

Ethical Dilemmas of African Feminist Leadership: Perspectives from Wangari Maathai's Personal Experiences

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ABSTRACT

African women navigate leadership within the complex intersections of societal expectations and their gendered experiences. By examining the life and contributions of Professor Wangari Maathai, a renowned environmentalist, political activist, and recipient of the Nobel Prize, this paper explores the ethical dilemmas that influence African women's self-conception as leaders and the societal framework of their leadership identity. Furthermore, the paper examines the impact of African cultural traditions and both colonial and post-colonial influences on the development of women's identities, specifically focusing on concepts like motherhood and womanhood, and their influence on leadership and societal roles in Africa. We argue that personal narratives are potent tools for exploring and forming leadership identities (Mwangi, 2009). By applying the feminist conceptual and theoretical framework of intersectionality, we also (1) uncover the complex interrelations between cultural expectations, colonial histories, and current demands, highlighting the nuanced nature of leadership and gendered experiences; (2) underscore the importance of transformational leadership to empower African women leaders, transforming challenges into opportunities; and finally we conclude by identifying practices and insights to inspire and empower future generations of African women leaders.

KEYWORDS: *African women, culture, personal narratives, transformational leadership.*

Introduction

African women navigate leadership within and at the complex intersections of societal expectations and their gendered experiences. In her book *We Will Have Gained ourselves: Narrative Experiences of African Women Pursuing Higher Education in the United States of America*, Mwangi (2009) observes that “the stereotype that African women must be domestic is used among other things to place the African woman in her natural location within the domestic sphere (p.6)”. She argues that domesticity does not just include the “dynamic interplays of roles and social structures in the lives of women ... but [also] impacts the choices and the decisions they make in their lives as women” (p.6). Mwangi further argues that domesticity also functions as an “ideology that embodies and authorizes normative gender - differentiated roles and beliefs about masculinity and femininity in society...[and that] as an ideology, [domesticity] requires women to function in no other context than the home because home is what defines them” (p.7).

By examining the life and contributions of Professor Wangari Maathai, a renowned environmentalist, political activist, and recipient of the 2004 Nobel Prize, this paper explores the ethical dilemmas that influence African women's self-conception as leaders and the stories they tell about the development of their leadership identity. Additionally, the paper examines the impact of African cultural traditions and colonial and post-colonial influences on the development of women's leadership identities, specifically focusing on concepts like motherhood and womanhood. We argue that personal narratives are potent tools for exploring and forming leadership identities (Mwangi, 2009). By using the feminist conceptual and theoretical framework we also (1) uncover the complex interrelations between cultural expectations, colonial histories, and current demands on African women and African women leaders, highlighting the nuanced nature of leadership and gendered experiences; (2) underscore the importance of addressing challenges of transformational leadership to

empower African women leaders, to transform and turn challenges into opportunities; and finally we conclude by identifying practices and insights to inspire and empower future generations of African women leaders.

Ethical Dilemmas

Ethical dilemmas also referred to as ethical paradoxes or (moral dilemmas), occur when two or more conflicting moral imperatives are at play. Ethical dilemmas can present as a conflict between two ways of resolving a problem and conflict between personal and societal values (Bermúdez, 2010). Ethical dilemmas experienced by African feminist leaders are complex and multifaceted. The socio-political environment and the overarching cultural contexts influence them. The ethical challenges from African feminist leadership stem from the intersection between gender, culture, politics, and history, which creates a complex environment for women leaders to operate with contradicting expectations and values. Within Africa, the traditional roles of women, colonialism, and post-colonial state nationalism are sometimes in conflict, while at other times, they function together, mutually reinforcing each other. According to Mwangi (2009), a review of social-historical context reveals how society still perpetuates the myths and stereotypical views about women's primary roles as wives and mothers in post-independent Africa. While social structures are distinct and different, "their discourses on women tend to be mutually enhancing and mutually supportive" (Mwangi, 2009, p.10). The colonial influence, for example, clashed with indigenous cultures, particularly on issues such as domesticity, and created problematic cultural struggles that persist today. Consequently, African women leaders are faced with difficult decisions that challenge their ethical beliefs and leadership practices, compounded by societal pressures to conform to patriarchal norms while simultaneously striving for gender equality and social justice.

According to Munro (1998), the subject woman is “constructed out of desires and fears that are not [her] own [To] be a woman is to lack authority, knowledge, and power, to be an [educated] woman is to have authority, knowledge, and power” (p.1). The stories women tell about themselves, and their lives suggest that women’s identities are not determined solely by these patriarchal discourses; instead, these stories become active agents in negotiating the gendered norms. This negotiation of the gendered norms embedded in dominant discourse suggest that the subject woman is always in production (Guard, 2001). Defining women this way is a paradox and a dilemma for Maathai, who finds herself simultaneously creating and disrupting the notion of womanhood in her life and the lives of women whom she strives to empower through her activism and leadership. Feminist leadership, or leading from a feminist perspective, provides an excellent opportunity “to explore the process of how gender ideologies become *natural* as well as how gendered norms are contested in the daily lives of women [leaders]” (Munro, 1998, p.4). In line with the foregoing, Maathai’s leadership journey provides a critical understanding of how ethical dilemmas that many African women leaders grapple with are far more complex than the questions of identity, power, and agency and extend to include their leadership styles, practices, and results.

Feminist Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Feminist conceptual and theoretical frameworks are critical for understanding and analyzing the gendered structures of power and inequality that shape societal dynamics. These frameworks, grounded in feminist theory, provide tools to examine the intersectionality of gender with other social categories, such as race, class, and ethnicity, as well as how systems of oppression are constructed and maintained (Crenshaw, 1989). Feminist theory challenges conventional patriarchal structures by privileging women’s agency, their experiences, and their roles in resisting and transforming systems of power. A central tenet of

feminist frameworks is the critique of historical and contemporary power relations, and their impact on women in marginalized communities (hooks, 2000).

Locating Ourselves

Feminist conceptual and theoretical frameworks embrace the concept of self-disclosure as a critical tool for feminists to immerse their voice, identity, and personal experiences within their work. As feminist researchers, authors, educators, and leaders in the diaspora, we subscribe to the feminist perspectives and a conceptual worldview that leverages personal experiences and narratives as ways of knowing (Belenky et al., 1997).

Additionally, as African women living in the diaspora, we argue that “ by discussing ... [our] identity and values ... [we] ... assert that ... what [we] know cannot be separated from who [we are] and that [our] warrants for making knowledge claims are subjectively situated and historically contextual” (Mwangi, 2009, p.54). Therefore, we critically examine leadership through intersectional and multifaceted ways in which African women challenge and transform their local communities and the broader global landscape.

Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides a critical framework for understanding the complexity of simultaneous intersecting social identities - such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity and how they interact to shape individuals' experiences, particularly in contexts of power, privilege, and oppression. Intersectionality, therefore, allows for the exploration of the challenges African women experience due to the complex interplay of African cultural traditions, colonial and post-colonial gender expectations, and realities.

Personal Narratives as Women's Ways of Knowing

A feminist assertion that knowledge is socially constructed underscores the importance of women's storied lives as women's ways of knowing (Belenky, 1997).

According to Bloom, quoted in Mwangi (2009), personal narratives “illuminate the course of life over time and the relationship between the individual and society; they demonstrate how women negotiate their ‘exceptional’ gender status both in their daily lives and over the course of their lifetime; and they make a possible examination of the links between evolution, shift, and changes in the development of female identity” (p.37). Therefore, the stories women tell about their experiences make visible not only their lived experiences but the meaning-making process of the world around them. Consequently, African women’s storied lives are essential for “illuminating women’s multiple subjectivities as wives, mothers, leaders, educated and professional which are often times contradictory and always in flux” (Mwangi, 2009, p.37).

Ambiguous Loss and Myth of Closure

In her book *Ambiguous Loss, Learning to Live with Unresolved Loss*, Pauline Boss (2009) articulated a conceptual framework termed *Ambiguous loss*, which offers a unique lens through which to understand grief or loss without clear boundaries. Engaging ambiguous loss as a conceptual tool offers a unique way to articulate the loss, grief, and ambiguity in African women’s life experiences, revealing the ongoing negotiations of the flux between such experiences as presence and absence, change and tradition, power, and vulnerability. In many circumstances, African women deal with situations of loss that are not easily defined. In her book, *The Myth of Closure*, Boss (2021) expands her previous groundbreaking work on ambiguous loss and argues that the myth of closure, which refers to the societal belief that every loss or difficult situation must eventually lead to a definitive conclusion or resolution, is neither attainable nor desirable. The fact that many African women live with this contradiction is an important truth or a knowledge claim about their ways of knowing and transformation.

Feminist Transformative Perspective

Feminist transformative perspective provides a dynamic approach to understanding African women's agency for social change (Nnaemeka, 2005; Oyěwùmí, 1997). Rooted in the belief that transformation involves not only structural changes but also personal and collective empowerment and liberation, the feminist transformative perspective has a strong political and ideological commitment to amplifying women's voices in leadership and, therefore, transforming society (Mama, 1997). It follows, therefore, that for many African women, leadership is ambiguous and constitutes an arena of struggle even as it becomes a source of resistance, empowerment, and transformation. Maathai's journey is replete with examples of such gendered political and societal challenges that demonstrate African women's arduous leadership trajectories.

African Traditions, Colonial & Post Colonial Influences: Contradictory Demands on African Women and Leadership

African Traditions

In many traditional African societies, the role of women has been closely tied to motherhood and womanhood. Motherhood, in particular, is often revered as responsible for nurturing and sustaining the family and ensuring the continuity of community traditions (Amadiume, 1987; Steady, 1981). Similarly, womanhood is constructed as a multifaceted identity encompassing cultural, spiritual, and communal responsibilities, reflecting the interconnectedness of individual and collective well-being that is deeply embedded in the social and spiritual fabric of the community (Amadiume, 1987; Oyěwùmí, 1997). While motherhood is celebrated, feminists have argued that it can also be a source of oppression and constraint for African women advancement and empowerment. The culturally imposed boundaries of womanhood often restrict women to roles that are primarily reproductive, which limits their ability to participate in public leadership fully. African women's leadership,

therefore, has historically been constrained by an *ideal* womanhood that prioritizes familial roles over professional or political aspirations (Maathai, 2006).

Colonial Influences

Colonial rule introduced Western models of governance and social hierarchies that often excluded African women from leadership, thereby reinforcing gendered divisions of labor (Mama, 1997; Ogunyemi, 1996). The imposition of colonial patriarchal structures and powers not only subordinated women in a social and political sense but also constructed the African woman's identity in relation to Western notions of femininity. As a result, African women's identities were redefined within colonial frameworks that positioned them as subjugated and suited for domestic labor, stripping away much of her leadership potential in public spaces. Additionally, as Maathai (2006) posited, even though Christianity provided a pathway for a few African women to access formal education, such education was geared towards preparing women to be better housewives and mothers. Access to education for many African women is still a challenge today. Hence, the need to advocate for women's access to education will create new spaces for leadership agency and social change in both private and public spheres of women's lives.

Post-Colonial Influences

African women in the post-colonial era offer a unique chance to look into gendered views regarding the evolution of their expected roles as mothers and wives and how they have continued to challenge the gendered views through their decisions to become leaders in contemporary African societies. The discourse on African women's domesticity, as discussed earlier in the introduction, has been primarily influenced by African culture and reinforced by colonial and post-colonial tropes of engagement. According to Mwangi (2009), when

discourses enter into a discursive relationships with social structures, they infiltrate systems and get reinforced by key institutional sites, including that of leadership. According to Mwangi (2009), tensions emanating from oppositional discourses are important in revealing continued contradictory demands on women's lives and become sites of ethical dilemmas. It is, therefore, evident that the oppositional discourses on domesticity have continued to make leadership for African women at home and abroad problematic. As exemplified by Maathai's dilemmas, tensions between domesticity and leadership illustrate how African women's choices to pursue leadership roles translate into contradictory demands on their lives, and the decisions they make to venture into social prospects outside of the home.

African Feminist Leadership

African feminist leadership centers on African women's experiences, voices, and agency in socio-political and cultural spheres, advocating for transformative spaces that address the intersectional nature of gender, race, class, and colonial legacies (Mama, 1997; Nnaemeka, 2005). African feminist leadership is grounded in the idea that true empowerment involves addressing structural inequalities and promoting self-determination, communal solidarity, and the collective liberation of all oppressed groups (Nnaemeka, 2004). It emphasizes the importance of indigenous knowledge, local practices, and the active participation of women in leadership roles at all levels of society. African feminist leaders often draw upon historical struggles to inspire contemporary activism, as seen in the work of Maathai, whose leadership was informed by her understanding of the interconnectedness of environmental sustainability, social equity, and women's empowerment (Maathai, 2006). Her leadership model is distinct in its focus on the lived realities of rural African women, promoting not only individual agency but also collective action of planting trees, which worked to transform the women's perception of themselves as mothers in the fight for justice, democracy and the preservation of the environment and sustainable development.

Introducing Wangari Maathai

Wangari Maathai was one of the most influential women of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Mutua, González & Wolbert, 2018). Maathai was born in the rural village in the central highlands of Kenya. She grew up following the Kikuyu traditions, where girls were expected to help their mothers at home. It was not until much later that she was enrolled in a catholic mission school, which started her formal educational journey. She eventually traveled to the United States and graduated in 1964 with a degree in Biological Sciences from Mount St Scholastica College at Atchison, Kansas, later earning her Master's degree in 1965 from the University of Pittsburgh (Maathai, 2006). Upon her return to Kenya, she obtained her doctoral degree from the University of Nairobi, where she taught veterinary anatomy (Maathai, 2006). She became the chair of the Department of veterinary anatomy and an associate Professor in 1976 and 1977 (Elverum, 2016). She was the first woman in East and Central African region to earn a Ph.D. Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her work with the Green Belt movement in Kenya (Toit, 2021). The Green Belt organization worked with rural women and promoted the planting of trees to ensure adequate and sustainable supply of much-needed firewood and clean water in the rural communities in Kenya.

The conception of the Green Belt movement idea began to take shape when Maathai was doing her graduate work in Pittsburgh. The development of her Western environmental and Feminist thought, and her deep-rooted Kenyan heritage created , she envisioned a movement that could address these interconnected issues in rural Kenya. The Green Belt Movement was inspired by her belief that environmental restoration could heal the land and empower women by involving them in tree planting and sustainable land management practices. Her time in Pittsburgh, where she was exposed to global environmental discourse and feminist ideals, became a turning point that encapsulated her development of a

transformative initiative that blended ecological conservation with social justice (Maathai, 2006).

It is clear that her determination to begin to address these issues inspired her into activism bringing her deep-rooted ethical dilemmas to the fore. For example, Maathai grappled with the tension between tradition and modernity as she navigated the complex terrain of reconciling the ideas emerging from her African identity with those she encountered in Western education and discourse and her beliefs about Christianity. Her concern over the dire state of African rural women, particularly in relation to colonial policies that contributed to environmental degradation, was deeply problematic for Maathai. The colonial policies not only marginalized African women but also disrupted the ecological balance of the land, which led to widespread deforestation, soil erosion, and the depletion of resources upon which rural communities, especially women, depended (Maathai, 2006). Her activism, particularly through the Green Belt Movement, is an effort to begin to deal with her ethical dilemmas of colonialism while empowering African women as well as addressing the environmental and social changes which were in many ways products of that history.

Maathai's Ethical Dilemmas

Maathai's ethical dilemmas can be understood through the complex intersections of her identity as a woman, an educated/ professional woman, a mother, an activist, and an African feminist leader. According to Munro (1998), "[how] individuals construct their stories, the tensions, the contradictions, and the [ambivalences] signifies the very power relations and discursive practices against which" [they write their lives] (p. 5). In reference to the *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists* Tamale (2020) states, "that by naming ourselves as feminists we politicize the struggle for women's rights, we question the legitimacy of the structures that keep women subjugated, and we develop tools for transformatory analysis and action" (p.373).

Intersectionality, as a theoretical framework, enables an understanding of the complexity inherent in Maathai's identities, emphasizing how race, gender, class, and nationality interacted and shaped her experiences. Using an intersectional lens to analyze Maathai's life allows for a more comprehensive analysis of her identity, which recognizes its fluid and dynamic nature. Failing to consider Maathai's identity through the intersection of these various dimensions risks oversimplifying her experiences and the strategies she employed in navigating her daily life and ethical dilemmas. Though Maathai experienced many ethical dilemmas, the following three illustrate the key tensions.

Ethical Dilemma 1 - Marriage: "But nobody warned me"

The early years of Maathai's marriage were uneventful. They believed their shared dreams and goals would steer their marital relationship. However, challenges began to arise, prompting Maathai to question the dynamics of their relationship and the societal expectations that shaped it. For instance, she began to critically examine how their marital relationship was socially constructed, recognizing ways in which each of them was expected to conform to traditional gender roles and norms. This realization ignited an internal struggle as Maathai confronted the tension between her aspirations and the inflexible expectations placed upon her as a woman in a patriarchal society. This sense of disillusionment is expressed in the following statement: "But nobody warned me – and it had never occurred to me that in order for us to survive as a couple, I should fake failure and deny any of my God-given talents" (Maathai, 2006, p. 140).

This statement encapsulates one of the central dilemmas faced by Maathai, which extends beyond the complexities of her marital challenges. Reflecting on earlier obstacles, such as the expectation that she change her last name after marriage, explains a broader societal assumption regarding women's identities. In this case, her initial refusal to change her surname was not merely an act of defiance but a refusal to conform to the reductive and

patriarchal notion that a woman's identity must be subsumed under that of her husband's. This issue inevitably marks the beginning of her long and protracted divorce.

Maathai's life exemplifies an array of ethical dilemmas, particularly in the ways she navigates the conflicting narratives of self-perception and societal judgment. On the one hand, Maathai perceives herself as an empowered, educated, and dedicated activist committed to social change, environmental preservation, and the betterment of her community. On the other, society, mainly through the lens of traditional gender expectations, views her as deviant, particularly because of her divorce.

Maathai's divorce positioned her as an anomaly in a culture where a woman's success is often intertwined with her ability to maintain a marriage. The divorce placed her in a precarious ethical position, as she was obliged to confront whether her identity, shaped by her educational and professional achievements, could be fully accepted if it was inconsistent with societal standards of a successful woman.

Additionally, the ethical dilemma of reconciling her perceived failure as a wife with her broader moral identity led her to question whether she was, in fact, a morally good person. The ethical dilemma also puts into question the legitimacy of her personal values and their alignment with societal values since the traditional belief placed on her as a wife was to remain married regardless of personal sacrifice. Maathai had to grapple with the ethical and moral weight of her choices: Was she a failure for deciding to leave a marriage that did not serve her well, or was her decision to walk away from the marriage a step towards personal freedom and integrity? This inner conflict tested her character, forcing her to reassess her values and the ethical implications of prioritizing personal fulfillment over social approval. In this regard, Maathai's ethical dilemma uncovers the profound impact of social norms on her identity and the complex process of her self-redefinition within the context of a prevailing patriarchal society.

Ethical Dilemma 2 - Motherhood and Leadership Values

Another ethical dilemma Maathai experiences was the tension between her role as a mother while simultaneously serving as a leader with the Greenbelt movement. After her divorce and subsequently losing her employment at the University of Nairobi, Maathai found herself in financial hardship. On a family outing, her children asked her for food, but she could not provide it. This dilemma squarely placed Maathai back to her identity as an African woman and a mother. It brought into her consciousness the conflicting demands and value of her leadership with the Greenbelt movement as an environmental activist and her role as a mother who was the sole provider for her family. While her leadership and activism focused on long-term societal good, the immediate and personal responsibility to provide for her children was equally pressing. Maathai had to navigate the tension between the immediate need to provide for her children as a mother after a divorce and her commitment to the broader, long-term fight for environmental justice under the Greenbelt movement.

This tension speaks to ethical and moral dilemmas experienced by women, particularly in African societies, who are required to fulfill domestic and community leadership responsibilities. For Maathai, holding in tension these contradictory demands shaped her understanding of what it meant to be a mother, a woman, and a leader. While Maathai deals with these specific ethical dilemmas at her personal level and everyday life, the decision to continue her leadership and activism roles reveals the complex dynamics that women have to grapple with when dealing with the competing challenges.

Ethical Dilemma 3 - Education, Religion, and African Identity

Upon returning to Kenya, Maathai faced a profound ethical dilemma embedded in the intersection of her education, environmental activism, and cultural identity. After receiving her higher education in the United States, Maathai returned home to find that the forces that had facilitated her educational opportunities, Western, colonial, and Christian institutions,

were also contributing to the ecological deprivation and the erosion of traditional African family structures. This presented significant tension for Maathai as she grappled with addressing the consequences of a system that not only nurtured her intellectual growth but had also been complicit in the environmental and social challenges she now sought to combat (Maathai, 2006).

Maathai's struggle centered around whether to align herself with the institutions, such as the Catholic Church and the Western values that had contributed to her academic success, or to fully embrace her African identity and advocate for a return to traditional values and practices that colonial influences had disrupted. Maathai's approach to this dilemma was to acknowledge the contributions of Western education while critically engaging with its implications for African identity and environmental sustainability. Rather than simply adhering to Catholic or Western values, she sought a path to embrace her academic achievements and her deep-rooted African identity, advocating for a form of development and environmental stewardship that leaned more towards local African traditional concepts of sustainable practices. This approach reinforced her commitment to the African-centered, ecological worldview, demonstrating her conscious decision to overtly and covertly deal with the ethical tensions at the intersection of her education, religious background, and African identity (Asante, 2003; Tutu, 1999).

For example, in her work with rural women in Kenya, Maathai focuses on civic education as a strategy to build the rural African women's political agency and to help them reclaim their traditional roles as custodians of agricultural knowledge in cultivating crops and protecting the land and livelihood, even as she continues to navigate her own complex identity as an educated African woman. Maathai consciously chooses to leverage her education to uplift rural women, many lacking formal education. Through the Green Belt Movement, she uses the planting of trees not only as a means of environmental conservation

but also as a means to cultivate rural women's critical consciousness through civic education, fostering individual and social empowerment.

While it is true that education is a powerful tool for empowerment, helping women to recognize their options and opportunities. It is equally true that not all women have access to education. In this context, Maathai's efforts to work with rural women under the Green Belt Movement demonstrate how empowerment can be achieved through recognizing and utilizing indigenous knowledge. By encouraging rural women to embrace their traditional knowledge in practices such as planting food and trees to ensure family sustainability, Maathai provides a way for them to see their indigenous and gendered knowledge as both valuable and empowering. In doing so, she addresses the ethical tension between her use of Western formal education to empower rural women, particularly those without access to such education.

In the same vein, Maathai bridges the gap between herself and the rural women by using her indigenous tribal language to communicate and integrate both cultural epithets and Christian principles from the Bible in the dissemination of knowledge and leadership skills. The use of indigenous language is significant because it allows Maathai to meet the women on their critical plain (Harding, 1987), thus elevating the importance and authenticity of their voice in conversations. Feminist scholars refer to the efforts of bridging the gap as an intentional process of establishing the critical plane—a term introduced by Harding (1987), which involves bringing oneself to the level of others. In navigating her ethical dilemmas, Maathai demonstrates an eclectic approach using Christian values that shaped her education and the cultural values that connect her to her heritage. It is evident that contrary to the argument by Namulundah (2014) in Van-Klinken (2021), Maathai "never resolved her contradictory allegiance to Western influence; she understood her dual provenance as a protégé of both Africa and the West"(p.7). Maathai's activism demonstrated a nuanced

engagement with the tension between her critique of Christianity and the engagement with Christian traditions. We argue, unlike Namulundah (2017), that this tension should be seen as an “unresolved contradiction,” which translates into an ethical dilemma that defies any closure (p.7).

In the light of the foregoing, discussing Maathai's ethical dilemmas offers critical insights into the complexities of leadership, particularly for African feminist leaders. Her efforts to challenge government policies and environmental destruction led to personal and professional risks, raising ethical concerns about the cost of activism. By analyzing Maathai's ethical dilemmas, scholars can explore the broader tensions that underscore the moral courage required to advocate for environmental justice, gender equality, and human rights while grappling with the consequences of challenging deeply entrenched systems of power, including cultural traditions.

Understanding the challenges leadership within the context of African feminism requires an understanding of the intersection of gender, culture, and political power in Africa as well as and global power dynamics. African feminist leadership not only addresses gender inequality but also involves navigating cultural norms, societal expectations, and global challenges which often marginalize women's agency and voice. In critically engaging the challenges faced by African feminist leaders, a deeper understanding of the resilience required to challenge both local and global systems of oppression is inevitable.

Conclusion

As explored in this paper, Maathai's ethical dilemmas demonstrate the multifaceted interaction between personal identity, societal expectations, and broader socio-political obligations regarding women. Maathai's life demonstrates the intricacies experienced by many African women leaders and those who aspire to lead. Many African women leaders tend to create and recreate new narratives about African feminist leadership simultaneously.

The process of creating, recreating, erasing and re-writing becomes intricately linked to the concept of the palimpsest as the narratives reveal the layers of lived experiences that shape African women's leadership journey and practice. Just as a palimpsest retains traces of previous writings even as new layers are inscribed, African feminist leadership emerges from the ongoing process of construction and deconstruction of "meaning and practice, a process seen as constantly shifting and unstable" (Munro, p.xi). By drawing on the palimpsest metaphor, African feminist leadership becomes a dynamic process of continuously revisiting and reshaping past struggles while confronting current ethical dilemmas (Harding, 1987).

Through this lens, African feminist leadership is seen as a process of layering new understandings and approaches over historical constraints to allow for a more nuanced and inclusive form of leadership that reflects African women's multi-layered identities. Mirroring Maathai's narratives as she navigates the intersection of personal, social, and political realms, African women leaders use their narratives to offer alternative visions of leadership that are rooted in a critical awareness of the past, the present, and the future with a commitment to social transformation through transformative feminism. Thus, their stories, like a palimpsest, reveal how ethical dilemmas are continually reexamined and redefined, contributing to the development of an African feminist leadership grounded in tradition and innovation in its approach to social justice (Collins, 1990).

In calling for fresh transformative feminisms in the continent, Marah, quoted in Tamale (2020), contends that transformational feminism is eclectic and recognizes the integrality of humanity" (p. 41). Just as a palimpsest, decolonial feminism invites the reinterpretation of traditional feminist discourses through the lens of local, indigenous, and colonial histories, creating spaces for liberation and for African decolonial feminist thought that are grounded in the realities of marginalized women (Mignolo, 2011; Tamale, 2020). Maathai is indeed inviting us to see the struggles of other women through their story/narrative

and to move beyond the narrow notion of self ... and assert ourselves as members of an “interrelated order of existence in the world” (Karenga, 2006, p.198). Karenga (2006) further argues that understanding of the world as an interrelated order of rightness supports Maathai’s values of connection between humans, nature and the divine on which the Green Belt tree planting campaign was instituted and implemented (Maathai, 2006).

The concept of ambiguous loss, as discussed earlier in the paper, and the contradictory demands of the ethical dilemmas exemplified in Maathai’s life when reframed, can become a powerful location for empowerment and transformation. By navigating the complexities of these challenges, African women can assert their agency and leadership both in the public and private spheres, fostering success through their assertiveness and resilience. Evidently, the future of African women and their leadership lies in the cultivation of a shared consciousness, where collective efforts drive systemic change and uplift women voices across the continent.

In conclusion, the following three knowledge claims deduced from the discussion on African feminist leadership in this paper provide a pathway for re-envisioning leadership models that are inclusive, transformative, and grounded in the lived experiences and cultural contexts of African women:

1. **Empowerment and Transformation is in the Space of ethical dilemma (ambiguity and lack of closure)** - The concept of ambiguity in ethical dilemmas, which defies closure, as articulated by Boss (2006), provides a unique space for empowerment and transformation. By embracing the inherent ambiguity in these dilemmas, individuals, particularly women, can navigate complex social and personal challenges without seeking ‘expected’ sense of closure.
2. **Success is in the Assertiveness** – The space for empowerment and transformation fosters a dynamic environment in which assertiveness becomes

a crucial tool for self-expression and leadership. Assertiveness allows African women to exercise agency over their lives, both personally and in public contexts.

3. **The Future is in the Shared Consciousness** - Cultivating shared consciousness is essential for collective action and solidarity. It allows for the recognition of women's common struggles and aspirations.

These knowledge claims are fundamental in advancing broader feminist social transformation and leadership. By holding in tension, unresolved ethical dilemmas become an innovative space for the development of African feminist leadership practices and collective empowerment that transcend traditional boundaries and foster progressive change in the continent and globally.

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