Christians.”⁹⁷ The underlying premise “was that the Kikuyu would remain in agriculture and either work on a large European settler farm or on his own plot indefinitely.”⁹⁸ Because of this mentality, the British provided Kenyans just enough education to learn basic English, rudimentary skills, and for the purpose of missionaries gaining access to their souls, while preparing them to be able to work in the fields on plantations. Essentially, the British created workers in these schools.

Educating African women and girls added another purpose. Kanogo states, “Missions endeavoured to produce moderately literate girls steeped in Christian ideals and suitable as wives for Christian men.”⁹⁹ However, beginning in the late 1920s, the Kikuyu began to demand from the colonial government that they be allowed to form their own schools independent of Europeans. These schools increased slowly in numbers due to opposition from the British. In

⁹⁶ Nathan Nunn, “Religious Conversion in Africa” in *The American Economic Review* 100, No. 2 (May 2010), 147.

⁹⁷ Theodore Natsoulas, “The Kenyan Government and the Kikuyu Independent Schools: From Attempted Control to Suppression, 1929-1952,” in *The Historian* 60.2 (Winter 1998), 289.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya*, 203.

spite of this contention, the native schools appealed to the Kikuyu because of their emphasis on indigenous culture.¹⁰⁰

In some regions of Africa, colonizers would not interact with native people within the realms of education, government, and economy unless they showed signs of interest or progress in converting to European culture, including participating in the colonial economy and converting to Christianity. Wangari Maathai explains a common method of proselytization, as conveyed by the Kikuyus, her native tribe; she states, “Initially, the missionaries would instruct small groups of adults in reading – only after they had converted to Christianity – but quite rapidly they established schools.”¹⁰¹ Since the association of education with wealth was strong, per the example of the white settlers, Africans were enticed by education. Regarding the primary goal of education sponsored by the colonizers, Wamagatta asserts, “their aim was not to educate Africans to compete with the white man, but rather to equip them to become useful subjects of the crown.”¹⁰² For the African, “useful subjects of the crown” indicated a posture of conformity, obedience, and service to the white man. Often, education from the missionaries and the schools they established along with appropriation of the culture they represented resulted in minor positions of leadership within the colonial government for native Kenyans. In this manner, the British rewarded conversion to Christianity and assimilation into European culture.¹⁰³

Converting an entire people-group to a different religion or spirituality is a complex endeavor, especially the conversion of the Kikuyus. Christianity differed in many ways from

¹⁰⁰ Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya*, 289.

¹⁰¹ Maathai, *Unbowed*, 8.

¹⁰² Evanson N. Wamagatta, “Changes of Government Policies Towards Missions Education in Colonial Kenya and Their Effects on the Missions: The Case of the Gospel Missionary Society,” in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 38, Fasc. 1 (2008), 4.

¹⁰³ Maathai, *Unbowed*, 11.

the common forms of spiritual beliefs practiced by native Kenyans, and it benefited the colonizer to promote this religion in the shape it took within the colonial time period. The British missionaries described the image of the white, male God of Christianity in the likeness of the colonizers themselves, and as such, it was believed that this representation gave the colonizers full reign to assert dominion over the lands and people. Sallie McFague notes, “God is imaged as king, lord, and patriarch of a kingdom that he rules, a kingdom hierarchically ordered.”¹⁰⁴ This image contrasts to native polytheistic spiritualities which contained representations of the feminine divine and emphasis on ancestral influence, as well as animistic representations which were criticized and devalued by colonizers. Maathai states, “From the moment they set foot on foreign shores, colonial forces demonized and marginalized the religious practices of those they conquered and occupied.”¹⁰⁵

In her memoir, Maathai provides descriptions of ways that the Kikuyu practiced their spirituality. Mount Kenya served as prominent feature in the landscape of the central highlands where the Kikuyu lived. Kikuyus considered the mountain to be God's (the Kikuyu term for God is Ngai) home and it served as a reminder of Ngai's presence and provision. Maathai states, “Everything good came from it: abundant rains, rivers, streams, clean drinking water. Whether they were praying, burying their dead, or performing sacrifices, Kikuyus faced Mount Kenya, and when they built their houses, they made sure the doors looked towards it.”¹⁰⁶ Even during the Mau Mau Rebellion, the Kikuyu fighters considered the densely forested hillsides

¹⁰⁴ Sallie McFague, “An Earthly Theological Agenda,” in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 90.

¹⁰⁵ Wangari Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World* (New York: Double Day, 2010), 95.

¹⁰⁶ *Unbowed*, 5.

that served to conceal the rebel army a gift from God.¹⁰⁷

The Kikuyu also performed rituals to celebrate the sowing of seeds, harvests, and rainfall. Teresia Hinga states, “Before planting in the soil, they routinely perform rituals signifying their awareness that the act of using the land is privilege they owe to Ngai.”¹⁰⁸ They considered abundant rain resulting in plentiful harvests to originate from Mount Kenya. As the home of Ngai, the Kikuyu considered Mount Kenya a sacred location. Within Kikuyu spiritual tradition, any person intending to climb the mountain must do so barefoot, “even those elders with spiritual authority.”¹⁰⁹

Maathai describes another spiritual Kikuyu ritual performed after childbirth. Women in the community gathered full bunches of unblemished bananas, sweet potatoes, and blue-purple sugarcane from their own gardens to signify wholeness and wellness and “to introduce the infant to the land of the ancestors and conserved a world of plenty and good that came from the soil.”¹¹⁰ In anticipation of the birth, the mother fattened a lamb that slept and ate inside the home. While the women collected their offerings from the soil, the new father sacrificed the lamb and roasted a piece of the flesh. Along with a portion of the roasted lamb, the mother chewed small pieces of the offerings (lamb, bananas, sweet potatoes, sugarcane) and put some of the juices from her own mouth into the mouth of the newborn child. Maathai states, “This would have been my first meal. Even before breast milk, I would have swallowed the juice of green bananas, blue-purple sugarcane, sweet potatoes, and fattened lamb, all fruits of the local

¹⁰⁷ Teresia Hinga, “The Gikuyu Theology of Land and Environmental Justice,” *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion*. ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 179.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁰⁹ Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 79.

¹¹⁰ *Unbowed*, 4.

land. I am as much a product of my native soil as I am of my father . . .”¹¹¹

The Kikuyu myth of origin also imparts an awareness of dependence and reverence for their land. In this cosmology, Ngai showed the primordial parents, Gikuyu and Mumbi, the land for them to settle surrounding Mount Kenya. Gikuyu and Mumbi had ten daughters and when the time arrived for them to marry, Gikuyu performed a sacred ritual under a fig tree (mugumo). Ngai told him to instruct his daughters to go into the forest and each cut a stick which represented her height. When the daughters returned with their sticks, Gikuyu performed another ceremony under the mugumo tree, in which he built an alter using the daughters' sticks and sacrificed a lamb. From this ceremonial fire, ten husbands emerged. These ten families became the ten clans represented within the Kikuyu people-group.¹¹²

The spiritual practices of the Kikuyu demonstrated a reverence for land which exemplified a social and ethical respect for the earth. Hinga states, “The ethical and social ideals of the Agikuyu made it possible for them to have a balanced relationship with nature and with one another.”¹¹³ However, when colonizers arrived and imposed Christianity on the Kikuyu, the paradigm represented by balance began to shift. Missionaries insisted that God did not reside on Mount Kenya, as the Kikuyu believed, but lived in heaven and could be worshiped only in a house created for him. This transition from Ngai, who resided on the Earth, to a God who dwelled “up in heaven” marked an alteration in the way that Kikuyus practiced relationship to the Earth. It follows that if God is not located on the earth, the sense of accessibility of deity shifts and produces a mentality that separates humans from the earth in the quest to be near to God. Maathai relates this concept to destruction of the land; she explains, “Hallowed

¹¹¹ *Unbowed*, 4.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 4-5.

¹¹³ “The Kikuyu Theology of Land and Environmental Justice,” 175.

landscapes lost their sacredness and were exploited as the local people became insensitive to the destruction, accepting it as a sign of progress.”¹¹⁴

In extreme cases, missionaries practiced “divinicide.” Bilinda Straight's article “Killing God: Exceptional Moments in the Colonial Missionary Encounter” explores the account of Anglican missionary John Scudder, who worked among the Samburu people in northern Kenya. Scudder believed that in order to convert the Samburu to Christianity, he must disprove the existence of their divinities; eventually, he went to a sacred space where the Samburu believed the god Nkai resided and fired his rifle into the cave, thus “disproving his existence” by shooting “Nkai's house or even Nkai itself.”¹¹⁵ The spectrum of missionary influence—from education to divinicide—imposed a major cultural shift, a disturbance from traditional indigenous spiritual belief and practice.

Indigenous religious/spiritual practices and values enabled native peoples to exist within a more reciprocal relationship to the natural world, specifically in comparison to the European version of Christianity. To be clear, a singular, monolithic religion/spirituality did not exist on the continent of Africa prior to the imposition of Christianity by European missionaries. A variety of expressions of spirituality also exist(ed)—often differing between families or tribes; within the values embodied by diverse spiritualities, a significantly healthier, syncretic relationship between human beings and the Earth represents the common paradigm. Though the belief system of the Kikuyus is unique, it offers a view into the general mindset of people-groups who bestow(ed) respect and reverence (and in many cases, divine characteristics) to the natural world.

¹¹⁴ *Unbowed*, 6.

¹¹⁵ Bilinda Straight, “Killing God: Exceptional Moments in the Colonial Missionary Encounter” in *Current Anthropology* 49, No. 5 (October 2008), 837.

In addition to cultural destruction, the imposition of Christianity upon the African continent introduced a new mentality and practice as to how humans relate to the rest of the natural world. Along with the fragmentation that allows plant and animal species to be extracted from environs as mere pieces (disassociated from the whole), some colonizers promoted the concept of dominion. According to this worldview, which originates from a specific mode of interpretation of the Bible, some believe that man is given dominion by God over land, animals, plants, along with women and people of color.¹¹⁶

Within the first two chapters of the book of Genesis, the Bible states that God created all things, and gives “man” responsibility to steward all that was created: nature.¹¹⁷ Genesis 1:26 states, “Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'”¹¹⁸ An analysis of this passage produces two separate, prevailing conclusions. One gives man ultimate authority over all that God created. The other interprets the text to reveal an authority likened to that of a conscientious ruler, offering protection and provision for all subjects.

Interpreting the text with a pre-existing bias towards hierarchy leads to a conclusion of human dominance over all other beings and land. It follows that from a colonial perspective, because of the close association of women and people of color to nature (ex. referring to indigenous persons as “savages”), the colonizers assume these “beings” also to be under the directives of European men. A sincere, deeply-held belief in authority undergirded by a patriarchal religious spirituality legitimates this form of oppression. In addition, the Christian

¹¹⁶ Genesis 1-2 (New International Version).

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ (New International Version).

notion of God in heaven (as opposed to residing on earth) imparts a detached mentality in terms of the relationships between humans and the land. Adams states, “When patriarchal spirituality associates women, body, and nature, and then emphasizes transcending the body and transcending the rest of nature, it makes oppression sacred.”¹¹⁹ Colonization provides one expression of the unhealthy interpretations of Western Christianity and an example of shaping sacred texts to fit the oppressor's agenda. Destruction and poverty are the outcome of the hierarchy represented in the colonizer's expression of Christianity.

The link between colonization and poverty lies underneath the obvious symptoms. As Europeans imposed religious, economic, and cultural assimilation on African people and demanded conversion to the colonizer's religion, abundance and a prosperous way of life were implied benefits. Instead, the breakdown of culture combined with the devaluation of native spirituality resulted in increased poverty. One of the most significant consequences of this transition is impoverishment due to desecration and destruction of the environment. As the colonizers invaded and took the land, they cleared enormous amounts of forests and grasslands, in order to establish (primarily, but not limited to) tea and coffee plantations for export.¹²⁰ The loss of local forests along with land alienation and relocation of most of the Kikuyu population produced a distinct and sizable impact on native people - in particular women, who are in general responsible for providing daily needs for their households. Overton states, “The loss of forests meant more than lost grazing. Timber was very scarce in the reserves, and some resorted to obtaining firewood and building materials from settlers in return for labor.”¹²¹ Importantly, not only did British settlers seize the land from the Kikuyus, they also cleared forests and

¹¹⁹ Adams. “Introduction,” 1.

¹²⁰ Overton, “The Origins of the Kikuyu Land Problem,” 114.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

subsequently required Kikuyus to work for them to access what the felled forests and transformed grasslands had previously provided.

Warren articulates why the clearance and disappearance of forests affects women in particular; she states, “in the [Global] South, women are typically more dependent than men on tree and forest products, and they are the primary sufferers of forest resource depletion. Trees provide five essential elements in these household economies: food, fuel, fodder, products for the home (including building materials, household utensils, gardens, dyes, medicines), and income-generating activities.”¹²² Tabitha Kanogo describes the domestic duties required from women and girls, specifically with reference to typical household manual food production; it was very uncommon for homesteads to possess any technology to aid with agriculture, such as a plow. She states, “Food production too was a large part of the work routine in all homesteads . . . The same was true of the whole agricultural process, including digging, weeding, harvesting, shelling, threshing, and winnowing. All these, except digging, were done manually.”¹²³ Women held the primary responsibilities for cultivating food sources and providing nourishment for their families. Carolyn Clark asserts, “Kikuyu women were responsible for most of the planting, day-to-day care, and harvesting of crops, while men did the heavy work of clearing and breaking the ground for first planting.”¹²⁴ As men increasingly worked wage labor positions, the duties of women expanded. In addition to assuming all of the daily tasks at home, women commonly worked on settler farms. Presley explains, “Thousands of Kikuyu women became involved in new forms of agricultural labor, and the double burden of indigenous agricultural production and labor for European farmers became part of the economic realities of

¹²² *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 4.

¹²³ Kanogo. *African Womanhood in Kenya*, 229.

¹²⁴ Carolyn M. Clark. “Land and Food, Women and Power, in Nineteenth Century Kikuyu” in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 50, No. 4 (1980), 364.

their lives.”¹²⁵

As trees become more scarce, the duties of women within their household become more difficult as it was/is still necessary to produce the same results, with decreased accessibility. Warren states, “In highly deforested areas, the situation for women is the worst, since women must devote more time to collecting fuelwood, thereby reducing the time available to do other activities.”¹²⁶ Environmental degradation and poverty are joined together, and this connection impacts women and children inordinately.¹²⁷ Meike Spitzner adds, “In developing countries, environmental degradation caused by climate change will affect poor women disproportionately, since as a gendered reproductive labour force, they are primary, hands-on, natural resource users.”¹²⁸ Evidence of a patriarchal system reveals that the work, struggles, and needs of women are not only undervalued, but also overlooked.

The advent of colonialism in the late nineteenth century altered Kenya by inflicting economic, cultural, and environmental destruction. Transitions from subsistence food production by indigenous people to settler-owned plantation wage labor reshaped the manner in which the Kikuyu (and many other tribal people-groups in Africa) lived out their days and provided sustenance for their families. Additionally, environmental degradation as a consequence of land mismanagement and abuse generated further problems for indigenous people. Devaluation of culture through missionary-influenced education and pressures to conform to the colonial version of civilization dismantled previous ideologies of native Kenyans. After Kenya obtained its independence in 1963, the post-colonial reality of denuded

¹²⁵ “Labor Unrest Among the Kikuyu Women in Colonial Kenya,” 256.

¹²⁶ Warren. *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 4.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹²⁸ Meike Spitzner, “How Global Warming Is Gendered: A View from the EU,” in *Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice: Women Write Political Ecology* (New York: Pluto Press, 2009), 223.

tribal identities, unsustainable food production systems, land ownership and access crises, and terrain damage produced the conditions which necessitate a new way of being in the world.

CHAPTER 4

WANGARI MAATHAI AND THE GREEN BELT MOVEMENT

The life story of Wangari Maathai illustrates the link between colonialism, environmental degradation, Climate Change, and empowering women through her childhood experiences, educated observations, and the movement she built around concern for women, her Kikuyu tribe, and the continent of Africa. Her story and work demonstrate a response to the massive environmental and cultural changes that occurred in Kenya as a result of European colonialism enacted primarily by Britain. During the late nineteenth century, colonial forces entered the region, established dominance, and began a process of removing the land from the Kikuyu people and other tribes. Missionary-run schools provided for indigenous people existed to create “useful subjects for the crown”¹ as well as indoctrinating their students in Christianity. Kenya gained its independence from Britain in 1963. After independence, native people attempt to deal with the existence of a post-colonial nation: dismantled traditional ways of life, obscured tribal identities and spiritualities, and the severely altered landscape, as a result of agricultural methods introduced by the British.

In 1938, E.P. Stebbing wrote an article titled “The Man-Made Desert in Africa: Erosion and Drought” which was published in the *Journal of the Royal African Society*. Within the report, published during the last quarter of a century of colonization, Stebbing details the types of environmental damage he witnessed occurring in Africa as a result of changes in land use.²

The conquering of native Kenyans and their land created a disturbance in traditional subsistence

¹ “Changes of Government Policies Towards Missions Education in Colonial Kenya and Their Effects on the Missions,” 4.

² E.P. Stebbing, “The Man-Made Desert in Africa: Erosion and Drought” in *Journal of the Royal African Society* 37, No. 146 (January 1938), 3-40.

farming methods that enforced a new economy and way of life on indigenous groups.³

Additionally, this new way of doing agriculture damaged the land.

Stebbing's 1938 report is clear: as a result of irresponsible agricultural practices, the Sahara desert invaded inhabited and farmed areas and with its approach came the loss of arable soil. He names several factors that encouraged this desertification, including clearance of large forests for the establishment of tea and coffee plantations.⁴ According to Stebbing, this deforestation led to decreased windbreak, loss of plant and animal diversity and essential soil nutrients, extensive erosion, flooding, diminishing water availability, and approaching sand dunes, to name a few.⁵ He details the effects of erosion, stating, "With the dispersal of the top soil the area loses its fresh fertility; subsequent continued cropping of the soil leading to increasing impoverishment of the soil layers capable of production, the drying up of water supplies and lowering of the water table, with the final formation of a desert."⁶ To summarize, the loss of trees and decreased natural areas enabled desertification.

Stebbing articulates who receives the blame for desertification and land degradation. Again, his report reveals the colonizing mentality; Stebbing states, "It has been said in some quarters that the education, now being so liberally given to the African, will result in his becoming soil-conscious, and that he will become aware of the present wasteful methods of soil utilization which have come down to him from his ancestors."⁷ Even though in previous sections of his article, he addressed the damage caused by overgrazing, forest felling, and other factors, the author's core point states that "the Administration" needs to further regulate how

³ Hinga, "The Gikuyu Theology of Land and Environmental Justice," 176.

⁴ Stebbing, "The Man-Made Desert in Africa: Erosion and Drought," 10.

⁵ Ibid., 3-40.

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Ibid., 26.

Africans do agriculture in order to prevent further damage.⁸ His report establishes a clear link between human activities (overgrazing, deforestation, and land clearance for plantations) and the problem of erosion-induced desertification, although it fails to acknowledge the colonial origins of said issues. Stebbing fails to mention the situation of overcrowding on reserves and the imposition of settler farms on indigenous land, which perpetuated the overgrazing and overcultivation problem. Though significantly short-sighted, Stebbing's report recounts the reality of a significant and expansive quandary, in which the encroaching desert threatens arable land, soil quality, and potable water sources.

The invading sand, unboundaried by the removal of the natural blockades that tree stands provide replaced green with the colorless yellow of desert. Wangari Maathai's endeavors address the same problems Stebbing described decades after his 1938 article was published, though she offers a different perspective on the origin and repercussions of desertification. Through her life and work, Maathai chose to advocate for the environment and her fellow Kenyans by working for environmental preservation, restoration, and women's empowerment. The ideologies Maathai put into practice through the Green Belt Movement include practices that expose and address issues from the root cause, dismantle hierarchies by valuing women, their work, and all life forms, and challenge the patriarchal colonial ethos. The grassroots, non-governmental organization she produced created opportunities for Kenyan women and men to generate income, acknowledge and value tribal identities and virtues, and restore the damaged terrain of their homeland.

A vision for how to combat environmental degradation formed within Maathai slowly and took many years to materialize. Maathai grew up and completed her grade school

⁸ Stebbing, "The Man-Made Desert in Africa: Erosion and Drought," 26.

education at a missionary school operated by Catholic missionaries in Kenya; after earning her undergraduate and master's degrees in the United States from 1960-1966, Maathai returned to her home country to find things significantly changed, particularly in the village where she grew up in the central highlands near Mt. Kenya. It was during Maathai's term of study in the US that Kenya finally achieved independence from colonial rule. In May of 1963 Kenya held the first elections for government representatives; independence was made official on December 12 of the same year.⁹

The “Mau Mau Emergency,” as labeled by the British, described the insurrection by native Kenyans against British colonial rule in the early 1950s and also served as an impetus for Kenyan independence. Although the colonial government labeled the indigenous fighters “Mau Maus,” the rebels referred to themselves as the “Land and Freedom Party,” a reference to their opposition to land alienation and the native reserve system.¹⁰ Parsons describes, “Forced to scratch out an existence in the overcrowded Kikuyu heartland, unwelcoming foreign reserves, restrictive settler farms, or the Nairobi slums, a generation of desperate young Kikuyu concluded that they had nothing to lose in taking up arms.”¹¹ During the revolt, estimates state that the British imprisoned most of the Kikuyu people, including women, at some point for Mau Mau participation. Parsons continues, “Eventually, almost the entire Kikuyu population of Kenya was either in detention or under close supervision in fortified strategic villages.”¹² The participation of women in the rebellion came as such a surprise to the colonial administration that a guarded facility had to be built to house the female insurgents.¹³ However, Maathai knew

⁹ Maathai, *Unbowed*, 53-118.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹¹ Parsons, “Being Kikuyu in Meru,” 84.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Presley, “The Mau Mau Rebellion, Kikuyu Women, and Social Change,” 512.

and recognized the strength and resilience of Kikuyu women and provided an avenue for women to engage this power for the benefit of their communities, the degraded environment of their homeland, and themselves.

During the early 1950s, Maathai received her grade school education at St. Cecelia's, a residential missionary school in Nyeri, her hometown. Her association with the missionary school largely insulated her from the Mau Mau rebellion. However, Maathai states, “there were very few Kikuyu families whose lives the Mau Mau rebellion did not directly affect.”¹⁴ British guards arrested Maathai once on her way to school. She described the conditions of the internment camp to which she was sent as “horrible—designed to break people's spirits and self-confidence and instill sufficient fear that they would abandon their struggle.”¹⁵ In *Unbowed* Maathai conveys that according to available information, a total of 32 white settlers died as a result of Mau Mau activities, while it is estimated that over 100,000 Africans (mostly Kikuyus) may have died in concentration camps and emergency villages.¹⁶

Fortunately, the Mau Mau Rebellion of the 1950s did not prevent the young Maathai's education at St. Cecilia's and later Loreto Girls High School,¹⁷ which led to her opportunities to receive higher education in the United States at Mount St. Scholastica in Kansas for her undergraduate degree, followed by a masters in biology at the University of Pittsburgh. While she was studying in Pittsburgh, Kenya finally achieved its independence from Britain. After the completion of her degrees Maathai returned to a much-altered Kenya to fill a research assistant position to a professor of zoology at the University of Nairobi. Immediately, she encountered sexism and tribalism at the University, a divisiveness she would encounter many more times

¹⁴ Maathai, *Unbowed*, 63.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 67-8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁷ Both were Catholic missionary schools.

throughout her life. In 1967, she left for twenty months to pursue her doctorate in Germany.¹⁸

Despite the demands of her research position and continuing studies, she often visited her family in her hometown. Maathai states “when I went home to visit my family in Nyeri, I had another indication of the changes under way around us. I saw rivers silted with topsoil, much of which was coming from the forest where plantations of commercial trees had replaced indigenous forest. I noticed that much of the land that had been covered by trees, bushes, and grasses when I was growing up had been replaced by tea and coffee.”¹⁹ Maathai also remembered that the colonial government deforested large tracts of land for the benefit of the timber industry and large-scale monoculture farming. Evidence of this ecological transition shows in the scarcity of drinking water, frequent landslides, and nutrient deficiency of the soil, which leads to inadequate and inefficient food production for those native people dependent on subsistence methods.²⁰ Although Kenya was independent from British authority after 1963, the impact of colonialism endured. Kathleen P. Hunt explains, “Urged to maintain the economic development spurred by colonial rule, Kenya, like many African countries, continued or expanded its trade in unsustainable resources including timber, coal, coffee, and tea.”²¹ This “development” entails benefits for the already elite, while damaging the land and increasing poverty. Plantation owners reaped the financial rewards from the work of native people on their farms.

Maathai's observations in her hometown impacted her deeply and her life's work began to unfold. As a consequence of her academic and research focus in science, Maathai saw the

¹⁸ Maathai, *Unbowed*, 95.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁰ Maathai's observations provide a personal account which verifies the 1938 report by E.P. Stebbing.

²¹ Kathleen P. Hunt. “It's More Than Planting Trees, It's Planting Ideas': Ecofeminist Praxis in the Green Belt Movement” in *Southern Communication Journal* 79, No. 3 (2014), 239.

cause-effect relationship between the lack of trees and the environmental degradation that resulted in increasing levels of poverty, especially among women and children. Through observation and study, she connected that the loss of trees created many problems for domestic life, specifically the work of women—lack of firewood for cooking, absence of animal species for food that previously lived in forests, and insufficient space and soil quality for growing food. Maathai explains, “Many farmers had converted practically all of their land into growing coffee and tea to sell in the international market. These 'cash crops' were occupying land previously used to produce food for people to eat.”²² As a result, nutritional deficiencies and diseases associated with malnutrition were/are prevalent in rural areas. These problems contrasted to Maathai's experiences as a child in rural Kenya, which she describes as a time without a Western concept of wealth, but with rudimentary plenty.²³ In her childhood Kikuyu community, hunger and malnutrition was not a common experience. The commercialization of agriculture contributed to this transition into widespread poverty. Maathai grew increasingly concerned about the environmental, social, and health issues she observed.

In the early 1970s, Maathai joined the National Council of Women of Kenya and over time, her membership responsibilities increased until organizers asked her to assume a position of leadership. The leaders expressed concern about the majority of the members, who were primarily poor, rural women—specifically “their access to clean water and firewood, how they would feed their children, pay their school fees, and afford clothing.”²⁴ The National Council of Women in Kenya meetings confirmed Maathai’s suspicions. These poor rural women “didn't have enough wood for fuel or fencing, fodder for their livestock, water to cook with or drink, or

²² Maathai, *Unbowed*, 123.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

enough for themselves or their families to eat.”²⁵ The relationship between poverty and the condition of the land became more obvious as Maathai continued to observe the effects of monoculture farming and disregard for the status of indigenous people. Maathai states “as I sat listening to the women talk about water, energy, and nutrition, I could see that everything they lacked depended on the environment.”²⁶

Deep concern for Kenya and the struggle she witnessed in the lives of rural women inspired Maathai to action. Over the course of years of observation and interaction with rural women, Maathai pieced together the relationship between large-scale agricultural methods, erosion and land degradation, and poverty. This discovered link offered a potential solution: planting trees. Trees, she said, would “provide a supply of wood that would enable women to cook nutritious foods. They would also have wood for fencing and fodder for cattle and goats. The trees would offer shade for humans and animals, protect watersheds and bind the soil, and, if they were fruit trees, provide food. They would also heal the land by bringing back birds and small animals and regenerate the vitality of the earth.”²⁷ Identifying this solution provided the first step, and in the years that followed, Maathai created a movement from the ground up, through a tumultuous trial and error process.

Over the next decade, Maathai's vision involving, trees, women, and environment evolved into a grassroots movement. Although several of her first attempts to begin official work failed due to lack of funding, the Green Belt Movement emerged from these roots.²⁸ Obstacles for funding included political obstruction and the withdrawal of support from the Kenyan Department of Forestry. As Maathai adopted and created methods that were effective in

²⁵ Maathai, *Unbowed*, 124.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

post-colonial Kenya, she used the failures to shape an appropriate, unique, and effective methodology. During this time of growth (the late 1970s and early 1980s) Maathai got married and gave birth to three children, earned her Ph.D. in veterinary medicine, taught at the University of Nairobi, and served in various government, environmental, and women's organizations, to name a few. Throughout all of this work, Maathai grew the Green Belt Movement.

The Green Belt Movement began small and embodies many of the characteristics of grassroots mobilization: local on-the-ground leadership, immediate, small-scale returns, effective social change, incorporation of local culture and concepts, and other region-specific features. On Earth Day in 1977, Maathai planted seven trees to honor seven Kenyans from different ethnic groups – these were the first official “green belt.” The movement spread out into rural villages, with Nairobi operating as its base. Through trial and error, Maathai, along with other members of the Green Belt Movement, developed a plan and methodology that was the most effective in fighting desertification, enriching and repairing the environment, and empowering women and their communities.

Originally, Maathai enlisted the Kenyan Department of Forest to provide free seedlings, which became a problem when the movement expanded. Over time, the demand surpassed the supply and the professional government foresters noticed that rural, uneducated women were, in essence, as effective as they were in growing trees. The Department of Forestry eventually withdrew its support and Maathai came up with a new plan: the GBM began to grow their own trees from seeds. When the professional foresters challenged Maathai about the inevitable failure inherent in teaching rural women how to plant trees, she began to call the successful

women “foresters without diplomas.”²⁹ Soon, these women trained by GBM started to show other women how to plant trees, and tree nurseries spruing up in other villages. These “foresters without diplomas” used the trees not only to enrich the ecosystems on their own properties and on the land around their villages, but they also planted, watered, nurtured, and then sold the seedlings which—though small—provided a valuable source of revenue. GBM also compensated them with a small amount, the equivalent (then) of four U.S. cents a tree.³⁰ This provided significant motivation for women struggling to sustain their families and demonstrates the ingenuity of Maathai through her creation of income for women while facilitating environmental restoration.

In addition to compensation and remedial measures for the damaged land, Maathai taught and urged the women to collect seeds from native trees in their region, to avoid uniform plantings across Kenya. This element of the GBM methodology illustrates a consciousness that disavows fragmentation and inspires diversity. Maathai states, “we did not want exotic species and not millions of the same tree spread across Kenya . . . so we told the women to collect seeds in the forests and their fields and try to grow trees native to their area.”³¹ An emphasis on native trees and plants illustrates an important factor in environmental restoration that provides ecosystems the opportunity to regenerate. In this way, the Green Belt Movement promoted the importance of biodiversity and enriching of local environs—a scientific necessity for the processes of restoring the environment.

Maathai describes these “foresters without diplomas” as incredibly resourceful. For example, in the absence of funds to buy appropriate supplies, the women used broken pieces of

²⁹ Maathai, *Unbowed*, 136-138.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 137

³¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

pottery filled with dirt to start the seeds and punched holes in old pots or cans to water the seedlings.³² Although the women did not possess professional-level forestry resources, Maathai recognized that rural women had access to sufficient materials in order to achieve success, in addition to knowledge about their surroundings—plants, animals, and ecosystems. Despite their poverty, the structure and methods established by Maathai enabled participation. GBM provided a procedure with ten steps, “beginning with forming a group, locating a site for a tree nursery”³³ continuing through reporting how many trees they raised and planted in order to receive compensation. After the women planted trees on their own farms, leaders encouraged them to convince neighbors and surrounding communities to begin planting trees. Maathai states, “this was a breakthrough, because it was now communities empowering one another for their own needs and benefit. In this way, step by step, the process replicated itself several thousand times.”³⁴ As the movement continued to grow, the GBM encouraged women to plant trees in groups of over a thousand, in order to create belts of forest that would “restore to the earth its cloth of green. This is how the name Green Belt Movement began to be used. Not only did the 'belts' hold the soil in place and provide shade and windbreaks but they also re-created habitat and enhanced the beauty of the landscape.”³⁵ This method deterred what E.P. Stebbing termed the “encroaching Sahara.”³⁶

While the GBM developed, the organization took on roles beyond giving women the means to plant trees; Maathai continued to note the disempowerment that plagued the Kenyan people. The GBM hosted seminars in communities in which GBM nurseries were already

³² Maathai, *Unbowed*, 136-137.

³³ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁶ Stebbing, “The Man-Made Desert in Africa: Erosion and Drought,” 3-4

established. In these meetings, Maathai encouraged women and men attending to identify the problems they dealt with on a daily basis. She allowed them to point one finger at the corrupt and oppressive post-colonial government, but also directed them to point another finger at themselves. Planting trees, she insisted, would prevent soil erosion. The methods of the GBM differ from other government assistance programs or aid in the form of NGOs, by encouraging individuals to take initiative to create changes in their communities. Maathai states, “It is the Green Belt Movement's vision to urge individuals not to wait for divine intervention, but to give themselves the energy they imagine, or pray that God will provide, and to recognize that God expects them to take action and rise up and walk!”³⁷

The GBM also encouraged a return to cultivation of traditional foods that would provide better nutrition than the exotic crops that often failed to thrive in Kenyan soil. Maathai states, “Many of the indigenous food crops – such as tubers – are only consumed in small quantities in many households today. This is partly because their nutritional value is not well understood by consumers despite the fact that many of them are higher in nutrients than processed foods.”³⁸ Processed foods are, as John Madelay describes, “white bread, maize flour, and white rice which are high in carbohydrates but relatively low in vitamins, proteins and minerals”³⁹ and are more appealing when firewood is scarce, because preparation requires less fuel. The link between malnutrition and the transition away from subsistence farming to cash crop agriculture is clear: instead of growing nutritious traditional foods, the people were growing products such as tea and coffee for export, then purchasing processed foods.

Information provided at GBM meetings empowered women at levels beyond nutrition

³⁷ *Replenishing the Earth*, 143.

³⁸ Wangari Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (New York: Lantern Books, 2004), 45.

³⁹ John Madeley. “Trees and Poverty,” *Appropriate Technology* 38, No. 2 (June 2011), 33.

and finance. Bethany Boyer-Rechlin posits, “Participants are compensated financially for trees planted, and this added income, combined with skills learned through GBM-sponsored workshops, helps to enhance women's decision-making power.”⁴⁰ In a post-colonial nation, the importance of legitimizing the value of original people and restoring their agency cannot be understated.

In addition, the GBM leaders also stressed holistic strategies for sustainable food production and environmental preservation. They implemented similar strategies in community groups and the GBM worked toward empowering communities by developing an attitude of personal responsibility. Marc Michaelson describes the GBM's work as a self-help movement which empowers participants at the grassroots level. Michaelson asserts, “self-help movements engage in collective action to improve conditions of the group directly, and in so doing, correspondingly alter social arenas.”⁴¹ By offering the knowledge and tools⁴² necessary to restore the land, the GBM enables women and men to increase their quality of life.

Within this approach, Maathai and the GBM combined the environmental needs of Kenya with the social necessities of native people, who struggled to survive between the tension of cash crops for export versus subsistence farming. In orienting her people toward social duty, Maathai promoted the value in honoring culture, particularly the tribal traditions that were largely abandoned by the Kikuyu as a result of colonization. Language offered a particular way that culture was celebrated. In GBM meetings, she insisted that attendees be able to speak their local languages instead of communicating in one of the dominant languages promoted and

⁴⁰ Bethany Boyer-Rechlin. “Women in Forestry: A Study of Kenya's Green Belt Movement and Nepal's Community Forestry Program,” *Scandinavian Journal of Forest Research* 25, Sup. 9 (October 2010), 71.

⁴¹ Marc Michaelson, “Wangari Maathai and Kenya's Green Belt Movement: Exploring the Evolution Potentialities of Consensus Movement Mobilization,” in *Social Problems* 41, No. 4 (Nov., 1994), 541.

⁴² Here, tools refers to tree seedlings and education about the environment.

demanding by the colonial (and post-colonial government), a mandate which took the voice from the many Kenyans who did not receive formal education. During GBM meetings in a community, Maathai insisted the leaders speak in the local language, using an interpreter if needed.⁴³

The promotion of this linguistic practice directly engaged the attempted cultural reductionism of the colonizers, who in their forced acquisition of the land re-named everything, including land forms and people, and required adoption of the language of the colonizer (in Kenya, English or French). Maathai explains, “this created a schism in many Africans' minds and we are still wrestling with the realities of living in this dual world.”⁴⁴ She reveals that at home, children were taught the names of mountains, streams, or regions from the parents, but at the schools begun by missionaries, they were taught the “proper” names of things, in English.⁴⁵

The story of how Kenya received its current name provides an example. As Maathai recounts the story, a native guide led two European explorers to a view of the formidable mountain now known as Mount Kenya. Before colonization, the Kikuyu knew the mountain as Kirinyaga.⁴⁶ They asked their guide, “What is this called?” The guide, assuming they were referring to the gourd he was holding responded, “It's called kii-nyaa.” As a result, the mountain and the area claimed by the British became known as Kenya and Kikuyus were taught to refer to the mountain as Mount Kenya, instead of Kirinyaga.⁴⁷ This story provides one example of the many ways colonizers devalued and replaced traditional cultures with their own culture. Through her insistence on using local languages, Maathai's response shows ingenuity

⁴³ Maathai., *Unbowed*, 175.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

and respect. This facet of the GBM illustrates her attempt to involve and mobilize Kenyans to change the course of the environmental damages in their communities.

In her approach, Maathai also emphasized the tribal cultures of ancestors, who exemplified respect and reverence for the environment. One of the stated values of the GBM is to “Encourage the preservation of traditional knowledge and wisdom regarding agriculture”⁴⁸ because, “in African traditional societies, a lot of knowledge and wisdom regarding agricultural practices and the value of various plants have been passed on from generation to generation.”⁴⁹ Acknowledging the value of ancestral expertise creates a link between sustainable ways of doing agriculture and current generations. Maathai asserts, “before the Europeans arrived, the peoples of Kenya did not look at trees and see timber, or at elephants and see commercial ivory stock, or at cheetahs and see their beautiful skins for sale. But when Kenya was colonized and we encountered Europeans, with their knowledge, technology, understanding, religion, and culture, all of it new, we converted our values into a cash economy like theirs.”⁵⁰ This analysis motivated the GBM to challenge their members to consider whether or not culture was a “missing link in Africa's development.”⁵¹ Essentially, colonizers achieved *maldevelopment*, because they enacted their methods of development in a way that disparaged the culture of native Africans.

Maathai also laments the loss of indigenous spiritual values which enabled and promoted a syncretic, sustainable existence between indigenous people and the natural world. The example of the fig tree helps to illustrate the symbiotic relationship demonstrated by tribal people before exposure to the corruption of colonial influence. In his 1911 report to the *Journal*

⁴⁸ Maathai. *The Green Belt Movement*, 46.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Maathai. *Unbowed*, 175.

⁵¹ Ibid., 175.

of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland titled “Further Researches into Kikuyu and Kamba Religious Beliefs and customs,” C.W. Hobley confirms the spiritual significance of the fig tree. Within his portrayal of the *itwika* ceremony, the “sacred fig tree (*mugumo*)”⁵² is a key element. Hobley states, “No one is ever allowed to cultivate on the area which has been used for an *itwika* ceremony, and no one must ever cut the *mugumo* (fig tree) with an axe or knife.”⁵³ The author's characterization of this Kikuyu custom is disdainful.

In her memoir, Maathai describes her own experiences with a particular fig tree near her childhood home, Nyeri. As a young girl, she gathered water from and played in the stream which flowed out of the fig tree's roots, while enjoying the wide range of plants and animals that flourished on its banks, though her mother instructed her to never gather firewood from the base of the fig tree. When asked “why?” by her inquisitive daughter, her mother replied, “because that's a tree of God . . . we don't use it. We don't cut it. We don't burn it.”⁵⁴ After her many years of higher education, Maathai's scientific knowledge helped her understand her mother's imperative, which exemplified the link between ancestral knowledge, cultural practice, and sustainability. She states:

I later learned that there was a connection between the fig tree's root system and the underground water reservoirs. The roots of the fig tree burrowed deep into the ground, breaking through the rocks beneath the surface soil and diving into the underground water table. The water traveled up along the roots until it hit a depression or weak place in the ground and gushed out as a spring . Indeed, wherever these trees stood, there were likely to be streams. The reverence the community had for the fig tree helped preserve the stream...The trees also held the soil together, reducing erosion and landslides. In such ways, without conscious or deliberate effort, these cultural and spiritual practices contributed to the conservation of biodiversity.⁵⁵

⁵² C.W. Hobley. “Further Researches into Kikuyu and Kamba Religious Beliefs and Customs,” 421.

⁵³ Ibid., 422.

⁵⁴ Maathai. *Unbowed*, 45.

⁵⁵ Maathai, *Unbowed*, 44-46.

The European settlers did not recognize or appreciate the spiritual or environmental significance of the fig tree. A fragmentary mindset prevents a holistic understanding of a tree with multi-faceted worth and significance. Instead, colonizers viewed *mugumo* and other sacred sites as impediments to progress. The practice of clear-cutting large belts of forest, including fig trees, for the purpose of large-scale, Western agricultural methods resulted in the destruction of millions of trees, some of them with distinct spiritual value to native people. As a result of this deforestation, streams dried up, erosion and landslides increased, the desert encroached, and plant and animal habitats were destroyed.

In Kikuyu tradition, the people considered other trees besides the fig tree sacred. Maathai explains, “for my mother, and the generations before her, the honoring of certain trees was part of a general reverence for nature.”⁵⁶ In *Replenishing the Earth*, Maathai describes that when trees were needed for home construction, fencing, or other uses, it was unacceptable to cut an entire group of trees in the same area. Instead, the Kikuyu intentionally left the taller trees in a group standing, and first utilized the undergrowth and smaller trees. They believed that the spirits of the cut trees resided in the taller trees that remained, and thus considered them sacred. This spiritual system of value proved to be an informal practice of agroforestry, which maintains the health of the ecosystem by enabling the absorption of water, while retaining topsoil, and preserving plant and animal habitats.⁵⁷ Maathai explains how the spiritual value placed on trees facilitates environmental conservation; she states, “Clearly, such restrictions stopped wholesale deforestation from taking place.”⁵⁸

The “ikumbi ria Ngai” provides another example of a Kikuyu ritual centering around

⁵⁶ Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 79.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵⁸ *Replenishing the Earth*, 78.

trees. In this ritual, farmers left a small portion of the first harvest in a grove of trees, as an offering of gratitude for abundance.⁵⁹ Maathai states, “This was called the “granary of God.” Here, every farmer was obliged to leave a portion of what he harvested as a kind of tithe for the wild animals or the very poor or those who, because of a physical or mental disability, weren't able to grow or harvest their own food.”⁶⁰ This spiritual practice centered around relationship to the community of life and the grove of trees served as the location for the ritual.

Although the focus in this section centers on the Kikuyu and their cultural and spiritual practices that demonstrate reverence for the natural world and a syncretic relationship with nature, it is also important to point to other indigenous people-groups who exhibit similar, life-affirming cosmologies and traditions. Maathai states, “certain species of trees have also been important spiritual centers.”⁶¹ She lists native people who revered trees as sacred in Ghana, Zimbabwe, South Africa, West Africa, Malawi, Nigeria, Zambia, Congo, and Angola,⁶² to name a few.⁶³ Maathai states, “Whether trees have been understood by their communities as nodal points that connect the world above with the world below, or as places where one's ancestors and/or their spirits reside, invading forces have understood that sacred groves or trees must not only be destroyed, but that such destruction is an extremely potent ways to demoralize, fragment, and intimidate the local population by stripping it of both its economic and spiritual sources and strengths.”⁶⁴

This thesis does not argue that indigenous cultures live(d) in perfect harmony with

⁵⁹ *Replenishing the Earth*, 50.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 80-81.

⁶³ This is not a comprehensive inventory of the cultures and people-groups that honor the divine in nature (specifically, in trees).

⁶⁴ *Replenishing the Earth*, 93.

Nature. Cecile Jackson agrees; she states, “The idea that 'indigenous societies', rarely specified with much precision and usually assumed to be geographically and culturally isolated, do not damage their environments unless forced to by capitalism and modernity is widespread but not very robust.”⁶⁵ Instead, this thesis highlights the idea that some indigenous cultures and spiritualities (as illustrated by the Kikuyu) promoted conservation and biodiversity, often without distinct, scientific knowledge; this harmony between humans and nature contrasts to the human-nature relationship paradigm embodied by colonizers. Additionally, indigenous ontologies enabled an abundance that illustrates an altogether different kind of wealth from the representation exemplified by European settlers. An ideology of harmony with all of nature was attacked and devalued by the colonizers, as well as demonstrated by the clear-cutting of forests to promote this other kind of wealth, defined as mass production and profit. Maathai spoke directly to this fragmentary mindset, pointing out that a tree can be converted to a profit, but without considering the impact on other humans and species.⁶⁶ Maathai continues,

In fact, scientists are only now beginning to understand the vast range of services – natural, social, psychological, ecological, and economic – that forests perform: the water they clean and retain; the climate patterns they regulate; the medicines they contain; the food they supply; the soil they enrich; the carbon they entrap; the oxygen they emit; the species of flora and fauna they conserve; and the peoples whose very physical existence depends on them.⁶⁷

Although this scientific knowledge may not have been recognized and practiced explicitly by the Kikuyu (and other indigenous cultures and spiritualities), the subtle awareness that humans existed as part of a whole enabled a greater respectful and harmonious relationship with Nature.

⁶⁵ Cecile Jackson. “Gender, Nature and Trouble with Anti-Dualism,” in *Women as Sacred Custodians of the Earth?: Women, Spirituality and the Environment*, eds. Alaine Low and Soraya Tremayne (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 36.

⁶⁶ Maathai. *Replenishing the Earth*, 86.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

Colonizers undermined the Kikuyu relationship with nature by the promotion of mass production as well as by the emphasis on Christianity. The foreign missionaries who settled in Kenya stigmatized the spirituality of the Kikuyu, which is verified by Hobley's account.⁶⁸ Missionaries deemed Kikuyu spirituality “primitive” and incompatible with the version of Christianity they aspired to bring to dominance in Kenya. Addressing Kikuyu and other indigenous spiritualities, Maathai states, “these practices were often demonized or eventually destroyed, with the full participation of the natives themselves. This was especially tragic because scientists are beginning to recognize that these traditional cultures and their lifestyles were responsible for the conservation of rich biodiversity in their environments.”⁶⁹ “Full participation of the natives” refers to the natives' acceptance of European ideas. Maathai states, “hallowed landscapes lost the sacredness and were exploited as the local people became insensitive to the destruction, accepting it as a sign of progress.”⁷⁰

In *Replenishing the Earth*, Maathai provides a description of the ways that missionaries representing Christianity gradually and intentionally sought to dismantle the culture of native people, usually by undermining the validity of their core beliefs. One example Maathai provides is the insistence by the missionaries that God could not be found outdoors, but only in the building built for him, presided over by a priest whose authority came “not from the community, but from another representative who lived many miles away.”⁷¹ As previously stated, the Kikuyu believed that Ngai resided on Mount Kenya. Although the Christian representation of God as “up in the sky” or in the building built for him undermined traditional Kikuyu spirituality, the incentive to convert prevailed in many cases. As the Kenyan economy

⁶⁸ Hobley, “Further Researches Into Kikuyu and Kamba Religious Beliefs and Customs,” 406-457.

⁶⁹ *Replenishing the Earth*, 21.

⁷⁰ Maathai, *Unbowed*, 6.

⁷¹ *Replenishing the Earth*, 95.

transitioned into the cash economy, the British required native people to convert to Christianity in order to buy food or work on plantations. The same is true for education; pressures to conform and assimilate came from many angles.

At times, colonizers utilized a more violent approach to demoralize indigenous people and attempt to gain converts. Maathai explains,

whether trees have been understood by their communities as nodal points that connect the world above with the world below, or as places where one's ancestors and/or their spirits reside, invading forces have understood that sacred groves or trees must not only be destroyed, but that such destruction is an extremely potent way to demoralize, fragment, and intimidate the local population by stripping it both of its economic and spiritual sources and strengths.⁷²

Using the knowledge gained from failures, setbacks, and persecution, the Green Belt Movement incorporated indigenous knowledge and practices into its tree planting methods. In doing so, she enabled native Kenyans to embrace their heritage as tribal people and to begin the work of dismantling the colonial process.

Wangari Maathai spent her grade school years in Kenya at a school operated by Christian missionaries; she excelled in such a manner that she proceeded to high-level degrees and positions. Her education also included an introduction to Christianity, which she embraces and uses in her work and writing.⁷³ Maathai's *Unbowed* begins with a verse from the Bible which conveys human connection to the land. On the first page of *Unbowed*, she shares Ezekiel 34:27 which states, "The trees of the field will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in the land. They will know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them."⁷⁴ This

⁷² *Replenishing the Earth*, 93.

⁷³ Both Maathai's memoir *Unbowed* and her non-fiction work *Replenishing the Earth* use Christian language and allegory to promote the purpose and values of the Green Belt Movement.

⁷⁴ New International Version in *Unbowed*.

verse shows resonance with the mission of the GBM by linking agriculture with food security, while representing the story of the Kikuyu gaining independence from the “yoke” of the colonial project.

Importantly, Maathai does not criticize Christianity in and of itself; instead, she uses her extensive knowledge about the Christian religion to advance both the purpose of the GBM and the values which encourage existing in harmony within Nature. She clearly expresses gratitude for her education⁷⁵ and acknowledges that most of the individuals that perpetuated the colonial process believed they were doing God's work in converting savages away from their primitive belief systems and lifestyle. In the GBM's efforts to reach local communities, organizers use the Bible, using examples from the Old and New Testaments. Maathai states, “These teachings offer guidance—alas, widely ignored by the faithful—on how the earth's natural resources ought to be treated.”⁷⁶ Maathai draws connections between stories from the Bible and a Christian theology of care for Creation. By pointing out the ways in which the tree held special significance in the Old and New Testaments, she appeals to native Africans who adopted the Christian religion. When speaking to GBM groups or other community gatherings, Maathai often uses Scripture to point communities to “consider the creation they read about in the Old Testament: the trees, the animals, the insects, the water, clean air, and the forests.”⁷⁷ One example of how Maathai employs using the Bible involves drawing a connection between the tree in the Garden of Eden (Old Testament) and the tree upon which the Romans crucified Jesus (New Testament) that redeemed the original sin of the Garden.⁷⁸

In *Replenishing the Earth*, Maathai connects spiritual values from both Kikuyu tradition

⁷⁵ Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 174.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷⁷ *Replenishing the Earth*, 134-5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

and Christianity. Consistently, she refers to stories from the Bible about stewardship of the earth as well as Kikuyu spiritual customs. Maathai expresses surprise that many Kikuyu (who converted to Christianity) do not share the values she finds in the Bible regarding care for the environment.⁷⁹ Through her books, speaking engagements, and GBM workshops, Maathai presents a blended version of the Christian religion and Kikuyu spirituality. Her mission does not entail forcing religious or spiritual beliefs on participants, but instead to draw out the values represented within and to “prick their conscience and provide them with serious information that we hope will make them think and spur them into action.”⁸⁰

Although the praxis of Christianity and Kikuyu spirituality differ, Maathai points to the similarities within the values presented by each. She states, “These values are not contained only within certain religious traditions. Neither does one have to profess a faith in a divine being to live by them.”⁸¹ The four core values of the GBM are: 1. Love for the environment, 2. Gratitude and respect for the Earth's resources, 3. Self-empowerment and self-betterment, and 4. The spirit of service and volunteerism.⁸² Each of these four values can be validated in the religion or spirituality of the participant.

Maathai demonstrates her ingenuity in the way she references God: in order to communicate effectively with her countrywomen and men who have adopted a Christian faith and to simultaneously promote the life-affirming spirituality of their ancestors, she uses the term “Source”⁸³ to represent deity. In this way, she can express the spiritual values of care for the environment, which are also representative of her own personal beliefs. Maathai explains,

⁷⁹ *Replenishing the Earth*, 29.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 21.

“Such a term helps remove the image that retains a hold over many Christians of a kindly grandfather sitting in heaven watching over all things and controlling our destinies. In this sense, then, the Source is the place of all knowledge and awareness. It is the repository of all that we cannot explain: which some call God, some Nature, and some Creator.”⁸⁴ Maathai possessed a unique ability to blend the religion of the colonizers, which many Kikuyu adopted, with the forms of spirituality practiced by the Kikuyus; as a result, a diverse population found the program acceptable, accessible, and engaging. This syncretism shows a key principle of creating an effective social and environmental movement in post-colonial Kenya and illustrates the genius of Maathai.

Although Maathai speaks to the affirmative ways that religion can be a positive ideology informing the ways that humans interact with and heal a damaged natural world, she also calls attention to the ways that humans misuse religion to persecute other humans, other beings, and the land. Her interpretation of the word “dominion” in Christian scripture provides an example. As interpreted by many, including the colonizers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scripture that references dominion of humans over all other things is translated to mean “absolute control over nature and exploitation without limits.”⁸⁵ This sort of mindset gives profiteers the right to remove and utilize resources (flora, fauna, and land) without concern for the ramifications of wanton disregard for ecosystems, humans, and other beings. Encroaching desert, landslides, erosion, loss of topsoil and plant/animal habitats, and ultimately, poverty and hunger are resulting from environmental degradation in Kenya, stemming from a fragmentary mindset.

⁸⁴ *Replenishing the Earth*, 21.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

Maathai teaches and promotes another attitude regarding the concept of dominion. She explains, “A consensus is emerging among theologians that the original definition of 'dominion' is more accurately translated as 'custodianship' or 'stewardship,' and that human beings do not have carte blanche to exploit nature without thinking of the consequences of our actions.”⁸⁶ The GBM demonstrates holistic and relational methodologies which align with the idea of “custodianship.” Using a syncretism of Christianity and Kikuyu spirituality, Maathai encourages GBM participants to accept the responsibility as stewards of the earth. She states, “One is left to wonder whether conceiving of God as the origination of all that is would make people of faith recognize that they have a responsibility to be custodians of God's creation and, in the process, their own survival.”⁸⁷

Maathai's enacts immensely important and successful work in the setting of a post-colonial nation. Not only did she impress upon others the “consequences of our actions,” but she designed a way to begin to reverse the damage caused to the land and native Kenyans by colonialism and the monoculture agricultural methods introduced by the British and French. The Green Belt Movement exemplifies the image of a highly successful grassroots, strategic coalition. By empowering women to use their Indigenous Technical Knowledge regarding trees and the natural world around them, Maathai initiated an indigenous-led, non-governmental organization which has planted over 51 million trees throughout Kenya⁸⁸ and millions more around the world. Her emphasis on embracing cultural traditions and spiritualities enable the women and men within GBM to connect with their heritage, a past which encourages reverence towards the natural realm and a deeper connection with all beings.

⁸⁶ *Replenishing the Earth*, 71.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸⁸ The Green Belt Movement. “Home Page,” <http://greenbeltmovement.org> (accessed April 28, 2016).

As Maathai explains, the methodologies designed and implemented through the Green Belt Movement provide a holistic representation of Nature by combining “practical programs to plant trees, restore degraded landscapes and forests, improve food security, harvest water, reduce waste, and launch and maintain sustainable enterprises, with campaigns for good governance as essential tools for social, economic, and ecological transformation.”⁸⁹ Revaluing nature in this way contrasts to the fragmented mindset and Western values introduced to Kenya and the Kikuyu people by colonialism. Maathai's example provides an imperative to pay attention, to seek the root causes of issues, and take action. Her legacy continues on in the work of the GBM in Kenya and globally, though Maathai passed away in 2011. Whether or not one believes in a capital-letter “Source,” the example of co-existing in harmony within Nature as “source” of all life is a lesson and a value which can alter the course of Climate Change.

⁸⁹ Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 140.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Climate Change represents a phenomenon that results from negative, man-made environmental damage. A few examples of this phenomena include melting polar ice caps and glaciers, rising sea levels, increasing water temperatures, and depletion of the ozone layer due to carbon emissions. These shifts in climate stability affect people in various regions of the world in different ways, even though all of human life will be affected if these warming trends are allowed to continue. In the areas where food is grown, where ecosystems are disturbed, where forests and grasslands are leveled and replaced by monoculture plantations, the effects of Climate Change are both pervasive and personal. In particular, land-dependent women feel the transitions in stability as potable water sources become more scarce, nutrient-deficient soil materials and medicine) become more difficult to obtain. Natural disasters are often the opposite of natural, as rampant and irresponsible sequestering of resources by humans creates unstable land structures and leads to severe erosion, landslides, and flooding.

Although the focus of this exploration is Africa, the effects of environmental devastation can be felt in the Global North as well as the Global South. For example, Rachel Carson's 1960s environmental classic *Silent Spring*¹ addresses the growing problem of pesticide usage and monoculture farms in the United States, an issue which expanded exponentially in the following decades. Carson draws connections between “development” and the ways that even within the abundance of a “First World” nation, wanton misuse and maltreatment of land affects

¹ Rachel Carson. *Silent Spring: The Classic that Launched the Environmental Movement* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1962).

all forms of life. Importantly, a large portion of the burden of environmental degradation falls on the less “developed” regions south of the equator. Arguably, the industrialist Global North primarily creates the issues contributing to the changes in the Earth's stability. Disguised as “development” and “progress,” blatant disregard for the stability and importance of ecosystems, over-utilization of the land, unprincipled extraction of mineral wealth, and deforestation provide factors that alter the patterns of the climate.

Colonialism enacted in the Americas, Africa, and Asia perpetuated the mindset of earth-as-resource. Colonizers used it as a tool for claiming, using, and destroying the lands and ecosystems of indigenous people groups. As explored in previous chapters, colonialism emerged from a Western confluence of religious, political, and scientific beliefs and theories. Cultures existed/exist in hierarchies and dualities. This top-down, either/or ethos placed the elite, white male atop the hierarchy of value (as closest to God), with women and people of color falling below. A mindset that adheres to this type of “ladder” ideology designates all other humans and living beings as inferior, to be used for the purpose of the white man, who believes himself to be uniquely capable of rational thought and noesis. In the same way, Western forces relegate the natural world to the role of commodity. Imperialist settlers instituted this posture of supremacy to “Nature” on the continent of Africa and other regions of the Global South.

In this paradigm of nature-as-resource, reducing entire ecosystems to single products results. This paradigm also neglects the notion of interdependence is or intentionally dismissed; a reductionist way of thinking enables beings, growing things, and land which are necessary for a stable environment to be destroyed, removed, and/or sold as a product in the market economy. In *Gaia and God*, Ruether describes reductionism succinctly; she states, “it reduces the complex and living interconnection of nature to its component parts. Its language

prefers nonliving parts to living and dynamic wholes.”² In this ideology, the land, beings, and people separate from each other and natural resources are labeled as products. While the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions provided the framework, colonialism provided the practical implementation of the commodification of the natural world. Ruether explains, “this era of colonization decisively reshaped the human, plant, and animal ecologies of colonized regions.”³

The Christian concept of “dominion” provides the religious scaffolding to uphold the wanton degradation of land, animals, plant-life, and people. The origin of the attitude of domination and subsequent oppression stems from the dominant religion in the Global North (whose culture and religion were imposed on the South through colonialism). Some scholars translate Scripture in such a way that God gives man “dominion” over the Earth, a widely misunderstood imperative, used as rationalization for abuses against other beings and land.⁴ Maathai succinctly explains, “it has been all too convenient for human beings to take the concept of dominion to mean absolute control over nature and exploitation without limits.”⁵ Instead, a more careful translation and reading offers an alternative perspective, which can birth a new paradigm. Maathai asserts, “A consensus is emerging among theologians that the original definition of “dominion” is more accurately translated as “custodianship” or “stewardship,” and that human beings do not have carte blanche to exploit nature without thinking of the consequences of our actions.”⁶ However, the businessman assumes and promotes the ideology of nature as an unlimited resource provided by God, so that he can reap the profits within the

² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 57.

³ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 198.

⁴ Genesis 1-2 (New International Version).

⁵ Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 71.

⁶ Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 71.

market economy without concern for the consequences upon other people and components of the environment. The colonial project enacted this mentality which continues to this day.

Many esteemed theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, John Stott, Wendell Berry, Thomas More, and Sallie McFague assert, as Maathai explains above, that God intended human beings to share Creation⁷ with all other beings and care for it, such as a ruler cares for her/his constituents. Hence, “Creation-Care” theology emerged, a brand of progressive Christianity which is gaining popularity and seeks to dismantle the systems of oppression which are damaging to other people and the natural world. This view of how human beings should relate to the environment postures in stark contrast to the version of Christianity theology introduced by the colonizers, which designates Earth as a resource. Maathai promotes this progressive mindset within the Green Belt Movement, in opposition to the colonial religion of hierarchies that was imposed on the native people by missionaries, plantation owners, and other officials, in which compliance and conversion was expected in order to achieve the European version of progress and development.⁸

As explored in previous chapters, the country of Kenya experienced major cultural, spiritual, and environmental shifts as a result of colonization by the British. After removal from their ancestral homelands and forced participation in the colonial wage-labor economy, culture, and religion, the Kikuyu people of central Kenya found themselves in a crisis of identity, position, and location. Hinga states, “The exploitation of Africans was particularly destructive since it led to a legacy of confusion, apathy, and a sense of alienation among the indigenous peoples. The fruits of this legacy manifest today in the perpetuation of the abuse of nature and

⁷ “Creation” is a commonly-used term with Christian connotations which denotes a belief in a Creator-God, who intelligently designed the Earth, humans, and all other life. In this context, “Creation” uses Christian vocabulary to indicate the Earth and everything that God made.

⁸ Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 165-168.

of each other that sometimes reaches shocking levels in contemporary Africa.”⁹ These societal-level transformations constructed major obstacles for post-colonial Kenya and its people.

The cultural shifts for the Kikuyu introduced patriarchal frameworks in their communities, including in familial relationships. In a previously egalitarian society,¹⁰ the introduction of colonial ideologies reduced the agency of women by stripping them of their decision-making powers. Forced participation in the colonial legal system (in which their rights were withheld) left women void of power—both on government and domestic levels—leading to a subsequent ethos of disempowerment. The conversion from egalitarian to patriarchal occurred in the realm of agriculture as well, when shared responsibilities for cultivation shifted as men left to earn wages on settler plantations. Additionally, shifts occurred as Christian missionaries placed women below men within their androcentric interpretation of religion. In many spheres, missionaries changed views on the roles of women. The form of Christianity represented by the missionaries devalued the duties and characteristics of women, a movement that Hinga refers to as the “radical patriarchalization of African societies.”¹¹

Another profound shift in Kikuyu society occurred in regard to their relationship to land. The ejection of the agriculturalist and pastoralist people-group from their homelands to reserves by European settlers created changes in the way that they viewed and utilized land. To a community that previously considered land as equally and fairly apportioned by Ngai (God),¹² the colonial ideologies of ownership and usage introduced a contrasting mindset. Hinga asserts, “With the coming of colonization in the late nineteenth century, however, these processes and ideals which by and large were friendly to the environment and ultimately to the people that

⁹ “The Gikuyu Theology of Land and Environmental Justice,” 173.

¹⁰ Hinga, “The Gikuyu Theology of Land and Environmental Justice,” 179.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹² *Ibid.*, 174.

depended on it, were undermined and almost totally replaced by attitudes and ideals that enhanced domination, both of the people and the environment.”¹³ The resultant degradation to the land that transpired as a result of this exploitation produced further obstacles for the Kikuyu people.

The cultural, environmental, political, and spiritual/religious transitions that plagued colonial Kenya endured when the country gained its independence from the British in 1963. The work of a native Kenyan woman provides an effective working methodology for restoring the environment and empowering women. Wangari Maathai found new ways to address the issues of a people experiencing an identity crisis by returning to old ways of relationship with Earth. Through her years of scientific study and observation of her homeland, she ascertained the problem and designed a holistic approach, implemented by the Green Belt Movement. Trial and error provided a necessary path to designing a holistic method for addressing the issues which plagued her fellow countrywomen and men, while failures enabled the praxis of environmental remediation to shape into an efficient and valid social movement.

Importantly, the program of the GBM does not provide a template for social/environmental movements. As Low and Tremayne state, “Accepting planning frameworks as universally applicable means a disregard for local knowledge.”¹⁴ Instead, the focus centers on Maathai’s usage of her failures and successes to develop an immensely successful operation that highlights the links between the ancestral knowledge of the Kikuyu and contemporary practices in the post-colonial nation of Kenya, between people and other beings, and between human activities and restoration. The GBM does not present a one-size-

¹³ Hinga, “The Gikuyu Theology of Land and Environmental Justice,” 175.

¹⁴ Alaine Low and Soraya Tremayne, “Introduction,” 17.

fits-all model, but it does provide a viable framework and exemplifies the benefits for the incorporation of local concepts, traditions, and values.

Maathai pointed her people in the direction of a balance between the healthy relationship practiced by their ancestors and the current reality of existing in a post-colonial nation. She states, “The task for us in healing Earth's wounds is to find a balance between the perspectives: between the vertical and the horizontal views; the big picture and the small; between knowledge based on measurement and data and knowledge that draws on older forms of wisdom and experience.”¹⁵ These “older forms of wisdom and experience” emphasize a relationship between people and all beings, as well as people and land. This focus on syncretism between the old and the new presents one element of the GBM that demonstrates originality and imagination. Maathai asserts, “the knowledge that had allowed them to survive in difficult circumstances was pushed aside, much as they were banished from the ownership of their own land, and their capacity for self-direction was lost.”¹⁶ By focusing on ancestral wisdom, knowledge, and experience, Maathai implemented an engaging and meaningful program for native Kenyans.

Most rural women could identify the factors in which accessibility issues made their daily life increasingly difficult: potable water, firewood, fodder for livestock, and food. When Maathai created the GBM, she addressed those problems directly. She pointed out the problem: deforestation, and then provided a solution: reforestation. For Kenyans who did not have the scientific knowledge to connect trees with watersheds, or lack of soil quality with responsible agricultural methods, Maathai provided specific information. Notably, she designed a process

¹⁵ Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 76.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

that enabled them to earn money while restoring their environment. This element is crucial, because participation in the cash nexus was fundamental for most people, due to the transition from food production to cash crops. Scholars reference Maathai's charisma consistently, but paramount to her success is the ingenuity she repeatedly displayed, along with her perseverance in the face of government obstruction, familial struggles, and resistance within all the spheres by those who were not willing to accept ideas from a woman. Importantly, the GBM also included male supporters and members, although other men with power provided the greatest opposition.

Maathai embodies the tenets of ecofeminism; she highlights the manner in which hierarchy imposed by the colonial project changed the approach of the Kikuyu relate to their land. Moreover, she connects the domination of Nature with the domination of women. Exposing the effects of patriarchy in Kenya reveals a solution: empowering women enables them to restore their land, while simultaneously creating the essentials for daily life. Maathai also consistently references “consciousness-raising,” which serves as one of the primary goals of the GBM. Maathai states, “the overall goal of GBM . . . was to raise the consciousness of community members to a level which would drive them to do what was right for the environment because their hearts has been touched and their minds convinced...”¹⁷ An awareness of connection between the destruction of environment (and the poverty and malnourishment some rural people experience) leads to action and participation in a movement which provides knowledge, resources, and support. This increasing understanding also draws attention to the work of women—the importance of their labor and contributions, along with the difficulties they experience as a result of environmental degradation. As the problem of the

¹⁷ Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement*, 33.

invisibility of women's work reveals itself to be a global issue, Maathai's work highlighted the value of women's labor.

In this context, it bears repeating that this thesis does not advocate for the theory of women's "innate" natural knowledge. Low and Tremayne state, "In general women are depicted as 'naturally' privileged environmental managers who over generations have accumulated specific knowledge that is different from, and more appropriate than, that of men."¹⁸ While the notion that because of the traditional roles of women (in the spheres of agriculture, medicine, and domestic duties), learned and experiential knowledge exists holds weight, the concept of women as bearers of a supreme form of natural wisdom remains unsound in the context of this argument. The focus of the GBM centers on empowering women, because women could identify more closely than men with the difficulties caused by degradation to their land, while men demonstrated greater adherence to the colonial concepts of wage labor and "development" in order to adapt to changing culture. Maathai did not advocate for promotion of "innate" knowledge about the natural world belonging only to women, but instead developed a sense of pride in the ancestral culture of the Kikuyu people that promoted kinship with the land.

Maathai also epitomizes a type of ecofeminist spirituality. Ecofeminist ideology does not necessitate spirituality; however, many ecofeminists are drawn to earth-based traditions that enable them to acknowledge all life as what Warren terms "beings-in-relationship."¹⁹ Within this paradigm, the relationship between all forms of life are honored, respected, and nurtured, an ideology which contrasts sharply to the dominant Western mindset of reductionism and fragmentation. Revealing the links among all beings enables humans to acknowledge the reality

¹⁸ Low and Tremayne, "Introduction," 3.

¹⁹ Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 142.

of interconnection and exist as healthy strand within the “web of life.”²⁰ Maathai observed that the cosmologies embraced by the Kikuyu before the introduction of colonial religion enabled a healthy relationship between all beings. The syncretism she establishes between Christianity and ancestral Kikuyu spirituality reveals her ingenuity.

The methodology of the Green Belt Movement provides a unique and innovative response to cultural and environmental damages in post-colonial Kenya. Wangari Maathai exemplifies an ecofeminist approach to restoring women's agency by empowering them to enact significant transformation among indigenous people-groups in Africa. Among NGOs seeking to provide assistance in post-colonial nations, the GBM exemplifies effectiveness and inventiveness. Hinga states, “The organization aims not only at reclaiming the quality of the land through planting trees, it also aims at reclaiming women's power by planting afresh the sense of self-confidence and pride in themselves nurtured in precolonial times by many African societies.”²¹ By using a grassroots, women-led process, the Green Belt Movement established over 5,000 tree nurseries across Kenya and planted over 51 million trees.²² Maathai provides an example of a restorative and empowering social and environmental movement that offers remedial measures for healing the land, people, and the relationship among all beings.

²⁰ Shiva, *Earth Democracy*, 1.

²¹ Hinga, “The Gikuyu Theology of Land,” 182.

²² The Green Belt Movement, “Who We Are,” The Green Belt Movement, www.greenbeltmovement.org (accessed October 4, 2016).

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Panels

Wagner, C.L., Alison Cox, Dr. Jill LeRoy-Frazier, Veronica Limeberry, Dr. Phyllis Thompson. "Conscientization of the Classroom: Feminist Pedagogies of Transformation in Theory and Practice." Workshop Presentation at the Southeastern Women's Studies Association (SEWSA). Greensboro, NC. April 20, 2013.

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