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Traditional Ecological Knowledge as a Tool for Colonial Resistance

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Abstract

This paper argues that Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) serves a more insightful function, as a mechanism of colonial resistance and decolonisation. By synthesising the social-ecological practice framework of Dudgeon and Berkes (2003) with postcolonial ecological effects revealed in Wangari Maathai's Replenishing the Earth (2010), this research explores how reclaiming indigenous environmental practice constitutes a subversive political act. Maathai's Green Belt Movement serves as the primary case study, showing how restoring indigenous flora and reviving spiritual connections to the land challenge colonial epistemology and extractive economies. Through the triad of knowledge-practice-belief, the study illustrates how local systems foster community sovereignty. Wangari Maathai's TEK is therefore not merely a tool for conservation but a grassroots mobilisation resource that facilitates the restoration of cultural identity and ecological integrity in post-colonial contexts.

Keywords: Colonial Resistance; Green Belt Movement; TEK; Wangari Maathai

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INTRODUCTION

All the challenges of Africa are connected to imperialist exploitation and Western technological abuse (Aseka, 1999), hence, colonialism is connected to the exploitation of the colonised people, their territories and natural resources. The Western colonial administration reorganised indigenous land-use systems, converting communal lands into cash-crop plantations, enclosing forests and marginalising traditional ecological knowledge (Beinart & Hughes, 2007). This colonial project has historically relied on the systematic erasure of indigenous scenery to facilitate resource extraction and political control. As a result, Great Britain officially annexed Kenya as a crown colony, granting the colonising power wealth and advantages that facilitated the West's flourishing, furnishing natural resources and markets that perpetuated industrialisation (Huggan & Tiffin, 2007).

This "epistemic violence" (Spivak, 1988) seeks to nullify local knowledge systems, rendering colonised populations dependent on external colonial ideologies. Grove (2017) asserts that colonial forestry policies alienated communities from their sacred woods, water catchments and forests, creating ecological imbalance and expunging cultural ties to the land. This shift led to considerable changes in African society and ecology, furnishing colonising powers with wealth and strategic advantages by accessing raw materials and resources that fuelled western industrialisation (Dominguez & Luoma, 2020). In effect, these colonial and neo-colonial strategies gave birth to Maathai's environmental activism.

Despite the global acknowledgement Wangari Maathai's activism has received, most critical studies isolate her ecological enterprises from her wider resistance to colonial and neocolonial structures. Her Green Belt Movement is an indigenous approach that guides Africans to challenge the Western concept of environmental exploitation, and therefore embrace the traditional concept of environmental stewardship. According to Kalipeni (1995), before Europeans' penetration of Africa, Africans had developed a unique system of preserving their environment. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) therefore, emerges as a critical site to contest the Global North's deliberate annulment of indigenous ecological practices.

This study therefore examines TEK not just as a theory, but as a potent tool for colonial resistance. When indigenous communities reclaim their traditional relationship with the environment, they fundamentally challenge the colonial order. To explore this, the research utilises the socio-ecological practice framework proposed by Dudgeon and Berkes (2003), emphasising the interdependence of culture and nature. This study applies Dudgeon and Berkes's framework to the work of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai, specifically her reflections in *Replenishing the Earth*. Maathai's Green Belt Movement (GBM) in Kenya vividly illustrate how "spiritual ecology," the integration of indigenous values with environmental action, decolonises the mind and the land simultaneously.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have examined indigenous environmental practices and Maathai's method of healing nature's wounds in post-independence Kenya. For instance, Ouma (2026) argues that the post-independence Kenyan state has not dismantled colonial structures but "Africanized" them. His focus is on the regimes of Kenyatta and Moi, who utilised land as a tool for political patronage, mirroring the colonial logic of extraction. In this situation, the state viewed indigenous forest as idle space available to be cleared for private development.

However, Maathai's sustainability practices, which challenge this ecological harassment through the Green Belt Movement, become knowledge born in the struggle (Karmakar & Byrne, 2024), allowing the subaltern to reclaim their right to define their own environment. To realise this emancipation, Maathai foregrounds her environmentalism in Kikuyu cosmologies, with the *mugumo* tree serving as the main representation of the indigenous roots (Okuyade & Egule, 2024).

Her work therefore becomes a tool of literary and ecological resistance, where restoring the African environment becomes inseparable from restoring African memory. Building on this academic proposition, Du Toit (2021) extends the argument and posits that TEK is a nature-based solution (NbS) rooted in an ethics of care, where African women make their environmentalism a form of resistance against both patriarchal structures and colonial environmental practices.

While scholarship highlights Wangari Maathai's successful activism, most analyses view her indigenous roots as a cultural heritage rather than a political strategy. A scholarly gap therefore remains in treating TEK as an intentional mechanism through which Maathai's environmental ideologies subvert colonial systems.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs Dudgeon and Berkes' (2003) socio-ecological resilience as a framework. Traditional Ecological Knowledge has been defined as a cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief, evolving through adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationships between living beings and their environment (Berkes, 1999, p.8). Dudgeon and Berkes' (2003) major contribution is the conceptualisation of TEK as a woven triad: Knowledge, practice and belief. Knowledge is the empirical observation of species and ecosystems, which leads to the process of knowing, focusing on ecological knowledge. For example, having an idea about medicinal plants and soil fertility through traditional methods, rather than Western scientific approaches and findings. Through knowledge, Maathai observes the effects of eucalyptus plants on the Kenyan soil and the weather in general. Secondly, TEK focuses on management practices through an understanding of social processes, thus, management systems and social institutions interact with the environment. For instance, traditional irrigation, taboos, and sacred groves were established to protect the environment. Lastly, belief is the overarching worldview or spiritual ecology that gives meaning to knowledge and practice. Rituals, ceremonies, and other traditions are attached to the knowledge and practices of indigenous people, leading to cultural internalisation.

TEK emphasises that processes are part of ecological cycles of renewability and regards human use of the environment in terms of how well it fits these cycles (Dudgeon & Berkes, 2003, p.85). Dudgeon and Berkes (2003) posit that the resilience of a social-ecological system (its capacity to absorb shocks and reorganise) is deeply tied to this triad. TEK contrasts with the "Command-and-Control" management style typical of colonial and modern industrial regimes which seeks to "reduce natural variation" for market productivity, ultimately leading to breakable "pathological" systems (Holling et al., 2000).

DISCUSSION

Maathai's framework begins from the premise that before colonial disruption, relationships between communities and the environment were sustained through locally developed knowledge, everyday practice, and moral obligation. In her memoir, *Replenishing the Earth* (2010), Maathai reveals Kenyan's orientation towards the environment before colonisation. She demonstrates some Traditional Ecological Knowledge which the indigenes practised in the following manner:

> *Even before the arrival of white settlers in the early 1900s, the countryside around the five forested mountains in Kenya was intensively cultivated and relatively densely populated. Nonetheless, the native peoples maintained extensive forest reserves where the population of elephants, leopards, buffaloes, and many other animals flourished (p.57).*

Nature preservation was central to the ecological knowledge and everyday practices of the natives before colonisation. Dudgeon and Berkes (2003:75) reveal that for Africans, knowledge was all about knowing and interacting with one's environment. For locals, life was not about egocentrism, but about collaboration and environmental sustainability. Ecological knowledge included observation of the forests, soils, water, crops and seasonal cycles, and also carried collective memory and cultural values. Although thin trees were permitted to be cut down for domestic purposes such as firewood and the construction of houses, larger trees were untouched (Maathai, 2010, p.57). This does not mean the pre-colonial society was perfect; rather, it highlights forms of ecological responsibility and locally grounded authority that colonial systems later undermined.

To sustain this local ecological practice, spiritualising nature was adopted to manage landscape patchiness, implement water-based management and protect certain species. Dudgeon and Berkes (2003) term these measures as "management practices based on ecological knowledge" (p.86). Kenyans, especially the Kikuyus, perceived the huge standing trees as spirits, hence, before one could fell it, the spirit had to be transferred to another tree or another tree in its place (Maathai, 2010, p. 58). Wagner (2016) further explains that through the Kikuyu people, the spiritual significance of Fig trees is established. These environmental belief systems reveal that the African's way of life has been a crucible of beliefs, practices and ideologies that shape the trajectories of people's lives (Ben-Daniels, 2022). Within this context, belief gave environmental practice an ethical foundation. Respect for land, trees, water and sacred places could shape how resources were used and protected.

Traditional ecological consciousness was part of everyday practice and handed down through generations by cultural transmission and oral traditions. This implies that the ecosystem then, improved from upland forests, protected by taboos, through several plant species, mountains, and downstream to the other water bodies (Dudgeon & Berkes, 2003). The relationship between humans and nature was therefore not necessarily defined by extraction. Through parents, the younger generation was educated on environmental consciousness through "knowledge-practice-belief" as part of their parental responsibilities, as demonstrated by Maathai's mother: "My mother told me very clearly when I was a child that I was never to collect twigs for firewood from around the fig tree near our homestead since, she said, it was 'a tree of God"(p.58).

Since indigenous ecological knowledge is grounded in belief systems, Howard and Widdowson (1996) challenge it, arguing that TEK is unscientific and should not be accepted

into environmental impact assessment because it is deeply immersed in spirituality. Their argument is based on the fact that it is impossible to measure spirituality (belief system) scientifically (Moberg, 2002). However, Maathai sharply disagrees with Howard and Widdowson's argument, as she viewed knowledge-practice-belief by the indigenes in her memoir not as a vague spirituality, but as a "native science", in the following manner:

> *Conceiving of the fig tree as muti wa Ngai had a kind of protoecological reasoning behind it. The tree's deep root system prevented landslides and allowed rainwater to travel from underground reservoirs to the surface in the streams and rivulets that then burst through the soil. Killing or harming every fig tree would, therefore, mean destabilizing the soil and making both the conservation of water and removing it from the ground more difficult (p.58).*

Maathai's assertion demonstrates that traditional ecological knowledge has scientific bases. Spiritualising the environment is not hollow but backed by traditional ecological observation and nature experiences. Likewise, Iaccarino (2003) argues that modern science is not superior to traditional knowledge since the theories formulated by scientists at each level are based on key observations, they can explain only a specific set of facts, just as TEK. Therefore, integration of Western science and TEK can become essential (Mazzocchi, 2006). Therefore, Western scientific institutions are modifying their perception, representation and application of indigenous knowledge, with the increasing frequency of counter-hegemonic indigenous voices, giving it validity and possible applications in environmental management, development, and education disciplines (Shava, 2013).

When these local environmental practices are juxtaposed with the Western capitalist approach towards nature, the scientific community and environmental managers may have to learn lessons from TEK (Berkes & Henley, 1997). Ecological knowledge that existed before the colonial era demonstrates that before colonial governance, the African way of life perceived nature as part of humanity, not a mere resource to be exploited. All the knowledge, practices and beliefs of the African were geared towards the veneration of nature, as Maathai recounts: "For my mother, and generations before her, the honouring of certain trees was part of a general reverence for nature" (Maathai, 2010, p.58).

The institutionalisation of local knowledge systems effectively transforms traditional territories into vital hubs for climate-resilient crops and ecological systems (Chao, 2024). This knowledge co-production ensures that the sustainability assessment remains grounded in the social lens of local communities, allowing identification of societal interconnections that are often overlooked at the global scale (Szetey et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, colonialism disrupted these relationships by introducing Western forms of land ownership, farming and political systems that destabilised traditional ecological knowledge. Traditional knowledge governed the organisation of space and land use in pre-colonial communities, which colonial authorities replaced with their own conceptions of environmental change and how to manage land resources to benefit the colonial enterprise (Boateng, 2017). The Western ideology portrayed traditional ecological knowledge as "perception" and scientific knowledge as "truth" (German, 2010). Colonial rule established epistemic hierarchies by presenting external expertise as superior to the knowledge held by communities whose lives were directly shaped by indigenous ecological principles. As a result, environmental damage was accompanied by weakening of local authority to define responsible land use. All these became possible through the introduction of Christian religion, as Maathai narrates:

> *Although these traditions were still alive during the early part of the twentieth century, they quickly died out as Christianity took hold. The new cash economy created by the colonial authority, quickly embraced by the locals (p.38).*

Colonial administration replaced traditional ecological knowledge with capitalist systems purposed to maximise extraction and export production to feed Western industries. Foster and Clark (2020) assert that the essence and purpose of Western capitalism is to make profit at all costs, thereby threatening nature. The colonial masters adopted this system of resource management which Dudgeon and Berkes (2003) term as the reductionist model. According to Berkes and Folke (1998), the reductionist model is based on a utilitarian premise that views nature as merely a collection of commodities that have no value until human beings directly benefit from their usage. This colonial approach adapted effectively to the fiscal calculus of economics, but was destructive to the ecosystem it exploits (Rogers, 2000).

In effect, traditional afforestation methods adapted from TEK were not immune to colonial influences. During her visit to a church one Sunday morning, Maathai expressed her fear about how locals had abandoned their traditional trees and followed the colonial masters' orders to plant more Eucalyptus on Kenyan soil. People still kept faith in the British wishes even after independence, including the religious community. She took the pain to educate this Christian society by saying:

> *Eucalyptus is an exotic species native to Australia that the British imported to Kenya for use as timber. Although the variety introduced into Kenya grows fast, eucalyptus nonetheless requires huge amounts of water. They are responsible for the widespread desiccation of the soil wherever they've been planted throughout the country. The situation has become so serious during a recent prolonged drought. . . (p. 98).*

It can be gleaned from the extract that environmental degradation is not merely a byproduct of development but a deliberate tool for dispossessing the colonised. Despite witnessing the destructive effects of eucalyptus plants, the indigenes were reluctant to remove the trees that had negatively impacted the Kenyan environment and weather patterns. This is as a result of Africans being dispossessed of their indigenous environmental knowledge, hence, triggering their taste and acceptance of the colonial culture. Unfortunately, the time Kenyans spent under colonisation was a period that attempted to overthrow the traditional ecological measures put in place to sustain the environment. This could be realised only through the infiltration of the African environmental knowledge-practice-belief model with a dominant pattern of paradoxical development promoted by global capitalism (Dudgeon & Berkes, 2003, p. 92).

Kenya's entire colonial era affected more than natural resources. When ecological knowledge is connected to ritual, sacred places and customary practices, the loss of land can also fracture cultural continuity and collective identity. Maathai's work responds to this history by showing that restoration must address the social and moral consequences of environmental loss, not merely its visible ecological effects.

Further, political independence did not automatically reverse colonial patterns of environmental governance. Kenya continued to suffer from colonial effects. Maathai became distressed at how colonialism had managed to whip the Africans into line with a capitalist

and environmental exploitation model. She lamented how successive Kenyan governments fell into this trap of bedevilling indigenous ecological practices after years of colonisation. Through her narration, Maathai reveals to the reader that: "The new cash economy created by the colonial authority, quickly embraced by the locals, and continued by postcolonial governments encouraged natives to plant cash crops such as coffee, tea, and corn" (p.38).

Concerning the reason for the perpetuation of the colonial agenda in post-colonial Kenya, Kushner (2009) posits that colonial administrations promoted young African leaders who were in line with Western ideologies to receive wealth, power and become elites to perpetuate the agenda of the colonial master. Kinefuchi (2022) reveals that, the problems endangering Africans stem from national and international policies which have spiritual, psychological, cultural and moral implications on the African.

The moral fibre of Kenyan society was soiled by craving for more, which led to the commercialisation of all facets of post-independence Kenya. According to Wangari Maathai, "The land on which these animals used to roam free has been commercialised, fenced in, and privatized" (Maathai, 2010, p.39). Kenyan President, Arap Moi's plans to build a 62-storey high-rise building, a gigantic statue of himself, and a shopping mall with 2,000 car parking lots at Uhuru Park show the total embrace of modernism and industrialisation at the expense of nature preservation and sustenance (Gorsevski, 2012). Moreover, the reverence the Kikuyu tradition showed towards animal sacrifice for human life on special days was abandoned. Indoctrination engulfed the society to an extent that:

> *Traditional foods were trivialized and considered only suitable for the poor and unsophisticated. Not only this mean that there wasn't extra food for the casual traveller, but the farmers themselves now did not have adequate, nutritious food (p.39).*

Postcolonial Kenya was engulfed with environmental and economic challenges as a result of colonialism (Kushner, 2009). The colonised, however, began to feel the repercussions of rejecting one's self-identity for an exotic culture full of self-centeredness. Maathai expressed her frustration in the following manner:

> *With the money earned from cash crops, native Africans began buying food, rather than producing it. The traditional diet that was mostly vegetarian and full of fresh greens—with many varieties of bananas, and grains such as sorghum and millet—gave away to imported food crops eaten in industrialized countries, a diet dominated by fats and sugars, salt, and processed foods. Needless to say, diseases associated with eating and living this way overtook the local communities with a vengeance (p.39).*

Although, high population may contribute to ecological disparity, Nagel (2005) postulates that capitalist exploitation is the primary cause of this disease burden, while environmental degradation remains the main cause of poverty in postcolonial Africa (Martinez-Alier, 1991). The economy of colonies shifted from agriculture to capitalism, while natural species were repurposed, blurring indigenous environmentalism, and leading to a hybrid identity. The post-colonial problem, then, is not simply the absence of environmental protection; it is the persistence of institutions and assumptions that deny communities a decisive role in shaping their environmental futures.

Importantly, Wangari Maathai formed the Green Belt Movement (GBM). The core values of the movement were with love for the environment, gratitude and respect for Earth's resources, self-empowerment and self-betterment, then, the spirit of service and volunteerism as core values deeply rooted in Traditional Ecological Knowledge. These core values are derived from clues human culture has generated; as a result, a guide to how to proceed (Shotter, 2009). The GBM departed from the conformist tree-planting methods by embracing traditional ecological methods during their tree environmental stewardship journey (Nagel, 2005). According to Maathai, the core values of the Green Belt Movement were part of nature, hence was optimistic that mankind is better off with these values than without them, because; "where these values are ignored, they are replaced by vice such as selfishness, corruption, greed, and exploitation, and can even lead to death" (p. 11).

Against the postcolonial effects, traditional ecological knowledge functions in Maathai's work as a practical and political tool of resistance. Her approach enabled local communities to name social and environmental damages through their own experience, preserve memories of alternative relationships with the land, and challenge development models that treat them as passive recipients of external expertise. By recognising these intensely local dynamics, the emerging framework for social-ecological resilience establishes a more precise and legally significant basis for safeguarding planetary health. This legal and ecological grounding further integrates spiritual practices and indigenous rituals, which serve as a transformative resource for fostering holistic healing from the scarcity and degradation imposed by colonial history.

Maathai's work recognises the inequality in African society that resulted from embracing the Western concept of capitalism during colonisation, which gave birth to the Green Belt Movement. In Maathai's *Replenishing the Earth*, she identifies colonial projects as a primary weapon to desacralise the African landscape. By reclaiming traditional knowledge and practices that believe the *mugumo* tree is sacred, as asserted by Okuyade and Egule (2024), Maathai employs ontological resistance. She provides a spiritual framework that frames the state's destruction of forests as a violation of divine law, creating a moral shield for rural women, and, revisiting pre-colonial ways of living. During her visit to a Christian congregation at an Easter festival, the whole church agreed that they are saved by the death of Jesus. Maathai used the church's belief system to educate the congregants on the essence of preserving plants in the following words: "If every one of you has been saved by Jesus Christ and is grateful for the salvation you received because of that one tree, then you should be saying thank you to every tree you see" (p.99).

The author draws on Traditional ecological knowledge from the Christian belief system, and exposes how religious communities deviate from environmental stewardship through the commodification of nature. Du Toit (2021) adds that women's ethics of care function as a colonial subversion; therefore, there should be a shift away from global capitalism by engaging in a dialogue with feminist knowledge to imagine more ecological ways of solving societal glitches (Wilson, 2020). By training women to establish nurseries using local seeds, Maathai proves that knowledge alone is not enough, hence, dismantles colonial dependency on exotic monocultures, and by educating local women, she empowered them and deepened their appreciation for their own knowledge and traditions (Nagel, 2005). Maathai transforms her political force into reinstating the erased communal practices, such as, tree planting, environmental education, organizing women, shared labour and public demands for accountable governance. Repairing the world requires education, empowerment and ethical

action (Kushner, 2009) because, "Self-empowerment is an essential element if the struggle to heal the earth's wounds, and our own, is to succeed" (Maathai, 2003, p.105).

Again reduce, reuse, recycle (3R's) became the main theme and a core pillar of the Green Belt Movement's values. According to Maathai, "The Japanese had a similar concept, known as *Mottainai*. Literally translated, the word means "don't waste!" and applies not only to objects but to resources and time" (Maathai, 2010, p.79). A modest way of living is the way to go rather than an egocentric way of life. Unlike those who consider that there is a single way of knowing or understanding "truth", GBM's Traditional Ecological Knowledge proves that there is much to be learned from other cultural ways of knowing as well (Dudgeon & Berkes, 2003, p.90). This local "Practice" (*mottainai*) allowed the Green Belt Movement to establish an autonomous ecological infrastructure that the state could neither control nor tax.

The social-ecological resilience framework addresses communities' psychological and spiritual well-being, ensuring that stewardship remains an act of meaning-making rather than a mere technical requirement. Such a culturally grounded approach ultimately shows that sustainable resource management is inseparable from the preservation of the inner development and collective identity of those defending their traditional territories. Maathai is seen as an integrated activist who has demonstrated how communication, culture and identity play a role in ecological and democratic struggles (Kinefuchi, 2022). This integration of spiritual and material stewardship suggests that local practices provide multiple evidence bases for understanding ecosystem dynamics, where indigenous and scientific knowledge are viewed as parallel complementary insights (Tengo et al., 2014).

However, indigenous knowledge has faced many difficulties since it challenges the Western scientific methods of farming and afforestation. Karmakar and Byrne (2024) term Maathai's method as, "knowledge born in the struggle." Maathai's approach defeats the low self-esteem society imposed on uneducated (formal) women in the villages, which the West socially constructed. By re-educating the colonised, GBM succeeded in eradicating societal intellectual racism.

One way to create an equitable relationship in African society is to recognise indigenous knowledge as a legitimate source of ecological information and values (Berkes & Henley, 1997). Maathai achieved this through grassroots education, leadership, and local knowledge (Kushner, 2009). She reveals her approach as:

> *The Green Belt Movement has long combined practical programs to plant trees, restore degraded landscapes and forest, improve food security, harvest water, reduce waste, and launch and maintain sustainable enterprises, with campaigns for good governance as essential tools for social, economic, and ecological transformation (p.105).*

Though an environmental sensitisation movement, Maathai's approach was also a political tool to resist corrupt and exploitative governance. Ouma (2026) extends this argument and posits that the postcolonial state maintained the colonial systems to facilitate the elite's extraction of natural resources to the advantage of the privileged few. By reclaiming local knowledge of indigenous flora, Wangari Maathai's movement exposed the state's development projects as ecologically destructive. This synthesis of local knowledge and activism allowed the GBM to challenge the state's "scientific" authority, thereby turning TEK into a tool for epistemic sovereignty.

Significantly, there has been a shift in the negative connotations associated with Traditional Ecological Knowledge, as defined by colonisers as primitive, ignorant, inferior, and unscientific, to its reappropriation by Maathai and her GBM as a signifier of identity, self-determination and autonomy (Shava, 2013). Hence, Martinez-Alier (2002) asserts that marginalised communities use environmental defence as a vehicle for political struggle to gain sovereignty, just as the Green Belt Movement planted trees to restore degraded land, promoted cultural identity among the indigenes and empowered women socially and politically (Wagner, 2016). Maathai's quest to plant indigenous trees is a way of asserting a right to self-determination. Such autonomy does not only imply that people achieve greater control, or self-governance, but rather that the natives assume much more control over resource management decisions in their traditional territories (Dudgeon & Berkes, 2003, p.91).

CONCLUSION

This study connects Dudgeon and Berkes' (2003) resilience framework with Wangari Maathai's Traditional Ecological Knowledge as a sophisticated mechanism of colonial resistance. By bridging the scholarly gap between ecological resistance and political subversion, this paper argues that Maathai does not merely use indigenous knowledge for conservation; she employs TEK to build a resilient, decolonial social-ecological system. Her Green Belt Movement is Maathai's method of aligning traditional ecological knowledge with contemporary sustainability frameworks. This study has demonstrated that ecological preservation is inextricably connected to restoring cultural agency and communal autonomy. As a result, the perspectives and views of traditional people can provide insights for redirecting the behaviours of a world that has commodified nature toward a more sustainable path.

Maathai's knowledge-practice-belief framework becomes most significant when knowledge identifies what has been lost and what must be restored, practice builds collective capacity and turns ecological care into public action, and beliefs sustain the ethical commitment of responsibility, interdependence, and dignity that prevent restoration from becoming only another technical project. Traditional ecological knowledge should therefore not be appropriated as isolated techniques but must be recognised as part of a living system of community authority, cultural meaning and ecological responsibility.

As a community-based and decentralised movement, Maathai's work contrasts with the highly centralised system of governance planted by the colonial masters, which places the destiny of the whole nation into the hands of a few oligarchs. This study has attempted to erase the old perception that traditional knowledge is just a common heritage of mankind, but advocates that environmental policies and management be made with full participation of indigenous and local communities as it preserves and sustains the natural environment better than the capitalist approach. The study has demonstrated that TEK provides the "knowledge, practice and belief" to subvert the extractive politics that ruins nature. Synthesising TEK and Maathai's memoir underscores that revitalising local knowledge systems is not a mere nostalgic return to the past, but a strategic reassertion of sovereignty that challenges the extractive logic of colonial legacies. Hence, Maathai's legacy in *Replenishing the Earth* proves that when a community reclaims its spiritual and ecological relationship with the land, it becomes "unbowed" in the face of colonial or post-colonial power.

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