

Unbowed: a memoir by wangari maathai



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Courtney Daily Book Review AAAS 351 Due 12/08/11 Unbowed: A Memoir by Wangari Maathai Unbowed was written to tell the captivating life story of Wangari Maathai. Maathai was a woman from Kenya who struggled against oppression due to her gender, ethnicity, and political belief. This woman achieved many first for the women of Kenya. She established the international Green Belt Movement, earned her Ph. D, and was the first African woman and environmentalist to win the Nobel Peace Prize. This story gave life to what we learned in class.

The movies and documentaries we watched never did the information justice. However, this book gave light to the struggles that many African people had to deal with during and after colonization. The book starts off with giving general knowledge about the Scramble for Africa. I thought this was helpful because in class we just talked about what it was, but in Unbowed you get the sense of how it really was. The European powers split up Africa in to regions not even considering the tribes that lived in these areas.

The colonization not only had an effect on the tribes but it also effected the environment. In her memoir Maathai writes, " The missionaries were followed by traders and administrators who introduced new methods of exploiting our rich natural resources: logging, clear-cutting native forest, establishing plantations of imported trees, hunting wildlife, and undertaking expansive commercial agriculture. Hallowed landscapes lost their sacredness and were exploited as the local people became insensitive to the destruction, accepting it as a sign of progress. " (p.) This quote gives visual imagery of the effect that colonization had on Kenya. Colonization affected

the tribes in many ways. The new settlers forced their religion upon the native people. Early on Maathai earned an education at a Catholic boarding school. While at school the Mau Mau rebellion was going on and during this time she was detained and forced to live in a concentration camp, which the British ran, for two days while her mother lived there for seven years. After boarding school she was awarded a scholarship to go to the US and earn a college degree.

She went on to graduate school and once she was finished she returned to Nairobi with the promise of a job at the University College of Nairobi, only to be denied the job upon arrival due to her gender and tribal identity. This would not be the only discrimination that Maathai would have to deal with. The Green Belt Movement was founded once the organizations that Maathai was a part of came to realize that Kenya's water scarcity and energy crises could be traced to their eviscerated forests and ecosystems.

Maathai in her book said, " It just came to me: ' Why not plant trees? ' The trees would provide a supply of wood that would enable women to cook nutritious foods. They would also have wood for fencing and fodder for cattle and goats. The trees would offer shade for humans and animals, protect watersheds and bind the soil, and if they were fruit trees, provide food. They would also heal the land by bringing back birds and small animals and regenerate the vitality of the earth. " (p 125) This is the idea that started the development of the Green Belt Movement.

The Green Belt Movement foundation was to pay low-income women in rural communities to plant trees, which also empowered the women to solve

related community problems and provided them with income. We have not had a lot of time in class to speak about this movement so I was glad that I took the time to read this book. The Green Belt Movement is an amazing organization. It is helping so many people on different levels. It helps the poor by creating jobs and then it helps the people of the community because the trees that are being planted are helping to restore the ecosystem throughout Kenya.

Even though Maathai had made great strides with her movement she faced political oppression from her own government. Maathai and her followers protested many different events that if they didn't could have caused even more desertification. They were beaten and held captive. Maathai had to go into hiding once because of the death threats that were being made against her. It was a tough time for her but she never gave up and continued to press forward with what she felt was her duty to the families and the environment of Africa.

All of her perseverance paid off in 2002 when she was elected to Parliament with a resounding 98 percent of the ballots cast, and then in 2004 she was the first African Woman and environmentalist to win the Nobel Peace Prize. I loved this book! It allowed me to imagine what it was like to live in Africa after colonization. After reading this book I believe that the Scramble for Africa was wrong. The European Powers took this beautiful country as their property and did not once think of the people who inhabit this land. They ripped the land from its rightful owners and in doing so they depleted the ecosystem tremendously.

As Al Gore said, " To some people, nature is like a giant data bank that they can manipulate at will. " (p. 203) Maathai also said that, " 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 at cheetahs and see beautiful skins for sale. But when Kenya was colonized and we encountered Europeans, with their knowledge, technology, understanding, 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" (p 175).