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AFRICAN JOURNAL OF GENDER AND RELIGION
EDITORIAL POLICY STATEMENT

The *African Journal of Gender and Religion* (AJGR) is a semi-annual publication, moved in 2017 from the Gender and Religion programme at UKZN (the Centre for Deconstructive Theology at UKZN) to the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice at the University of the Western Cape.

Since 2004, the Journal has published research papers, which are relevant to gender, religion, and theology in Africa. The editorial committee considers for publication submissions of a scholarly standard from any of the social science and theological disciplines or related fields of inquiry, which provide useful perspectives at the intersections of gender, religion, and theology in Africa. Particular areas of interest include the gendered analysis of religion; theology and the study of religion; innovations in contextual theological education; theological and ethical reflection on social transformation; the significance of new religious movements and African-initiated forms of religion; the role of women in religion and society; interfaith dialogue; peace-making and reconciliation; normative and non-normative sexualities; and queer politics.

The *African Journal of Gender and Religion* seeks to promote dialogue and response, not only within the academic community in Africa and beyond, but also with faith practitioners working "on the ground" to build a more just society in the region. These may include religious leaders, clergy, other religious officials, professionals, and laity across broad social spectrums who seek to read their faith against the critical issues confronting society today.

Written submissions to the *African Journal of Gender and Religion* may take the form of researched scholarly articles or essays. Book reviews, brief responses to articles, conference reports, and summaries of research projects are also welcome. Articles submitted for the section called "praxis" must show evidence of how sound theoretical reflections are brought to bear on practical action. Within the section on "praxis" we will publish essays that are not considered "mainstream academic" but nonetheless point to theories of gender justice in action. Submissions are evaluated through an editorial committee screening process. Further, the articles are also sent for peer review to a minimum of two competent scholars working in a similar field of interest. Prospective contributors of scholarly articles should send a typed copy of their article via e-mail to the submissions editor at submissions@ajgr.org. All submissions must

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Honouring Dr Alease Brown

This volume is dedicated to honouring the memory of Dr Alease Brown who was the initial lead editor of this special issue before her untimely passing. The impact of her sudden demise and the yawning gap that she left among the members of the Circle is aptly captured in the eulogy prepared by Professor Musa Dube, the current continental coordinator of the Circle, in the following words:

> On the morning of 12th March 2020, we learnt, with great shock and sorrow that Dr Alease Brown had passed on. A cloud of sadness, tears, broken hearts and silence descended upon members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and all who knew her, as we tried to come to terms with her untimely passing. Dr Alease Brown was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice at the University of the Western Cape, having completed her PhD in Systematic Theology at Stellenbosch University in Cape Town in 2019.
>
> Dr Brown attended the 5th Pan African Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' Conference and 30th Anniversary celebrations from July 1-5, 2019, which were held at the University of Botswana. She presented a paper entitled, "The Discourse of Drought: Ongoing Gendered Inequality in Water Access in Cape Town, and Implications for Public Theology." During the gathering, Dr Brown was among the young scholars who were conferred the "Rising Star of the Circle Award" by Prof Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the founder of the Circle. The award commissioned younger scholars to carry on the mandate of the Circle for the coming decades. Dr Alease Brown was further elected the National Coordinator of the Circle chapter of the Republic of South Africa, charged with driving research and publication among Circle members in South Africa. She also assumed the role of a guest editor of a special issue of the *African Journal for Gender and Religion* on the theme of Sacred Earth,

> which consisted of papers selected among the eighty presentations given at the 5th Pan African Circle Conference. Simultaneously, Dr Brown wrote and circulated a call for papers in honour of Prof. Katie Geneva Cannon, thereby encouraging Sisters of the Circle to engage and connect with the work of a famed diaspora theologian and ethicist. At the time of her passing, Dr Brown had made significant progress towards coordinating these editorial projects, and we believe her peers will ensure their completion.[1]

The completion of this volume is the fulfilment of the heartfelt wish presented in the above eulogy. As members of the Circle grappled with the reality of the passing of our sister Alease, it was unanimously agreed that dedicating this volume to honour her memory would be one of the ways of celebrating her life and work. As a result, the co-editors of the volume, Sophie Chirongoma and Sue Rakoczy were given the mandate to complete the noble task which Alease had started so as to ensure that her hard work comes to fruition. Fitting into Alease's gigantic shoes was no mean feat. It was a real labour of love. Her endearing and 'infectious' smile, her resilience and tenacity continued to spur us on whenever the going got really tough. This volume therefore celebrates the life of Alease, a daughter of the soil. Compiling this piece is a really bitter sweet pill; as we honour our sister, our hearts are heavy with grief. It is an emotionally packed undertaking. The void she left is inexpressible. Alease would have been the one to compile this piece but she has since passed on the torch to us. Following her bidding, it is with a sense of accomplishment that we present the work she left for us to complete.

Alease was full of life; she was passionate about the plight of all those who are pushed to the peripheries of society on the basis of race, social class or gender. Her life and work as an academic activist and a religious leader

[1] Musa Dube, "Unpublished Eulogy for Dr Alease Brown," circulated via email to members of the Circle on the 15th of March, 2020.

are succinctly summarized below in the eulogy prepared by the "Daughters of the African Atlantic".

> Alease Brown, Ph.D. was a theologian, social justice advocate, and global religious leader. She was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of the Western Cape (Cape Town, SA) and worked with the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice. Dr. Brown was particularly interested in the topic of human dignity as it is realized by, or impeded in, the lives of Black women of the African diaspora. Her research probed race and gender justice, protest, resistance, discourses of (non)violence through the lens of critical theory, Africana, gender, and postcolonial (decolonial) studies, biblical studies, and early church history. She completed her PhD in Systematic Theology at Stellenbosch University (Cape Town, SA). Before her passing, Dr. Brown was the "on the ground" South Africa liaison for the Daughters and served on the 2020 Daughters Consultation Committee. Dr. Brown held a deep love for connecting people, preaching the gospel, drawing out new theological meaning from familiar passages, and sharing light with the world. In her words, "she was born for this![2]

As evidently captured in the above eulogy, Alease was born to serve; she was committed to transforming the world into a better place for all. To achieve this goal, Alease travelled around the world and she practiced what she preached. The following excerpt from the eulogy prepared by Professor Musa Dube says it all:

> Dr Alease Brown, originally from Long Island, New York State, was a diasporic sister who came to dwell amongst us. She crossed many cultural, economic, racial, class, gender and political boundaries to

[2] Daughters of the African Atlantic Fund, "The Daughters of the African Atlantic Remembers Dr. Alease Brown," https://www.africanatlanticdaughters.com/2020/07/21/the-daughters-remembers-dr-alease-brown/ (Accessed 30 November, 2020)

> be rejoined with her sisters and brothers in the Mother Continent of Africa, thereby bridging many broken boundaries… We were looking forward to the gifts that Dr Alease Brown would confer upon us by her coming to learn, live, lead and work with us in the Mother Continent.[3]

In celebration of the dedication that Alease had towards strengthening ties between the brothers and sisters in the North and the South, the contributors to this special issue interact with Alease's work around the theme of the intertwinements between the sacredness of the Earth, climate change and gender justice issues.

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Dube, Musa. Unpublished Call for Papers for the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologian 5th Pan-African Conference on the theme "Mother Earth and Mother Africa in Theological/Religious/Cultural/Philosophical Imagination," circulated via email on the 11th of December, 2018.

[3] Musa Dube, "Unpublished Eulogy for Dr Alease Brown".

Editorial: Sacred Earth and African Women's Theology

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This special issue is one of the nine academic publications emerging from the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' (the Circle) Fifth Pan-African Conference, held at the University of Botswana (Gaborone), July 2-5, 2019. The conference was also a commemoration of the Circle's thirty years of existence. It featured papers on some aspects of the theme, "Mother Earth and Mother Africa in Theological/Religious/Cultural/Philosophical Imagination." As was noted in the Conference Call for Papers:

> The land is often constructed as female gendered and the oppression of women is interlinked with the oppression of the Earth; and…it is widely acknowledged that we live in the era of global warming - which is humanly induced and of which many have also

> linked with anthropocentric religious/cultural/theological perspectives.[1]

Furthering the theme of the conference, this special issue interrogates, not only the links between "gender, land, race, class, ethnicity, colonialism, globalization and environmental sustainability"; it specifically focuses on contextual examples of the ways that women, nature, sacred sites, and theology are connected. The volume therefore seeks to add a melodious chord to the existing body of literature on African, eco-feminist religion and theology by presenting some case studies on the interface between religion, gender and the ecological crisis in our contemporary times

The first article, A Dark Green Religious Analysis of the Life and Work of Wangari Maathai (1940 - 2011) focuses on the work of one of the great African ecological conservationists. Author, Louisa Johanna Hannelie du Toit, offers a cogent and generative discussion of Bron Taylor's conceptualisation of Dark Green Religion and deploys its underlying principles of, belonging, interconnectedness and sacredness to uncover and underline the significance and scope of Maathai's contribution to the field of ecological conservation. This essay is critical because it is one of the few published explorations of Maathai's contributions to ecofeminism within the African context and beyond. This article is an important record of how Africa's first woman Nobel Peace Prize laureate has both figuratively and literally shifted the fields in paradigmatic ways.

In keeping with the metaphor of the functional productivity of fields, in the article, "Sisters in Solidarity: Resistance and Agency Through Urban Community Food Gardens in Pietermaritzburg", Linda Naicker, offers an empirical study of women's experiences and practices within the context of

[1] Musa Dube, "Mother Earth and Mother Africa in Theological/ Religious/ Cultural/ Philosophical Imagination", Unpublished Call for Papers for the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologian 5th Pan-African Conference circulated via email on December 11, 2018.

food production and (in)security. She provides a thought-provoking analysis that invokes a variety of intersections among marginalization, inequality, and subjugation. In adopting the theoretical resources provisioned by African Women's Theology and Oikos Theology, Naicker both theorises and theologises "how ecological and indigenous wisdom [are] applied in urban community food gardens and produce mutually sustaining relationships between local communities and the earth." Additionally, Naicker argues that in mitigating food insecurity, ecological consciousness also empowers women to resist other intersecting systems and structures of oppression and exclusion.

Following the theme of gendered insecurity set by Naicker, Gertrude Aopesyaga Kapuma, in the article "Gender and Access to Land Ownership: The Experiences of Malawian Widows and the Absence of the Church", articulates the vulnerability of widows in relation to issues of inheritance and expulsion from their matrimonial homes and communities. Based on in-depth interviews with Malawian women, Kapuma raises and addresses important and urgent questions regarding the enabling conditions of gendered insecurity on the multiple challenges faced by widows. She challenges churches to exercise critical solidarity with the widows in their time of need.

Authors Sophie Chirongoma and Ezra Chitando in the article entitled, "What Did We Do to Our Mountain?": African Eco-Feminist and Indigenous Responses to Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani and Chipinge districts, Zimbabwe", explicate and explain religio-cultural interpretations of Cyclone Idai as produced and presented by the survivors of this ecological catastrophe. The authors conducted their interviews just over a month after Cyclone Idai wreaked havoc in the Chimanimani and Chipinge districts and this article offers a rare glimpse into how lived experiences are informed by conditions of crisis created by forces of nature. This article provides an illuminating discussion of how Christian and Indigenous optics frame interpretations and responses to the phenomenon of the cyclone. Furthermore, the authors adopt expansive and inclusive African eco-

feminist lenses to articulate and nuance the interfaces of religion, gender, and nature as experienced by the people of the regions that were the most adversely affected by Idai.

An additional contribution to this compendium of ecologically-oriented contributions to scholarship on religion and gender, is a review article by Mutale Kaunda, titled, "Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Women's Role in Indigenous Religions". Kaunda presents an overview of current debates about indigenous rituals, gender and ecology. This paper also examines how ritual functions as a tool for understanding how contemporary African people's search for justice can be gleaned within African rituals to attain women's agency.

Collectively, the contributions make links between ecological conditions and challenging aspects of African life such as fundamentalist Christianity and gendered interpersonal violence. Additionally, the volume provides a coherent demonstration of the inseparable link between African Women's Theology and the living environment. The articles go beyond theory and offer vivifying contextual engagement to clearly elucidate how women, theology, and nature in Africa are linked. As this introductory piece draws to a close, it seems befitting to echo the sentiments raised by Alease Brown as she was beckoning women to unshackle the chains of patriarchal injustice amidst the water crisis situation in Cape Town, South Africa. She said:

> Women must embrace their power in the church to lead the discursive transformation. Because material conditions are not the key issue that is at stake, the root of the issue, with its sexist implications is best addressed by women naming and acting in resistance against the discourse that persistently imperils their lives. Women called and gifted to lead, must do so, even if this engenders significant tension within specific cultural contexts. It is women who must determine and assert what is required for their flourishing, as opposed to what might be endured for their survival. The vision of

> flourishing must be held before the people, along with the hope that such a future is God's eternal, and present, reality for the disinherited.[2]

Although the above excerpt is drawn from a text written to address a specific context, the message speaks eloquently to the key concerns raised in this volume. It is our sincere hope that this special issue successfully serves a two-fold purpose, i.e., celebrating the life of Dr. Alease Brown whilst affirming the sacredness of Mother Earth amidst the ecological crisis which is threatening the health and well-being of all Earth's inhabitants.

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Dube, Musa. "Mother Earth and Mother Africa in Theological/Religious/Cultural/Philosophical Imagination", Unpublished Call for Papers for the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologian 5th Pan-African Conference circulated via email on December 11, 2018.

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[2] Alease Brown, "The Discourse of Drought: Ongoing Gendered Inequality of Water Access in Cape Town, and the implications for Public Theology", Unpublished Conference paper presented at the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologian 5th Pan-African's Conference, University of Botswana, July 2-5, 2019.

A Dark Green Religious Analysis of the Life and Work of Wangari Maathai (1940 - 2011)

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[1]SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

Dark Green Religion (DGR), is an umbrella term formulated by Bron Taylor, to describe nature revering movements that do not fit into the category of organized religion. These movements use religious-like emotions to express their convictions and display a sincere commitment towards the environment. A central focus of DGR is a deep-felt kinship with all living organisms on Earth (arising from a Darwinian understanding that all forms of life have developed from a common ancestor), accompanied by feelings of humility coupled with a critical view of human moral superiority. This article presents a Dark Green Religious analysis of the life and work of Wangari Maathai (1940-2011). She was the first woman in East Africa to receive a doctorate, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her work with the Green Belt Movement (GBM). In the DGR analysis, it is illustrated that the principles of belonging, interconnectedness and sacredness are revealed through Maathai's written legacy. Evidence is also presented that she could be viewed as an example of Naturalistic Gaianism, one of the four types of DGR. In conclusion, a link between ecofeminism and DGR is proposed by highlighting the shared concepts between the two phenomena.

KEYWORDS

Belonging, Dark Green Religion, environmental crisis, Gaian Naturalism, Green Belt Movement, Wangari Maathai.

Introduction

This article focuses on the contribution made by the 2004 Nobel Laureate from Kenya, Wangari Maathai, who won the Noble Prize for peace for her work in addressing the global environmental crisis. This article is based on a study of her written legacy.[1] The hermeneutical lens of DGR is applied to

[1] The works by Wangari Maathai that were consulted for the purposes of this study / article are as follows: "An Unbreakable Link: Peace, Environment, and Democracy," *Harvard International Review* 29, no. 4 (2008); "Nobel Peace Prize Speech: Nobel Lecture, Oslo, 10 December 2004," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 6, no. 1 (2005); *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World,* (New York: Double Day Press, Random House, 2010); *Unbowed. A Memoir* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007). For the detailed study on which this article is based, see also Louisa Johanna du Toit, "*Evaluating the Life of Wangari Maathai (1940 – 2011) using the Lens of Dark Green Religion*" (Masters' diss, University of Johannesburg, 2019).

demonstrate that environmental spirituality served as the foundation of her life and work. DGR is a phenomenon defined by Bron Taylor. It is an umbrella term encompassing nature revering movements in all areas of society that hold nature sacred and prioritizes the care and reverence for Mother Earth.[2] Three principles are indicative of a DGR spirituality, namely belonging, interconnectedness, and sacredness. These principles are applied to the autobiography and other publications by and about Wangari Maathai, to support the notion that she embodied the spirituality of DGR. This analysis also proposes the type of DGR she most likely represents.

Background

a) Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement – a response to environmental degradation in Kenya

Wangari Maathai (April 1940 - September 2011), achieved recognition for the establishment of the GBM in 1977.[3] The movement arose as a response to the effect of environmental degradation on the lives of people, especially women, in rural areas of Kenya. Maathai who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for the work achieved by the GBM[4] was also active in other spheres. She advocated that an *indivisible link* exists between the environment, peace and democracy. She considered her Nobel Peace Prize as recognition of the importance of this indivisible link.[5] In light of the mounting global environmental crisis[6] this recognition presented an important step.

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2 Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley California: University of California Press, 2010), 13.

3 Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed,* 254-276, 291-295; Wangari Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 13.

4 Wangari Maathai, "Nobel Peace Prize Speech," 195-201.

5 Wangari Maathai, "An Unbreakable Link, 24-27.

6 The global environmental crisis is the topic of worldwide research and according to the 5th assessment report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released in 2014, a limited time remains before the changes to the earth's ecosystems as a result of human exploitation will become irreversible and lead to a chain reaction of increasing magnitude,

Members in country-wide communities, over a period of thirty years,[7] planted 30 million indigenous trees in so-called *Green Belts* of up to 1000 trees and this resulted in the GBM. Through these unassuming and modest deeds of planting trees the GBM empowered women in rural parts of Kenya to improve their lives.[8] The planting of such large numbers of trees was beneficial in reversing the effects of environmental degradation. Observations of the implementation of GBM projects revealed that becoming involved in the regeneration of their living environment positively impacted other aspects of people's lives, and in this case particularly that of women living in rural areas.[9]

Wangari Maathai did not found the GBM based on a specific religious denomination or spiritual creed.[10] She acknowledged that specific spiritual or religious traditions did not inspire her work with the GBM, but that she tended to lean towards an ecumenical understanding of faith.[11] GBM workers used concepts that were familiar to the communities where they worked. The use of biblical examples in the GBM, to explain how natural resources should be appreciated and utilized,[12] was a fallout of the introduction of Christianity during the colonial occupation of Kenya. The GBM often also incorporated concepts from other religious traditions into the GBM values.[13]

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the exact implications of which cannot be predicted. Jonathan Watts, "Global Warming must not Exceed 1.5˚C warns Landmark UN report," *The Guardian Weekly,* October 2018, accessed May 7, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-15c-warns-landmark-un-report

7 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 137.

8 Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth,* 13.

9 Maathai, "An Unbreakable Link,*"* 25. Lisa Merton and Alan Dater, "Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai," Directors' Statement, 2008, 2, accessed April 6, 2019, http://www.takingrootfilm.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Taking-Root-Directors-Statement.pdf

10 Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 13.

11 Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 14.

12 Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 20.

13 Maathai, "An Unbreakable Link", 27; Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 15.

Maathai does not distinguish between 'spiritual' or 'secular' activities of the GBM. However, she realized over time that even the simple action of planting trees led to changes in people themselves.[14] The involvement in caring for and regenerating their living environment allowed people to discover their own voices, increase their self-knowledge and develop self-confidence – characteristics that are negatively affected by poverty and hopelessness.[15]

This realization that people's lives can be positively transformed by their involvement in regenerating their living environment motivated Maathai and the GBM to get involved with communities striving for justice and a democratic society. The movement therefore started to play a more public role in advocating for human, environmental, political and civic rights in Kenya.[16] The GBM used a practical approach and thinking to solve environmental problems.

A key reason for the success and growth of the GBM was its dependence on specific core values. The founding values of the GBM are love for the environment; reverence for the earth's resources; a willingness to strive for self-empowerment and self-improvement; and a readiness to volunteer to help other people.[17]

b) The global environmental crisis

Humans cannot exist on Earth without impacting the environment. Changes in the environment as a result of human activities have been recorded throughout human history.[18] However, the rate and impact of changes in the earth's environment as a result of scientific and technological advances have

[14] Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 14.
[15] Merton and Dater, "Taking Root."
[16] Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 14.
[17] Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 14.
[18] Lyn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203-1207.

accelerated markedly of late. The impact is felt on a global scale.[19] Although the exact effect of environmental changes brought about by human activities cannot be accurately predicted, there are some indications that signal it. The most recent scientific measurements of indicators of global warming confirm that deterioration is occurring faster than anticipated. These indicators include the increased concentrations of atmospheric carbon dioxide and methane gas; accelerated melting of the Greenland ice sheet, Arctic ice cap and Antarctic ice shelves; increased global average temperatures; and an alarming increase in the extinction of species (loss of biodiversity) that threatens food security globally.[20]

The continent of Africa is particularly susceptible to the effects of climate change. Areas that are currently experiencing food scarcity and the resulting famine will be further destabilized by increasing climate variability. Subsistence farmers in particular, will struggle more and more to adapt to unaccustomed seasonal variations in temperature and rainfall.[21]

The severity of the global environmental crisis has been underestimated and measures to combat the crisis have been hugely insufficient. Measures to reduce greenhouse emissions implemented by the United Nations is a case in point.[22] Meanwhile, time to reverse the crisis is fast running out. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports that the time remaining

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19 Roger Gottlieb ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.

20 Chris Engelbrecht, "At Death's Door," Power point slides for the talk posted on February 27, 2019 accessed from @UJLibrary · Library Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/UJLibrary/videos/614262732377939/

21 Thomas Downing, "Vulnerability to Hunger in Africa: A Climate Change Perspective," *Global Environmental Change* 1*,* no. 5 (1991):365-380; Tim Wheeler, and Joachim von Braun, "Climate Change Impacts on Global Food Security," *Science* 341, no. 6145 (2013): 508-513.

22 Clare Breidenich, Daniel Magraw, Anne Rowley, and James W. Rubin. "The Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change," *American Journal of International Law* 92, no. 2 (1998): 315-331.

to implement effective changes to limit global warming is about 12 years.[23] These predictions are disturbing and overwhelming and give rise to contradictory opinions. One deduction, however, remains undisputed – the effects of human excess on the earth and our environment are clearly discernible and need to be addressed.

c) The role of religion in the environmental crisis

All humans have a vested interest in their own and the planet's survival. Humans are guided by religion and spiritual leaders. Therefore, religion has a role to play in human life, whether in policy making or in daily life. Religion is significant in affirming the connectedness of human life to nature and natural resources. Thus, religion, as an important thought-leader in human society, cannot remain aloof from the environmental crisis. Religions have been accused of being partly responsible for the severity of the planet's crisis.[24] As guardians and guides of human societal norms, religious leaders have a responsibility to take a lead in addressing the crisis.[25]

Modern history provides a record of how progress and development were prioritized over the rights of other inhabitants of the earth and the earth herself. Part of the responsibility for the anthropocentric worldview that prevails in Western society has been ascribed to Christianity.[26] Some Christian scholars like Norman Habel have attempted to change this worldview. As part of the Earth Bible Team, a reinterpretation of the Bible was undertaken using feminist hermeneutics of suspicion to expose anthropocentric biblical texts.[27] The goal was to instil a sense of reverence for creation in readers of the Bible, and an acceptance of shared

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23 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "5th Assessment Report (2014)," accessed May 13, 2019, https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar5/; Watts, "Global warming must not exceed 1.5°C"

24 White, "The Historical Roots," 1205; Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 10-11.

25 White, "The Historical Roots," 1206; Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 147, 150.

26 White, "The Historical Roots," 1205-1206.

27 Norman Habel, ed., *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* Volume 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 7.

responsibility. For this purpose, a set of eco-justice principles were formulated.[28] An environmentally friendly worldview from a Christian perspective, according to Habel, can be expressed as follows:

> Earth is a living planet that originated in cosmic space and evolved into a living habitat; Earth is a fragile web of interconnected and interdependent forces and domains of existence; Earth is a living community in which humans and all other organisms are kin, who live and move and have their common destiny.[29]

Such attempts by Christian scholars had a limited impact and have not served to undo the heavily anthropocentric worldview undergirding Christian beliefs.

Dark Green Religion

Greening of Christianity from within, however, did not achieve the desired response. The acceptance of an environmentally friendly worldview by the majority of Christian devotees has not yet occurred. Consequently, more and more nature revering movements that are detached from recognized religious systems, have been emerging worldwide.[30] This phenomenon of nature revering movements has been extensively researched by Bron Taylor who labelled it *Dark Green Religion*.[31]

According to Taylor, adherents of DGR do not regard care of the environment purely as a moral obligation but have a passionate affection for nature and consider it to be sacred and deserving of reverent care.[32] DGR is distinguished by a kinship that incorporates all living organisms and renounces human superiority. There is also a focus on interconnectedness

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28 Habel, *Readings*, 16.
29 Norman Habel, *An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible possible*? (Hindmarsh: Australasian Theological Forum Press, 2009), 43.
30 Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 11-12.
31 Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*. 10-13.
32 Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 10.

and interdependence, a realization that is informed by scientific knowledge from various disciplines such as ecology and physics.[33]

The possible role of Dark Green Religion in promoting an alternative worldview

There are a range of movements that could fall under the DGR umbrella, Taylor distinguishes four types of DGR. They are: Spiritual Animism, Naturalistic Animism, Gaian Spirituality, and Gaian Naturalism (Gaian Earth Religion). The separations between these types are not definite and overlaps between the different types of DGR exist.[34]

Spiritual Animism refers to the conferring of supernatural powers to specific natural objects or living entities. Spiritual animism believes that these entities possess some form of consciousness and should be revered.[35] Deep Ecology[36] is a concept related to this type of spirituality that reveals a more holistic worldview.

Naturalistic Animism is a belief system without any supernatural connotations. It is based on a yearning to relate to and understand nature in all its manifestations and leads to a respectful and harmonious relationship with other living organisms.[37]

Gaian Spirituality and Gaian Naturalism are based on the concept of Gaia, the living Earth goddess.[38] This perception regards the whole biosphere as

[33] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 13.
[34] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 15.
[35] Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 11.
[36] Deep Ecology refers to the addition of ethical and spiritual components to the science of ecology, producing an interconnected and relational perspective on the environment. Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*, 2.
[37] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 15.
[38] Bron Taylor, "Religion and Environmentalism in America and Beyond," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger Gottlieb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 595; Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*, 2, 275.

one self-sustaining system. It is an expression of the DGR principle of interconnectedness and can also be referred to as organicism.[39]

Gaian Spirituality is the belief that the biosphere is a conscious supernatural being which should be revered and held sacred. It contains an element of pantheism. The belief in the supernatural links this type of DGR with Spiritual Animism.[40]

Gaian Naturalism, however, does not incorporate a belief in the supernatural, similar to Naturalistic Animism. Gaian Naturalism still incorporates a pantheistic reverence towards Gaia, the earth, but combines it with scientific knowledge regarding living eco-systems and their interactions.[41]

The four types of DGR outlined above illustrate how diverse belief systems can be interrelated, allowing them to merge into the phenomenon of Dark Green Religion.

Though it might seem unfamiliar, the essence of DGR is present around us in various guises. A brief examination of the topics of popular films, books, music and poetry reveals aspects of DGR, directly or indirectly. World leaders also reflect aspects of DGR in their media releases, an example being the well-known documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth,* released in 2006 by the then vice-president of the USA, Al Gore.[42]

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39 Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 16.
40 Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 16.
41 Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*, 114.
42 John Rafferty, "An Inconvenient Truth: 10 Years hence", 2016, accessed January 16, 2019, www.britannica.com/story/an-inconvenient-truth-10-years-hence

Evidence of the principles of Dark Green Religion in the life of Wangari Maathai

Wangari Maathai is an excellent example of a world leader promoting a change in worldview and supporting it by her actions.

a) A growing environmental awareness

The autobiography of Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2007), provides the reader with a vivid account of Maathai's early childhood in rural Kenya.[43] She recounts how her love for and association with nature was nurtured. At that time the land was fertile, and people could cultivate sufficient food to provide for their needs.[44] Her childhood years were spent under colonial rule and she witnessed the deterioration taking place in the environment due to exploitative agricultural practices. The land was denuded of trees. This, in combination with other consequences of commercial farming, resulted in the deterioration of the environment. The extent of the degeneration of the environment within just one generation was such that subsistence farmers could no longer survive.[45]

Maathai also grew up with the Kikuyu tradition of evening storytelling, which was how knowledge was transferred from one generation to the next.[46] The stories helped children to develop a sense of identity and belonging, while simultaneously imbibing the foundations of African traditional religion as part of their daily lives. Stories instilled in youth an appreciation for the knowledge of their people as they learned to live in harmony with the land around them.[47]

These cultural practices were replaced when Christian missionaries introduced Western concepts into the Kikuyu culture. People lost their sense

[43] Maathai, *Unbowed*, 2-3.
[44] Maathai, *Unbowed*, 4.
[45] Maathai, *Unbowed*, 37-39.
[46] Maathai, *Unbowed*, 5.
[47] Maathai, *Unbowed*, 5.

of identity and developed a disregard for their environment.[48] Colonial rulers promoted the use of English, instead of African languages, and renamed landmarks. This further confused and disrupted people's development of a sense of belonging.[49]

However, colonial practices did not compel Maathai to lose her love for her mother tongue and her traditions[50] – factors contributing to the success of the GBM in obtaining the support of rural communities.[51]

b) Indications of the principle of belonging

The principle of belonging refers to a sincere belief that the earth is our home and humans belong and derive our personal well-being from this connection.[52] The principle of belonging can be discerned in various facets of the life of Wangari Maathai. As already mentioned, her African traditions were a major influence in her life. These included the Kikuyu rituals at the birth of her children;[53] the naming of her children after relatives;[54] the changes to her own name;[55] the tradition of storytelling which was often used by Maathai when speaking in public;[56] and the maintaining of her family ties.[57]

The relationship with her mother was especially important to Wangari Maathai. This strong bond enabled her to relate to the problems experienced

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48 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 6.
49 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 11, 60.
50 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 60, 71.
51 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 174.
52 Hendrik Viviers, "Is Psalm 104 an Expression (also) of Dark Green Religion?" *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017): 4, a3829. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.3829.
53 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 7.
54 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 49, 112.
55 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 96, 147.
56 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 50; Kathleen Hunt, ""It's more *than* Planting Trees, it's Planting Ideas": Ecofeminist Praxis in the Green Belt Movement," *Southern Communication Journal* 79, no. 3 (2014): 235.
57 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 13, 274-276).

by rural women living in a degraded environment.[58] This connection between rural African women, who are directly affected by the condition of their environment, and social justice, was the starting point that led Maathai to engage with authorities.[59]

The actions initiated by Maathai and the GBM against social injustice and corruption, as well as decisions negatively affecting the environment, resulted in conflict between her and the government.[60]

Wangari Maathai's commitment to her African roots translated into actions to protect the environment, to enable future generations to continue living sustainably. This is evidence of the principle of belonging. In her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, she emphasizes this: "Africans, especially, should re-discover positive aspects of their culture. In accepting them, they would give themselves a sense of belonging, identity and self-confidence".[61]

c) Indications of the Principle of interconnectedness

The principle of interconnectedness is based on the reality that all life on Earth is *connected* and *interrelated* in some or other way and shares the same resources.[62] The principle of belonging or kinship discussed previously forms part of this recognition of the interconnectedness of life on Earth. Interconnectedness refers to the connections that exist between all humans, but also extends to other living organisms, for example trees.

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58 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 123-125.

59 Maathai, "Nobel Peace Prize speech," 2; "An Unbreakable Link," 25.

60 Her campaigns for democratic governance and sustainable environmental practices provoked harsh responses from the Kenyan government but that did not deter her. Maathai, *Unbowed*, 179-183; "An Unbreakable Link," 24; A well-known incident took place at Freedom Corner in Nairobi. There a protest against detention of political activists without trial was held by the mothers of the prisoners and by Wangari Maathai herself. She remarks: "The story of Freedom Corner did not end with my hospitalization or the dispersal of the mothers. *We remained unbowed*." (222), which became the title of her autobiography – *Unbowed: A Memoir*, 2007.

61 Maathai, "Nobel Peace Prize speech," 3.

62 Viviers, "Psalm 104 an Expression of Dark Green Religion?" 6.

From a very young age Maathai loved cultivating the fields and planting crops with her mother. During this process, she observed the interdependence between the soil, plants, insects such as bees and butterflies, and the birds that came and ate the seeds.[63] Even after moving away to attend school, she returned during holidays to help her mother cultivate the fields and harvest the crops.[64]

Trees played a large role in the life of Wangari Maathai, and one specific fig tree features in some of her cherished childhood memories. Her mother taught her that fig trees are sacred and should always be left undisturbed.[65] As a small child, she used to play at the foot of a huge fig tree with a stream bubbling out from under its roots. In the stream among the plants growing there, she played with the frogs' eggs and tadpoles.[66] Her scientific education later enabled her to understand the interdependence between the various components of ecosystems. She also realized that the traditional knowledge of her people acknowledged this interdependence and protected it.[67] The significance of Kikuyu traditional knowledge was brought home to her in a stark manner when she returned as an adult to the area where she used to play and found the tree cut down and the stream dried up.[68]

During her university career, Maathai was required to do research on cattle diseases, and became aware how undernourished not only the animals, but also the people of the rural areas had become. It indicated a decrease in the yield from the once fertile fields and illuminated some of the problems faced by women in rural areas. These problems became the focus of the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK).[69]

63 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 37-38.
64 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 47-48.
65 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 45.
66 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 45.
67 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 46, 122.
68 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 121-122.
69 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 123-124.

Maathai concluded that the undernourishment she observed was as a result of a diet lacking in nutrients and that it was linked to a shortage of firewood. Trees were removed to provide space for commercial farming and indigenous forests were replaced with plantations of exotic trees.[70] This resulted in less wood being available for household use. Women prepared foods that required less cooking or reverted to more processed foods and as a result, people became undernourished.[71] The fields also did not yield as abundantly as before due to exhaustion of the soil.[72]

The realization that the environment had deteriorated, in just one generation, such that people could no longer sustain themselves, and that this deterioration would affect all future generations including herself and her children,[73] motivated Maathai to find a solution. The solution was to plant indigenous trees. These trees would address the problems faced by rural people, particularly rural women, on more than one level. The natural eco-systems would be restored by the trees providing a habitat for birds, plants, insects and animals; the trees would nourish and enrich the soil; the trees would improve water retention and prevent erosion by binding the soil with their roots; the trees would provide food for humans and animals; the trees would provide shade; and the trees would provide firewood. From this idea, the GBM was born.[74]

In her speech when accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, Maathai says that:

> Women did not realize that meeting their needs depended on their environment being healthy and well managed. They were unaware that a degraded environment leads to a scramble for scarce resources and may culminate in poverty and even conflict. They were also unaware of the injustices of international economic arrangements.[75]

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70 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 38-39.
71 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 123.
72 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 121.
73 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 125.
74 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 125.
75 Maathai, "Nobel Peace Prize speech", 2.

This statement reiterates the interconnectedness between people, their environment and their personal well-being.

d) Indications of the Principle of sacredness

The word *sacred* means that something or someone is above or apart from the ordinary.[76] In terms of DGR, the term sacred implies the possession of intrinsic worth, and describes the feelings of awe and wonder experienced when faced with the beauty and grandeur of creation.[77] This principle opposes the utilitarian worldview that only considers the material worth and profit potential of the earth and her resources. The DGR principle of sacredness links directly with religion as revealed by the language used to describe it.[78]

The title of her work, *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World* (2010),[79] confirms that spiritual values are at the core of the work of the GBM and formed the foundation of Maathai's personal vision. In this book, she elaborates on the core values underlying the GBM and describes how the beauty and wonders of nature inspire feelings of wonder and awe in people, a confirmation of the DGR principle of sacredness in her life.

According to Maathai, the earth should be preserved, protected and respected and she urges all earth's inhabitants to participate in this. Her own words powerfully express this: "The future of the planet concerns all of us, and all of us should do what we can to protect it"[80]... "As women and men continue this work of clothing this naked Earth, we are in the company of

[76] Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1987), 282.
[77] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 12; Viviers, "Psalm 104 an Expression of Dark Green Religion?" 7.
[78] Eliade, The Encyclopedia of Religion, 282, 284.
[79] Maathai, Replenishing the Earth.
[80] Maathai, Unbowed, 138.

many others throughout the world who care deeply for this blue planet. We have nowhere else to go".[81]

Maathai makes little reference to her personal relationship with religion, but the language she uses to refer to nature displays her reverence for the earth and her resources. Her references to Mount Kenya are examples of this: "I faced Mt Kenya, the source of inspiration for me throughout my life, as well as for generations of people before me";[82] and "At that moment I felt I stood on sacred ground".[83]

Maathai acknowledges that she adopted an ecumenical approach to religion,[84] and as already discussed, admits that her African traditions and culture played a large role in her life. Therefore, in interaction with communities, the GBM makes use of knowledge from the Kikuyu tradition as well as practices with a Judeo-Christian origin.[85] Concepts from other religious traditions are also included, such as the concept of *mottainai*, from an Eastern religious perspective,[86] that promotes respect and gratitude for the earth's resources. Maathai's ecumenical approach supports the view that her main motivation was to care for the earth and to encourage all other people to join her in that mission. She views the earth as possessing intrinsic worth and as being worthy of care, protection and respect.[87] This is a reflection of the DGR principle of sacredness.

e) The symbolism of trees

Trees are considered as a symbol of life because of their ability to regenerate. They represent youth, immortality and wisdom.[88] Throughout

81 Maathai, Unbowed, 295.
82 Maathai, Unbowed, 292-293.
83 Maathai, Unbowed, 293.
84 Maathai, Replenishing the Earth, 20.
85 Maathai, Replenishing the Earth, 20.
86 Maathai, "An Unbreakable Link", 27; Maathai, Replenishing the Earth, 15.
87 Maathai, Unbowed, 138, 295.
88 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Houghton Mifflin: Harcourt, 1959), 149.

the history of humankind, trees have been part of religious ritual and are imbued with sacredness.[89] Trees also form part of African traditional religion and sacred practices involving trees are found in various communities all over the continent.[90]

The GBM promoted the planting of trees as a way of regenerating the environment, but Maathai remarks that "Trees are living symbols of peace and hope."[91] Thus, she acknowledges that trees have ecological as well as spiritual value.

Maathai planted trees to commemorate important occasions,[92] a technique that became characteristic of the GBM and one that was used as a method of peaceful environmental activism by communities.[93] The actions of the GBM also focus on the preservation and recreation of forests through the planting of *Green Belts of trees*.[94] Maathai believed that forests played an important role in healing the wounds inflicted on the earth and therefore considered them very important.[95]

f) Gaian Naturalism

In the preceding explanation of DGR, it was mentioned that the phenomenon of DGR can be discerned as four different types of spirituality. Gaian Naturalism is a personal belief system that reveres the earth without any supernatural connotations, in combination with ecological scientific knowledge.[96] From the discussion about Wangari Maathai and the evidence of the principles of DGR in her life, it may be concluded that her spirituality resembles that of Gaian Naturalism. Her spiritual value system is closely

89 Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1661.
90 Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 81.
91 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 293.
92 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 228, 292, 306.
93 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 131, 167; Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 96.
94 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 273.
95 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 173.
96 Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*, 114.

bonded with an overarching reverence and concern for the earth and her inhabitants.

A link between ecofeminism and Dark Green Religion

The term *ecofeminism* is a combination of the words *ecology* and *feminism*. Ecology is the study of the *oikos* or *household* of earth and the relationships that binds all members of the household together, [97] and feminism is seen as being different from the accepted (masculine or patriarchal) norm and questioning the status quo.[98] The term *ecofeminism w*as first used by Francoise d'Eubonne in a publication in 1974 and has since been considered as either a wave of feminism or a manifestation of *Deep Ecology*.[99] (see also Footnote 39).

As discussed previously, the phenomenon of DGR is characterized by the three principles of *belonging*, *interconnectedness* and *sacredness*. These principles are also important concepts of ecofeminism. The holistic thinking promoted by ecofeminism is grounded in ecological principles instead of a dualistic view of life and strives towards interconnectedness between human genders and between humans and nature.[100] The lack of an alternative home means that sustainability is our only future, a founding tenet of ecofeminism.[101] DGR promotes this same interconnectedness, derived from a holistic ecological point of view.[102] In the work of Wangari Maathai with the GBM, trees functioned as living examples of *interconnectedness* and

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97 Jytte Nhanenge, "Ecofeminism: Towards Integrating the Concerns of Women, Poor People and Nature into Development" (Master's diss, UNISA, 2007), 120.

98 Nhanenge, "Ecofeminism: Towards Integrating the Concerns of Women," 98.

99 Laura Hobgood-Oster, "Ecofeminism – Historic and International Evolution," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron R Taylor (London: Thoemmes, 2005), 533.

100 Nhanenge, "Ecofeminism: Towards Integrating the Concerns of Women," 114; Hobgood-Oster, "Ecofeminism evolution", 534.

101 Nhanenge, "Ecofeminism: Towards Integrating the Concerns of Women," 412.

102 Viviers, "Psalm 104 an Expression of Dark Green Religion?" 6.

changed both the environment and people's lives, in particular, that of rural African women.[103]

The principle of interconnectedness is closely linked to that of sacredness, in that it focuses on the one Earth that is our home and our only refuge.[104] Ecofeminism has a strong spiritual component and often interacts with inter-religious dialogues, and links with feminist interpretations of sacred texts.[105] The movement's promotion of respect and reverence for the earth as the foundation for the survival of humanity [106] provides proof of the sacredness that nature is regarded with.[107] Based on the acceptance of Mother Earth as our home, belonging is the remaining principle of DGR that is interwoven with the other two (interconnectedness and sacredness).[108] In Wangari Maathai's life, evidence of this principle is found in her appreciation of her African roots and culture.[109]

In the prior sections of this article, I attempted to provide proof of the principles of DGR in the life and work of Wangari Maathai; but as indicated above, these principles can likewise be found in the concept of ecofeminism as well. Therefore, Wangari Maathai can be viewed as an eco-feminist, based on her role as a social activist in pursuing social justice for women as well as environmental justice.[110]

Conclusion

A discussion of the environment we live in and the deteriorating condition of the earth and her interlinked eco-systems inevitably leads to the deduction that the effects of human excess on the earth and our environment are

[103] Gathuru Mburu, "Kenya Green Belt Movement," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron R Taylor (London: Thoemmes, 2005), 957.
[104] Nhanenge, "Ecofeminism: Towards Integrating the Concerns of Women," 558.
[105] Hobgood-Oster, "Ecofeminism – Historic and International Evolution", 537.
[106] Nhanenge, "Ecofeminism: Towards Integrating the Concerns of Women," 558.
[107] Nhanenge, "Ecofeminism: Towards Integrating the Concerns of Women," 558.
[108] Viviers, "Psalm 104 an Expression of Dark Green Religion?" 4.
[109] Maathai, *Unbowed,* 60, 71, 174.
[110] Mburu, "Kenya Green Belt Movement," 957.

clearly discernible and need to be addressed. Only a unified response from all sectors of human society would have the potential to positively impact environmental degradation. This article attempted to examine the underlying principles holding together the life of a person who dedicated her life to respond to environmental degradation, namely, Wangari Maathai, the Nobel Peace Prize winner of 2004.

This study of Wangari Maathai's written legacy provides evidence of the presence of the DGR principles of belonging, interconnectedness and sacredness in her life. I conclude that she may be considered a proponent of the Dark Green Religion and that her spirituality may be viewed as Gaian Naturalism, one of the four types of the DGR.

Viewing Wangari Maathai's life through the hermeneutical lenses of DGR provides support for the promotion of DGR as a forum that could unite nature revering movements and formulate a unified response to the environmental crisis. A unified response could, in turn, promote a change in worldview among human beings and accelerate the adoption of an environmentally sustainable lifestyle. An environmentally sustainable lifestyle could significantly contribute to the reversal of the degradation of the environment and ease the global crisis.

Maathai's reverence and concern for the earth and all her inhabitants resulted in admirable perseverance and commitment in attempting to restore the environment of her country. Wangari Maathai is an example to all of us. She made any sacrifice necessary to reach her goal of restoring the environment, and in the process made a significant contribution.

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Sisters in Solidarity: Resistance and Agency through Urban Community Food Gardens in Pietermaritzburg

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[1]SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

In this article I explore the solidarity, resistance and agency of a group of women involved in an urban community food garden project in collaboration with the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community Social Action (PACSA). I explore this initiative through the lenses of African Women's Theology (AWT) and Oikos Theology and suggest that urban community food gardens represent a cooperation with nature and a resistance to social structures and systems that perpetuate marginalization, inequality, and subjugation of women. AWT provides a means to theorize and theologize women's suffering and agency, and Oikos Theology recognizes the connection between economy and ecology. I tease out how ecological and indigenous wisdom applied in urban community food gardens results in a mutually sustaining relationship between local communities and the earth. I also show how the development of an ecological consciousness not only serves to mitigate food insecurity but empowers women to resist systems and structures of oppression and to embrace affirming and life-giving traditions.

KEYWORDS
African Women's Theology, community urban food gardens, ecological wisdom, food insecurity, indigenous wisdom, Oikos Theology

Introduction

In this article I focus on women who participate in urban food gardening in the city of Pietermaritzburg and examine their agency and ecological astuteness. Through the lens of AWT, I demonstrate how urban community food gardens have become not just a measure to mitigate food insecurity but a space where women could unite in a common struggle against a myriad of social woes brought on by structural inequalities. The socio-economic struggle for people living in under-resourced areas is systemic,

pervasive and destabilizing.[1] Amidst it all, women navigate, struggle and demonstrate agency through resistance and solidarity. Through the lens of Oikos Theology, I suggest that urban community food gardeners in Pietermaritzburg resist economic injustice and oppression by reclaiming access to the land (albeit temporarily) which was taken under apartheid. By employing ecological and indigenous wisdom in tending the soil and taking care of nature, a mutually sustaining relationship between the food gardeners and the earth is achieved and food insecurity is alleviated.

A propitious encounter

When I embarked on my doctoral studies in 2017, I first encountered a group of women working on urban food gardens in the city of Pietermaritzburg. My affiliation with the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community Social Action (PACSA), began in 2007, when, as a student worker for the Ujamaa Centre, University of KwaZulu-Natal, I assisted in conducting a series of contextual Bible studies on gender related issues at PACSA. My awareness of the social justice work undertaken by PACSA is what prompted me to approach them to request that they act as gatekeeper[2] for my research. The response was positive and led to my working with the group of women who partner with PACSA vis-à-vis urban food gardens.

Established as a Faith Based Organization (FBO) in 1979, PACSA is located in the city of Pietermaritzburg. Working within a social justice paradigm, the initial task of PACSA was the conscientization of white Christians in South Africa about the evils of apartheid and the impact of its oppression on the majority of South Africa's population.[3] Over time, and with the eradication of

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1 Yousif Ismael Abdulla, "Causes of food Insecurity in Southern Africa: An Assessment," (Masters diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2007), 20-21.; Jonathan Crush and Mary Caesar, "City without Cchoice: Urban Food Insecurity in Msunduzi, South Africa," *Urban Forum* 25 (2014):165-175.

2 A gatekeeper is an individual or organization that acts as an intermediary between a researcher and potential research participants.

3 Charles Manda, "Doing Theology at the Margins: PACSA's Accompaniment of Communities in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, 1979-2012," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 40, no 2 (2014): 263.

apartheid, PACSA's mandate changed to serving marginalized communities still grappling with the legacies of apartheid's oppression.[4] Guided by what it calls a 'theology of accompaniment,' PACSA privileges a preferential option for the poor,[5] and works towards community development and transformation. Through its core strategy of process facilitation, PACSA partners with local communities in efforts to build citizenship and restore human dignity.[6]

As a researcher interested in the lived realities of women on the margins of society—their interests, concerns, struggles, challenges and triumphs—I was keen to observe the inner workings of the group because of their commitment to dealing with issues of food insecurity in their communities, and because they provided links to community knowledge that I would otherwise not have access to. PACSA invited me to journey with the group of women (with their permission) for a short while as they worked on urban food gardens in collaboration with PACSA. This group of urban food gardeners would subsequently become research participants in my doctoral research.

The gardeners are deeply embedded in their local communities, and have a profound interest in the well-being and development of these communities, particularly that of women. Aside from their work on urban food gardens in the city, the gardeners undertake other income generating measures to sustain themselves and their families. Their income generating activities also serve to spearhead community-centered support groups that address particular community needs and challenges. The group's creative endeavours represent a form of resistance to structural inequalities that result in food insecurity and other social problems.

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4 See PACSA's work with the urban poor at: Julie Smith and Mervyn Abrahams, "PACSA Food Price Barometer," *PACSA, Pietermaritzburg*, November 2016, 2.

5 A preferential option for the poor is built on the premise that poverty and inhumanity is contrary to the will of God. See Gustavo Gutierrez*, On Job,* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), 94.

6 Manda, "Doing Theology at the Margins," 263-280.

Falling between the ages 28 and 60, each of the ten community food gardeners belonged to a township or informal settlement in and around Pietermaritzburg. Deeply committed to their Christian faith, they represented various Christian denominations. Each of them also spearheaded community support groups within their communities to address social justice issues relevant to their communities. The women were a mixed group consisting of single, married and widowed women with families to support. A few were grandmothers responsible for the guardianship or care of their grandchildren.

Food insecurity in Pietermaritzburg

South Africa is viewed as a food secure nation. This means that it has the capacity to produce enough food and the means to import food in instances of deficit. Yet, research in the field of food security reveals high levels of food insecurity across the country.[7] Even though there is an availability of food, many people do not have access to sufficient nutritious food due to poverty, unemployment, and other social factors. Due to the spatial and socio-economic segregation of cities in South Africa, urban food insecurity is pervasive and affects predominantly the low-income urban poor. The prevailing inequitable social structures in South Africa—the vestiges of apartheid—further exacerbate the levels of disparity. The gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow, even under the post-apartheid dispensation.[8]

In Pietermaritzburg and the surrounding areas, research reveals that a large percentage of urban households are food insecure and rely upon social grants as their only source of income.[9] With households ranging from around 7 to 10 members on average, it is impossible to provide sustenance for an

[7] Jonathan Crush and Bruce Frayne, "The Invisible Crisis: Urban Food Security in Southern Africa," *Urban Food Security Series* No. 1. (Kingston and Cape Town: Queen's University and AFSUN, 2010), 5.

[8] Jane Battersby, "A Call for a Food Systems Approach to Alleviating Food Insecurity" *Input for Province* (September 2015): 3.

[9] Battersby, "A Call for a Food Systems Approach," 2.

entire family with the meagre sum received through social grants of R300 per child and R1700 for pensioners.[10] With high unemployment rates, rising food prices and escalating transportation and schooling costs, households must find other means of income generation and food supply.[11]

Research also reveals that women are most affected by food insecurity.[12] Due to the evolving familial system, where the heads of households are often women, it is incumbent upon them to find pragmatic and agentive ways of putting food on the table.[13] Research shows that, though women are the backbone of many under-resourced households, they are often more marginalized than their male counterparts.[14] Due to the feminization of poverty,[15] its severity is most pervasive among women and children and it is extremely arduous for women to lift themselves and their children out of such a state. Compounding the issue of poverty are the lack of access to important services such as health care and housing, as well as lack of proper plumbing and sanitation systems in homes.[16] These put a strain on women as they struggle to acquire sufficient water to cook healthy meals and take care of their households. This also negatively impacts women's health and the health of their families. Consequently, many women in South Africa still find themselves totally crushed by the weight of socio-economic

[10] Battersby, "A Call for a Food Systems Approach," 3.
[11] Battersby, "A Call for a Food Systems Approach," 4.
[12] Belinda Dodson, Asiyati Chiweza and Liam Riley, "Gender and Food Insecurity in Southern African Cities," *AFSUN Food Security Series*, no. 10 (2012), 3.
[13] Battersby, "A Call for a Food Systems Approach," 4.
[14] Dodson, Chiweza and Riley, "Gender and Food Insecurity," 3.
[15] The term 'feminization of poverty' refers to the widening gender gap in poverty that is caused by inequality between genders in living standards, livelihood opportunities, deferential pay for similar work, and lack of a level playing field in education and employment, among other causes. It refers to the phenomenon of a disproportionate percentage of women and children found in the low-income category than men belonging to a similar socio-economic group.
[16] Jonathan Crush and Bruce Frayne, "Supermarket Expansion and the Informal Food Economy in Southern African Cities: Implications for Urban Food security," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 37, no.4 (2011):781-807; Crush and Frayne, "The Invisible Crisis," 54.

deprivation.[17] Food insecurity has proved to be one of the main areas of vulnerability for under-resourced women, living on the margins of society in the Msunduzi Municipality.[18]

African Women's Theology (AWT)

African Women's Theology is a form of liberation theology.[19] Its theological and empirical approach is contextual and communal. The liberationist tenets of AWT include an ethic of resistance and transformation, creating a space for African women and men to deal with all forms of domination and oppression.[20] It extends beyond merely seeking liberation for women, by seeking the liberation of all people – men, women and children in all of society. It is a protest against the subjugation of African women in church and society, leading women to rise up against the forces of oppression and injustice, be it socio-economic, political, religious or cultural. AWT is committed to women at the grassroots level, to women in the academy, and the church.[21] As such, it speaks the language of the academy and the community, linguistically, culturally and socially.[22] It engages themes of religion and theology, social justice, equity, inclusion and solidarity across race, class, gender and ethnic lines, aiming to be both prophetic and activist.[23] AWT takes seriously the idea of human dignity for all and the notion that African women's oppression is intertwined with racism, socio-

[17] Frank Chikane, "Reflections of South Africa's Oikos Journey: From Apartheid to Democracy," Diakonia Council of Churches, 2006. 1.

[18] Crush and Frayne, "The Invisible Crisis." 5.

[19] African Women's Theology focuses on oppressive religio-cultural, political and economic systems that disenfranchise African women.

[20] Ezra Chitando, *Troubled but not Destroyed: African Theology in Dialogue with HIV and AIDS* (Switzerland: World Council of Churches Publications, 2009), 32-33.

[21] It is important to point out that African Women's Theology embraces an interfaith approach and has established links with women from other faiths. See Melany Adonis, "An African Woman's Theological Analysis of a Development Programme: 'Churches, channels of hope'" (Masters Thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2017), 73-74.

[22] Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, eds.*, African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Oduyoye* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2011), 83.

[23] Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, "The Personal is Political: Faith and Religion in a Public University" *Acta Theologica: Supplementum* 14, (2011): 83.

economic injustice and oppressive religious and cultural practices.[24] It confronts all factors that deny African women and others their basic human right to dignity.[25]

African Women's Theology is cognizant of the vital role women play in their communities, churches, and society at large and takes seriously women's experiences of dehumanization. Significantly, AWT is designed specifically for African women[26] on the African continent. As such, it is deeply attuned to understanding and analysing the specific challenges African women in Africa face. AWT is also, unquestionably, ecologically attuned. Its gaze is not limited to analysis of women, but to all of humanity and nature.[27] It holds the view that women's struggle for liberation from all forms of oppression is a struggle for liberation for all of humanity and nature. As such, AWT is inherently ecologically sensitive.[28] It is characterized by interrelationships, justice and transformation, and seeks to address challenges of contemporary life and struggles women in Africa are confronted with.[29]

African Women's Theology challenges the silence around issues of gender and the denial of women's agency and it maintains that women are not only survivors of oppression and domination but active agents in their own

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24 Phiri and Nadar, "The Personal is Political," 83.

25 Adonis, "An African Woman's Theological Analysis," 73-74.

26 The term 'African women' is not used to categorize African women in Africa as a monolithic and homogenous group. I acknowledge that there are both similarities and differences between African women. In this article I wish to only convey that the term "African Women's Theology" clubs "African women" together under a common rubric that is based on shared challenges faced by African women in the context of Africa.

27 Martha Fredericks, "Miss Jairus speaks: Developments in African Feminist Theology" *Exchange* 32, no1 (2003): 72.

28 Philomena Mwaura, "The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and Their Engagement in Public Theology: A Pathway to Development," *Online Journal* (2015) http://journals.vonbi.ac.za. Accessed June 30, 2019.

29 Philomena Mwaura "The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and Their Engagement in Public Theology: A Pathway to Development," *Online Journal* (2015): 99, accessed June 30, 2019, http://journals.vonbi.ac.za.

liberation.[30] AWT's awareness of economic policies and systems and of how colonization, apartheid, globalization and issues of race, class and gender affect the lives of women in specific locales, puts it in a pivotal place to theorize the suffering, resilience, and agency of the group of women working on community urban food gardens in Pietermaritzburg.

Resistance through solidarity: Navigating suffering and agency

The starting point of AWT is women's experience. This analysis entails an enquiry into the nature of the oppression women face, the sources of oppression, and questioning what is being done to eradicate that oppression. Work is then undertaken towards empowerment and change. Schüssler-Fiorenza makes the point that women's suffering is located in the "structural interconnections between the gendered economic system of capitalistic patriarchy, its racist underpinnings, and women's global poverty."[31] The politics of economics, then, is one of the key reasons women suffer systemic injustice and oppression. In an attempt to understand such oppression and exploitation in any given locale, there is a need to capture the voices of women as they speak: of their experiences of being women, of the many forms their resistance to injustice takes, and of the vital elements such as spirituality and sisterhood that they embrace to make meaning of their lives and lift themselves out of dire situations.

As I journeyed with the group of women gardeners, I became deeply mindful of the embodiment of AWT in their lives – they embraced it, and through it, found ways to overcome the harsh conditions they faced. While the group of women were not aware of the theological, academic, and activist nature of

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[30] Nyambura Njoroge, "A New Way of Facilitating Leadership: Lessons from African Women Theologians," A Paper Presented at *The American Society of Missiology* (2004): 447, accessed on July 23, 2021, https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/21579/018.

[31] Elizabeth Schüssler-*Fiorenza, "The Endless Day: Introduction," in Women, Work and Poverty, ed., Elizabeth* Schüssler-*Fiorenza and Anne Carr Concilium, (London: SCM Press, 1987): xviii-xxiii.*

AWT, they embodied its tenets in their day-to-day struggle for survival, their resistance to systemic injustice, and their agency in the face of overwhelming disparity. In an environment where under-resourced households struggled to put food on the table, these women used urban community food gardens as an important safe space to mobilize and draw on communal strength as they worked in solidarity to overcome poverty. Where conflict or disagreement arose within the group, the collective met regularly at PACSA with a mediator to iron out their differences. More importantly, the group of women maintained that prayer, fellowship, and building strong friendships with each other was an appropriate way to navigate differences and disagreements among them.

Resistance took on many forms among the women as they garnered social capital[32] through interaction with each other. Participation in urban community food gardens provided a space not only to grow their own food, thereby mitigating food insecurity, but also created a space where the women could unite in a common struggle. As I journeyed with them, we engaged in conversation about a wide range of issues, resulting in a depth of connection developing between us. I shared my own journey and struggles and listened to theirs. In the sharing of our life stories, our struggles and our victories, I realized how deeply beneficial such an exercise was, how our sharing helped each of us to develop our own self-confidence and self-worth. I recall the admiration I felt as I observed the camaraderie and genuine concern women showed for each other's well-being. Significantly, as is characteristic of women in South Africa, we sang as we worked, tilling the soil and invoking God's grace and aid in ensuring enough rain for the crops to grow and a bountiful harvest. Intermittently, we shared how our faith helped us through difficult times. In and through our interactions, I recognized the very tenets of AWT being lived out in everyday life by extraordinary women. As a group, united in a common struggle, the concern

[32] Social capital exemplifies a network of relationships within a group or society which enables positive and productive interaction and, in turn, produces tangible or intangible results through networking, the exchange of ideas, and emotional and physical support.

was first and foremost the empowerment of women and the recognition that every woman had something significant to offer on the road to transformation. In confronting the life-denying elements of poverty, and exclusion from mainstream economy, the group of women affirmed their interconnectedness with nature and recovered their human right to dignity. The power they exhibited was shared power, inclusive of all in the group and flowing freely from one to another. In and through all this, transformation was apparent.

Oikos Theology

Derived from the Greek language, the term 'oikos' means 'house' or 'household.' 'Oikos' therefore by implication refers to the earth, which is our home, and all of creation as belonging to the household.[33] Oikos Theology encapsulates three essential components. Oikos-nomos, or God's economy, means 'the rules of the household.' Oikos-nomos speaks of God's engagement in creation. Economy and economic justice are always matters of faith and, as such, are at the very core of God's will for creation.[34] Oikos-nomos foregrounds the delicate balance of all life on Earth and is mindful of the balance that is essential between production, consumption and waste as humanity co-exists on the earth as God's household. Oikos-nomos insists that the current generation be cognizant of the generations to come in the ways in which the generations live on, live together and preserve the earth. Oikos-logos, or God's ecology, is intricately related to oikos-nomos. The economy of the earth cannot be separated from the earth's ecology. How we treat the earth's natural resources has a direct impact on the ability for life on Earth to either flourish or fizzle. In order to sustain life, both economy and ecology must be in perfect harmony. However, this harmony has been disturbed. Industrial and technological advancement broke the link between the two. Economy now implies the generation of wealth through aggressive exploitation of the earth's natural resources, treating the earth as a dump-

[33] Diakonia Council of Churches, *The Oikos Journey: A Theological Refection of the Economic Crisis in South Africa* (Durban: Diakonia Council of Churches Publications, 2006), 23-24.
[34] Diakonia Council of Churches, *The Oikos Journey*, 24.

site and a receptacle for waste. Oikoumene, translated 'the whole inhabited Earth,' and the word 'ecumenical,' bring together the idea of the household of God along with some of the meanings of both economy and ecology[35]. Oikoumene speaks of God's engagement with the earth towards social justice, equality, reconciliation and a flourishing of the whole Earth and all of God's creation.[36] As inhabitants of the household of God, humanity is called to be co-creators with God, seeking unity and mutual benefit of all the people of the earth. Oikoumene is governed by seven key principles[37]:

1. The Earth, our home, is full of God's grace and love and our ability to survive depends on how we receive and appropriate God's grace and love. The exploitative nature of humanity's economics is incongruent to God's economics.

2. Labour can be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, humanity is called to be co-labourers and co-creators with God, making labour an expression of creative power. On the other hand, labour can be a curse when people do not have the right to the produce or products they produce. When their earnings are so meagre, they cannot afford to buy the very thing they have produced, hence, labour becomes oppressive.

3. There is a direct link between economy, ecology, human labour, human rest and human dignity. Rest, or the Sabbath, is God's way of reminding us that humanity has dignity beyond being units of production. God's rest calls us to acknowledge that economic systems must be subservient to the ethic of justice and equality. God's economy and God's ecology are designed to serve all. Where some prosper at the expense of others, it defeats God's intended purpose for economy and ecology coming together to form oikoumene.

[35] Diakonia Council of Churches, *The Oikos Journey,* 25
[36] Diakonia Council of Churches, *The Oikos Journey*, 25.
[37] The principles are adapted from: Diakonia Council of Churches, *The Oikos Journey*, 25-30

4. God's prosperity is always shared prosperity. This shared prosperity is dependent on just, fair and appropriate management of God's ecology and equitable access to resources in God's economy. Economic justice is also ecological justice.

5. When prosperity is pursued at the expense of human dignity, it becomes life-denying, not life affirming, and is in direct contrast to God's plan and intention for the household of God.

6. God's economy is not only about structures and systems but a matter of discipleship – about how we as individuals live out our lives in the world; how we wrestle with and fight injustice, greed and oppression.

7. God's economy is not just about the present generation but about generations to come. As co-labourers and co-creators with God, humanity must live in a way that is sustainable so that the land, or the Earth, is preserved for generations to come.[38]

Resisting economic and ecological injustice

Economic injustice breeds poverty and has a direct impact on the many vulnerabilities women face. In the quote below, a member of Diakonia Council of Churches spoke to a 34-year-old unemployed volunteer who worked on local community projects. The quote brings to light the reality of poverty and lack of food in under-resourced communities in South Africa:

I am a mother of five. There are no jobs and there is a high rate of illiteracy. Elderly people have no IDs to access pension. They have grandchildren to look after. The government is doing nothing about this. Some of these children have opted to sell their bodies in order to have something in their stomachs. I don't want to talk about this because it makes me feel so bad.[39]

[38] Diakonia Council of Churches, *The Oikos Journey*, 29.
[39] Diakonia Council of Churches, *The Oikos Journey,* 11.

The situation portrayed is indicative of the lived reality of many people in South Africa. Economic injustice puts women and children in harm's way because it is embedded in political and economic systems, thus disenfranchising the poorest of the poor. Moreover, economic freedom is often an elusive dream as economic opportunities are few in an environment where unemployment is rampant.

It is in this context that the group of women I engaged with became activists, environmentalists, community organizers, and urban food gardeners to address the economic challenges they face. The gardens, situated on the edges of the city on unused land, are tended regularly and with consummate dedication. The gardeners work on the premise that their foremothers tended and nurtured the soil until it yielded nourishment and that gardening is, therefore, an established and viable measure to counteract food insecurity. The women spoke of how urban existence and segregated living under apartheid robbed them of the vocation of farming the land and providing sustenance for their families. In tilling the soil, planting and harvesting, they rely on indigenous knowledge handed down to them by their mothers and grandmothers. They know instinctively when to plant and when to harvest, when to water the soil and when to leave it up to the weather, which crops to plant in particular seasons, and the importance of crop rotation.

By reclaiming access to the land, the community urban food gardeners live out the first principle of *Oikos* Theology – the Earth is full of grace and love. Food gardening is both an expression of creative power and a means of nourishing provision. It is through community food gardening that the work of their hands becomes a means of overcoming oppression. It is resistance to structural socio-economic subjugation and injustice. Through such resistance, the women are able to enjoy the fruits of their labour. In this nexus, they live out the second principle of *Oikos* Theology – their labour is a blessing to themselves and their families. In their labour, time is allocated for rest and restoration, a sublime reminder that they are not part of the status-quo; that they have dignity beyond being mere units of production. In this mutually beneficial relationship between themselves and the earth, they

uphold an ethic of ecological justice and equity that serves all. In this way, they live out the third principle of *Oikos* Theology – Sabbath or rest is the fundamental rule of God's economy. Eco-justice is part and parcel of God's economy. This sentiment is echoed by Pope John Paul II in *Peace with God the Creator - Peace with all Creation*:[40]

It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess goods, squandering available resources, while masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence. Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness-both individual and collective are contrary to the order of creation.

In God's economy, humanity is called to be the protector of the environment and all living things. This point was clearly illustrated at the food garden on one particular occasion. As a group, we made a line across the field and began to till the soil. The person directly next to me uncovered a nest of snake eggs in the soil. Petrified, I threw down my shovel and ran to safety. This action was met with hilarious mirth by my fellow gardeners. From a distance I yelled, "Why aren't you afraid?" My companions, gesturing for me to return to the line, explained that all living things must live and thrive on the land; the land is not just for humans. Each creature has a role to play in God's delicate eco-system. "Besides", they quibbled, "humans are more of a threat to snakes than snakes are to humans." "They will not harm you," I was told. "In fact, they move away from the threat of human presence."

The women gardeners also spoke of how the harvest was shared equally among them. Some of the harvest was for household use and some was sold at market places to supplement their incomes. In a world where progress is often characterized by greed and personal gain alone, this system was to me a refreshing change. In this, I recognized the fourth

[40] Stephen Scharper and Hilary Cunningham, *The Green Bible*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 71-72.

principle in *Oikos* Theology – shared prosperity is the goal of God's economy.

The fifth principle of *Oikos* Theology – we cannot serve God and selfish greed, is a stark reminder that in our world of greed and the scramble for self-enrichment, the value of money often takes precedence over the value of people and the value of the environment. With the rapid degradation of the earth's natural resources and the widespread exploitation of the poor, it is a reminder that prosperity has its limits. Detached from justice and equity, prosperity becomes an all-consuming object of worship.[41] The food gardeners displayed a deep respect for the environment and the understanding that humanity needs to work with nature, not exploit it, so that everyone can reap the benefits of their labour and the earth is preserved.

The sixth principle of *Oikos* Theology – God's economy is a matter of discipleship--is an indication of our role as stewards of the earth and of each other. As humanity, we have a corporate responsibility to be stewards of creation and of all the earth's resources. This lesson was demonstrated clearly by the food gardeners who chose to work in unison with nature and with each other.

The seventh and final principle of *Oikos* Theology – we are called to live long in the land—is an appeal to humanity to preserve natural resources, limit pollution, and promote eco-justice—so that generations that follow us may enjoy the earth's abundance. A poignant display of the food gardeners' deep respect and passion for preservation of the earth occurred during one of my conversations with a particular young woman. She explained to me that what we put into the soil has a lasting effect and that if what is put in the soil results in degradation, it will have an effect on the crops produced for hundreds of years to come. She also shared the following words of wisdom pertaining to responsible stewardship of the earth:

[41] Diakonia Council of Churches, *The Oikos Journey,* 29.

Never use harmful chemicals, instead, in order to get rid of bugs that eat the plants, we use a mixture of vinegar and water. We never allow anyone to throw plastic or other materials on the ground. If we see them lying around, we pick them up and give it to people who recycle. We collect fruit and vegetable peels and natural stuff to make manure. We also teach children and people in the community how to treat the soil, not to throw harmful things such as oil in it because that will destroy the soil. This is how we preserve the land for the future.

The lens of *Oikos* Theology makes clear that the oppression of women and the degradation of nature is interlinked. Through a deep connection with nature, ecology and indigenous knowledge systems, these women gardeners demonstrate how self-determination, self-reliance and agency in the face of overwhelming odds can contribute to community development and environmental sustainability.

Conclusion

In sum, I discussed how, through urban community food gardens, a group of women from under-resourced communities in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, resist food insecurity perpetuated through structural and systemic oppression. I argued that they demonstrate agential action through solidarity with each other, cooperation with nature, and the use of ecological and indigenous knowledge in their gardening initiative. Through the lens of AWT, I addressed issues of suffering, solidarity and agency, and through the lens of Oikos Theology I demonstrated how ecological and indigenous knowledge applied in the tending of urban community food gardens resulted in a mutually sustaining relationship between the food gardeners and the earth. This collaboration not only served to mitigate food insecurity but also led to the urban community food gardeners becoming agents of transformation and change within their own communities.

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Gender and Access to Land Ownership: Christian Reflection on the Experience of Malawian Widows

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[1]SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

Most women in Malawi encounter gender-based discrimination and violence when attempting to access land rights. Although legally land is transferred from parents to children, culturally in practical terms, land is either controlled by a brother or an uncle, leaving female members of the family with no decision-making powers. Upon the death of the husband, the widow loses property jointly held with the husband, as well as her own marital property to either the brother of the husband, or to her own brothers and uncles. Regardless of the many years spent in building their life together while enjoying the land they lived on and cared for together, unfortunately, the death of her husband leaves the widow with nothing. Lack of civic education makes many widows remain ignorant of the fact that the Malawian law protects them, and their land claims. This ignorance contributes to the suffering and impoverishment of many widows and leads some to live in acute poverty. The church has a special obligation to protect the rights of widows. It has an obligation to help empower women to secure land and the right to land so that widows can contribute to the larger community. Using a narrative approach, this article will demonstrate the difficulties faced by Malawian widows in terms of land claims. Current practices of inheritance and the ways widows are dispossessed will be uplifted through widows' own stories about their lived realities. The article will conclude by proffering constructive proposals about how the church can empower widows to find solutions to these very real problems.

KEYWORDS

Access to land, caring, Church, gender-based discrimination, violence, human rights, land ownership, Malawi, widows, Ubuntu.

Introduction

The right of women to own land in Malawi is not a straight forward issue. The majority of local people are largely dependent on subsistence farming for a living. Those who do not have land, hire land at a very expensive rate in order to grow food. Malawi has a population of 18 million people and most of them require a small piece of land for cultivation. The country has two systems of lineage, which are patrilineal and matrilineal. Both these systems, as well as practices within family life are influenced by patriarchy.

In simple terms patriarchy is a system wherein men have authority over the household and women are expected to be subordinate to male power. When death strikes, male members of the family have the power to decide on funeral arrangements as well as distribution of the deceased's assets, particularly, land. Ruether defines patriarchy as "Rule of the father." She further elaborates that "patriarchy refers to a system of legal, social, economic, and political relations that validate and enforce the sovereignty of male heads of families over dependent persons in the household."[1] In a society based on patriarchy, women experience systemic discrimination, their voices are not heard, and their interests are not being protected. Gruenbaum explains further that patriarchy is not only more power residing in men but that there is more to it:

> Patriarchy is not simply a system of rule by males, but a more complex set of relationships that result in domination by older men over both younger men and females. However, there are other dominations and authorities here as well: females over children, older women over younger women, older children over younger children, boys as they grow up increasingly asserting themselves over girls, even older sisters who used to have authority, and so on.[2]

This is the context of Malawi in which land is controlled by men in families.

Culture has often been used to defend the treatment of those who are considered inferior in society. Culture is used against those that are powerless to benefit those in authority. The question that one could ask is: Does a healthy culture really oppress, discriminate and marginalise people? Women play a significant role in transmitting culture to their children, generation after generation. Through their given traditional roles, they are

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1 Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Patriarchy," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies,* eds. Letty M. Russel, and Shannon. Clarkson, (Louisville: Westminster, 1996), 205.

2 Ellen Gruenbaum, *Female Circumcision Controversy: An Anthropological Perspective.* (Philadephia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001),378.

able to teach their children the beliefs and traditional practices they hold. Kanyoro expresses her concern that:

> Women in Africa are custodians of cultural practices. For generations, African women have guarded cultural prescriptions that are strictly governed by the fear of breaking taboos. … Harmful traditional practices are passed on as 'cultural values' and therefore are not to be discussed, challenged or changed … Such a state of affairs illustrates the reality of women's powerlessness and vulnerability in the face of cultural prescriptions.[3]

This kind of understanding of what culture is meant to be, affects the well-being of a widow. Culture is not static. Rather it is dynamic. So much has changed in our way of living except when it comes to patriarchal values that oppress women. Under the pretext of culture, people should stop treating widows as if they are less human. All other changes are accepted but when it comes to transforming the status of widows, culture is used as an excuse to deny her right to own land that could sustain her as she goes on with life. Such selective rigid attitudes raise two crucial questions: (1) Why do we make women victims of selfish cultural practices? (2) Should society not change the rights of land ownership so that women can benefit from it? To situate the context of these questions better, a discussion on Malawian cultural practices is necessary.

Gender Context of Malawi vis a vis socio-economic and cultural practices in Malawi

As indicated earlier, Malawi practices two cultural systems of lineage which are patrilineal and matrilineal. Each system has its own dynamics that impact the way people live. These dynamics often negatively affect women and, more so the widow.

[3] Musimbi Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Contribution to Theology in 21st Century," in *Talitha Cumi: Theologies of African Women*, eds. Nyambura Njoronge and Musa W Dube (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 159-160.

Patrilineal System

This is practiced in the Northern region of Malawi and some districts in the Southern region. In patrilineal systems land is owned by the men. After marriage, women move to live in their husband's home. Men are decision makers and have the right to own land and children. Tschirhart et al explain that:

> Women can only access land through their husbands and sons. … Upon the death of the husband, the woman, as long as she is unmarried, can use the land her husband owned. As she grows old and as the sons grow old, she shares the land with her sons and may be squeezed out of the land.[4]

This means that after the death of her husband, the widow may us e the land as long as she is unmarried, but she may not own the property. She no longer owns the land, and if she is given land, she may be given that which is not fertile.

Matrilineal System

According to this system, land is passed on from parents to daughters. In matrilineal systems, when a woman gets married, her husband is expected to come and live with her in her home village. He is given a space by the uncle or brother of the woman to build his house. The wife in this marriage will make use of her own land inherited from her mother or from her grandmother. Even though she has the right to own land, some decisions are made by her uncle or brother as the *mwini mbumba* (custodian of the family clan). Even though she has these advantages, the husband is the head of the family and controls whatever happens to the proceeds of the farmland. This shows that the matrilineal system too has some shortfalls, and the woman, especially when widowed, may not have complete power

[4] Naomi Tschirhart, Lucky Kabanga, and Sue Nichols, "The Convergence of HIV/AIDS and Customary Tenure on Women's Access to Land in Rural Malawi," *Journal of Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS* 12 no. 1 (2015): 134-146, 137.

over her inheritance. Even the small piece of land that would sustain her is usually taken away from her.

Thus, in both systems—patrilineal and matrilineal—the people who are supposed to protect the woman are the same people who have the power to dispossess the widow, and cause hardship to her and her children. In such patriarchal family structures where power resides in the male family members, women become more vulnerable. The inability of such family systems to protect women leads to problems of gender-based violence. The widow becomes a victim of violence with no one to protect her. Le Roux comments that; "Challenging these patriarchal structures would mean challenging culture, as patriarchy is culturally supported and condoned."[5]

If cultural practices are not challenged, women who are widows will continue to suffer and submit to dangerous rituals without questioning them.

> The challenge is thus to find a way of challenging culture and the cultural practices which empower men at the expense of women, and which enable and leads to violence against women, while at the same time not denying or degrading the importance of culture.[6]

Most systems and structures in our society violate the rights of women (widows).

Gender-Based Violence

Violence targeted at women happens everywhere even in places like the home, where one would expect to get maximum security. Such violent behaviour is intended to show the other person that those in control have power and can do anything. It is also intended to undermine a person's humanity, identity and dignity. It encompasses acts of physical as well as

[5] Elisabet le Roux, *Telling Stories: Talking about VAW Within Church and Seminary,"* in *Living with Dignity: African Perspectives on Gender Equality*, eds. Elna Mouton, Gertrude Kapuma, Len Hansen, Thomas Togon. (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2015) 238.

[6] Le Roux. *Telling Stories,* 239.

emotional abuse. The dispossession of property which includes land, are acts of violence that affect the widow physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Zulu alludes to gender-based violence when he states that;

> Despite the fact that this cultural practice applies to both men and women, it is in most instances the women who are subjected to it in practice. This is so because in most situations, the woman would be dependent on her husband for her livelihood. One also sees that this gender-based prejudice or treatment of women is linked with other culturally legitimised forms of discrimination- in some contexts, with a woman's inability to inherit from her husband, or women's inability to own land … Men would often use her fellow women to subject her to all sorts of practices in the name of culture.[7]

Because the society is patriarchal in nature, and power resides in men, men will not risk challenging their own privileges to favour women. Patriarchy will make sure that men benefit at the expense of women, even if they do not deserve it.

Nyangweso comments that;

> The major oral concern with regard to widowhood rites is that they violate many basic principles contained in all key International Human Rights Conventions. A culture that undermines one's health, freedom of choice and general welfare is a violation of the basic human rights and should be considered problematic.[8]

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[7] Edwin Zulu, "Masks and the Men Behind Them: Unmasking Culturally-Sanctioned Gender Inequality," in *Living with Dignity: African Perspectives on Gender Equality*, eds. Elna Mouton, Gertrude Kapuma, Len Hansen, and Thomas Togon. (Stellenbosch: Sun Press. 2015) 93.

[8] Mary Nyangweso, "Religion, Human Rights, and the African Widow," *Peace Human Rights Governance* 1 no. 3 (2017): 374.

Poverty

Poverty is a serious concern among women in Malawi. Women become poor due to many reasons such as being deprived of the basic necessities of life and being disadvantaged because of their marital or social status. Many widows live in poverty because all their possessions are taken away by their in-laws. In Malawi, the condition of poverty is manifested in the lack of a productive means to access basic needs of life such as food, water, shelter, health, and education. Widows are pushed to an unbearable plight when they are stripped of all they had and have no means to start a new life again. Everything may have been taken including land, which she could have cultivated in order to have food for survival. Sometimes the land she may have is a small piece that cannot produce anything without applying fertilizers and manure. These are the things she cannot afford because of her situation.

The experiences of some widows that make them to fall into this condition of poverty is not by choice but because family members do not take into consideration her upkeep in the long term. When her property is controlled, she becomes a victim of abuse. Chebet and Cherop further comment that;

> Gendered poverty and the right to human dignity have been recognised as the central challenge to the development of humanity. Poverty is a dehumanising condition for everyone. It violates the human rights of the affected, whether women or men. Poverty subjects an individual to a state of powerlessness, hopelessness and a lack of self-esteem, confidence and integrity.[9]

[9] Dorcas Chebet, Beatrice Cherop, "Gender and Poverty: Rereading Proverbs 31 in Pursuit of Social-economic Justice for women in the Reformed Church of East Africa," in *Living with Dignity: African Perspectives on Gender Equality*, eds. Elna Mouton, Gertrude Kapuma, Len Hansen, Thomas. Togon, (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2015), 195.

This is a situation that some widows find themselves in as we will see from the stories later in this study that clearly portray that they have been victims of abuse.

Land laws in Malawi with special reference to women:

Summarising conclusions regarding property ownership and inheritance rights of women in her study[10], Naomi Ngwira observes that because widows start from a low base of goodwill, they still inherit less often than men. Her study sets forth the following conclusions that show clearly the stark reality of dispossession faced by widows in Malawi. She says,

> In the particular case of land, 37% of widowed respondents said that the husband relatives were among the heirs … The fact that half of the respondents were from matrilineal customs and yet only 6% of widowers said that land devolves to the wife's relatives when she dies also poses a curiosity that needs to be further understood … Since the administration and adjudication of inheritance is strongly influenced by perceptions, land may increasingly be owned by men even in matrilineal customs … A logistic regression analysis (of) dispossession has shown that being a widow married according to patrilineal customs increases the odds of dispossession over being a widower married under the same customs, by 12.2 times. …Property grabbing happened in 30% of the widows' cases compared to 3% for widowers. Thus, the likelihood of a widow's inheritance being grabbed is 10 times that of a widower. Grabbing may be a remnant of traditional customs of sharing out all the property, except kitchen items, usually under the pretext that everybody needs some of the property to wipe away their tears.

[10] Naomi Ngwira, "Women's Property and Inheritance Rights and the Land Reform Process in Malawi" (Development Alternatives Inc, and USAID, Year NA), accessed July 27, 2021, https://sarpn.org/documents/d0000585/P522_Malawi_property_rights.pdf

It is such a context that the Malawian Land Policy reforms tried to address since the turn of the millennium. According to a Working Paper on securing land rights for women in Malawi put together by Netherlands Land Academy (LANDac) and Oxfam in Malawi,[11] the Malawi National Land Policy (2002) mentions the rights of 'vulnerable' groups, including women, children and the disabled, and stresses the need for a clear policy and implementation strategy to ensure equal rights and access for women and men.[12] Subsequently land bills for better tenure security were passed in 2016 and the new Land Bill came into force in March 2018. These new Land Policies state that customary land committees shall be responsible for the management of all customary land in a Traditional Land Management Area and that at least two out of six committee members should be women.[13]

However, despite these legal advances, many women are still denied the right to own property due to practices that discriminate against them.[14] The problem is exacerbated by low literacy levels among women and a high child marriage rate.[15] In 2018, after the 2018 land laws had been passed, Jean Kalilani, Minister of Gender, Children, Disability and Social welfare, summed up the stark situation of widows in Malawi when she said: "We have seen cases of women going destitute following the death of their husband just

[11] Oxfam in Malawi and LANDac, "Securing Women's Land Rights: Scaling for Impact in Malawi," *Working Paper 4: Securing Women's Land Rights in Africa*. (Utrecht: LANDac.,2018) accessed July 27, 2021, http://www.landgovernance.org/assets/20181127-A4-Working-paper-04_Malawi.pdf, 2

[12] Oxfam in Malawi and LANDac, *Working Paper 4,* 2.

[13] Clause 14 and Clause 25 (f) of *Customary Land Regulations 2018*, Malawi Gazette Supplement, dated 20th April, 2018, containing Regulations, Rules, etc. (No. 9A), Government Notice No. 18, (Lilongwe, Malawi: The Government Printer, 2018), accessed July 27, 2021, https://resourceequity.org/record/3152-malawi-customary-land-regulations/

[14] Emma Kaliya, Head of the Gender Coordination Network, as quoted by Madalitso Kateta, "Malawian Women Struggle for Land Rights Despite Equality Drive," Thomson Reuters Foundation, September 25, 2018, accessed July 27, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malawi-landrights-women-idUSKCN1M51GQ

[15] Lucky Kabanga, a researcher at SAHARA-J, a journal as quoted by Madalitso Kateta, "Malawian women Struggle for Land Rights."

because they lost most of the property to their spouse's relatives." [16] She further affirmed that the government was committed to protecting such women through enabling laws.

The (LANDac) and Oxfam Working Paper highlights some pertinent strategies to ensure that provisions in the new Land Policy are taken forward with regard to omen's land rights, land registration and opportunities for women:[17] 1) Take measures to ensure women attend meetings called by the chiefs regarding customary land registration and titling. Only then women can be available to participate in the elections so that they can become members of customary land committees. Women being elected members will ensure that the chiefs do not take bribes or intimidate women.[18] 2) Mobilise women leaders to act as local champions and to demand their position on either customary land committees or the customary land tribunal, and to be protectors of women rights in the traditional authority of the village. 3) In general, raise the awareness of grassroot women about the new Land Policies, including the new 2016 land bills. 4) Consistently Keep engaging traditional leaders (who are gatekeepers for their communities) and mobilising them to advocate for women's land rights in the country.

The broad gender context of Malawi and the laws pertaining to property, inheritance and land rights of women in Malawi provide the backdrop in which the narratives of widows dispossessed of their property and lands should be properly situated. Having thus situated the context, this study next applies a narrative methodology to uplift the voices of widows and their experiences of dispossession.

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[16] Madalitso Kateta, "Malawian Women Struggle for Land Rights Despite Equality Drive," Thomson Reuters Foundation, September 25, 2018, accessed July 27, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malawi-landrights-women-idUSKCN1M51GQ

[17] Oxfam in Malawi and LANDac, *Working Paper 4,* 4-5.

[18] Oxfam in Malawi and LANDac, *Working Paper 4,* 4.

Giving voice to the widows

In order to understand in-depth, the plight of widows and the violence they experience in their quest to own land, the author has used a narrative approach. This method was chosen to allow widows to narrate their stories thereby providing authentic data for analysis. Kumar confirms that: "Narratives are very powerful method of data collection for the situations which are sensitive in nature"[19]. A purposeful sampling was done with two groups of women – one from the urban and another from semi-rural areas. Through sharing of their sacred stories widows were able to learn from each other's situations and this was immensely helpful. Few widows who were interviewed expressed disappointment at the way they were treated after the death of their husbands. They could share their painful experiences as they narrated their stories. Almost all the widows were emotionally wounded because of the lack of support even from people they trusted. In order to protect their identities, the author will use different alphabet to represent them instead of their names.

Widow K said that:

> I went to live in my late husband's home. I took care of his children from another relationship and his mother who was blind. After the burial of my husband in 2012, they wanted me to go to my village immediately, but because of the sick mother in-law, I resisted. I felt that I had an obligation to look after her, besides there was no one to care for her. When she died, my late husband's family started ill-treating me. They burnt the house I was living, took the property, and would steal whatever I had. They did this to make sure that I leave. I went home with nothing; my family received me and gave me a space to build a house. I hire a piece of land every year to cultivate because all the land in my family is taken by my sisters and cousins. We had a

[19] Ranjit Kumar, *Research Methodology: A Step -by-Step guide to Beginners*, (London: Sage, 2005), 125.

> good fertile land at my husband's home, all that was taken away from me and shared amongst my husband's nephews and nieces.[20]

The outcry of most of the widows relates to how the property and land was taken away from them. In some cases, the widows were left with nothing to start a new life. They are left with nothing to help support care of their children.

Widowhood experience was described as inhuman. Widow G narrated her story thus:

> My husband was diagnosed with kidney failure and died in 2015. The family took all the six houses we were letting out. They took all the money benefits that came. They also sold the land that belonged to us. I was left with nothing. I could not send my son to school because there was no money to pay for his fees. Thinking about the life we had before and the hardships that we were going through, my son attempted to commit suicide. This happened when he was selected to go to secondary school and there was not enough money to pay for his school fees. It was a difficult situation coming from a 'somebody' to a nobody. I have no relationship with them. I was a respectable person when their son (my husband) was alive, but when he closed his eyes (died), they did what suited them.[21]

The story above illustrates clearly how women's rights are violated with impunity and it is taken for granted that the widows will abide with such violation of their rights. Chitando explicates how this needs to be challenged when he says,

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[20] Widow K (not real name), Interviewed in September, 2017 in Zomba. These are women coming from the Women's Guild in the Church who felt that the Church was not there to help them.

[21] Widow G (not real name) Interviewed in September, 2017 in Zomba.

> Personhood in African cultures has been construed and constructed in a hierarchical manner, with men enjoying full and privileged status … Expunged of its patriarchal underpinnings, *ubuntu* can socialise boys and men to fight sexual and gender-based violence. Currently African men committing violence are not exuding *ubuntu* (particularly in its refined form). *Ubuntu* can empower men to realise and accept the full humanity of women.[22]

When men are empowered to understand issues of violence, oppression, and dehumanisation faced by women, they will begin to affirm and protect women and afford them the dignity they deserve.

Many widows are not aware of the laws that are in place in the country – laws that can protect them from being dispossessed. Widow B described that:

> They wanted the bank book immediately after the funeral in 2014. I refused to give them. They went and took control of the Guest House that we had as a business, and one piece of garden, which was more fertile. We had nothing to live on except for the small garden.[23]

Women need protection. This protection may not be available from her family or community where she lives. The community leadership including the church should make themselves available to assist and journey with the widow. Nyangweso propounds that;

> Although indigenous practices and attitudes are culturally legitimate and meaningful in social units in which they are found, it is imperative that moral principles remain a fundamental responsibility of Africans. Recognizing that some of what is upheld, as culture is incompatible

[22] Ezra Chitando, "Do Not Tell the Person Carrying You that S/he Stinks: Reflection in Ubuntu and Masculinities in the Context of Sexual Gender-based Violence and HIV," in *Living with Dignity: African Perspectives on Gender Equality,* eds. Elna Mouton, Gertrude Kapuma, Len Hansen, Thomas Togon, (Stellenbosch: Sun Press 2015), 276.

[23] Widow B. Interviewed in September, 2017 in Zomba.

> with the welfare of significant members of African communities, ought to be central to efforts to promote human rights in Africa. It is particularly important that the rights of women be centralized in moral discourse of African virtues."[24]

Widow P also narrated with bitterness her experiences in interacting with her in-laws in the following words:

> When my husband retired from work, we agreed to come and settle at his home. We bought land not far from the family home. We developed the place and the land. When he died in 2010, my in-laws wanted me to go back to my home. I asked them, 'where will I go? I have been here for a long time; my people do not know me. I have my children and grandchildren here, I cannot leave.' They decided to do the last ritual so that I could go back home. They were doing this because they wanted the land that we had developed. They felt that I did not deserve to own the good land since I was not biologically connected to their family. They forgot the time I spent to develop the land and make the home good. They wanted all that. I refused. In 2014, they took me to the Village Chief so that he could agree that I go back home. I was accused of not wanting to leave my husband's land to his people because I was a witch; that I wanted to stay in the village to kill the people.[25]

Such inhuman treatment and exploitation come coated in the name of culture. The community takes it for granted that the widow is going through her grieving period without problems and choose not to pay attention to the pain she is going through which needs attention and care.

Women are supposed to live with dignity as those created in the image of God. They are supposed to be treated as human beings who have rights. Whenever one makes reference to African culture, it is pertinent that one

[24] Nyangweso, "Religion, Human Rights, and the African Widow," 387.
[25] Widow P. Interviewed in September, 2017.

takes cognisance of the fact that culture is not static but dynamic. Cultural practices have to change with time. Women have to be recognised as people with their own rights to exist with dignity and happiness. Baloyi further comments that:

> Cultural widowhood rituals clash with the rights of individuals involved in the act. Despite the widow's tears, many African women continue to instigate this practice even if it threatens someone's life. A culture that disregards one side of human individual rights but promotes the other fails to acknowledge what it means for God to have created a human being as complete. It fails to recognise that human individual rights are essential steps towards reaching full development for women.[26]

When the full humanhood of women and their rights are observed and women themselves know their rights, they will be able to go to the right places to seek advice. This knowledge on human rights and the laws relating to land and property should also be imparted to the custodian of culture, for instance, the Village Chiefs so that they can understand and protect the interests of women.

In light of the above discussion, it is evident that culture should change with time and while there is a need to look at the positive elements of culture that make us who we are, there is a greater need to abolish those practices that are inhuman and dangerous to women. This is the hope is for all communities, and that includes the church as well, to bring back *ubuntu*.

A discussion on cultural anthropology will ground an analysis of systems and structures that are oppressive to women.

[26] Gift Baloyi, "When Culture Clashes with Individual Human Rights: A Practical Theological Reflection on the Dignity of Widows. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017): 1-5.

Cultural Anthropology

According to the *Dictionary of Feminist Theology*, Lummis explains that, "Cultural anthropology is the study of cultures of various groups over time and how their values and beliefs interrelate and change."[27] Some cultural beliefs have changed with time but there are still some that resist change. This is so because of the socialization process that people go through makes them think that cultural beliefs are the accepted norm.

Parents, especially the mother, play an important role in the upbringing of children. There are basics and life skills that children learn from their mothers. These basic life skills and knowledge are common to all children regardless of gender. But in many cases, the female child experiences discrimination and is expected to learn more life skills than the boy child. Society regards men as strong and women as weak, and although this may be portrayed as positive as the girl child acquires more life skills, in actual fact, this disguises the reality that the girl child is conditioned to be submissive and the boy child to be in control. A boy child can control even the older sisters and make them do things for him. The male child sees himself to be as important as the father and as compared to the mother and sister. He can also have authority in the home in the absence of the father. Women are expected to play by all these values. "These values that are instilled in girls include being submissive and subservient to men in the family. This leaves them disempowered and without 'skill' to escape violent situations or relationships."[28] In-laws will be eyeing their land and sometimes a brother of the deceased would also want access the land because it is productive and consequently this prevents the widow from owning it. The bottom line that cultural belief upholds is that if you are a woman, you may not control property and access land freely, and that a male relative has the prerogative to decide on issues of land and property. Women thus, live

[27] Adair Lummis, *Anthropology, Cultural*, in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies,* eds. Letty Russell, and Shannon Clarkson, (Louisville: Westminster, 1996), 9.

[28] Gertrude Kapuma, *Gender Based Violence and the Church? Malawian Women Speaking Out*, in *Living with Dignity: African Perspectives on Gender Equality,* eds. Elna Mouton, Gertrude Kapuma, Len Hansen, Thomas Togon, (Stellenbosch: Sun Press 2015), 257.

without security. All of this suffering of women is justified on the pretext of protecting our cultural values and beliefs.

Oduyoye outlines what women's anthropology is by looking at what culture prescribes for women. She argues that;

> Women's anthropology points out that what is described as feminine and masculine are culture-coded and should not be allowed to circumscribe our humanness. It is, therefore, unacceptable that women's humanness should be limited to biology and that the cultures that make women into beings whose only reason for existence is to assure the continuity of the race need to be transformed.[29]

This mind-set may be one of the reasons why widows are unable to contribute to their own and their children's socio-economic well-being. Cultural beliefs determining access to land to grow crops that can assist the family disempowers women.

Human dignity is essential if we are to live a fulfilled life. Women have a right to enjoy their humanness. The widow status should not be seen as a basis for treating them as if they are nothing and that they do not belong to the family. They have a right to continue the life they built with their husbands and take care of their children with dignity and be able to provide for the children. Widows need to have and experience the abundance of life that was promised by Jesus. That is why Oduyoye says:

> Women are seeking to pursue an anthropology that makes women and men co-responsible for the well-being of the whole community especially the family … And the man ought to recognize his co-responsibility genetically, and in the upbringing of the children he participates in making.[30]

[29] Mercy A Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology,* (Sheffield: SheffieldAcademic Press, 2001), 70.
[30] Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology,* 72.

Taking a cue from women's anthropology therefore implies that in affirming women, widows will have power to exercise and own property including land. There should be ways to help restore the dignity of women so that they may live a life that has meaning. What this means is that culture, which is oppressive and exploits people, in this case, women, cannot be accepted. The enabling nature of Malawian land laws related to women and the possible strategies to implement them are issues that the church and faith-based communities could get involved in through church and community mobilisation, both to raise awareness and provide solidarity to women lobbying for these rights. Issues of violence should be the priority of each community including the church because it deals with the humanity of people and as it is a justice issue.

Role of the Church

The Bible is clear in its teachings pertaining to loving and caring for others. This is the fundamental basis of Christian beliefs and practice. God loves and cares for all creation and this includes women created in the divine image (Gen. 1:27). God does not only love and care for widows, but God is also the defender of the widows so that they should not experience shame. Psalm 68:1 says, "A father to the fathers, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling (NIV). God is a God of justice and compassion. This is the basis that the Christian tradition must use in dealing with issues of injustice and exploitation. Issues of women should be handled with dignity because they are justice issues. The Christian tradition must bring back the lost biblical vision of the duty it owes to widows. In the present age this includes fighting for widows to have what belongs to them including land.

The church is the body of Christ called to care for God's people and bring human dignity to all. The church is seen as a safe place where people can go to without being harmed or discriminated against. Holmes et al says: "We; as a faith community, can be the safe place that people are intuitively

searching for."[31] Unfortunately, the faith community has been too slow to offer such support. She has allowed culture to control the well-being of its members, consequently making them to suffer. Shisanya points out that the absence of the church in the face of women's struggles has made her unable to address some of the critical issues that affect widows. She comments that; "The Church as a major liberating agent should show practical commitment to the oppressed and work for their fruitful future."[32] In this regard, the community of faith needs to be liberated in order to liberate others.

The community of believers must be Christ like - to love and care for all people. Holmes and Williams add: "What we are describing here is more than just a polite, smiley kind of love. Christ suggests that we are all capable of loving one another as an act of human will, hence his command to love (Lk. 10:27)."[33]

Culture should not be used as a tool to oppress people. Both men and women should be able to understand culture in the light of Christ so that they become liberated. Jordaan and Mpumlwana add:

> I do not mind a cultural practice if it does not contribute to the belittling of women. Once people exploit, discriminate against, and deprive women of their God given status, in the name of culture, I begin to have a problem as a Christian.[34]

Baloyi affirms that:

> Total freedom for women cannot be fully attained when inhumane cultural practises are still prevalent. Most cultural rituals release males

[31] Peter Holmes and Susan Williams, *Church as a Safe Place: A Handbook Confronting, Resolving and Minimizing Abuse in the Church*, (Colorado Springs: Authentic. 2007), 13.

[32] Constance Shisanya, *Death Rituals*, in *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God,* eds. Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge, (Nairobi: Action, 1996), 186-194.

[33] Peter Holmes and Susan Williams, *Church as a Safe Place*, 17.

[34] Roxanne Jordaan, and Thoko Mpumlwana, "Two Voices from Women's Oppression and Struggle in South Africa, in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader,* ed. Ursula King. (London: SPCK 1994), 165.

> from their control and leave women to suffer. Such cultural hegemonies should not be worshipped as if they have been prescribed by a higher authority and cannot be changed. Culture is dynamic, and as such is changeable.[35]

Issues of gender-based violence should be included in the curriculum in theological institutions so that students understand how these issues negatively affect women in the community, and are empowered to address them positively when they go to work in the congregations. Lay training institutions and theological education by extension should also address these social issues and produce learning materials for the grassroots church. Such materials and knowledge will empower the communities to live in harmony with women, and respect one another's rights.

Conclusion

In conclusion, women as citizens of Malawi as well as members of faith communities have the right to own land. Access to land will help women and widows become independent and live with freedom. The Christian tradition should rediscover its voice as a liberating agent, and an agent of positive cultural reinforcement (Ubuntu) that challenges cultural injustice. For this to take place, the leaders of the community, including the faith-based organizations, and the civil society, have a role to educate members on issues that affect the community such as inheritance rights and equitable land distribution. Faith communities must be transformed to become healing and holistic spaces for everyone. It should demonstrate the Christ like love to all members including women, and especially widows, so that all are able to experience the abundance of life promised by Jesus. When women, including widows are denied access to land, they are being denied access to live in abundance which is a human right. The church should become a prophetic presence to ensure that women are treated with dignity and empowered to rise out of poverty, and this role of the church can be

[35] Baloyi, "When Culture Clashes" 1-5. 2.

practically manifested in the rooting out of practices that result in land grabbing, gender-based violence and human rights abuses.

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What Did We Do to Our Mountain? African Eco-Feminist and Indigenous Responses to Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani and Chipinge Districts, Zimbabwe

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

Cyclone Idai caused untold devastation in Chimanimani and Chipinge districts, Zimbabwe. In scenes reminiscent of the biblical deluge, in some places entire settlements were eradicated from the face of the earth. Houses were swept away, bodies were submerged and water, typically understood as the source of life, became the source of death. Individuals, families, communities and nations were left traumatized, and the search for meaning continues. Inevitably, religion featured prominently in explanations of this tragedy. This article is a preliminary review of the explanations of Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani and Chipinge districts, Zimbabwe, within the frame of African Traditional Religion/s (ATR/s) and Christianity. The article delves into questions at the interface of climate change and religion, such as: how do survivors of the cyclone explain its occurrence? What do we learn about the interface between religion and climate change in Africa from the responses to Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani and Chipinge districts? The article adopts the African eco-feminist perspective. This is informed by the fact that women and girls comprise the bulk of the population heavily impacted by Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani and Chipinge as well as the fact that they are the ones who were in the forefront of mitigating the impact of devastation caused by this ecological catastrophe. Our article seeks to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussions on the nexus between religion, gender and climate change by foregrounding the experiences of women and girls affected by Cyclone Idai. The first part of the article describes the devastation caused by Cyclone Idai. The second part outlines the Christian and indigenous interpretations of the cyclone. The third part of the article teases out the indigenous interpretations of unpredictable weather patterns.

KEYWORDS

African Ecofeminism, Zimbabwe, climate change, Cyclone Idai, ecological crisis, religion

Introduction

On March 15, 2019, Cyclone Idai slammed into the Chimanimani Mountains that form the border between Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Torrential rain and sustained winds up to 190km per hour flattened this low-lying area. It set off landslides that have altered the landscape in the Zimbabwe highlands. The most severe devastation occurred in Chimanimani and Chipinge districts, as Chimanimani district was literally in the eye of the storm. Officials in Zimbabwe estimate that 171 people died, 326 went missing, 4073 people were displaced, and 2251 houses were destroyed. Utilizing the African eco-feminist lenses and drawing insights from the field research conducted in Chimanimani district, this article seeks to reflect on the indigenous and Christian explanations offered by the survivors of Cyclone Idai as they grapple to articulate their understanding of what actually triggered this enervating tragedy.

As academic-activist researchers interested in exploring the interface between religion and climate change with a focus on human rights advocacy and gender justice, the following key questions undergird this multi-disciplinary study: (1) What are the Christian and indigenous explanations articulated by the survivors of Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani and Chipinge districts to make sense of this death-dealing and life-changing disaster? (2) In light of the indigenous and Christian responses to Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani and Chipinge districts, what lessons can be derived from the nexus between religion and climate change in Africa? (3) How do the debilitating effects of Cyclone Idai, as experienced in Chimanimani and Chipinge districts, contribute to the ongoing discussion surrounding the interconnection between religion, climate change, gender justice, and risk and disaster management initiatives in Zimbabwe?

Scope of study and research design

Chimanimani and Chipinge districts are located in Manicaland province in the eastern part of Zimbabwe. The study chose to focus on these two districts as they were the most affected. According to the most recent official census conducted in Zimbabwe in 2012, Chimanimani district had a total

population of 134,940 and Chipinge Urban, where the study was conducted, had a total population of 25,292.[1] The study participants were purposively sampled from five temporary shelters where displaced survivors were residing. The required permissions from the study participants and relevant district officials in both Chimanimani and Chipinge districts were acquired. The approximate population of residents at these five temporary shelters was 1500. Data was collected through conducting in-depth interviews with ten survivors of Cyclone Idai from each of the five temporary shelters, making a total of 50 interviews. This article is a summary of the key issues emerging from the interviews. Since there were more women than men residing in these temporary sites, the distribution of study participants was tilted towards women—with 40 women and 10 men. Study participants fell between the ages of 18 and 65, thus affording an intergenerational perspective. The field research was conducted in April 2019, barely a month after the catastrophe had occurred.

African ecofeminism theoretical framework

The main thrust of eco-feminism is to engage in ecological conservation for the benefit of future generations tapping into female activism.[2] The eco-feminist premise is based on the belief that there is an intertwined relationship between women and nature.[3] Hence, the harm or degradation suffered by nature impacts women more heavily due to their closer interconnection.[4] As noted by Jamie Thompson,[5] "Ecofeminism seeks to emphasize the interconnectedness of all creation through caring for the

1 Zimbabwe Population Census 2012: Provincial report, Manicaland. (Zimbabwe: ZimStat, Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2013) 22.

2 Isabel Apawo Phiri, "The Chisusmphi Cult: The Role of Women in Preserving the Environment" in Ruether R.R. ed., *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996)161-171.

3 Susan Rakoczy, *In Her Name*: *Women Doing Theology* (Pietermartizburg: Cluster Publications, 2006) 302.

4 Lilian Cheelo Siwila, "Tracing the Ecological Footprints of our Foremathers: Towards an African Feminist Approach to Women's Connectedness with Nature," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiaticae* 40, 2 (2014): 137.

5 Jamie Thompson, "Ecofeminism: The Path towards Healing the Earth," *Dialogue & Nexus* Vol. 4, Article 8.(2017): 1.

earth as well as other oppressed groups." Ifechelobi and Asika articulate the principles of eco-feminism as follows:

> Eco-feminism is based on the theory that the subjugation of women and the oppression of nature are linked together. Eco-feminism is linked to the study of the internal and intricate relationship between women and ecology. The theory projects that the subjugation of women and the oppression of nature are linked together. Discrimination and oppression due to power, class, gender and race are directly related to the exploitation of the environment. In patriarchal societies, women and nature are ordinarily seen as fertile and capable of providing life, care and shelter.[6]

Our article adopts the African eco-feminist theoretical framework because the tenets of ecofeminism concur with the reality of the situation on the ground in Chimanimani and Chipinge where women and children bore the brunt of burden in the aftermath of Cyclone Idai. For instance, the official statistics in Zimbabwe reveal that more than 80% of the people who either lost their lives or were injured during the Cyclone Idai catastrophe were women and children. Additionally, women were responsible for most of the care giving and humanitarian work in the wake of the Cyclone Idai disaster. This illustrates the fact that the ecological crisis has a far-reaching impact on those who are pushed to the periphery of society within patriarchal communities. Hence, our adoption of African ecofeminism concurs with Jamie Thompson's[7] assertion that "the oppression of women and the exploitation of the earth is further connected because, historically, women and nature have been tied together." In adopting African feminism as our

[6] Jane Nkechi Ifechelobi and Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika, "Women and Ecology: An Eco-Feminist Reading of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart," *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* Vol. 2, no.4, (July – Aug 2017):33.

[7] Thompson, "Ecofeminism: The Path towards," 2.

theoretical lens, we also concur with Munamato Chemhuru[8] who posits the argument that:

> Ecofeminist philosophical thinking in general is a broader feminist view concerned with understanding environmental justice by looking at social structure, while the African ecofeminist perspective is part of this broader perspective, but being particularised in the African context.

The framing of our article therefore resonates with the views raised by Chemhuru because we seek to foreground how the Cyclone Idai disaster can be understood from the perspective of ecofeminism within the African context, with particular reference to the experiences of women and children in Chimanimani and Chipinge districts. The findings in our field research reiterate that humanity's negligence or failure to care for the earth has major consequences on their well-being: The survivors participating in the study upheld that humanity's sustenance has a strong spiritual link with how humans interact with Mother Earth. Below, we discuss how the study participants interpreted the occurrence of Cyclone Idai from a religious perspective.

Religious interpretations of Cyclone Idai

Like any other indigenous African community, the survivors of Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani and Chipinge districts reflect on the fateful natural disaster with spiritual lenses. This is because the indigenous African communities perceive the cosmos as a spiritual entity. As such, nothing happens by sheer chance; instead, any incident, whether good or bad, is interpreted from a religious perspective. Speaking of symbols, rituals and community in African religions, Ray aptly captures this worldview when he observes that "the spiritual world of the Africans is densely populated with spiritual beings,

[8] Munamato Chemhuru, "Interpreting Ecofeminist Environmentalism in African Communitarian Philosophy and Ubuntu: An Alternative to Anthropocentrism," *Philosophical Papers* 48, no.2 (September 2018): 11 10.1080/05568641.2018.1450643.

spirits and the living-dead."[9] The African perspective regarding this spiritual worldview is that every effort must be made by the living to maintain peace and harmony with the spiritual entity. As noted by Dahlin[10] and Shoko[11], if aggrieved in any way, the ancestral spirits have the potential to cause pandemonium among their descendants, consequently exposing them to all sorts of misfortunes [*kuvhurira mhepo*], such as, being struck by complex natural disasters, allowing negative spirits to attack the descendants. and in some instances, causing mysterious loss of wealth or well-being among descendants.

Writing specifically about the Karanga people, a sub-group of the Shona in Zimbabwe, Aschwanden[12] notes that the Karanga believe that the *midzimu* spirits are essentially positive, but if they are provoked, they can either turn against humans and cause misfortune or they can withdraw their protection and allow harm to befall them. This deeply African spiritual worldview is also articulated by J.S. Mbiti as follows:

> Any misfortune must have a traceable cause, even if someone comes down with malaria after having been bitten by mosquitos, the African people would still want to investigate why that particular person was bitten by mosquitos and not the others with the intention of establishing who or what is behind the unleashing of the mosquitos.[13]

In the same light, the people in Chimanimani district use their indigenous knowledge systems and their understanding of the spiritual worldview to

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9 Benjamin Caleb Ray, *African Religions: Symbol*, *Ritual and Community* (Prentice Hall: London, 1976), 78.

10 Olov Dahlin, Zvinorwadza: Being a Patient in the Religious and Medical Plurality of the Mberengwa District, Zimbabwe (Universitetstryckeriet: Uppsala, 2000), 120.

11 Tabona Shoko, *Karanga Indigenous Religion in Zimbabwe: Health and Well-Being* (Ashgate: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 87.

12 Herbert Aschwanden, *Symbols of Death* (Mambo Press: Gweru, 1987), 98.

13 John.Samuel Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1990), 65.

interpret the occurrence of the drenching rains, mudslides, drowning, death and devastation in the wake of the Cyclone Idai catastrophe.

In congruence with African feminism which perceives the earth from a feminine perspective as is denoted by the use of the term Mother Earth, the survivors of Cyclone Idai also interpreted the catastrophe as an illustration of their maternal spirits having deserted them. This was revealed in their use of the proverb, *midzimu yamai yakadambura mbereko* (our maternal spirits withdrew their protection from us and left us susceptible to this ecological carnage). This is informed by the entrenched Shona people's belief that one's maternal spirits are the most protective, hence, if they become incensed and remove their protection from an individual, he/she becomes predisposed to all forms of vicious attacks.

"Demonstrating the power of God the father": Summarizing Christian interpretations

Upon interacting with various survivors of Cyclone Idai during field research, it became apparent that both adherents of ATR and Christianity tend to use indigenous interpretations in trying to make sense of this disastrous phenomenon. Some Christians interpreted the cyclone as a sign of God's rage against the sinful and permissive behaviour of the local people. Their vantage point for interpreting the cyclone as a sign of God's wrath was the argument that even though almost every building was swept off by the raging waters, mudslides and rolling, sliding boulders, both in Ngangu settlement in Chimanimani and in Ndakopa community in Chipinge, the church buildings in both places survived the calamity and became places of sanctuary for the surviving communities who lost their homes to the cyclone. A male survivor who was volunteering his time to coordinate distribution of donations at the Roman Catholic Church in Ngangu where the bulk of the survivors sought sanctuary put it across as follows:

> On the fateful night, without having been instructed by anyone, people ran for dear life from various sectors of Ngangu settlement and converged at this church building for sanctuary. The first group to

> arrive here had to force open the locked doors of the church building in order to gain entry. No sooner had they entered did others start arriving. Some brought their injured relatives and as the night progressed, slowly, other members of the community began to bring the corpses of their loved ones into the church building. Since it was extremely cold and most of the injured were shivering from the cold, we resolved to light a fire inside the church and had no recourse than to dismantle the wooden benches in the church to use them as firewood. The other church building that was spared the devastation here in Ngangu belongs to the Methodist Church. In the same manner that those who live in close proximity to this (Roman Catholic Church) building all thronged here, those residing near the Methodist Church also rushed to seek refuge there. [14]

The general conception among the people who survived the cyclone in Chimanimani is that the Lord God mysteriously saved the church buildings to demonstrate God's glory, as well as to provide sanctuary for the survivors. Another middle-aged woman residing in Chimanimani village who described the ordeal of the cyclone had the following to share:

> The [Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa] ZAOGA church in Ngangu miraculously survived the trail of destruction. Some survivors sought refuge inside the church and the pastor's house which is the only house that survived the devastation in that area. The huge boulders that swept off other houses and buildings within the vicinity of that area astoundingly formed a barricade around the ZAOGA church and the Pastors' house such that even the mudslides which destroyed most of the infrastructure in Ngangu did not find a pathway into the ZAOGA church stand. In Ndakopa where whole communities were swept off by the ferocious flood waters, another ZAOGA church building survived the onslaught and all those who sought refuge inside the church survived the calamity. We believe that God is speaking to

[14] Personal Interview, Ngangu Residential area in Chimananini, April 28, 2019.

> us and although we are aggrieved by the losses of so many lives and belongings, we believe that God has plans for the greater good in our lives. [15]

The Jehovah's Witnesses' Kingdom Hall also survived unscathed. One of the new converts to the Jehovah's Witnesses said that she was touched by the fact that their building remained intact in the face of the merciless pounding by the cyclone.

> I was attracted to the Jehovah Witness church because of their church building that remained intact in Chimanimani after Cyclone Idai devastation. To me, it showed that God was indicating something to this generation in that church.[16]

It must be observed that in rural Zimbabwe, in general, church buildings tend to be built on high ground. There are both theological reasons for this development (to be visible/imposing/quest for permanency) and practical reasons (safety). While scientists would concentrate on the physical explanation, Christians view the proceedings through the eyes of faith. For them, it is inconceivable that church buildings would be spared "by a random act of nature, or by dint of sheer physical location." They utilize a theological frame to explain how church structures became sanctuaries during the devastation.

Other Christian explanations adopted eschatological and moralistic themes. Thus, according to them, just as God came down on an apostate generation during the time of Noah (Genesis 6:9 – 9:17), so did God decide to prefigure the sure end of time through Cyclone Idai. Some study participants maintained that there was simply too much corruption, debauchery, wretchedness and mocking of God for God's wrath not to be provoked. They felt that while the death of the people of Chimanimani and the loss of

[15] Personal Interview, Chimananini Village, 27 April, 2019.
[16] Jena Nunurai, "Thousands of Witnesses Besiege Chinhoyi," *NewsDay*, July 31, 2019.

property and general devastation was unfortunate, it served as a reminder that the end of the world is very near indeed. As Nyahuma has demonstrated, there is a strand of Zimbabwean Christianity that insists that the world's "extreme loss of morals" portends the end of the world.[17]

Study participants who insisted that the world/Zimbabwe had become "too sinful" did not in any way suggest that the people of Chimanimani in general, or the victims in particular, had more sins than those in other places that did not experience the disaster. They maintained that God's sovereignty cannot be questioned. Therefore, God saw it fit to demonstrate God's power through Cyclone Idai. The message was clear: people had to leave their wicked ways and turn to God while there was still a window of opportunity. Although there are serious ethical challenges associated with this explanation, it had some enthusiastic supporters.

Wearing African eco-feminist lenses, one cannot stop questioning why and how, if God is all-loving and all-caring, there were so many innocent lives lost during the Cyclone Idai carnage. Why did God not just punish the sinful people and spare the rest of the innocent folks? Cognizant of the fact that 80% of the people who suffered the most during the disaster were women and children, the Cyclone Idai misfortune affirms the eco-feminist contention that the ecological crisis has a gendered dimension.

"Annoyed Ancestors": An overview of indigenous interpretations

Besides these interpretations of Cyclone Idai from members of the Christian community in Chimanimani and Chipinge districts, there were several African traditional interpretations tendered by the residents of Chimanimani regarding the possible causes of the disaster. An elderly female survivor

[17] Blessing Nyahuma, "The Whore of Babylon: Gender Metaphors in the Revelation of John and the Use of Apocalyptic Language in Response to Changing Gender Roles in Zimbabwe," in *The Bible and Gender Troubles in Africa,* eds. J. Kügler, R. Gabaitse and J. Stiebert (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2019), 89.

residing in Ngangu shared her conceptualization of the original cause of the cyclone as follows:

> We believe that the desecration of the sacred clay pots which resided in a sacred cave on top of Ngangu Mountain perpetrated by some overzealous Christians is the reason behind the ancestral wrath resulting in the unleashing of this calamity. Since time immemorial, the sacred cave has always been revered as the abode of the highly respected ancestral spirits of our land [*mudzimu mukuru*]. It is an extremely beautiful natural cave which attracts pilgrims from the adherents of both Christianity and African traditional religion. Traditional rituals used to be performed inside the cave, especially rainmaking ceremonies and thanksgiving for good harvests. With time, some Christian groups have also designated the cave as their favourite spot for conducting night vigils whilst praying, fasting and meditating. Inside the cave, there are artistic rock paintings believed to have been inscribed by the San during the pre-colonial period. Several unusual objects as well as sacred clay pots filled with *rapoko* are found inside the cave. Unfortunately, it is said that some Apostolic and Pentecostal Christian groups decided that the sacred clay pots were objects belonging to "heathen groups upholding evil traditions" and they decided to destroy the clay pots. Such an act is believed to have infuriated the ancestral spirits and raised their ire; hence, the ancestors expressed their indignation by causing the heavy rains, mudslides and the rolling of the stones from the mountain.[18]

Clearly, the destruction of the sacred clay pots did not sit well with those who still uphold the traditional African worldview. The general consensus among the residents of Chimanimani is that it needs no genius to fathom that there is a spiritual reason behind the fact that Ngangu Mountain, which used to be their source of water, well-being and sustenance, suddenly became the

[18] Personal Interview, Ngangu Residential area in Chimananini, April 28, 2019

source of devastation, death and destruction. Their cherished source of enrichment, safety and security precipitously became their enemy. Such an abrupt turn of events could only be explained using their indigenous knowledge systems. They believe that the ancestral spirits, whose main abode is Ngangu Mountain, either abandoned them or withheld their protection and exposed the whole community to this tragedy.

It is critical to note that there is a silent war relating to sacred sites that is raging across Zimbabwe. Traditionalists are locked in a spiritual battle against members of African Independent Churches (especially the white-garment/Apostolic type) and newer Pentecostal churches when it comes to sacred places. For example, the Great Zimbabwe Monument, a UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Site, attracts different religious groups who lay claim to it.[19] Similarly, Musoni describes contestation for holy places in Zimbabwe's religious landscape.[20] The emerging Pentecostal churches have also argued that God has given them mountains that were previously associated with traditional religion. In one sense, this has contributed towards a positive environmental ethic. However, it has also generated animosity and pollution.[21]

An elderly male cyclone survivor who described himself as a renowned traditional herbalist and a resident of Ngangu, interpreted the occurrence of Cyclone Idai as follows:

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[19] Munyaradzi Mawere, Munyaradzi Elton, Sagiya and Tapiwa Raymond, Mubaya, "Convergence of Diverse Religions at Zimbabwe Heritage Sites: The Case of Great Zimbabwe National Monument," *International Research Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 1, no.2 (2012): 25.

[20] Philip Musoni. "Contestation of 'the Holy Places in the Zimbabwean Religious Landscape': A Study of the Johane Masowe Chishanu yeNyenyedzi Church's Sacred Places," *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 72 no.1 (2016): 44, http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3269.

[21] Golo Ben-Willie Kwaku, "Creation and Salvation in African Neo-Pentecostalist Theology," in *Creation and Salvation: A Companion on Recent Theological Movements*, Vol. 2, ed. Ernst M. Conradie (Zurich: LIT, 2012): 66.

Before the outbreak of Cyclone Idai, our interaction with the mountain had been one of interdependence. Growing up, our elders engraved in our hearts that Ngangu Mountain has sacred significance. Our indigenous teachings passed on from one generation to the other inscribed in us the understanding that the mountain is a special gift from above. We enjoyed a cordial relationship with our mountain and always looked up to it as our source of livelihood and abundant living. When my grandfather started grooming me as a herbalist, we would climb the mountain to collect several medicinal herbs and I have maintained the tradition of collecting herbs from the mountain to treat my patients even in my old age. Ngangu Mountain has always been our continual source of clean water for domestic use and irrigation. We have always revered the mountain as a place of spiritual significance as well as our provider for water, food and medicinal herbs. Unfortunately, the coming in of *vatogwa/vauyi* [outsiders] from other parts of the country and from different parts of the world to reside in Chimanimani brought in conflicting religious and cultural beliefs and practices which threatened the prevailing harmonious co-existence with our mountain. All hell broke loose after the unfortunate incident whereby a white farm owner whose farm was adjacent to Ngangu Mountain shot and killed several *mhondoro* (lions believed to be the harbingers of the ancestral spirits). The *mhondoro* permanently resided on the mountain but would sometimes roam around the neighbourhood and prey on domestic animals. The white farmer was concerned that the *mhondoro* were depleting his livestock and so he decided to shoot the *mhondoro* dead. As much as his farm workers who were locals tried to dissuade him from such detrimental action, he went ahead and shot the *mhondoro*. Shooting the *mhondoro* was a direct affront against the ancestral realm and we all knew that this would not end well. Clearly, the Cyclone Idai disaster is a result of the ancestors' outrage against such a slur. When ancestral spirits are aggrieved, they express their grievances through withholding

> their protection of the community from harm, consequently exposing them to all manner of misfortunes.[22]

From the information presented in the above excerpt, it is apparent that the indigenous interpretations of the Cyclone Idai catastrophe are anchored on the community's relationship with the ancestral spirits of the land. They believe that whenever they maintain peaceful and harmonious relations with the spirit world, they will be guaranteed safety, protection and abundance of life. Conversely, whenever relations with the spirit world have been negatively interrupted, there will be far reaching repercussions just as what transpired in the Cyclone Idai calamity. What is most unfortunate is the fact that whenever the spirit world registers its rage, it is not usually directed at the individual perpetrator who caused them to be furious; often times even the innocent ones become major causalities. If we are to embrace these indigenous explanations of what ignited Cyclone Idai, it would lead to the simple conclusion that most of the people who lost their lives, their loved ones and their belongings in the wake of the cyclone were merely caught in a vicious cycle of events beyond their control. They were caught in the crossfire without being directly responsible for their misfortune. Bujo poignantly illustrates this point:

> Africans operate on the premise that "Everybody's behaviour and ethical action have consequences for the whole community: the good contributes to the increase of life, while evil destroys or at least reduces life."[23]

Whenever death and destruction strikes, African indigenous communities immediately turn to their indigenous knowledge systems for explanation. As such, the Chimanimani communities also proffer their indigenous understandings of what might have caused the untold misery and devastation wrought by Cyclone Idai. The other explanation tendered by the

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[22] Personal Interview, Ngangu Residential area in Chimananini, April 28, 2019.

[23] Benjamin Caleb Bujo, The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and Dialogue between North and South (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 189.

residents of Chimanimani emerges in the above excerpt. Everyone practicing farming or mining within that community brewed traditional beer annually and offered sacrifices as a sign of thanksgiving and respect for the protection and provision of abundant harvests by the spirits. The white farm owner incited ancestral indignation by adamantly refusing to propitiate them through such practices or offerings. Consequently, the spiritual realm registered its dissatisfaction by sending the *mhondoro* to devour his livestock as a warning. Instead of conceding and doing the needful, the farm owner retaliated by shooting and killing the *mhondoro* which further infuriated the spirit world forcing them to strike back harshly in the form of the calamitous cyclone.

The shooting and killing of the *mhondoro* by a *mutorwa/muvuyi* [foreign national] is perceived as literally the last straw that broke the camel's back. Relations between the spiritual realm and the Chimanimani communities are believed to have been strained already due to the desecration and destruction of the sacred cave and the clay pots on Ngangu Mountain as described in the earlier section. Consequently, the *mhondoro* shooting incident is regarded as the final blow unleashing the ancestral vengeance making the Cyclone Idai tragedy inevitable. Such an indigenous interpretation resonates with the view put forward by Chirongoma and Manda:

> In the African world-view, life should be lived to the fullest and in appreciation of others. There is a strong impulse to secure life through the practice of good habits. Illness or any other type of misfortune is therefore interpreted as the work of evil especially if customary practices are being upheld.[24]

[24] Sophia Chirongoma and Domoka Lucinda Manda, "*Ubuntu* and Women's Health Agency in Contemporary South Africa" in *From Our Side: Emerging Perspectives on Development and Ethics*, eds. Steve de Gruchy, Sytse Strijbos and Nico Koopman (Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers, 2008), 196.

Official statistics on the Cyclone Idai carnage reveal that of the majority (80%) who died, were injured or reported missing, most who are feared to have been swept into the ocean were women and children. Whilst children are celebrated as the community's future, women are also valued as the bearers and nurturers of life. Hence, a disaster of such magnitude where women and children abruptly and needlessly lost their lives caused community's anguish and led to uncertainty about the future. Writing specifically about the Karanga-Shona in Zimbabwe, Chitando explicates this indigenous perspective on life as follows:

> African beliefs and practices are a celebration of life. Life is good and must be enjoyed to the full. Life must be enhanced and celebrated. Traditional Africans are stubbornly Earthbound, that is, they are not preoccupied with the idea of a world to come...The dominant belief is that one should live to a ripe old age...Traditional African beliefs and practices promote a pro-life agenda.[25]

Hence the traditional African reveres life; there is a preoccupation with longevity and abundance in the physical life. Anything that threatens or diminishes life is to be resisted and avoided. As such every effort is made to ensure that a fortuitous disaster such as Cyclone Idai is never repeated in the future. The intertwined connection between ecological disasters and the suffering of African indigenous women is also highlighted in various writings of African eco-feminist scholars who argue that the suffering of the earth perpetuates women's suffering since they are the ones in charge of domestic chores such as preparing food, fetching water and firewood. Hence, the scarcity of these resources adds an extra burden to their daily chores. [26] The

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[25] Ezra Chitando, *Living in Hope: African Churches and HIV/AIDS* 2. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007), 47-48.

[26] See the following works by Sophie Chirongoma "Women Curbing Ecological Degradation: Hope for Transformed Lives Inspired through Inter-faith dialogue between Shona Religion and the Christian Faith in Masvingo, Zimbabwe," in *Voices From the Third World: Inter-Faith Dialogue Listening to African Voices*, ed. K.C. Abraham, (India: Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, 2005), 39-60 Volume XXV111 No.2; "Motherhood and Ecological Conservation of Mother-Earth" in *Women in God's Image: Images of God*

African indigenous explanations proffered by the study participants, particularly the vulnerability of women and girls to the Cyclone Idai carnage, also echo the views raised by Siwila, writing in the Zambian context who said the following:

> In view of the current ecological challenges that are more pronounced for women than men, there is a need to embrace new ways of engaging in ecological debates. One way [to do this] is to examine how society has responded to indigenous knowledge derived from the peripheral of our societies…To what extent can these teachings contribute to discussions on the value of ecological indigenous knowledge to the sustainability of nature, and how can such discussions broaden the dialogue on the field of African ecofeminism, especially in the field of African Traditional Religions?[27]

Hence, our explorations of the study participants' views concur with the voices of African eco-feminists such as Siwila cited above, who propound for a deeper understanding of African indigenous values in an endeavour to make sense of the current ecological catastrophe. We also cohere with Siwila's proposition for Africans to acknowledge the efficacy of indigenous knowledge to effectively address the ecological crisis in our respective African contexts. She argues thus:

> [There is] a need to appreciate the value of indigenous knowledge, especially in today's society where theologians are continuously challenged to seek other ways of practising theology…If religion is

the Mother, ed. Karen Buckenham (City Printing Works Private Ltd: Pietermaritzburg, 2005), 8-12; "Karanga-Shona Rural Women's Agency in Dressing Mother Earth: A Contribution Towards an Indigenous Eeco-feminist Theology" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa: Essays in Honour of Steve de Gruchy* Vol 142, (March, 2012):120-144; "Eco-Feminism and Gender Justice: The Missing Link in *Laudatio Si"* in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (ed) Andrew Warmback and Sue Rackozy, Volume 157, No 1. (2017):135-171.

[27] Siwila, "Tracing the Ecological Footprints of our Foremathers,"141-142.

> to meet the demands of its adherents, especially those at the peripheral of society, there is a need to embrace their value systems. Indigenous knowledge in this case is one value system that has been challenged by modernity and colonialism to the extent that some religions have threatened to do away with some of the practices that carry along valuable indigenous knowledge.[28]

Some study participants also underscored the value of the area that was devastated by the cyclone, namely, Chipinge. They reiterated that this area was the seat of indigenous spirituality. They said that Chipinge is associated with *kupinga* (to lay the foundation of/to anchor/to establish) in Zimbabwe. Thus, it is not an ordinary place. To borrow the formulation by Eliade, Chipinge is the country's very own axis mundi or, 'center of the world.'[29] In this scheme, events in Chipinge are not to be interpreted in isolation: they carry a message to the whole country. Therefore, political leaders need to take corrective action and communicate with the ancestors through the traditional leaders in order to correct the wrongs done by this generation.

The indiscriminate punishment which is believed to have been meted out by the aggrieved ancestors also raises major ethical concerns. The overarching question that one is left asking is, "why did the aggrieved ancestors not unleash their wrath on the offenders only, rather than indiscriminately punishing all and sundry?" In the backdrop of this question, the next section focuses on navigating indigenous solutions to unpredictable weather patterns.

Indigenous solutions to unpredictable weather patterns

As noted above, the indigenous understanding within the Chimanimani and Chipinge communities is that there is co-existence between the living folk and the spiritual realm that encompasses all facets of the environment. Safety, security and abundant living is dependent on how the living folk

[28] Siwila, "Tracing the Ecological Footprints of our Foremathers,"142.
[29] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 113.

interact with the spirit world.[30] Any breaking of environmental taboos or deliberate negligence of traditional norms and values disrupts the peaceful co-existence causing the ancestral spirits to withdraw their protection from the living folks consequently exposing them to misfortunes, especially natural calamities such as the tragedy suffered in the wake of Cyclone Idai. The general consensus among the indigenous communities is that the living should strive to maintain a balance between themselves, the ancestors and the environment.[31] The preservation of water sources such as the waterways in Ngangu and Ndakopa is regarded as a sacred responsibility. Failure to preserve these sacred sites results in disaster as seen in the devastation experienced during the cyclone. If these sites had been perpetually persevered as had been done in the past, the loss of lives and infrastructure could have been averted despite the mudslides and the torrential rains.

Although there were various religious explanations proffered in trying to make sense of this catastrophe, some survivors also explained that human error contributed immensely towards the loss of lives. First, the two sections of Chimanimani that suffered heavy losses of life i.e., Ngangu and Coppa had been designated as human settlements by the district council while knowing fully well that these geographical locations were waterways. As such, when the heavy rains soaked the soil, the water escaped via these weak points and in the process, all the homes and the residents were swept away by the raging waters. Second, if the Department of Civil Protection (DCP) had promptly evacuated the residents to safety, they could have saved many lives. The survivors shared harrowing stories of how they were not alerted of the looming disaster from the mudslides that began pouring into their homes at night. As they ran for dear life, some of their family members got stuck in the mud and could not make it to safety. Some also

[30] Taringa Nisbert Taisekwa, *Towards an African-Christian Environmental Ethic* (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2014), 49.

[31] Tabona Shoko, *Karanga Indigenous Religion in Zimbabwe: Health and Well-Being* (Ashgate: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 79.

explained how their neighbors were fast asleep when disaster struck and hence, whole families were swept off by the heavy rains and the mudslides and they remain buried underground by a heap of stones where their homes once stood.

Many displaced individuals sought shelter in overcrowded spaces and the lingering trauma of losing all that was dear to them was immeasurable. What was even more heart wrenching was the manner in which most of the survivors living in the temporary shelters were masking their trauma and hopelessness by drowning themselves in drugs and alcohol. This was a common feature among all age groups –male and female – in all the temporary shelters. The ones who suffered the most during this climate related catastrophe were women and children. For instance, some women and girls related harrowing stories of how they became susceptible to various forms of dehumanization and exploitation during their stay in the temporary shelters. A young woman shared the following:

> Losing our homes and our source of livelihood has heavily impacted on our humanity and dignity as women. Some of the devious male humanitarian workers and some unscrupulous government officials take advantage of our vulnerability and solicit for sexual favors before allocating us bare necessities such as tents, food, clothing and sanitary ware. Also, due to prolonged periods out of school, some of the idle girls are engaging in pre-marital sex or entering into early marriages in order to escape from the poverty and uncertainty confronting them.[32]

Third, some of the survivors died due to the prolonged delay in receiving external help. Survivors explained how they helplessly watched their loved ones writhing in pain after having sustained severe injuries from getting stuck in the mud or being hurt by the boulders falling from the mountain and other stones emerging from the ground due to the heavy rains and mudslides.

[32] Personal Interview, Ngangu Residential area in Chimananini, April 28, 2019.

They emotionally related how they remained cut off from the rest of the country for three days, with no food supplies, no electric power amidst the chilling weather with no life-saving medical help. Since their roads had been destroyed and the weather was foggy, they could not be reached either by road or by air. Some related how they sought shelter in church buildings located on higher ground where they spent days huddled together with the corpses of their loved ones as well as gravely ill family members some of whom gave up the fight after failing to receive the much-needed help in time.

Clearly, poor planning in terms of risk and disaster management as well as lack of due diligence in allocating residential stands precipitated the loss of lives that could have been averted under normal circumstances. Now what remains is just but a heap of stones covering the place they used to call home, stones burying memories of a once-upon-a-time integrated, happy, and thriving community. The pain, suffering, loss and trauma endured by the survivors of Cyclone Idai should raise a clarion call to those in positions of authority to exercise more vigilance, due diligence, and foresight to avail adequate resources to facilitate the evacuation of vulnerable communities to safety. On the part of the affected community, the important lesson that will hopefully be derived from this deeply unfortunate calamity is to take heed of warning signs in the event of future natural disasters and seek sanctuary timeously. No amount of compensation will ever heal the wounds of trauma suffered by the Chimanimani and Chipinge community as a result of the effects of Cyclone Idai. Granted, we cannot turn back the hands of time. However, we could take a leaf from how other countries and continents are successfully implementing their risk and disaster management initiatives and ensure that we also do the needful.

It is becoming crystal clear that climate change's most devastating effects will intensify among the world's poorest and most vulnerable communities. While those who have contributed the most to climate change, such as the rich communities of the Global North, experience the least impact, communities in the Global South will have to intensify efforts for survival. Therefore, it is important for activists at different levels to remind, particularly

religious leaders, of their prophetic role. They must invest in standing with the communities in places such as Chimanimani and Chipinge, long after the television cameras have left … in search of the next disaster elsewhere! As Chitando has argued, it is vital for African religious leaders to stand in solidarity with vulnerable communities that are facing the effects of climate change.[33] From an African eco-feminist perspective, it is also important to interrogate the fact that women in the Global South are the ones who are bearing the brunt of the global ecological crisis. Such a status quo should spur African governments and African religious leaders to make concerted efforts towards putting measures in place to reduce the carbon footprint whilst paying particular attention to the plight of women and girls whose quality of life has been further diminished by the perpetually increasing ecological disasters. This view is aptly put across by Munamato Chemuru[34] who posits that:

> … the African ecofeminist philosophical view, which challenges all forms of domination and oppression, implies that if the origin of human social and political problems is understood and addressed, then it would also be easier to comprehend and address environmental problems as well.

Conclusion

Drawing insights from African ecofeminism, our article has attempted to find responses to the overarching question raised in the title of this article, "What did we do to our mountain?" This question denotes the indigenous people's perplexity as they grapple with coming to terms with the calamity in their midst. As explicated above, Ngangu Mountain which once represented a place for enrichment, sustenance, and was an oasis for abundant living, unexpectedly turned into a poisoned chalice and became an agent of death and destruction. Reminiscent of Mother Earth which is usually connected

[33] Ezra Chitando, "Praying for Courage: African Religious Leaders and Climate Change," *The Ecumenical Review* 69 no.3 (2017): 427-428.

[34] Chemhuru, "Interpreting Ecofeminist Environmentalism in African," 10.

with nurturance and preservation of all life forms, Ngangu Mountain which was looked upon by the local people as their oasis of livelihood and well-being suddenly turned into a weapon of mass destruction. As Chimanimani district is well known for its rainy weather and fertile soils, when the rains started earlier in the week before the disastrous loss of lives and infrastructure on the night of the March 15, 2019, the residents of Chimanimani never suspected that anything was amiss. The assumption was that it was the normal rainy season and hence they expected it would end well. Even though several survivors acknowledge that they heard warnings of a looming cyclone, none of them foresaw the death-dealing, heart wrenching and life-diminishing catastrophic events that were to unravel in their midst. Whilst acknowledging that some individuals broke taboos and traditional prohibitions in their interaction with Ngangu Mountain and the sacred phenomena inhabiting the mountain, the survivors cannot help but feel let down by their beloved mountain and their ancestral spirits. Even those who uphold the Christian beliefs and values are left asking, "Where was God when this tragedy hit us?" More importantly, they feel let down by the government of Zimbabwe and its leadership, particularly considering that they remained cut off from any form of help for more than three days. They felt desperately alone and whilst numbed in pain and disbelief, they had to proactively salvage the limited resources at their disposal to make arrangements for mass burials of their loved ones who died due to the cyclone. "Never again!" must another community be left to perish due to a preventable disaster, or at least one whose impact could have been minimized with greater levels of preparedness and more timely reactions.

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Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Women's Role in Indigenous Religions

Mutale Kaunda[1]

[1]**SHORT BIO**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nexus between African indigenous religio-culture and ecology, gender, rituals and the environment, in current ritual debates. Current debates demonstrate that ritual has filtered into the public space thereby being resilient and at the same time vulnerable to exploitation by the public sphere. Examining the current debates on rites of passage, this article reviews four chapters from the book *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions*. African indigenous rituals are spaces that produce knowledge for African ways of living. However, in search of progress, development and better life, most African people have been neglecting rites as they seem unprogressive. In ritual spaces, the novices were instructed about how to engage with nature and how to live with others within communities. Ritual spaces gave women and men (initiates) agency over a vast number of life issues. Drawing on African feminist cultural hermeneutics, I examine ritual functions as a tool to understand how contemporary African people's search for justice can be gleaned within such African rituals in order to uplift women's agency.

KEYWORDS
Rites, liminal, African women, indigenous, Mother Earth

Introduction

Many African women hold on to rites of passage as an aspect of life that informs their cultural identity despite arguments suggesting that these rites are oppressive for women. At times women are forced to be initiated because culture or community demands it. The reverse is also relevant as women look forward to being initiated because it gives them a certain identity and status in communities.

In this paper, I analyse the current debates around African women and initiation rites. My main focus is on the book, "*Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Indigenous Religions*" written by African women belonging to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter referred to as the Circle). This book emerged from the 'Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians 5th Pan-African Conference' that was held in Botswana from 2 to 4 July 2019. The theme of the conference was 'Mother Earth and Mother

Africa in Theological/Religious/Cultural/Philosophical Imagination.' This book drew its title from the conference theme and the chapters in the book are revised versions of papers that were presented at this conference. As can be expected in any writing on the topic of Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions, the topics are as diverse as the authors and regions they come from within Africa.

All ten chapters affirm that African indigenous religion engaged with human responsibility regarding nature and argue that the relationship between humans and nature was understood to be a symbiotic one prior to contact with Western missionaries. Some of the themes in the book include: technology in African imagination, indigenous religio-culture and ecology, gender, rituals and the environment.

An interesting thread in the book is that four out of the ten chapters engage with rituals. Indigenous rituals and rites are an important area for women's engagement because African women have been marginalized, excluded or accepted within communities due to rites. An African woman who has not undergone certain rituals that the community deems necessary for women's belonging in the community, may be ridiculed and called names, made an outcast and sometimes excluded from spaces that are for initiated women only.

My focus will be on the four chapters that overtly focus on rituals. I will draw mostly from the Bemba rite of passage, *imbusa,*[1] and the Bemba context in my engagement with the four chapters. I will draw on this context as I am more familiar with that ritual and context. Drawing on African

[1] *Imbusa* is a premarital teaching for Bemba women of Zambia. *Imbusa* are sacred emblems/visual aids handed down to Bemba brides before the wedding. A detailed explanation of *imbusa* is given in Mutale Mulenga Kaunda, "Negotiated Feminism? A Study of Married Bemba Women Appropriating the Imbusa Pre-Marital 'Curriculum' at Home and Workplace," PhD diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2017), ix.

feminist cultural hermeneutics[2], the paper will demonstrate the shift in ritual understanding from private or secrecy to public. Rituals are spaces that give a glimpse into the African culture and expose elements that are life denying and those that are life-giving. From birth to death, African life follows rituals at every transition. In the book edited by Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, the significance of ritual in African societies is underscored. The authors have argued that rituals are mainly performed on and for women: in certain cases, the ritual is often drawn upon to perpetuate patriarchal enforcement, while in other cases ritual in Africa has a significant function of giving women an identity and status among their peers. Despite such accusations of its entanglements with patriarchy, it is still important to ask whether rituals empower women with a significant identity or steep them further into the patriarchal strictures of society. Rites offer a new theoretical or methodological angle through which to enter into this debate.

I also note that "This volume is dedicated to the 'giantess' on whose big shoulders every African woman theologian and women theologians globally are standing – Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye, daughter of *Anowa*, and the founder of the Circle." Oduyoye has written a significant preface to the book; starting with a quote from Bolaji Edowu

> Where she (Africa) behaves herself according to prescription and accepts an inferior position, benevolence, which becomes her 'poverty', is assured, and for this she shows herself deeply and humbly grateful. If for any reason she takes it into her head to be self-assertive and claim a footing of equality, then she brings upon herself a frown, she is called names; she is persecuted openly or by indirect means; she is helped to be divided against herself... a victim who somehow is developing unexpected power

[2] Musimbi Kanyoro, Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

> and resilience which might be a threat to the erstwhile strong. (Idowu, 1975:77)[3]

This quote succinctly captures the perception about African women and Africa, globally. Elsewhere also Oduyoye[4] succinctly states, "The uncanny resemblance between Africa as a continent of nations and the women who are Africans is what makes cultural hermeneutics an important aspect of women's theology." This is not only a perception; it is how women and Africa have been, and, are often treated at the global scene. Oduyoye bemoans the slow pace that Mother Africa and African women take to respond to words that are directed against them. She then delves into the essays that are offered in the book and agrees with the authors regarding the importance of the interaction between humans and nature in African Traditional Religions which affirms respect for nature. She also discusses various African cultural practices especially rituals that focus on women.

African Women and Rites of Passage – From Secrecy to Public

The African continent has vast ethnic groups and, as such, there are as various initiation rites as there are ethnic groups. Some ethnic groups have rites for both boys and girls, others only have rites for girls and still others have rites only for boys. This also relates to the fact that some ethnic groups are patrilineal[5] and others are matrilineal[6]. Despite this, the ritual essence is the same, to pass on the values, uphold culture, enforce cultural identity and share in solidarity. At every point of transition, there is usually a ritual that needs to be performed for most if not all Africans, from birth to death.

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3 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Preface" in *Mother Earth Mother, Africa and African Indigenous Religions* ed. Nobuntu Penxa Matholeni, Georgina Kwanima Boateng and Molly Manyonganyise (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2020), xiii-xviii; xiii.

4 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield Academic Press: England, 2001), 15.

5 This means that the family line is traced through males.

6 This means that the family line is traced through the female.

These rites of passage have an emphasis on secrecy of what is taught and shared within the ritual context. This secrecy is because those who are taught share a bond of knowledge, solidarity and awareness, whereas those who are untaught should find access only through the right channels and not try to gain this knowledge from friends without going through the process of initiation themselves. Hence, the emphasis on secrecy. This is borne out by Silvia Tamale who observes while commenting on Baganda women's rite of passage called Ssenga, saying, "Behind the public silence about women's sexuality and eroticism is the realm of 'women's secrets.' Only females are privy to such secrets, with the Ssengas being the chief custodians of Baganda women's sex secrets archives."[7]

Some anthropologists interpret this secrecy as an enigma and puzzle, and stress that no one should ever talk about the teachings outside of the ritual space. Ironically these ritual teachings have now found space on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, consequently making these public rituals. For instance, imbusa premarital teaching for Bemba women of Zambia has found this space on Facebook and Instagram. Christopher Helland has observed that with the increase in use of the internet, many people "do not distinguish their life-online and life-offline."[8] Helland further points out that when they are '"offline,' people know the rules and limits of their conversations or involvement in 'sacred spaces in their communities.' However, the online space has not mastered what Helland calls 'cultural memory.'[9] This gives people freedom to express themselves in ways that they would not otherwise do if they were

[7] Silvia Tamale "Eroticism, Sensuality and 'Women's Secrets' Among the Baganda" *IDS Bulletin* 37, no. 5 (October 2006): 89-97, 91.

[8] Christopher Helland, "Ritual," in Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds, ed. Heidi Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 26.

[9] Heidi Campbell, *Digital Religion*, 34.

in their offline life. Thus, in my opinion, people articulate 'online' their real feelings[10], for instance, toward rites.

According to José Van Dijck, Facebook is a space where one can find unfiltered voices. Before Facebook or the internet, there were diaries and letters which were forms of communication. People have been imprisoned due to evidence found in their or the victim's diaries. José Van Dijck argues that "Blogs may well be seen as twenty-first century diaries and Facebook as a new type of 'published conversation'".[11] I submit that Facebook is a valid tool if not a space that women and men are using to express their frustrations and emotions in general around life, inclusive of rites, identity and experiences.

Initiation rites have empowering and disempowering aspects of the taught values and principles of life. Rites are not a one-way process but a continuous flow of beliefs in various directions in the search to interpret the meaning of cultural identity and belonging. While Africans knew their own history and their rites, they had never written it down and it was passed on orally from generation to generation. Initiation rites were spaces where part of this knowledge was passed on. While rites are for both women and men, women's rites are more pronounced due to how they have been written about. Anthropologists and missionaries were among the first people (pioneers) to write about Africa, initiation rites and history.

As they lived with the communities, Western anthropologists and missionaries put in efforts and commitment to learn their language and cultures. Their research among the people of Africa however can be "understood as a movement taking place from the centre to the periphery,

[10] While people find it easier to express themselves online, it must be kept in mind that there are also issues of privacy regarding Facebook and other social media platforms (considering data sharing, privacy invasion by State and hacking issues).

[11] José van Dijck, "Facebook as a Tool for Producing Sociality and Connectivity," *Television & New Media* 13, no. 2 (2012): 160-176,167.

and from the privileged to the marginalized of society."[12] Chammah J. Kaunda calls this

> …a capitalist research paradigm in which the researcher [usually middle class] functions as the centre for the exploitation, production, distribution, and circulation of knowledge emerging from the margins, which is subsequently used by the powerful to reinforce global hegemony, and hence capitalist relations of exploitation. Too often, knowledge contribution from the margins has only functioned to strengthen the centre. In short, it has worked against the margins.[13]

Research among the African population by the Western researchers is primarily owned by the researchers and their publishers. Knowledge is gathered, translated, interpreted, and it empowers and promotes the researchers while the researched remain in their marginalized and un-empowered state.

As if that is not enough, some of the analysis depicts African women as being in dire conditions and unable to have a voice against injustice. It is as if African women sit down and take in all the abuse and injustice unreservedly. While some women, not only African women, find themselves in dreadful situations of abuse and unable to fight for their liberation, there are plenty of African women who are fighting for abused, marginalized, exploited and oppressed women. Obioma Nnaemeka argues that African women do not take injustice lying down.[14] They negotiate

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[12] Jooseop Keum, ed., *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Geneva: WCC, 2013), 6.

[13] Chammah J. Kaunda, "On the Road to Emmaus Together towards Life as Conversation Partner in Missiological Research" *International Review of Mission* 106, no. 1 (2017): 34-50, 35.

[14] Obioma Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 21(2003), 361.

patriarchy in subtle ways and unless one is skilled in the African ways and approach to life, they would not recognize this negotiation and navigation. This subtle negotiation and navigation of patriarchy is often taught to women via rituals. Nnaemeka explains succinctly that African women, using nego-feminism, a feminism of negotiation which "knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines."[15]

A case in point to illustrate how African women negotiate patriarchy and practice agency is the issue of dance in general, and erotic dance in particular. During several African rites, erotic dance is a part of the process especially if it is a puberty or a marital rite. Dancing is always a part of rites in Africa. Among the Bemba people of Zambia for instance, funerals are characterized by singing and dancing. Lianne Bronzo[16], a Korean-American woman who "served as an aquaculture Peace Corps volunteer in Zambia from 2018 until being evacuated in March 2020 due to COVID-19," writes her experience attending a Bemba funeral in Zambia, and says "the choir belt rhythms and dance in a circle with the drum beat. The whole scene was mesmerizing and went on for over an hour."[17] Gibson Ncube and Margaret Chipara discuss whether erotic dance empowers or commodifies women.[18] Ncube and Chipara conclude that,

> …while erotic dancing can be viewed as demeaning and denigrating to women, their bodies and sexuality, it can simultaneously be seen as a way to empower women by allowing them to subvert patriarchal

[15] Obioma Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way,": 357.

[16] Lianne Bronzo, "A Bemba Funeral in Zambia." accessed May 25, 2021, https://liasian.wordpress.com/2018/06/09/a-bemba-funeral-in-zambia/

[17] Lianne Bronzo, "A Bemba Funeral in Zambia." accessed May 25, 2021, https://liasian.wordpress.com/2018/06/09/a-bemba-funeral-in-zambia/

[18] Gibson Ncube and Margaret Chipara, "Dancing with Power: Does Erotic Dance Empower or Commodify Women?" *Buwa! Journal of African Women's Experiences* 2, no.2 (December 2013):70-75

> ontologies, which regard women as objects that are to be deployed by men for their own pleasure.

This kind of negotiation and navigating of patriarchal landmines is what Nnaemeka presents as African women's way of subverting cultural constraints using cultural tools. While Western anthropologists may consider erotic dancing as commodifying women, an insider African worldview could view it differently.

Another case in point to illustrate the clash with the African worldview could be about the effects of cultural traditions on the education of women. Award winning educationist Dr. Christine Mushibwe wrote her doctoral thesis on this topic with specific reference to the Tumbuka people of Zambia. Her argument has been that rites of passage keep girls from school and once initiated, the girls do not want to go back to school because they feel old and want to stay home.[19] However, in the African worldview, rites and rituals are themselves spaces of education and instructions for life and wellbeing. In fact, even before Western education was introduced, this was the form of education that African people had and shared with one another. British social anthropologist Pnina Werbner[20] submits,

> …I propose, against early missionaries and anthropological narratives that construct Tswana girls' initiation as objectifying, subjectifying, and violent, that the Tswapong girls' puberty ritual, the mothei, endows novices with seriti, a quality that implies an active sense of autonomy, dignity, respect, and self-respect. I argue that the mothei rites enact a conjunctural, embodied dialectics of

[19] Christine. P. Mushibwe, "What are the Effects of Cultural Traditions on the Education of Women? (The Study of the Tumbuka People of Zambia)," PhD diss., University of Huddersfield, 2009.

[20] Pnina Werbner, "The Hidden Lion: Tswapong Girls' Puberty Rituals and the Problem of History," *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 3 (2009): 441-458, 441.

> fertilization, (and) respect, as the novice is moved in and out of the hut-womb in a series of transformative phases to agency, and from darkness to protective shadow. In addition, the secret singing, dancing, and performance in the hut, the cult's esoteric lore creates moments of transgressive sexuality, creativity, fun, and conviviality, as well as posing challenging physical ordeals.

Rituals are about agency and guidance to be rooted in one's identity. Despite modernity and industrialization, African women and men continue to hold on to rites of passage because it is the essence of their cultural identity.

Overview of Women's Initiation Rites Debates in Africa

Rituals are significant in the life of African peoples. A significant volume of research into African rituals has been carried out by Western anthropologists[21] who pioneered such research using ethnography. Thera Rasing, an anthropologist who has written extensively on Bemba women's initiation rites in Zambia, has noted that the ritual secrecy increased with the arrival of missionaries in order to prevent tainting of the rites by missionaries who were "trying to control and Christianize these rites."[22]

Current discourses around ritual are significant and have started finding their way into public spaces, thereby becoming public rituals. Serawit Bekele Debele[23] observes that ritual has become a public ritual. This shift in ritual functions like public religion or public political theologies, where the ritual gets into the public sphere and sometimes changes meaning. For

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[21] Victor Taylor, "The Ritual Process Structure and Anti-Structure," (Routledge: London, 1969); Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage: Anthropology and Ethnography*, (Routledge: London, 1960); Audrey I. Richards, *Chisungu*: *A Girl's Initiation Ceremony Among the Bemba of Zambia* (London: Tavistock Publications Ltd. Faber and Faber. 1982/1956); and others have been pioneers of ritual research.

[22] Thera Rasing, The Bush Burnt, the Stones Remain: Female Initiation Rites in Urban Zambia, (London: African Studies Centre, 2001), 26.

[23] Serawit Bekele Debele, *Locating Politics in Ethiopia's Irreecha Ritual*, (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 3.

instance, *imbusa* among the Bemba people of Zambia was a hidden rite but has slowly been transitioning into some public dimensions. Some features have become public wherein people come together publicly to talk about certain things that are taught during rituals, as a way of subverting the normative. Despite this, there is still a hiddenness to the ritual which traditionally has continued to be maintained and preserved. Certain aspects of the ritual maintains its hiddenness and air of mystery.

The ecological focus and embeddedness of ritual is becoming much stronger. This seems to be a response to current struggles around climate change that are taking place in the world, and African people are reclaiming the ecological dimensions of the ritual much more forcefully and intentionally than they did in the recent past. In a context where ritual has come to be perceived as for 'uneducated,' African women began to denounce ritual practice for fear of being perceived as primitive. Thus, African women started moving away from the dimensions that engaged with ecology too so that they would be seen as progressive. The emergence of the critique of modernity within postmodern theories has led Africans into embracing and reclaiming indigenous knowledge and aspects that they were rejecting. The importance of African identity in postcolonial context has also redefined the meaning of reclaiming what it means to be African. Achile Mbembe[24] has argued that the 'becoming black of the world' is an animistic enactment in contemporary times that is not just limited to the ritual context, but includes the social, economic, religious and political contexts as well. It is as if the entire public space is becoming ritualized to an extent that animistic tendencies are found everywhere. In this sense Mbembe brings animistic dimensions to ritual.

The ritual has found its place in the public spaces and I argue that the public is a space of resistance against some oppressive aspects of ritual.

[24] Achille Mbembe, "Introduction: The Becoming Black of the World," *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois, (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2017), 1-9, [Accessed on July 10, 2021] https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822373230-003

African culture, as Sarojini Nadar and Isabel Phiri have argued, has life-denying elements just as it has life-giving elements.[25] In as much as ritual is gaining a very strong position in the public spaces, it is also becoming increasingly vulnerable to political exploitation, manipulation and abuse.

There are arguments of rituals being backward and causing girls and women to drop out of school,[26] being oppressive toward women, and often for the benefit of men[27] and affecting women's health negatively.[28] I acknowledge that these arguments still exist and some African feminist scholars are challenging them, within the African context. However, it must be noted that these discourses/arguments operate side by side, rather than one replacing the other. Mercy Amba Oduyoye[29] commenting on African cultural elements, argues that, "although the Christian church has struggled to replace them with other possibilities that passed for Christian culture, these African elements did not just survive the Christian onslaught - they adamantly resisted being touched."

After studying Sylvia Tamale's[30] writings that demonstrate that ritual has been a space for African women's solidarity, I too shifted my understanding of ritual as a space where women are taught subordination, to an understanding of ritual as a space where women's agency[31] is affirmed.

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25 Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, "What's in a Name? - Forging A Theological Framework for African Women's Theologies," *Journal of Constructive Theology* 12, no. 2 (2006), 5-24.

26 Mushibwe, "What are the Effects of Cultural Traditions," 1.

27 Mutale Kaunda, "A Search for Life-Giving Marriage: The *Imbusa* Initiation Rite as Space for Constructing 'Wellbeing' Among Married Bemba Women of Zambia Living in Pietermaritzburg," (Masters diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2013), 41.

28 Dorothy Akoto, "Women and Health in Ghana and the Trokosi Practice-An issue of Women's and Children's Rights in 2 Kings 4: 1-7" in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006): 96-112.

29 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Introduction" in *the Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 1-8; 2.

30 Tamale, "Eroticism, Sensuality and "Women's Secrets," 9-36, 91.

31 Mutale M. Kaunda and Chammah J. Kaunda. "*Infunkutu*-The Bemba Sexual Dance as Women's Sexual Agency," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 155 (2016), 159-175;

Rituals in rural areas continue to maintain many traditional elements that inform its practice. Christianised ritual in the cities has received disproportional attention among scholars. Recently, Sylvia Mukuka[32] argued for the need for a comparative analysis between city rituals and their traditional rural versions as this remains an area that has been inadequately studied.

Positioning Mother Earth, Mother Africa in the Debate

Most African rituals have an explicit connection to the earth in its process and performance. The reason I choose to focus on ritual dimensions is because rituals often gravitate toward earth spirituality and the very title of the book under study seems to suggest a connection between women's concerns and Mother Earth, which is not a new conversation. The connection between women and nature or Mother Earth has been researched in Western scholarship as well.

Mary Mellor argued that "feminism and ecology are brought together in the ecofeminist assertion that women's subordination and the earth's degradation are linked."[33] This linking of the earth's degradation and women's subordination fails to capture the African contextual grounding in rituals and ecology. In the African context rituals are grounded in earth spirituality and ritual ideas have links to issues of climate change. African rituals have always intentionally had a strong focus on the earth and ritual teachings have resonance with the earth. Most aspects of every ritual are related to the earth- be it rituals of birth, adolescence, marriage, sex, and even death, and all of these are articulated through ecological life. African

Chammah J. Kaunda and Mutale M. Kaunda, "Imbusa as a Return to the Divine: Sexual Desire, Gender, and Female Ritual in Bemba Mythology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 37, no.1 (2021): 27- 44.

[32] Silvia Kasapatu-Mukuka, "A Quest for Embracing Indigenous Knowledge Systems in the United Church of Zambia: Pastoral Care and *Imbusa*," (PhD diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2019), 174.

[33] Mary Mellor, *Feminism and Ecology: An Introduction*, (New York: New York University Press 1997), vii.

being is embedded in creation and therefore rituals call for promotion of creation. As Jacob K. Olupona argues that "it may not be out of place to speak of the ritualization of the environment as a way to describe the intricate relationship between ritual and environment in African cosmology and religion."[34] For example, when announcing death among the Bemba, they usually say *noyu tulepema ebalauleta*, which is literally translated as 'the air we are currently breathing s/he is the one blowing it to us.' Basically, this means that when someone dies, they rot and go back to nature thereby becoming part of nature that produces air. In essence, in Africa, the ritual tends to function as a space of how to interact with the world. Such being the existential fabric where ritual and ecology are intricately interwoven with every aspect of life, the claim of eco-feminism as quoted by Mellor that earth's degradation parallels women's subordination seems inadequate to reflect the African context.

Beliefs that women are bestowed with wisdom to tend to nature and concepts like Mother Earth, should both be held in tension. The concept of Mother Earth implies that just as women are oppressed, so also the earth can be oppressed and exploited. It is not a simplistic or straight forward paradigm to define the earth as the mother. It has implications on how both women and the earth are dominated as something that people can exploit. Similarly, the concept of Mother Africa is also not neutral as Africa has suffered oppression and injustice relentlessly. Musa Dube has crudely and explicitly argued, "the African continent was being penetrated by the West, its male subjugator."[35] Dube's argument captures that women's experiences regarding the penetration of the West into Africa, parallels their own oppression as African women. Both the concepts of Mother Earth

[34] Jacob K. Olupona, "Religion and Ecology in African Culture and Society" in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2006),1.

[35] Musa Dube, "The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial Perspectives," *Society of Biblical Literature Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* 13*,* ed. Musa Dube, Andrew Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013):2.

and Mother Africa therefore, mirror the contextual reality that both the earth and women are seen as something to be exploited and thrown out without regard.

The ten chapters presented in the book *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions* show how diverse Africa is, and how inequality due to patriarchal ideologies have impacted the lives of African women in similar and yet different ways. Diverse as Africa is, there are experiences that unite the continent and African women theologians. Women's experiences are the starting point of theologizing.[36] African indigenous religions are rich with environmental conservation strategies. These are often seen as backward and primitive when viewed through the prism of Western researchers, anthropologists, and Western religions. However, these capture the spiritual ways of environmental conservation strategies inherent in African indigenous religions. Oduyoye has shown how there is never a dichotomy between spiritual and secular in Africa, while the late John Mbiti[37] has explicitly stated that "Africans are notoriously religious." For Africans, lives are religious, from birth till or sometimes even after death. Mbiti[38] emphasizes that

> Wherever the African is, there is his [sic] religion: he (sic) carries it to the fields where he (sic) is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he (sic) takes it with him (sic) to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him (sic) to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he (sic) takes it to the house of parliament. Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his (sic) birth to long after his (sic) physical death.

[36] Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, "What's in a Name? - Forging A Theological Framework for African Women's Theologies," *Journal of Constructive Theology,* 12, no. 2, (2006): 8.
[37] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy, 2nd ed.* (London: Heinemann,1990),2.
[38] Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 2.

Women are the majority in religious spaces and this is one of the reasons that makes the contribution of this book important. Initiation rites are often for and about women, and while this makes the four chapters' focus on rites important, this does not in any way suggest that men do not have rites. Much as African women have been speaking out, advocating for their own rights, writing, righting and re-righting their own stories, there is still a significant number of women whose voices are necessary for the conversation to be complete. There is still a need to mediate these voices as honorably and respectfully as possible and not just add these voices to the intellectual property of the academy. I now highlight the salient arguments in each of the four chapters chosen for study.

Matholeni's chapter opens with Xhosa rituals: *KwaNtojane* for females and *ulwaluko* for males, and bemoans the inequality that these two spaces offer in terms of how men have much room for privacy while women do not. *Ulwaluko* is an initiation rite for boys that prepares them for adulthood. "KwaNtojane is an isiXhosa concept that refers to the space that a young umXhosa girl occupies from initiation to adulthood."[39] If a woman did not have an opportunity to be initiated as a young girl. KwaNtojane is later repeated in her adult life.

In these ritual spaces, women are taught regarding their womanhood, marriage and procreation while men are taught decision making and leadership. While Matholeni has admitted in her reflexivity that she never went through the ritual as a young girl, she has not shared whether she went through the ritual as an adult or not. It is also not clear whether her decision to go through or not go through the ritual was made due to observations she saw during her aunt's *KwanTojane* ritual. Most rituals have dual if not multiple interpretations and meanings of the teachings. Elsewhere, I have argued that everything that happens in a ritual space,

[39] Nobuntu Penxa Matholeni, "KwaNtojane: The Indigenous Rites of Passage amongst amaXhosa in Relation to Prejudiced Spaces" in *Mother Earth Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions*, (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2020), 7-16,7.

from the space itself to the songs and food is a teaching and instruction to the initiate. The instructors use coded language and often the explanation given to the observers may vary from what the initiate will be taught.[40]

Given this scenario, if therefore, Matholeni had not undergone the ritual, she may not have received or understood the full meaning of certain aspects of the ritual. This however, does not mean that she cannot make her critical observation of the ritual. In most ritual spaces, wisdom is passed on and chiseled into the initiates through symbolism. Matholeni points this out when she argues that these teachings filter into society after the ritual as "the location of unequal space set the tone for the future distribution of unequal spaces and unequal social relationships."[41]

Victor Turner has noted that ritual usually has three phases: separation, liminal and re-integration. Matholeni has mentioned three similar segments of *KwanTojane* ritual stating that, "The *intonjane* ceremony (the initiation school for girls) has three segments, namely: *umngeno* (joining), *umtshatiso wentonjane* (slaughter of a cow), and the final stage, *umgidi* (welcoming home ceremony)."[42] The slaughter of the cow segment is that liminal space where the initiate has transcended the binaries of gender, age and is almost undefined. According to Turner, the significant phase in the ritual is the liminal as it is the process to lay a foundation for balancing of relationships in society. For Turner, liminal is a "stage of being between phases" as the individuals in this phase are neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between.[43] During the liminal phase Chammah Kaunda[44] argues that

[40] Mulenga Kaunda, "Negotiated Feminism? 89.
[41] Matholeni, "KwaNtojane: The Indigenous rites of Passage," 8.
[42] Matholeni, "KwaNtojane: The Indigenous Rites of Passage," 8.
[43] Taylor, *The Ritual Process*,151.
[44] Chammah Kaunda, 'Ndembu Cultural Liminality, Terrains of Gender Contestation: Reconceptualising Zambian Pentecostalism as Liminal spaces,' *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017): 3718. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.3718

> The *communitas* of liminal subjects was embedded in radical equality and genderlessness. The liminal subjects, therefore, were regarded as neither males nor females and not transgendered but ungendered pure spirits. They could function with any gender but remain ungendered and undefined.

Ritual spaces have coded activities that may seem one thing to the observer and mean something different for those who are initiated and those being initiated. *KwaNtojane* initiates may seem powerless and weak to the observer, but it might actually mean different empowering messages for the initiate. In the liminal phase which is their formative phase, initiates have power to be and do what they could not do previously if the argument from Chammah Kaunda above is critically understood. The liminal stage is where initiates are empowered and given agency. In ritual spaces often the novice/s are taught to pay attention because everything that happens in the space is important. The dancing, singing, silence, beating of drums all signify something important. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians[45] have continued to argue that there is a possibility to salvage life-giving aspects of culture as well as reject life denying aspects, especially as they relate to African women.

The next is Mukuka's chapter which sought to demonstrate that the wives of *bashi Cingo* are forbidden from going to farm during the times when their spouses are performing rituals on the dead chiefs' bodies because they may contaminate the land. "*Bashi Cingo* are men who are assigned to preserve the bodies of some Bemba chiefs when they die"[46] or simply put, they are royal embalmers. Megan Vaughan[47] says that "Bemba belie(ve) in the supernatural powers of their chiefs." This means when a chief dies,

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[45] Apawo and Nadar, "What's in a Name? 5-24. See also Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 19.

[46] Mukuka Bridget Masaiti, "Bemba Rituals and the Environment: Experiences of the Wives of *Bashi Cingo* in the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church" in *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and African Indigenous Religions*, (Stellenbosch: Sun Press), 19-37.

[47] Megan Vaughan, "Divine Kings: Sex, Death and Anthropology in Inter-War East/Central Africa," *The Journal of African History*, 49 no.3 (2008):383-401 ,384.

bashi Cingo and their wives leave their home to be near the mourning site so that they can perform rituals. Sometimes it takes one year before a chief can be buried. So *bashi Chingo* and their wives stay away from their homes and work for that period. Those directly in contact with the corpse of the chief are *bashi Chingo* (men) and it is indeed noticeable that the women (bashi Cingo's wives) who are not in contact with the corpse are the ones that are not allowed to go to the farm. *Bashi Cingo* will gather food from the farm and their wives would cook it. What Mukuka has not explained is whether there are rituals between *bashi Cingo* and their wives or just the wives' rituals that are deemed able to contaminate the land. It has been argued that Bemba women were very industrious women especially with farming and they were admired by their neighbouring villages.[48] 'The death of the founder'[49] should have been a paragraph within the background of Sweetheart church so that Mukuka could focus more on the rituals of *bashi Cingo* and its effect on their wives. African rites of passage often work with fear. *Bashi Cingo* have to perform rituals to keep themselves in line with the work they are required to do as they keep kings and chiefs' corpses. Apart from stating that *bashi Cingo* preserve the kings' corpses until burial, this chapter would have done justice if it had demonstrated and elaborated on how the corpses are preserved and what is required of *bashi Cingo* during the embalming period. This information would have given a glimpse into why *bashi Cingo* and their wives are separated from their communities while they embalm the chiefs' corpse or why their wives should in fact accompany them at all. Sometimes there are sex rituals that need to be performed during funerals for instance as Vaughan[50] has argued.

In the next chapter on rites, according to Fidelis Nkomazana, indigenous beliefs are slowly waning but people still desire that certain aspects of their

[48] Karla Poewe, Matrilineal Ideology: Male-Female Dynamics in Luapula, Zambia. (New York: Academic Press, 1981) And Richards, *Chisungu: A Girl's Initiation Ceremony*, 26.
[49] Masaiti, "Bemba Rituals and the Environment," 26.
[50] Vaughan, "Divine Kings: Sex, Death," 401.

everyday life be connected to their indigenous beliefs. This desire could be leveraged as a way of continuing with aspects of African cultural beliefs. African women theologians[51] have consistently argued for leveraging aspects of African culture that are life-giving like African women's ecological way of life. It would have been remarkable if Nkomazana explicitly inserted 'sacred sites/places' in the title of her chapter as well as positioning the objectives of the study within the introduction of the chapter. Part of the reason why rites are seemingly waning is Christianity. Elsewhere, I have argued using empirical research that African Pentecostal women have selected aspects of the culture and ritual that they have removed because they believe certain aspects are outdated or purely demonic, and certain aspects that they choose to keep as they align with the word of God.[52] While Pentecostal women have redefined rites, rituals and culture to fit their context, they have also held onto some colonial perceptions of African culture as being demonic. Nevertheless, they have opened up discussion for redefining culture, rites and rituals, which means that rite, ritual and culture is fluid not static and one can extract aspects that fit well with their context.

Abednico Phili's chapter on the effects of urbanization on traditional mourning rituals in Southern Africa sheds some light on the impact and transformation that results from encounter between two or more cultures. Most African rituals have metamorphosed due to various reasons from intercultural interactions to modernity and technology. Most of these ritual metamorphoses are always negative and often impact negatively on women than men.

Culture is fluid and never static[53], it continues to change. From dress code to who cries loudest these had meaning for African funeral rituals. This

51 Apawo and Nadar, "What's in a Name?" 7.
52 Mulenga-Kaunda "Negotiated Feminism? 216.
53 Apawo and Nadar, "Treading Softy but Firmly: African Women, Religion, and Health" in African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa

chapter would have enlightened and added much to the body of knowledge on funeral rituals and traditional mourning if the author had delved into changes that have come about in the burial rituals of married women, and touched upon the question of whether the rituals become more oppressive for women or to what extent they have been redeemed if at all? Phili however, has noted that "Some married women I interviewed pointed out that they had relocated to towns and they wish to be buried there. Others reasoned that they have worked hard and attained a high socio-economic status for themselves and, as such, have bought pieces of land at Phomolong in the Phakalane estates, where they will be buried." It appears that there is social change that is happening and yet, women can only exercise their agency in choosing a burial place in any place but their own natal homes.

The ritual discussion in the book *Mother Earth, Mother Africa* enters the ritual debate nuancing the current conversations. The authors broadly discussed rituals in rural and urban areas. This makes the discussion rich as it does not focus only on rural women or squarely on urban women. Both spaces are engaged, mediating both rural and urban women's voices. Within the broad ritual debate, *Mother Earth, Mother Africa* has not engaged explicitly with ritual as a public ritual. The focus has been on the unjust and oppressive aspects of ritual toward women.

Concluding Remarks

Mother Earth, Mother Africa contains chapters that have overtly argued that missionaries assumed the superiority of European ways of life and sought to extend these to the indigenous people thereby illegalizing and criminalizing specific ways of indigenous living and practices. There are deep set hierarchies of power and patriarchy that order people's lives. Even before we talk about rights, institutions and laws, we need to understand rights as a way of belonging and dignity.

Oduyoye ed Isabel Apawo Phiri, and Sarojini Nadar, (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 2006), 1-13, 5.

My impression is that the chapters have not engaged scientific aspects of Africans – African women in particular. Two chapters by Macloud Sipeyiye and Doreen Karimi Nyaga have tried to engage with technology but ended up describing the challenge of technology as contributing to the replacing of indigenous ways of engaging with religion and environment.

When two worldviews collide, there is an inevitable change that should occur. That change of course does not always have to be negative. Can science, ritual and religion share a space? We are faced with artificial intelligence and, as religious people, we need to engage with AI critically in order to be relevant. This depiction of African women as highly religious has led to the perception of African women as irrational. This representation has not engaged with the fact that there are many African women that have moved past religiosity and are engaging life without their entire focus on religion. Women who engage in everyday life without focusing or depending on religious worldviews would have been necessary to include in such conversations.

African women's agency is minimized due to the gloomy representation of their ritual involvement. Nnaemeka highlights that "African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiation and compromise."[54] Women's agency is present in subtle ways in ritual as African feminism "knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines."[55] Colonial religions have negatively impacted women and have been a source of much oppression for women but in most indigenous religions, women held strategic positions of power.

How we represent ourselves as African women is important. The four ritual chapters in the book demonstrates the necessity to engage liberative methodologies and approaches in order to understand the indigenous

[54] Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism" 377.
[55] Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism" 353.

rituals especially those ritual aspects that cannot easily be seen by observers. Certain rituals show gender swaps in the liminal as resistance and counteraction against inequalities. Oduyoye in the preface succinctly explains "The reference to Mother Earth in the title recalls the picture of Earth as a woman exploited and expected to be silent, just as colonial Africa was seen by both Africanists and colonialists." The authors in this book have given voice to the agency that African women in indigenous religious ritual spaces hold and leverage it to show women's agency.

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