Decolonizing the Forest: Understanding the Green Belt Movement in an Eco-Postcolonial Context

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Abstract

The Green Belt Movement, founded by Wangari Maathai in 1977, is a widely recognized environmental movement. However, little has been written on the implications this movement has for the colonial legacies that still impact Kenya today. To address this gap in the literature, this paper proposes a new theoretical framework that combines green and postcolonial political theories to create a new tool: eco-postcolonialism. Through this lens, this paper argues that the history of widespread deforestation in Kenya is a colonial import with ongoing implications. The Green Belt Movement emerges as a promising solution. By using an eco-postcolonialist framework, the Green Belt Movement's usage of both democratization and decolonization of forest management creates a solution where immediate environmental concerns are addressed as well as the underlying attitudes that led to deforestation in the first place. The implications of this conclusion & new theoretical framework are just as promising, offering a new way of understanding the role of direct environmental action for creating lasting change in postcolonial contexts.

I. Introduction

Founded by Dr. Wangari Maathai in 1977, the Green Belt Movement sought to address the rampant unsustainable deforestation in Kenya and the drastic effects it was having on the people. Since its creation, the Green Belt Movement's solution has centered a democratizing and decolonizing approach that has resulted in 51 million trees being planted, a significant restoration of Kenya's forest cover. Prominent discourse around the subject has focused on the movement's contribution to an ecofeminist understanding of the world in which the liberation of women and the environment are inextricably tied. While this certainly provides an important perspective, ecofeminism and its focus on the patriarchy as the root cause of environmental degradation fails to adequately explain the nuances in the causes of environmental degradation in a postcolonial state. By combining green theory and postcolonial theory, more is revealed in terms of understanding not only the problem, but also the solution. An eco-postcolonial approach reveals two important things. First, that Kenya as a state is a uniquely colonial idea that created the economic, political, and social structures that have caused unsustainable deforestation. Second, the Green Belt Movement emerges as an effective case study in understanding how democratization and decolonization provide an important, two-pronged approach in healing the environment in a postcolonial context.

First, I will briefly explain how I combine green and postcolonial theory to create my eco-postcolonial theoretical approach. Then, I will explore the structures and systems that the colonial and postcolonial Kenyan state have utilized to spread an anthropocentric, profit-driven relationship between humans and their environment. After this, I will explain how the Green Belt Movement is effective, highlighting its commitments to democratization and decolonization. Then, I will go deeper into the ways in which an eco-postcolonial theoretical approach adds to the

conversation around the Green Belt Movement as well as where this approach falls short. Finally, I will conclude the paper by making predictions and identifying areas for further research.

II. Understanding an Eco-Postcolonial Approach

To analyze deforestation and the Green Belt Movement, I will borrow ideas from both green theory and postcolonial theory to create a combined framework: eco-postcolonialism. I borrow several components from green theory. First, the idea that the reason behind a lot of environmental degradation is that the current world order is "based upon capitalism, industrialization, and consumer culture", all of which espouse an anthropocentric, profit-driven understanding of the relationship between humans and their environment (Ari and Gökpinar 168). Second, Green theorists propose an ecocentric—getting rid of the hierarchy between humans and the natural world—and decentralized approach where actors "Think global, act local" to avoid problematic global systems (Ari and Gökpinar 171). Green theorists want to create a new world where the relationship between people and their environment is not seen as simply an extraction of resources and where solutions are on a local, grassroots level. From postcolonial theory, I borrow "a performative mode of critical revisionism, consistently directed at the colonial past and assessing its legacies for the present, but also focusing on those forms of colonialism that have surfaced more recently in the context of an increasingly globalized but incompletely decolonized world" (Huggan). The state, as a uniquely colonial construct, was and is a very effective tool in not only extracting resources and increasing the wealth of colonial powers, but also in deeply infusing colonial attitudes into Kenya. In the spirit of postcolonial theory, I will focus on the economic, political, and social factors that Britain used

as a colonial power and their legacies today. Altogether, eco-postcolonialism cites the colonial creation of the state of Kenya as the source of environmental degradation and helps us understand better how the Green Belt Movement is successful at addressing this problem.

III. Understanding Kenyan Deforestation in an Eco-Postcolonial Context

To understand how colonialism forever changed the relationship between people and their environment in Kenya, we must first understand what the area was like pre-colonialism. In the years leading up to British rule, a number of indigenous communities lived in what is now Kenya. In general,
"the use of forest resources, like other resources, was controlled through a system of traditional rules and rights. For most communities, the rules were enforced by a council of elders, who through sanctions and fines ensured the sustainable use of communal tree and forest resources. Characteristic of traditional systems of management were those pertaining to religious and cultural systems" (Oleleboo 2). Most indigenous groups in the region used systems similar to what is described above, centering sustainable communal usage and an ecocentric view of the environment.

During the Berlin Conference in 1885 when East Africa was being divided among European colonial powers into "territories of influence", Britain "claimed" what would become Kenya ("A Brief History of Kenya"). Overall, Nkomo explains that the colonization of Africa was about the domination and control of markets, labor, and other resources and the domination and control over the discourse surrounding African identity—declaring all things indigenous to Africa negative and all things European positive (Nkomo 368). The creation of the state of Kenya and its colonial government were the principle ways that

Britain could facilitate economic, political, and social domination. At the beginning of the 20th century, the colonial government created what is now the Kenya Forest Service (Oleleboo 4), which held centralized power and used Eurocentric forestry management principles.

Domínguez and Luoma identify three major ways in which colonial governments, including the colonial Kenyan government, changed the relationship between people and the land. First was the introduction of individualized property regimes, which gave private ownership of land to individuals in a structure that prioritized economic profit. Instead of allowing indigenous groups to continue their communal, sustainable relationship with the land, the central colonial government issued it as privately-owned land to white settlers (Oleleboo 4). Second was the colonial idea of cultivation—using the land to produce profitable resources like food or fuel—as the best way to use land. In contrast, indigenous groups like the Kikuyu used land for more purposes like ceremonial sacrifices for rain and bountiful harvest (Oleleboo 2). Third was the colonial attitude of strict conservation strategies—namely "gazettement" or setting aside land that restricts "private" use, for example living on the land (Oleleboo 3). These three changes under the colonial government were "structured to benefit the colonising power" by removing indigenous groups from their homes and ways of life (Domínguez and Luoma).

All three of these principles were carried out by either the central government or specifically by the Kenya Forestry Service. The result is that "forests originally managed by local communities became the locus of a struggle between the colonial government attempting to mediate access, local people who did not recognize the colonial state's authority, [and] companies and other external actors eager to gain logging concessions" (Klopp 355). While indigenous groups were excluded from the land they lived on, they were not completely alienated from the economic, political, and social frameworks of the colonial state. Ndege explains that "Generally the colonial economic policies in Kenya were instrumental in incorporating the pre-capitalist communities into the colonial and international economic systems." Indigenous groups in the area became a part of colonial society and its economic, political, and social structures.

This incorporation deepened after independence. Branch and Cheeseman explain that "The co-option of sympathetic African elites … into the bureaucracy, the legislature and the private property-based economy meant that the allies of colonialism and representatives of transnational capital were able to reap the benefits of independence." In fact, they argue that while there were many governmental changes, "the structure of the state itself has demonstrated remarkable continuity" between colonial and postcolonial periods (Branch and Cheeseman). In this way, the anthropocentric, profit-driven relationship between people and their environment stayed. Those same three pillars of colonial forest management mentioned above continued, their roots in the colonial creation of the state. If British colonial powers had not created the state of Kenya to organize efforts to extract natural resources and bolster their own wealth and superiority, the role of sustaining the forests and surrounding environment would have stayed with local, ecocentric indigenous groups. The implications of the creation of the colonial state and centralized, Euro-centric authority are astounding. According to Klopp, Kenya's forested areas went from covering 30% of the country in 1895 to 3% today (356). This causes an incredible number of detrimental impacts. The United Nations reports that deforestation in Kenya has caused a decrease

in river flows in the dry season, more erosion and sedimentation in the wet season which damages fertile soil and freshwater areas, increases malaria cases, and disrupts the global carbon cycle, among other things (United Nations Environmental Programme). Today, Kenyans, especially rural women in Kenya, are noticing that "streams were drying up, their food supply was less secure, and they had to walk further and further to get firewood for fuel and fencing" ("Our History"). From an eco-postcolonial approach, the root of all these problems is the colonial (and remarkably similar postcolonial) state.

IV. The Green Belt Movement

In the 1960's and 1970's, these issues that were directly affecting rural Kenyan women and their livelihoods came to the attention of professor Wangari Maathai. To address these problems, she began the Green Belt Movement. The principle program of the Green Belt Movement is their tree planting program where they pay women in rural Kenya to grow tree seedlings and plant them. They have expanded their programming in many directions, including educational programs and more accessible economic opportunities for women and rural communities. Since its founding in 1977, the Green Belt Movement has facilitated the planting of 51 million trees ("Tree Planting and Water Harvesting"). This movement is effective from an eco-postcolonial perspective because of two key components: it democratizes the forest management process and it refutes colonizer attitudes of seeing the environment as a commodity.

First, the Green Belt Movement seeks to democratize environmental preservation by directly engaging people, instead of relying on a centralized, bureaucratic forest management department. As previously discussed, the creation of the colonial state centralized power and responsibility for forest management in one, Euro-centric

authority. By directly engaging rural Kenyan women in the planting of trees, the Green Belt Movement subverts the existing colonial power structures by taking a decentralized approach, outside of the postcolonial state government. This embodies the grassroots approach that both green theorists and postcolonial theorists advocate for. For both theories—and for eco-postcolonialism as a hybrid—a grassroots, democratized approach is integral because larger, centralized systems are rooted in colonialism and capitalism. However, democratization alone does not always succeed. An important part of colonialism beyond imposing economic and political structures is reshaping social systems to fit colonial ideas. If people have been living in a society structured by colonial ideas and attitudes, then pure democratization will only continue those ideas and attitudes.

Second, the Green Belt Movement takes steps to decolonize these anthropocentric, profit-making attitudes towards the natural world. "[The Green Belt Movement's] experience shows that when the communities understand the linkage between their actions, environment and their livelihood situations (poverty, water scarcity and soil loss and food insecurity) they are more likely to muster their energies and take action for change." ("Gender Livelihood and Advocacy"). Emphasizing these linkages takes a more ecocentric approach to understanding the relationship between people and their environment. As mentioned in the section above about colonial Kenya, colonial government practices were very successful in incorporating indigenous communities into an anthropocentric, profit-based economic system. The Green Belt Movement seeks to change the colonial narrative of the relationship between humans and their environment being purely a relationship of resource extraction. The livelihoods of people and health of the

environment are inextricably linked and dependent on each other. In this way, the Green Belt Movement embodies an eco-postcolonial perspective by decolonizing societal attitudes and pushing for a more ecocentric view.

V. Additions to The Conversation

Multitudes of written work have been published on the Green Belt Movement's contribution to ecofeminist theory and literature, which is incredibly valuable for the academic conversation surrounding global feminisms and environmental degradation. The Green Belt Movement positions itself in this way, too. Their solution centers women as agents of change in reversing environmental damage. Their website explains that the Green Belt Movement was "created under the auspices of the National Council of Women of Kenya to respond to the needs of Kenyan women" ("Who We Are"). In interviews and speeches about her movement, Maathai identifies the root causes of deforestation as governance, corruption, and dictatorships (Gilson). However, she never explicitly goes deeper than these factors. In much of the literature about the movement, many authors point towards the patriarchy as the major system the Green Belt Movement addresses. While all of these ideas are important, the roles of colonialism and its legacies are certainly missing in the conversation. The Green Belt Movement certainly does address these oppressive colonial systems in its solutions, but neither the movement nor scholars writing about it seem to explicitly and actively acknowledge this. I believe it is important to be explicit about how environmental movements can be successful in not only addressing visible ecological damage, but also subverting and undermining the colonial state systems and pervasive colonial attitudes that are often at the root of these disasters. To gloss over this issue is to gloss over the effectiveness of the Green Belt Movement and potential opportunities for actors in other postcolonial contexts to adopt the same strategies in their goal of putting an end to colonial legacies that devalue the interconnected nature of humans and their natural environment.

VI. Theoretical Weaknesses

Both postcolonialism and green theory aim to address and subvert very large systems. This poses potential problems, especially when combining them, for being able to successfully apply them and identify promising solutions that do not already exist. In many ways, green and postcolonial theories are much more successful at understanding the past and present rather than proposing a new solution just from a theoretical perspective. Because of this, eco-postcolonialism is quite weak in providing guidelines for creating new solutions. In this paper, I have been able to identify both an existing problem and existing solution to better understand why the problem exists and how the solution is effective. However, without an existing solution to hang the theory on, this paper would simply be about the huge, systematic root causes of deforestation. Like many critical theories, eco-postcolonialism in itself is not able to provide many future predictions or specific advice on effective solutions. However, while this may make it more difficult to use and apply, it does not necessarily mean it is a bad theory. A major hallmark of many critical theories like postcolonialism and feminism is that they help give a better understanding to the contexts in which we live, aiming to not make assumptions that could be rooted in problematic attitudes. While eco-postcolonialism is not always helpful, I think it is an effective tool for understanding existing problems and how existing solutions can be widely effective through adaptation and replication in other contexts.

VII. Conclusion, Predictions, and Further Research

By combining green theory and postcolonial theory, we can move beyond the current ecofeminist discourse around Kenyan deforestation and the Green Belt Movement and gain a more holistic understanding of the roots of this problem and also why the Green Belt Movement has been so effective. Without understanding the postcolonial context of Kenya and its role in erasing ecocentric indigenous communities, we cannot fully understand what makes solutions like the Green Belt Movement effective. The Green Belt Movement's two-pronged approach of democratizing environmental solutions and educational programs that decolonize ideas of the environment as a simple commodity are important for not only planting trees in Kenya, but also subverting the colonial and postcolonial structures of the state that created these problems in the first place. I believe that both green theorists and postcolonial theorists would predict that this kind of solution, tailored to specific postcolonial contexts, can be a very effective model for solving environmental degradation and decolonizing postcolonial societies. Unless approaches like this are used that actively seek to work outside of existing frameworks, progress will continue to be stunted and liberation for all living beings will be limited.

I believe further research should be done into why Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement choose to not be explicit about the colonial legacies that contribute heavily to their identified problem. Why do they stop at blaming contemporary governments and government officials? Why do they not explicitly and publicly dig deeper and expose colonialism as the root cause of Kenyan deforestation and its subsequent effects? Is it because they rely on global donations and contributions from former colonial powers are not willing to confront their state's own role in the problem? Their explicit focus on ecofeminist causes has certainly won them a lot of attention on the global stage from global feminist movements that see women across the world as united in the same struggles. It is possible that they choose to remain not explicit about the colonial roots to continue economic support to their cause. Ultimately, it is most important that the Green Belt Movement continues the actual work of challenging colonial legacies. However, a better understanding of how the Green Belt Movement views its own role in relation to colonial legacies and systems may provide more insight for others in postcolonial contexts across the globe in understanding how this approach can be helpful and effective for them, too.

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