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Kenyan environmental reform: Maathai's thoughts based on African culture in Indonesian perspective

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ABSTRACT

This perspective article examines Wangari Maathai's thoughts about the Green Belt Movement, which heavily influenced by her culture. It has importance meaning for its community; it gives guide through a way of life for its community, such as African culture. Despite the importance of it, African culture gradually eroded by the influence of Western colonialism. Through her contact with rural women, Maathai discovered the link between environmental degradation and its influenced on poverty and the loss of culture towards Kenyan communities. The difficulties in obtaining firewood to cook traditional foods to provide nutrition for the communities became the spark of the ideas of the Green Belt Movement. Numerous articles relating to Wangari Maathai to the Green Belt Movement have been written, and this article delved further into her ideas, which were influenced by her own culture in the matter of the Green Belt Movement. This article also discusses the issue from an Indonesian perspective, comparing Maathai's ideas and the historical conditions in Kenya with the situation in Indonesia. The environmental damage occurring in Africa follows a similar pattern to that in Asia, particularly Indonesia. Consequently, it is anticipated that this article will serve as a catalyst for future collaborative research endeavors between Africa and Asia.

KEYWORDS:
Baduy, Culture, Green Belt Movement, Indonesia, Kenyan, Wangari Maathai

INTRODUCTION

Quite possibly the most influential woman ever to emerge from post-colonial Africa is Wangari Maathai, who was born in 1940 in Nyeri, Kenya. Maathai was a biologist and an environmentalist, but first and foremost, a courageous vocal advocate of democracy and women's rights. She became the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, awarded for her "contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace" through the Green Belt Movement. Her activities are a strong convergence of environmentalism, gender activism, and political reform, although with controversy and criticisms.

Born on 1 April 1940 on the colony of Kenya, Wangari Maathai was born with the name Wangari Muta[1]. Her parents were peasant farmers and part of the Kikuyu community, the most populous ethnic group in Kenya. She described her village Ihithe at the time she was born, as "(...) still lush, green, and fertile. (...) abundant with shrubs, creeperes, ferns, and trees". Throughout her memoir, Maathai associated her land closely with her. For instances, she referred to herself as 'child of the same soil' when she recounted the story on how the rural women welcomed and appreciated her efforts in helping them to improve the lives and the environment where they live as part of the Green Belt Movement. This showed that Maathai held her identity as Kenyan in high regard, as she found it as something she was proud of[2].

Despite coming from humble background, Maathai's family was one of the many Africans families to embrace formal education and Western conventions. In spite of the majority of schools were preserved for boys at the time, Maathai managed to enroll in school and even finished her studies until she got PhD. During her early lifetime, Africans in Kenya were fiercely against the imposition and the rampant influences of colonial rule, and when she reached adulthood, Maathai became critical on colonial policies implemented in Kenya. One of those policies were the requirement to only speak English at school, which in turn detached the students from their mother tongue and slowly eroded the people's culture[3].

METHODS

This article used historical method and literature studies in dissecting the influences of African culture on Maathai's environmental reform. Primary sources, gathered during heuristic, focused on Maathai's own works such as *The Challenge for Africa, Unbowed: A Memoir,* and *The Greenbelt Movement* in order to delve further on how much Maathai's own culture contributed to her work. Secondary sources, consisting of articles published in various online journals, served as corroboration and filled the gap in primary sources. After criticism in regards the matter of sources, the next step was coalescence all the information to form a cohesive and comprehensive narration during historiography.

To enrich this inquiry, historiographical sources addressing Indonesia's environmental policies, such as those documenting reforestation efforts, community-based conservation, and the legacy of colonial resource extraction, were also examined. This comparative lens highlights both convergences and divergences in postcolonial environmental reform across the two nations.

In the context of postcolonial theory, we turned to J.D. Elam, who delineated it as a conceptual framework that prioritized the analysis of the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social ramifications of European colonial dominance worldwide from the 18th to the 20th centuries. Postcolonial theory manifests in various forms and interventions, yet all subscribe to a shared fundamental assertion: the world we inhabit cannot be comprehended except in the context of the historical progression of imperialism and colonial domination[4].

Additionally, we refered to Young, Robert J.C. In his discussion of the emergence of postcolonialism, Young not only provided an excellent introduction to anti-colonial thought but also elucidated the direct influence of anti-colonial thought on postcolonial theory. His argument posited that anti-colonial thought and postcolonialism are inherently transnational in nature, emphasizing their dissemination throughout the "tricontinental" world (comprising South America, Africa, and South Asia) during the 20th century[5].

To complement this, historiographical sources were used to frame Maathai's activism within broader discourses of postcolonial ecological history. From the Indonesian perspective, environmental histories focusing on deforestation, *adat* (customary) land rights, and state-led reforestation initiatives provided critical points of comparison.

The comparative framework revealed both convergence and divergence: while Maathai mobilized traditional values against state and corporate deforestation, Indonesian environmental reform has been shaped by top-down state involvement and legal contestations over customary land. The synthesis of all sources was conducted to create a coherent historiographical narrative, although further explanation of the analytical tools (discourse analysis, thematic coding) would strengthen the methodological clarity.

DISCUSSION

The Colonialism of Kenya

The colonial projects in Africa slowly eroded the culture of its people. The imposed colonial rule and policies, borne with sole purpose to gathered revenues for patria, slowly deteriorated cultures of African people[6]. Western style education and missionary activities were one of the primary projects of the colonial government, and the implementation of both projects had ramifications on African traditions. The individualistic values of Westerners such as capitalism, corruption, and oppression went rampant. As it ingrained the Western values into the African, the colonial government has disarranged the traditional moral and practice of the African.

One of the many cases can be seen in the Kikuyu community. As a consequence of colonialism, the reverence for nature that was part of the Kikuyu's beliefs and traditions have virtually died away; they were dying the moment Maathai was born. The European missionaries preached their religion and many local people started to accepted it, and within the next two generations, they lost respect for their own beliefs and traditions. On her own account, Maathai saw the forests being felled and replaced by commercial plantations as part of colonial projects[7].

Environmental Advocacy: The Green Belt Movement

Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement (GBM) in 1977, a grass-roots movement that started as a tree-planting initiative to combat deforestation but developed into a vehicle for broader social change. The GBM organized rural women to plant trees as a means of restoring ecosystems and earning sustainable living. Over 51 million trees have been planted by the GBM so far, assisting Kenya's ecological resilience[8].

However, her environmentalism was never apolitical. As scholars note, she emphasized that "environmental degradation and political repression go hand in hand"[7]. Her work targeted both issues simultaneously, making her a symbol of eco-feminism in Africa. Some critics viewed her strategy as too idealistic, questioning GBM's long-term sustainability in the absence of deep systemic reforms[9].

Her activism was deeply rooted in advocating for women's roles in environmental conservation and civic participation. She believed that when women are empowered, entire communities benefit. Through GBM workshops and civic education, women were educated on constitutional rights, environmental stewardship, and democratic principles[10]. This link between ecology and gender made her an iconic figure of African ecofeminism[11].

Unfortunately, most Kenyan male politicians and elites saw this empowerment as threatening. Maathai was constantly criticized as being too "Westernized" or "radical," accusations most commonly leveled against African women who challenged traditional gender roles. As Mabera (2021) explains, she embodied "Afrocentric decolonial environmentalism" that challenged patriarchal and neocolonial orders. However, her confrontational style repelled some local allies and NGOs, who advocated more pragmatic approaches.

One of Maathai's most controversial roles was her open defiance of President Daniel arap Moi's regime during the 1980s and 1990s. She led protests against illegal land grabbing, including the famous Uhuru Park protest in 1989 where she successfully stopped a skyscraper development in Nairobi's only urban park[12]. For this, she

was vilified in the press, beaten, and arrested multiple times.

Even though the majority of people applauded her bravery, her political ambitions were often faulted by others as contradictory. For example, she was inducted into government as Assistant Minister of Environment in 2003 by President Kibaki but was faulted for not making enough change from within the system[13]. Her tenure showed that it is difficult to translate activism into bureaucratic domination.

The Kikuyu's Values and Influence on the Green Belt Movement

The Kikuyu people represent the most significant ethnic group in Kenya, comprising approximately 23% of the nation's population. They are predominantly located in the highlands near Mount Kenya, which they refer to as Kirinyaga or the "Mountain of Whiteness." The Gikuyu language is widely spoken in this region, alongside Swahili and English, particularly among urban dwellers. The Kikuyu people possess a rich cultural heritage, which includes agricultural practices centred around fertile lands. In these areas, they cultivate a variety of crops and raise livestock. In accordance with customary practices, the roles of Kikuyu women and men were clearly delineated. The sphere of female domestic labour and agricultural activities constituted the primary domain of female engagement, while males were responsible for the management of livestock[14].

Central to their cultural identity is a deep reverence for family and community, which manifests in structured social organizations, including age-grade systems (*riika*) and councils of elders (*kiama*), that guide communal decision-making and conflict resolution[15]. These systems embody values such as respect, cooperation, and unity. The myths of Kikuyu's origin, particularly the legend of Gikuyu and Mumbi, emphasize the sacredness of land, symbolizing a spiritual connection to nature and ancestral heritage[16].

Ritual practices remain a cornerstone of Kikuyu culture, with initiation rites such as circumcision marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. This rite of passage is not just personal but also a communal affirmation of identity and readiness to assume societal responsibilities. Furthermore, gender roles are distinctly delineated in Kikuyu society, with women often serving as custodians of agricultural knowledge and traditions, while men typically hold leadership positions within the kiama system[17]. These practices, while deeply rooted in tradition, are increasingly dynamic, adapting to contemporary influences including Christianity and Western education[18].

Kikuyu cultural resilience is evident in the ways traditional beliefs and practices are blended with modernity. For instance, while Christianity has become widespread, many Kikuyu continue to observe indigenous practices such as libations to ancestors and seasonal agricultural rites[19]. The adaptability of Kikuyu culture, including its artistic expressions like music, dance, and oral narratives, has fostered a strong sense of identity amid globalization. This evolving cultural tapestry not only highlights Kikuyu history but also offers a lens through which we can understand the community's contributions to Kenya's broader socio-political landscape[20].

Maathai's view regarding nature was influenced from her community, the Kikuyu. The myth of origin in the Kikuyu community was tied with nature; and thus, nature became important aspect for its member community[21]. In the context of the Kikuyu people, the influence of Mount Kenya is undeniable.

For Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, the mountain held significant cultural and spiritual importance for the local community. It was a source of material needs and a site for ritualistic and ceremonial practices that took place in an atmosphere of undisturbed tranquility. Mount Kenya's forests offer a multitude of benefits to the local community. They serve as a source of wood and raw materials, play a crucial role in preventing natural disasters such as flooding and soil erosion, regulate the supply of groundwater and air humidity, and control air pollution. Additionally, these forests provide a habitat for wildlife, further emphasizing their ecological significance[22].

Maathai articulated the significance of the Mount Kenya Forest from the perspective of a native of its slopes. She contended that humans inhabited terrestrial environments characterized by a proliferation of shrubs, vines, ferns, and trees. The regular and reliable

precipitation ensured the consistent availability of clean drinking water throughout the region. The topography of the region is characterized by expansive, fertile, and well-irrigated fields that are utilized for the cultivation of corn, beans, wheat, and vegetables. The soil is characterized by its fertility, reddish-brown coloration, and moist texture. She posits that local community members regard the Mount Kenya Forest as a sacred space that merits reverence[23].

This observation underscores the significance of Maathai's perspective. She did not relinquish her commitment to both nature and the local community in order to prioritize environmental preservation. In the context of Indonesia, this phenomenon persists. In various rural and remote regions, communities that adhere to strong traditional customs have developed practices aimed at preserving nature through mystical and mythical approaches.

According to Maathai, the belief system of the people residing in the area was intrinsically tied to the presence of the mountain, which was regarded as a divine entity. This belief was deeply ingrained in their cultural consciousness, fostering a sense of security and abundance, as if guided by a higher power. The frequent occurrence of precipitation in the region is attributed to the presence of cloud cover over Mount Kenya. During the rainy season, the people had more than enough food for themselves and their livestock, and they experienced a period of peace.

However, with the arrival of missionaries who disseminated the doctrine that God does not reside on Mount Kenya, these traditions have nearly become extinct. The local populace exhibited a diminution of respect for their own beliefs and traditions.

After the initial missionary efforts, administrators introduced novel methods of exploiting Kenya's natural resources. These methods included deforestation, clearance of native forests, establishment of plantations of imported trees, hunting of wild animals, and large-scale commercial agriculture. The sacred landscape was stripped of its sanctity and destroyed, while the local populace became desensitized to the resulting destruction, perceiving it as a consequence of modernization[22].

Therefore, according to Njagi, Maathai initiated GBM to reestablish the practice of authentic culture, which fosters interconnectedness rather than hierarchical structures that are detrimental to life. GBM has determined to safeguard and revert to the original methods, acknowledging both the spiritual connection to the earth and the cultural practices that are in place. The subjects are the postcolonial subjects who forge their own narratives as they navigate their lives within a destroyed cultural and environmental landscape, a consequence of the imperialist expansion of the Western world.

In her research and activism, Maathai reflected on her childhood and realised that her family and the Kikuyu culture had instilled in her an intuitive sense of environmental balance. She was of the conviction that reverting to customary methods of conservation would prove efficacious in the preservation of Mount Kenya and other forest ecosystems within Kenya. It is evident that, in her view, the pivotal elements of self-empowerment and conservation are rooted in traditional spiritual values. These values encompass a profound love for the environment, a commitment to self-improvement, a sense of gratitude, a fundamental respect for all living beings, and a steadfast dedication to serving others. These values constitute the fundamental principles that underpin the Green Belt Movement[24].

In her Nobel lecture delivered on 10 December 2004 in Norway, Maathai stated that GBM in Kenya had adopted the tree of peace as a symbol of peace during periods of ethnic conflict. During the ongoing revision of the Kenyan constitution, arboreal symbols of peace have been planted in various locations throughout the country with a view to fostering a culture of peace. The utilisation of trees as symbols of peace is consistent with a pervasive African tradition. For instance, the Kikuyu elders carry sticks made from the thigi tree. When these sticks are placed between two disputing parties, they are said to cause the disputing parties to stop fighting and seek reconciliation[25].

Indonesian Perspective: The *Pikukuh Karuhun* of Baduy

This phenomenon is exemplified by the Baduy tribe in Banten, Indonesia. The prohibition of gadgets and the

internet, coupled with a lack of adherence to technological advancements and modernization, is indicative of a society that is resistant to change. The enforcement of strict surveillance measures, including the prohibition of outsiders from entering the territory, further underscores this resistance.

The Baduy community has a local belief system known as *Pikukuh Karuhun* (*Pikukuh*), which bears a resemblance to the Kikuyu concept. Pikukuh Karuhun is a form of local wisdom that governs all aspects of the Baduy community's life. The *Pikukuh Karuhun* document is a compendium of regulations designed to safeguard the natural environment and to impede the practice of converting land for agricultural use[26]. The local religion, or indigenous faith, practised by the Sunda Wiwitan people, is also of interest in this study. *Pikukuh* is one of the fundamental tenets of this philosophy.

Pikukuh was transmitted orally from generation to generation as unquestionable customary rules that must be obeyed. Consequently, any violations of these customary rules are met with consequences that are accepted by the Baduy indigenous community. The Baduy people's philosophy is characterised by a series of tenets, which encompass concepts such as peace, honesty, simplicity, and compassion. These principles serve as the foundation for their way of life, and they are committed to upholding and practising these values in perpetuity.

The Baduy community adheres to the *Pikukuh*, a practice that is said to ensure their protection under the auspices of *Batara Tunggal*, the supreme authority in the Baduy belief system. It is believed that the guriang, or messengers of *Batara Tunggal*, are sent by the Karuhun, or ancestors, to provide guidance and protection to the Baduy community. Furthermore, the hardships experienced in life are considered to be retribution from the *Karuhun* and *Batara Tunggal* for disobeying the *Pikukuh*. The Baduy community's adherence to their religious beliefs, as embodied in that tradition, has been identified as a critical factor in maintaining the community's cohesion[27].

Understanding Wangari Maathai's environmental activism requires a nuanced engagement with indigenous ecological philosophies—particularly those rooted in the Kikuyu culture of Kenya and the Baduy traditions of Indonesia. Both communities articulate a cosmo-centric understanding of nature that deeply informs land use, spiritual relationships with the environment, and ecological responsibility.

In Kikuyu cosmology, the natural world is intrinsically sacred. Elements such as the *Mugumo* (fig tree) are venerated as physical embodiments of spiritual power and community identity[28]. These trees are not to be cut or disturbed, as they symbolize the presence of *Murungu* (God) and serve as traditional sites for communal rituals. Land among the Kikuyu is not seen as a commodity but as a collective inheritance, entrusted to the living by past and future generations.

This worldview underscores a moral responsibility to protect the environment, a principle deeply reflected in Maathai's advocacy. Her GBM promoted tree planting not merely as a conservation tactic but as an act of cultural preservation and political resistance. As Maathai recounts in Unbowed, her respect for the sacredness of trees and communal land directly stems from her Kikuyu upbringing and traditional values.

In contrast, the Baduy people of Indonesia adhere to Sunda Wiwitan, an indigenous spiritual tradition that emphasizes ecological equilibrium. Their environmental ethic is codified in customary law (*pikukuh karuhun*), which strictly prohibits exploitation of natural resources within designated sacred zones. These include *Leuweung Kolot*—untouched ancestral forests where human intervention is forbidden—and *Leuweung Bukaan*, which may be used for subsistence but only under carefully regulated practices. The Baduy thus maintain a sophisticated zoning system that preserves biodiversity while ensuring community needs are met sustainably. Their relationship with nature is both spiritual and regulatory, rooted in ritual observance rather than political confrontation.

While the Kikuyu and Baduy operate in vastly different geographic and sociopolitical contexts, both uphold traditions that center ecological stewardship as a cultural and spiritual mandate. Maathai's activism, though more overtly political and activist in style, mirrors the Baduy's ethic in its refusal to commodify

land and in its deep respect for natural systems. By framing Maathai's work within this comparative indigenous lens, it becomes evident that her environmental ideology is neither derivative of Western conservation models nor uniquely African, but part of a broader, transnational pattern of indigenous environmental knowledge systems. This alignment strengthens the argument that sustainable ecological action must engage with, and be informed by, place-based cultural epistemologies.

CONCLUSION

From the perspective of Kikuyu and Maathai's thoughts through GBM, we in Indonesia deeply appreciate these efforts and believe they can be applied in our country. The subjects of this study placed significant value on nature and are influenced by local religious beliefs. This phenomenon is particularly noteworthy in light of Indonesia's substantial deforestation rates. The ongoing degradation of Indonesia's forests is a consequence of a combination of corporate exploitation and government policies.

If Maathai's struggle was accompanied by the impact of Western colonialism in the form of natural exploitation, then the situation in Indonesia is even more concerning. As previously stated, deforestation and exploitation, which have become increasingly widespread, are not the result of Dutch colonialism in the Dutch East Indies. Rather, these practices emerged subsequent to Indonesia's attainment of independence and have persisted to the present day, exacerbating further. Consequently, an examination of Maathai's endeavours from a local vantage point is particularly pertinent to our context in Indonesia.

The Kikuyu and other African cultures that continue to adhere to local traditions were, as Maathai noted, reminded of the importance of not forgetting their heritage and of not being degraded by exploitation in the name of modernization.

This is a significant undertaking for us to undertake in Indonesia. It is anticipated that this article will serve as a catalyst for the dissemination of ideas and the continuation of Maathai's struggle, encompassing various local communities and traditional customs that continue to adhere to their beliefs in order to preserve nature.

As is evidenced in Africa and Kenya, where it is not solely the Kikuyu, it is similarly demonstrated in Indonesia, where indigenous communities that uphold traditions and protect nature are not exclusively the Baduy.

In addition to the Banten (the Baduy), there are also other regions and villages on Java Island, including those of the Banten, Sunda, and Javanese ethnic groups. In a similar manner, within the geographical confines of Eastern Indonesia – encompassing Sulawesi, Nusa Tenggara, Maluku, and Papua – the ideas and struggles of Maathai find significant pertinence.

From the perspective of Kikuyu environmental values and Wangari Maathai's vision through GBM, this article highlights the relevance of indigenous ecological thought for broader global contexts. While Kenya's case is unique, some of Maathai's ideas—particularly those grounded in cultural heritage, environmental stewardship, and community activism—may resonate with challenges faced in Indonesia, especially regarding deforestation. Indonesia's own environmental degradation, largely driven by post-independence economic policies and corporate land use, presents a different historical trajectory than Kenya's colonial legacy. Thus, while parallels can be drawn, it is important to approach such comparisons with caution.

This article centers on cultures that place high value on nature, often grounded in local spiritual or religious traditions. However, it is limited in scope by focusing mainly on the Kikuyu and the Baduy, without exploring the wider diversity of Indonesia's indigenous communities or considering counterexamples where modernization has disrupted traditional ecological values. Although the Baduy represent a strong case of indigenous conservation, they are not the sole guardians of local environmental wisdom in Indonesia. Other ethnic groups across Java, Banten, and eastern regions such as Sulawesi, Nusa Tenggara, Maluku, and Papua also maintain diverse relationships with nature rooted in their own cultural contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None declared.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the conceptualization of the study, manuscript writing, and the review and revision of the final manuscript.

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