

BOOK REVIEW

Besi Brillian Muhonja. *Radical Utu. Critical Ideas and Ideals of Wangari Muta Maathai*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2020. xiv + 153 pp. Preface. Acknowledgments. Appendixes. Notes. References. Index. \$32.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0896803268.

Women are often overlooked with regard to their political roles in advancing peace and development in society, but some African women have been at the forefront of these movements and are recognized for their roles in conceptualizing African agency in international politics. In January 2012, the African Union (AU) adopted a decision calling for the joint commemoration of Africa Environment Day and Wangari Maathai Day to be observed on March 3, in recognition of the work and life of Nobel laureate Prof. Wangari Maathai, an action which stamped her legitimacy.

Besi Brillian Muhonja's book *Radical Utu: Critical Ideas and Ideals of Wangari Muta Maathai* combines theoretical insights about "utu" and gender environmental politics in a way that connects the dots for readers, painting their centrality to all respects of human endeavor. One group was a threat to Maathai's life, while the other guarded her to ensure her security, yet she was fighting for a common good, the environment. This theory of utu is developed chapter by chapter but most substantively elaborated in Chapter Four, with the recognition that the concept of utu was lost during colonization; this in turn resulted in loss of identity and poor postcolonial African leadership, leading to underdevelopment because (re)humanizing has never taken place.

Most African approaches such as Maathai's Green Belt Movement (GBM) seem to be an embattled response to the effects of colonial legacy against the social systems that predated colonialism as well as the current social system. That is why the author wastes no time in Chapter One, delving directly into Maathai's background from childhood to womanhood. It becomes apparent to readers that multiple events in her life inspired her to embrace the roles of human rights defender, environmental activist, and politician.

In the subsequent chapter, the author unravels for the readers the above ideals by exploring Maathai's Green Belt Movement as one of the African

pioneers in championing the shift from a brown agenda to a green agenda, an ideal that until then had only been considered applicable to the Global North. The paradox is that, according to Maathai, the Global North was responsible for disassociating Africans from the land and environment by monetizing it during colonization and causing the present-day environmental challenges.

From Chapter Three onward, the author deliberately deviates from the norm of Maathai's previous representations by theorizing her ideals and ideas. Authentically presenting Maathai as a representative of African female agency in international relations, Muhonja demonstrates how Maathai's work had a ripple effect, not only locally but also regionally and globally, through a holistic decolonization process that disrupted the narrative of Eurocentric feminism. This was accomplished by reclaiming the position of African women within the indigenous communities that had been destabilized during colonization.

Through her critical understanding of Maathai's work, the author is able to simplify for readers the rather complex and subtle nuances of terms that are often used interchangeably: feminism, women's rights, and human rights. She shows that Maathai, who was never a feminist, was nonetheless able through women's movements and environmental and political activities to champion human rights issues without presenting herself as a helpless female. Maathai was simply a human being, championing the theory of persons and personhood (*utu*) and thereby garnering support from both genders.

September 25, 2021, marked a decade since Maathai's death; therefore, this book serves as a perfect dedication to Maathai as a decolonial ecogent. However, the author, in her attempt to represent Maathai in as authentic a way as possible, may cause readers to conclude that the only cause of development problems in Africa has been colonialism. Even though in Chapter Five another problem is highlighted, that being "a disempowerment that breeds erasure of self-confidence, trepidation, feelings of jadedness and apathy, and ultimately dependency, which benefits the Global North" (90), propagated by an imbalanced globalization, interestingly these problems are still traced back to colonialism. Yet, arguably, the country that has benefited the most from globalization is China, which is also a Global South country.

Nevertheless, this book is very relevant because, unlike previous representations, the author manages here to convince readers that Maathai's ideas and ideals in educational, cultural, political, and economic arenas have much broader conceptualizations than she is generally given credit for. Maathai's ideas "involved holistic approaches to meeting societies' needs and proper political, economic and environmental management" (116) that are still relevant to date, and so they continually deserve institutionalized engagement, even years after her passing.

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