ABSTRACT

Gikuyu and settler colonist women’s life histories were analyzed using textual analysis of first-person accounts to understand the ideologies behind women’s perceptions of land, place, and human-environment relationships, and to fill a gap in the literature on women in central Kenya. Earlier studies have focused on social relations between Gikuyu and colonists, social issues affecting these groups, or land as an important, but non-gendered construct. Our major finding was that the women’s understandings of human-environment relations and place reflected gender awareness, but overall were consistent with the dominant ideologies of men from their cultural background and time. Settler colonists took a decidedly Western perspective of people as separate from, acting upon, and improving unordered, chaotic lands and Kenya as an aesthetically pleasing, though potentially dangerous place. Gikuyu women saw land as ancestral home, site of struggle against colonial land grabs and forced labor, and people as more connected to, rather than separate from their environment.

Key Words: colonialism, Gikuyu, Kenya, land, women

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, studies of ideas and concepts about nature have reflected male perspectives (Glacken 1967; Nash 2001). Women’s perspectives on the environment, although potentially different from men, are less likely to be represented (Merchant 1983; Thomas-Slayter 1995). Yet, gender is a key variable in the determination of access to and control over natural resources (Schroeder 1999). The gap in materials available which focus on gender, the environment, and resource use is especially true for poorer countries, including many of those in Africa (Thomas-Slayter 1995). In order to expand the relatively limited data on women’s environmental ideologies and understandings of human-environment relations, the authors employ a textual analysis of non-traditional sources of environmental information, the
life histories of African and colonial women. Sources include the memoirs, autobiographical fiction and oral histories of British colonial and Gikũyũ women living in Kenya’s Central Province from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth century.¹

**BACKGROUND**

British colonial expansion in parts of Africa included land ownership by settler colonists as a low-cost means of enforcing colonial authority and bringing development (Berman and Lonsdale 1992). Settler colonialism involved ordinary citizens establishing at least semi-permanent residence in the colonies and was most widespread in Kenya, Rhodesia, and South Africa as well as the French colony of Algeria (Good 1976). The term “settler colonist” generally referred to farmers, capitalists, and entrepreneurs, not missionaries, officials, or teachers (Riley 2003, 27, 39). Early or “pioneer” settlers went to the colonies with the hope of quick profits through the establishment of coffee, tea, or sugarcane plantations, livestock rearing, or, less commonly, surface mining for gold (Riley 2003).

Output on colonist-owned agricultural and mining operations ensured Britain of its needed supply of raw materials for industrial production (Wasserman 1974), thus the British administration gave some early colonists tracts of up to 10,000 acres in exchange for a simple vow to build a house on the land (Nicholls 2002). From 1870 to 1913, overseas colonies provided at least one-third of the imports increasingly required for manufacturing in Britain (Wolff 1976). However, these imports were the product of economies based on the colonized territory’s land, labor, and taxes (Maughan-Brown 1985).

Land was acquired militarily throughout Britain’s African empire. The inhabitants of lands that colonists acquired were relocated to ethnic reserves or remained on the land in exchange for labor (Berman and Lonsdale 1992). Given the scourges of rinderpest, smallpox, and famine that accompanied the arrival of the Europeans in the 1890s and the locals’ seasonal use of many lands, settler colonists perceived Kenya as “empty” and frequently applied for deeds to seemingly vacant lands, which had only temporarily been abandoned (Waciuma 1969; Trzebinski 1985; Nicholls 2002). Because land is at the heart of people’s livelihoods throughout sub-Saharan Africa, such land alienation was at the heart of anti-colonial struggles in all of Africa’s settler colonies (Maughan-Brown 1985).

The Gikũyũ, the primary inhabitants of central Kenya prior to British colonial rule in the 1890s, were forcibly removed from their homelands and relocated into reserves. The removal process included considerable human and animal deaths, destruction of property, and crop seizure (Good 1976; Davison 1996). Central Kenya, especially Central Province, including what are today the districts of Kirinyaga (formerly part of Embu), Kiambu, Thika (formerly part of Kiambu), Murang’a (formerly Fort Hall) and Nyeri, was the principal site of violent struggle over land (Law 2005) (Fig. 1). By 1921, approximately 11,000 Gikũyũ had become landless in southern Kiambu alone, one of the hardest hit areas of Central Kenya (Nicholls 2002). Some landless Gikũyũ sought work in the capital, Nairobi; others became Europeans’ household servants or agreed to labor 180 days annually for European landowners in exchange for the right to work ancestral land for subsistence purposes (Trzebinski 1985; Nicholls 2002).

By 1952, the eve of Kenyans’ armed anti-colonial struggle, referred to by the British as the Mau Mau Emergency, “9,000 settlers [mostly British, but also Dutch via South Africa, Danish, Germans, Irish, and Austrians], had exclusive rights to 16,700 square miles of Kenyan land [more than one million acres], while several million Africans tried to exist on congested reserves, as contract labourers on farms, and as unskilled workers in towns” (Good 1976, 603). At this time the British used bombs and heavy artillery, the forcing of Gikũyũ into villages and cutting off supplies, and population sweeps (turning out whole villages to fell forests and to kill anti-colonial guerillas) against the resistance (Shaw 1995).

The Gikũyũ, representing approximately 20 percent of Kenya’s population, were
the main group taking up arms against the British. They served as nationalist leaders because they had experienced the most land alienation, and had the greatest exposure to the ideal of self-government through formal education (Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Davison 1996). Although the Mau Mau included followers from the Meru, Embu, Maasai, and Kamba, the British encouraged the perception of a Gikũyũ-only movement because it fit their view of Africans’ “tribal” nature (Maughan-Brown 1985; Otieno 1998, 53). Some Gikũyũ in turn adopted the British perspective (that the Gikũyũ won independence for all ethnic groups), thus partly undermining the formation of a strong, multi-ethnic Kenyan national identity (Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Shaw 1995). Land remains central to politics and power in Kenya (Haugerud 1997) and the country’s top earners -- coffee, tea, wildlife tourism, and horticulture -- are inextricably linked to land (Government of Kenya 2002). The iniquitous land ownership patterns and landlessness initiated by British colonialism remains largely intact with potentially catastrophic consequences for the country’s future.

RATIONALE, RESEARCH METHODS AND QUESTIONS

Research on land-driven anti-colonial struggles and human-environment relationships in central Kenya has focused on Kenyan ethnic groups as a whole or on African and settler colonist men (Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Shaw 1995). However, these analyses have excluded white women who were one-fourth to one-third of the white population in Kenya (Riley 2003), as well as Gikũyũ women who, on the whole, were strongly affected by the colonial land grabs and agricultural policies. This paper explores the lives of individual Gikũyũ and settler colonist women in central Kenya from the 1890s to the 1990s in order to understand the ideologies behind female perceptions of land, place, and human-environment relationships. Whereas some works explore the lives of settler colonist women or Gikũyũ women in central Kenya, few analyze both; when both groups of women are described, writings generally focus on social relations and topics include religion and education (Sandgren 1989), childbirth, violence against women, betrayal in marriage (Nzioki et al. 1992), prostitution (White 1990), gender
relations within Giküyü society and gendered practices such as clitoridectomy (Kenyatta 1953; Leakey 1977; Shaw 1995; Thomas 2003). Although some writings explore colonial or Giküyü relations with land (Maughan-Brown 1985; Overton 1988; Clough 1998) they do not examine how men and women might experience their environment differently. This paper will help to fill a gap in the scholarship on women and the environment in central Kenya by examining both Giküyü and settler colonist women’s lives while noting the extent to which gender factored into the women’s experience of and interaction with their environment.

To understand the ideologies that shaped Giküyü and settler colonist women’s perceptions of their relationship to land in central Kenya in the colonial and post-independence periods, we undertook textual analysis of the women’s life histories as reported in their memoirs, autobiographical fiction, and oral histories. Life histories analyzed include all available, in-print, book-length, English-language works by Giküyü women and British settler colonist women living in central Kenya.2 For British settler colonist women, these include: Bache 1934; Simpson 1937; Huxley 1959, 1960, 1962, 1985; Cole 1975; and Markham 1942. Life histories of Giküyu women include: Waciuma 1969; Likimani 1985; Davison 1996; Otieno 1998; and Maathai 1985. Additional life histories include non-British settler colonists living in central Kenya (Dinesen 1938; Adamson 1960; and Zweig 2004) and British traveler and writer Etta Close (1924).

For central Kenya, life histories of settler colonist women outnumber those of Giküyü women. Differences by ethnic background in terms of the number of life histories available is hardly surprising given the limits on formal education for Giküyü women until recent times (Davison 1996). Ideally, many more life histories, especially of Giküyü women, would be available for analysis.

Almost all of the British settler colonist and Giküyü women wrote memoirs, with the exceptions of Huxley, Likimani, and Markham, who wrote autobiographical fiction, and the Giküyü oral histories recorded by Davison. Likimani’s autobiography describes the lives of seven women including the author’s family and friends and is fictional only so far as to avoid libel (name changes of some people described) (O’Barr 1985). Huxley and Markham’s biographers concur that the women’s work is largely autobiographical but that the authors took liberties with facts to make certain passages more compelling (such as hunting scenes) (Trzebinski 1993; Nicholls 2002).

Each group of women wrote during or about times that were especially meaningful to them. For the settler colonists this was generally the period of empire building (1890s to 1930s) and the decades immediately thereafter and for the Giküyü women, the struggle for and achievement of independence (1950s-1960s). Exceptions include Huxley who also wrote during the post-independence period, Otieno and Maathai who address events through the 1980s to 1990s, and Waciuma who includes childhood memories from the early 1940s and reflects on decades from before her birth as described to her by her grandfather. Inclusion of life histories as recorded through oral history (Davison, 1996) was one means of accessing Giküyü women’s thoughts about the decades prior to independence (only two of the seven women Davison interviewed were born after 1950, three were born in the 1930s, one in the 1920s, and one around 1910). A limitation of the life histories Davison records is the directed nature of her questioning in which women are asked to report on major life events (most discussed marriage, the death of a loved one, and circumcision) as opposed to their everyday activities in a rural part of Kenya with an agriculturally based economy. A focus on the women’s everyday activities would no doubt have yielded much more on human-environment relations than was the case. It should be noted that among the authors only Maathai set out to expressly share her perspectives on the environment.

In many ways, the women whose words have been recorded, like those of any published author, are atypical of women of their times. Dr. Wangari Maathai, a member of Kenya’s Parliament, was the first African
woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize (2004). Beryl Markham was the first person to make a successful transatlantic flight east to west. Charity Waciuma is an established author of children’s books, and Wambui Waiyaki Otieno is the widow of S.M. Otieno who made national headlines in Kenya in 1987 when she and her late husband’s Luo family publicly feuded over where his body should be buried, and in 2003 when, as a 67-year-old prominent politician, she married a 25-year-old man (Kariuki wa Mureithi 2003). Other authors, with the exception of six of seven of the Davison interviewees who were peasant farmers with three to four years of formal education, had strong writing skills, sufficient time and resources to devote to writing, and a compelling story to tell. As is true of many life histories, most of the women whose works were analyzed committed their memories to paper many years after events occurred and largely without the support of records such as diaries and personal letters for reference. All were aware that others would view and potentially judge them according to their life histories. Virtually all of the women were living in Kenya when they recorded their life histories, although Elspeth Huxley lived almost all of her adult life in Britain, making only periodic visits to Kenya.

Questions addressed in this study include: How do female British settler colonist and female Gikuyu authors portray Gikuyu-environment and settler colonist-environment relations? How and why might such portrayals differ? Do British settler colonist women and female Gikuyu authors portray Central Kenya as a place relatively positively or negatively and do these portrayals change over time? Do the authors stress the importance of their gender in shaping their lives? Can the authors be considered “feminist” (i.e. someone who believes that women and men deserve equal rights and opportunities, politically, economically, and socially)? Do European female settler colonists of non-British descent hold ideologies similar to those of British settler colonists?

GİKÜYÜ RELATIONSHIPS TO THE LAND

Land is central to Gikuyu society, and was the symbol of Gikuyu unity used to recruit followers to the nationalist cause. Jomo Kenyatta, a Gikuyu who became independent Kenya’s first president, described land and his people’s rights to it as:

the most important factor in the social, political, religious, and economic life of the tribe. As agriculturalists, the Gikuyu people depend entirely on the land…. It supplies them with the material needs of life, through which spiritual and mental contentment is achieved (Kenyatta 1953, 21).

Land is understood as the life source of the people, as it is the sustainer of their food crops and cattle. It was the “foundation rock on which the Gikuyu tribal economy stands and the only effective mode of production” (Kenyatta 1953, 55).

Generally, land in one’s region of birth is seen by African Kenyans, including the Gikuyu, as the home of their ancestors, and they develop a deep personal connection with it. Earth is considered the “mother” of the tribe, “thus, the earth is the most sacred thing above all that dwell in or on it” (Kenyatta 1953, 21). The group takes its name from the male of the primordial couple, Gikuyu. The female of the couple, Mumbi, gives “rise to powerful connections between land and kin” (Shaw 1995, 33), particularly among Gikuyu women.

To the Gikuyu, it is the clearing and cultivation of land that gives a man the right to own it (Kenyatta 1953; Good 1976). “Complexity, elasticity and overlapping or interlocking interests in the land—for women and men, youths and elders” characterized land rights during precolonial times (MacKenzie & Fiona 1998, 25). Males had the right to allocate land to males and females while females usually had the rights of access and use. Furthermore, through birthing women were the “medium through which land passed from one generation to another” (MacKenzie & Fiona 1998, 31-32).
In Gĩkũyũ society, the functions of reproduction and production are indivisible because a Gĩkũyũ woman’s most important role as a mother is in providing for the family (Berman and Lonsdale 1992). Gĩkũyũ females perform the bulk of horticultural and food processing activities. Women plant staple crops, including maize, beans, and millet, engage in hoeing, weeding, and harvesting of crops, as well as storing and tending the food supply. They gather fuelwood, fetch water, ground grain, pound sugar cane for beer, and tend beehives for honey (Shaw 1995). Men engage in all aspects of work related to cattle. Women contribute to the herd’s size by trading vegetables for small stock (sheep, goats, and calves).

While there is no evidence of gender equality in Gĩkũyũ society prior to European arrival, there was a fairly balanced system of gender relations in place at the time of colonization in which women generally had control over women’s issues and men had control over men’s issues as well as those affecting the entire community (MacKenzie 1998). British colonial rule exaggerated gender inequalities by implementation of notions from English common law which treated women as dependents without the power to make formal, legally binding decisions (Mikell 1997). During the colonial period, land increasingly became viewed as a site of struggle against foreigners (Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Shaw 1995).

**SETTLER COLONIST RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE LAND**

Settler colonists commonly embraced the quintessential Western perspective of human-environment relations in which humans were viewed optimistically as capable of controlling nature and bringing progress by improving upon it (Glacken 1967; Buckingham-Hatfield 2000; Myers 2002). In this view, humans were superior to nature and separated from it by their intellect. Humanity’s ability to acquire and use knowledge enabled them to improve upon God-given Eden-like landscapes by domesticating animals, domesticating and improving plant varieties, and other acts which would allow humans to live better lives. As separate from and acting upon the wild and relatively unordered virgin landscapes of the natural world, people needed to exercise caution only to avoid disrupting the balance of nature (Marsh 1874).

During the colonial period, environmental change was increasingly associated with cultural history, so Africans “proved” to Europeans their lack of culture by not having “improved” the land (Glacken 1967, 364-365) in ways acceptable to the latter. Europeans viewed themselves as especially capable of bringing positive change to nature, whereas the native people of the New World and elsewhere were believed to lack the force and vigor to change their environment (Glacken 1967). Many male colonists viewed tsetse infestation, shifting agriculture and inter-tribal warfare as signs that Africans were poor managers of their environment, though this was not the case (Kjekshus 1977). Settlers established discourses of progress and environmentalism to justify their land grabbing, the basis of which lay in a “privileging of such Western-based knowledge and technology” despite examples of African proficiency in ecological management (MacKenzie & Fiona 1998, 8).

Male and female settler colonists set about shaping Kenya’s land into an “English countryside by replacing native trees with seedlings shipped from England and tearing up native shrubs and flowers to plant English-style gardens” (Riley 2003, 128). European administrators taught Africans “proper” land use. Africans were seen as “progressive” if they embraced European ways (Huxley 1960, 26). Wild animals, heat, malaria and other diseases for which no synthetic drugs had been invented were potential impediments to bringing progress, but cause for only a minority of Europeans to abandon the lands they had obtained in the colonies as well as the superior social standing they enjoyed there.

**SETTLER COLONIST WOMEN’S DESCRIPTIONS OF HUMAN—ENVIRONMENT RELATIONSHIPS**

Settler colonist women’s ideology included viewing Europeans as separate from and act-
ing upon the environment, as well as improving and bringing order to land, through communication networks and improved security. Their ideology also included viewing Kenya as wild, unused, and virtually devoid of human inhabitants. When Kenyan land tenure systems were acknowledged, female colonists viewed them as inefficient. Kenyans’ apparently poor decisions with regard to land use were attributed to their childlike nature and proved a need for European guardianship. Some female colonists compared Kenyans to animals and viewed Kenyans as closer to nature than Europeans. Thus, settler colonist women’s perspectives on human-environment relations largely mirrored those of the men of their cultural background and time.

The division between the human and natural worlds for Europeans (Table 1A, column 1) is apparent in the writings of Austrian Joy Adamson (1960). Adamson and her husband, a game park administrator, devoted their lives to rearing orphaned lion cubs. The subtitle of Adamson’s book Born Free: A Lioness of Two Worlds reflects the author’s perceived separation of humans and the environment; there is a human world and a natural world. In her conclusion Adamson wrote: “She [Elsa, one of the orphaned lions] belonged to nature, not man…[we must] leave her now and give her back to nature” (Adamson 1960, 170-171).

The ideology of Europeans as especially suited for improving and bringing order to lands was widely embraced by female settler colonists (Table 1A, column 2). Evidence of progress included paved roads, railways, irrigation canals, cattle dips, healthier cattle, terraced modern productive farms, well-kept lawns, game parks and reserves, and larger populations of Africans due to reduced inter-tribal conflicts, less famine, and better health care and education. Eve Bache wrote that an explorer during colonial rather than pre-colonial times “…would see plantations of trees, stretches of cultivation, maize, coffee, wheat; cattle grazing…instead of desert country, clusters of native huts” (Bache 1934, 211). Elspeth Huxley wrote of the need for pioneer colonists like her parents to bring improvement, to “alter things and then move on” (Huxley 1962, 188). She believed that “…there was order waiting to be created out of wilderness, a home out of bush, a future from a blank and savage history, a fortune from raw materials that were, as they then existed, of no conceivable value at all” (Huxley 1959, 22).

Similarly, from the settler colonists’ perspective order and progress was brought
### Table 1B: Female settler colonist views of African Kenyan-environment relations in central Kenya

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>1. When Europeans arrived central Kenya was unused, virgin, like the Garden of Eden, timeless and unchanging</th>
<th>2. Kenya’s lands as empty, uninhabited prior to European arrival</th>
<th>3. Kenya’s people had done nothing to improve a chaotic, unordered landscape</th>
<th>4. Kenya’s people had made poor land use choices and needed European guardianship for positive change</th>
<th>5. Africans are closer to/part of nature, not separate from it like Europeans, and also animalistic in nature</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adamson (1960)</td>
<td>pp. 17, 186</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bache (1934)</td>
<td>pp. 26, 209, 227</td>
<td>p. 29</td>
<td>pp. 37, 42, 87, 103, 261</td>
<td>pp. 48, 89</td>
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<tr>
<td>Close (1924)</td>
<td>pp. 1, 130, 150, 168</td>
<td>p. 150</td>
<td>pp. 122, 267</td>
<td>p. 74</td>
<td>pp. 6, 7, 76, 236, 259</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cole (1975)</td>
<td>pp. 34, 47, 48</td>
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about through British improvements to security by reducing inter-tribal warfare and to a lesser extent, slaving. Bache claimed that “the agriculturalists have gained not only the right to live, but the power to prosper. Under our protection, the negro enjoys what he never had any conception of before in his history – security of life and property” (Bache 1934, 261). Etta Close also noted the escape from “savagery” provided by a reduced slave trade (Close 1924, 54 and 59). As noted by Huxley, Africans were expected to be grateful and loyal “to the British, who had done so much to bring civilization, law and order to the savages” (Huxley 1959, 262). Bache and her husband believed Africans should be grateful, because Europeans brought “roads and railways; provide doctors and hospitals, protection and justice, education and technical training, employment” (Bache 1934, 259). Close also described the Gikuyu as “ungrateful people” (Close 1924, 29).

Female settler colonist views of central Kenya included that it was a wild, unused, virgin, timeless, and unchanging Garden of Eden (Table 1B, column 1). Close described Kenya as “wild”, “untouched”, and “unspoilt” (Close 1924, 1, 130, 150), and Alyse Simpson wrote of Kenya as “Eden” and believed “the place seemed to have been untouched by time” (Simpson 1937, 13 and 240). Beryl Markham made comparisons between Africa and Eden and referred to the land as “unused” (Markham 1942, 111). Huxley presented Kenya as having “fresh land, virgin land” (Huxley 1985, 29). She wrote of the “unspoilt country” and a “mould that’s laid undisturbed since Creation” (Huxley 1962, 48, 234). She described the Uasin Gishu plateau and Kenya generally prior to the arrival of settler colonists as being like a picture of the Garden of Eden (Huxley 1959, 10, 18, and 245; 1960, 33, 45; 1962,13, 306). Adamson described how, after the rains Kenya was like “a garden of Eden” (Adamson 1960, 186). She found that “civilization has made little impact on this part of Africa” and that Kenya had “wild, unchanged land” (Adamson 1960, 17). Bache followed the pattern, writing that “the land is as the garden of Eden” (Bache 1934, 209) and claimed that the settlers’ land was “virgin soil,” implying it had never before been used (Bache 1934, 26, 227).

Female settler colonist ideology also included the notion that Kenya contained large tracts of empty lands (Maughan-Brown, 1985) (Table 1B, column 2). In reality the lands that Europeans frequently described as “unoccupied” and “undeveloped” (Kenyatta 1953, 36-37) were the most fertile lands, which contained saltlicks, springs, and pastures, and were the Gikuyu’s public lands that were shared by the community. The settler colonists generally did not recognize this. Settler Alyse Simpson wrote, “the land one felt had no history, no human associations”, “no sign of human habitation as far as the eye could see” (Simpson 1937, 223, 64). Lady Eleanor Cole, like Simpson, described Kenya as a “developing new country”, “a completely unsettled country”, and a “totally unknown country” (Cole 1975, 34, 37, 48). Markham described Kenya as marked by “emptiness” (Markham 1942, 109), and Huxley believed that “the pioneer settlers of these hills took the land they fancied from no one; it was not only unoccupied, it was unclaimed” (Huxley 1960, 44). She believed there were no Africans living on the Uasin Gishu plateau at the time Europeans arrived (Huxley 1985, 23). In The Mottled Lizard, Huxley said that the land was empty of humans and full of animals and was almost untouched by humans in certain parts (Huxley 1962, 43, 170). She believed Africa to be the last of “empty”, “uncivilized lands” (Huxley 1962, 52, 55) and went so far as to say that God didn’t want Africa to be inhabited. These statements are congruent with Huxley’s later sympathy for Africa’s animals, as she believed that the land belongs to them.

Isak Dinesen (a.k.a. Karen Blixen), a Danish coffee farmer, was the only female settler colonist studied who explicitly stated that Africans were living on the land before European arrival. She wrote: “not very long ago…the Natives of the country had held their land undisputed, and had never heard of the white men and their laws” (Dinesen 1938, 377). However, Dinesen saw land alienation as justified because of the progress and civilization brought and went so far as to posit that civilization through European
guardianship “might be in some way divine and predestinated” (Dinesen 1938, 37).

To the female settler colonists, Kenyans had seemingly done nothing to improve their chaotic and unordered landscape (Table 1B, column 3) and hadn’t left any meaningful mark on it. In *The Flame Trees of Thika*, Huxley wrote:

> Doesn’t it strike you as strange that nothing people have created here has survived? Not even a few traces? ... No sign that generations of people have lived here, lived and died? ... It’s true the natives have done nothing yet with the country, but we [Europeans] shall (Huxley 1959, 67).

Wise land use included order, but according to Huxley, in Kenya there was “no order, no road and no town, no places even: just marks on a map which, when you got there, turned out to be merely an expanse of bush or plain exactly like the rest of the landscape” (Huxley 1959, 26). Markham similarly bemoaned supposed towns which contain only scattered huts and “disorganized ranks” of trees (Markham 1942, 143).

By the 1930s, the need for European guardianship was evident to the female colonists in their perceptions of Kenyans’ poor choices in regard to land use (Table 1B, column 4). Settler colonists assumed the world functioned according to a ‘balance of nature’ which was maintained by wise land use or upset by poor decision-making regarding resource use. Land degradation, which resulted in soils becoming less fertile and resilient, was generally blamed squarely on Gĩkũyũ “faulty cultivation methods” and the desire by other cultural groups, such as the neighboring Maasai, for many cattle, even those of poor quality (Huxley 1960; Cole 1975, 87). Huxley repeatedly espoused the idea of balance in nature in *A New Earth* and referred positively to colonialists’ planned environmental changes. She believed that soil erosion “comes when the balance is upset” (Huxley 1960, 165), such as through overstocking.³

The colonists believed that the Gĩkũyũ’s inefficient land tenure system led to poor decision-making because it discouraged land users from making investments on properties. Cole reported that: “Quite often under the old system, a man has cultivation rights on several tiny bits of land, which may be as much as ten miles apart, or even more. It’s impossible, of course to farm under those conditions” (Cole 1975, 90). Huxley also wrote that “[land] fragmentation…is like a net spread for the feet of Progress in which he becomes enmeshed and stuﬁﬁed” (Huxley 1960, 100). A major objective of the colonists was land tenure reform through surveying and consolidating these small, scattered plots into single, larger holdings to which (male) heads of households received title. Colonial authorities believed private property rights would encourage investment, fueling agricultural output and economic growth (Mackenzie 1998). Huxley accepted this idea, writing that “…if Progress is not to stumble… land [must] become, as in other countries, the property not of tribes but of individuals” (Huxley 1960, 11).

Recent tropical agricultural research has revealed the ignorance behind settler colonists’ agricultural reforms and the wisdom behind mixed cropping on unconsolidated holdings and having many thin rather than few well-fed cattle (Leach and Mearns 1996). Such strategies are appropriate risk averse responses in environments where rainfall is erratic, labor is in good supply, and capital in short supply (Leach and Mearns 1996) as was true for the Gĩkũyũ in central Kenya. ‘Wanjiku’ (a woman interviewed by Davison, who conceals their true names) recalled the value of cultivating a variety of crops on smaller, scatter plots of land: “…that way we could harvest at different times…that way we had food for eating and food for storage” (Davison 1996, 70).

With the exception of Markham and Cole, the British settler colonists shared the view of Africans being animalistic and a part of nature, rather than separate from it like Europeans (Table 1B, column 5). Huxley described nakedness as “indecent” for Europeans, but not Africans (Huxley 1959, 118). Bache agreed that it is “natural for Africans” to be naked (Bache 1934, 89). In *The Flame Ideologies of Land and Place: Gĩkũyũ and Settler Colonist Women in Kenya*
Trees of Thika, Huxley used dozens of similes to compare Gikuyu movements with those of wild animals (gazelle and antelopes), insects, or small slimy creatures (snails, eels, toads). She wrote of “savage spearmen with naked limbs gliding toward us like eels” (Huxley 1959, 27). Non-Gikuyu African Kenyans similarly are compared with wild animals (hyenas) (Huxley 1959, 77). In the same work, Huxley never compared Europeans with wild animals, but favorably compared European’s physical traits to those of birds, domesticates, and tame creatures. British individuals were described as “like a robin, with a bright eye and friendly manner” and “having warmth...like a bird cupped in the hand” (Huxley 1959, 25 and 61).

By 1962, Huxley’s comparisons of humans with animals were somewhat less race-based. She not only compared Africans with ants and buffalos, but also with domesticates. Europeans were also described as being like “hippos”, “tigers”, and “wild dogs” (Huxley 1962, 223, 224, and 41). Huxley’s word choice suggests some change in her thinking, but in the same work she nonetheless indicated that most settler colonists in Kenya still viewed Africans as relatively childlike or in harmony with nature.

Like Huxley, Dinesen compared Gikuyu and other Africans to animals. She wrote that a Swahili woman “screamed like a pig” and that old Gikuyu women laugh like “crocodiles” and bite like “old mules” (Dinesen 1938, 96, 165, and 383). Nyeri men reminded her of “dirty and shaggy old Hyenas,” and they sat like “ticks upon a sheep” (Dinesen 1938, 118). Masaii girls bared their teeth “like angry young carnivora” (Dinesen 1938, 270). Dinesen believed “The Natives were Africa in flesh and blood”, and “the umbilical cord of Nature has, with them, not been quite cut through” (Dinesen 1938, 21 and 162).

Simpson similarly attributed superiority and infallibility to whites and believed Africans are often “tired of civilization and are feeling the call of the wild” (Simpson 1937, 48). She described African women holding “the calm expression of meditating cows”, servants who fought, “snarling like furious dogs” and her cook as having limbs “like an ape’s” (Simpson 1937, 22, 81, and 69). Africans “were at all times closer to the earth, the trees and the jungle” (Simpson 1937, 250).

Cole and Markham, who did not make use of animal imagery, shared a greater than average respect for the Gikuyu and other Africans. Cole campaigned to help Kenyans out of poverty (Riley 2003), became a citizen of independent Kenya, and expressed happiness in her old age that her grandchildren and great grandchildren also lived in Kenya (Cole 1975). Markham (1942) had considerable knowledge of Swahili, stayed in Kenya after the family farm folded, and formed business partnerships in aviation and horse training with Africans she had known since childhood.

Whether British or non-British, on the whole, settler colonist women held relatively similar perspectives on human-environment relations (Table 1, parts A, B, and C). They led somewhat similar lives in that virtually all of the settler colonist authors enjoyed the abundance of “Eden” by going on safari and hunting. Many of the women tended horses, had pets which included wild animals, spent time on farms, became engaged in wildlife or soil conservation, and had limited, detached relationships with Africans. With the possible exception of Markham, they viewed the colonizing mission as relatively if not entirely just and its planned outcomes as successes.

**SETTLER COLONIST WOMEN’S PERSPECTIVES ON PLACE**

Topophilia is defined as the affectionate bond between people and place, and it is especially strong among people experiencing a place that is viewed as a setting for adventure (Tuan 1974). Consequently, it is not surprising that settler colonist women generally portrayed central Kenya relatively positively: as a place of natural beauty in which to make profit, seek refuge/start a new life, view wildlife, go hunting, fall in love, perform great deeds, or bring progress. Notably, Huxley wrote of the potential for making a fortune in Kenya (1959) as did Close (1924).

The abundance of wildlife and the aes-
Thetically pleasing landscapes were major contributors to the women’s predominantly positive view of Kenya (Table 1C, column 1). Markham remarked on her awe of large animal assemblages noting that, “You cannot live in Africa and not hunt” (1942, 103) as well as the beauty of Lake Nakuru’s flamingos. To Adamson, Kenya was “a game paradise” that “harbored elephants” and contained lakes with real beauty and appeal (Adamson 1960, 83). Dinesen (1939) also spent much of her time on safari and wrote lengthy descriptions of African landscapes.

Stefanie Zweig, the daughter of a German Jewish settler colonist, demonstrated her topophilia for central Kenya when she described its “beautiful” and “lovely” landscapes (Zweig 2004, 62, 72). Dinesen and Cole exhibited strong connections to Kenya, due to its beauty and the romantic attachments they made there. Cole marveled at the lakes, hills, and country’s colors after the rains. She was taught to “love and cherish this land” by her husband and indicated that she “left her heart” there (Cole 1975, 75 and 39). Markham wrote, “Africa is mystic; it is wild; it is a sweltering inferno; it is a photographer’s paradise, a hunter’s Valhalla, an escapist’s Utopia” (Markham 1942, 8).

Alyse Simpson, who described herself as coming from a poor family, stands apart from the other women in offering an almost entirely negative portrayal of settler colonist life and holding many negative memories of her years in Kenya. She hated the “wilderness, so alien” and viewed Kenya as “a cruel country”, “a prison”, “hostile”, as well as “treacherous and cruel” (Simpson 1937, 148, 6, 103, 119, 126).

Other settler colonists held negative feelings about Kenya as well, but these were mixed with positive portrayals. Simpson’s and other settler colonists’ negative portrayals of Kenya likely related to Europeans feeling out of place there. Almost all of the settler colonist women described life in Kenya as physically challenging. They mentioned the poor roads and daily struggles due to isolation from peers and extended family, lack of amenities, concern about disease, or other dangers (Table 1C, column 2). Simpson (1937) wrote of maggots in her bed sheets and mosquito bites. A poisonous spider bit Huxley, a lion bit Markham, and both women had a pet at least partially eaten by a wild animal (Huxley 1959; Markham 1942). Markham noted “the burning heat of the country, the malaria, the backwater, the utter

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<th>Author</th>
<th>1. Kenya as relatively pleasing aesthetically, mostly through its abundance of wildlife</th>
<th>2. Kenya as a physically-challenging place, where Europeans encounter adversity, even danger</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adamson (1960)</td>
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<td>Bache (1934)</td>
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<td>Dinesen (1938)</td>
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<td>Simpson (1937)</td>
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lack of communications” (Markham 1942, 4). Huxley described central Kenya as a place where “everything was dusty” and she and her family members needed to protect themselves from the sun (Huxley 1959, 5). Zweig (2004) portrayed central Kenya as dusty and hot, having poor roads, disease, and locusts.

The women also had troubles in their agricultural enterprises. Huxley’s mother had difficulty growing crops and dealing with drought (Huxley 1962). Dinesen’s coffee farm failed. Simpson and her husband also eventually sold their failing farm. They only had “one decent crop of maize in five and a half years” (Simpson 1937, 262). Despite these setbacks, the women still found themselves to be personally attached to the land.

Overall, settler colonist women embraced the prevailing ideologies of human-environment interactions of the West, as well as race-based ethnocentric ideas on culture, civilization, and place. Even the most progressive of them did not seem to understand the full extent of European impact on the Gĩkũyũ men and women who were living in central Kenya, long before their arrival.

**Gĩkũyũ Women’s Descriptions of Human—Environment Relationships**

Gĩkũyũ women portrayed central Kenya differently from colonial women. They viewed central Kenya as containing sacred, ancestral land that provided material needs, supported a gendered identity, and served as the site of struggle against foreign invasion and the dismantling of traditional land tenure and agricultural systems (Table 2). In these ways, Gĩkũyũ women held perspectives similar to those of Gĩkũyũ men (Berman and Lonsdale 1992; MacKenzie 1998).

Europeans did not understand Gĩkũyũ land tenure systems and disrupted them (Table 2A, column 1). Children’s author Waciuma noted that outside of the communal lands, “Every acre of land in Kikuyu country belonged to an individual family” (Waciuma 1969, 107). Kenyatta (1953) concurs, stating that many colonials overestimated the land held collectively. Because the Europeans did not understand Gĩkũyũ land systems, they introduced harmful policies that continue to affect Kenya even today. Although some women were the recipients of agricultural extension, most colonial policies, such as terracing, animal disease control and cooperatives, targeted men, not women. One of these policies which targeted women was the introduction of cash crops, which caused Gĩkũyũ women to forsake subsistence farming (Maathai 1985). Davison interviewed seven women living in Mutira location of Kirinyaga district and one of these women noted that Gĩkũyũ women “were shown by government agricultural officers how to plant the coffee, take care of the bushes – pruning them when needed – and how to pick the ripe seeds” (Davison 1996, 104). Gĩkũyũ women are now trying to combat many legacies left by colonial land tenure policies, including “overcommercialization of agriculture, which has resulted in excessive monocropping in various areas” and “heavy reliance on cash crops” (Maathai 1985, 110). The emphasis on

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<th>Author</th>
<th>1. Europeans exploited the land and disrupted Gĩkũyũ traditional land tenure systems and agriculture</th>
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<tr>
<td>Likimani (1985)</td>
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<td>Maathai (2003)</td>
<td>p. 28, 46, 68, 110</td>
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<td>Otieno (1998)</td>
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<td>Waciuma (1969)</td>
<td>pp. 37, 50-51, 107</td>
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Note: Page numbers in *italics* in all sections of Table 2 are those cited in the main text.
Table 2B: Gikuyu women’s views of African Kenyan-environment relations in central Kenya

| Author       | 1. Land as a life source, a motherland providing material needs and economic support | 2. Land as sacred space, an avenue for communing with ancestors, or important in spiritual practices | 3. Land as a place of struggle against neighboring and invading groups, motive for independence movement | 4. Land as an important part of identity and fulfilling the traditional Gikuyu woman’s role |
|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
| Likimani (1985) | pp. 92, 95, 102, 107, 122, 126, 131                                                | pp. 112, 140, 174, 187                                                                      | pp. 41, 54, 57, 71, 86, 92, 102, 107, 114, 119, 121, 135, 147, 149, 183                            |
| Maathai (2003)  | pp. 11, 17, 38, 104                                                                | pp. 21, 30                                                                                | pp. 24-28, 37                                                                                |
| Otieno (1998)   | p. 16                                                                              | p. 43                                                                                  | pp. 12, 15-17, 20, 26, 34, 57, 69                                                            |

Cash crops is a major contributor to Africa’s food shortages even today (O’Barr 1984).

Land ownership is increasingly meaningful in land-short, economically depressed independent Kenya, where, relative to men, women have lost the most in terms of financial security. It has only been since 1992 that widows in Kenya have had legal rights to inherit property (Davison 1996). “Wanja” stated in 1994 that “the thing that satisfies me the most now is having my own land” (Davison 1996, 225). Although not a widow, Wanja believed that land ownership was a key to becoming financially independent and reported that she was most pleased when her father agreed to divide his land in 1992 equally among his three sons and Wanja. Women cannot rely on such fairness with regard to land distribution, but Wanja, the only secondary school graduate among Davison’s interviewees, stood out as someone in which her family was willing to invest.

Land is important to Gikuyu women because it is a life source providing material needs and economic support through agriculture and other land-based economic activities (Table 2B, column 1). Natural materials provide for women’s every day lives in Kenya; clothing, musical instruments, baskets, and toys are fashioned from natural products (Davison 1996; Waciuma 1969). Professor Wangari Maathai wrote of land as a life source because soil sustains the economy. She also wrote that “losing topsoil should be considered analogous to losing territory to an invading enemy” (Maathai 1985, 38). One of the seven women whose life histories Muthoni Likimani described said “that piece of land is my only wealth, it is the only place where I can get bananas for my child, the place I grow beans, maize and sweet potatoes, without that land I am as good as dead” (Likimani 1985, 95). This reflects a notable legacy of colonial rule in that women are starting to view their land and crops as the means to make money to send their children to school (Davison 1996; Haugerud 1997).

Certain lands, especially those containing unique natural formations, are also valuable to the Gikuyu because they are felt to be sa-
cred; they are an avenue for communing with ancestral spirits and engaging in spiritual practices (Table 2B, column 2). Recognition of the sacredness of land to the Gĩkũyũ is even found in settler colonist writings. Huxley writes, of the “fig tree, sacred to the Kikuyu” (Huxley 1985, 54) and that “Some trees were sacred and some were not, and we had no way of telling which was which; but the Kikuyu always knew, and on several occasions had refused to touch one that Robin told them to fell” (Huxley 1959, 95).

Gĩkũyũ traditional religions contain strong naturalistic aspects and include ceremonies for rain, planting, purifying the crops, and harvesting (Kenyatta 1953). Although many Gĩkũyũ have converted to Christianity, belief in ancestral spirits and other aspects of their traditional belief systems remain. A prominent Gĩkũyũ author, wrote that “these ancient hills and ridges…kept the tribes’ magic and rituals pure and intact” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1965, 3). Likimani referred to the “God of Mount Kenya” and “mother Africa” (Likimani 1985, 140 and 174), while Maathai simply referred to spiritual values linking people to “their roots, God, and the environment” (Maathai 1985, 46). Otieno also noted that freedom fighters “held prayers facing Mount Kenya” (Otieno 1988, 43). On several occasions, Waciuma referred to the God who dwells on Mount Kenya and of elders praying to him. Waciuma also mentioned that her parents, though Christians, would not leave their farm on their clan land due to fear of being “persecuted by the spirits of their own place or of their ancestors” (Waciuma 1969, 20). In contrast, none of the women Davison interviewed made connections between land and the sacred. This could be due to Davison’s line of questioning, to the fact that land is no longer the only source of sustenance in modern Kenya, or because the women had converted to Christianity and found some traditions to be “backward” (Davison 1996, 222).

Another aspect of Gĩkũyũ women’s understandings of human-environment relations was viewing land as a place of struggle against neighboring and invading groups, and also a motive for independence movements (Table 2B, column 3). Although Waciuma mentioned a “preoccupation with cattle-raiding and defense of their own country against neighboring people” (Waciuma 1969, 22) discussion of struggle against outsiders focused on the colonizers. Waciuma described a group of traditional healers praying to Mwenenyaga to destroy the “White Man who came to our land and dominated us and took our shambas” (Waciuma 1969, 29). She wrote that “they became bitter, bitter to the roots, about the strangers who came and took their land” (Waciuma 1969, 52). It is clear in Likimani’s depictions of women and freedom fighters that land recovery was the motive for action – “the soil was their lives, giving them strength as they grasped handfuls, smelling it as if a precious perfume and repeating: “The soil is ours”” (Likimani 1985, 92). Often the forest fighters and women chewed the soil and repeated, “the soil is ours” as a greeting (Likimani 1985, 102, 107). Otieno described female freedom fighters singing “Our lands are our birthright” and “Freedom is our right as Africans, the soil is our demand” (Otieno 1988, 57 and 69).

Many of the Gĩkũyũ had negative experiences regarding land and place during the Mau-Mau Emergency. Many Gĩkũyũ women made reference to internment camps, forced labor, and beatings received for working too slowly (Waciuma 1969; Likimani 1985; Otieno 1998; Davison 1996). Several of the Davison interviewees spoke of being forced to dig trenches to prevent freedom fighters from entering camps to obtain food. Many of the Gĩkũyũ women described Kenya’s independence as significant, though ultimately somewhat disappointing because injustices remain, people still struggle to make ends meet (Davison 1996), and the women who fought for independence were not rewarded with land and benefits commensurate with their expectation (Otieno 1998).

Land is a component of Gĩkũyũ identity particularly for women because it is an essential factor in their gendered roles as providers, especially in rural areas (Table 2B, column 4). Gĩkũyũ women consider cultivation, fetching wood and water among their primary responsibilities (Davison 1996). These
responsibilities are closely connected to their roles as mothers and wives; Gĩkũyũ women gather wood for cooking, water for cooking, laundry, bathing children and growing vegetable gardens to feed them. Land is linked to womanhood; “Watoro” said that “Womanhood means to me taking care of one’s things at home and caring for the children” (Davison 1996, 128). These duties are inextricably linked to land and a Gĩkũyũ woman’s relationship to it. The colonizers recognized this land-identity link. Dinesen described land as “their past as well, their roots and their identity” (Dinesen 1938, 375).

Although Gĩkũyũ women share many ideologies about human—environment interactions, including seeing it as a life source, sacred, and as threatened by invaders, a difference was noted between Wangari Maathai and the other women. Dr. Wangari Maathai, is highly educated, holds advanced degrees from Western universities, and was the only of the Gĩkũyũ women to spend considerable time living among people of European descent. Her description of her homeland partially reflected Western values which place a premium on land’s aesthetic and financial value (Marsh 1874; Glacken 1967). Maathai mentioned the “beautiful hills of Nyeri” (Maathai 1985, 12) and that the “topsoil ought to be considered a very valuable resource, especially because it continues to play a major role in sustaining the economy through agriculture” (Maathai 1985, 38). Maathai has led nature appreciation initiatives through eco-tourism packages “through which environmental conservation and community development can be promoted” (Maathai 1985, 52). Other Gĩkũyũ women (those Davison interviews, Likimani, and Waciuma) did not share the focus on conservation and development. Some of the women had unpleasant memories of forced terracing as a conservation measure to control soil erosion under colonial rule (Waciuma 1969; Likimani 1985; Otieno 1998). To these women, land was more a matter of survival and acquiring land was motivated by a need to support their families.

**Gĩkũyũ Women’s Perspectives on Place**

Gĩkũyũ women expressed a strong attachment to where they lived. They cherished the sacred places and the presence of the ancestors there. They slaughtered sheep or cattle from the land to mark special occasions such as birth, circumcision, or marriage. The land also provided food and material for household objects, as well as a connection between place and their identity, specifically to which clan within the larger Gĩkũyũ ethnic group they belonged. Women also “expressed sadness at leaving their natal homes” for nearby areas when they married (Davison 1996, 234).

Gĩkũyũ women were less prone to point out the physical challenges of living in Kenya than settler colonists, although some did mention the dangers of living near wildlife and of possible disease (Table 2C, column 1). Wanja described how she would stay close to her mother when collecting forest products “because there are animals in the forest, such as elephants, hyenas, and leopards” that used to scare her (Davison 1996, 218). Waciuma recalled how a horn would be blown to sound the alarm “in cases of fire, attacks by wild beasts or invasion” (Waciuma 1969, 23).

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<th>Author</th>
<th>1. Kenya as a potentially dangerous place, especially due the abundance of wildlife which can harm crops and family members</th>
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<tr>
<td>Davison (1996)</td>
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<td>Likimani (1985)</td>
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<td>Maathai (2003)</td>
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<td>Otieno (1998)</td>
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Wanja mentioned the danger of malaria and certain diseases that are more prevalent during the cold season, such as tuberculosis and pneumonia (Davison 1996).

Most negative portrayals of central Kenya by Gikũyũ women were historically specific and focused on Kenya as the site of anti-colonial struggles and associated land loss, artificial colonial boundaries, and colonially-introduced diseases (Davison 1996). Waciuma described helping her grandmother extract “from her feet the jiggers she could not see. These small insects lay eggs and when they hatch out they eat away your feet horribly” (Waciuma 1969, 14). Jiggers (sand fleas) were unknown on the African continent prior to their inadvertent introduction by Europeans (Kjekshus 1977). Wangari Maathai wrote, “British colonists divided Kenya into regions so as to better control the indigenous people … When drawing boundaries for the administrative units the British colonists did not consult with the indigenous people.” She believes the government’s goal was to “preoccupy and control Gikũyũ women in Central province so as to deny them time for other issues, such as paying the Mau Mau freedom fighters secret visits to provide them with food and information on what the colonial government was planning” (Maathai 1985, 30). Negative portrayals of central Kenya generally did not relate to the place itself but to events specific to colonial history. The Gikũyũ viewed their homeland positively, and thus enemies who destroyed it and introduced diseases were viewed in a negative light.

GENDER, FEMINISM, AND THE WOMEN OF CENTRAL KENYA

Feminism emphasizes equality for women. Pre-colonial Kenya’s dual sex structures in which each gender had authority over the major activities engaged in by that gender, allowed for women’s inclusion, voice, and protest, if not guaranteeing equality. British colonial rule exaggerated gender roles in ways that disadvantaged women as agriculturalists, political actors, and overall (Mikell 1997). In the post-colonial period it remains difficult for Gikũyũ women to find opportunities that give them voice (Shaw 1995; Mikell 1997; Otieno 1998).

Because of this difficulty, African feminist voices have formed, voices that articulate very different concerns from Western feminisms. Various forms of African feminism generally do not emphasize individual autonomy, the female body, or radical feminism as Western feminisms, but instead tend to be pro-natal; concerned with livelihood issues, cultural norms, and culturally linked public participation; and shaped by resistance to Western hegemony (Mikell 1997). African women, especially many educated, westernized ones, embrace control over reproductive rights while considerably contributing economically (Davison 1996; Mikell 1997).

Both Gikũyũ and settler colonist authors could be considered gender-conscious, but few could be considered feminist. Colonial women were aware of engaging in activities which were uncommon for their gender (Close 1924; Lovell 1987; Markham 1942; Trzebinski 1985), but did not consider the relationship between gender and development or land alienation. None of the settler colonist women whose writings include the Mau Mau period mentioned the rounding up of Gikũyũ men and women into concentration camps or their use in forced labor. Their understandings of land remained in the arena of personal gain or loss and Kenya as a place where women achieved more freedom and opportunity. Because the colonists anticipated social advancement in Kenya it was often only when their fortunes were not as they hoped that some viewed their gender as partially responsible for their financial failure.

Of the settler colonist women whose lives were studied, Cole stands out as the one anti-feminist. In 1957, she wrote of “the sin of domination in women. When women become a dominating influence in a nation, that nation begins to go downhill morally. It was the undoing of Rome, and is taking place in America and England today” (Cole 1975, 98-99). Huxley, however, emphasized colonizing females’ rugged individuality, freedom, independence, practicality, and level-headedness (Webster 1999) and chose to continue paid work throughout her life.
She bemoaned the lack of hospitals and trained African nurses, writing that “women and babies had been sadly neglected” by British rule (Huxley 1985, 50). Huxley was also “unusual for her time in being a woman unafraid to travel alone to lands unknown to her” (Nicholls 2002, 115).

Markham was also rather progressive; she was the first woman in Africa to obtain a license to train racehorses (Lovell 1987; Trzebinski 1993). She had pride in being “the only professional woman pilot in Africa” (Markham 1942, 9), but she objected to being referred to by the press as a flying mother, a bird woman and such. She wanted to be depicted as a professional pilot without her gender emphasized (Lovell 1987). Markham’s biographers note Markham’s failure to form close relationships with other women due to her being raised by her father and the ability of her beauty and success to make other women jealous (Lovell 1987). Yet there is no suggestion of anti-feminism. Instead Markham scoffed at what women “ought” to do (Markham 1942, 77), and, like most other settler colonist women, had pride in her accomplishments, but only infrequently mentions the role of gender in her life or expresses direct belief that men and women should have equal opportunities and receive equal credit for tasks achieved.

Only Dinesen referred to the fact that she is a “woman farmer” and that this means something unique in leaving her farm (Dinesen 1938, 370). For her, a woman has a special bond with her farm that cannot be understood by men. The other settler colonist women did not exhibit a feminist understanding of their relationship to central Kenya or understanding of human-environment interactions. Simpson, in particular, did not, for the most part, make references to her gender. For women of European descent living in Kenya, race was much more frequently mentioned than gender. Given that colonial society was largely structured along racial lines, and that white women stood out in central Kenya due to their skin color, this is hardly surprising.

Gikũyu women’s discussions of land had much to do with economic empowerment, a key component of African feminist thought (Mikell 1997) as well as a major factor in Gikũyu men and women’s struggle against colonial rule. While none of the Gikũyu women referred to themselves as feminist, several did directly express the value of greater gender equality in specific arenas or thought that women should have their own land, be rewarded with land for assisting during Mau Mau, or that it was important to educate both sexes (Davison 1996; Otieno 1998; Maathai 1985). Otieno believed that the new land laws in Kenya had not changed much and that men still own most of the land (Otieno 1998). She stated that, “Any strategy for women’s economic development in East Africa, and Kenya in particular, must be rooted in agricultural policy” (Otieno 1998, 118-119). Otieno used the final pages of her book to express indignation at women’s discrimination in Kenya and called for fair pay for female farmers.

Waciuma and Wanja spoke out against polygamy and “bride-price” because they believe it hurts the dignity of women (Waciuma 1969: Davison 1996, 223). Otieno and Maathai both worked on women’s issues including trying to increase the number of female representatives in government. In spite of her gender consciousness, Maathai was hesitant to attribute her interests or her achievements to her gender: “my concerns, energies and successes had nothing to do with my womanhood...It was truly coincidental that I was a woman” (Maathai 1985, 12). However, Maathai also wrote of her discontent with women’s social standing and notes the role of her tree-planting Green Belt Movement in gaining respect from men in a country in which “women’s roles are commonly perceived as subordinate” (Maathai 1985, 37). One of her main goals has been to raise “awareness...of the willingness, ability and capacity of women to play leading roles in...development” (Maathai 1985, 37).

Several of the women Davison interviewed were involved with agriculturally based women’s self-help organizations, but out of economic necessity rather than an expressed desire to be feminists or specifically improve economic conditions for women.
The Gĩkũyũ women whose words Davison recorded understood that their job was not solely reproductive, but productive. They recognized their role as providers for their families by cultivating, fetching wood and water, and cooking. These Gĩkũyũ women had a gendered understanding of land because of the part it played in their gender role. To the Gĩkũyũ women interviewed and Gĩkũyũ women authors, losing land meant losing part of their identity as women.

Likimani was the only one of the Gĩkũyũ or settler colonist women who wrote her book with a feminist goal in mind: to provide accounts of Gĩkũyũ women’s lives during the Emergency because other works to date had focused almost exclusively on the contributions of men to Kenya’s independence. For most Gĩkũyũ women, treatment on the basis of their race was much more relevant to their life histories and their understanding of human-environment relations than that of their gender.

CONCLUSION

Colonial ideology included a belief in progress through technological improvements (technocentrism), environmental ideologies of wise land use (conservationism) and protection of wildlife and lands from people (preservationism), and social Darwinism in which Africans were viewed as incompetent, ungrateful, primitive, brutal, childlike and inferior to Europeans. To Europeans, African resistance to improving the land reflected their conservatism and superstition. These stereotypes grew from established ideas of the ruling class toward the working class in England (Shaw 1995). Sexism was also part of the ideology (Maughan-Brown 1985) and settler colonist women did not expect full equal treatment, but reveled in opportunities to step outside of their assigned gender roles (Markham 1942). Typical of the gendered perspectives Europeans held of Africans was that virtually all settler colonist women viewed Gĩkũyũ women, but not Gĩkũyũ men, as hard working.

Settler colonist women took a classical colonial perspective on human-environment relations which mirrored that of the men of their time. Like men, settler colonist women saw Europeans as separate from and improving the land and Africa as an empty, virgin land that had been neglected. None of the authors expressed any direct concern over land alienation, the colonial system of establishing small reserves for large numbers of Kenyans, or the massive wealth disparities between the two groups. Cole even reported that “…the Wakamba tribe has voluntarily given 50,000 acres of its land on the watersheds for reforestation” (Cole 1975, 88). Cole viewed such “voluntary” acts as stemming from the recognition by Africans of the superiority of European land management methods (Cole 1975).

Settler colonist women were aware of changes in land tenure through privatization and consolidation of scattered holdings, but none found these changes problematic or viewed them as responsible for soil compaction, erosion, or loss. In this way they were typical of colonial men throughout sub-Saharan Africa who unambiguously viewed European land use and farming methods as superior to existing ones (Leach and Mearns 1996). Well into post-colonial times, Huxley believed in the appropriateness of an apolitical, non-critical stance with regard to colonialism: “For good or ill, colonialism happened, as it has throughout centuries…” (Huxley 1985, ix).

Settler colonists’ biographers also reflected the classical colonial perspective in terms of human-environment interactions and on place. Markham’s biographers referred to colonists acquiring “virgin lands” (Lovell 1987, xx and 87; Trzebinski 1985, 97; Trzebinski 1993, 8-9) and animal herds as part of “this Garden of Eden” (Lovell 1987, 5). Trzebinski, wrote that, “British East Africa was the promised land” and that the settlers found “little evidence” to suggest that the lands were inhabited (Trzebinski 1985, 2). Trzebinski presented a portrait in which land alienation was not violent, but instead the Gĩkũyũ were consulted on land prices and paid in full for them (Trzebinski 1985).

Ideologies of land and place appear to be similar for Britons and non-British settler colonist women. Zweig shares the fewest
ideologies with other settler colonist women. This is likely so because Zweig (2004) wrote much later than the other women and as a German in 1940s Kenya she was interned by the British and could not partake in what other settler colonists viewed as bringing progress to the region.

Gikuyu women had a somewhat more gender-aware perspective on human-environment relations than colonist women, but generally shared environmental outlooks that were similar to the men of their cultural background and times. An explanation for somewhat greater gender awareness could be that the Gikuyu women are writing later and have been influenced by education or various forms of African feminism which have drawn from Western feminist movements. Gikuyu women had a stronger personal bond with land and a greater understanding of tropical environmental issues than did the colonist men or women. This is most likely due to the fact that many the Gikuyu women spent the majority of their lives working the soil and producing food for their families whereas settler colonists generally managed farms or grew up on them, but they did not work the soil.

Although Gikuyu and settler colonist women lived in proximity to one another, their views of land and place differ significantly. There is virtually no overlap in key perspectives (Table 1 versus Table 2) other than that settler colonist women expressed concern over the physical challenges and potential dangers of life in Kenya, including threats from wildlife. Gikuyu women also expressed concern over the potential danger from wildlife, but with much more frequency than settler colonists. This is likely due to colonial wildlife laws that treated whites as sportspeople and Africans as poachers (Ofcansky 2002) and that Europeans generally called upon Africans working for them to kill snakes and other animals that Europeans perceived as threatening. Whereas Gikuyu women certainly experienced physical challenges along with settler colonist women, their failure to emphasize this aspect of their lives may reflect that Gikuyu women did not come from families that had experienced better roads or more comfortable surroundings elsewhere and thus did not harbor expectations for things to be different. It is notable that Gikuyu perspectives on human-environment relations and place are so consistent across authors (See Table 2). This consistency across Gikuyu women’s perspectives perhaps points to the more limited opportunities for Gikuyu versus settler colonist women to interact in a variety of ways with their surroundings.

Gikuyu and settler colonist women did not, and perhaps could not be expected to, step outside of the traditional ideologies of their time and cultures. Although Markham and Maathai both spent considerable time with Africans and Westerners respectively and Maathai adopted elements of a Western perspective in terms of wildlife conservation and aesthetics, for the most part, settler colonist and Gikuyu women could articulate, but did not share the perspectives of the other group. Huxley noted that there was a world of ghosts and spirits in which “I was a foreigner, but the Kikuyu were at home” (Huxley 1959, 197). Waxiuma (1969) mentioned Europeans’ understanding of Africa as Eden.

Settler colonist and Gikuyu ideologies of land and place might overlap more if all the authors were from similar socio-economic backgrounds and reflecting on recent decades during which opportunities for the groups have been more similar. It is also interesting to note that Mau Mau combat experiences might make the life histories of settler colonist men and Gikuyu men more similar than those of women.

Life histories are relevant to the study of human-environment interactions because they capture people’s understandings of their relationship with the natural world over time. The considerable gap in the two groups’ interpretations of land and place reinforces the importance of understanding women through their own words and points to the extent to which people’s perceptions of the physical world are shaped by social constructions. Although the unique use of life histories in this study was applied to central Kenya, it could prove useful to gaining insight into human-
environment relations and the environmental ideologies of men and women in other parts of Africa and beyond.

NOTES
1. Early Europeans used “Kikuyu”, but locals themselves refer to their group as the “Agĩkũyũ,” making Gĩkũyũ the preferred spelling. Although the Gĩkũyũ are treated as a discrete ethnic and cultural group in this paper and in the memoirs and other sources used, the authors recognize that notions of fixed or static “tribes” are partially a product of colonialism and did not exist in East Africa (Mikell 1997).
2. Not analyzed was Huxley’s non-Kenyan life history, Love Among the Daughters (1968, London: Chatto and Windus), which focused on her life in Britain and the United States.
3. What the settler colonists did not understand was that many thin cattle spread the grazing impact over large areas relative to small numbers of well-fed cattle. Worse erosion would come from ‘improvements’ such as boreholes around which cattle would concentrate (Leach and Mearns 1996).

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REFERENCES


