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## Why a Nobel Peace Prize for Environmental Activism?

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**WANGARI MAATHAI**, ASSISTANT MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES IN KENYA, WAS AWARDED THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE IN 2004 FOR HER GREEN BELT MOVEMENT, WHICH HAS PLANTED 30 MILLION TREES IN HER COUNTRY. SHE RECENTLY SPOKE WITH NPQ, FROM WHICH THESE COMMENTS ARE EXCERPTED.

NAIROBI—In my own experience in Kenya, I saw how the introduction of commercial crops linked to world market prices—in the place of small-scale subsistence farming—led to depletion of the land and the loss of livelihood.

In some areas in the 1970s, vegetation was cleared from large swaths of land, traditionally used for grazing or household farming, in order to grow wheat. But the land

wasn't suitable and couldn't sustain such a crop. Only one crop was harvested, but with the vegetation gone, the rains just ran off. What was left was a dust bowl.

I saw how deforestation, which undermined local watersheds, led to scarce water supplies and the breakup of communities. Men abandoned their families under the pretense that they were going to look for jobs in town. People would fight over water because there wasn't enough to share with their neighbors.

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This kind of conflict that emerges from the environment can be seen today in Darfur, for example. No doubt there are other causes as well, but among the things they are fighting over is grazing ground. There is not enough land for both the "farmers" and "pastoralists." Then the government got in the game and politicized the ethnic overlay—Arabs vs. Africans—of the conflict.

Since women are the primary caretakers in much of Africa, the burden of environmental degradation and conflict has fallen mainly on them. In Kenya, our response, starting in 1977, has been to engage women in planting trees—30 million so far—that provide fuel, food, shelter and income to support their children and their household needs. The planting also creates employment, replenishes the soil and improves the watersheds. Planting trees is simple, attainable and the results can be seen right away.

Getting from there to here was not easy. At the outset, this work was very hard because people were conditioned to believe that the solution to their problems must come from "outside." And they didn't understand the connection between their own needs and a healthy environment. They were unaware that a degraded environment leads to a scramble for scarce resources and may culminate in poverty and even war.

I am thus very grateful to the Nobel Committee for bringing this issue of the environment onto center stage. It is extremely central to peace.

But activism and international recognition are not enough. In order to manage resources successfully, we need "democratic space" in our societies. I don't want to say "democracy," which implies only a United States or Western set of institutions. I mean a space where the voices of people who are affected by environmental degradation can be heard, a space for negotiation in which resources can be shared and responsibly managed instead of fought over.

**MISSING CULTURAL LINK** | My life has been about finding ways to empower very disempowered people. In looking at Africa, I have come to the conclusion that certain things that happen during the process of colonization remove the humanity from a person. Africans taken from their own land to America as slaves have

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**South Africa  
Beneath the  
Concrete**

**NADINE GORDIMER**, well known as an anti-apartheid activist, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991.

Like the rest of the colonized continent, South Africa was covered over with concrete, as Wangari describes. The concrete is now broken. Yet it is remarkable how much remained intact underneath.

One of the consequences of “the taking command” of black majority rule, in fact, has been the new problem of class among blacks themselves. A strong upper middle class is emerging, and there is a strong undercurrent of resentment among those still living in shacks. Somehow, it was all right for white fat cats to drive around in a Mercedes-Benz and go to fancy restaurants. But black fat cats are another matter. The anger about this is not yet dangerous to social cohesion, but it is something to be watched.

As for a new African identity, I worry that in the pursuit of embracing their own culture, African youth will reject universal values and culture—such as literature from elsewhere. This “cut off” of other cultures seems a danger to me today. The idea of cultural freedom is that the whole world belongs to you. Yes, don’t deny your own culture. But don’t cut yourself off. When it comes to literature, that would be a terrible deprivation.

not to this day recovered from having their names taken away and their memories severed. Black Americans are still trying to find out who they are. This lost culture is their missing link. Something similar is true for post-colonial Africa.

What are the elements of culture? The name—who you are—is foundational. Food—what you eat, how you prepare it, how and where you grow it or hunt it. Architecture—how you design your habitat and what you use from the environment to build. Dances—how you celebrate life, how you mourn the loss of life. How you pass knowledge from one generation to another—through the language, through stories, through ceremonies, through rituals, through the symbols you develop.

Human beings are very symbolic. There is more to it—to reality—than we can verbalize. So much of a culture is left unsaid but is nonetheless understood through signs and symbols. Sometimes those symbols are religious images, sometimes they are the clothing we wear. Values, religion and the way we govern ourselves are all aspects of culture.

When you are colonized, all these elements of culture are removed from you and supplanted by something not your own. A new system—other people’s culture—is put in its place. A new system of governance, a new name and a new language are

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imposed on you. If you speak your mother tongue in school, you are punished. A person who goes through this process is dehumanized. What you are is taken away.

My name is Wangari, not Mary. If you name me Mary and call me that, you are talking to someone else. If you see only Mary, then Wangari doesn't exist. I'm missing. If I'm missing, how can I develop?

People who are disempowered don't feel OK. They need validation because, over time, they come to believe they are not like other people; they are somehow broken. After generations, this feeling is internalized.

This deprivation of culture, of identity, is the missing link in Africa's development equation. Colonization also destroyed environmentally benign ways of life that were integral to African culture. For example, before colonization, Mt. Kenya was revered as the seat of the Creator for all the communities that could see it from near and far away. The water they drank flowed down from that mountain into streams and rivers. When the colonizers brought Christianity, the focus was no longer the mountain, but heaven above.

Once it was no longer revered, the mountain was no longer protected. Its tree cover was exploited. Its water dried up considerably. The biodiversity along its slopes was so damaged that Mt. Kenya has today been named a UNESCO "hot spot" with species on the brink of extinction. That is what happens when people get detached from their culture. They become participants in their own destruction.

Only when Africa accepts that there is something she has lost, and now needs to gain, will she know who she is. Only then will she have the self-confidence to rise to the challenges of development.

Of course, I don't advise going back. Culture is dynamic and evolves over time. It should discard retrogressive traditions, like female genital mutilation, and embrace more positive aspects of culture—like reverence for nature—that would give all Africans a sense of belonging and identity.



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