

Indigenous Roots of Environmentalism in Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir*

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Abstract

This article examines the indigenous environmental consciousness present in Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir*, with an emphasis on the integration of African ecological values and local knowledge systems in her environmental activism. Maathai's environmentalism is deeply rooted in indigenous Kenyan traditions and cultural heritage, which she invokes to address contemporary environmental challenges. By drawing on concepts such as community land stewardship, the spiritual connection to the land, and traditional conservation practices, Maathai points to the way in which indigenous knowledge can offer sustainable solutions to modern ecological crises. The article argues that *Unbowed* serves not only as a personal narrative of resilience and activism, but also as a testimony to the vital role indigenous content plays in global environmental movements. In analysing the intersections between indigenous traditions and ecological activism, the article underscores the importance of recognizing and integrating local knowledge in global discourses on environmentalism and sustainability.

Keywords: Ecology, Africa, environmentalism, indigenous, Kenya, Wangari Maathai

Introduction

This article offers an in-depth exploration of the ecological motifs in Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir*, highlighting how her life story serves as a call for Africans to reconnect with their indigenous eco-ontological beliefs and environmental ethics. Through her narrative, Maathai advocates a return to traditional African values that prioritize ecological sustainability, conservation, and preservation, countering the dominance of Eurocentric ecological ideologies. She emphasizes the rural, village-centered lifestyle of traditional African societies, deeply rooted in practices that promote environmental balance. Her reflections suggest that indigenous ecological alternatives can offer solutions to the current environmental crisis, proposing a spiritual and ethical connection to nature as fundamental for ecological well-being.

Maathai's approach suggests that African animism and environmental ethics provide a framework for ecological conservation. She argues that traditional African beliefs encourage a holistic understanding of the environment, where humanity reveres all aspects of nature. This perspective aligns with the views of scholars like Sussy Gumo et al., who observe that African spirituality enhances environmental protection through practices that restrict the exploitation of natural resources as part of a broader conservation ethic. Similarly, Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye points out that African spirituality views the environment as sacred, embedding conservation within cultural and spiritual practices.

This article underscores the potential of these indigenous ecological perspectives as viable alternatives for achieving sustainability in the face of modern environmental challenges. In fact, Awuah-Nyamekye insists that the belief that natural objects are not only commodities for consumption but are of essence in the

way in which people conceive divinity prompts them to perceive such natural entities as being sacred to their collective existence and environmental sustainability. Thus, people cherish this measure because it guarantees the preservation and conservation of nature (Awuah-Nyamekye 50). This perspective aligns with Bron Taylor's and Jan Slikkerveer's ideas of *dark green religion*, which they see as ascribing spiritual agency to natural entities, hence establishing an interconnection between natural entities and the divinity. It, therefore, accounts for how this connection projects the local indigenous environmental consciousness on conservation and sustainability. In this light, Emefie Ikenga-Metuh affirms Slikkerveer's notion of cosmovision, which posits that the intricate relationship between nature, life, the universe, and humanity fosters a profound interconnectedness – one that unites human existence with the rhythms of nature and its diverse species, establishing a mutually sustaining bond (50). Building upon this premise, the concept of an Afro-ecological cosmovision encapsulates the way individuals comprehend the universe and interact with its elements through the lens of human habitability and ecological sustainability. This worldview functions as the cognitive framework through which people interpret their surroundings, significantly shaping their engagement with the natural world. In a similar vein, Samuel Bassey Akpan and Timothy Adie Okpe emphasize that traditional African ecological thought is inextricably linked to indigenous religious beliefs. Consequently, environmental consciousness within African societies is deeply influenced by religious perceptions, which position human beings as active participants in the intricate web of relationships that define their environment (92).

Maathai, like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, John Pepple Clark, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and several other African writers, has demonstrated vividly the interconnection between the sacred, religion and nature, and has pointed to the ways in which humans explore this connection in order to derive ontological and existential meanings, to connect to the invisible world, to perform religious rites and rituals and to seek a harmonious relationship with the natural and spiritual worlds. For

Maathai, the strong connection between nature and divinity is manifested in natural entities like seas, rivers, mountains, forests and animals. Therefore, it reflects the fact that Africans believed that nature is in one way or the other intertwined with divinity. So, there is a tendency to nurture and take good care of nature. Emmanuel Nweke Okafor explains that the connection between nature and divinity presupposes a reconnection to the indigenous environmental consciousness that is rooted in the tradition in which the sacredness of the earth is tied to the indigenous eco-religious ontology.

Theoretical Framework: Ecocriticism

This article adopts Ecocriticism as its theoretical framework – an interdisciplinary approach that integrates literary, scientific, ecological, and philosophical perspectives (Oppermann 9). Ecocriticism bridges literature and the environment, celebrating nature's purity and sustainability while addressing both natural and human-induced ecological crises (Ayinuola 33). As a critical lens, it equips scholars with the tools to reinterpret literary texts from an earth-centered perspective, foregrounding the representation of the natural world (Barry 169). Pramod Nayar further observes that Ecocriticism not only shapes environmental consciousness but also aligns literature with broader ecological sciences and material practices, fostering a deeper awareness of environmental issues (330). Meanwhile, there is an African perspective to ecocriticism and much of the current discussion dwells on this perspective. Chengyi Coral Wu traces the emergence of this perspective back “to the 1960s, pre-dating ‘ecocriticism’ as a specifically environment-oriented literary approach that began to flourish in Anglo-American literary studies in the last two decades of the twentieth century” (Wu 6-7). In reinforcing this argument for the emergence of an African ecological perspective, Ogaga Okuyade claims that, starting in the 1930, African writers articulated in their narratives the intricate relationship between Africans and their environment as the environment was seen to be of paramount

importance in African metaphysics and culture (Okuyade “Can the Earth” 139). Hence, Okuyade believes that the environment is not just the ‘other world,’ but the life force of human existence. As a result, the environment is encapsulated within the culture of the African people since it is an integral part of what makes up the African world-view or ethos (“Eco-cultures” 465). Okuyade’s insight is suggestive of an already existing afro-ecological thinking within the African cultural art forms prior to the emergence of eco theory. Thus, given the several existing cultural art forms, this position is not far-fetched. Therefore, taking into consideration the various arguments, there is no doubt that, considering the existing critical commentaries and several pre-colonial based artistic works, there is valid ground for the recognition of an African ecological perspective that is quite distinct from that of the West.

Animalism and Ecological Sustainability: Reimagining Cultural Lessons in Africa

In Maathai’s *Unbowed*, two very important natural entities with effective agencies stand out. Maathai implicitly uses these two entities to demonstrate one of her eco-nativist visions for ecological conservation in the face of imperial intrusion and globalization. Though what she projects is not new on the African continent, her intention is to remind Africans of their time-tested traditional beliefs that have helped in ecological sustainability for generations. These two entities vested with supernatural agency and sacredness are “Mount Kenya” and the “Fig tree.” It is what Grace Musila describes as “The ascription of spiritual value [which] signals a fluid continuum between spiritual and cultural values” (30). With these entities, Maathai demonstrates the Kikuyu belief in the sacredness of nature. This eco-practice promotes both a culture of respect for the natural environment and the recognition that degrading nature implies a degraded humanity. For Maathai, the Kikuyu, like most Africans, recognizes that nature is spiritual and sacred, and it is only when humans have such disposition toward nature that they will be able to rethink the abuse and destruction of

the environment. This awareness of the sacredness and divinity of Mount Kenya and the Fig tree is a nativist ecological epistemology that is an essential part of Kikuyu's eco-cultural ethos.

Interestingly, what this whole thing implies is that Mount Kenya for instance is seen as a sacred representation of an ontological presence with ecological implications, based on Kikuyu mythology, the place of birth of their ancestors. This means that it is a special ecological place and serves as the place of contact between the divinity and the progenitors of Kikuyu land. Maathai believes that God created their ancestors, Gikuyu and Mumbi, from Mount Kenya, and gave them the land West of Mount Kenya to settle (5). This implies that, with this ancestral provision, the reader needs to understand the significance of Mount Kenya in Kikuyu's cosmology and the need to conserve and preserve this natural endowment. Moreover, Maathai increases the readers' understanding of the ecological dimension of the divine and the spiritual significance of Mount Kenya when she facilitates insight into this natural entity. She describes Mount Kenya as the second highest peak in Africa, but what is more important to her and the Kikuyu people is the fact that it is a very sacred place, one that carries a divine presence — Kirinyaga, a place of Brightness. Maathai suggests that everything good in the Kikuyu land has its origin in Mount Kenya. This includes all their aquatic bodies, abundant rains, rivers, streams, and clean drinking water. On the other hand, all the socio-cultural, religious and spiritual activities are carried out facing Mount Kenya. In a nutshell, their entire life is tied to reverence to Mount Kenya; even when they build their houses, they make sure the doors face Kirinyaga. Maathai states that "As long as the mountains stood, people believed that God was with them and that they would want nothing. . . . As long as the rains fell, people had more than enough food for themselves, plentiful livestock and peace" (5).

In the passage, Maathai shows the ecological value of Mount Kenya, and this prompts people to act in a certain way. Thus, the understanding of the numerous ecological significances of Mount Kenya to the Kikuyus is the reason for the people's spiritually-

oriented ecological strategy for conservation and preservation of such natural endowment. The Kikuyu clan's awareness of the limitation of human-based laws in protecting such natural entities demonstrates its eco-spiritual conservational orientations. Thus, ascribing celestial agency to Mount Kenya implies that they will do everything within their power to protect this entity. Even when one examines the above extract closely, it is quite obvious why the survival of such an entity needs to be sustained.

Maathai's explanation of the eco-spiritual connection of the indigenous people to Mount Kenya is best understood in relation to Polycarp Ikuenobe's observation: "Everything in reality has a vital force or energy such that the harmonious interactions among them strengthen reality" (2). Furthermore, Maathai's nativist ecological thinking is in line with Leopold Sedar Senghor's argumentation that "the whole of the universe appears as an infinitely small and at the same time an infinitely large, network of life forces which emanate from God and end in God, who is the source of life . . . He . . . vitalizes and devitalizes all other beings, all the other life forces" (49). Thus, Maathai shows that the indigenous ecological thought system, as instantiated among the Kikuyu clan through the spiritual agency of Mouth Kenya, projects the intimate ontological relationships and interactions among beings, in which there is an indication that things in reality are forces that help to preserve the bond that one has with others.

Significantly, one also sees this pattern of nativist eco awareness in the last chapter of the text entitled: "Epilogue: Canopy of Hope," following the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Maathai. Thus, in expressing her gratitude to The Almighty, she symbolically turns to Mount Kenya as she declares her loyalty, victories, gratitude and dependency to nature divine in all her endeavors. She sees it as a moment of sober reflection (292-93). Therefore, what the reader deduces from such sensibility is the feeling of connectedness between human beings and a sacred/divine nature. It is a simple but dependable connection, which, according to Musila, is a return "to this spiritual bond between human beings and nature as a divine life-affirming

relationship that should be honored and respected” (11). The spiritualization of Mount Kenya grants it intrinsic worth, reflecting the African tradition of sanctifying cherished entities. Maathai’s perspective underscores the profound reverence and deep-seated appreciation for the land and environment inherent in African worldviews—an ethos rooted in the principle of sacredness. For her, this reverence forms the foundation of an unwavering commitment to environmental stewardship.

Beyond the nativist, spiritualized significance of Mount Kenya, Maathai also highlights the sacredness of the Fig tree, an emblem of indigenous ecological consciousness expressed through animism. This spiritualized relationship with nature demonstrates how cultural and traditional practices serve as vital mechanisms for environmental preservation, even in the absence of scientific awareness. The Fig tree, in particular, illustrates the intricate interconnectedness between humans and their environment – a theme Maathai frequently revisits. She poetically captures this symbiosis in her reflections on the Fig tree, the stream, and the tadpoles, revealing a holistic vision of nature’s delicate balance. As a child, she is warned by her mother never to collect firewood from or around a Fig tree – an admonition that encapsulates the profound ecological wisdom embedded in indigenous traditions. “Don’t pick any dry wood out of the Fig tree, or even around it . . . Because ‘that’s a tree of God . . . We don’t use it. We don’t cut it [and] [w]e don’t burn it’” (44). A particular Fig tree in the vicinity is the source of a stream of cool and clear flowing water, and Maathai loves to spend hours playing there. “Along the stream, people plant edible plants such as arrowroot, and, in the stream, under the big, green leaves, are a myriad of frogs’ eggs and eventually, tadpoles” (Maathai 44-45).

As a child, she did not understand the link between these entities, but after her studies in the natural sciences, she realized that the roots of the Fig tree located water underground and then provided the water with an outlet, thus creating a stream. The stream provided a habitat for the tadpoles and water for the edible plants. The roots of the tree bound the soil and acted against soil

erosion and loss of topsoil (Maathai 46). “The undergrowth of the Fig tree was also very fertile because people did not cut anything near those trees but allowed the undergrowth to flourish. All this added to the tree’s mystery” (Maathai 44). The sustainability of the Fig tree through animalism is essential, as well as the ecological impact of the Fig tree. This eco-awareness of the mystery surrounding the Fig tree and the reverence of the community to protect the tree and the life system resulting from it is a clear example of the recognition of the spiritual agency of the non-living components of the biosphere. This thinking lies at the heart of sustainable living on earth. It is therefore very important to incorporate this concept in actions related to all spheres of human involvement with the environment.

In an article entitled “Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World,” focusing on the link between peace and the environment, Maathai reiterates that: “we must remember that while the rest of the species on the planet can survive without us, we cannot survive without them. In protecting the survival of other species and respecting their right to be we can in turn ensure our own” (27). The principle of interconnectedness is deeply entwined with those of belonging and sacredness. What we feel intrinsically connected to naturally commands reverence and care. Thus, these principles are inseparable from the individuals or organizations that embody them. According to Maathai, “The reverence the communities had for the Fig tree helped to preserve the stream and the tadpoles that so captivated me. The trees also held the soil together, reducing erosion and landslides in such ways that, without conscious or deliberate efforts, these cultural and spiritual practices contributed to the conservation of biodiversity” (*Unbowed* 46). Maathai’s observation is in line with indigenous ecological practices, and her revelation underscores the basis of indigenous environmental knowledge and its relevance for ecological well-being. Therefore, the ecological space Maathai depicts is one where the nonhuman aspects inspire humans, and the latter are very aware of such impacts (Iheka 132). It implies that, as

an activist, Maathai is well informed on her traditional practices and their significance for ecological regeneration and conservation:

Maathai's ideological position on human/environmental relations is fascinating. She understands the infinite relationship between sociocultural practices of a people and the space they occupy. She enchantingly weaves myth into history to enunciate this fact. This is further amplified by the significance of the metaphor of . . . the Fig tree . . . [It] symbolizes hope and the continuity of human existence. . . . [It] connect[s] the past to the present, and connects both to the future. But above all . . . [It] equally demonstrate[s] the relationship between mortal and supernatural forces. (Okuyade, "Can the Earth Be Belted" 147-48)

Therefore, the depictions of the spiritualization of Mount Kenya and the Fig tree demonstrate an indigenous ecological strategy towards ecological conservation and preservation. This ecological sensibility is only appreciated when one encounters the ecological devastation caused by the cutting down of the Fig tree for the construction of an anthropogenic structure. This singular act shows the strength and rationality of a nativist ecological spiritualization of nature. Thus, for Maathai, it takes a people who have strong ontological connection with the cosmos to understand the role such practices and beliefs play in relation to the ecological balance and the equilibrium of the ecosystem. Hence, it is on this basis that some scholars insisted on the need for humanity to sustain socio-cultural practices that are instrumental in strengthening the bounds between humans and a spiritualized nature, resource utilization and environmental protection. This is why Gumo et al. have observed that African thought and belief are not an isolated system. Additionally, African philosophy on resource utilization and environmental protection is spiritually-based. Therefore, it is held that spirituality influenced major conservation efforts and the control of resources in Africa. In this sense, spiritual worldviews are viewed as natural entities (526). The indigenous ecological tendency to spiritualize natural entities, as Maathai points out in her narrative, creates an ecological

balance, which ensures the rational use of animals and plants for food and other purposes. "They guide the attitude of resource utilization, conservation, and environmental protection. Such sacred places or phenomena can never be abused and, as a pay-off, the biodiversity of the surrounding ecosystem becomes protected" (Gumo et. al 527-28).

The conservation of resources is aided by traditional beliefs and cultural practices. This is primarily achieved through the ascription of psychic powers as seen in the instances of Mount Kenya and the Fig tree. The reverence and respect for these items are a result not only of the ascriptions of the supreme powers, but also of people's respect for the divinities associated with their lands. For Maathai, nature is a privileged locus for encountering divinity; acknowledging the presence of divinity in the physical universe permits humanity to discard the perception of the physical world as a space of profanity and darkness. She believes that divinity exists only in the physical as an indistinguishable and inseparable composite. Therefore, she shows that traditional African communities participate voluntarily in the management of natural resources, and this is aided by the belief in the existence of a supreme being responsible for the protection of the communities. This respect and reverence ascribed to natural entities, together with restrictions from entrance and usage are key concepts to conservation, followed by the rules and sanctions put on offenders. This is very much the case of her mother's admonishment never to collect firewood from a Fig tree or around it, not to pick any dry wood out of the Fig tree, or even around it, not to use and cut or even burn it because it is a tree of divinity. It is in this sense that David Maillu observes that human and non-human are dependent on each other. With this in mind, humans are expected to be very delicate in their engagement with the earth. Maillu believes that, as humans, we can live to our full potential if we partake of the various empirical and spiritual secrets life provides us with. So, the end goal is, again, human success, and humanity may use the earth to achieve it (38).

To sum up, in an effort to understand the holistic inter-relationship that exists in the eco-system, Maathai demonstrates that the nature of the Kikuyu's spirituality leads to the demand for ecological preservation and sustainability. It is this understanding that helps a community to develop and practice the indigenous culture of environmental preservation, which will help create a balance in the natural world (Okafor 147). Therefore, Maathai's narrations, encounters and experiences of a spiritualized ecology represent a demonstration of an indigenous ecological epistemology as a way of articulating her rejection of unfriendly Eurocentric ecological philosophies that destroy local ecological systems. According to Bhalchandra Nemade, "when non-native, alien, imported values . . . and cultures coming from outside threaten [and erode] native values . . . and cultures, communities have to become nativistic in order to survive" (15).

This explains Maathai nativistic response to Eurocentric ecological values that negate the indigenous ecological epistemology. Thus, a nativistic ecological approach becomes one of the weapons in the hands of an invaded culture, the weapon that is capable of throwing out the dominant systems of Eurocentric ecological influence that erode capable native methods. There is no doubt that Maathai implicitly calls for a return to the roots. Only in this way can self-worth be acquired. Therefore, as Musila asserts, "both the aforementioned *mugumo* (the tree of God) and Mount Kenya (indigenously known as Kirinyaga, God's mountain in Kikuyu cosmology) become central codes to her [Maathai's] ecological thought and its spiritual dimensions" (29). Musila acknowledges that Maathai articulates an ecological intervention grounded in indigenous knowledge. Her intervention doubles as an articulation of epistemic justice, here embodied by the aforementioned Fig tree and the mountain (29-30).

The implication for humanity in general, given such nativistic ecological sensibility is that culture is bound to collapse in its attempts to break away from such connectedness with the divine nature, but with such awareness humanity's survival is ensured. The principle of interconnectedness is central to Maathai's

philosophy, as she consistently highlights the interdependence of all life forms. She emphasizes that human existence is inseparable from a thriving environment, asserting that every element of the biosphere is vital to sustaining life. For Maathai, humanity's survival hinges on the preservation of delicate ecosystems. Therefore, she implicitly draws attention to this very important way of conserving and preserving the environment. Her "focus is on the environment . . . she does this in a way that brings out [literary] aesthetics" (Mukutu et al. 15).

Environmental Ethics and Wilderness Experience:
Rethinking Ecological Sustainability and Cultural
Lessons in Africa

In addition to articulating a pro-nativistic conservational sensibility in *Unbowed*, Maathai also depicts how understanding nature and the significance of the natural environment have always been vital to Africa's ecological ethos. In this regard, Maathai deploys pastoral settings in upholding pro-environment ethics in *Unbowed*. She ventures into pastoral thinking by demonstrating how environmental ethics encourages pastoral living and generates quality biodiversity that is beneficial to the human population. Among the several pastoral ecological postures present in the memoir is the idealization of the bionetwork through the ecological ethics that advocates humanity's care, love and collaboration with nature, suggesting that Mother Nature is indispensable to humanity's physical survival, including nature's provision of a healthy psychic regeneration through the encounter with the wilderness.

Thus, in the first two chapters of her eco-biography, Maathai explores bucolic images of her agrarian and nomadic communities. This is meant to demonstrate an indigenous ecological sensibility, pointing to people's ecological ethics in relation to their environment. Interestingly, Maathai's delineation of her nativist pastoral ecology in *Unbowed* is in line with what Terry Gifford classified as "an idealization of the rural life to the extent of

ignoring the difficulties of life and work conditions there in reality” (92). This pastoral idealization of the ecology by Maathai deliberately demonstrates to the reader the level of serenity and tranquility prevalent in her nativistic ecological space before any imperial intrusion.

From the beginning of the narrative, Maathai introduces the reader to the fact that there was a time in the history of the Kikuyu people when the nativist ecological space had a perfect, fertile and productive biosphere. She was born to witness a very green vegetation around Ihithe (Maathai 3). As part of an agrarian community, she upholds that the soil is highly productive for plants and animal husbandry. The locals virtually survive from their agricultural produce together with the keeping of domestic animals, which is part of their daily dietary consumption. The people did not lack; they were blessed with land abundant with shrubs, creepers, and farms. These account for some of the berries and nuts produced in the land (Maathai 3-4). In addition to the fertility of the soil and the products from it, Maathai also presents a world with a near perfect ecological condition, where weather and seasons are easily predictable – thereby supporting and sustaining a stable life for the Kikuyu people. Their seasonal patterns remain steadfast and predictable, and one does not need either specialized knowledge or formal training in order to interpret them. Take, for instance, the arrival of the long monsoon rains – an event so cyclical and unfailing that it heralds itself with an unmistakable rhythm, woven seamlessly into the fabric of time (Maathai 3). Thus, the regularity of the seasons allows for regular and clean water for consumption, cooking, laundering and migration: “There were large well-watered fields of maize, beans, wheat and vegetables. Hunger was virtually unknown; the soil was rich, dark red-brown and moist” (Maathai 3-4). These images and encounters are always associated with serene pastoral settings, where there is full observance of eco-friendly environmental ethics. Maathai takes the reader through several ecological spaces to demonstrate the beautiful, unspoiled and natural biodiversity of her native place. In doing this, she emphasizes the effects of nature – friendly ethical behaviour among

the local people, which is the substance of pastoral ecological serenity in communities.

Maathai captures the ecological idealizations in the pastoral community of Nakura when she and her mother visit her father. Nakura, like Ihithe, boasts a remarkable landscape. Nakura and its surrounding areas display more grassland than the gigantic vegetation found in other areas. So, except for occasional trees, especially acacia, the area is more grassland. Also, part of the ecological features of Nakura are natural forests with plantations of exotic species, such as pine and eucalyptus most especially up on “the ridges . . . in those days, the upper part of Nakura was still enclosed by forest and was extremely clean” (Maathai 5). Forests, like the Abadare, dominate Nakura’s landscape, while Ihithe unfolds in lush shades of green, its fertile, terra-cotta soil concealed beneath a dense expanse of fresh, thriving vegetation. In the regional capital, Ngeri town, Maathai makes similar observations: “It rained frequently, but the rivers were always clear and clean because the land and the riverbanks were covered by vegetation” (32-33). Likewise, “[t]he waters of the Gura River were fast and clean. The stones beneath the waters were black and round . . . but had a lot of foam” (Maathai 46).

Significantly, the picture Maathai paints as she takes the reader through the various ecological spaces of her Kenyan society, is that of perfect, unspoiled, pristine, natural and fertile biospheres, rich and fertile soil, perfect climatic conditions, including the presence of an aquatic ecology. Thus, by depicting these bucolic spaces, Maathai creates a picture of utopian rural life and tranquility in Mother Nature, emphasizing the centrality of the African ecological perspective. Drawing from the pastoral tradition, Maathai simply asks the reader to inhabit the natural outside. Maathai’s purpose in these depictions is to remind the reader that all this ecological productivity, beauty and tranquility is possible because of people’s eco-friendly lifestyles and environmental ethics, which entails a respect for nature and an awareness of not taking more than what is required. Maathai’s reasoning is that if the local people before the colonial intrusion had had no belief systems

and nativistic base ethics that are consciously or unconsciously fashioned towards ecological sustainability via conservation and preservation, their ecological spaces would have been degraded even before the imperial arrival. Therefore, Maathai feels that the ability to have this connection, which brings together religious beliefs and natural entities, is the game changer for the African continent. The ability of the indigenous Kenyan people to see beyond the Western dualistic philosophy, and, in Maathai's opinion, guarantees ecological sustainability and harmony. As the reader notices, the stream and the tadpoles are effectively preserved through an indigenous pragmatism that entails a reverence for the Fig tree. Obviously, this nativist approach, together with cultural and spiritual practices, contributed to the conservation of biodiversity (Maathai 46). Thus, where there is a tradition of conservation, there is a high degree of productivity. Maathai also reminisces this fact as she states, "Many aspects of the culture our ancestors practiced had protected Kenya's environment . . . the people of Kenya did not look at trees and see timber, or at elephants and see commercial ivory stocks, or at cheetahs and see beautiful skin for sale" (*Unbowed* 175). Therefore, for Maathai, the trajectory is simple and unambiguous; nativist ethics and conservation promote ecological efficiency, equilibrium and sustainability.

In addition, Maathai's exploitation of the pastoral concept of *locus amoenus* is also quite remarkable. Maathai employs the *locus amoenus* to describe pleasing places. According to Deanna Wesolowski, the use of the *locus amoenus* interrupts the narrative with an emphatic description of a natural location. Thus, the use of the *locus amoenus* as a literary or visual representation of pleasing places creates a fictionalized space in which a desire may be fulfilled (Wesolowski 34-36). Maathai's *locus amoenus* also functions as a narrative frame around depictions of desire. She draws the reader's attention to an agrarian episode in which the farmer encounters nature at its best. Providing a tranquil atmosphere for the farmer, in which the farmer is aided in her cultivation by the cool nature of the air and the soil, "the air and the

soil are cool, the sun is going down, the sunlight is golden against the ridges and the green of trees and there is usually a breeze” (Maathai, *Unbowed* 47). Maathai as a farm artist eulogises how the elements of the earth, water, air and the waning fire of the sun combine to form the essential elements of life and reveal to her an affinity with the soil. This encounter for the farm artist is refreshing and creates an eternal impression in her life, “the freshness of the evening air lifted the burden of labor off shoulders” (Maathai, *Unbowed* 47).

The description of the encounter with nature has elements pleasing to the human senses. The visual aspect dominates: the central highlands, the sun which is going down, the ridges, and the green trees. The description also triggers the other senses. The freshness of the evening air, as well as the waning fire of the sun, engage the tactile sense. A similar experience of the *locus amoenus* is also captured by the farm artist when she explores the aquatic scape (Maathai, *Unbowed* 16). For the farm artist, the serenity these spaces provide sets the scene for desire in the pastoral; they become large-scale framing devices around pronouncements of desire – which may, in some cases, be inspired by the setting itself, and, secondly, they are “a part of both non-erotic and erotic desires” (Wesolowski 35).

In addition, like the eco psychologists, Maathai attributes great significance to life in the wilderness. She believes that wilderness can contribute positively to the development of the human psyche and can enable humans to lead meaningful lives. Chellis Glendenning believes that human psychology can be properly streamlined and become more ecologically conscious when encountering the wilderness. He anchors this in the fact that wilderness experiences are an essential element in the life of people that adulate nature (52). Therefore, Maathai takes the reader through her retrospective childhood encounters with nature and her several encounters with the wild in Ihethe, Nakura and other Kikuyu communities, as she strongly believes in the positive psychic impacts such encounters have on humans. For example, Maathai alludes to an aquatic encounter in the Kanungu stream,

which is exhilarating and refreshing not only to one's sight and taste but also to one's psychic reorientation. . In these childhood scenes, she explores the psychic impact of the stream on her and the potential benefits of the stream to the local community. Not only did the stream provide clean and drinkable water to its surroundings, but it provided fertile soil that aided plant growth: "along the stream were bananas, plants and sugarcane, which were typical food crops. Arrowroots, when cooked, provide a starch tuber like potatoes, and grow only where there is a lot of water" (Maathai, *Unbowed* 45).

Maathai's vivid pictorial descriptions illustrate how an intimate encounter with nature offers profound fulfillment – providing physical sustenance, fostering a sense of belonging, bridging desire and meaning, enabling immersive participation in life's rhythms, affirming personal agency, and nurturing a spiritual bond with the natural world. Stream Harper highlights the transformative power of wilderness experiences, asserting that they serve as the most potent eco-psychological remedy for modern individuals confined within urban landscapes, offering them a pathway to wholeness. He contends that when humans embrace Mother Nature through these encounters, they gain access to a deeper wisdom, one that unfolds organically as undisturbed nature sustains itself (185). Maathai, much like Harper, perceives humanity's relationship with nature not as one of possession but of intrinsic being – humans are nature rather than mere custodians of it. She views the wilderness as a silent yet profound teacher, one without hierarchy or prescriptive authority, capable of guiding individuals toward heightened attentiveness and awareness. In this perspective, the natural world is not merely a resource to be managed but an ever-present mentor, offering lessons in resilience, harmony, and interconnected existence.

Maathai draws the reader's attention to another episode in her narrative where nature provides her with insight to metamorphosis: the biological process where an animal undergoes a dramatic transformation from a juvenile or larval stage to an adult stage, which she will later understand and appreciate in her life.

"Suddenly the eggs would disappear. And subsequently, I would see what seemed to be an army of black tadpoles wriggling in the water. . . . In time, these also would disappear around the area near the stream" (*Unbowed* 45).

Significantly, this informal process of learning from the natural world establishes the foundation for a future encounter with nature through formal education: "I [Maathai] never made the connection between the eggs, the tadpoles, and the frogs until I went to school and learned about the life cycle of amphibians" (*Unbowed* 46). For Maathai, this experience is an act of initiation that ensures a personal transformation, not through external preaching or force, but arising from within oneself. Harper aptly captures the transformation that reverberates through the body-mind system after getting connected with the wilderness in nature, which is exactly what Maathai experiences in her encounter with the wild of Ihethe and other neighboring areas across Kikuyu lands: "Upon entering wilderness, one of the first things almost everyone experiences is an enlivening of the five senses. Suddenly we are bathed in (and sometimes overloaded with) new sounds, awareness sights, interesting textures, different smells and tastes" (*Unbowed* 189). Maathai sees this wilderness-aided transformation as subtly powerful; she also juxtaposes her experiences in the wilderness with what is obtainable in the urban areas.

In addition, and in consonance with Harper's explanation, Maathai describes the experience of an encounter with an aquatic wilderness when she envision an aquatic experience (*Unbowed* 46). Thus, this incident is a reflection of the change in Maathai's perception that is an outcome of a sensory aliveness and alertness in the wilderness. The recognition of her own psychic wilderness and the envisioning of the physical wilderness outside ensure a harmonious life with nature. Maathai further gives a glimpse of this wilderness encounter as she more or less engages with Mother Nature in a refreshing endeavour, but this time as a care provider through acts of cultivation. She appreciates the cultivation of nature more than anything else. This is because, as a farm artist, this activity gives her the golden opportunity to enjoy the all-

encompassing love of Mother Nature: “As you remove the weeds and press earth around the crops you feel content, and wish light would last longer so you could cultivate more” (*Unbowed* 47).

Maathai’s depiction of farm life reflects her deep environmental consciousness, portraying her as both an artist of the land and a devoted steward of nature. Cultivation, for her, is not merely agricultural labor but an intimate engagement with the environment – an act of harmony and reciprocity. The farm emerges as an ecological space where she meets, understands, and works alongside nature. As Chaiyon Tongsukkaeng observes, “The farm is an ecological site in which a farmer must understand, adapt to, and sustainably harness nature – both the earth and animals” (13). In the passage quoted above, the collaborative effort is aptly captured: while Maathai focuses on cultivating the land, one can also notice nature’s reciprocal gestures, especially the cool breeze and golden sunlight, which she appreciates and wants it to continue longer.

As a participant observer, Maathai reproduces direct experiences in prose form to represent working landscapes. She combines georgic sentiments and key elements of the pastoralist tradition that encourages work or cultivation as part of the pastoral thinking. John Goodridge argues that the pastoral is limited to its idealization of nature while the georgic centrally considers the practicality of labour in rural life (6). The interest in the georgic¹ is the ecological relationship between literature, agricultural practice, and rural life. Maathai’s engagement with human labour and the passion for farming can be regarded as the modern georgic. In this sense, therefore, pastoral and georgic are closely intertwined; co-operation and the reality of hard rural work are emphasized in the georgic tradition.

Hence, what one sees from this experience is that, in relating these encounters, Maathai considers her actions as an expression of her loyalty to earth. Her ecstatic description of the pastoral ecological wilderness dominates the first two chapters of the memoir. These kinds of invigorating and rejuvenating wilderness experiences are an integral part of her life. They have essentially

framed her attitude towards nature. Maathai's wilderness perceptions have multiple valences. Consequently, Maathai's position is that wilderness has significant implications as it is linked not only to humanity's present, but also to its past and future. "Wilderness is humanity's source and power; it is thus an essential measure of human history and behaviour. Hence, it is indispensable for the study of human nature" (Wendell 45). Maathai is aware of the fact that wilderness can help humanity to define its potentials and possibilities. Thus, as Berry Wendell suggests "the preservation of the wild becomes inevitable as humanity has to assess itself in relation to it at a scale that extends from the present to the past and future" (45). Hence, the reader sees Maathai's rhetoric and pleas for the preservation of the pristine and undiminished world of the wilderness as the prime responsibility of the Kikuyu people as it is the most significant legacy they have inherited.

Conclusion

Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir* eloquently articulates her resistance to Eurocentric ecological practices by reasserting indigenous ecological knowledge systems that have long been marginalized, disrupted, and displaced by colonial and globalized environmental policies. Through her autobiography, Maathai exposes the destructive impact of these Eurocentric forms of ecological imperialism, which have not only impoverished rural African communities but have also stifled Africa's socio-economic potential by degrading its natural environment. She critiques the imposition of these foreign environmental practices, which often result in the exploitation and exhaustion of the land, further marginalizing rural Africans whose livelihoods are deeply dependent on a symbiotic relationship with nature.

Her memoir serves as a powerful counter-narrative to the dominance of these Eurocentric ideologies, advocating the revitalization of African ecological practices grounded in indigenous knowledge systems. Importantly, this is not a rejection of development or progress, but a call for a more sustainable,

logical approach to resource use – one that is in harmony with Africa's own eco-ontological perspectives. Maathai also challenges the entrenched human/non-human binary present in Eurocentric thought, where humans are seen as central subjects and the environment merely as a resource to be exploited. By contrast, she champions an African worldview that emphasizes the deep interconnectedness between humans and the natural world, a relationship rooted in African environmental ethics and spiritual traditions.

Through her literary work, Maathai urges Africans to reclaim their ecological heritage as an act of resistance against the destructive forces of globalization, while also advocating a more sustainable future. Her memoir is not only a personal account but a call to action, underscoring the need for Africans to reconnect with and protect their environmental traditions as a path toward both cultural preservation and environmental sustainability.

Note:

¹ A georgic is a refined literary form that extols the virtues of agriculture, rural existence, and the diligence of labor upon the land. Didactic in nature, it seeks not merely to delight but to instruct, offering sagacious counsel on the art of cultivation, the tending of livestock, and the intricate symbiosis between humankind and the natural world. The most illustrious example of this tradition is Virgil's *Georgics* (composed circa 29 BCE), a magisterial Latin poem in four books. In its verses, Virgil dispenses wisdom on the rhythms of the earth – guiding the reader through the nuances of farming, the caprices of the weather, the stewardship of beasts, and the cultivation of vines – while simultaneously meditating upon the ceaseless toil that binds humanity to the soil and to the inexorable forces of fate. Distinct from the pastoral, which bathes rural life in an air of idyllic serenity, the georgic is rooted in the grit of labor and the solemn grandeur of industry. It does not merely celebrate nature's beauty but venerates the sweat, perseverance, and resilience demanded by the land. Often infused with moral and political resonance, it elevates work itself as a noble and dignified calling, a testament to human fortitude in the eternal dance with nature.

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