

Women's Spiritual Leadership in Africa

Tempered Radicals and Critical Servant Leaders



Faith Wambura Ngunjiri

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Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

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Printed in the United States of America

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For information, contact State University of New York Press, Albany, NY
www.sunypress.edu

Production by Eileen Meehan
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ngunjiri, Faith Wambura, 1973–

Women's spiritual leadership in Africa : tempered radicals and critical servant leaders / Faith Wambura Ngunjiri.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4384-2977-9 (hbk. : alk. paper)

1. Leadership in women—Africa. 2. Women leaders—Africa. I. Title.

HQ1787.N495 2010

305.420967—dc22

2009018959

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Foreword

By Judy A. Alston

I was honored when Faith asked that I write the foreword for this book. To be able to see the fruits of my teaching and mentoring labor bear her own fruit is an awesome experience that makes the past 21 years that I have spent as an educator so much more worthwhile.

The Road to Leadership

When I consider the concept and reality of leadership, from my own worldview, I must first situate myself—beginning with who I am, what I bring, and how I have come to know. In many respects, I respond to inquiry on every side of this notion of leadership with more questions than answers. So I begin this foreword with some fundamental knowledge that will assist the reader with an increased understanding of my perspective as it relates to a (re)visioning of leadership from one Black woman's perspective—a womanist (Walker, 1983) perspective.

As I have noted in other writings, there is a dearth of research and writing on women of color and leadership, more specifically from my view as a Black (African American) woman. The desire and passion for this area of research came to fruition during my doctoral studies, but perhaps it was always there in my life experiences as both a tempered radical and servant leader from the beginning.

In August 1996 I received my Ph.D. in educational administration from Pennsylvania State University. Prior to reaching this goal, I had been trained in some of the finest educational institutions in South Carolina. I received a BA in English from Winthrop College, an M.Ed. in secondary English and an M.Ed. in educational administration, both

from the University of South Carolina. My K–12 parochial education in Charleston, South Carolina, began with a focus on the basics (reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion), with a continued focus on college preparatory curricula and extracurricula leadership opportunities. Since 1987, as a teacher, teacher-leader, and now university professor/administrator, I have committed my life, personally and professionally, to improving educational and organizational leadership—what I believe to be my mission in life.

In addition to my education profile, I am Black. I am a woman. I am middle class. I am a Christian. I am an American citizen. I have a sexual orientation. I have an astigmatism. These “axes of identity,” public and private, create the intersections of my selfhood and my view of leadership.

As I matriculated from my K–12 education to the completion of a terminal degree, I was most often in classrooms (usually the only person of color, or one of few, except in K–8) and under the administrative leadership of white, Eurocentric teachers, professors, and administrators. In only a few cases (six to be exact) did I have a classroom teacher or professor who was a person of color—five Black, one Cuban. This educational context and experience, coupled with my training, has led me to a particular meaning making that guides me to think, interrogate, analyze, critique, and (re)act. The epistemological underpinnings, the ways in which I have come to know and influence what is known, have become a critical unit of analysis as I explore the social and political transformation of educational/organizational leadership. It is within this “positionality” (Chavez 2008, p. 474) that the theoretical frame for my discussion, teaching, and research of leadership finds its genesis.

Black and African Women in Leadership

The focus concepts of this book—servant leadership, tempered radicalism, spirituality, and meaning making—were all formally introduced and delineated in courses that I taught while I was a professor at Bowling Green State University in the leadership studies doctoral program. This text meshes these concepts along with the experiences and knowledge of the marginalized to the center by standing aside to let the community speak for itself (Thomas, 1998). Built upon my research about Black female superintendents as tempered radicals and servant leaders (Alston, 2005), Dr. Ngunjiri extends this research by focusing on African women leaders who are spirited, tempered radicals (a combination of Africana spirituality, tempered radicalism, and servant leadership).

In the context of preparation, practice, and research, a few cornerstones of leadership (power, control, authority, and influence) have historically been used in a negative fashion to marginalize, silence, and erase the accomplishments of historically underrepresented groups, that is, women, African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, as well as gays and lesbians. Parker (2005) noted that the “tradition” of African American women’s leadership is absent from the literature in general. Often in the field of leadership preparation and leadership studies, the voices of the marginalized are not heard in the discussion or teaching of leadership theories, concepts, and research in general, thus it is a slanted view of the concept. Therefore, in order bring some balance to the field, the perspectives, experiences, and voices of Black and African women leaders are essential to the study of leadership.

I heard once that history is about winners and losers, and the winners get to tell their story. In many ways, the “winners” have told their story about leadership, and their concepts, models, and examples of leadership have reigned supreme and superior. Furthermore, the silencing of some groups while privileging others in the study of organizational leadership has been a product of theoretical perspectives that frame our current understanding of gender, discourse, and organization (Parker, 2005).

Dr. Ngunjiri’s new work brings to the fore a new landscape, a much-needed addition to the discourse. It is transformative and powerful research that will broaden and enrich those people who take the opportunity to read and extend their own knowledge and experiential bases.

Judy A. Alston, Ph.D., is director/associate professor of the doctoral program in educational leadership at Ashland University, Ashland, Ohio. Her research foci include Black female school superintendents; the exploration of how the intersections of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual diversity, and ability affect educational leaders; tempered radicals; servant leadership; and Black gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) issues in educational leadership. She is the coauthor of *School Leadership and Administration: Important Concepts, Case Studies, & Simulations*, 7th ed., 8th ed. (2007, 2009), the author of *Multi-leadership in Urban Schools* (2002), and the author of numerous journal articles.

Preface

Leadership studies have generally been dominated by theories and approaches developed in the West, by Western scholars who overwhelmingly utilize White males and androcentric models. Various scholars have argued for the inclusion of non-Western and non-White studies of leadership to expand and sometimes counteract the Western hegemony. This book demonstrates how leadership is enacted in a specific social, cultural, and historical context by African women in Kenya. The study is based on leadership and life stories of 16 women from Kenya who lead grassroots, national, Pan- African and global organizations. The study was guided by the work of African feminists, Black feminist and womanist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, Judy A. Alston, Khaula Murtadha, Clenora Hudson Weems, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and others who argue that African and African American women's life experiences are an epistemologically valid standpoint from which to construct theories. In the absence of sufficient studies of African women in leadership, the study was guided by empirical and conceptual work from African American women scholars.

This book will provide a worthwhile contribution to our understanding of women and leadership by contributing the perspective of African women as I have interpreted them. Scholars and the educated publics in the interdisciplinary field of leadership studies will find the explication of tempered radicalism, servant leadership, and spirituality understood through the meaning-making experiences of African women both informative and inspiring. This book demonstrate how context matters in the practice of leadership—a context that has produced critical servant leaders who *rock the boat without falling out*, convicted and guided by their spiritual praxis. As the witness and interpreter of the life stories that formed the data for this study, a short biography of my life and educational experience will help the reader understand my positionality.

I was born in Nyeri in the Central Province of Kenya (East Africa), the middle child of lower-middle-class parents. My parents were both teachers, so high expectations in academic performance were the norm. I was blessed to have moved from a nondescript primary school in Kirinyaga district to one of the top girls' secondary schools in the country, the Alliance Girls' High School, Kikuyu. Here I interacted with the best-performing girls from all over the country, opening my eyes to the rich ethnic diversity from an experiential perspective.

In 1993, I joined Kenyatta University to study for a bachelor's of education degree with a focus on language and literature. At that point, I had no intentions of becoming a teacher; I thought I would then join a business organization and begin a career in corporate Kenya. However, during my teaching practicum, I came to the realization that teachers have the power to make or break students' lives by the choices they make. At that point, I made the decision to pursue teaching, at least for a short period of time. I did my practicum in a small private school that catered to poor children, most of whom came from the slums of Nairobi. I realized that such students were disadvantaged because the schools they could attend if they did not make it into public schools were often underfunded and understaffed, so their ability to rise from poverty through education was limited. After graduation, I worked in a private Christian school for middle-class children—the exact opposite of my previous school. That experience engendered in me the desire to pursue values-based education as I realized that while the two schools were on opposite ends of the economic spectrum, children in both settings would benefit from authentic values-based education that would prepare them to deal with life, educating them not just intellectually but spiritually to promote character development.

To cut a long story short, I joined Nairobi Chapel, a non-denominational evangelical church situated on the campus of Nairobi University in order to engage in their leadership development program, culminating in my leading the instituting of a Christian school (Logos Christian School). In the four years that I served at Nairobi Chapel, I also engaged in theological education at Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST), graduating with a master's degree in mission studies. One of the defining moments in my development as a leader occurred during that period. In the process of advertising for a principal for Logos, one of the governing board members asked why I was not being considered for the role since I had been serving in a leadership role all along. A pastor who was serving on the board as well replied to this effect: "She cannot be the principal because she is young, she is not married, and she has no children." Suffice it to say

that I was flabbergasted. I had not realized that marriage and children formed the basis for credibility as a leader. Only in doing this study did I realize that this issue of denying women positions or the authority due to their positions based on marital status and being biological mothers is actually quite widespread in Kenya—the stories of Esther Mombo and Muthoni Wanyeki in this book affirm that.

A second critical incident occurred at NEGST that helped define my purpose in life as a scholar and as a woman in leadership. During the Biblical Ethics course, one of the men in the class claimed that women should not be in master's degree programs. Instead, the women should be in the certificate "women's program," which was aimed at preparing women to support their husbands in pastoral ministry. This man, a pastor and leader from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, then went on to say that women have smaller brains and therefore less capacity for making ethical decisions!

The third incident at NEGST was more of an eye-opener. I found out that some of the women who had come to the college with their husbands were physically abused right there on campus. The stories that they told of their experiences broke my heart. I could not imagine a pastor and a church leader beating his wife, let alone all of the other abuses that these women faced. That realization made me decide that rather than preach for my homiletics practicum, I would challenge the institution members to rethink their ways by reading and performing a long poem. The poem consisted of five portraits of women who had survived in spite of major challenges—domestic abuse, forced early marriage, widowhood, divorce, and sexist discrimination in organizational contexts. Whereas those poetic portraits were based on my creative imagination, this book demonstrates the reality of the intersecting forces that women face and that are a part of the *raison d'être* for the women leaders profiled. Even the extreme poem I had created about a Maasai woman forced to marry at age 12, only to be widowed at age 30 and left with children to raise and educate, turned out to be closer to reality than I had ever imagined! Ms. Nangurai's work as chronicled here aims at helping such women and girls access education in order to better their lives and that of the community.

The defining incidents mentioned here led to my decision to enroll in the doctoral program in leadership studies at Bowling Green State University to prepare for life as a woman leader and a professor. Under the direction of Dr. Judy Alston, I conducted the research that forms the basis for this book in the summer of 2005, intent on demonstrating that even though African women faced a lot of hardships, they were actively engaged in their own emancipation. The portraits

illustrate the power of faith and deep spirituality in the lives of women social justice leaders. The portraits further illustrate the choices these women make, regarding their approach to leadership as tempered radicals and critical servant leaders, intent on transforming their communities, organizations, and nations. I wrote this book because I am invested in providing authentic representations of African women to both African audiences and the Western academic audiences of which I am now a part. The conviction that only half the story about African women is told—the half that is deficient, pathological, negative, sad, and sometimes a misrepresentation of the context and the people—led me to engage in this research project to provide a counter-story.

Outline of the Book

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the text, describing the status of women in leadership in Africa with Kenya as an example and offering short introductions to the women participants to show how they fit into the educational, religious, civil society and government arenas as leaders working toward social and economic justice. The chapter also details the rationale for the study, conceptual framework, and design of the study.

Chapter 2 provides a theoretical framework for leadership scholars to place the book within the literature in the field of leadership theory and practice.

Chapter 3 begins with a contextual framework in terms of the geographical, social, political, and economic setting of Kenya, East Africa. Even though some of the women lead Pan-African and global organizations, their most pertinent issues regarding their life history and leadership experiences have to do with the cultural and social setting of Kenya, where they were born, raised, and educated and where they experienced their most significant and meaning-making events as women in leadership.

Chapter 4 contains succinct portraits of nine women leaders plus the liaison who helped in gaining access—it would have required too much space to provide exhaustive portraits of all 16 participants. The nine-plus-one snapshots cover a succinct life story of each woman and her leadership context.

I selected seven participants to provide in-depth portraits based on diversity of experiences, ethnicities, level of leadership (local, national, Pan-African, and global), age, and marital status (single, divorced, widowed and married). I also selected the seven because they provided the

most comprehensive stories based on the fact that I spent more time with them than with the other nine-plus-one women. As will become evident in the theme chapters, these seven women are the most often quoted in illustrating the themes. These seven portraits best communicate to the reader what it means to be a woman and a leader in the African context. Chapters 5–11 include seven in-depth portraits; each woman selected for this level of analysis received her own chapter. The purpose of the in-depth portraits is to provide the reader with a profound and multilayered view of women's experiences and expressions of leadership in Africa. Additionally, each of the portraits adds on to the bigger story of what it means to be a woman in leadership—how women's various social identities interact with their experiences and expressions of leadership.

Chapters 12–14 include discussions of the elements of the conceptual framework, using extant quotes to illustrate the themes that emerged in support and/or expansion of spirituality, servant leadership, and tempered radicalism.

Chapter 15 reviews the thematic chapters and reconstructs the conceptual framework based on the themes from the previous chapters. The final section of chapter 15 discusses some of my personal lessons in doing this study and provides implications for practice and future study.

Acknowledgments

I am forever grateful to the many people who have contributed to my development as a scholar, and to the process of writing this book. Many remain un-named, but for all of them I am forever grateful.

To my mentor Dr. Judy Alston (Ashland University): Thank-you is too mild a phrase to fully explain what I feel. You have been the best mentor a graduate student and junior faculty member could ever wish for. Thank-you for directing me toward becoming a professor!

To Dr. Cynthia Tyson (Ohio State University), Dr. Khaula Murtadha (Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis), Dr. Lara Martin Lengel (Bowling Green State University), and Dr. Mark Earley (Bowling Green State University), my dissertation committee, and continuing mentors: You enriched my educational experience—thank- you. When my students appreciate my engagement with them, I thank God for you because I learned how to be a spirit-led facilitator of learning through my interactions with you. I continue to grow as a professor through the guidance of Dr. Alston and Dr. Lengel—may God bless you both.

To Dr. Wairimu Mutai (Loyola College, Maryland), Dr. Anne Christo-Baker (Purdue University, North Central Indiana), Dr. Patrice McClellan (Lourdes College, Ohio), and Dr. Lillian Schumacher (Indiana Tech, Fort Wayne): I thank you for being my sisters in graduate school and my colleagues in the academy. I also thank you for the many times I have asked you to read and review my writing.

To Dr. David W. Miller: Thank-you for the one year at Yale Center for Faith and Culture.

To my brother, John Murigu: Thank-you for your willingness to invest in me, and for giving me Wangari, Wambura, and Ngunjiri to dote upon! I pray that your daughters will grow up to be courageous and committed leaders, and that your son will be a feminist like his aunt! To my entire Mukira family: Thank-you for being the greatest family one could wish for. To my mom, Wangari Ngunjiri, and my aunts, Waruguru Mukira and Rev. Joyce Kariuki: You are the best! To

my 34 cousins and counting: I hope I offer a worthy example! And to Grandpa Moses Mukira and my brother Moses Mukira, both deceased: Your memory lingers on.

To my new friends at Eastern University: I am glad to be in an environment where people practice what they preach. Thank-you to Jo Ann Flett, Dr. Sharon Gramby-Sobukwe, Dr. Kathy Ann Hernandez, and Dr. Heewon Chang for being worthy colleagues and critical collaborators.

To the men who create drama in my life: Thank-you for keeping me entertained!

To the 16 women who graciously gave of their time and wisdom: Thank-you for sharing your life with me. And to Aunt Wanjiru (Rev. Joyce): Thanks for supporting me and introducing me to these wise women.

Ultimately, to God be the glory

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Contextual and Conceptual Framework

The statement *ex Africa semper aliquid novi*, attributed to Pliny the Elder, is translated as *out of Africa, always something new*. Apparently the saying was often used derisively, because there was little known about the Dark Continent. Through this book, however, out of Africa becomes something new, something worth celebrating. Rather than stories of war and rumors of war, hunger and disease, and corruption and mismanagement of government coffers, herein are stories of women who are working hard at their own emancipation from these and other man-made evils. These are women who lead with courage and conviction, spirit and strength, serving their communities and changing the status quo for the sake of social and economic justice. There is enough bad news coming out of Africa on a frequent basis to make the rest of the world think that nothing good comes out of the Continent. In contradistinction, this book illustrates that there are beacons of light and hope in the women of Africa, beacons of change for a better world. The *Endarkened* Continent can no longer be dismissed as a place of ignorance and disease; these stories demonstrate that there is something the rest of the world can learn from their black African sisters. From these leadership stories, we learn that our African sisters are resourceful problem solvers who collectivize to resolve their common problems, who are not silent in the face of severe challenges but instead are spirited social justice leaders who serve with a servant's heart and a tempered radicalism necessary to achieve their goals for healing community and restoring justice to the marginalized.

Five Steps Forward, Three Steps Back

Africa's women have made tremendous progress in politics, economics, and educational attainments in the last half century. Prior to

independence, Africa's women actively participated in freeing their nations from colonial domination as freedom fighters engaged in armed warfare, or by offering spiritual and material support to their freedom fighters, or by keeping the home fires burning while their men fought. In this section, I introduce the status of women in various arenas and how the participants in this study fit as leaders in those areas. As Muthoni Likimani, a prolific writer, indicated, even though the historical canon in many African countries may be silent on women's agency in the anti-colonial struggle, this does not diminish their [women's] contribution to freedom and nation building.

Muthoni Wanyeki, a human rights, women's rights, and development expert, indicated that women's active engagement continued after independence. Women organized themselves into national women's organizations that were instrumental in bringing about rural development in many regions across Africa between 1960 and 1980. Furthermore, Wanyeki noted that in the last 30 years, Africa's women have been at the forefront of the fight for democracy in their nations and for closer unity among African countries through Pan-African organizations such as FEMNET (African Women Communication and Development Network, which she directed for 7 years). Such Pan-African organizations helped articulate the needs of women in the nationalist development agendas. In their native countries, Africa's women organized into civil society organizations through which they agitated for democracy, good governance, and human and women's rights, resulting in more women participating in elected political positions in the new century. Many of the women who now serve as elected members of parliament in many African countries started their activism and engagement through the civil commons.

As of October 2008, when the Inter-Parliamentary Union last updated its records, one African country is leading the world in women's participation in parliament. Rwanda leads the world; 58.3% of Parliamentarians are women—the average for Africa is only 17.9%. The table that follows contains other leading African countries' ranking as of October 2008.

My own native Kenya lags behind at 106th, with only a 9.8% representation of women in the current (as of March 2008) parliament. The stories of Honorable Beth Mugo and Honorable Charity Ngilu, who are members of the cabinet in Kenya, are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to women's struggles to serve their communities in parliament. Wahu Kaara has tried and failed to get into parliament the last three general elections. Part of the struggle for women in Kenya is that they do not have the financial wherewithal to play the political