

Wangari Maathai, by Tabitha Kanogo. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2020

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Reviewing this book is an honour for me. The subject – Wangari Maathai – is a woman I knew personally and admired greatly. She and I shared a cup of tea and buns at an international symposium that she had officially opened as an Assistant Minister for environment law on the morning of the day her award of the Nobel Peace Prize was announced in 2004. The author – Tabitha Kanogo – is a woman I have known personally for many years and greatly admire. Her tenacity in the academy has greatly inspired me. I read Kanogo's history scholarship with the eagerness of a hungry child because it filled the gaps in my study of legal subjects such as women, property, and the environment.

Kanogo's story of Wangari Maathai fits in my genre of (her) story and departs from (his) story. It fills many of the gaps I have had about the towering Maathai's life. It is easily written and very accessible, yet its depth and incisiveness capture the paradoxical life of an iconic woman who is at once simple and very complex. The story of the hummingbird doing the best it can is the story of Wangari Maathai. I first met Wangari in the early 1990s as a young academic at the University of Nairobi. I was awed by the work of the National Council of Women in Kenya (NCWK) but never got to understand why tree seedlings littered the NCWK office. But then, there were many other things that I did not understand. For instance, why was the NCWK office at the Central Police Station? What was the connection between the Association of African Women on Research and Development (AAWORD) and NCWK and the tree seedlings?

As a curious young scholar, I joined AAWORD and got to work with many great women including Tabitha Kanogo and Wangari Maathai. With the benefit of hindsight, I now see the connections between trees, women's research, and women's lives. Having grown up in central Kenya's deforested and bare landscapes in the 1970s, the thickets of trees and shrubs that now cover those

same landscapes today, the giving of way by muddy waters to clear waters in the rivers, and the ambient air that I enjoy when I visit those landscapes now make me revere Wangari's farsightedness. She was way ahead of her time. Populations have grown but trees have also increased. It is a credit to initiatives of Wangari's brainchild, the Greenbelt Movement (GBM), that rural landscapes in densely populated central Kenya are green. The genius of engaging women in the initiatives has also highlighted the role of women as managers of landscapes and countered narratives that assign land rights to men and deny women such rights. Despite not having title deeds to land – the highest recognition of land ownership rights – women have used the access rights that make them the primary workers on land to cover the landscapes with trees and shrubs. As in Wangari's hummingbird story, women are doing all that they can. Maathai noted of the GBM that its greatest achievement was not the planting of trees, important as that is, but the elevation of illiterate women to a space where they could use their skills to make a difference.

Kanogo's mastery of Kenya's history and her deep understanding of the gender and class contexts permeates the narration. This makes the book a rich source of material for students in diverse disciplines including history, women's studies, politics, religion, sociology, economics, anthropology, and law. As a teacher of the law of equality, I am fascinated by the intersections within which Wangari found herself – gender, patriarchy, race, class, and domesticity – and which she had to navigate. The description of Wangari as a child of two worlds is deep because the binaries are not just colonial/postcolonial but also cultural/religious, exposed/unexposed, aware/unaware, and educated/uneducated, among many others. Having been born in and grown up as part of a polygamous family, her monogamous marriage must also have been a case of learning by doing.

The description of Wangari as a child of the soil with an intimate relationship with land is very apt. The quests to secure Karura Forest and Uhuru Park as open public spaces for current and future generations exemplify that relationship. Planting trees also demonstrates that aspect of Wangari's life. Many of us were amazed that Wangari was always dressed in a manner that would not stand in the way of planting a tree when the opportunity presented. In her flowing African robes, it was easy to squat, scoop the soil and plant a tree. She did not worry about getting her hands dirty from the soil.

The account of Wangari's education is fascinating, particularly the denial of opportunities for African children in the reserves and on squatter farms. The duality of education, agriculture, and health systems for Africans and the settlers explains the inequalities that were cultivated during the colonial period and bequeathed to the new state at independence. The accounts of the competition between different mission groups and between the colonial government and indigenous educational entrepreneurs are mind-boggling. It is disturbing that these took centre stage and, in the circumstances, it did not matter that African children lost out on educational opportunities.

Another point on education that is interesting is the dialectic between 'social mobility' and 'social death'. It is ironic that education that facilitates movement in the social echelons also kills one's connectedness to one's roots. The loneliness of the socially mobile on the one hand and socially dead on the other is paradoxical. Colonialism's erosion of culture is an issue that many people in postcolonial states continue to grapple with as calls for decolonisation grow louder.¹ Wangari's assumption of Roman Catholic names, and English as the language of choice during her studies, and her movement to Roman Catholic institutions for further studies reveals the overbearing tenor of these seemingly benign steps. The schisms in society caused by religious formations are also not obvious. One would think that the conversion of heathens to Christianity is a universal quest for all denominations of the Christian faith. The competition and segregation between protestant and catholic faithful and schools tell a different story.

The awakening for Wangari during her studies in the United States illustrates that one's consciousness can be raised by events in a far-flung land dealing with seemingly different issues. In shedding the names given to her by the nuns, Wangari was asserting her identity. The assertion of identity is not an explicit theme in the book but it is implicit in discussions of her entry into and exit out of marriage; her work at the University of Nairobi; her work as a women's rights champion, environmental conservationist, and advocate for the rights of the poor; and as a politician. The one identity that interspersed with all others was gender. The description on pages 51-52 aptly captures the fact that she took on womanhood responsibilities with zest. It states:

¹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. 2012. *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa: Myths of Decolonization* Dakar: CODESRIA. 37.

...she adopted a hands on approach, especially on the home front, and took to waiting on family guests personally: after all, domesticity was the cultural symbol of wifedom and womanhood. But the gendered construction of the social reproduction of her household was exacting. Hers was a furious dance as she juggled household responsibilities, a career, and public commitments. Even for this accomplished academic, the 'business of [African] womanhood was a heavy burden.'

The reference to Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*² enables the reader to appreciate the burdens of womanhood and wifedom in an African context. For women like Wangari who take on roles that are outside what is expected of the African woman, the burden is extremely onerous.

Wangari's fight for the environment is legendary and continues to reverberate. Her concern about deforestation went beyond trees to the soil that trees held together and protected from erosion; the carbon that trees store, which helps in regulating the climate and cleansing the air from pollution; the water catchment functions of forests; and the species of flora and fauna that are hosted in forests. Interestingly, former President Daniel Arap Moi and she were at loggerheads most of the time yet President Moi was a great champion of the environment. He is famed for his soil conservation campaign and other initiatives. It is either because he perceived stewardship of the environment as a male space and Wangari therefore, as out of order in venturing into it, or because his policies were riddled with contradictions. The latter seems to be a plausible explanation. As Kanogo demonstrates, Wangari exposed the contradictory policy moves of the Moi government over the environment at a time when dissent on any matter was not tolerated. It is therefore not surprising that Wangari's environmental conservation initiatives merged with and fuelled general dissatisfaction with Moi's repressive government.

Wangari's initiatives led to awareness raising about wrong incarceration, corruption, abuse of human rights, and poor governance. Everything Wangari did was connected to everything else leading to people's movement from the practical to the strategic needs in both urban and rural contexts. This may explain the brutal use of force against Wangari and those who supported her. Her

2 Dangarembga, Tsitsi. 1988. *Nervous Conditions*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Zimbabwe Pub. House.

courage and resilience fuelled the fire that led to the opening of the democratic space in Kenya and contributed to the birthing and eventual promulgation of the transformative 2010 Constitution. Wangari used all means at her disposal to fight for what she believed in – from rallying local and internal support, to court battles, to protests and traditional ways of expressing opposition. For a woman who was highly educated, the protests with mothers of political prisoners that used *guturama* (showing your private parts) and shaking breasts at policemen who attacked them illustrate how women like Wangari belonged to different worlds. That could be an advantage when fighting a war that had many different fronts and required marshalling of all arsenals.

Wangari did her work with conviction and great passion. The expectation of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Wangari in 2004, while merited, was not what kept her going. She was as comfortable with local people as she was with players at the national and international levels. She was famous locally and internationally before the award of the Prize. Kanogo's account of the initiatives that Wangari got involved in after the award of the Prize point to her vision and the use of her skills to improve the world she lived in. Wangari's vision continues to inspire generations. This history of her life is a great addition to the existing troves of knowledge and provides excellent fodder for future generations and scholars.