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**A Cross-Cultural Approach to Environmental and Peace Work:
Wangari Maathai's Use of *Mottainai* in Kenya**

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*Protecting the environment and nurturing peace are global concerns requiring scholarly attention across and within cultures. This essay proposes that cross-cultural exchange serves as an invaluable approach to the goal of communicating about creating a healthy environment and everyday peace. We examine how Wangari Maathai interpreted the meaning and purpose of *Mottainai* as a global call to save the environment. *Mottainai* is an ancient Japanese concept that means “Don’t waste! What a waste!” Of interest to us is establishing Maathai’s motivation to employ the concept of *Mottainai* as informed by her lived experiences in Kenya. The relevance of *Mottainai* to Maathai’s environmental work offers lessons for global concerns about peace. There is an opportunity to grow peace work by extending its focus to commonalities between various forms of local knowledge, beliefs, values and skills.*

Introduction

The call to save the environment seeks to convince humanity to join efforts to save the world from the dangers of environmental depletion. The 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Paris, France affirms the urgency to save the environment. A consensus was reached among the 195 countries to limit global warming to less than 2 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial level (Davenport, Gillis, Chan & Eddy, 2015). In order to achieve this common goal, the Paris Climate Agreement included language calling for collaborative efforts: “Parties are encouraged to take action to implement and support...policy approaches and positive incentives for activities relating to reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests...” (United Nations, 2015, p.23).

While this conceived goal stands to improve the quality of life, the question becomes, how do citizens and communities practice the mandate of sustainable environmental management? In other words, how do campaign efforts to save the environment connect to a people’s way of life and advance ideas that express the urgency to improve the quality of life?

In this essay, we seek insights into such questions by exploring Wangari Maathai’s use of the Japanese concept of *Mottainai* to bolster the civic call to save the environment at both local and global levels. Although the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement came after Maathai’s death, we believe her work with the Green Belt Movement (GBM) since the 1970s partially anticipated a model that engages rural communities with both local and global understandings in efforts to save the environment and make peace. Specifically, we are interested in exploring her use of the cultural practices and values of other cultural groups. The use in Kenya of the Japanese concept of *Mottainai* is an example of borrowing cultural knowledge and correlated action about the environment. We are also interested in Maathai’s role as a sort of cultural broker. In this cross-

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cultural context, Maathai focuses on shared meanings embedded in cultural and spiritual values about the environment in Kenya and Japan.

This essay proposes that cultural knowledge borrowing and sharing is an invaluable approach to communicate about ways to create a healthy environment and everyday peace. In illustration of this point, we will examine how Maathai's employment of stories, her speeches and interviews during international travels, and documentation of her lived experiences present a pragmatic model to protect the environment and nurture global peace. We will show how she perceived and applied this cross-cultural model to persuade communities including "world leaders to examine their own environmental values" (Kirkscey, 2007, p.13). It is important to observe that some readers might see Maathai's use of *Mottainai* as cultural appropriation. However, Estuko Kinefuchi's (2018) theorization of Wangari Maathai and *Mottainai* posits *Mottainai* as an apparatus for empowerment and intercultural collaboration. Kinefuchi urges us to appreciate how Maathai used *Mottainai* not as a way to advance her interests in a selfish manner, but to show "how it is possible to rearticulate and use it to create a more hopeful, compassionate, and just world".

Cultural knowledge borrowing

The concept of cultural knowledge borrowing enables us to typify Maathai's use of *Mottainai*. Maathai's environmental work was global in reach. She was attentive to how different cultures conceived the *why* and *how* of the environment. Her recognition of culture-specific approaches that allow for borrowing, sharing and exchanges of cultural knowledge is helpful to understanding efforts needed to save the environment. Moreover, it exemplifies the principal of working in conjunction with communities in diverse cultures. Maathai through such cross-cultural contexts 'borrowed' the word *Mottainai* to help advance around the world a holistic understanding of the environment. The meaning of the expression "*Don't waste! What a waste!*" is one that resonates with many cultures. Generally, the importance of preserving both physical and spiritual resources, living and non-living, is a tradition considered to sustain the well-being of human life (Mbiti, 1991). Thus the manifold meanings embedded in the concept of *Mottainai* also allowed for alterations according to environmental needs and context in Kenya. Kay (1995) stated in this regard,

Words often take on adapted meanings to serve the needs of a changing society.

Loanwords are especially open to modification, both on entering the language, and with time. One reason is that the meaning or usage of a word in its original language may not be fully understood; nor need it be, as loanwords are used without reference to their source words. Another is that, with words of foreign origin, there is no deep cultural motivation to protect their original meanings. The flexibility of form and meaning of loanwords enables them to adapt easily to the structure of the host language, and current trends and needs (p.72).

Evidently, cognizant of the flexibility of the meanings of loanwords, one understands Maathai's use of *Mottainai* in Kenya to rally various traditional and scientific communities to save the environment.

The idea of the flexible and critical combination of old and new is evinced in both the theory and praxis of many thinkers whose work examines ways communities can borrow, mix, welcome

and/or let go of practices, beliefs or ideas. Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye has described what is necessary in defining African cultural life in the modern world. According to Gyekye (1996) it is required to make appropriate and necessary amendments and refinements to cultural values and practices as African people adapt to the modern world (p. 173). In India, the Swadhyaya movement focuses on contemporary changes to spirituality and duties to improve the quality of contemporary social, cultural and economic life (Srivastava, 1998, p. ix).

The approach used to promote the *Mottainai* Campaign is advocacy of the agency of ordinary people. It focuses on encouraging individuals and communities to practice *Mottainai* in their own ways. We hope our effort to understand how Maathai interpreted the meaning and purpose of *Mottainai* in Kenya will contribute to knowledge about cross-cultural approaches to empower communities to save the environment and promote peace. In this essay, we seek to examine how Maathai interpreted the meaning and purpose of *Mottainai* as a global call to save the environment. Of interest to us is establishing that Maathai's motivation to employ the concept of *Mottainai* was informed by her lived experiences in Kenya. We have a glimpse of Maathai's motivation in the *Mottainai* campaign in an interview with Mainichi Newspapers in 2005:

“We have to save and share materials for peace. The 'mottainai' spirit makes this idea tangible, and the 'mottainai' campaign is my lifetime work” (cited in Miller, 2007).

Maathai's message mirrored the practical essence of *Mottainai* as a practice that “encompasses an attitude of respect and even reverence for what one has been lucky enough to receive and the need to use it with care, without wasting” (Maathai 2010, p.106). She did not simply advocate for committing ourselves to not wasting but rather wanted humanity “to cultivate reverence for the resources we use and amplify the regret we have over the waste we produce” (p. 110). In this regard, Maathai conceived *Mottainai* as “a dialogic concept reflective of its Buddhist emphasis on interconnectedness” (Kinefuchi, 2018).

The concept of *Mottainai*

The term *Mottainai* originates from a Japanese Buddhist belief of *Mottai-Nai*, which means that the intrinsic dignity in the material entity (*Mottai*) becomes empty or absent (*Nai*) (Yoshimura, 2011). Today, *Mottainai* is used to refer to waste resulting from the improper use of things according to their intrinsic value (Olejarz, 2011). The emotion associated with *Mottainai* is the feeling of fear or awe about the act of waste (Nishimura, 2007). Kurokawa (2013) found that the emotions about *Mottainai* are significantly correlated with animistic thinking and feelings of guilt and regret. Interestingly, Kurokawa (2013) asserts that emotions about *Mottainai* are correlated with respect toward various entities, and not with any economic value orientation. The idea of respecting the non-humans assumes that all objects have a spirit (Kurokawa, 2013). As such, the recognition of the existence of spirit in all objects promotes respect toward every entity. That encourages the feelings of regret and guilt about wasting objects.

Several scholars argue that Asian cultures tend to perceive the world holistically (Nisbett, et al., 2001). When people perceive the world holistically, all entities in it are interconnected and it is impossible to detach a person or an entity from the context (Nisbett et al., 2001). On the other hand, Western cultures tend to use analytic thinking, which means that people can perceive an object or person detached from its context (Nisbett et al., 2001). For example, in Japan, parents tell their children to finish all the rice grains in the rice bowl as a sign of respect to the farmers

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who grow the rice. In the U.S, parents urge their children to finish their food because it is good for their health.

The *Mottainai* intercultural campaign began in 2005 when Maathai visited Japan. It aimed to popularize the 3Rs of environmental activities (reduce, reuse, and recycle). An additional R (respect) was later added to capture the individual and collective obligation to act for the well-being of mother earth. Miller (2007) explains how Maathai vowed to spread *Mottainai* as a watchword for environmental conversation.

Maathai communicated the principle of *Mottainai*, namely the 4Rs to local and international actors including the United Nations, governments and grassroots organizations. In Japan, the *Mottainai* campaign engaged Japanese people to do simple things that make a big differences. Examples include the “Doggy Bags” campaigns to encourage Japanese people to bring home leftovers, and the promotion of the slogan ‘bring-your-own-chopstick’ in order to reduce waste and save money. Japanese Environment Minister Yuriko Koike advocated the use of ‘Furoshiki’, a traditional reusable wrapping-cloth to reduce the waste from plastic bags (Ministry of the Environment, Government of Japan, 2006) .

Cross-cultural context: Japan and Kenya

At first glance, Kenya and Japan might not seem to have much in common. However, when the association is made through cultural knowledge about conserving the environment, then we begin to see the connection. Maathai actualized this connection by adopting the Japanese concept of *Mottainai* to complement the work of the Green Belt Movement (GBM) in Kenya. According to the GBM website, the GBM was founded to respond to the needs of rural Kenyan women by empowering them and their communities, to conserve the environment and improve their livelihoods (Green Belt Movement, n.d). The problems which the women faced were explained by the mounting evidence of environmental degradation. Therefore, the “Don’t Waste” message embedded in *Mottainai* served as a practical way to respond to the problems encountered by rural women. By introducing *Mottainai* to support the work of the GBM, Maathai envisioned a development approach facilitated through borrowing, sharing and/or the exchange of cultural knowledge in local and global contexts.

Drawing from cross-cultural experiences and interactions in world travels, Maathai led an environmental activism true of Ellen Gorveski’s notion of “local messages... global reach” (Gorveski, 2012). The 2004 Noble Peace Prize recognized Maathai's zeal to embrace cross-cultural knowledge borrowing, sharing and exchange as relevant to the goal of saving the environment. In 2005, her trip to Japan coincided with events organized in connection to the Kyoto Protocol. Maathai learned about *Mottainai* at an interview with Mainichi newspaper (Itochu Corporation, 2016). Subsequently, this African and Kenyan woman publicized *Mottainai* as the message to the world from Japan.

Daisuku Ikeda comments on Maathai’s visit to Japan as follows, “Dr. Wangari Maathai is traveling around the world urging the importance of protecting our natural environment with the rallying cry *mottainai*. Why has this Japanese word--which means, ‘What a waste!’--so captured Dr. Maathai's imagination?” (Ikeda, 2005). According to Iwatsuki (2008), at the time Maathai

visited Japan, *Mottainai* worship had been forgotten by the Japanese people because of modernization and industrialization. Tatsuru Yamamoto, a spokesperson of a Tokyo NGO opines that “When Japan experienced the bubble economy at the end of the ’80s, people tended to prioritize monetary achievement over spiritual gratification” (cited in Miller, 2007). Yumiko Kawano (2011) historicizes the departure from local traditions by arguing that “though European countries did not colonize Japan, Eurocentrism has been imposed through the educational system and has actively worked to negate indigenous knowledge of Japan and those racialized minority groups” (p. 83).

How then does *Mottainai* matter in efforts to rally the world to save humanity? Ikeda’s question about how *Mottainai* captured Maathai’s imagination, and enables us to explain her mission to find cultural resources to save the environment. Maathai saw a common ground in cultural and spiritual values and beliefs about resolving problems of the environment. She made a connection between Japan and Kenya, which would be beyond the capacity of people not interested in the environment. Maathai’s lifetime commitment to the environment is the entry point into our discussion about the following: i) why Maathai resonated with and employed the concept of *Mottainai* to rally the world for a healthy environment and peace, and ii) how its use provides a model for a cross-cultural approach to gain support to save the environment.

By exploring the meaning and relevance of *Mottainai* to Maathai’s work, we see an opportunity for peace communication scholarship and environmental work to extend the focus to commonalities rather than differences among cultures. Engaging diverse cultures broadens our understanding of factors and views that support the values of the environment and peace.

Method

The method used to investigate Wangari Maathai’s work itself provides a case study for research practice. Our research aims to contribute to knowledge that allows collective public responses. Zainal (2007) argued, “Case study research, through reports of past studies, allows the exploration and understanding of complex issues” (p.1). Additionally, case study research enables scholars to investigate the social phenomena in the field (Fidel, 1984; Yin, 2003). Yin (2003) argues that with case study research, scholars can investigate the social phenomena holistically in real-life. In working within these guidelines, we used methods relevant to case study research which include documents, electronic resources and other archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant-observation, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2003).

Electronic databases, libraries, and the worldwide web were used to search information using the key words “*Mottainai*”, the Green Belt Movement and Wangari Maathai. Additionally, we searched references to help understand recurring patterns in responses to the *Mottainai* campaign in Kenya. As recommended by Eisenhardt (1989), the data gathered were analyzed qualitatively to find themes using grounded theory to build a new theory. From the interpretation of these patterns or themes, we offer a theoretical explanation of the conceptual foundation of the success of Maathai’s efforts to engage the practice of *Mottainai’s* 4Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle, respect) in Kenya.

Maathai's Environmental Work

This section will discuss Maathai's lifetime dedication to saving the environment as key to her use of *Mottainai*. The contexts discussed highlight meanings embedded in *Mottainai*. Specifically, we discuss Maathai's lived experiences that give meaning to her environmental work as well as clarify the relevance of borrowing cultural knowledge in global efforts to save the environment. Notably, Maathai's lived experiences in rural Kenya, her education in Kenya, the U.S.A and Germany and world travels, solidified her zeal to find common ground among diverse cultures in order to save the environment. Maathai described her strong advocacy for the environment as follows: "my background as a biological scientist and daughter of a peasant farmer provided the seed for growth and long-term commitment to the environment." (Maathai, 2004, p. 9). This statement shows that Maathai's diverse background availed her the opportunity to learn, borrow, share, exchange or apply knowledge about environmental conservation locally and globally.

The founding of the Green Belt Movement in 1977 presents a conscious response to women's needs in the village where Maathai was born and raised. These needs include disease and a lack of clean drinking water, firewood and food. The call to plant trees is one of the responses to the problems identified. It provides a context to theorize civic actions relevant to improving livelihoods and a better future. Building on the Paris Climate Agreement, global efforts to save the environment would seem likely to benefit from encouraging collective partnership among citizens, governments and non-governmental organizations. In view of this, we see the relevance of Maathai's life experiences as an opportunity to draw best practices to aid the environment across cultures. Her commitment to the environment did not limit her experiences to her village alone.

Maathai advocates a global civic duty to improve every aspect of human life. In her book *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World* (2010), Maathai raises global awareness about the connection between humanity and the environment. She asserts that "the physical destruction of the earth extends to humanity, too...it hurts us, chipping away at our health and creating injuries at physical, psychological and spiritual level" (2010, p. 16). This observation makes a persuasive global call for conversation and action for sustainable environmental management across diverse cultures. The significance of Maathai's rhetorical mission lies in the ways she reflected on and utilized her lived experiences to provoke a paradigm shift about how we view the environment. The fact is that saving the environment is not just about planting trees but also advancing democratic rights, peace, human rights, and sustainable development.

In the following paragraphs, we observe selected examples of moments in Maathai's personal life and environmental work that inform how she resonated with the concept of *Mottainai*. Our purpose is to generate insights about the contribution of Maathai's work to theory building about cross-cultural approaches in environmental and peace work.

Daughter of a peasant farmer who became a biological scientist

Early childhood experiences help us to understand Maathai's work in Kenya and globally. These experiences are known to the world through the stories Maathai told in her speeches, books and

interviews. We know that the founding of the GBM is engrained in ideals that emanate from her childhood experiences. Growing up as a daughter of a peasant provided the opportunity to see the environment at its best. As a biological scientist, she was able to see the extent of environmental degradation and call for action to save the environment. Maathai used narratives of her personal life and storytelling as methods to communicate about the environment and peace. Her success as an environmentalist for over four decades reveals the fact that the relevance of stories and personal experiences cannot be underestimated. Recently, African novelist and storyteller Chimamanda Adichie (2009) demonstrated the many ways that stories are used to aid and bring people together, or even to dehumanize a people. Maathai used stories about her lived experiences to bring the world together to focus on the environment. Her self-constructed image as ‘a daughter of a peasant who became a scientist’ is centered on her lived experiences which define her life as one of the world’s renowned environmentalist.

Arthur Bochner (1997) theorizes about personal narratives as ways to build an understanding of a continuity of life experiences, linking the past to the future from the standpoint of the present as well as enabling people to assign meanings to memories (p.419). Ellis and Bochner (1992) observe, “By making intricate details of one’s life accessible to others in public discourse, personal narratives bridge the dominions of public and private life. Telling a personal story becomes a social process of making lived experiences understandable and meaningful” (pp. 79-80). An example to illustrate how stories make lived experiences meaningful and offer opportunities to bring people together is the role played by women in peacebuilding in post-genocide Rwanda. Mutua and Tibeso (2013) discuss how women find meaning in their shared experiences as an “important knowledge base of what they say and do” (p. 191). This discussion, enables us to understand how Maathai’s lived experiences prepared her to rally the world to save the environment. She resonated with *Mottainai*’s motto “Don’t Waste” because she had witnessed the ‘wasting away’ of the environment.

Maathai’s childhood memories of the place she grew up, and general reminiscence of the past through storytelling demonstrates her awareness of the need to save the environment. For example, her stories about nature reveal the importance of cultural and spiritual meanings assigned to human-nature interaction. In particular, the stories serve as the basis of instructions and skills for the protection of the environment. Maathai’s memoir *Unbowed* (2007) narrates a journey that shows the development of her motivation to conserve the environment. She uses stories about the past to illustrate how the environment is necessary to sustaining life. Memories were available in the village about rich foods such as bananas, sweet potatoes, arrowroots and beans that illustrate how a healthy environment nourishes humanity. Similarly, her accounts of interactions with nature, such as playing with tadpoles as a child and the fear of collecting firewood from the *Mugumo* tree (believed to be the tree of life), articulate her feelings of the later loss of intimacy with a flourishing environment and her inspiration to rectify the problems. Overall, Maathai’s experiences growing up in the rural village help us understand the role she played on a global stage as an advocate of the environment. In addition, her academic training in biological sciences in Kenya, the U.S and Germany, as well as what she learned from people from different regions of the world, were all significant in her understanding of ways to effectively teach and convince audiences to save the environment.

Maathai’s approach to environmental and peace work applied methodologies that combined

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cultural and scientific knowledge and challenged Eurocentric ways of knowing “that have long perverted the power of local cultural knowings” (Dei, 2010, xii). Put together, Maathai’s childhood, educational and travel experiences had two major outcomes. The first outcome is that the experiences increased her commitment to environmental work. The second outcome is the increased engagement between scientific and traditional knowledge to create a new theoretical framework for environmental conservation and peace. The ultimate background of this synthesis, in our view, may be Maathai’s upbringing and personal growth, as the daughter of peasants who became a biological scientist.

Founding of the Green Belt Movement

The GBM provides a context to understand the meaning of *Mottainai*. The movement was founded to serve as a platform to address concerns about the depletion of the environment, and to empower rural women to become agents of change. Since its founding in 1977, the GBM prepared its members to become proactive in development activities. The tree-planting campaign empowered women to become problem-solvers and “custodians of their surrounding environment” (Maathai, 2004, p. 33) rather than expecting that the government will fix everything. Other GBM activities included food security and water harvesting, civic education, advocacy and Pan-African training workshops (p. 34). According to Gail Presbey (2013), these activities are evidence of Maathai’s approach to women’s empowerment, employing team work, political action, informal and formal education, and other cultural resources, to overcome various factors impeding women’s livelihoods.

Maathai’s approach to empowerment enabled the GBM to serve as a communal space that extended environmental work from merely planting trees to attending to other aspects of human well-being. Maathai (2004) outlines achievements of the movement for its members and their communities in a variety of ways, which include raising awareness on the importance of the environment, inspiring various kinds of activism, providing employment, encouraging democracy, conflict resolution, improving the status of women, and so on. By highlighting these achievements, we acknowledge the centrality of the campaign’s foresight to plant the future in Kenya and globally. In Kenya, the campaign relied on cultural knowledge, values and practices revered by local communities. An example of this reverence for local knowledge and traditions is Maathai’s push for women to use “common woman sense” in that “they had for a long time successfully cultivated various crops in their farms” (2004, p. 27). The claim that “many women have indeed become foresters without diplomas” (p. 28) reveals Maathai’s witty approach to interpret and encourage environmental and peace work. In this context, Maathai’s work with members of the GBM was on the one hand her encouragement to privilege local knowledge, and on the other hand a critique of Western scientific knowledge and other cultural impositions. So far, the GBM has planted more than 30 million trees across Kenya. Scott (2013) attributes the GBM’s success to Maathai’s grassroots ties.

According to Maathai, a primary reason for the movement’s success is that it circumvented government control and is kept firmly under local control. Being independently funded, although challenging, gave the GBM freedom to expand from just an environmental organization into a civic and political organization (Scott, 2013, p.305).

The GBM engaged in activities which became the epitome of Maathai's environmental work. The movement planted seeds, literally and figuratively, and embraced the "Don't waste" concept of *Mottainai*, both becoming integral parts of contemporary transnational environmentalism.

Winning 2004 Noble Peace Prize

The Norwegian Noble Committee decision to award the 2004 Noble Peace Prize to Maathai legitimized her efforts to save the environment at both local and global levels. It was a moment in Maathai's life that affirmed the fruits of her labor of love for the environment. Her work demonstrates the relevance of cross-cultural sharing and exchanges of best practices in environmental conservation. Adages such as "local goes global" or "think globally, act locally" recognize Maathai's work as the bridge to our common earth and humanity. The committee's press release noted the following about Maathai's environmental work:

Protecting forests against desertification is a vital factor in the struggle to strengthen the living environment of our common Earth.....She represents an example and a source of inspiration for everyone in Africa fighting for sustainable development, democracy and peace (Norwegian Noble Committee, 2004).

An excerpt from Maathai's acceptance speech endorses the new paradigm for thinking about the environment in the twenty first century. She notes:

"In this year's prize, the Norwegian Nobel Committee has placed the critical issue of environment and its linkage to democracy and peace before the world" (Maathai, 2004).

In this remark, Maathai affirms the theme increasingly prominent in the contemporary era among philanthropists of recognizing the interconnectedness of our existence. It is found in the works of her contemporaries such as the Martin Luther King, Jr., the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Jimmy Carter, and Rigoberta Tum, to mention a few. Consequently, Maathai's proclamation in Japan that *Mottainai* was going to become her life time work impresses upon us that her environmental work was a global phenomenon.

The Mottainai Campaign in Kenya

In a video about the GBM *Mottainai* campaign, Maathai is shown holding a hand-written placard with the following words "Sharing and spreading the *Mottainai* message." The campaign focused on the 4Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle, respect) of environmental management. Despite government red tape, the GBM's campaign successfully influenced policy prohibiting the production and use of un-recyclable, thin plastic materials. The campaign persuades Kenyans to use traditional baskets instead of plastic bags. At the same time, it encourages members of the GBM to reuse plastic bags to plant seedlings. In 2017, more than a decade after Maathai's advocacy for a plastic-bag-free Kenya, the government banned the use of plastic bags. According to a BBC news report (2017), several other African countries have outlawed plastic bags, including Rwanda, Mauritania and Eritrea.

Lessons learned to advance environmental and peace work

We draw from Maathai's efforts and writings crucial lessons for further environmental and peace work. The proposed areas for study moves the fields of environmental, communication and peace studies towards analyses of fruitful points of engagement between traditional culture and spirituality on the one hand, and scientific knowledge and contemporary activism on the other. How can this help us to promote democracy, a healthy environment and peace? Our recommendations center on aspects of traditional African culture embedded in ways of

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communication such as orality, family, individual and community responsibility, reciprocal respect, and honoring the relationship between humans and the environment.

Advocacy of individual and collective responsibility

We believe that scholarship on individuals, organizations, and movements that are shaping the future of the world enriches knowledge about cross-cultural communication. In the conceptions of Maathai, the responsibility to make the world a better place is a commitment involving self-sacrifice by individuals and communities from diverse cultures. These individuals and movements play a leading and vital role in maintaining the connections necessary to enriching human action and improving life. In acknowledging the role of active leadership in fostering change, Kirkscey (2007) stated that “Maathai's leadership is a component of change in the social, political, and environmental spheres of African life. Her work illustrates that rhetors can effectively use narrative as an instrument to spread the principles of social movements” (p.12). Scott (2013) supports views expressed by Kirkscey (2007) about narratives and leadership by stating that

There are a few human rights activists whose actions had the power to positively affect their families, friends, and neighbors. A very small number of these advocates have further influenced their larger communities; only a miniscule number of these individuals have the courage and persistence to extend their influence beyond their immediate communities to alter the course of entire countries and continents (p.299).

Kirkscey (2007) observed that “Maathai's work stands as a bridge between traditional African values and globalization” (p. 13). In an era of global capitalism, Maathai recognized the need to engage the globalized world in the transformation of societies in their social, economic and political aspects. Her skillfulness in privileging the rhetoric of individual and collective responsibility was manifested in the GBM's activities and teachings. Maathai convinced people that nothing would change if they considered themselves to be passive “victims” who depended on their governments to improve their life circumstances. Her metaphor of “wrong bus syndrome” teaches about the consequences of inaction to save the environment: One takes the wrong bus, and ends up in wrong destination (Scott, 2013). The meaning assigned to this metaphor in the *Mottainai* campaign is that individuals and communities will suffer the consequences of failing to save the environment. The lesson here is “Don't Waste” any chance to save the environment.

Finding commonalities among diverse cultural contexts to address global concerns

The consideration of the environment and peace as global concerns entails understanding the meanings diverse cultures assign to the benefits of a healthy and peaceful physical and human environment. Future studies exploring meanings across diverse cultures will help scholars to find a common ground to initiate approaches to addressing humanity's problems. Ultimately, saving the environment depends on the ways communities understand it. Maathai grasped the meaning and purpose of *Mottainai* as significant in her environmental work. She recognized the similarity of *Mottainai*'s cultural and spiritual meanings to African cultural and spiritual values regarding the environment. The *Mottainai* campaign calls upon communities to value and respect the knowledge they possess in order to save the environment. It gets support from attitudes of embracing and synthesizing the diversity of humanity's cultural inheritance. The urgency to share cultural and spiritual knowledge to save the environment demonstrates the importance of

finding commonalities among cultures. Maathai constructed messages about saving the environment that situated *Mottainai* as a global expression that resonates with diverse communities in the world.

Privileging Storytelling-based methodology

African communication scholarship would benefit from privileging a storytelling-based methodology, in order thereby to develop distinctive theoretical perspectives about how communication is structured and patterned. Another area of interest is to explore how African oral communication styles address efforts to improve the human condition. Stories serve numerous purposes in communities rooted in oral traditions. Storytelling is a source of important information about a given society; its survival and well-being (Fisher, 1984; Mbiti, 1984 and 1991; and Yartey, 2018). Thus, storytelling as a community participatory activity enables individuals to connect with each other. In an interview with Katie Bacon (2000), Chinua Achebe opines that “Once you allow yourself to identify with the people in a story, then you might begin to see yourself in that story even if on the surface it's far removed from your situation.” Kennedy C. Chinyowa (2014) uses illustrations from the Zimbabwean Shona trickster narrative to argue that African storytelling is a powerful pedagogical tool for communicating the people's knowledge and wisdom. In this regard, storytelling can serve as a methodology in addressing global and local concerns, and engaging communities to learn about each other. Maathai evinced the relevance of communities conducting dialogue when she launched the Peace Tent in Nairobi after the 2007/8 post-elections violence. Kenyans from all walks of life were invited to the space to engage in intercultural conversations, tell stories about their experiences and “appeal to (then) President Kibaki and Hon. Raila Odinga to initiate a dialogue for a peaceful settlement to the current crisis for the sake of the people of Kenya.”(Maathai, 2008). The Green Belt Movement website highlights continued efforts to sustain the Peace Tent initiative as a community participatory activity where people can gather and tell stories.

In celebrating the first anniversary of Maathai's death, GBM launched a seven-day Peace Tent initiative with the goal to promote peace by inviting Kenyans to the tents to pledge their commitment for peace in Kenya (www.greenbeltmovement.org). This initiative was an opportunity to sustain the power of stories as vehicles of communicating local societal expectations, shared values, norms and possibilities for a better future. Baines (2010) emphasizes the importance of local realities in peacebuilding processes. She urges scholars to acknowledge local processes that “do not reproduce the ‘local’ through the lens of universal to the neglect of the socio-cultural” (Baines 2010, 413). The focus on the ‘local’ reproduces lived experiences through narratives which shape peacebuilding processes (see Mutua, 2015, 2009). Further, we offer some examples to illustrate the importance of stories as vital connections that bring people together to find meaning in shared experiences. Scholars interested in promoting intercultural dialogue acknowledge the significance of integrating storytelling into intercultural education contexts (See Haydari & Holmes, 2015). Similarly, there are benefits to bringing people together to share their experiences and identify possible solutions to local problems. For example, Rolston (2011) proposes dialogue-based methodology to engage communities in Southern Africa that are each seeking ways to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Stories reiterate the centrality of orality in African communication.

Maathai used storytelling as a methodology to seek commonalities among diverse cultures. In

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Kenya, the *Mottainai* campaign was successful partly because the stories told about Japanese culture were relevant to and resonated with her audiences in Kenya and elsewhere. Maathai minimized differences in geography, history, culture, politics and economic prosperity between Kenya and Japan by cultivating awareness of the need to address the problem faced in both places. The focus on the problem at hand (environmental degradation) rather than a place (Kenya or Japan, etc.) were especially effective for promoting the practice of the 4Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle, respect) as a way of life among Kenyan and Japanese people.

In all, Campbell (1989) argues that Maathai's discourse was highly appealing because her role as an advocate for the environment, and she appealed to common experiences and values in the diverse audiences she addressed.

Conclusion

This essay explored the cultural knowledge borrowing and sharing approach in promoting the well-being of the environment as well as all humanity. The significance of this essay lies in its potential to motivate scholars in peace studies and intercultural communication to explore useful concepts that exist in different regions of the world, and to promote collective action in tackling global issues.

We collaborated on this essay as friends and intercultural scholars working in the same department of communication in a Mid-West public university. The motivation came from a call for papers for the 2017 National Communication Association Conference in Philadelphia on "Communication and Civic Callings." The decision to present a paper on Wangari Maathai's work at the conference was an opportunity for us to engage in scholarship that offers insights into finding commonalities among cultures. In this essay, we show possibilities for collaborative research on special topics about global problems, and solidarity with cultures often invisible in mainstream intercultural communication research.

We believe that our collaboration demonstrates Cooks & Fullon's (2003) observation that "intercultural communication scholars are themselves situated in and can learn from their cross-cultural encounters; alliances can be built through reflection and reflexivity both within and across intercultural encounters" (p.162). Finally, our essay acknowledges the importance of seeking shared cultural and spiritual values that support a collective global consciousness of shared humanity. *The Mottainai* campaign is a great example of how people can adapt various traditional concepts to solve problems.

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