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Book Review: Women's Spiritual Leadership in Africa. Tempered Radicals and Critical Servant Leaders

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Women's Spiritual Leadership in Africa. Tempered Radicals and Critical Servant Leaders. 2010. Faith Wambura Ngunjiri. NY: State University of New York Press. 259 pp. \$ 60 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Priscilla Wamucii¹

A review on research carried out on women's and gender studies by researchers and activists based in English-Speaking sub-Saharan Africa identified: health; gender-based violence; sexuality, education, globalization and work; and politics, the state and nongovernmental organizations as the common feminist issues (Ampofu, Beoku-Betts, Njambi & Osirim, 2004). Few studies have focused on women leadership in Africa beyond the political realms, an area that is profoundly gendered. The central focus of Faith Wambura Ngunjiri's book is to determine how women interpret their experience as leaders, including how they are able to thrive and be effective in spite of challenges to their authority.

At the heart of the book are diverse experiences provided by sixteen women leaders in Kenya. The participants comprise of women belonging to varying age groups ranging from 40-80 years. The women work in different professions and bear distinct social backgrounds. A common thread that runs through the narratives is a professional focus on social justice issues. More specifically, some women work in politics, economic empowerment of women, education, human rights arena, religious organizations and other professional spheres. Many of the women also work towards the inclusion of women in historical as well as current societal discourse by documenting and highlighting women's accounts, and by advocating for the use of gender lenses in daily interactions. The majority of participants are well educated. The participants were selected based on diversity of experiences, ethnicities, levels of leadership (local, national, Pan-African, and global), age, and marital status (single, married, divorced and widowed).

Structurally, the book provides an introduction of the status of women in Africa and Kenya in particular. The book also discusses the theoretical background and methodology utilized for the study. The author then provides brief portraits of 9 participants, and 7 in-depth accounts. Concluding sections make connections between the conceptual framework and the emergent data. The final chapter provides Ngunjiri's personal experiences in conducting the study, implications for practice and future studies.

As indicated in the book's title, Ngunjiri focuses on African women's spiritual leadership. Spirituality is construed broadly by drawing from Africana literature which conceptualizes spiritual leadership as a "critical spirituality resulting in prophetic leadership." This spirituality is connected to both tempered radicalism and servant leadership. In brief, tempered radicals as described in the book consist of leaders who do not fit within the common styles of practiced leadership. Tempered radicals include women who refuse to act like men in male dominated institutions. Servant leaders on the other hand are more collaborative but do not withdraw from the system, rather, these leaders critically engage with the system in pursuit of social justice. For the women

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interviewed in the book, spirituality serves different purposes: 1) as a source of direction for life and leadership; 2) A source of leadership practices and; 3) a source of strength in the midst of oppression and challenges (p. 203). Whilst this subject is influenced heavily by many participants' Christian background, Ngunjiri's analysis moves beyond Christian or religious spirituality to accommodating participants who might not necessarily define spirituality as such. For example, her study provides spaces for those who link spirituality to traditional belief systems, and also those who might not perceive their work as being spiritual.

As a whole, the book makes significant contributions to existing work on African women by highlighting issues of voice and representation. In matters relating to voice, the book shifts from an adoption of Eurocentric perspectives by deviating from the application of a western gaze whereby studies on women in Africa and in other low income countries are explored primarily by non-Africans. All of the participants are from the continent. The author is also an insider as she grew up in the Kenya, hence shares some experiences with the women in the study. Further, the book is informed by theoretical underpinnings that privilege local contexts. The author draws from Africana literature on leadership, black feminist theory and African womanists scholars. The author makes a valid claim that her choice of these frameworks was influenced by the few studies on African women and leadership

Another commendable approach is the use of a research methodology that was largely participatory. Ngunjiri's work created a number of avenues for participants to take a central role in shaping the book. First, she adopts the portraiture perspective that relies on biography accounts which privileges context and attempts to understand the situations as they are experienced by individuals. As such, Ngunjiri's interviews were shaped by three themes namely: Women's lives prior to becoming leaders (life history); women's lives as leaders; and women's visions for the future. As a whole, the research process can be seen as a co-construction of knowledge because her choice of participants was determined in consultation or collaboration with local women in the community. While this kind of research is subjective, the emergent themes display some consistency in the narratives, therefore warranting the research significant validity and credibility.

The book is further strengthened by its approach to issues of representation. It provides an alternative perspective by providing accounts of successful women, thereby, moving from the more widely available representation of African women as marginalized, to a more empowering portrayal of individuals taking central positions in shaping their own life trajectories as well as that of others in positive ways. The narratives in the book provide counter narratives, to dominant narratives as women presented in the book have advanced professionally. Additionally, the women selected for the study transcend popular leaders or household names in Kenya like Beth Mugo, Charity Ngilu, Martha Karua, Wangari Maathai who have served as members of parliament, to other less known individuals.

However, by focusing on women leaders, the narratives highlight disparities in the achievement of gender equality including access to resources, education and professional opportunities. Other challenges that emerge from the narratives are failed attempts in accessing political leadership, economic and organizational glass ceilings, patriarchy, and cultural practices that limit women's upward mobility. One participant, Wahu Kaara, a women leader in the areas of human rights, debt relief and poverty

eradication, for example, has attempted to become a member of parliament in three elections without success. Muthoni Likimani, a prolific writer on Kenya's history and who has worked in the media, refers to being sidelined in a number of promotions which lead her to begin her own company. Others like Priscilla Nangurai who focuses on providing girls in her community with a refuge from forced marriages, and Esther Mombo, who has worked in Christian institutions cited patriarchy as a stumbling block in their work.

The richness of the narratives contained in the book also derives from Ngunjiri's location of the narratives within larger structural injustices and institutional cultures. Through the women's biographical accounts, issues of colonialism, neocolonialism, culture and patriarchy emerge as critical elements for understanding the gender dynamics in Kenya. These components also highlight the challenges and opportunities presented by the resultant political, economic and social contexts. The narratives and experiences are therefore not isolated accounts—instead they are interwoven with the larger environment. In many ways, the women in this book engage in deconstructing and reconstructing their lives through their narratives.

At the social level, the book tackles issues of culture and its effects on gender issues. As Ngunjiri notes “the economic disenfranchisement of women begins with the low status accorded to women in Kenya, through the misappropriation of traditional customs and norms that have come up in society and that are not truly traditional but those that the elders and those intent on denying women their property and human rights claim to be cultural” (p. 78). Moreover, in discussing tensions between tradition and modernity, Agnes Abuom, a peace advocate unpacks the status quo by noting that as a result of the cultural transitions from traditional to the contemporary, the current norms are neither supported by modernity or tradition which forms a basis for the emergence of social norms gender relations where the “market” dictates, or anything goes. The legal system also works against women, as Judy Thongori a human rights lawyer, explains in her narrative, when the law in Kenya conflicts with the traditional ethnic customs, the ethnic law takes precedence. As such, women in Kenya have suffered major injustices without adequate legal protection. The book reveals how women navigate and work towards dismantling the above and other cultural constraints.

Interwoven in the narratives is a desire for the women leaders to speak up on issues that affect women. The participants illustrate how they traverse issues of promotion and a lack of women leaders at institutional levels, for instance, in religious organizations. Further, the women provide alternatives to linear ways thinking and acting, for example, when they advocate for the analysis of certain subjects such as abortion, forced marriages and the abuse of women by pointing out the glaring omissions of men roles in contributing to these social challenges. The narratives also reveal the dynamics that emerge when women's ways of leading are highlighted. Wahu Kaara indicates in her narrative that women are able to utilize capacities from the private arena for their work in the public. These capacities include: resourcefulness, creative problem solving, deep concern for the needs of the community and motivation to serve those needs, ability to see the bigger picture so that the private becomes public and the local global (p. 143).

Women in these narratives also critically question the standards used in evaluating women leaders. A number argue that the criteria are different from those applied to men. Issues like marital status are used as a platform for discrimination of

women. Unmarried, childless or divorced women leaders are also judged harshly, while men with similar status might not be faced with similar problems.

Just as women's experiences are diverse, the book highlights that although men have contributed to women's disempowerment by limiting their access to avenues of leadership, there are men who have supported women's agenda and equality. Women's accounts on men are therefore not monolithic. Illustrations of women who work towards dismantling patriarchy include "square of concerned male theologians," a group of male priests, pastors, and theologians willing to join in the struggle toward making religious institutions more gender sensitive. A number of women also describe fathers who went against cultural norms by supporting their education. Some fathers also engaged in house work which transcended female roles advanced by some societal beliefs. One woman also credited a male mentor who helped shape her career path from corporate law to family law and a focus on women's rights. In Priscilla Nangurai's work, the local government official has been supportive of her work. Taken together, these male supporters motivated the women to work towards gender equality.

One of the shortcomings of the book is that the title explicitly positions readers for an analysis of the experiences of women leaders in Africa but the field work data focuses on primarily on Kenyan women. Although Ngunjiri does an excellent job in her articulation of women's issues in Kenya, the book's title could be interpreted as being overly ambitious. Another limitation of the book is that it focuses on urban elite, middle class women leaders. Nguruiya alludes to this aspect by noting that she does not disregard women in rural areas or those in urban slums. A focus on women a few leaders from the margins, so to speak, could have been more representative of Kenyan women activities in the social justice arena.

Nonetheless, Faith Ngunjiri provides a thorough fair-minded description of Kenya women leaders. She brings together an impressive body of literature, which is complemented by local women's accounts, as well as her own analysis. Taken together, this work provides a foundation for the exploration of women leaders in comparative contexts in African settings, women's histories, policy work, and in larger development contexts.

References

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