Wangari Maathai: Righteous Leader of Environmental and Social Change

Jennifer L. Kushner
National Louis University

Follow this and additional works at: http://newprairiepress.org/aerc

Part of the Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License

Recommended Citation

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.
Wangari Maathai: Righteous Leader of Environmental and Social Change

Jennifer L. Kushner
National-Louis University

Abstract: This Africentric historical inquiry introduces Wangari Maathai, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, as a visionary adult educator and leader of the liberatory environmental movement known as The Green Belt Movement. The study describes Maathai’s philosophy and how it informed her leadership of adult education for environmental, political, and social change.

Introduction

“Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking so that humanity stops threatening its life support system. We are called to assist the earth to heal her wounds. And in the process, heal our own...In the course of history there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness. To reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. That time is now.”

-Wangari Maathai’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, 2004

Wangari Maathai, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize recipient and internationally renowned Kenyan activist, is a visionary adult educator who is not present in the discourse of the field. The movement she started, The Green Belt Movement, addresses decades of mis-education through a variety of grassroots and culturally grounded adult education activities. These programs help communities understand the linkages between environmental degradation and poor governance, and educate people to participate in democracy. As well, the programs address root causes of environmental and social problems by teaching about relationships between colonialism, poverty, racism, and capitalism.

The purpose of this study was to introduce Wangari Maathai to the field of adult education. Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work linking just and sustainable care of the environment with issues of peace and governance. In 1977, Maathai started a grassroots tree planting campaign with rural women in Kenya that eventually grew into a multifaceted environmental, social and political movement. The study focuses on Maathai’s philosophy, and how that philosophy informed adult education and leadership within The Green Belt Movement. As an Africentric historical study, its primary goal is to add to the knowledge base of adult education history with regard to the lived experiences of Africans and members of the African Diaspora. This is important, as sociocultural and intellectual racism has led to the exclusion and marginalization of these histories. The study adds to Africana philosophy in how it draws on and evolves this tradition in current times. Hord and Lee characterize philosophy within this tradition as essentially an intellectual power of mediation,

It is the philosopher’s role, for example, to mediate the desires and expectations of the individual with the interests of the social collective, interests that the philosopher will be quick to acknowledge are themselves largely responsible for the particular contour of the individual’s desires and expectations. Given the historical facts of European slave-trading, colonialism, and postcolonialism as dominant features of the history of Africa and the African Diaspora, the philosopher’s mediating role takes on a second dimension: not only must the
black thinker work out systematically ideals that help shape the individual’s relation to the life of his or her community, but this thinker must also help mediate the complex relationships between colonizer and colonized, between European cultural demands and the authentic interests of black culture. In short, philosophy is here is called upon to evaluate and counter the dehumanization to which people and ideas of African descent have been subjected through the history of colonialism and of European racism. (1995, p.5)

Given this history of colonialism and European racism, it is useful to understand the Eurocentric worldview that informed that history, and which created the conditions necessitating the founding of the Green Belt Movement. Eurocentrism is rooted in dualistic understandings of reality, and thus creates artificial binaries such as the construction of race and the positioning of humans as ‘above’ and separate from nature. The problem with duality is that by making something ‘the other’ we can more easily distance ourselves from its suffering, degradation or demise. As a result, exploitation and domination of people and nature have gone hand in hand as Europeans and non-native Americans have colonized the world.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in Africentrism, which Asante defines as, “… a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values and perspectives predominate” (2003, p. 2). In the study all constructs, perspectives, and units of analysis were grounded in Africentrism. Within this paradigm, racism is viewed as the primary impact factor, or in the language of Wangari Maathai, racism is a “root cause.” The study draws on the African philosophical framework of Maat as a lens through which to view Maathai’s philosophy, and which provides conceptual grounding for understanding that philosophy. While Maathai does not speak specifically of Maat, her practice as an activist and educator reflects ideals inherent to this philosophical and moral ideal. Thus, Maat provides the historical antecedent to a philosophy born of Maathai’s lived experience. A key principle of Maat is holism and an orientation toward unity between humans, nature, and the divine. As described by Verharen, this holism is simply a commitment to join together what has been split apart. In their infancy, humans have radically separated whole categories of beings from one another: heavens from the earth, humans from animals, men from women, Africans from non-Africans, and spirit from matter. (2006, p. 960)

Following Verharen, the concept of ‘right relationship’ is central to fostering harmonious and reciprocal relationships between humans, nature, and the divine. As a philosophical and moral ideal, Maat calls for action and the living of principles such as ‘right relationship’. Thus, fostering relationships in which there is no domination or exploitation becomes a practice in living justice. As described by Asante, “This idea of Ma’at is the idea of justice not merely in legal terms but in terms of the proper relationship between a human person and the universe, between the person and nature, between the person and another person” (1990, p. 90). The Green Belt Movement reflects a commitment to this notion of justice in how it connects the well being of people to the well being of nature.

Maathai’s commitment to this deep manifestation of justice is exemplified in her practice of Righteous Leadership (Karenga, 2006). Righteous Leadership involves the modeling and pursuit of ‘right relationship’ regardless of the outcome. Through her leadership Maathai fosters agency, which from an Africentric perspective is the capacity to act and speak in one’s own
name. Maathai, through liberatory adult education in the movement, fosters agency by renewing and restoring African knowledge and values.

The Green Belt Movement embodies the Africentric values reflected in the Nguzo Saba through its approach to community development and adult education. For example, at a structural level, the movement’s organization is rooted in the principle of Kujichagulia, or self-determination. Likewise the principles of Ujima (collective work and responsibility) and Ujamaa (Cooperative economics) are employed in the approach used by women working for the tree planting campaign. These women share financial risk and profit and maintain collective ownership of tree nurseries and related resources.

This study employs Africentric Postcolonial Theory as the primary lens through which to view the history and impact of racialized imperialism. In particular, it speaks to the experiences and perspectives of Africans and members of the African Diaspora who have been de-centered, exploited and dominated by Europeans and non-native Americans in pursuit of white supremacy and capitalism. The exploitation of natural resources for commodities to manufacture and sell was central to colonialism in Africa, as many other places around the globe. Environmental racism was a commonplace within colonialism, from the stealing of fertile lands to the clear-cutting of indigenous forests. The entire capitalist enterprise upon which colonialism was built, and which neocolonialism still is, rests on the availability of natural resources at the cheapest costs. Extraction or unsustainable use of these resources not only results in their demise, but the infrastructure need to support these activities incurs huge environmental and social costs as well. Social inequity is perpetuated through the non-negotiation of who controls these resources and the access to them. Activists like Maathai recognize the ways liberation is contingent on freedom within all realms of experience: the physical, the psychological or spiritual, the social, and the political, and the role for adult education in helping people understand how these are connected.

Methodology

This Africentric historical inquiry relied almost exclusively on primary sources. These sources included two books written by Wangari Maathai; her autobiography Unbowed (2006; 2007) and The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience (2003; 2006), a documentary film entitled, “Taking Root” (2008), produced by Lisa Merton and Alan Dater of Marlboro Productions, Inc., as well as speeches, interviews, articles, an original training manual, and position papers.

Discussion

Before the Europeans arrived, the people of Kenya did not look at trees and see timber, or at elephants and see commercial ivory stock or even at cheetahs and see beautiful skins for sale, but when the country was colonized and we encountered Europeans with all their knowledge, technology, religion and culture, all of it new, we converted our values into a cash economy like theirs. Everything was now perceived as having a monetary value. As we were later to learn, if you could sell it, you can forget about protecting it. (Richards, 2007)

Colonialism in Kenya, as in most places, resulted in tremendous destruction of both environment and culture. Within her lifetime, Maathai was able to witness much of this destruction. She saw fertile lands, virgin forests, biodiversity, and clean water disappear. She was a subject in the reformation of social relations and marginalization of culture. Yet her early formative experiences grounded in Kikuyu culture provided a strong foundation for the
development of a holistic and harmonious worldview. This, coupled with the positive experiences she had with education throughout her life, laid a foundation for the development of a philosophy of education intended to foster agency and liberation. As a person committed to the collective good, she used her understanding of education and her scientific training to help people learn how to identify and address root causes of the problems they faced.

**Salient Elements of Maathai’s Philosophy**

While Maat generally offers a historical lens through which to view the philosophy behind Maathai’s leadership and adult education practice, the Maatian principle of *serudj-ta* (repairing, renewing and restoring the world) provides a more precise organizing construct for examining what is common across her actions.

Maat in its most expansive sense as *rightness in and of the world* is the philosophical locus in which all the critical questions in ancient Maatian and modern Maatian thought converge and ground themselves. Maat thus insists on a holistic view of the moral ideal, one that gives rightful and adequate attention to self, society and the world as component parts of an interrelated order of rightness. The on-going quest, then, is to maintain, renew, repair, and enhance this order as self-conscious creators and bringers of the good in the world in a process and practice called *serudj-ta*- restoring, repairing and renewing the world. Such a world-encompassing concept of moral practice invites us to move beyond narrow notions of self-, national and even species interest and understand and assert ourselves as members of an interrelated order of existence in the world. (Karenga 2006, p. 408)

The ethic of *serudj-ta* informed the development of the first activity of The Green Belt Movement, which was planting trees. This program fostered restoration and renewal of the world in the physical realm, by focusing on the growing of ‘life support systems’. As well, this adult education activity fostered cultural restoration and repair as it re-centered local, indigenous and women’s knowledge related to the environment. The program was culturally grounded in its design and therefore was restoring education to its appropriate cultural center. Embedded in this approach was an understanding of the world as “an interrelated order of rightness” which equally valued and saw the connections between humans, nature, and the divine. Other programs evolving out of the tree planting campaign, such as Civic and Environmental Education, reflected a commitment to *serudj-ta* in using education as a vehicle to restore participatory democracy, collective welfare, just management of natural resources, and agency. These programs focused on repairing the world by teaching people to identify and address root causes of problems rather than symptoms.

**Adult Education in the Green Belt Movement**

The Green Belt Movement started with a seed, literally and figuratively. The first adult education activity of the movement was a tree planting campaign created by Maathai in response to rural women talking about the problems caused by deforestation. From the beginning, Maathai encouraged women to draw on their own knowledge and experience, and to teach each other, saying, “I don’t think you need a diploma to plant a tree…Use your woman sense” (Maathai 2007, p. 136). As the tree planting effort grew, it became clear to Maathai that unless the root causes of the problems were addressed, symptoms would continue. She began to understand the
need to educate people about the connections between corrupt governance and sustainable management of natural resources.

As the Green Belt Movement developed, I became convinced that we needed to identify the roots of the disempowerment that plagued the Kenyan people. We had to understand why we were losing firewood; why there was malnutrition, scarcity of clean water, topsoil loss, and erratic rains; why people could not pay school fees; and why the infrastructure was falling apart...Why were we robbing ourselves of a future? (Maathai 2007, p. 173)

She began teaching people about the history and legacy of colonialism and how it set the stage for the conditions they faced. In the process, she taught about the role of culture and how destruction of culture contributed to these conditions.

Culture is coded wisdom, wisdom that has been accumulated over thousands of years and generations. Coded in our songs, dances, and values...there was something in our people that helped them preserve those forests. They were not looking at trees and seeing timber. (Merton and Dater, 2008)

Over time, Maathai’s efforts at teaching and organizing people to stand up for their rights became formalized through a program called Civic and Environmental Education. This program addressed the ways sustainable and equitable management of natural resources is related to issues of governance and human rights. A primary focus of the program was on teaching people how to participate in democracy and on the centrality of culture in that effort.

In addition, I saw how important culture was to the larger goals of the Green Belt Movement and to managing our natural resources efficiently, sustainably, and equitably. Many aspects of the cultures of our ancestors practiced had protected Kenya’s environment...we integrated the question of culture into our seminars and eventually wondered whether culture was a missing link in Africa’s development. (Maathai 2007, p. 175)

The program operated primarily through community-based, culturally grounded seminars. The program became a primary site for liberatory adult education in the movement. Other key sites of adult education included food security and water harvesting, the Pan-African Network, women’s advocacy, and Green Belt Safaris.

**Righteous Leadership**

Maathai’s commitments to the restoration of environment, democratic governance and culture, led her to take actions that challenged those with power. This did not come without sacrifice. Much of her work as an activist, organizer, and educator was done from the margins. Although she had a formal education, as an African woman she did not have much money, power, or status on which to draw. Yet she led peaceful protests, educated citizens to stand up for their rights, challenged oppressive regimes with corrupt governance practices, and advocated for the marginalized and the common good. At first she was discriminated against, publicly humiliated, and ostracized. Later, more serious threats to her safety and indeed her life were an indication of the perceived threat she posed to those in power.

**Implications**

Maathai employs adult education as the central vehicle for manifesting environmental, political and social change within the context of culturally grounded community education. Her key message, that equitable and sustainable management of natural resources is inextricably
bound with issues of governance and social justice, suggests the consciousness that allows exploitation and domination of people is the same consciousness that allows exploitation and domination of nature. Adult education is central to the project because of its role in helping people deconstruct their own lived experience and the roots causes of injustice, in all its forms.

Maathai’s philosophy, adult education practice and leadership are relevant to those in the field of adult education who are concerned with the actualizing of agency within communities. Place is an important concept to community and can be understood in temporal or spatial as well as geographic terms. In fostering agency and self-determination, communities must be able to define themselves on its own terms. Therefore the work of community based adult education must address the political, economic, physical, and social domains, all of which relate to some shared understanding of place. Within the field of adult education, movements have the potential to provide a structure for this work. They do this by bringing together people to learn and act in ways that improve the conditions or places they inhabit. Liberation movements do this by re-centering people in their own story, intellectual and cultural traditions, and meaning constructs. The field of adult education should be especially interested in liberation movements for what they have to teach us about the role of education in challenging racism and other forms of oppression, but also for how they can foster the reclamation of environment and place.

Maathai’s success at mobilizing thousands of people at the grassroots, many marginalized, to both challenge oppressive systems and affect environmental change one tree at a time at the local level speaks to the power of culturally grounded adult education. Through the Green Belt Movement, Maathai employed adult education as a decolonization process, to foster the revitalization of indigenous culture, selfethnic identity, women’s empowerment, and participatory democracy. For activist-scholars in the field of adult education concerned with the environment, Maathai’s work teaches us that we must not isolate our work in that domain from the larger, systemic and root causes of environmental problems.

References