

# The Politics of Environmental Conservation in Africa: Exploring the Intricate Interplay Between Ecological Disruption and Kenyan Politics

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*Abstract- This paper explores the nexus between ecological disruption and politics in the Kenyan context as depicted in Wangari Maathai's Unbowed: A Memoir and the politics surrounding forest conservation in Kenya. Unbowed, set in post-colonial Kenya, serves as a lens through which to examine the politics of environmental conservation and their impact on society and identity. Through Maathai's narrative and other discourses surrounding ecological conservation efforts in Kenya, this paper examines the themes of resilience, power dynamics, exploitation, and political manoeuvring as portrayed in the politics of the Karura and Mau forests. By analysing ecological disruption as a catalyst for political manoeuvring and identity construction, the paper sheds light on the enduring legacy of colonialism and the resilience of human communities in the face of environmental change, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between ecology, politics, and society in post-colonial Kenya. The paper invites readers to contemplate the complex dynamics shaping post-colonial societies with respect to environment and politics, serving as a reminder of the enduring impact of environmental change on human experience.*

*Keywords: environmental conservation, post-colonial Kenya, Wangari Maathai, Karura Forest, Mau Forest, ecological disruption, political ecology, Green Belt Movement*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Environmental conservation in Africa has long been entangled with the legacies of colonial governance, post-independence political authority and competing socio-economic interests. In Kenya, the management of natural resources particularly forests has become one of the most politically contentious arenas of public life. Forest cover, water catchment areas and biodiversity are not merely ecological concerns; they are deeply politicised spaces in which questions of

power, identity, ethnicity and national interest are continuously negotiated and contested (Neumann, 2005). This paper situates itself at the intersection of political ecology and post-colonial studies to examine the politics of environmental conservation in Kenya. Wangari Maathai's memoir, *Unbowed* (2006), provides a compelling autobiographical account of one woman's struggle to reclaim Kenya's environment from the twin forces of post-colonial elite accumulation and political repression. Her founding of the Green Belt Movement in 1977 was not merely an environmental initiative; it was a radical act of political defiance that linked tree planting with democratic governance, women's rights and national sovereignty (Maathai, 2006). In documenting her activism, Maathai illuminates how ecological disruption serves as both a symptom and a cause of broader political dysfunction in post-colonial African states.

The politics of the Karura Forest in Nairobi and the Mau Forest Complex in the Rift Valley are two of the most illustrative cases in Kenya's recent history where environmental conservation collided dramatically with political interests. In both cases, forests were encroached upon, excised, or degraded through politically motivated decisions, provoking civic resistance and highlighting the fragility of environmental governance structures (Klopp, 2012). These events reveal how the environment becomes a site of political struggle in which ordinary citizens, civil society organisations and political elites engage in competing claims over land, resources and legitimacy.

This paper argues that ecological disruption in Kenya cannot be understood in isolation from the political economy of post-colonial governance. Drawing on

Maathai's *Unbowed* as a primary literary and testimonial source, alongside secondary literature on political ecology, colonial land history and forest governance, the paper examines how environmental conservation became a site of political resistance, identity formation and democratic struggle.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the growing body of work that interrogates the political dimensions of environmental governance in Africa. Understanding the interplay between ecological disruption and politics is essential not only for designing effective conservation policy but also for building the democratic institutions necessary to sustain such policy in the long run (Thaxton, 2015).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Political Ecology and Post-Colonial Environmentalism

Political ecology as a discipline emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a critique of apolitical approaches to environmental change that ignored questions of power and inequality (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987). By situating environmental problems within broader social and political contexts, political ecology seeks to explain how ecological outcomes are shaped by power relations at multiple scales, from the local to the global (Peet & Watts, 2004). In the African context, political ecology has been particularly useful for analysing how colonial land policies, post-independence governance failures, and global economic pressures combine to produce environmental degradation.

Mamdani (1996) argues that the colonial invention of 'customary' land tenure in sub-Saharan Africa created a bifurcated system of governance that relegated rural Africans to ethnically defined 'native reserves,' effectively excluding them from access to the most productive lands. This colonial dispossession established the structural conditions for post-colonial conflicts over forests and land (Mamdani, 1996). In Kenya specifically, colonial alienation of land created acute inequalities that persisted into the post-independence period, shaping the politics of forest encroachment and elite land grabbing that Maathai documents in *Unbowed* (Kanyinga, 2009).

2.2 Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement  
*Wangari Maathai's Unbowed* (2006) occupies a unique place in African environmental literature as both a memoir and a political manifesto. Scholars have analysed the text from multiple angles: as a feminist narrative of resistance (Muthoni, 2010), as a post-colonial critique of development ideology (Ogude, 2011), and as a meditation on the relationship between democracy and ecological health (Nyong'o, 2015). Maathai's central contention—that trees and democracy are inseparable offers a compelling framework for understanding environmental politics in Kenya.

The Green Belt Movement, which Maathai founded under the auspices of the National Council of Women of Kenya, mobilised rural women to plant trees as a strategy for combating soil erosion, restoring watersheds, and generating income (Maathai, 2006). By the early 1990s, the movement had planted over 20 million trees and had evolved into a platform for civic education and democratic activism (UNEP, 2006). The state's violent response to Green Belt Movement activities including the harassment and detention of Maathai herself underscores the degree to which environmental activism threatened entrenched political interests.

### 2.3 The Karura Forest Controversy

The Karura Forest, located on the northern edge of Nairobi, has been described as one of urban Africa's most contested environmental spaces (Klopp, 2012). During the 1990s, large portions of the forest were illegally allocated to politically connected developers during the tenure of President Daniel arap Moi. Klopp (2012) documents how these allocations were facilitated by a corrupt system of land administration in which senior government officials issued title deeds to public land in exchange for political patronage. Maathai's confrontations with state security forces during protests at Karura Forest in 1998 became a defining moment in Kenya's environmental and pro-democracy movements.

The Karura Forest struggle illustrates several key themes in the politics of environmental conservation: the instrumentalisation of state power to facilitate elite accumulation; the role of civil society in challenging environmental destruction; and the use of

symbolic acts of resistance to galvanise public opinion (Wanjiku, 2014). The subsequent rehabilitation of parts of Karura Forest under the Kenya Forest Service and its designation as a public urban forest represent partial victories for conservation advocacy, though challenges of encroachment persist (Kenya Forest Service, 2020).

#### 2.4 The Mau Forest Complex and Ethnic Politics

The Mau Forest Complex, covering approximately 400,000 hectares in the Rift Valley, is Kenya's largest indigenous forest and the source of twelve river systems that supply water to millions of people and sustain the Maasai Mara ecosystem (Government of Kenya, 2009). The degradation of the Mau Forest has been attributed to a combination of politically motivated settlement schemes, charcoal burning, and agricultural encroachment. Ojwang (2010) notes that the politics of the Mau are inseparable from the ethnic politics of Kenya's Rift Valley, where land and forest resources have been distributed along ethno-political lines since the colonial period.

The government's 2009–2010 evictions of settlers from the Mau Forest were highly contentious, with critics arguing that the exercise was selectively applied along ethnic lines and that affected communities were given inadequate notice and compensation (Human Rights Watch, 2010). This controversy highlights the intersection of ecological imperatives and political considerations in forest governance, and the difficulty of implementing conservation measures in politically polarised contexts. Scholars such as Nyangena (2011) have argued that sustainable Mau Forest management requires not only technical interventions but fundamental political reforms that address the root causes of encroachment.

#### 2.5 Colonialism, Land, and Environmental Governance

A recurring theme in the scholarship on environmental politics in Kenya is the enduring legacy of colonial land policies. The British colonial administration alienated millions of acres of fertile land from African communities for European settlement, designating other areas as Crown Land or Forest Reserves under state control (Elkins, 2005). This dispossession not only impoverished African

communities but fundamentally altered their relationship to the land, replacing customary systems of resource management with bureaucratic state control (Leys, 1975). Post-colonial governments in Kenya largely inherited and reproduced these colonial structures, using control over land and forests as instruments of political patronage and accumulation (Kanyinga, 2009).

The literature thus establishes a clear genealogy of Kenya's environmental politics: from colonial dispossession to post-independence elite capture of land and forest resources, through civic resistance and partial conservation gains. This paper builds on this scholarship by examining how the themes documented in the academic literature are refracted through Maathai's literary and activist work in *Unbowed*, and what this tells us about the politics of environmental conservation in post-colonial Africa more broadly.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

This paper employs a qualitative research design grounded in the traditions of critical discourse analysis and political ecology. The study is primarily interpretive and textual in orientation, focusing on the analysis of written sources both literary and scholarly to generate insights about the politics of environmental conservation in Kenya. The choice of a qualitative approach is consistent with the epistemological assumptions of the study, which holds that political and environmental phenomena are socially constructed and must be understood through the interpretive frameworks of the actors involved (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

#### 3.2 Primary and Secondary Sources

The primary literary source for this study is Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2006), which provides a first-person account of her environmental activism and the political contexts in which it unfolded. *Unbowed* is treated both as a literary text amenable to close reading and as a historical document that sheds light on the empirical realities of Kenyan environmental politics during the 1970s through the 2000s. Additional primary sources include government policy documents, parliamentary

records and reports from the Kenya Forest Service and the National Environment Management Authority.

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports from organisations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Human Rights Watch. These sources provide the theoretical frameworks, empirical context, and comparative perspectives necessary to situate the analysis within broader scholarly debates about political ecology and post-colonial environmental governance.

### 3.3 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework for this study draws on three theoretical traditions. First, political ecology provides the overarching lens for understanding how power relations shape environmental outcomes (Peet & Watts, 2004). Second, post-colonial theory, as articulated by scholars such as Achille Mbembe (2001) and Frantz Fanon (1963), informs the analysis of how colonial legacies continue to structure contemporary environmental politics. Third, feminist political ecology, associated with scholars such as Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari (1996), highlights the gendered dimensions of environmental politics and the particular importance of women's environmental activism in African contexts.

The analysis proceeds through close reading of *Unbowed*, identifying key themes, narrative strategies, and political claims advanced by Maathai. These textual findings are then situated within the broader empirical and theoretical literature to generate an integrated analysis of the politics of environmental conservation in Kenya.

### 3.4 Scope and Limitations

This study is limited to the Kenyan context and to the specific cases of the Karura and Mau forests as discussed in the existing literature and in Maathai's memoir. While the findings may have broader applicability to other post-colonial African contexts, no systematic comparative analysis is undertaken. Additionally, the reliance on a single primary literary source means that the analysis is necessarily shaped by Maathai's particular perspective and narrative choices. Future research might supplement this

analysis with primary fieldwork and interviews with a broader range of stakeholders.

## IV. FINDINGS

### 4.1 Ecological Disruption as a Political Act

One of the central findings of this study is that ecological disruption in Kenya has consistently been a politically motivated act rather than simply the incidental outcome of poverty or ignorance. As Maathai documents in *Unbowed*, the destruction of forests and the degradation of water catchment areas were often facilitated or actively orchestrated by political elites seeking to convert public natural resources into private assets (Maathai, 2006). The illegal excision of Karura Forest for real estate development during the Moi era exemplifies this pattern: government officials issued title deeds to politically connected individuals, enabling the clearing of protected forest for private construction (Klopp, 2012).

This finding is consistent with the political ecology literature, which holds that environmental degradation in the Global South is frequently a product of power asymmetries rather than the failure of individual resource users (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987). In the Kenyan case, the state itself was the primary agent of environmental destruction, deploying its coercive and administrative powers to redistribute natural resources from the public domain to the private sphere. Maathai's account makes clear that this was not a technical problem susceptible to managerial solutions but a deeply political problem requiring political resistance.

### 4.2 Environmental Activism as Democratic Resistance

A second finding is that environmental activism in Kenya, particularly as embodied by the Green Belt Movement, functioned as a form of democratic resistance that challenged both ecological destruction and political authoritarianism simultaneously. Maathai (2006) explicitly frames the movement's activities not as narrowly environmental but as contributions to a broader struggle for democratic governance, human rights, and the rule of law. The act of planting a tree, in her account, becomes a

metaphor for the nurturing of civic life and democratic institutions.

This conflation of environmentalism and democracy reflects a broader truth about the political context of conservation in Kenya: in a system where political elites controlled access to land and natural resources, challenging environmental destruction necessarily meant challenging the political structures that enabled it (Nyong'o, 2015). The state's violent responses to Green Belt Movement activities—including the teargas and beatings at Karura Forest in 1998 and the repeated detention of Maathai—confirm that environmental activism was perceived by those in power as a genuine political threat.

#### 4.3 Identity, Ethnicity, and Forest Politics

The study finds that both the Karura and Mau forest controversies were deeply inflected by questions of ethnic identity and political belonging. In the case of the Mau Forest, the politics of eviction were complicated by the historical settlement of Kalenjin communities in parts of the forest during ethnically targeted settlement schemes under the Moi administration (Ojwang, 2010). The subsequent eviction of these communities under the Kibaki government was thus read by some as an act of ethnic discrimination, even as conservationists argued it was an ecological necessity (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Maathai's own ethnic identity as a Kikuyu woman complicated her public reception at certain points in her career, with critics seeking to frame her activism in ethnic rather than civic terms (Muthoni, 2010). Her insistence on a national and universal frame for environmental politics one that transcended ethnic divisions was itself a political act in a context where ethnicity was the dominant idiom of political mobilisation. The finding suggests that effective environmental governance in Kenya requires addressing, rather than evading, the ethnic dimensions of land and resource politics.

#### 4.4 Colonialism's Enduring Environmental Legacy

The analysis consistently reveals the extent to which colonial structures and ideologies continue to shape Kenya's environmental politics. The system of state control over forests established during the colonial period created the institutional framework within which post-independence elites appropriated forest

land (Leys, 1975). The colonial ideology of African land use as primitive and destructive, which justified the alienation of African land for European farms and forest reserves, persisted in post-colonial conservation discourse in ways that delegitimised African smallholders' claims to forest resources (Neumann, 2005).

Maathai's narrative in *Unbowed* can be read as a sustained critique of these colonial legacies. Her account of growing up in a landscape of abundant trees and clean rivers contrasts sharply with the degraded environment of her adult years, a contrast she attributes not to inevitable development but to the specific political choices of colonial and post-colonial administrations (Maathai, 2006). This nostalgic ecological memory serves a political function in the text, grounding the case for environmental restoration in a vision of pre-colonial abundance that challenges colonial and post-colonial narratives of African environmental degradation as natural and inevitable.

## V. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 The Nexus Between Ecology and Politics

The findings of this study confirm and elaborate the central claim of political ecology: that environmental outcomes cannot be understood without reference to the political and economic structures in which they are embedded (Peet & Watts, 2004). In Kenya, forests have been arenas for the contestation of political power as much as ecological spaces, and the fate of specific forests has been determined as much by presidential patronage and ethnic politics as by ecological management principles. This finding has important implications for how we conceptualise environmental governance in post-colonial African states.

The tendency in mainstream environmental policy discourse to treat conservation as a technical problem requiring better monitoring systems, stronger institutions, or more community-based management obscures the political dimensions that this study foregrounds. While such technical interventions may be necessary, they are unlikely to be sufficient in contexts where political elites have strong material incentives to appropriate forest resources and the

coercive capacity to do so with impunity (Thaxton, 2015). Effective environmental governance therefore requires not just technical capacity but political will, institutional accountability, and civic engagement.

### 5.2 Maathai's Political Ecology in Comparative Perspective

Maathai's approach to environmental politics linking ecological restoration to democratic governance, gender equality, and community empowerment anticipates the contemporary concept of 'just sustainability,' which insists on the inseparability of environmental and social justice (Agyeman, Bullard, & Evans, 2003). Her work suggests that conservation initiatives are more likely to succeed when they are embedded in broader movements for political reform and social justice, rather than pursued as isolated technical programmes.

This insight has resonance beyond Kenya. Across sub-Saharan Africa, environmental activists have faced state repression when their work threatened the material interests of political elites (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The conditions that Maathai confronted in Kenya a powerful executive, weak rule of law, ethnic political mobilisation, and a civil society operating under constant threat are shared by many African states. Her example suggests that environmental activism can contribute to democratic transformation, but only when activists are willing to engage the political dimensions of conservation explicitly.

### 5.3 Gender and Environmental Politics

The gendered dimensions of environmental politics emerge clearly from both Maathai's memoir and the supporting literature. Rural women in Kenya bear disproportionate burdens from environmental degradation: they walk longer distances for water and firewood as forests recede, and they are more dependent on environmental resources for subsistence agriculture (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Maathai's insight in founding the Green Belt Movement was to recognise these gendered vulnerabilities as a political resource, mobilising women's environmental burdens into a constituency for conservation activism.

The success of the Green Belt Movement in mobilising millions of rural women speaks to the power of feminist political ecology as both an analytical framework and a practical organising strategy. It suggests that sustainable environmental governance in Africa may require centering the experiences and voices of women, who are often the most directly affected by ecological disruption and yet the most marginalised in formal conservation governance processes (Muthoni, 2010).

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the findings and discussion, this paper advances the following recommendations for environmental conservation policy and practice in Kenya and in comparable post-colonial African contexts:

Forest governance institutions must be insulated from political interference and subjected to robust mechanisms of democratic accountability. This requires strengthening the legal frameworks governing forest management, including the full implementation of the Forests Act (2016) and the Environmental Management and Coordination Act (1999), and establishing independent oversight bodies with genuine enforcement powers. Parliamentary scrutiny of forest excisions and land allocations must be strengthened, and public participation in forest management decisions must be institutionalised (Nyangena, 2011).

Sustainable environmental governance cannot be achieved without addressing the unresolved land inequalities that trace their origins to the colonial period. A comprehensive land reform process, informed by the National Land Policy (2009) and the Land Act (2012), is necessary to provide secure and equitable land tenure to communities living adjacent to forests. Such reform must include mechanisms for the restitution of land unjustly allocated during the post-independence period of elite accumulation documented by Maathai and others (Kanyinga, 2009).

Conservation policies and programmes should systematically integrate gender equity objectives, ensuring that women's voices and interests are

represented in forest governance structures at all levels. This includes ensuring women's representation on community forest associations, integrating women's economic needs into forest management plans, and providing women with secure land tenure. The Green Belt Movement's model of linking environmental restoration with women's empowerment offers a valuable template for policy design (Rocheleau et al., 1996).

Conservation strategies should draw on indigenous and local ecological knowledge in the design and implementation of forest management programmes. Communities with historical connections to specific forest areas often possess detailed knowledge of forest ecology and sustainable resource use practices that can complement formal scientific approaches. Recognising and incorporating such knowledge also serves the broader goal of ensuring that conservation is pursued in partnership with local communities rather than over their objections (Neumann, 2005).

## VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the politics of environmental conservation in Kenya through the lens of Wangari Maathai's Unbowed and the scholarship surrounding the Karura and Mau forest controversies. The central argument advanced is that ecological disruption in Kenya cannot be understood in isolation from the political economy of post-colonial governance. Forests have been sites of political contestation in which questions of power, identity, ethnicity, and democratic accountability have been negotiated and fought over, often with violent consequences for those who dare to resist.

Wangari Maathai's life and work offer an enduring model for thinking about the relationship between ecology and democracy in post-colonial Africa. Her insistence that the health of the environment and the health of democracy are inseparable was not merely rhetorical: it reflected a deep understanding of how political structures shape environmental outcomes, and how environmental struggles can catalyse broader processes of democratic transformation. The Green Belt Movement's success in planting trees and cultivating citizens simultaneously remains one of the

most creative and instructive examples of political ecology in practice.

The legacies of the Karura and Mau forest controversies continue to shape Kenyan environmental politics. While partial conservation gains have been achieved, the structural conditions that produced forest destruction elite impunity, ethnic patronage politics, weak institutional accountability, and unresolved colonial land inequalities remain substantially in place. Addressing these conditions requires not only stronger conservation policies but deeper democratic reforms that dismantle the political economy of environmental destruction.

This paper contributes to the growing body of scholarship that insists on the political dimensions of environmental governance in Africa. Its findings suggest that the most consequential interventions in African environmental conservation are likely to be those that engage seriously with questions of power, accountability, and justice, rather than those that treat conservation as a purely technical or managerial challenge. In this sense, Wangari Maathai's legacy remains not only historically significant but urgently contemporary.

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