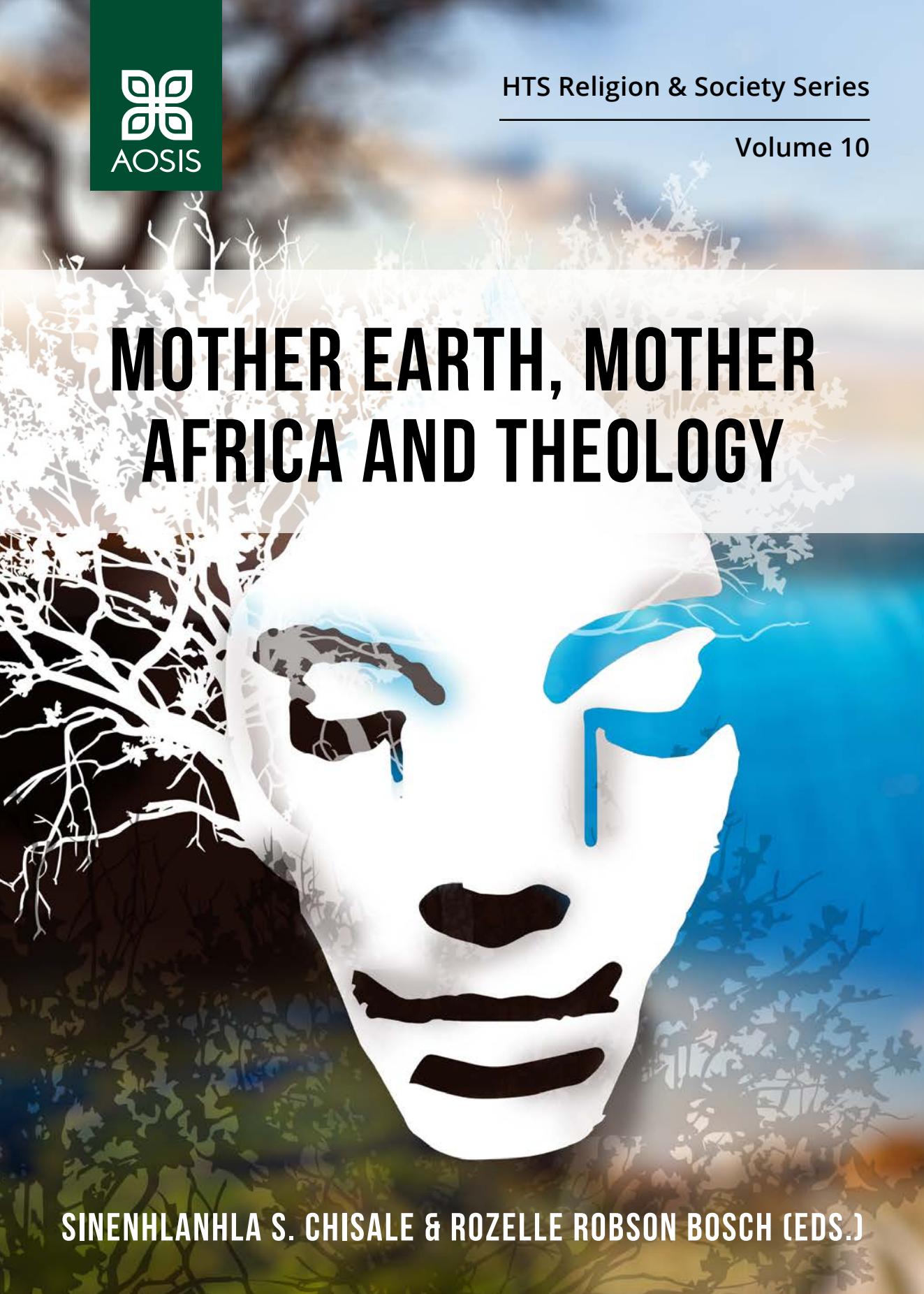




HTS Religion & Society Series

Volume 10

MOTHER EARTH, MOTHER AFRICA AND THEOLOGY



An abstract illustration featuring a white silhouette of a human face in profile, facing right. The face has black outlines for the eyes, nose, and mouth. The background is a soft-focus photograph of a landscape with trees and a body of water. Overlaid on the image are several abstract shapes: a dark grey shape resembling a bird or a hand reaching upwards from the left; a blue shape resembling a stylized plant or a flame rising from the center; and a white shape resembling a shell or a wave on the right side. The overall composition blends the academic title with a symbolic representation of nature and humanity.

SINENHLANHLA S. CHISALE & ROZELLE ROBSON BOSCH (EDS.)

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Volume 10

MOTHER EARTH, MOTHER AFRICA AND THEOLOGY



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MOTHER EARTH, MOTHER AFRICA AND THEOLOGY

EDITORS
Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale
Rozelle Robson Bosch



*This book is dedicated to Brigalia Bam, a
founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.*

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Research Justification

In this volume, African ecofeminist and ecowomanist theologies are used to reimagine human relationships with Mother Earth from paradigms of liberation. The main contribution of this volume is that it is written from a multi- and trans-disciplinary perspective to explore and reimagine human relationships to Earth from an African ecofeminist theological approach. The volume presents original and innovative research by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter Circle) and friends of the Circle. It engages in critical conversations of re-interpreting and reimagining African cultural, religious, theological and philosophical perspectives on gender and the Earth in efforts to construct Earth-friendly relationships in the face of a growing global environmental crisis. The conversations include scholarly voices of African women and men in various fields such as Theology, Environmental Law and Policy, Tourism, Agricultural Science and Natural Resources and Economics. The theological and theoretical frameworks and principles applied in the various chapters are relevant resources for academic research and are used by theologians and scholars in other academic disciplines from multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary perspectives. Research areas focus on religion, gender and ecological justice in Africa and globally. Methodologically, contributors from fields such as ecology, gender, religion and theology explore the theme of Mother Africa and Mother Earth from their particular areas of specialisation and contexts. The majority of the chapters are theoretically oriented, with one chapter making reference to empirical ethnographic research. The targeted readers of this volume are scholars in the fields of gender, ecology, religion and theology. No part of the volume is plagiarised from another publication or has been published elsewhere before.

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List of Abbreviations

AIKS	African Indigenous Knowledge Systems
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
FBO	Faith-Based Organization
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
FOMWAN	Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria
GBM	Green Belt Movement
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
PCEA	Presbyterian Church of East Africa
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-based Violence
UN	United Nations
WCC	World Council of Churches
WHO	World Health Organization

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Amplifying our powerful heritage anchored in wisdom of our foremothers

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I am at a stage in my life when I am spending a lot of time reflecting on my beginnings and who has significantly influenced my thinking and the decisions I have made along the way. Revealing the lessons learned has become a very important task that has been partly provoked by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the heightened quest for economic, ecological and racial justice. One place to look for lessons learned has been my childhood and my journey as a founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter the Circle). Hence, writing this foreword is personal and it gives me great pleasure to contribute to this book.

My childhood takes me back to rural Kenya growing up among small-scale farmers and strong women community/church leaders as well as breadwinners alongside the men. I loved the fact that we had ripe bananas round the year and thoroughly enjoyed the mango, orange and avocado seasons. My mother ensured that I kept the kitchen garden of onions and other vegetables free from weeds, well-watered and manured. One of my paternal grandmothers in the extended family taught me the art of weeding without damaging the plants especially the beans. During the rainy season part of our land (commonly known as *shamba* in Kiswahili) had springs of water gushing out for days and weeks, hence, the piece of land is known as Gathima (small spring) Farm. Unfortunately, today there are no traces of the springs.

Equally important, my decision to study theology (1978–1980) to prepare for a fulltime ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament with the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) gave me the opportunity to encounter more strong women leaders from other parts of Kenya and other African countries who were seasoned visionaries, activists, theologians and religious scholars. Among these women were Priscilla Mereka, leader of PCEA Woman's Guild,

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Brigalia Bam from (Apartheid) South Africa working at the Geneva, Switzerland based World Council of Churches (WCC) and two Ghanaian theologians and religious scholars: Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah. In a nutshell, these four women facilitated my path to becoming one of the founding members of the Circle 10 years after my first encounter with them in 1978 (Scott & Wood 1978).

Eventually Priscilla Mereka introduced me to Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya.¹ Later, I met Musimbi Kanyoro, a fellow Kenyan who worked at the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva, Switzerland who with Mercy Amba Oduyoye, then a staff of WCC provided visionary, action and result-oriented leadership of the first decade of the Circle. In 1992, Mercy and Musimbi brought me into the inner circle of enlarging the Circle when I joined the staff of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Geneva, Switzerland. These three international ecumenical faith-inspired and justice-seeking institutions were among the midwives of the Circle. In particular, over the years the WCC has worked closely with the Circle in ecumenical theological education and ecumenical HIV response (Chitando & Hadebe 2009). Henceforward, the Circle became internationally known and a valued member of the academic ecumenical and interfaith theological fora. Her publications are internationally read, critiqued and quoted in academic thesis throughout the world.

For 30 years, the Circle has laid a strong theological platform for action and has magnified women's theological voices, research, writing and mentorship skills. Therefore, as the Circle embarks on celebrating Mother Africa, Mother Earth and healing the Earth and Africa, the authors apply a multidisciplinary approach and stand on a firm powerful heritage. This collection of essays endeavours to amplify this heritage and is strongly anchored in the wisdom of our foremothers as we mentor a new generation of scholars and activists who interrogate the cross-cutting themes of gender, land, race, class, ethnicity, colonialism, globalisation and sustainability of the environment and communities. The authors draw from lessons learned during in-depth research on African religio-cultural and biblical hermeneutics from women's perspectives and experiences which question patriarchy and its many facets. Rather than start from a mother's womb, the Circle now dares go into the Womb of Mother Earth to begin a conversation with our daughters and sons who are among the global climate activists.

As we have learned from addressing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and HIV pandemics, the Circle has no choice but speak and write in

1. Wangari Maathai was the first African/Kenyan woman in Eastern and Central Africa to earn a PhD in Veterinary Sciences in 1971. She is the founder of the Green Belt Movement in 1977 and the winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize. Read more about her in Maathai (2006).

multiple theological languages which communicate to the majority of the population, the children, adolescents and young people (0 to 30 years) who make 70% of the population in Africa. To nurture homegrown solutions given the escalating economic and ecological crises, theology and ethics in Africa must have the sights and sounds of its citizens. Furthermore, the Circle must continue to engage with the international community. Inevitably, the Circle needs to constantly and contextually evaluate its audience, reader ability, and research and communication methodologies.

Moreover, the Circle is critically aware that Mother Africa is vibrant and brings forth precious gemstones of tanzanite, diamond, gold, coltan, uranium and a rich biodiversity of fauna and flora and the splendid mountains, rivers, lakes and deserts; yet Africa's youthful population is at the mercy of police brutality and violence, greedy, corrupt leaders and rapists, and grossly mismanaged institutions including religious and institutions of higher learning. All these chronic injustices have been revealed and magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Unavoidably, the Circle urgently needs intergenerational theologising platforms that will attract the young people in primary schools who stage strikes using makeshift placards - 'Save the Congo'; 'School Strike for Climate'; 'If We Don't Act Fast, We Will Be Extinct Too!! #ClimateStrikeOnline' - and who use all kinds of social media to amplify their activism and concern for a healthy and fulfilling future. By using the metaphors of womb, Mother Africa and Mother Earth, the Circle invites us also to care for the most delicate human life in the womb and to be prepared to nurture that life until it returns back to the womb of the Earth. Men are not spared from this exercise as they too undertake the same journey from the womb of their mothers to the womb (tomb) of the Earth.

Besides, both SGBV and HIV pandemics have fundamentally schooled the Circle to value storytelling and narratives including those found in sacred scriptures as well as to pay analytical responsiveness to data and scientific evidence-based information. As we collect people's narratives how they have been affected by economic and ecological crises and contextualise sacred texts and theological teachings from a wide variety of faiths in Africa, the Circle has a daunting task of perusing scientific information shared by professional United Nations (UN) agencies such as UN Environment Programme which was established in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1973, and the only UN agency with its headquarters in Africa. In addition, there are non-governmental organisations such as the Green Belt Movement that can offer lessons of what works, the achievements and the challenges activists and scholars face in advocating and educating people in rural and urban communities how to be fully engaged in healing the earth.²

2. Wangari Maathi, *The Green Belt Movement Sharing the Approach & the Experience*. Lanten Books, first published in 1985 and revised in 2003, 2004.

Interestingly, Wangari Maathai, in 2010, a year before her death explained that when she began the Green Belt Movement, she was not motivated by faith or by religion. What motivated her was thinking literally and practically about how to solve problems on the ground. But after much reflection, she was able to share the spiritual values that guided her actions and the movement and challenged us to use wisely the source of our inspirations and motivations to heal the Earth and ourselves.³ All together, faith-inspired and justice-seeking international institutions such as the WCC have tremendous experience of addressing care for creation and ecological justice from the creator or source, the sacred scriptures and drawing from its Christian teachings. From the 1990s, the WCC has been present at all UN climate change conferences and has a rich archive of theological statements and practical toolkits that can offer a plethora of research material. After all, the COVID-19 pandemic just like HIV has rudely reminded us that different agencies (multi-stakeholders) must work together to address the root causes and symptoms that are ailing the world and Mother Earth otherwise we will perish together.

No doubt, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has a powerful heritage and is anchored in the wisdom of foremothers who never shied away from dreaming and acting against all odds. In conclusion, I share inspiring words with our granddaughters from Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1988) who gathered us together in her homeland Accra, Ghana, 25 September-02 October 1989:

Dream Girl Dream

What's the future going to be?
Dream girl dream.
What we may become, that's what matters.
What dream, Africa's dream.
Dream of the least of the world,
Permissible dreams.
Dream, for the other is you turned inside out.
Make the other strong and you will be strong,
We shall all be strong together.
Dream girl dream.
Be a woman, and Africa will be strong. (p. 35)

3. Read her inspiring testimony in Wangari Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World*. Doubleday, 2010.

Introduction

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The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians encourages young theologians to reflect on African women's liberation in a way that is consistent with the cultures, narratives and histories of Africa. This book, initiated by the Circle, is the culmination of research conducted by women and men with the aim to present new readings on women, Earth and theology. Creation and Earth take centre stage as the work deliberately steers away from dominant anthropocentric interpretations of the relationship between human beings and the earth that sustains them. Throughout the ages and in many cultures, woman and the Earth have been closely associated, often to the detriment of both. The book explores the negative and positive aspects of this association. It concludes that humanity and the Earth can only survive and flourish if *all* human beings assume the responsibility of justice and care for *all* of God's creation.

In Part 1, the theme of 'Creation, the Trinity and Mother Africa' is explored in two chapters.

In Chapter 1, 'When women and Earth connect: African ecofeminist or ecowomanist theology?', Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale introduces the methodological underpinnings of the book that draws from African ecofeminist theology and African ecowomanist theology to 'reimagine human relationships with the Earth

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from paradigms of liberation'. Defining African ecofeminist and ecowomanist theologies, she describes how African women theologians negotiate their eco-theologies in describing the women-nature relationship. African women theologians use African ecofeminist theology interchangeably with the African ecowomanist theology, acknowledging the fact that the struggle of nature and African women's domination is collective. Acknowledging the fact that women are not homogenous, they describe how their theologies are unique from those of African American women and women of other races by emphasising the women-nature interdependence to the community, particularly the partnership between men and women and solidarity by men and women from other privileged groups.

In Chapter 2, 'Mother Earth in theological perspective: A sacramental unveiling', Rozelle Robson Bosch searches for a new language to articulate the sanctity of Mother Earth for whom God has a restorative vision. In this chapter, the Trinity is not seen in traditional terms as 'three persons', but rather as God who is present to the created order through the Cross. With a uniquely feminine grammar of the Cross, Christ is depicted as the mother who carries Africa in her womb. The Cross symbolises the reality of both suffering and restoration. In this theology of wholeness, the restoration of the Earth is grounded in Christ. The whole of the created order should flourish. It is not only or firstly about the salvation of human beings. This vision rests on the relation of the created order to Christ, and of Christ to the Trinity. Insights of Julian of Norwich are utilised in this African women's hermeneutic. Her understanding of the Trinity and vision of Christ's wounds form the point of departure for this reflection on Mother Earth in Christ.

In Chapter 3, 'Earth-centred Trinitarian models: The Trinitarian synergy and symbiosis in the creation narrative', Kelebogile T. Resane utilises the creation story to explain an Earth-centred rather than human-centred theological point of departure. Creation was already there when the Trinity conferred among themselves about the creation of human beings. The management of creation by human beings should be in symbiotic and synergistic cooperation with God. Partnership between God and humanity is essential to the sustainability of creation. The implication is that human beings are fully involved in the process of redemption. He suggests that eco-hermeneutical anthropogenesis should replace anthropocentric hermeneutics - human beings are both central to and interdependent with nature. Human beings and nature can grow and flourish if they serve each other in a responsible way. Theology of Mother Earth and ecofeminist theologies redefine the human relationship with the Earth. The Earth, which has always sustained human beings, is now in dire need of healing. Resane calls for ecological stewardship to promote justice and shalom for all of God's creation.

Part 2 of the book, ‘Caring for Mother Africa’, focuses on the involvement of faith communities in environmental issues and sustainable development. This involvement is necessary if faith communities aim to contribute actively to the improvement of people’s lives.

The section begins with Chapter 4, ‘Women, religion and sustainable development: Redeeming the environment for human survival’, in which Sylvia and Beatrice-Joy Owusu-Ansah, from an ecofeminist perspective, point out that environmental injustice and ecological challenges have a greater negative effect on both Africa and women. They examine the interconnection between the oppression of women and the domination of nature. Christian values that affirm the connection between human beings and the ecological system can form the basis of a mutually beneficial relationship between the Earth and humanity. The chapter discusses the effects of climate change, environmental sustainability and the religious foundations of ethical issues. Mother images and images of the Earth as mother in the Bible and various African cultures are explored to emphasise the relationship between human survival and the survival of women. The discussion on Sustainable Development Goals illustrates that women are more vulnerable and have less access to resources. The chapter concludes that all stakeholders, including women, will have to work together to manage and protect natural resources. Earth Stewardship is the task and responsibility of all.

In Chapter 5, ‘Inclusive environment-friendly strategies: A study of women with disabilities in Port Harcourt, Nigeria’, Jessie Fubara-Manuel investigates the harmful consequences of pollution in the Niger Delta, the oil-producing region of Nigeria. Vulnerable people such as women, children and people with disabilities are severely affected. Apart from the primary health effects, people with disabilities also suffer because of the secondary sociological and psychological consequences of pollution. Women with disabilities are doubly marginalised and stigmatised – because of their disability and their gender. The chapter explains how they are more severely affected by the pollution of the air by black carbon. Anti-pollution activism and advocacy in the region focus mostly on the health effects and fail to take the emotional effects into account. The chapter emphasises that a gendered disability-friendly perspective is needed when solutions are sought.

In Chapter 6, ‘Christian and African concepts of God for liberation’, Felicidade N. Chirinda draws a parallel between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the land by both church and culture in Africa. Her focus is on Mozambique. The abuse of women and land is justified by invoking Scripture and cultural beliefs. Chirinda draws from Scripture and African understandings

of God to demonstrate that respect for all of God's creation is central to both. This respect should translate to constructive attitudes and actions with regard to all aspects of creation, including women and nature. The failure to do this is punishing humanity today. Repentance and positive change are needed. The church, as steward of God's creation and the good shepherd of God's flock, should provide the impetus for change. From the point of departure of a Theology of Creation, the church should educate people on environmental issues and encourage a deep respect for nature and all human beings.

In Chapter 7, 'Water deficiency, poverty, ecology and *Botho* theology in Botswana', Tshenolo J. Madigele, Patricia K. Mogomotsi and Goemeone E.J. Mogomotsi discuss the problem of water scarcity in developing countries with a specific focus on Botswana. They point out the connection between water scarcity, food scarcity and poverty. Vulnerable groups such as women, children, the poor and people with disabilities are especially challenged when it comes to access to water. Because water is scarce, it is also costly. The church should become involved in environmental issues on three levels: relief, development and advocacy. Relief is about what the church can do *for* people, namely to provide water to the poor. Development is about what the church can do *with* people to open up employment opportunities, which can alleviate poverty. Advocacy is about empowering people to liberate themselves. The chapter suggests the Tswana philosophy of *Botho* (or *Ubuntu*, understood as 'humanity') as a resource for pastoral ministry. The failure to understand that human and non-human entities are connected and that interdependence, interrelatedness and mutual responsibility are central, leads to the loss of humanness. The cultural values of *Botho* support the religious value of a profound respect for all of God's creation. The church should become the healing, transformative, therapeutic and liberating power it is called to be.

Part 3, 'Mother Africa and her daughters' (in)fertility', explores attitudes and practices with regard to fertility and infertility in Africa as they pertain to women and nature.

Chapter 8, 'Wasting 'Womb': Towards a constructive and inter-relational eco-public theology', is Telesia K. Musili's ethical response to the crisis of the degeneration of the ecology and its effect on humanity. From an ecofeminist perspective, she proposes an ethic of interconnection and inter-relationality. Social ecology and eco-ethics are the responsibility of all human beings in partnership with God. The image of a 'wasting womb' describes the degeneration of the previously fertile Earth. Woman and Earth have been associated in almost all human societies. Both are subjected to destructive patriarchal power. With contraception becoming available, women have been socialised to accept the sole responsibility for birth and population control. This is unfair to women and misdiagnoses the ecological problem, which cannot be solved by only curbing population growth. The problem is of human

making and is the responsibility of all. Musili calls for an eco-public-theology and an eco-spirituality that extend beyond the spiritual to include the practice-oriented engagement of all. All should take responsibility for all that is affected. She points out: 'It is a global civic duty to conserve Mother Earth'.

In Chapter 9, 'Women's reproductive and natural environmental health: An African ecofeminist pastoral care praxis from the Ndebele, Zimbabwe', Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale highlights the social expectation in traditional African communities that women should bear children. Their ability to produce offsprings determines their social status. In Ndebele culture, the reproduction of human beings translates to care for the environment since humans cannot flourish if nature cannot sustain them. Nature provides the herbs that promote health. The use of herbs in that culture is gender-differentiated: males take herbs that strengthen their bodies, whereas females use herbs that cleanse the body and boost fertility. The intersectionality of human and environmental health has led to theological interest in the connection between nature and African spiritualities. There has been much discussion in the literature on the negative connection between women and nature and the oppression of both. Chisale focuses on the positive aspects of that connection in order to develop environmentally friendly and ethical health strategies. Pastoral care should not only focus on human beings but should also be about reconciling the human and non-human. This includes promoting a 'green spirituality' which emphasises environmental stewardship. Nature should be granted the same dignity as human beings. Chisale rejects a male-female dualism in pastoral care practice in African communities. Men also have a connection with nature, which is described as eco-masculinity. From an *Ubuntu* perspective and a *shalom* theology, she emphasises that the whole community is the custodian of everything, human and non-human. A communal approach to the conservation of nature disrupts patriarchy as it unites men and women equally in ecological consciousness. It also disrupts anthropocentrism as it unites humanity and nature equally in their intrinsic dignity, worth and value.

In Chapter 10, 'Fertility of women and Mother Earth: An Ethiopian theological perspective', Seblewengel Daniel examines fertility and infertility in the context of Ethiopia, which she describes as an ancient culture and a highly religious society. Fertility is understood to be a blessing from God. Women who produce children have a greater social standing and more access to means of livelihood. Infertility is the result of God's anger for which women are blamed. Infertility is also attributed to malevolent spirits, the evil eye or the failure to have undergone female genital cutting. It is believed that the prayers of uncut women will not be heard by God. The chapter reflects on fertility and infertility in both human beings and the Earth, and how the church can respond. The attitudes and actions of Christian believers should reflect the gospel message of healing and restoration where the Earth and women have been wounded because of ecological and gender injustice. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church

does much to protect the forests, which it regards as holy sites. This theology can be revisited to include the whole Earth and all of God's creation, including the protection of the God-given lives of women. The church can extend its efforts to create awareness of the need to preserve and conserve the environment. Churches should break their silence with regard to the oppression of women and the Earth.

In Chapter 11, 'Mutual stewardship and the ethics of the environment: Ikare women as a case study', Opeyemi W. Adedoyin argues that the care of the environment should be the responsibility of all people in mutual stewardship. From an environmental ethics perspective, the chapter investigates what a moral relationship between humanity and nature should entail. Stewardship is the responsibility of all human beings of all religious traditions. The Ikare-Akoko community in Nigeria with its economic activity and the effect of that on the environment is presented as a case study. The chapter suggests ways in which awareness can be created and training given from an early age to equip people of both sexes and all ages to assume responsibility for the stewardship of the environment.

PART 1

**Creation, the Trinity and
Mother Africa**

When women and Earth connect: African ecofeminist or ecowomanist theology?

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■ Introduction

The connection between women and Earth has been explored by feminists across the sciences. African women theologians have joined the debate by expanding on Rosemary Radford Ruether's assertion that feminist theology is the 'promotion of full humanity of women' (Ruether 1993:18). Building on this statement, African women theologians through the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter Circle) constructed life-affirming theologies from African cultural and religious context. Like other ecofeminists, African women theologians highlight the interplay of the oppression of women, other marginalised groups and the degradation of nature. Using African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS), the Circle has taken a lead in sifting the liberative African

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cultural-religio philosophies and traditions from the oppressive to reject anthropocentrism (Chirongoma 2005; Phiri 1996; Siwila 2014). They actively respond to the call of an Earth-centred approach for sustainable development.

The Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030 includes a call to everyone to be the stewards of Earth. African women theologians through the Circle's 5th Pan-African Conference theme namely, *Mother Earth and Mother Africa in Theological/Religious/Cultural/Philosophical Imagination* responded to this call by honouring mama Mercy Amba Oduyoye the founder and mother of the Circle. The conference took place in Botswana, Gaborone from 01 to 05 July 2019 and was attended by mama Oduyoye, senior Circle members, and emerging female and male theologians. This book is a result of the 5th Pan-African Conference where the established and senior Circle members gathered around a Circle in dialogue and conversations with emerging and young Circle members on caring for Mother Earth. The aim of the Conference was to explore and examine environmental sustainability in connection to gender, land, race, class, ethnicity, colonialism and globalisation. The conference encouraged delegates from diverse communities to 'reimagine human relationships with the Earth from paradigms of liberation'. The conference theme was interrogated by using multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches and covered different scientific disciplines such as Biblical Studies, Theology, African Indigenous Religions, Mission Studies, World Religions, Creative Literature, Postcolonial and Liberation Theologies, Sacred Mountains, Rivers, Trees and African Women's Theology.

This chapter introduces this volume's methodological underpinnings that draw from African ecofeminist theology and African ecowomanist theology to 'reimagine human relationships with the Earth from paradigms of liberation'. The chapters explore the interplay of gender, religion and the environment, while interrogating the philosophical and practical relationships between women and land in the history and in contemporary Africa. The volume covers theology and specifically African ecofeminist theology from a broader theological approach, where young and emerging Circle members engage in the 'Mother Earth and Mother Africa' metaphors from three perspectives: the creation and Trinity theology approach, the praxis of faith-based communities in environmental matters and sustainable development and lastly the relationship that exists between God, women's fertility–infertility and nature in the African contexts. The African ecofeminist theology approach is used as the main lens for 'reimagining human relationships with the Earth from paradigms of liberation'.

■ Ecofeminist theology and ecowomanist theology

Although the Circle adopted African women theologies rather than African feminist theologies because of the effect feminism has on African ears (Oduyoye 1994:167), some African women theologians continue to use feminism in their work without reservations. Most research on ecology by African women theologians adopts ecofeminism without reservations, while some use ecofeminism interchangeably with ecowomanism.

■ Ecofeminist theology

Ecofeminism is sometimes referred to as ecological feminism, and according to Ruether (2012) it:

[E]xamines the interconnections between the domination of women and the domination of nature. It aims at strategies and world views to liberate or heal these interconnected dominations by better understanding of their aetiology and enforcement. (p. 22)

Eaton (2009) asserts that this examination is done from an empirical and conceptual (cultural/symbolic) claim. The empirical claim explores how the structural restrictions that include the socio-political and economic injustices reduce women's lives to poverty, ecological deprivation and economic incapacity, and the conceptual (cultural/symbolic) claim emerges from diverse cultural perceptions that highlight the historical and symbolic connection between women and nature (Eaton 2009). The conceptual claim exposes the hierarchical and dualistic connection of women and nature's domination at times promoting anthropocentric environmentalism.

Ecofeminist theology emerges from feminist theology, where feminist theology discourse and praxis highlight ecological consciousness. Ruether (2012:28) asserted that the development of ecofeminism started by rejecting assumptions that promoted the dualism of the soul and body, as well as assumptions that prioritised the controlling and dominating role of the male-identified mind over the female body. It uses anthropologies and cosmologies that reject theologies of dualism and hierarchy. Ecofeminism exposes the sacredness and integrity that lie in the purpose of creation by God, such as to live in harmony with each other and be stewards of all creation in this harmony. Sahinidou (2017:251) asserts that 'ecofeminism brings to consciousness the past as basis to knowing the present, it makes us aware of the values hidden in worldviews'. As a result of this, ecofeminist theology deconstructs hierarchies that were created by patriarchy in the past replacing them with theologies that promote egalitarian communities.

From ecofeminism, other ecological theologies emerged as women from diverse contexts constructed their own theologies that addressed their relationship with nature. The multifaceted oppressions of women because of class, ethnicity, race, gender, religion and ecological degradation led to diverse theologies regarding women–nature relationships. Thus, from ecofeminism African American women developed ecowomanist theologies and argued that black women’s relationship to nature includes the interplay of class, race and gender (Harris 2016).

Ecowomanist theology

Ecowomanist theology focuses on ‘the religious, theological and spiritual perspectives of black women and women of colour as they confront multilayered oppressions such as racism, classism, sexism, and environmental injustice’ Harris (2017:17). Ecowomanist theology links the social justice struggle with the ecological justice from a theological approach. It emerges from African American women’s lived experiences and struggles with racism, classicism, violence, heterosexism and androcentric attitudes that oppress the Earth to benefit specific humans at the expense of the Earth’s well-being (Harris 2016:6). According to Harris (2016), black women in America have experienced structural evil in history; as a result, issues of justice particularly Earth justice has been their priority. The oppression of black women is connected to African slavery and is encouraged by colonialist approaches on the domination of black female bodies and Earth. Thus, Harris (2017) says black women’s bodies embody an inherent and spiritual connection with Earth. Black women have published and taught about this connection, but their epistemological contributions on this have been ignored, rejected and weakened ‘by white scholars and intellectual practices based on systemic white supremacist and patriarchal structures’ (Harris 2016:6). Black women use the ecowomanism theology to confront structural violence that is caused by white supremacy and colonialism that perpetuates societal and environmental oppression (Harris 2017). Their suffering is parallel to how the Earth suffers in the hands of those who undermine and pollute her. As a result, they apply their prophetic theological voices and stand for the truth against the dominant powers, while rejecting theologies that promote white supremacy, hierarchy, dualism and patriarchy (Harris 2016). Ecowomanist theology campaign for theologies that starts with black women’s Earth narratives that highlight how the oppressions and dominations of black women is linked to the current oppressions experienced by the Earth (Harris 2016, 2017).

The other central theme of ecowomanist theology is the connection of the theologies of the female body and the feminisation of the Earth (Harris 2016). The link that has led to Earth’s identity as ‘mother’ contributes towards the

structural violence both women and Earth experience (Harris 2016). Ecowomanist theology explains that the exploitation of the Earth is because of her feminisation that is linked to the control of slave women's bodies that were used as the property of white slave masters who used them for sexual gratification when they continuously raped her. Although ecowomanist theology is closely linked to African women' struggles of environmental justice, African women theologians use ecowomanism with reservations, because their struggle for environmental justice is intertwined with their roles as custodians of religion, ethnicity and culture in addition to class, gender and race, which makes it different from the struggles of African American women. Thus, African women theologians' reservations encourage them to highlight their differences in quest for environmental justice and gender justice by adding Africa or African to ecowomanism or ecofeminism to make African ecowomanism or ecofeminism.

■ African ecofeminist theology or ecowomanist theology?

Feminist theology and the broader feminist discourse across social and human sciences highlight the fact that women are not a homogenous group, their struggles for gender justice are unique and diverse. Thus, the emphasis on the Africanness of ecofeminism or womanism by African women does not divide the feminist movement but it reinforces it. The African continent in the name of 'Mother Africa' has experienced more than her 'fair share' of women and environmental injustice. African women theologians acknowledge this by highlighting the fact that their ecological responses are embedded in African cosmologies and anthropologies that place women's bodies at the centre of Earth Care (Phiri 1996; Siwila 2014). In caring, African women take leadership as stewards of 'Mother Earth' by promoting life-affirming theologies that encourage transforming praxis towards the justice for women and the environment. They have coined theories such as African feminist cultural hermeneutics (Kanyoro 2002) to sift for African cultural-religio indigenous knowledges and practices that revive traditions that exalt the sacredness of 'Mother Earth'. Theologies that exalt the sacredness of 'Mother Earth' contest anthropocentric and androcentric thinking.

African feminist cultural hermeneutics theory highlights the fact that although some women resist feminism, they still use the concept and emphasise its African embeddedness. As a result of this, African women theologians use African ecofeminist theology interchangeably with African ecowomanist theology. For them, the struggle of nature and African women's domination is collective, for they are dominated and silenced because of their gender, race, class, religion and ethnicity. When hierarchies are constructed, the intersection of African black women's and land's struggles are doubled if

compared to African American women and women of other races. Thus, the separation of African women is significant for justice to prevail. Maybe it is time for African women theologians to conceptualise African ecowomen theology that evolves from the broader African women theology.

This does not mean that African women theologians should reject ecological theologies that emerge from ecofeminist or ecowomanist theologians, rather African ecowomen theology complements these theologies by highlighting the gaps that exist in order to embrace all women's ecological struggles. Thus, themes that embrace African women theologies such as communalism and solidarity highlight the fact that African women theologians are in partnership with other women in the quest for ecological justice. African women theologians highlight the fact that the communalism concept that draws from *Ubuntu* philosophy is ecologically and economically viable in promoting humanity and Earth integrity (LenkaBula 2008). In explaining the significance of the community as promoted by *Ubuntu*, LenkaBula assert that *Ubuntu* which is *Botho* in Sesotho translates the *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* in Nguni to Sesotho *motho ke motho ka batho ba bang* which literally means that 'no person is complete in him or herself; she or he is fully human in as far as she or he remains a part of the web of life, including creation and the earth' (2008:378). LenkaBula highlights the fact that life (both non-human and human) is interconnected and as a result, dualism or hierarchies are rejected in favour of communalism.

African women's promotion of community or communal life does not only draw from the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, cosmologies and anthropologies, but they also draw their understanding of communal life from Scripture. Kasomo and Maseno (2011) argue that the community concept that African women promote draws from the Bible because the Bible is one of the sources of African women's theologising. Their theologising prioritises the communal sense of belonging and connection to the environment, as a result advocating for life from an 'unbroken circle' approach (Chisale 2018) where the 'circle as a shape can be said to accurately symbolise the unity of existence of all creation' (Kaunda 2016:196). In a circle there are no hierarchies, all creation is weaved and interdependent on each other. For African women theologians everything is connected, the living, living dead and all creation; as a result, one cannot exist without the other. For example, Phiri (1996:161) asserted that 'there is a special relationship between God, deities, ancestors, human beings, and nature' (Phiri 1996:161). This connection is often displayed by women, who act as custodians in Earth Care. Phiri (1996) highlights this as she explains the *Chisumphi* cult in context of the Chewa people of Malawi by describing women's role at the shrines in connection to the preservation of natural resources. Siwila (2014) resonates with Phiri as she describes the positive connection of women and nature by using the analogy of *tracing the footprints of our foremothers* that highlights the interplay of ecological indigenous

knowledge emerging from mythical and symbolic language evolving from African women's spirituality. Using the ecomaternalistic theory Siwila (2014:136) argues that, when used as a social construct, the ecomaternalistic theory exposes the positive influence that emerges from the dual relationship that women and nature have. Siwila's argument is critical in understanding that women's link with nature is sometimes critiqued for being anthropocentric, while a proper and detailed historical analysis shows that women-nature relationship was meant to care for nature, because of the perception that human life and non-human life are interdependent on each other.

African women theology and emphasis on community and solidarity

The focus of African women theologians on community and solidarity makes it different from ecowomanist and ecofeminist theology. They construct their theologies from the 'two-winged theology' that emphasises their relationship to men. According to Oduyoye (1990), a bird with one wing cannot fly, thus for women theology to be effective, women should partner and work in cooperation with men. According to Oduyoye (1990), a two-winged theology highlights the fact that both women and men are able to communicate with God. In agreement, Kasomo and Maseno (2011:155) argue that the blaming of men as the cause of women oppression in Africa is not the issue; thus sexism is not an issue because men and women know their place and play their role in partnership and solidarity ungrudgingly. The partnership of men and women in confronting oppression and domination is also highlighted by African feminist from the fields of Sociology, Anthropology and Literature who argue that feminism and womanism as they are conceptualised by Western feminists do not embrace the struggle of African women. In articulating this, Buchi Echenna's (cited in Mikell 1997) speech asserts that:

I have never called myself a feminist. Now if you choose to call me a feminist, that is your business; but I don't subscribe to the feminist idea that all men are brutal and repressive, and we must reject them. Some of these men are my brothers and fathers and sons. Am I to reject them too? (p. 335)

African women do not throw stones at men because they acknowledge the fact that the system of patriarchy that favours men over women is a colonial agenda enforced by white male supremacy to protect their agenda of dominating women and Earth. As a result, Mama (1997:47) argues that men and women fought colonialism side by side where communal perceptions were adopted in the struggle against colonialism. Thus, African feminists and women reject radical feminism that views men as enemies and evil (Kaitesi 2014:109). So, in reimaging the relationship between women and nature, women do so in partnership with men. They reject the colonial agenda that separates and divides African women from their male counterparts because it

is destructive for the Earth. The destruction of the Earth affects all community members, but women particularly, African rural women, experience this manifold because they depend on nature to sustain families through food, fuel, water, health and shelter. Any form of environmental degradation is a threat to these women's roles who struggle to perform their domestic duties to provide sustainable livelihoods for their households and communities. Thus, in concern, African women mobilise communities on issues of Earth justice. By mobilising communities' women become the primary custodians of environmental justice and sustainability.

The communal principle that is promoted by African women allows women and men from the privileged groups to be in solidarity with African women from the African ancestry. For African women theologians, solidarity is the backbone and strength in the struggle against any form of injustice. They welcome and embrace other people's solidarity and in turn they extend solidarity to other marginalised groups. African women theologians embody solidarity in that it includes women and men from all races, classes, religions and ethnicities who recognise and affirm solidarity with African women and Earth. Ackermann (2008:272) asserts that African women fight all forms of oppression through solidarity and resistance. They draw strength from each other and men who are 'friends of the Circle' (Ackermann 2008:272). The strength that comes from solidarity transcends the ecological, economic, social, political and religious boundaries. It strengthens the web of life, by raising the world's ecological consciousness.

This volume applies African women theologians' understanding of African women's connection to nature, because contributors are members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter Circle). We draw our ideas from African women theologians and the dominant thread in our argument is that the women-nature relationship is both negative and positive in ecological and gender justice. Thus, we use the worldview of African women theologians that embraces community and solidarity in our quest for gender and ecological justice. The unique and significant contribution of this volume is that all of us who contributed in this volume are an embodiment of African women and nature struggles. We have first-hand lived experiences of how the domination and destruction of Earth affect our livelihoods and health.

■ Conclusion

African ecofeminism and ecowomanism are growing within African women theological discourses. African women theologians use the two interchangeably to analyse the women-nature relationship. However, in this chapter, as I present the underlying theoretical framework of this volume, I suggest that maybe it is time for African women theologians to coin an African ecowomen theology to complement the African ecofeminist and ecowomanist theologies

and give African women from the African ancestry directly affected by the destruction of the environment a voice. This chapter introduced the theory and method applied in this volume by presenting the debate in the African ecofeminist and ecowomanist movement. It explored how African women describe their connection to nature by highlighting the interplay of the oppression of the female body to race, class, ethnicity, gender and religion. The debate on ecofeminist theology categorises women according to their dominant feminist politics. This volume draws from both African ecofeminist and ecowomanist theologies but aligns its epistemologies to African women theologies by emphasising the women-nature interdependence to the community, particularly the partnership between men and women and solidarity by men and women from other privileged groups. The volume revisits African cultures, religions and traditions and sifts and promotes Earth-centred practices and philosophies for the common good.

Mother Earth in a theological perspective: A sacramental unveiling

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■ Introduction

To read the Earth in theological perspective is to hold two conceptual frameworks together: the contextual and the theological. There is the personified grammar of the Earth and its suffering and there is the grammar of theology, of God who is creator of the Earth and its inhabitants. Bringing these two landscapes together was the objective of the sixth pan-African conference for the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter Circle). The theme of the conference was 'Mother Earth in Theological Imagination'⁴ and served as a platform from which new readings of the Earth and theology were advanced.

4. The full title of the conference is: Mother Earth and Mother Africa in Theological/Religious/Cultural/Philosophical Imagination, see Fretheim (2018).

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Putting the Earth first in a reading of doctrine and Scripture means finding a language that self-consciously places emphasis on the created order, and not on humanity. The predominance of anthropocentric interpretations in Scripture and doctrine is purposefully set aside, in this instance, to construct a theology that places the Earth centrally in its formulation. When wanting to place the Earth at the centre stage, a challenge arises since Christ's life, his death, resurrection and ascension, all say something about God's redemptive plan for humanity. Such a one-sided redemptive vision of the Cross, however, would unduly limit any investigation of the Earth in redemptive perspective. One New Testament author who takes a more comprehensive stance on the redemption that the Cross brings, is Paul.

Recent New Testament scholarship focusing on the book of Romans find in Paul's soteriology a vision of the created order that encompasses its current calamitous state as well as its intended restoration. To uncover the movement from old to new and from created to recreated in a reading of the Earth in theological perspective, one must have a better understanding of the role and function of the Cross in the book of Romans (Wright 2017:290). In particular, Romans 7–8 provides a vision of the Cross where Christ's groaning encapsulates the groaning of the created order (the Earth and her inhabitants): past, present and future. This continuous bringing before God the groaning of the created order can only possibly occur when one moves away from a Christo-centric reading of the Cross to a Trinitarian reading of the Cross. Before one begins to explain how the Cross becomes the expression of God's triune activity and how this vision relates to Paul, it is necessary to make the following concession: the Cross is not without paradox, in fact, as James Cone warns, it is a sight of immense pain and collective trauma (Cone 2011:xiii–xix).

James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* warns that the Cross means different things to different people and as such must be employed with caution (Cone 2011:xiii–xix). For Cone (who speaks to the experience of African American women, men and children), the Cross symbolises freedom and oppression, and comfort and violence (Cone 2011:xiii–xix). The tensions between oppressor and oppressed that Cone holds together requires each reader to identify with the Cross in ways that acknowledge their hermeneutics, their privileges and their beliefs. Although Cone speaks to the American context, his work bears significance for the African continent.⁵ Africa has its own narrative of oppression that affects every sector of society whether it be economic, agricultural, religious or cultural. Each sector attests to the pervasive effects that the injustices of the past have had on persons, communities and the Earth.

5. For the relationship between Cone and African theologians, as well as Cone's address of African theologians at the '1977 Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians' in Accra, Ghana, see West (2018:240).

The Earth, as suggested by the 5th Pan-African Circle Conference signifies more than life, it personifies the role a mother plays in nurturing her children. Mother Earth is a metaphor that, in very intimate terms, describes the relationship between persons and the Earth – those persons come from the dust of the Earth and will return to dust. As such, speaking of Mother Earth not only means the created order but also the spiritual practices, prayers and beliefs of those persons who receive her as their mother.⁶

When one hears the groaning of the created order in Christ's groaning on the Cross, one brings Mother Earth into theological perspective. A reading of Romans 7–8 suggests that each person of the Trinity features centrally in Christ's groaning. Christ groans on the Cross, the Spirit holds the groaning of Christ and the groaning of the created order as one and God receives both Son and Spirit in a communion of Love. When speaking of the Trinity in this way, the aim is not to ascribe a set of roles to each person in a way that instrumentalises their activity.⁷ Instead, one seeks to affirm God's diverse yet simultaneous activity as one and undivided.

In what follows, a reading of the Earth in theological perspective centres on the Cross as a site that recognises suffering, that articulates such suffering in Christ's groaning and finally, which re-envisiones the wound in Christ's side as the birthplace of a healed and restored created order. The movement from old to new invites us to think of the Earth in sacramental terms so that its creation signifies God's plan to know the created order intimately, and the Cross signifies God's restoration and perfection of the created order. The in-and-through-Christ which the Cross establishes casts the created order as a sign and promise of God's first (in creation) and continued (through Spirit and

6. My reading of Mother Earth in Theological Perspective is influenced by the agenda which has been set by the Circle. In the first instance, I am guided by the task Mercy Odumoye gives young theologians to think of African women's liberation in a manner which is consistent with its culture, narratives and history, see Fiedler and Hofmeyr (2011:40–41). In the second instance, I am reminded of the centrality of experience to liberation theologies as Denise Ackermann continuously reminds us. As a young South African theologian, my reading of the Trinity is particularly informed by the loss that I have experienced in the face of the AIDS pandemic and of the suffering incurred because of gang related violence, see Ackermann (1997:65) as well as Dube (2002:535–549). In the final instance, I am informed by the personalised account of 'mama Africa' which Musa Dube employs to speak of the African continent and the trauma and suffering that it has endured, see Dube (1999:11–17). With the guidance of the three respected mothers of African women's theologies, I intend to employ a uniquely feminine grammar of the Cross in order that Christ may be shown to be our mother in who's womb mother Africa exists.

7. Describing the nature of the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity has been the task of theologians over centuries with the most recent models being that of psychological and social sort. These theories, Karen Kilby shows, are all analogies by which to understand the nature of the existence of the three persons who are in union. While analogies are the means by which we describe the nature of self in relation to the divine, there is a danger of instrumentalising such analogies, see Kilby (2000:433). In Kilby's own words, 'Projection, then, is particularly problematic in at least some social theories of the Trinity because what is projected onto God is immediately reflected back onto the world, and this reverse projection is said to be what is in fact *important* about the doctrine (Kilby 2000:442)'.

Son) presence on the Earth. This sacramental rendering, one may propose, opens the possibility for a new language with which to approach Mother Earth as one who is sacred and as one for whom God has an encompassing restorative vision.

■ The Cross as Trinitarian address

An obscure figure unknown to many but whose visions led her to speak of God our mother, is a female religious person of the 13th century. Julian of Norwich lived during a time when many people were dying of the bubonic plague, and where sickness was the order of the day. Even though Julian is not of African descent, her understanding of the Trinity and her vision of Christ's wounds provides different ways of thinking through the relationship of Mother Earth in Christ. Her reflections are deeply resonant with an African women's hermeneutic.⁸

On her sickbed, Julian receives 16 visions of the Cross and Christ's compassion for her.⁹ Through a series of addresses, God relates to her pain and suffering as a carer, lover and maker – relational terms that, with each address, describe a different dimension of God's relationship with Julian. One example of Julian's Christo-centric yet Trinitarian speech is as follows (Julian of Norwich 2015):

And he showed all this most blessedly with this meaning, – 'See, I am God. See I am in everything. See, I do everything. See, I never lift my hands from my works, nor ever shall, without end. See, I guide everything to the end to which I ordained it from without beginning by the same power, wisdom, and love with which I made it. How should anything be amiss? (p. 56)

In Christ, God's triune presence is present to the created order¹⁰ just as God is present to the suffering of the created order through the Cross.¹¹ On the Cross,

8. I will expand more on this hermeneutic as the paper develops.

9. In Julian's visions, Christ addresses her in terms that most adequately address her own bodily existence. She writes, '[a]nd yet in all this time that Christ was present to me, I felt no pain except for Christ's pains'. In Christ's suffering, Julian's own suffering is subsumed and momentarily forgotten. A conflation occurs in this instance where the self relates to the divine on the plain of the immanent. The conflation is significant for the fact that it situates the Cross at the centre of Julian's experience. The Cross makes visible the God who is transcendent to Julian and yet immanent to her suffering (see Julian of Norwich 2015:15).

10. Julian visually expresses this dynamic in her vision of the Earth being held by God. It is traditionally referred to as Julian's hazelnut vision. It reads: 'And in this vision he also showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as a ball, as it seemed to me. I looked at it and thought, "What can this be?" And the answer came to me in a general way, like this, "It is all that is made." I wondered how it could last, for it seemed to me so small that it might have disintegrated suddenly into nothingness. And I was answered in my understanding, "It lasts, and always will, because God loves it; and in the same way everything has its being through the love of God' (Julian of Norwich 2015:7).

11. In contradistinction to a pantheistic view where God is rendered entirely immanent to the world and all ontological distinction falls away, Julian advances God's presence to the world through Christ.

there is the God who meets Julian as maker, carer and lover, three modes of existence premised on relationality.¹² Firstly, Julian is brought into union with the Creator God of creation *ex nihilo*. Secondly, Julian is brought into union with the Incarnate God. Thirdly, Julian is brought into union with the God who eternally expresses love through the Cross. These three modes of naming God originate on the Cross from where Christ addresses her.

With Christ at the centre of the encounter between creature and creator, as Romans suggests, the Cross becomes an act of restoration.¹³ This restoration is made explicit in Julian's perception of Christ in terms that suggest God's care and love for her. A restorative model of soteriology advances a normatively different reading of the Cross than, for example, the penal substitution model. Whereas the penal substitution model speaks of restitution, the restorative model speaks of transformation and perfection (an ontology of oneing).¹⁴ Stated simply, an ontology of oneing suggests that persons are incorporated into the economy of the Second Person of the Trinity through the Cross. The same person who is present to creation *ex nihilo* and the incarnation. On the Cross, persons are incorporated into Christ's economy, and thereby brought into union with the Second Person of the Trinity.

Christ is key to a restorative model of the Cross because he is the ground upon which the restoration is established in the created order. Such restoration finds its expression in the Second Person of the Trinity by whom God brought existence into being, and through whom Mother Earth finds her existence. God's embrace enacted through the Cross serves as the absolute affirmation of God's transforming presence in persons and the created order.¹⁵ The purpose of the Cross, and this is key, is encompassing and inclusive of the created order. On the one hand, the created order exists because God willed it into being. As such, it is a revelation and promise of God's indwelling presence. On the other hand, the fact that Christ took on the materiality of existence establishes the created order as the matrix in which the restoration of the Cross is to unfold.

12. Julian of Norwich writes, 'But what is this to me? Truly, the maker, the carer, and the lover. For until I am of one substance with him I can never have complete rest nor true happiness; that is to say, until I am so joined to him that there is no created thing between my God and me' (Julian of Norwich 2015:45).

13. Julian follows a restorative reading of the Cross. See Grace Jantzen who finds an interesting contrast between Julian's soteriology and an Anselmian soteriology. Whereas Anselm's model is one of atonement, Julian's model is one of restoration, Jantzen suggests. See Jantzen (2000:198–199) and, Bosch (2019).

14. The scholar, Brant Pelphrey, describes this dynamic in Julian's theology of the Cross as an 'ontology of oneing'. Pelphrey places Julian's ontology of oneing in direct opposition to what he believes to be the Protestant narrative of at-one-ment. Whereas the latter describes an attitude on behalf of both God and humanity which justifies a rhetoric of condemnation and necessitated death by way of the Cross, the former speaks of an orthodox inclined reading of participation in God's being by way of the Second Person. See Pelphrey (2012:52).

15. For further readings grounded of the Cross as restorative model as it relates to Paul's theology, see Eastman (2017), Wright (2017) and Macaskill (2018:87–102).

The inclusion of the created order in the restoration which the Cross brings is deeply resonant with what Oduyoye has advanced as a theology of wholeness (Bosch 2014:24; see also Oduyoye 1995:495, 482). A theology of wholeness reads the salvation which the Cross brings as encapsulating every aspect of existence (Oduyoye 1989:194; see also Oduyoye 1995:495, 482). The wholeness of the created order thus rests on the Second Person of the Trinity in whom it not only finds its existence but through whom it lives out this new existence (Oduyoye 1995:482). That is, the created order has its existence continuously founded by the reality which the Cross establishes. A wholistic reading of the Cross, as Oduyoye shows, concerns itself not only with persons and their ‘salvation’ but also with the created order and its flourishing. How this vision is said to unfold rests on the relation of the created order to Christ, and of Christ to the Trinity.

At every point in the created order’s existence, God expresses God’s creative activity. That God is present to all that is, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* confesses so that it is God who creates by God’s Word and by God’s Spirit. In Christ’s taking on the materiality of the created order, and bringing such materiality to the Cross, a continuum is established between God’s first creative act and God’s second creative act. Within this cruciform reality, the Trinity is present, establishing the restoration the Cross initiates and continues in the everyday lives of persons.

Oduyoye registers the role that Christ plays in the life of the created order through her uniquely feminine grammar of perception as he who is our midwife (Oduyoye 2010:57). Here, Christ on the Cross is the One who helps to carry the pain and suffering which persons experience. Christ bears the suffering of the created order as his own suffering on the Cross. On the Cross, Christ captures all suffering in his own being, and thereby becomes our mother in grace. This is the implication of Oduyoye’s imagery of Christ our midwife.

Because Christ is the Second Person of the Trinity and so present to the Trinity’s activity, Christ is our mother in three distinctive ways (Julian of Norwich 2015:12).¹⁶ These moments describe the various stages at which the Second Person of the Trinity is present to the lives of the created order. Firstly, it is the Word by whom God creates and in whom our existence is subsumed. Secondly, it is by the incarnation that the Word takes on our nature and becomes our mother in nature. Thirdly, on the Cross Christ establishes our new status in him. Christ is thus the mother of our new existence. When

16. In Julian’ of Norwich’s own grammar, the relationship of Christ to the created order is cast in the following manner: ‘And so Jesus is our true mother by nature at our first creation, and he is our true mother in grace by taking on our created nature ... I understood three ways of regarding motherhood in God: the first is how he is the foundation of our nature’s creation; the second is his taking on of our nature (and there the motherhood of grace begins); third is the motherhood at work, and in this, by the same grace, and of his height and depth without end, and all is one Love’ (Julian of Norwich 2015:129).

seeking to describe God's relationship to the created order we thus need to situate it entirely within Christ's being. The imagery of Christ as our mother avails a new language by which to map its existence in relation to the divine, one which I would like to continue now as providing the key to a Trinitarian reading of the Cross, and its relation to Mother Africa.

■ Christ's immanence

The imagery of Christ who is midwife and mother of our being establishes two central aspects of the Cross: first that Christ is our mother in our suffering, and that he is our mother in nature. The feminine grammar of Christ our mother proves to be a fruitful way of speaking of the relationship between God and the created order. This is because, as I have sought to show thus far, the Cross is the moment where God expresses God's continued creative activity in the restoration of the created order. Musa W. Dube describes the healing that Christ brings to Mother Africa when she narrates the life of 'Mama Africa' in terms of the bleeding women in the Gospel of Mark. She writes (Dube 1999):

Mama Africa as a character thus personifies the story of Africa. Her role exposes the various gender oppressions and other forms of oppression encountered by African women (and the people of Africa in general) yet highlights their will to arise. The latter is dramatized by the repeated song and by Mama Africa's surprising assumption of power, when she calls *Thalitha Cum!* ['Little girl, arise!']. (p. 11)

In the account of the bleeding woman, Mother Africa reaches out to Christ and when her hands touch Christ's garment, she is healed. With the power of suggestion, Dube ends her narration at the moment where Mama Africa too stretches for Christ's robe. The suggestion is significant insofar as it places Christ central to Mother Africa's suffering, and her healing.

The vivid imagery of Mother Africa as the one who bears the wounds and scars of those who are her people, brings into relief the language of Christ who is our mother on the Cross. An image that supports the notion of Christ our mother, is the image of the wound of Christ received at the last, to confirm Christ's death. The wound of Christ visually depicts the paradox that Cone refers to in his *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Here Cone's hermeneutic, as the South African theologian Gerald West suggests, centres on the lived experiences of African Americans for whom the Cross was a grotesque reminder of the violence that had been inflicted upon them (West 2018:244). Likewise, the wound of Christ in African context symbolises more than salvation, it symbolises the victory over the death that comes with oppressive regimes.

Like the Cross, the wound of Christ is a site of paradox. The wound of Christ captures in its economy the death that comes with sinfulness and the life that comes with Christ. Here womanist theologies make headway in claiming for themselves a reading of the Cross that accords with their embodied

circumstance.¹⁷ Importantly, the wound of Christ is also a symbol of new creation, of God's loving communion with the created order and of the sacramental existence of Mother Earth. The wound thus maps the Cross as a moment of re-creation first, in Christ's bringing into being a new reality by which persons may live and second, in the partaking of Christ's body.

Two grammars of perception are pertinent to the wound of Christ. Firstly, there is the grammar of suffering where the created order's suffering is synonymous with Christ's suffering. This is captured in the imagery where blood and water flow from Christ's pierced side. The blood and water which spill from Christ's side visually depict the suffering and pain which is so pertinent in the history of Mother Africa. In Dube's own words, 'Mama bears in her own flesh the wounds of their [the people of Africa] suffering. And they die in her loving arms' (Dube 1999:16). Just like the Cross encompasses both human and divine, the blood of Christ also renders the suffering of Mother Africa in visceral terms. Christ hereby becomes for us an image of the suffering which is registered in the body of Mother Africa.

Secondly, there is the grammar of beatification. The grammar whereby the Cross establishes an entirely new reality by which the created order exists in Christ's divine economy. Here, Christ as mother embraces the created order as the One in whom it is founded, as the One in whom it is restored and as the One in whom it is brought into union with the divine. Christ's holding of the created order in his side, establishes the Cross as the moment of God's continued activity in the created order. The blood and water that flow from Christ's side can also be the blood and water of birth and of life. To exist in Christ's wound is also to exist as the embodiment of Christ's restorative vision for the created order. This is beautifully illustrated with imagery where the church is born from Christ's wound.

The wound of Christ maps the relationship between suffering and birth in God's divine economy. Whereas Christ's side was pierced as evidence of his death, the church now regards the blood and water that flowed from his side, as the place of the origin of new life. This is the place from where the church is born. The church proclaims God's restorative intent for creation and seeks to realise it on a daily basis; Christ's wounds represent the wounds of the created order and his victory over death their wholeness and joy.

Insofar as the created order is understood to have divine presence immanent to it through the Cross, the Cross equally acts as the activity of the Trinity in the created order. In the relationship of the Cross to the created order, and of the created order to the Trinity, the semantics of groaning present to the

17. See Chapter 5 of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by Cone which expounds on how womanist theologians resist a redemptive reading of the Cross and opt instead for an analogous reading where Christ's death foreshadows the death of African American individuals and vice versa.

created order (Oduyoye 1989:200) is echoed in the groaning of Christ on the Cross. The groaning of the created order is subsumed in the groaning of the Son who is our mother in creation, in nature and in grace (Julian of Norwich 2015:129).

If we bring the conceptual framework of Christ our midwife in Oduyoye and Mama Africa in Dube together with Christ's wound as landscape of suffering and life, we may say that Christ is Mama Africa's midwife in her suffering and her mother in the new life she has in Christ. This means that on the Cross, Christ heals, carries and holds Mother Africa's suffering, and at Christ's death, the salvation, which is given to the created order, places Mother Africa in Christ's wound. The language of death and life, of suffering and birth, imaginatively renders the Cross first, as a moment of restoration and second, as a moment of re-creation. Within this economy, the wound of Christ metaphorically becomes a womb – a moment where Christ's suffering establishes a new reality in the created order, one of life, of a new mode of existing in relation to Christ and of being created anew in Christ's being. In this womb, a reading of the Cross shows, Christ is present to the created order, and Christ is present to the Trinity.

■ Mother Earth in sacramental terms

It is at this point that we return to our initial challenge, that when speaking of Christ as Second Person of the Trinity, one does not instrumentalise the language one uses to speak of the relationship of the Trinity. The simultaneity of Christ's presence to the created order and to the Trinity sets the stage for an Earth-centred reading of the Trinity.¹⁸ It is possible to proceed with caution when all that is to be said concerning the Trinity and Mother Earth is said in relation to the Cross and Christ's economy. One thus proceeds not by projecting the analogy of the divine relations back onto the Earth, but by appropriating the Trinity at work in the Cross as mode by which one reads the Earth.

Insofar as Christ is our mother whose wound, or womb, perpetually incarnates God's encompassing vision for the created order, Christ's wound becomes the paradigm by which one may speak of the relation of the Trinity to the created order.¹⁹ In Christ's economy, the groaning of the created order is encapsulated in Christ's cry of dereliction. The Spirit makes such groaning immanent to the persons of the Trinity, and Christ's groaning immanent to the

18. It is also at this stage that we must bear in mind the danger of which Karen Kilby has warned us, to avoid as far as possible the instrumentalisation of the imagery we use to describe the relations of the three divine persons.

19. For further readings on the place of relationality in Paul's person, see Eastman (2018a:288–301) and Eastman (2018b:103–126).

created order. Both Son and Spirit are held in God's being. The Holy Spirit who is our mother in creation, incarnation and the Cross is the same God who bears the suffering of the created order in his wound. It is the same God who by the Spirit holds the groans of Christ and the groans of Mother Earth in union, and who registers this groaning within the divine economy. The dynamic presence of the Trinity to the Cross thus renders the wound of Christ in Trinitarian terms.

This chapter's reading of the Trinity as it relates to Mother Earth, therefore, does not rest on an analogy of the three persons of the Trinity, but on God's presence to the created order through the Cross. An entirely different reading of the Trinity is advanced in this instance insofar as it is not the description of the nature of the relation of the three persons which is of concern but Christ's holding of the created and the divine. Here, the imagery of Oduyoye and Dube advances a robust theology of the Cross which is situated in the Second Person of the Trinity. When one thus speaks of God's immanence to the created order, one does so through a grammar of the Cross. The uniquely feminine grammar of perception found in Julian, Oduyoye and Dube registers this presence through the blood and water that flow from Christ's side.

Such an embodied register finally brings into perspective a reading of the Earth which neither depends on a social model of the Trinity nor the instrumentalisation of analogies. This chapter suggests that a reading of Christ as mother mapped so far advances a new reading of the relationship of the persons of the Trinity, and of their activity in the life of Mother Africa. This brings one to the final imagery present for the blood and water of Christ, the language of the sacraments. By existing in Christ, the created order finally presents itself as sign and sacrament of God's creative and restorative presence. By articulating the relationship between the created order and divine in sacramental terms, the Cross is always the defining moment by which the created order may be said to articulate God's presence.

In the same manner that the Trinity is present to sacraments, God is present to Mother Africa. When considering her as a sign and symbol of God's encompassing vision through the Cross, her own suffering and glorification casts the Cross in embodied terms. For in the created order's suffering, one is reminded of the suffering of Christ on the Cross, one is reminded of the Spirit who registers such groaning and one is reminded of the God who holds all that is in God's economy. When the body of Christ partakes of the sacraments, they commit themselves to the mandate which comes with it. In the same manner, when one partakes of the created order as situated in Christ, one commits oneself to establish God's vision on Earth. It is the task of the body of Christ to render this sacramental existence in corporeal terms.

The language of the sacraments sets out a particular mandate as to how one is to engage with Mother Earth. In the first instance, the sacraments have

a liturgical language of their own which may suggest that the church should incorporate Mother Earth in her worship and practice. One may, as Oduyoye encourages, provide new lenses for thinking through ministry and practice (Oduyoye 1989:195). With Mother Africa as sacrament, the church may incorporate her songs, her narratives and her glorification in its celebration of the Cross. In the second instance, partaking in the sacraments incorporates persons into God's encompassing vision. That is, by partaking of the created order, persons are to make it their mandate to realise the grounds upon which the created order may flourish. Persons are, in the words of Dube, to be in 'partnership with God on Earth' (Dube 2009:439) and to, through prayer, pledge themselves responsible for the 'interpersonal and international relationships on Earth' persons have (Dube 2009:439-440). In the third instance, one's engagement with Mother Earth as that which has its unfolding within God's restorative vision means that the church's engagements are to be considered as a manner of worship and of the bringing about of God's vision for the created order. Finally, this sacrament is a sacrament that may be shared across religions. The sacrality of Mother Earth is one which is not restricted to Christian practice but to God's greater vision as well.

■ Conclusion

This chapter suggests that one can speak of the Trinity in deeply personal and embodied terms provided that they are articulated in terms of the Trinity's activity on the Cross. The Cross is key because it places Mother Earth central to the story of our Christian faith. When Mother Earth comes to us as sacrament, one is necessitated to take seriously her health, her well-being and her flourishing. The church is, therefore, called to share with its neighbours the blessing that the created order is and to articulate her existence as the revelation and promise of God's continued presence to persons.

Earth-centred Trinitarian models: The Trinitarian synergy and symbiosis in the creation narrative

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■ Introduction

The God who has been commanding the universe into existence is now entering into consultation. The God who is not in need of a counsellor is consulting with Godself (Is 40:14). This text is the testimony that there exists a plurality of persons in the Godhead (Calvin, cited in King 1975:92). The Genesis creative narrative stresses the human distinctness as the note here is of God's self-communing, and the impressive plural proclaims creation as a momentous step (Kidner 1967:50).

In the blog website Compelling Truth (2011–2021), the following answer is given for the question, 'Why is the plural used for God in Genesis 1:26 and 3:22?', in *The Truth about God* (see Compelling Truth 2011–2021):

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The plural does not infer or refer to the multiplicity of gods. God is biblically presented as one God. The first verse of Scripture notes, 'In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth' (Gn 1:1). The Mosaic Law eliminates any doubt, declaring, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might' (Dt 6:4-5). The Decalogue also commences with the command, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me' (Ex 20:2-3). (n.p.)

Many scholars have and are still continuing to debate this Trinitarian plurality. The whole canon supports a Trinitarian reading, which is suggested by the literal etymology within the text and should be confirmed by inductive study of the entire canon. Etymologically, 'Trinity' denotes the Christian doctrine that God exists as a unity of three distinct persons: Father/Mother, Son and Holy Spirit. This implies three distinct persons yet related in essence. My personal conviction is that it is rather the plural of fullness, which is found in the regular word for God, *Elohim*, used with a singular verb, and this fullness, as expressed by the Old Testament was to be unfolded as tri-unity. The plurality in unity tallies well with the Johannine expression of 'we' and 'our' in John 14:17, 23. Many scholars are of a strong opinion that a reference to Trinity of God is implied in the language used. The first plural pronoun is significantly employed in respect to God, as Godself say, 'Let *us* make man in *our* image' (Wood 1980:26). The fact of the matter is God is multiple in nature, yet on the basis of exegesis, it would be impossible to say the reference is to the Trinity (Hamilton 1999:22).

■ God the creator commands stewardship

The 'Let us...' motif in the creation story demonstrates that God was setting the pace for stewardship. God is in comradeship with Godself, inviting humanity to join in this stewardship. The 'Let us...' conveys the spirit of communalism to set creation into motion that resulted in creation at large. Human response to this is expected to be godly stewardship because we are assigned by God to take the responsibility of caring for the Earth on behalf of God (Resane 2010:6). This puts direct responsibility on humanity for the profitable utilisation of the Earth and its resources. They are not the owners of the Earth but co-caregivers with God.

The biblical account of stewardship teaches us that God owns all but has delegated it to humanity – male and female to take responsibility for caring of this creation. God's self-communalism in Genesis 1:26 demonstrates that humanity cannot care for the Earth as individuals, but that both males and females must be at the forefront of the management of the creation. There is a need for symbiotic and synergistic cooperation. This cooperation should be both vertical and horizontal. It is the complementarity which is what and how the God-human-Earth relationship should be. The God-human-Earth

relationship should 'be mutual dependence and a mutual exchange of privileges' (Resane 2010:5).

The fractured relationality of original communality of the triune God, humanity and creation led to the current ecological crisis and to some extent to human dichotomy based on gender prejudice and discrimination. Kaoma (2015) tries to address this issue in *The Creator's Symphony*, where he invites some pro-active Christian engagement in redeeming the ecological crisis in Africa. God's intended creation was never meant for human supremacy over the creation to destroy and abuse it. The mandate given to humanity regarding the Earth 'was and is to be Earth-keepers, or Earth-servers as opposed to Earth-destroyers' (Kaoma 2015:23).

The communality of God, in creating humanity was a demonstration that the triune God in consultation was bringing into being partners, and not contenders or destroyers of this resourceful Mother Earth. Mother Earth is hereby used as the expression or reflection of interdependence among human beings, Earth and the triune God. The Earth and its ecosystems are the human home. The fundamental assertion here is that in order to achieve a just balance among the economic, social and environmental needs of present and future generations, it is necessary to promote harmony with Mother Earth. 'Humanity is expected to be in partnership with God for the sustainability of creation' (Resane 2015:2). The Trinitarian Godself 'Let us...' conference that proposed, adopted and implemented the creation of humanity highlights a special position humanity possesses in relation with God's creation. Each person of the Trinity is involved in the 'process of redemption from the beginning to the end' (VanGemeren 1990:243).

God's self-communality took place after the universe was set in motion for eschatological creation. The members of the Trinity conferred about human creation while creation was already in place, when all creation was already in motion.

■ Perichoresis: Trinitarian symbiosis and synergy

Each person of the Trinity plays a special role in making creation the reality to be reckoned with. Miroslav Volf (1998:209), in expounding the *ecclesiality* of the church, dwells on the concept of *perichoresis* which 'refers to the reciprocal interiority of the Trinitarian persons'. The term was originally used by the Church Fathers. *Perichoresis* describes the relationship between each person of the triune God (Father/Mother, Son and Holy Spirit). The contemporary theologians who use it widely include Jürgen Moltmann, John Zizioulas and C Baxter Kruger. The term is used to explain the *imago Dei* of which humans are carriers. The one God existing as Father/Mother, Son and Spirit is the

'persons' (*hypostases*) and 'being/essence' [*ousia*] related to each other in a mutual, perichoretic way (Kärkkäinen 2014:262).

The intention of this chapter is not to entertain the historical scientific concept of symbiosis. The term is intended here to demonstrate the Trinitarian model of God-human-nature co-existing harmoniously for a better ongoing output. In this case, a 'symbiosis', according to the description in the *Biology Dictionary* (2016), is described as:

[C]o-existence and mutual relationship with an ongoing interaction between the members of the triune God, humanity, and nature in general. The symbiotic relationship may be obligate or facultative. The obligate symbiosis is when members relate interdependently where members cannot survive without others. Facultative symbiosis is when members of the community engage in a partnership through choice and can survive individually. Obligate symbioses are often evolved over a long period of time, while facultative symbioses may be more modern, behavioural adaptations; given time, facultative symbioses possess the potential to articulate towards obligate symbioses. (p. 271)

In biological sciences, symbioses may be classified or identified as mutualism, commensalism, amensalism, neutralism, commensalism, competition and parasitism. I apply the first one that is mutualism to perichoretical reflection of the Trinitarian model. In theological thinking, perichoresis can refer to how God, in his or her omnipresence, intersects with all creation. In mutualism, both symbiotic partners (here male and female together with the Trinitarian God) become interactive beneficiaries, often resulting in a significant gain for either one or both parties. The Trinitarian communalism is the interaction between members of the community (triune God, humanity and creation) living in close association, typically to the advantage of each member. It is a mutually beneficial relationship between these members.

Symbiotic relationship of God-human-nature produces synergy. The term synergy comes from the Greek word *synergia* [συνέργεια] from *synergos* [συνεργός], meaning *working together* (Rm 8:28). Synergy in this context speaks of the harmonious interaction of community members towards higher and better benefits for the sake of individual members. The triune God and humanity work together *perichoretically* towards the creation of an effective liveable planet (Beckwith, cited in Green 2010:172).

The understanding of this divine co-existence leaves one with the conclusion that God as the transcendent God 'has become one with humanity in the person of Jesus Christ and through whose Spirit humanity and the whole cosmos are being brought to fulfilment' (Peters 2000:86). This condition nullifies discrimination between males and females, as neither can be brought to fulfilment without another. The social doctrine of the Trinity provides a concrete and visual representation of God's life together and the participation of humanity in the divine life. This tallies well with Travis (2014:127) that 'Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in a loving relationship free from domination,

mutually considerate, tolerant of difference, and open to the whole of creation'. Humanity (male and female) should relate and live together symbiotically, synergistically and perichoretically.

There is no doubt that this Trinitarian communion reflects the church, and humanity in general, dwelling in one place with the members of the Trinity among them; living all together symbiotically and in unison to reflect the desire of Christ in his John 17 high priestly prayer. Trinity must be thought of in relational terms (ed. Green 2010:285) – the *perichoretic* space where there is peace and serenity. This *perichoretic* space creates and enables the atmosphere of togetherness, where there is no discrimination. According to Travis (2014:127), in this space, 'there is possibility for human relationship characterised by a similar freedom, mutuality, diversity, and openness'.

■ Anthropocentric hermeneutics versus anthropogenic approach

For ages, Christian theology has embraced the concept of *imago Dei* as laid out in the creation narrative. Unfortunately, this has been thrown off tangent to justify human exploitation of creation. Attitudes of dominion towards 'ecological responsibility have been very superficial and egocentric' (Resane 2015:1). There are some theological shortcomings regarding Earth-centred Trinitarian models of creation. There is a theological view that because humanity is the apex of creation, humans have the absolute authority over creation, to the extent that they possess the rights even to abuse it or destroy it. The fundamental contribution towards this notion is *anthropocentric hermeneutics*, 'which must be replaced with eco-hermeneutical anthropogenesis' (Resane 2010:5). A text is traditionally read anthropocentrically, whereby humans take charge regarding the cosmological interpretation of texts.

Anthropocentrism is the view that humans are at the centre of everything. Everything in the universe is seen in terms of 'human utility and human interests' (Gnanakan 2014:71–72). This anthropocentric approach elevates humans, with the assumption that humans are 'a totally different order than all other creatures in nature [...] the hierarchy of things is God, human beings, and the rest' (Habel 2000:4). Humans tend to forget that they are the *laat lammetjies* (late-comers) of creation. These anthropocentric hermeneutics (reading, interpreting and applying biblical texts) relate to nature as the object. Humans have subjected Earth to scientific analysis that elevate humans above nature, while simultaneously promoting a sense of distance, separation and otherness. Kaoma (2015:17) is correct in stating that the supposition that Earth 'exists solely for human exploitation was emphasised ever more increasingly during the scientific age'. Nature has become a force to be

harnessed, to be exploited for the benefit of the human survival. It must be considered that the Creator God is eschatologically involved in reshaping and reforming humanity into his likeness and character. It is ironic that Christianity has given religious support to the notion that the ‘universe has been created primarily for the absolute benefit of human beings’ (Conradie 2011:5). The bottom line remains that Mother Earth can be corrupted and tampered with by human beings. ‘Creation can be spoiled by wicked, disobedient or ignorant lesser beings’ (Turaki 1997:56).

There is a lack of solidarity between humanity and nature, which is contrary to the will of God. ‘Humans by their actions, oppose the author of nature’ (Boloz 2008:11–26, 15). Humanity as part of nature shares the Earth with other living and non-living; animate and inanimate beings (Buel 2005:137). The correct proposal is the one suggested by Kaoma (2015):

Christianity needs a new way of relating to Earth. Enlightenment-informed anthropocentric theological convictions that view Earth as a bank of raw materials should be replaced with theologies that value the Earth as a sacrament, our sacred home and home to future generations of life. Thus, how we move to address the mounting ecological crisis is essential to Christian social witness. In short, anthropocentric theologies need rejecting as wrong theology. (pp. 2–3)

Anthropocentric hermeneutics promotes and elevates human beings to become the dominant species on the Earth and therefore the primary culprits in causing ecological deterioration (Butkus & Kolmes 2011:170). The *visio Dei* [vision of God] is that creation is not self-sustaining but is sustained by the ongoing presence of God in some eschatological dynamism whereby creation continues into the future where it will be renewed and restored.

Anthropogenicity views humans as centrally intertwined and interdependent with nature, that humans and nature grow together simultaneously serving each other responsibly. This means that humans should not claim the absolute rights to dominate Earth and other creatures in such a way that they become the sole consumers alone. McFague (2008:90) refers to this as ‘synergism of planetary operation, whereby the various parts of the planet work together to create something either better or worse than the individual parts’. Moltmann (1985:212–213) calls it the ‘open system, where the creative activity of God in history is in the process towards conclusion and completion of the open and the opened systems’. The whole creation was given the stamp of approval so that at the end of each creative act, God could say: ‘It is good’. The use of the term ‘good’ is significant in the creation story. It is one of the several key words used in the creation story in multiples of seven – a mark of conscious artistry in the writing of the Genesis account. It views humans and the Earth as a whole, existing in cosmological harmony. The word ‘good’ was also the final word of God the Creator at the end of the 6th day, after both man and woman were created (Gn 1:31).

Humanity and the Earth are interrelated, interconnected and interdependent and in communion with the communal God. The Lord could intimate to Adam (Gn 3):

By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return. (v. 19)

This is expressive and a virtual identity of humanity with the Earth. Humans are totally dependent upon the soil. Peters (2000:148) captures it well that ‘we come from the soil, and when we die, we are buried, we return to it. We come from dust and shall return to dust. We are soil’. The same notion is highlighted by Habel (2000:212) that ‘humans were made from the dust and will return to the dust – the very name *Adam* means *dust*. By so doing, God has sanctified everything God has created’.

In another contribution I explained that ‘anthropogenesis proposes a picture of continuum which embraces interrelationship and interdependence whereby humans and all of the Earth are an integrated, healthy, and whole’ (Resane 2010). Furthermore, anthropogenesis emphasises an ecology that promotes ‘the stability and integrity of ecosystems’ (Gnanakan 2014:72). Humans, as part and members of creation, communing together with God, live *proleptically* (in anticipation) as demonstrated when they say grace at the dinner table. By doing so, they show ‘thankfulness for the life of the animal or plant sacrificed so that they can eat’ (Peters 2000:389).

It is unfortunate that when this grace around the meal table is pronounced, thankfulness is appropriated to the hands that have prepared the food, the provider (God) but rarely the reference to the hands (farmers) that produce it. This producer has become a middle mediator who is not recognised in prayers of thankfulness (Resane 2018:2). Humanity, especially women, participate with God in sustaining the creation (livelihood) through the practices of food sustainability, natural justice and health promotion. Indeed, human beings, especially women, have an ‘ethical responsibility to sustain the integrity of creation’ (Butkus & Kolmes 2011:170).

In Africa, the producers and the preparers are women. It is in many occasions, women who under strenuous circumstances, till the land, plant the crops, care for them until their full maturation ready for consumption. Women who are in the majority are the ones who prepare (cook) this food to feed not only their households but also their communities. Women labour industriously as the shepherds of the nation ensuring that there is food security for human survival. Prayer or blessing over the food is the religious duty that should recognise the role of producers, in this case women. Waruta (cited in Maimela 1994:79) is right that religion is not separated from daily concerns for food, shelter, health, wealth, children, happiness and good social life.

■ Communion theology engages Trinitarian models of relationality

Relationality and communion theology help humanity to put in perspective the idea of God as the cause. It is from this perspective that the Trinitarian God is the loving and caring God who is symbiotically operational in God's creation from the beginning to the end. God provides for existence, and inevitably promotes values of mutual relations, radical equality and community in diversity. The premise of this symbiosis is God's loving communion as 'relational, while utterly transcendent, also intimately related to everything that exists' (Johnson 1993:228–230, cf. Baker-Fletcher 2006). This mutual indwelling of God also links with the metaphor of friendship, which has a 'close affinity with women's experience of closeness and sharing' (Johnson 1993:233–236). The essence of God is relational – an ontology of relation 'based on the idea of personhood as communion, in relation to the others' (LaCugna 1991:109–110). Zizioulas (1997:16) points out that 'the being of God could be known only through personal relationships and personal love'. For Zizioulas, being means life, and life means communion. The Trinitarian vision of the church is the basis of communion theology. Ecclesial being is essentially connected with the being of God. Being of God is communion. God is a community of persons. That is the reason why the church in its ecumenical expression is also a communion.

Communion theology contributed immensely to contemporary theology, where God is envisioned as 'the dynamic, living, engaging community of the three-in-one' (Kärkkäinen 2014:320). God is present in creation alongside humanity. God's activity in the creation is the relation through the Word made flesh or the Spirit outpoured, of humanity in its integrity as creature, with God in his divine integrity (Shelton, cited in ed. Green 2010:43). The three persons of the Godhead interrelate. The three are in essence one. Father/Mother, Son and the Holy Spirit cannot be dissected into individual beings as they in essence are one. There is some relationship of humanity with the triune God, without excluding relationship with creation.

The entire world is God's creation, 'where humanity encounters the Trinitarian God' (Veeneman 2018:157). This is the 'event of communion' (Kärkkäinen 2004:100) expressed in the formula of baptism when people are baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). This formula evidences the Trinitarian model where the triune God, a baptismal candidate and the priest (humans) and water (creation) are all symbiotically involved and synchronically complete the act. This sacramental act is not gender biased as candidates, either male or female, are taken through the same ritual. They have experienced the same transformational power through faith. The Trinitarian formulation expresses synchrony in 'God's creative and redemptive acts in Christ among us in the power of the Spirit through the word of God' (Nürnberger 2016a:379).

Following the tradition of this Genesis text, the human being must be deemed as the ‘image of God, whether male or female’ (Nürnberger 2016b:33). The bottom line is that ‘likeness to God cannot be lived in isolation. It can be lived only in human community’ (Moltmann 1993:222–223). The human communalism (male and female) is the reflection of the communitarian God. The linkages between humanity and God are intricate and very interrelated that it is logical to conclude that human beings are earthly creatures with connections beyond the physical (Kiogora, cited in Waruta 1995:83).

■ Theology and life sciences enter into dialogue – Theology of dialogue as a mediator

Scientific questions do not often get at questions asked in the course of theological work. Natural sciences provide universally accessible knowledge about the surrounding world. Unfortunately understanding was scantily embraced by both the theologians and the natural scientists. The primary intellectual challenge is not creating a conflict between theology and sciences, but unspoken biases against either theology or science caused by the lack of the real understanding (Spezio, cited in Lovin & Mauldin 2017:24). This anomaly is enhanced and further expanded by gender biased outlook of human reality that men and women are both the carriers of *imago Dei*, go through the same experience of conversion and are both the subject at the centre of natural and social sciences.

Religion-Science dialogue has been a topical motif for over two centuries, but conflicting thoughts at the convergence points had created tensions, disagreements and to some extent, semi-permanent animosities. This was caused by the lack of laying the foundations on which dialogues should take place. Any dialogue involving theology should have motifs such as reconstruction, democratisation and social transformation as shapers of the agenda (Kusmierz & Cochrane 2013:85). Listening to each dialogue partner is important as it leads to understanding each other’s points – whether departure or convergent points. Vaezi (2018) is correct that:

Not only talking but also listening to the words of others are signs of having tolerance. Practising the intellectual dialogue is a tool for increasing tolerance towards others. The importance of such a dialogue is most evident in confronting different followers of religions. (p. 1)

Vaezi (2018) puts it as follows:

The emphasis here is that human society should constantly learn the culture of dialogue with those in opposition and to disagree with others who are different in terms of views and behaviours. (p. 6)

Disagreement must be based on a Christian golden rule of love. Although Vaezi emphasises tolerance, my Christian conviction emphasises love. Love covers the multitudes of sins, including sins such as discrimination in all its fronts. Tolerance can reach *cul-de-sac* while love is limitless and never ending. Pannenberg (1981) is a theologian who wrestled with the theology-science debate. He was insistent that theology and natural sciences need to be in dialogue with each other. He (Pannenberg 1981) writes:

If the God of the Bible is the creator of the universe, then it is not possible to understand fully or even appropriately the processes of nature without any reference to God. If on the contrary, nature can be appropriately understood without reference to the God of the Bible, then that God cannot be the creator of the universe, and consequently he cannot be truly God and be trusted as a source of moral teaching either. (p. 66)

Veeneman (2018:33) agrees that for Pannenberg, theology and the natural sciences need to be in dialogue with each other. Natural and life sciences are legitimately invited to dialogue for better care of our Mother Earth.

Humanity is invited to employ its mental and moral capacities to safeguard the Earth. These capacities involve the expertise of dialogue. Specifically, here, the dialogue should be that of theology and natural sciences, especially relating to Earth and/or environmental sustainability. Before doing that, humanity has to solve its own fragmentation caused by gender biases that had been a great wall of hostility between males and females. There is an urgent call for transformation of the human mind, as only human beings can act as agents of transformation, including gender inclusivity that erases all prejudices and bigotries in nature's synchrony. VanGemeren (1990:377) encapsulates this proposal to demonstrate that the synchrony and communalities of the Trinity situates humanity as a centrifugal force of transformation.

The triune God, together with humanity, and creation are symbiotically together as travel companions, therefore in dialogue with each other, to enhance their relationship. After all, the Setswana proverb is correct that, *Batho ba itsane loetong* [People start to know and understand each other when in a journey together]. They participate in dialogue or converse with each other during the journey. These dialogues in a journey open up the deep-seated thoughts, feelings and inhibitions of travel companions. In our theological journey, dialogue must not be self-centred but should also be cordial, hence the proposal to dialogue with natural sciences. This is also necessitated by the fact that the triune members are involved in the process of redemption from the beginning to the end (VanGemeren 1990:243). So, all events on Earth are happening with and within the Trinitarian scope, going beyond institutional forums (Kusmierz & Cochrane 2013:69).

■ Conclusion

The so-called primitive societies that have retained the primordial lifestyles continue to bear witness that Mother Earth is to be protected, not destroyed. Humanity, through some religious worldviews, has opted for the prodigal direction of destroying Mother Earth, consequently exacerbating the scarcity of natural resources that were designed to give us abundant life. Olivier (cited in Kretzschmar & Ntlha 2005:124) cautions human irresponsibility by pointing out that ‘Humans and the consequences of their ways of life [...] have brought the world we live in to the brink of global environmental catastrophe’. Theology of Mother Earth brings us back to our senses. It provides redefinitions of our identity with Mother Earth, and re-sets us for healing. Theology opens our eyes to see that Mother Earth has the ability to connect with our deepest emotions. Mother Earth deserves dignity and respect, and retribution.

The Trinitarian God holds humanity accountable to the Earth management. The synergy, symbiosis and perichoretical relationality of the triune God is the bedrock on which human relationality should be based. God created men and women for fellowship just as Godself exists in fellowship. There is no doubt that males and females participate in the triune life of God as they are united with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, as together, ‘they are the body of Christ, the body that is in need of him as its head’ (Summer, cited in Crisp & Sanders 2014:146). The biblical instruction regarding human beings as the image of God relates to both men and women in their wholeness, in their full, sexually specific community with each other (Moltmann 1992:94).

The importance of relationality, communion and interrelatedness calls for listening to the women’s voices. Trinitarian models agree with Ruether (2009:337) that ‘ecofeminism is in demand to dismantle the basic paradigm of male over female’. The power-laden hierachic dualism is always accompanied by abuse of nature, and the *other sex*, ‘which is contrary to the fellowship of the Spirit that builds community, belonging and mutuality’ (Kärkkäinen 2016:191).

Anthropocentric hermeneutics based on Genesis 1:26–27 encourages male dominance instead of a ‘gender-free’ approach. This approach goes against the Trinitarian models that promote complementarianism that sees communality and mutuality of the Trinitarian God in synchrony with God, creation and humanity. God is as much the Creator and Redeemer of the female as of the male.

Humanity (male and female) is part of the cosmos for the purpose of caring stewardship of the creation. The triune God, who is communal, and the humanity, which is male and female, cooperate in order to advance creation into a blissful sphere for life sustenance. Humanity should experience personal encounter towards justice of God, which is to sustain the universe in order to

make it a safe and habitable space for the life of the whole creation. Both natural justice and social justice are observed in the Trinitarian models where there is no discrimination based on gender, race or communal preferences. This is asserted by Ejeh (2008) that:

The understanding of the ecological problem is not restricted to damage done to land, water and air alone, but includes all aspects of exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation on the basis of gender, race, colour or creed. (p. 284)

The task of the church in Africa should go beyond the liberation of the oppressed. In her deliberations to liberate the oppressed, there must also be the liberation of Mother Earth from scandalous usurpation of responsibility because of greed and self-enrichment at the expense of Mother Nature. As the church, ‘we should be engaged in the battle for cosmos against chaos’ (Adeyemo 1997:69). Theology or religion should become a liberating force, ‘an experienced reality, indescribable but extremely real’ (Mugambi 1974:50).

Through dialogue, the church needs to create culture through interaction with the physical and social environment (Kiaziku 2009:34). My appeal in this chapter is that because humanity is failing to partner with the triune God by breaking stewardship with God, we are now finding ourselves trapped in deplorable environmental conditions. There is an urgent need for a clear Christian moral vision for environmental or ecological stewardship. The ethical goal for this ecological stewardship is to promote justice and shalom for all of God’s creation. Humanity has the mandate as bearers of God’s image to ‘protect and care for creation’s well-being and not to become destroyers of God’s creation’ (Nkansah-Obrempong 2013:273).

Superiority complex and supremacist ideals over creation and humanity are not in line with God’s triune communality. That is why in the attempts to decolonise theology, there should be an advocacy to ‘resolutely resist new temptations to exercise mastery over others’ (Brett 2009:182). Dialogue partners (theology and science) unmask their façade that may be coloured by all sorts of bigotries, prejudices and biases. For mutual understanding and cooperation for the roll-out of social justice, when these partners come into proximity with one another in the embrace of the Holy Trinity, life and healing are made possible (Travis 2014:127). This attitude opens the way for dialogue to go beyond life sciences, to even to dialogue with other religions regarding human theological responsibility in creation stewardship. I agree with Kiaziku (2009:13) that: ‘In Christianity there are values that can be adapted to non-Christian religions, in such a way as to enable them to “enter a dialogue” with Christianity [...]’

In honour of Mother Earth and Mother Africa, now is the time for African women theologians to reclaim their heritage of power, by discovering their theological voices (Njoroge, cited in Phiri, Govinden & Nadar 2002) in order to redeem our dissipating continent.

PART 2

Caring for Mother Africa

Women, religion and sustainable development: Redeeming the environment for human survival

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■ Introduction

Over the years, three aspects of eco-theology have focused on Christian stewardship, eco-justice and creation spirituality. The Christian stewardship approach emphasises the biblical or creation mandate that gives responsibility

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to humans to care for the environment. The eco-justice theology combines environmental justice with the church's stance on social justice demanding an equitable sharing of the earth's limited resources. This approach merges existing Christian ecological work with 'environmental concerns particularly those that centre on the effects of environmental degradation on peoples of colour and the poor' (Kearns 1996:57). 'Creation spirituality' puts more emphasis on human consciousness that recognises the place of other creatures cohabiting with humans in the universe and therefore making the effort to protect the environment in order to protect other forms of lives and not to endanger them and humans themselves (Kearns 1996:57).

Ecofeminist theology seems to deal with a combination of the three different aspects of eco-theology. Ecofeminism stems from two words that portray the idea of environmental degradation and its effects on women. This notion is primarily linked to the oppression of women as a result of patriarchal systems. Ivone Gebara (1996:76) notes that the term 'Ecofeminism' was recently coined by women in response to the obliteration of life caused by male-controlled structures. Gebara (1996:76) links women's quest for self-worth with the nurturing and care of the environment. Ranjith and Pius (2017:18, 19) declare that women and nature have always been seen as a resource in this patriarchal world. They have been exploited for the personal use of men who parade themselves as the master of both. Ranjith and Pius (2017:18, 19) established a connection between egoistic masculinity and the ruin caused to the ecological system and to humans. She goes further to say that hiding behind the façade of development is greed, pollution, deforestation, environmental degradation and sexual exploitation of women by men. Ruether states in her 'Ecofeminism – The Challenge to Theology' that, 'Ecofeminism or ecological feminism examines the interconnections between the domination of women and the domination of nature' (Ruether 2012:22). She explains that the goal of ecofeminism is to come up with ways and develop ideologies that would extricate and restore the chain of ecological decadence by acquiring adequate insight into their origin and execution (Ruether 2012:22).

Ecofeminism invites all and sundry to engage in welcoming attitudes and behaviours that enhance all lives, including natural resources in order to stop environmental degradation that affects women in a greater dimension and eventually the entire human race. Gebara critiques the monotheistic regions of 'being structural accomplices of destruction in spite of their discourses about love and their good actions' (Gebara 1996:77). This she attributes to 'hierarchical systems' and their endorsement of an 'enterprise of conquest' (Gebara 1996:77). She calls for a reconsidering and rediscovering of Christian virtues that affirm human connectivity to the ecological system. Using Gebara's appeal as a basis we discuss the mutually enhancing relationship between God's naturally created ecological order and human beings living

on earth. The mandate given by God to till the land presupposes a responsibility towards caring for and protecting the environment. On the other hand, the instructions given by God to live on the produce of the ground and other living things presumes the ecological systems caregiving to humans in return.

The Christian tradition has used images that describe God as a caring and loving mother who protects and cares for her children, delivering them from oppressive systems and domination. God's care goes even beyond the care of a nursing mother. He or she vindicates the vulnerable and the weak from the strong and mighty. In other words, the degradation of the environment God created is part of God's saving agenda. The entire creation groans and awaits the ultimate salvation (Rm 8:19–22). The difference between ecological stewardship and creation spirituality lies in the formers focus on the biblical ecological tenets and the employment the instrumentality of science while creation spirituality engages religion to interpret the import of the acknowledgement of science in the framework of the story of evolution (Kearns 1996:57, 61).

Some liberation theology advocates combining environmental justice with ecological justice emphasising that they are mutually dependent. Cone's (2000) environmental liberation theology is linked directly or indirectly to racism. He emphasises that advocacy on social injustice and anti-racists campaigns are futile if they are not invariably linked to anti-environmental degradation campaigns and advocacy. He highlights how people of colour are denied lands and discriminated against in the sharing of environmental sanitation projects and equipment. In this essay, the woman becomes the focus and the one receiving much effect of the end product of environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources. In most homes in Africa, women are responsible for the sustenance of the entire household, probably not in terms of financial provision only but also in terms of providing the raw materials and cooking for the entire families. The heat of the effect of environmental injustice is therefore heavy on the female species more than on their male counterparts. Environmental injustice is seen in the way humans have neglected the mandate given by God to care for the natural world which has resulted in damaging natural and environmental resources. Human activity has created climatic changes which has affected times and seasons resulting in low production of crops and other resources.

■ The effect of climate change

Climate change, one of the major effects of global warming threatens to disrupt the social, economic and ecological systems of our planet. The impacts of climate change are anticipated to become more severe and recurrent, even more so in sub-Saharan Africa (Jerneck 2018). Therefore, in order to promote a thriving and sustainable future, we need an 'all hands on deck' approach

where scientists and other stakeholders support religious communities in taking the necessary steps to ensure 'earth stewardship' (Hitzhusen & Tucker 2013). The subject of earth stewardship, evolving from a religious environmental response and thought process, has created an opportunity for religious communities and scientists to work towards a common goal. The attitudes and views that most people have of nature are to a large extent, shaped by their religious outlook and moral practices. Religion therefore has the power to bring about socio-ecological change by promoting the principles of earth stewardship to enhance ecosystem resilience and a positive response to climate change (Hitzhusen & Tucker 2013). However, religion as an element of development was not factored into discussions concerning sustainability until the onset of the new millennium (Basedau, Gobien & Prediger 2017). Climate change is acknowledged to be both a moral and ethical issue (Posas 2007; Tarusarira 2017). Though Science and Religion have often had difficulties in reaching a consensus, it is imperative that an alliance be formed between them and also with policy makers, and non-governmental organisations (Hitzhusen & Tucker 2013).

Two basic responses to climate change are adaptation and mitigation. Jerneck (2018:4) defined mitigation as 'the reduction of future climate change' and adaptation as 'adjusting to actual or expected climate effects'. 'The effects of climate on human society, and our ability to mitigate and adapt to them, are mediated by social factors, including gender' (World Health Organization [WHO] 2014:3). According to the WHO (2014) women are more vulnerable to climate change impacts and suffer higher risk than men in health and life expectancy. It is imperative that mitigation and adaptation processes provide opportunities to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Tackling the challenges posed by the changing climate from the perspective of gender would help curb unforeseen outcomes on social development and poverty eradication (Habtezion 2012).

■ Religious foundation for ecological issues

Studies exploring the role of religion in ecology began fervently in the 1960s and led to the creation of the disciplinary field of religion and ecology in the 1990s. Recently, increased partnerships between environmental organisations and faith communities have promoted the formation of religion-ecology groups (Hitzhusen & Tucker 2013). Religion is an institution that can be found in every human society. It is a unique attribute of humankind which stems from our identity as a three-fold being consisting of the physical, the social and the spiritual (Fatubarin & Alabi 2014). It plays a fundamental role in shaping people's perspective of the natural environment and instils in them ethics that guide human behaviour (Basedau et al. 2017; Hitzhusen & Tucker 2013). According to Mcleod and Palmer (2015):

[R]eligions may also provide leadership in initiating conservation projects, provide guidance on pursuing conservation objectives, and may seek to persuade members that each has a moral obligation to contribute to conservation. (p. 240)

Undeniably, religion is an important catalyst that can significantly speed up or slow down the process of sustainable development (Basedau et al. 2017).

Degradation and pollution of the environment that have resulted in ecological and sociological challenges, and threaten environmental sustainability, are proof of the declining environmental values among people (Fatubarin & Alabi 2014). Climate change impacts such as global warming, sea level rise, extreme weather events and many others have had a serious effect on coastal areas and low-lying coastal countries. These include several developing countries and small island states (Tarusarira 2017). The survival of many societies and of the planet's ecological system is at risk now more than ever. Though some organisations such as the United Nations (UN) are devising ways to help combat this problem, the fact remains that they, for the most part, ignored the role of religion and culture (Tarusarira 2017). Religion as a tool for dealing with ecological issues cannot be overlooked as most of the world's people view themselves as cultural and moral beings having spiritual aspirations and purposes (Hitzhusen & Tucker 2013).

The place of humans in nature and the actions one needs to take towards the environment is defined through religion as it teaches virtues such as humility, moderation and anti-materialism. It helps one acknowledge the natural world as sacred and encourages its protection (Mcleod & Palmer 2015). Kaunda (2016, cited in Mbiti 1990) states that:

[A]ccording to African people, man [*sic*] live in a religious universe, so that natural phenomena and objects [*including human beings*] are intimately associated with God... man's [*sic*] understanding of God is strongly coloured by the universe of which man is himself [*sic*] a part. Man [*sic*] sees in the universe not only the imprint but the reflection of God; and whether that image is marred or clearly focused and defined, it is nevertheless an image of God, the only image known in traditional African societies. (p. 48)

In the past, religions have been a powerful agent of transformation in political and environmental issues. About 80% of the world's population belongs to at least one of the 11 major faiths (Baha'i, Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism) and approximately 4 billion people have values entrenched in these faiths (Mcleod & Palmer 2015:240). The abolishing of the slave trade is a key example of the use of religion as a tool for political change. Christian activists initiated and organised the abolitionist movement. It certainly can be argued that the campaign against the atrocities of the slave trade was long-delayed. However, one cannot deny the fact that, without the contributions of the major leaders and spokesmen, which were based on Christian principles, the slave trade could not have been abolished in 1807. It proved to be a powerful political force.

Also, it left behind a legacy that gave birth to the powerful black Christian community (Walvin 2008:195).

When it comes to Christianity, there is the principle of earth stewardship where God put humans in charge of all his or her creation and gave them the mandate to rule and take care of it (Gn 1:26, 2:15). Colossians 3:23 tells Christians to do everything passionately as though they were doing it for God and not their fellow human. God will ask us to give an account of all our actions as described in Jesus's parable of the talents (Mt 25:14–30). In Leviticus 25:1–5, God gives Moses specific instruction on Mount Sinai about how to use the land given to them sustainably. God tells him to inform the Israelites to allow the land to rest for 1 year after they had used it for a period of 6 years. Also, in verses 24 and 25 of the same chapter, God tells Moses that the land was not to be sold permanently. The land belonged to God and the Israelites only resided in it as foreigners and strangers. There are many other scriptures that depict humankind as stewards of a world created by God. We are to use and care for the Earth because it is dear to its creator. However, some have argued that the 'dominion-over-nature' worldview of the Judeo-Christian belief system has had negative impacts on environmental attitudes in Western culture. Quoting the words of Lynn White 'Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen' (White 1967:1205).

Religion and spirituality are the framework or foundation for understanding the social, cultural, economic, material and political. In Africa, most cases where people have accepted or rejected developmental processes have religion as the underlying factor. It is key in shaping indigenous health, agriculture and environmental beliefs and practices (Tarusarira 2017). Despite the existence of peculiarities in the cultural and spiritual characteristics of the African people, the practice of their indigenous faith is rooted in the way they perceive, interact and experience their environment. Generally, there are two domains: the perceptible world of humans, animals and nature; and the unseen world of the spirits, ancestors, divinities and the supreme deity. These two intermingle to form one world where caring for the environment and the climate becomes an integral part of its development (Tarusarira 2017). The belief that certain natural sites are sacred has led to the protection of these habitats and inspires compassion towards ecosystems (Mcleod & Palmer 2015). For example: the belief that a certain forest is sacred means that it is protected from deforestation, thereby affecting the economic activity in that area (Tarusarira 2017).

In a case study done by Siwila (2015:138) about the Tonga people in the Gwembe valley (Zambia), a religious connection is drawn by her between the value of sacred sites and rituals, and their ecology. In her discussion, she explains the kind of tragic effect that the construction of the Kariba dam in

the 1950s had on the local people in that community. Siwila (2015) discloses that tremendous conflicts arose between the local people and the federal government over the construction of the dam, which led to a high number of deaths and the displacement of over 57 000 people from the lower Zambezi valley to the highlands. Those who decided to remain in the valley lost their lives to floods when the water was released. With time, those who had settled in the high lands discovered that the climate and environment did not support cultivation (sorghum and millet were their major crops) and livestock. Other reasons why the locals refused to move, in addition to the fact that they preferred that geographical setting, were unwillingness to abandon their shrines or the graves of their ancestors. Also, they wanted to be close to nyami, the god of the well-known Zambezi river (Siwila 2015:140, cited in Kaoma 2013). Conservation science provides an empirical approach in ensuring environmental sustainability such as identifying quantitative conservation goals. However, it is unable to give directions on how to value nature. In this regard, religion serves as the root of good ethics, addressing the duties, joys and responsibilities of how people can interact with each other, with the divine and with the natural world (Mcleod & Palmer 2015). Also, there is the need for religion to be seen as an important determining factor in terms of sustainable development choices.

■ God as a mother metaphor and images of the Earth as a mother

Rakoczy (2012, cited in Comblin 1989) stated:

God acts among human beings as a mother; the direction of the whole of human history demonstrates the motherhood of the Spirit. A paternalistic church has forgotten the motherhood of the Holy Spirit. (p. 396)

The Bible uses mothering images and metaphors to describe how God cares for his or her people. Such images include the mother bear and the mother bird, particularly the eagle. God is seen as the strong mother who shelters her offspring from disaster and calamity. The Almighty is presented as a shelter and a refuge. Such biblical texts include but are not limited to the following:

Keep me as the apple of the eye;
hide me in the shadow of thy wings,
⁹ from the wicked who despoil me,
my deadly enemies who surround me. (Ps 17:8; RSV)

¹² 'The Lord recompense you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!' (Rt 2:12; RSV)

⁴ he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
His faithfulness is a shield and buckler. (Ps 91:4; RSV)

God is seen as a human mother who cares for and protects her children. The mother has compassion for her children and is willing to go an extra mile in caring for them. God the creator has come to the level of his or her creation to care for, sustain and protect them. Like a woman travailing and giving birth and later being filled with compassion for the baby, she laboured to bring forth:

²⁷ All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time.

²⁸ When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. (Ps 104:27-28; NIV)

¹⁴ For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in travail,
I will gasp and pant. (Is 42:14; RSV)

¹³ As one whom his mother comforts,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. (Is 66:13; RSV)

¹⁵ ‘Can a woman forget her sucking child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you’. (Is 49:15; RSV)

¹³ Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the Lord has comforted his people,
and will have compassion on his afflicted.

¹⁴ But Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me,
my Lord has forgotten me’.

¹⁵ ‘Can a woman forget her sucking child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you’. (Is 49:13-15; RSV)

In most African traditional religions, the notion of God as a mother is not limited to matriarchal societies. Patriarchal societies also consider God as a woman when depicting the love, care and nurturing nature of God. In several Bantu languages such as Kiluba, no grammatical difference is seen when referring to the gender of God. An example is the term unena meaning ‘he or she’ speaks. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Bakongo ethnic group, which practices the matriarchal system refers to God explicitly as a ‘mother’ (Asante & Mazama 2008:288, 289). Other African cultures represent God as a dual being with female-male polarity signifying unity and equality. This unity-in-duality can be seen in Benin where God is given the name Mawu Lisa with Mawu signifying female (fertility, motherhood, life, gentleness) and Lisa signifying male (war, death, strength, toughness) (Brown & Mitchell 2010:146, 147). In Ghana, the Ga tribe addresses God as Ataa-Naa Nyorjmo which means ‘grandfather grandmother God’. Ataa means grandfather, Naa means grandmother and Nyorjmo means Supreme Being. Theologically speaking,

the Ga recognise Nyorjmo as playing the role of a father who protects and defends his people in times of trouble, and of a mother who is caring and loving (Adjei 2006).

The Akan people of Ghana refer to earth as a goddess and rank her second after the Supreme Being. The Asantes (a subset of the Akans) and other Akan areas believe Thursday to be her day of rest and hence refer to her as 'Asaase Yaa' (*Asaase* [Earth]; *Yaa* is name given to females born on Thursday). The Fantes (another subset of Akans) believe she rests on Friday and refer to her as 'Asaase Efua' (*Efua* is a name given to females born on Friday). Traditionally, these days are specially set aside for her by these tribes, and in the past, anyone found to have gone against this rule was punished, as there was fear that doom would befall the entire community (Frimpong 2011). Images and metaphors that portray the earth as a mother abound in indigenous societies throughout the world. Konare discusses the significance of the Yggdrasil tree in Germanic mythology which is esteemed by the ancient deities 'as a source of holiness and a symbol of life and power'. Humans were said to have been created from that tree contrary to the biblical view of the creation of the human beings from clay. However, both depictions clearly link the origin of humans to the earth (Konare 2011). Ethnic and indigenous societies symbolically depict Mother Earth as a nurturer and conserver of lives, and feminine qualities are also used in the Bible to represent transcendence. In traditional societies, the earth is often worshipped as a sustaining mother, source of fertility and provider of comfort. The analogy of Earth as a mother, our first object of attachment in the objective world, can be clearly understood in the way it nurtures us. The Earth provides us with resources (food, chemicals, wood) that satisfy all our needs in an almost infinite way (Konare 2011). Comparing Mother Earth's ability to care for its human dependent signified by the mandate given at creation to the reciprocal care demanded from humans to care for the earth we see a mutual relationship and interdependence in the picture. The benefits that humans derive from Mother Earth's caregiving ability partly or wholly depend on human's ability to care for and preserve the earth. Endangering the earth goes with a negative consequence of endangering human life. Sustainability of human lives is largely linked to environmental sustainability.

■ Environmental sustainability

The environment can be referred to as 'the surrounding of an organism in the place where it lives' (Fatubarin & Alabi 2014:2). This definition includes the natural or biological environment, and the other environments created by humans such as the socio-economic environment, built environment, political or governmental environment and the spiritual environment (Fatubarin & Alabi 2014).

All the different forms of environment interact with each other and with the organism living in them. Hence, it is important to consider how our actions in one environment affect the others to ensure sustainability, especially in the natural environment. The natural or biological environment is also termed as the ecological environment (Fatubarin & Alabi 2014). The World Commission on Environment and Development defines sustainability as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Wilkinson, Hill & Gollan 2001:1493). Fatubarin and Alabi (2014) emphasise how the advent of the 'modern man' has led to the degradation, pollution and over exploitation of the natural environment's resources. This has become a source of concern for scientists, especially with the current global challenge of climate change (Fatubarin & Alabi 2014). Climate change is said to be 'the greatest challenge ever faced collectively by humankind on the planet earth' (Fatubarin & Alabi 2014:4). Adaptation and mitigation are two key responses to climate change. According to Jerneck (2018), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines climate change adaptation as 'adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climate stimuli or their effects which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities' (Jerneck 2018:3).

Habtezion (2012:17) also defines mitigation as 'the actions taken to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions in order to minimise their effects on global climate change'. Some mitigation actions include investing in cost-effective and sustainable energy technologies, developing climate-friendly markets such as carbon trading, targets for concentrations of greenhouse gases and rationalised consumption and production patterns. Religion and culture can also be used as effective mitigation tools (Tarusarira 2017). In order to reverse the current environmental decline and ensure environmental security and sustainability, the following areas must be addressed: conservation of basic resources and natural environments with their wildlife; improvement of human health and the quality of human living environments and the promotion of greater harmony between mankind and nature (Vlek & Steg 2007).

In September 2015, the United Nations 2030 agenda was adopted during the 'UN Sustainable Development Summit' that took place in New York. The agenda is aimed at achieving global sustainable development and encompasses all three dimensions of sustainability – environment, social issues and economy. It includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their 169 targets which seek to eradicate poverty and hunger, realise human rights and achieve gender equality (Council of Europe 2014). The SDGs differ from the preceding millennium development goals in that they are integrated. In other words, the targets of individual SDGs emphasise the interlinkages between SDGs (Basedau et al. 2017). The SDGs are unique in the sense that 'no one is left behind'. It applies to all countries (rich, middle-income and poor) encouraging them to work to promote prosperity while protecting the planet (UN 2018).

■ The relationship between human survival and the survival of women

The impacts of climate change affect men, women and children across Africa differently with respect to locality, form and degree. Gender-based roles designed by societies and cultures have resulted in differences in vulnerability levels among male and female members of the community. Women are more likely to bear a greater brunt of the negative impacts of climate change, especially in terms of their assets and well-being (Habtezion 2012). Several studies show that the vulnerabilities that women face are not inherent but result from gender constructs laid out by society in the form of gendered divisions of resources (land, labour), authority and many others. However, information on the manner and degree to which climate change interacts with social inequality is very much downplayed in both policy and research (Jerneck 2018). According to the WHO, women suffer more from droughts, floods, heavy rains, heatwaves, water scarcity and other climate change impacts. They are also more prone to higher health and life expectancy risks. Moreover, women have limited access to key information on crop husbandry practices and weather patterns (Jerneck 2018; WHO 2014). To make climate responses more effective and sustainable, both women and men should be involved in the mitigation and adaptation processes. Particularly, capitalising on the role of women in climate responses can lead to greater returns in sustainable development and help acknowledge the links between climate change, health care and gender equality (Habtezion 2012; Karanja n.d.).

Because women play a crucial role in realising all of the SDGs, decision makers and development partners need to plan, finance and execute climate responses from a gender perspective at all levels and in all fields (Habtezion 2012; UN Women 2016). A few selected SDGs that outline the involvement of women in attaining sustainable development are discussed further in the text.

SDG 2 addresses 'Zero hunger'. About 90% of our household meals are prepared by women. Unfortunately, women and girls are the first to go without food or receive smaller portions during difficult times (UN Women 2016:6). Moreover, 70% of small-scale farmers especially in sub-Saharan Africa are women. Unfortunately, most funding is often channelled towards men (Karanja n.d.).

SDG 3 aims at 'the right to health'. Adequate and efficient healthcare is the basic right of every human. However, because of gender bias, women are more likely to fall sick while less likely to receive care for reasons such as poverty, or social conventions that keep them at home. There is therefore the need to develop healthcare systems that fully address the needs of women and girls in an outstanding and efficient way (UN Women 2016:8).

SDG 4 addresses ‘the right to education’. Education is a tool that can be used to help improve the welfare of people. It also adds to social and economic growth. About 50% of recorded economic growth in Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development countries over the past five decades has taken place because of improvement in education. Approximately half of that is attributed to increased enrolment of women in higher levels of education, and equal number of years men and women spend in school (UN Women 2016:10).

SDG 5 talks about ‘gender equality’. Equality is the right of women in all aspects of life. Empowerment of women and eradicating inequality is also necessary in realising other SDGs. It must be planted in every legal system and maintained in both laws and legal practices (UN Women 2016:12).

SDG 6 aims at ‘ensuring water and sanitation for all’. Pollution has resulted in the reduction of water quality. In addition, the effects of climate change such as drought means that women have to travel further, spending more time and energy searching for clean and safe water for their household. Within a day, women in about 25 sub-Saharan African countries spend 16 million hours collecting water. They do this mostly at the expense of school or paid work. Not only that, they may also develop potential health risks from continuously carrying heavy burdens over long distances (UN Women 2016:14).

The greater percentage of the world’s poorest people are women. Also, women depend more on natural resources that are highly subject to climate change, for sustenance. Therefore, promoting gender equality in development policies will have a huge impact on the economy. For instance, if female farmers were entitled to the same level of resources (such as money, land and machinery), their agricultural production output would increase by 20% to 30%; increasing national agricultural production by 2.5%-4%. This in turn could reduce the number of hungry people by 12%-17% (Habtezion 2012:9). When it comes to climate change adaptation, women are at a higher risk and face greater challenges than men by reason of the roles and responsibilities they carry out. Habtezion (2012) categorised the vulnerabilities that women face as follows: Inequity in terms of access to available resources between the rich and the poor. Resources are needed to respond to climate change effects.

According to Habtezion (2012), this places the poor at a major disadvantage as:

[T]hey do not have access to the technology needed (improved crop varieties, utilities, [...]) to adapt to a severe change in climatic conditions. Therefore, poor women are twice as much affected because they make up the majority of the poor. In addition, climate change also exacerbates existing gender inequalities. Poverty, poor access to resources and information, and the lack of decision-making power are the main factors that add up to the distinctive vulnerability of women. (pp. 12, 26)

There is discrimination against women when it comes to access to resources and property acquisition. With the majority of the world's poor being women, they do not have adequate resources to respond effectively to the negative outcomes of climate change (Habtezion 2012):

Women still face gender-based cultural and legal constraints to ownership of land and access to natural resources, credit and so on. The lack of such critical assets renders them disproportionately vulnerable to the ill effects of climate change. (p.12)

There are existing socio-cultural barriers that put females at a higher risk of exposure to the effects of climate change (Habtezion 2012):

Socially constraining norms and values often lead to increased vulnerability to climate change for women and girls. It is believed that women and children are 14 times more likely to die than men during disasters'. (p. 12)

An example is seen in Zimbabwe where solar cookers were introduced to the women so as to take away the burden of collecting firewood. Even though this was an innovative step that would have made life a lot easier for the women and protected their well-being, the project failed. The failure was because of opposition from their men who did not want the women to learn a new technology that they were unaware of (Ranjith & Pius 2017:23).

Women are key stakeholders when it comes to managing and protecting our natural resources. However, when decisions on how to use these resources are being made, women are often ignored and not allowed to play any significant roles (Turquet, Watt & Sharman 2008). Women are essential to achieving all of the SDGs. Many of the SDG targets focus on women's equality and empowerment, and acknowledge it as part of the solution. Women have a right to equality in all areas and this must be the foundation of legal systems and laws (UN Women 2016).

■ Environmental survival and human survival

According to Kaunda (2016:194) 'the environment is a place where human intellect and creation harmonizes in order to articulate what it means to be a community of created beings'. The African way of producing knowledge involves the fusing of human intellect with the environment, thereby resulting in the realisation of ideas. In other words, both human intellect and environment influence each other. The term 'sustainable development' usually refers to the economic, social and environmental components of the future survival of humankind. Environmental sustainability is a fundamental subject for all human societies. It is necessary that countries maintain the quality of their natural resources, ecosystems and the diversity of plant and animal species, not forgetting the human settlements (Vlek & Steg 2007).

Estimations by the IPCC suggest that the impacts of climate change are widespread and diverse (Habtezion 2012). It has implications on habitats, wildlife, soil productivity, coastal zones, human settlements and several ecosystems (Karanja n.d.). There is also a high possibility that the adverse effects of climate change could retard the advancement of sustainable development (Habtezion 2012). It is undeniable that mankind has achieved a lot and made great progress through Science and technology. However, industrialisation and modernisation brought with them the power to transform our environment on a global scale (McElroy 1999). According to Wilkinson et al. (2001), data from the IPCC shows that there is a continuous relationship between the burning of fossil fuel, carbon dioxide emissions and global warming. Science alone cannot solve this problem; we need a moral approach. There are both ethical and technical issues that must be addressed in order to take a responsible course of action towards the restoration of our environment (McElroy 1999).

The concept of environmental sustainability encompasses the following features: the maintenance, renewal and the ethics of balance between current economic pressures and the future needs of the environment. To achieve the aforementioned dimensions, it is imperative that we exchange our dominion-over-nature ideology for earth stewardship to ensure environmental balance (Wilkinson et al. 2001). The rate at which the environment is being degraded by human activities is alarming and affects not only our present life but that of the future generations (Mcleod & Palmer 2015). Most developing countries are already experiencing low and erratic rainfall patterns. This means lower agricultural production as they mostly rely on rainfall in agriculture. Africa is projected to be among the hardest hit continents by climate change impacts. Increasing sea levels, erosion of coastal lands, water shortages and rise in the incidence of malaria are but a tip of the iceberg (Habtezion 2012). Wilkinson et al. (2001) emphasise the role that governments, markets and corporations have to play in the pursuit of sustainable development. Governments need to develop environmental standards and regulatory frameworks that will ensure the preservation of production inputs and the quality of life, while markets and corporations must move towards more environmentally friendly production methods and products. This creates opportunities for innovations that will lower the total cost of a product and/or improve its value and productivity (Wilkinson et al. 2001).

■ The role of religion or religious leaders in environmental sustainability

Lynn White, a well-known historian delivered a speech before the 'American Association for the Advancement of Science' on the role of religious thought on environmental concern. In his speech, he argued that the Judeo-Christian

belief system promotes a ‘dominion-over-nature’ ideology by humans which negatively affects the environmental attitudes of people in the Western culture. He mentioned that Christianity was the ‘Root of Our Ecological Crisis’ in the middle of the 20th century and that it fostered a sense of entitlement over the earth and its resources. White’s hypothesis sparked a heated debate on the role of religion in environmental concern. Many have counter-argued that Judeo-Christian doctrines encourage their followers to respect and protect the sanctity of nature. They promote environmental stewardship ethics through the belief that God gave human beings the mandate of caring for all of his or her creation, including the natural environment (Arbuckle & Konisky 2015; Norgaard 2002; White 1967).

Several leaders of religious faiths such as Pope Francis, Pope Benedict XVI, the Dalai Lama and Archbishops of Canterbury have pressed for environmental stewardship (Mcleod & Palmer 2015). Pope Francis pointed out the fact that the world’s environmental crisis is equally a moral and spiritual challenge and not merely a scientific, political and economic problem in his encyclical *Laudato Si’* (the second letter he sent to all the Catholic churches) (Tarusarira 2017). Because of the degree and density of our current environmental crisis, it is imperative that collaborations among religions and other domains of society, including science, economics, education and public policy be established (Hitzhusen & Tucker 2013). The participation, commitment and support of important stakeholders such as key decision makers and leaders (religious, conservation and government) are necessary for effective partnerships in the dialogue on environmental conservation (Mcleod & Palmer 2015:247). Some examples of organisations that promote synergy between religion and ecology include: The Alliance for Religions and Conservation, Green Faith, Earth Ministry, Scientists’ Speakers Bureau for earth stewardship Outreach to Faith Communities and the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture (Hitzhusen & Tucker 2013). Organisations such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) sponsor environmental outreach and educational programmes with the goal of increasing environmental awareness among religious communities. Also, some protestant denominations such as the Episcopal, United Methodist and Presbyterian Churches actively support environmental stewardship (Arbuckle & Konisky 2015). Köhrsen (2015) pointed out three potential functions of religion in contributing to sustainability: (1) campaigning and intermediation in the public sphere, (2) materialisation of transitions, and (3) dissemination of values and worldviews that empower environmental attitudes and action.

Campaigning and intermediation in the public sphere: Religious leaders are able to reach the public through statements and activities that support environmental development. In Ghana, for example, religious leaders can take advantage of the fact that most politicians and other policy makers like to visit churches and mosques, especially during election periods, to highlight

the need for collaborations to promote Earth stewardship and development. Materialisation of transitions: This can be achieved through the involvement of religious actors in projects that relate to sustainability. For instance, churches can organise clean-up exercises in their neighbourhood and other locations, while educating the community on the importance of maintaining a clean environment. Dissemination of values and worldviews that empower environmental attitudes and action: Through ethical teachings about the environment and emphasis on the responsibility given to man by God to take care of his or her creation, church leaders can orient their members towards making lifestyle changes that will benefit the Earth (Koehrsen 2017; Köhrsén 2015) (Table 4.1).

In Nigeria, Christian and Muslim faith-based organisations (FBOs) contribute largely to sustainable development (Table 4.2). According to Ogbonnaya (2012), these FBOs:

[W]hich are over 46 000 engage in charitable works for poverty reduction. They work to promote progress, and serve as agents of development, providing health and educational services through their hospitals, clinics and maternity, schools and colleges, vocational training centres, seminaries and universities. They also own economic institutions such as bookshops, hotels, banks, insurance, mass media and ICT companies. (p. 10)

TABLE 4.1: Examples of religious engagement in ecological restoration.

Project	Description
Congregations Caring for Watersheds and Wildlife	Project that brings together both ecologists and religious leaders to support the restoration of watersheds and wildlife environments.
Sugar Creek Project, NE Ohio	Scientists collaborated with Amish farmers to improve waterways and manure management. The methods they used are now models for 21 neighbouring counties.
Marianist Environmental Education Center	A Catholic environmental education community created the 'Mount St John Nature Preserve' (a Natural Landmark in Ohio), and also carries out several community projects.

Source: Adapted from Hitzhusen and Tucker (2013).

TABLE 4.2: Examples of religious organisations and the projects they undertake.

Religious organisation	Projects
Christian Rural and Urban Development of Nigeria (CRUDAN)	Collaborates with government and other FBOs to advance rural and urban development, particularly in areas of agriculture, water and sanitation, micro-finance and livelihoods development and training
Justice and Peace Caritas Organization (JDPC)	Coordination of programmes involving social welfare, rural, urban and water development, etc. They sink boreholes, train police and prison officers, grant small-scale loans to farmers and traders, provide housing, build hospitals and schools, advocate for widows, women, unjustly imprisoned, etc.
Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN)	Works with the Nigerian government through various programmes. FOMWAN aims to promote the intellectual and economic empowerment of Muslim women, the rehabilitation of children and orphans, the emboldening of young girls to embrace education, good personal hygiene, among others

Source: Adapted from Ogbonnaya (2012:11-12).

FBO, faith-based organisation.

■ Conclusion

According to Reuther (2012), ecofeminism (the relation between sexism and ecological exploitation) can be split into two levels. The first being the cultural-symbolic level and the second being the socio-economic level. She proposes that the former is an ideological superstructure that reflects and supports the second. In other words, the method used in the oppression of women itself is entrenched in a larger patriarchal hierarchical system of priestly and warrior-king rule over natural resources and people to control wealth, power and knowledge (Ruether 2012:22). Ecofeminism can therefore be described as a challenging multifaceted and multilocated structure that confronts systems of patriarchy, race and class and seeks to end all forms of oppression of women and the environment (Chemhuru 2019:10; Siwila 2014:132). This structure has provided us the needed resources to put into action our hopes for change (Rakoczy 2012:395). Using ecofeminism as a tool in environmental ethics, the environment and the various environmental problems facing the world can be seen as a feminist issue. Because the problems of injustice facing women and nature are similar, they can be addressed using a similar framework (Chemhuru 2019:10).

Posas (2007:32) referred to a statement by the IPCC saying that 'decisions being made about climate change are value judgments determined through socio-political processes, taking into account considerations such as development, equity, and sustainability, as well as uncertainties and risk'. Climate change responses therefore need to be tackled in a holistic way. Mitigating and adaptation to environmental change must employ technological solutions while also dealing with developmental and social issues such as food insecurity, ill-health, inequality and poverty. This will ensure a more effective method for promoting sustainability and development (Jerneck 2018).

Decision makers and development partners must implement policy and research on adaptation initiatives that take into account the influence of gender in small-scale agriculture, distribution of rights, risks and responsibilities. It is key for women to be integrated into the decision-making process in all sectors (Habtezion 2012; Jerneck 2018). Furthermore, neither religion nor science alone can promote the implementation of earth stewardship. Hence, all stakeholders such as governments, scientists and religious leaders must work together to achieve this. Although scientific and religious communities have not always viewed each other as allies, recent decades have seen an increase in successful partnerships among the two (Hitzhusen & Tucker 2013).

Religions can serve as a beacon of hope to the conservation movement. Through collaborations between the conservation community and the faith of people worldwide, we can gradually halt the destruction of the environment and create a future for posterity where respect and care for the environment

encourages responsible choices (Mcleod & Palmer 2015). Partnerships between scientists and religious groups have a higher chance of being successful when it supports both environmental solutions and action on other social problems such as the impacts on indigenous communities (Mcleod & Palmer 2015). Climate change approaches in Africa must take into consideration the influence of African religion and the religious significance attached to ecological sites. This will encourage the people to be open to new ideas and processes. Integration of African religion in climate change efforts shows respect and acknowledgement of the religious beliefs of the people. This will help to increase the success of climate change campaigns (Tarusarira 2017; Siwila 2015). The dialogue on sustainable development will continue to yield flawed results unless religion is included as a factor with regards to globalisation, progress and development of people (Ogbonnaya 2012):

The neglect of religion as an ordering, uniting and dividing factor in a number of influential interpretations of globalization is a major cause of misunderstanding and a studied blindness regarding what is going on in the world. (p. 2)

In conclusion, it can be observed that religion plays a major role in earth stewardship – God's mandate to humankind during creation was to manage the land; God's mandate to take dominion and manage the non-human resources; God's provision to humans to live from the environment. All these demand caring for the environment to enable human survival. In addition, almost all stakeholders are partly or fully religious – politicians, social workers, land managers, men, women, children and the like.

Environmental sustainability is a worthwhile endeavour. In order to ensure a sustainable environment, we as humans need to protect the environment. By doing so, we ultimately enjoy good health, good life and longevity. Human survival is directly linked to environmental survival as humans live out of environmental resources. Environmental resources on the other hand survive on human behaviour and attitudes. Currently, there is the need for a change in our attitudes and behaviour. Religious leaders play a role in attitudinal change and can do so through advocacy and education towards environmental sustainability. They must be sensitive to environmental issues because God is interested in environmental stewardship.

Protection of the woman's well-being is protection of the entire human race. Also, protection of women is linked to protection of the environment. In the same way, protecting the environment is linked to protecting women. In a nutshell, a healthy environment produces healthy humans.

Inclusive environmental-friendly strategies: A study of women with disabilities in Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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■ Introduction

Pollution has been described as (Obinna 2017):

[A] human activity that releases materials and substances or energy into the environment being potentially hazardous to humans and plants, causing them harm, damaging the ecological structure, and altering the use of the environment. (p. 10)

By its nature, therefore, pollution has devastating consequences for all living things and includes socio-economic hardships and health hazards for the affected population with women and children bearing the brunt of the impact

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of pollution (Kraayenoord 2008). The WHO estimates that air pollution affects over 93% of the global population and results in about 7 million premature deaths yearly (WHO 2020).

Persons with disabilities, who make up 15% of the world population, are often confronted with multiple levels of difficulties, diseases and challenges in the face of environmental pollution (Kraayenoord 2008). Beyond the medical concerns of pollution are the secondary sociological and psychological effects that could result in the inability of persons affected by pollution to perform or function in a manner that society considers 'normal' or acceptable (eds. Brandt & Pope 1997).

However, society's response to pollution often fails to include these secondary effects or persons with disabilities, not to mention women with disabilities who are doubly stigmatised on account of their gender and disability. Women with disabilities, therefore, adopt self-sustaining strategies and support systems to cope with the peculiar impact of the secondary effects of pollution that affects them because of disability.

This chapter draws on an ongoing ethnographic fieldwork among women with disabilities in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, in Niger Delta, Nigeria. It examines the impact of air pollution, particularly the black soot, on women with disabilities in Port Harcourt. Research activities for this chapter included semi-structured interviews, interactive sessions and participant observation by including 10 women with disabilities who were aged 25-40 years. All research participants identified themselves as Christians. The chapter also benefits from the lived experience of the author who has a home in Port Harcourt, Rivers State and has first-hand knowledge of the challenges of pollution in the city.

This chapter examines some of the sociological and psychological challenges that women with disabilities face from the impact of pollution and how these challenges further exclude them from community spaces. It demonstrates that women with disabilities face challenges incidental to their disabilities and gender, and seeks to unveil the invisibility of women with disabilities in examining their peculiar experiences with the black soot environmental pollution. This chapter is a call for collaboration with women living with various types of disabilities as they challenge their exclusion and seek participation in environmental response actions.

■ Background

On a dry morning in November 2016, residents of Port Harcourt noticed a black substance that settled and formed thick layers on all surfaces called 'black soot'. It comprised odourless tiny particles that floated in the air and were visible only on surfaces. Humans, animals, equipment, vehicles and floors

or grounds were not spared. One government official stated his perplexity at this mysterious substance (Onukwugha 2018):

In the morning, your car is black. [...] in the night, the floor is black. [...] you begin to wonder what is happening to your lungs? What is happening to your children? What is the impact of these things on the long-term? (n.p.)

While the soot defaced surfaces and gave the city a dark skyline, it had no immediate effect on the health of people who inhaled this poor quality of air, causing fear as to what the long-term consequences could possibly be. Nnimmo Bassey, Nigeria's Livelihood Award winner and Environmental Justice Advocate said this of the devastating effects of pollutants (Nnimmo 2018):

The Niger Delta is so scarred, so polluted today that what we have on our hand is an environmental emergency, no less. Our air, water and land are all polluted. We breathe and our nostrils are blackened by soot. (n.p.)

The Niger Delta is Nigeria's oil-producing region with an estimated production of almost 3 million barrels of oil daily (Fawole 2016). About 80% of Nigeria's annual earning is dependent on oil production and export. Yet it is also one of the most under-developed areas of the nation with legal and illegal oil explorations causing oil spills and gas flares both of which are detrimental to the health of all creation (Fubara-Manuel 2014a). It is estimated that the Niger Delta has over 300 flare sites within the region making it a 'prominent source of [...] soot (predominantly black carbon)' (Fawole 2016).

Flares are a result of the activities conducted by oil and gas industries in the Niger Delta. There are six states in the south-south region of the Niger Delta, of which Rivers State is one. The capital of Rivers State, Port Harcourt, has an estimated population of about 6 million people. Until the pollution crisis, Port Harcourt was regarded as one of the clean cities in Nigeria and an enviable holiday resort for many. Its green sceneries and well-planned city layout gave it the deserved name as the 'Garden City' of Nigeria. It was and is still being regarded as the headquarters of the oil-rich Niger Delta with international oil multi-national companies having their administrative head offices in Port Harcourt.

Port Harcourt has many flare sites belonging to multi-national oil exploration companies, local illegal artisanal refining groups and government operatives responsible for burning down the illegal refining sites.²⁰

Environmental experts assert that the emission from these illegal refineries scattered across the rivers and creeks in River State is a major contributor for the formation of the black soot. Also, to stop this illegal refining of petroleum products, national government security agencies such as the Joint Military Task Force burn identified illegal refining sites sending fumes from the destruction

20. See https://eugeneabels.com/s/The-Port-Harcourt-Clean-Air-Summit-2018_Dr-Giandom_Lead-Paper_docx.pdf.

into the air as pollutants in the form of black soot. According to the governor of Rivers State, Nyesom Wike, when the Task Force destroys illegal refining sites without safety measure, they contribute to the black soot that affects the state. Port Harcourt is most affected by the soot in the Niger Delta region (Onukwugha 2018). Sources of soot in the Niger Delta include 'gas flares, illegal refineries, the burning of illegal refineries and crude oil, burning of oil spills by incompetent contractors and the burning of sundry wastes' (Nnimmo 2017).

While there has been a public outcry by the residents of Port Harcourt, and several activists detailing the fears of the anticipated medical hazards of the black soot, government's action to stop the continuous causes of the black soot has been inadequate. As such, the air quality in the city is said to be one of the 10 most hazardous in the world.²¹ A study by the Public Health and Disease Control Department of the Rivers State Ministry of Health showed a notable rise in respiratory, skin and reproductive health conditions of assessed residents because of exposure to soot. This is besides the health predictions that the residents of Port Harcourt are expected to suffer cancerous and non-cancerous effects from the soot in the atmosphere, as well as diseases traceable to respiratory, asthmatic and cardiovascular infections.²²

In April 2018, Health of Mother Earth Foundation, in collaboration with other civil society organisations in Port Harcourt, undertook a peaceful march to the Rivers State Government House, State Office of the Department of Petroleum Resources and the State Assembly complex. They demanded that the government of Rivers State (Nnimmo 2018):

[/]initiate a 'street by street public health awareness campaign' on the soot issue, investigate the issue (of soot) and determine the sources of the pollution and ensure that the polluters pay for the menace and in addition to putting in place a supplementary budget for research for the purpose of determining the extent of impacts on residents, adequate compensation from organisations and persons whose activities have resulted to the two-year old soot downpour, with the aim of halting it. (n.p.)

In August 2019, after several petitions to national and international bodies, another non-governmental organisation, Extra Step Initiative and Eugene Abels filed a suit against the Federal Government and its agencies 'for the enforcement of the fundamental rights to life and to a general satisfactory environment favourable to their development' (#StopTheSoot Petition to the United Nations n.d.). Unfortunately, these noble acts of advocacy do not seem to mainstream the peculiar concerns of women or disability. They often do not go beyond the health concerns and they do not consider the emotional trauma of dealing with the black soot. As in other society's response to challenges, issues of gender and disability are excluded from environmental issues.

21. See <https://eugeneabels.com/s/Public-Health-Soot-in-PH.pdf>.

22. See <https://eugeneabels.com/s/Public-Health-Soot-in-PH.pdf>.

■ Conceptualising disability and gender

The term ‘disability’ is a contested concept (Nwokorie & Devlieger 2019). The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in its Preamble recognises (Grue 2019):

[7]hat disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in the society on an equal basis with others. (p. 3)

While it has been argued that this is no specific description for disability, it is acknowledged that the CRPD’s description allows for a broad contextualised understanding of disability especially when viewed from the perspective of the persons with disabilities (Grue 2019).

Section 57 of the *Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018* of Nigeria provides two interpretations for persons with disabilities (ReliefWeb n.d.):

1. ‘a person who has [...] any limitation due to weakness or significantly decreased endurance so that *she or he* cannot perform *her or his* everyday routine, living and working without significantly increased hardship and vulnerability to everyday obstacles and hazards’.
2. ‘a person with long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which in interaction with various barriers may hinder full and effective participation in society on equal basis with others’ (n.p.)

Like the UN CRPD, the Nigerian understanding of disability recognises the fluidity of society’s actions and barriers that cause exclusion as experienced by persons with disabilities.

Samuel Kabue (2014) describes disability from the perspective of persons with disabilities as a societal limitation or restriction of activity with little or no consideration of those with physical impairments thus hindering them from participating in societal activities.

Kabue’s description of disability, and also those by Nigeria and CRPD, aligns with the social model of disability that places on society the burden of dismantling physical, environmental and social barriers or structures that disable persons with various types of impairments, whether visible or invisible. Unfortunately, the actions of the Nigerian state seem more akin to the medical and religio-cultural model of disability that sees persons with disabilities as personally responsible for their disability as a direct consequence of impairment (Etieyibo & Omiegbe 2016). As such, the reality in Nigeria is that society’s response towards mainstreaming disability in its policies and strategies is still inadequate. Persons with disabilities are therefore expected to make personal extraordinary efforts to overcome obstacles that keep them from active inclusion and participation in the society (Wendell 1997).

Women with disabilities in this study acknowledge inadequate inclusion of disability in public discourse but they also recognise the impact of the absence of gender mainstreaming in much of societal response strategies indicating that much of the practical challenges to women are often not addressed. Gender mainstreaming has been generally used to refer to an intentional act of incorporating gender in much of society's discourse. It is a more 'general acceptance of the importance of gender as an explanatory and analytic category and an acknowledgement of its relevance' in society (Bradley 2012). Bradley further refers to gender as the complicated relationship between men and women that often includes issues of reproduction and divisions of labour (Bradley 2012). But gender, like disability, is seen as a contested and evolving concept.

For this chapter, therefore, gender is described as a social construct that is unfixed and varying across cultures and peoples. It is about the relationship between men and women and how society appropriates power, duties and expectations to each gender. It is therefore within the lived experiences of a people that gender dynamics are revealed. And because much of society views the female gender as lesser and second-class, the female gender is susceptible to 'gender discrimination' when compared to the male gender (Bradley 2012). Again, this is contextual but while many societies are positively evolving because of male involvement in gender equality in what is termed 'masculinity transformation', many other societies are still reeling under patriarchy and the subordination of women. This means that gender mainstreaming is still a much sought-after strategy for most.

If women's concerns are lacking, then the concerns of women with disabilities are absent as well. This may not be unrelated to stigma occasioned by gender discrimination and disability-exclusion informed by religious and cultural stereotypes (Etieyibo & Omiegbe 2016). Yet culture and religion are significant players in the lived experiences of African women with or without disability.

Embedded in Christian and African indigenous traditions is a patriarchal system that mostly informs and encourages women's domestication. The stereotypes of women as unequal and inferior to men, within religious and traditional domain, enable exclusion of the woman from the place of power and authority. Within the Christian tradition, women are 'systematically excluded or defined as inferior' (Ishewood 2010:427-442). Although the African indigenous concept of community is usually perceived as 'inclusive and embracing the totality of creation', women still struggle to find their rightful place (Tofa 2016). Increasingly, therefore, this struggle manifests in African women challenging and subtly rejecting these patriarchal norms in creative acts of survival. Women continue to create safe spaces of engaging with their realities within the limits of their power optimising new forms of power within and without the gender roles.

■ Impact of pollution on women with disabilities

The assumptions of this chapter supported by both literature and the daily realities of the women that I interviewed are three-fold. The first is that men and women are ‘socially constructed gendered beings’ with societal-imposed roles that are neither inevitable nor necessarily natural. The second is that because disability is a stigmatised condition, coping with disability is more difficult for women who are already stigmatised on account of gender. And thirdly, while there are issues common to all women with or without disability, women with disabilities experience double oppression that comes from both their gender and disability which makes them (women with disabilities) a distinct oppressed group. The consequence of these assumptions is that gender and disability place women with disabilities more at risk both socially and financially (Kamba 2013; Osukwu 2013; Philpott 1994; Piotrowski & Snell 2007; Wicks 1990).

When research into environmental issues such as pollution occurs, it rarely goes beyond health and medical implications leaving out the sociological and psychological impacts that this chapter focuses on. This does not infer that this author diminishes the impact of the black soot pollution on the health of persons, with or without disability, who are exposed to pollutants. It is not possible to do so because evidence suggests that air pollution could cause severe health problems and increase in mortality rate of the affected population (Fawole 2016).

Newspapers in Port Harcourt are awash with warnings of health hazards as a consequence of inhalation of the black soot (Onukwugha 2018):

And over a long period of time, [...] it results to chronic respiratory conditions that can end up as malignancy or even kill the individual.

[...] Hydrocarbons after prolong [sic] exposure can predispose to cancer, [...] other long lasting conditions ... such as infertility.

[...] But in children, the effect can be unpredictable, and if care is not taken the child could die from asphyxia. (n.p.)

These warnings neither provide adequate information on preventive measures nor the time duration of exposure to the pollutants before potential health effects set in. Added to this is the fear that persons with long-term health conditions and those with compromised immune systems are most vulnerable to be affected by poor air quality (Obinna 2017).

Persons (men and women) whose disabilities are caused by prolonged illnesses or whose limited functionality is occasioned by chronic muscular deficiencies understand this fear. During an interview conducted on 20 November 2019, Angel Vule, a woman living with disability, stated:

I am still battling with my health. New troubles every day. How will this black soot affect me now or tomorrow, I don't know. Even the government is confused, asking us to help them find the soot, *Na wao [it is terrible]!* (Angel Vule pers. comm., 20 November 2019)

Although this fear is not specific to persons with disabilities, the envisaged effect on those who are susceptible to illnesses or who have chronic conditions is frightening for women with disabilities. More troubling to the research participants is the fact that there are yet no stipulated signs or prognosis to watch out for as the immediate effects of the poisonous substance being daily inhaled.

That persons with visible or invisible disabilities experience 'higher rates of non-fatal injury' from environmental disasters has been noted although not scientifically proven (Leff et al. 2010). However, it has also been noted that persons with disabilities are more likely to experience social, physical, psychological and emotional trauma that could be related to inexplicable factors in physical environments (Leff et al. 2010). A lesson from HIV response is taking seriously the social dimensions of an issue for an effective intervention to take place. At the moment, the advice by the Rivers State Ministry of Health to maintain proper hygiene falls in the face of the fact that the pollutant is in the air and it is inhaled in the course of breathing; therefore maintaining hygienic condition does not stop the black soot from settling. However, maintaining hygienic conditions, through frequent washing of the hands, is not as easy for women with disabilities who struggle with inaccessible facilities and gender-based expectations of sanitation.

As stated earlier, the black soot falls in tiny particles without any smell or immediate medical effect. It settles quietly on surfaces and is inhaled unconsciously during the natural act of breathing. A noticeable presence of black soot is in the blackened surfaces that in turn makes everything dirty. One research participant shared her personal challenge with the black soot:

I am too busy trying to get clean. I am constantly covered with soot. My entire body is soot itself. How do I get clean when my hands, with which I use to move is black as the soot itself? (N. Stanely pers. comm., 20 November 2019)

She was reacting to the caution issued by the Rivers State Ministry of Environment that Port Harcourt residents should constantly wash their hands and keep their environment clean. In response to this caution, a woman with disability posted a photo on social media of a woman in the wheelchair trying to but unable to reach the wash basin to clean her hands. Accessibility for the disabled is almost non-existent in many buildings in Port Harcourt and persons with disabilities face the difficulty of movements because of physical barriers.

Another woman said:

Going to wash my hands all the time was not funny. Once my hands are black, I need to wash and movement is a big deal because sometimes, I am so tired to move but I still manage to wash my hands(F. Etim pers. comm., 21 November 2019)

So, getting the soot out of the hands, something easily done by others becomes a herculean task and matters more to women with disabilities because of supposedly feminine needs for hygiene and society's expectation for the woman to be clean. For some, looking 'dirty with black soot' was not good for their businesses which in turn adversely affected their income and financial independence. As with many women with disabilities, poverty is a common challenge because of difficulty with getting employment. They are 'significantly more likely to be unemployed than men with disabilities or women without disabilities' (Wicks 1990). This was especially the case for those who were traders and had to deal with keeping themselves and their market stalls clean.

Another woman mentioned the 'stress' of keeping her house and herself clean. 'The surfaces are constantly dirty. I am dirty. A disabled woman is bad enough now I am talking about a dirty disabled woman', she said with a chuckle. So, keeping clean for a woman whose culturally informed gender-role is to be clean becomes impossible and adds to the emotional trauma of being unable to meet's society expectations because of disability. Women with disabilities speak of different struggles for acceptance. To be accepted as women, notwithstanding the imposed gender norms but to also be accepted as 'able' despite the effects of disability.

It has often been said that a person's appearance does not and should not be used to judge one's abilities or lack of it. But that is not always the case. Often, society's opinion of a healthy body image and positive sexual identity does not include disability (Peuravaara 2013; Piotrowski & Snell 2006). Women in this study know their bodies are different because of disability when compared to the bodies of those without visible disabilities. But they also know that their self-esteem is more affected by societal views and environmental barriers than by the disability itself. Self-esteem then becomes erroneously equated to self-image. Studies in gender and disability point to the fact that when women with disabilities are unable to form close friendships and intimate relationships on account of their disability or the effects of disability, they are often more susceptible to sexual abuse, depression and isolation (Piotrowski & Snell 2007:3-17).

Two blind women speak of the frustration with the black soot. The blind person does not see the soot because of sight impairment. They cannot smell the soot because the soot presents no smell. They know there is a problem because people say so and continuously point out that their hands and noses need cleaning:

I did not know there was a problem in the air. There was no odour. I did not get sick. I heard on the radio and read in the newspapers. Now, I rely on my sighted family members to tell me where to clean and when to clean it. (N. Franklin pers. comm., 21 November 2019)

She worries when she goes out; whether she is clean enough or whether she should touch a surface or sit on one. And because she does not know the extent of the dirt because of the soot on her, she says she prefers to stay indoors. This self-isolation prevents her participation in the social and religious settings of the community. It also affects her self-esteem as she is unable to deal with an aspect of the soot that may seem insignificant to others.

Few studies have taken the relationship between disability identity and self-esteem seriously. So, although self-esteem is a learned attribute and could derive from a variety of traits and activities, evidence indicates that 'stigma can threaten self-esteem' (Nario-Redmond et al. 2013). Women in this study speak of the stigma induced by disability and gender as being made worse by 'dirty hands, dirty feet and dirty body'.

Another woman who moves with the aid of a wheelchair mentions how her house is full of markings from the wheels of her mobile chair. She explains:

When I wheel inside my house, it is as though I am still outside. Wheel prints everywhere. I step out of my chair to crawl around and my hands and legs are all black. I feel frustrated and sad. (N. Saturday pers. comm., 20 November 2019).

Much of how persons with disabilities navigate their psychological well-being in the face of social, physical and emotional challenges have often been personal endeavours. Studies have shown that it is expected that the responsibility of taking care of oneself, especially when it concerns appearances and the body, is 'an individual project' and one is blamed for any inability to do so (Peuravaara 2013). Women with disabilities have made taking care of themselves as much 'an individual project' as possible. They look inward to find strength to face those challenges, whether that includes religious affirmations or personal determination to confront and overcome the troubling stigma. One woman said:

I had to make washing my hands and face like a normal thing because no one will listen to me if I say it's a big deal. I always have my cleaning wipes and when I can't help it, I just ignore it and go on (Tessy Osaki pers. comm., 20 November 2019).

Although they are striving and surviving in articulating these challenges, they recognise that their voices are still low because of the numbers of them ably placed economically and socially to stand up for justice. Lately, however, the place of collective strategies 'to promote social justice' has been advocated as group identity is likely to lead to 'higher self-esteem' for some disability groups (Nario-Redmond et al. 2013). Collective strategy for women with disabilities would be having women without disabilities identify adequately with their peculiar concerns to ensure gendered disability-friendly environmental response to pollution, and in this case, the black soot.

Women with disabilities interviewed are willing to have their voices heard and so they talk about having the accompaniment of fellow sisters in the struggle and advocacy for inclusion. They agree that disability and women

oppressions are both social constructs and as such women need to address it collectively (Chisale 2018). This would mean women being ‘champions of women’, a term that has been viewed as paternalistic, as it would seem that women always need to be prodded and driven to act (Adichie 2017). However, the view here is that when women are champions of women, it falls within what the women with disabilities in Port Harcourt refer to as the transition from friendship to sisterhood that allows for mutual support based on an understanding of the situation. It is for this reason that the call to the Circle to sensitise African women theologians to investigate the concerns of disability and gender is an urgent necessity. Otherwise, the Circle may just make true Chisale’s assertion that ‘African women theologians, particularly the Circle, are guilty of silencing the plights of WwDs’ whether that may be so intentioned or not (Chisale 2018).

Until the effects of pollution suffered by women with disabilities are adequately researched and mainstreamed to ‘support environmentally-friendlier options’ (Wei-Bing Lin 2016), the actions undertaken by government operatives will continue to exclude women with disabilities. It is for these reasons that women with disabilities believe they need to bring their plight to the attention of government and other international agencies involved with environmental justice. It is noteworthy that the sociological and psychological effects of the black soot affect not only their bodies but also their finances and their ability to live self-sustaining lives.

A gendered disability approach to environmental justice advocacy could start from women mainstreaming the concerns of disability in their campaign for an inclusive environmental response strategy. Such an approach will not only address their physiological concerns but also their concerns for dignity and wholeness. For liberation is ‘about wholeness and transformation’ (Ishewood 2010:427–442). Women with disabilities are deserving of liberation as they do suffer from ‘double oppression that comes from both their sex and disability’ (Wicks 1990). They therefore are advocating in the slogan made popular by James I Charlton (2000) that ‘nothing about us without us’ in seeking appropriate inclusion in efforts to articulate the broad varieties of the primary and secondary effects of the black soot. Women with disabilities interviewed want active inclusion and participation in environmental issues for which they feel greatly impacted.

■ Conclusion

The environmental pollution crisis in Port Harcourt is real and affects all residents of the city as well as those in its environs. No one is exempt from the possible health or sanitary challenges that the pollution from the black soot causes. However, this chapter has highlighted the peculiar difficulties that women with disabilities face, whether the disability is visible or invisible,

physical or sensory. Health advice given to tackle the soot is oblivious of the concerns of gender and disability. It is discriminatory and exclusive. Public outcry and the minimal response efforts do not mainstream persons or issues of disability. This systemic exclusion of disability in policy formulation and implementation deprives persons with disabilities involvement in state and religious spaces.

Environment-friendly actions call for the inclusion of all groups affected or impacted by pollution to be involved in its remedial actions. The sociological and psychological trauma experienced by women with disabilities who are unable to deal with the challenges of the black soot because of their disability should be noted and should inform future precautionary or warning signs. It would be correct to say that the absence of gendered disability mainstreaming in the environmental strategy means the concerns of a good percentage of the residents of Port Harcourt are excluded from considerations on the impact of the black soot. On the other hand, a gendered disability friendly perspective to seeking remedies to the possible effects of the black soot would ensure inclusion of the concerns of gender and disability.

It seems apt to conclude this chapter with a poem by the author, written while on the porch of her house in River State and watching the gas flares some kilometres away.

Air of Death

Would it help
If they knew
That the air I breathe
Is poison.
Is this my home?
Particles of dirt falling on my head
Engulfed in pollution.
As the gas flares into the skies
And oil spills run through my land
Wondering...
How do I remind them?
That I live in death!

(Fubara-Manuel 2014b)

Christian and African concepts of God for liberation

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■ Introduction

The Ronga culture of Mozambique has the following saying: 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained'. It was this saying that has encouraged me to re-visit and re-interpret the Theology of Creation in connection to the oppression of the land and women. This chapter affirms that God is the creator and liberator of both the land and women. The aim is therefore to explore how land and women can be liberated from oppression that is preventing them from bearing fruits as expected by the creator. The chapter is divided into five sections. The term oppression is defined and discussed in the first section. The second section discusses how women and the land are parallelly oppressed by the church and culture in Africa. The third section identifies African and Christian concepts of God on land and women. The fourth section discusses the role of the church towards the liberation of both the land and women. Finally, the chapter presents a conclusion and recommendations.

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■ Oppression: Towards a definition

According to Hornby (2005:1025), in the Oxford Dictionary, to oppress is to treat somebody (*or something*) in a cruel and unfair way, especially by not giving him or her, the same freedom or rights.

The above definition highlights the fact that the root of oppression begins with a personal or collective' negative attitude towards the other, particularly those assumed to be weak, in this case, the land and women. Oppression does not end in denying someone the same freedom or rights, but it is also identified by the way someone or something is abused. According to biblical exegetes (Butkus 2002):

[7]he Earth and its natural systems are in serious jeopardy because of deforestation, pollution of Earth systems, depletion of natural resources and other activities that have been threatening and disrupting natural and social systems. (p. 17)

This is a result of men's actions, which confirm that his thirst for power can only be satisfied through oppression and through abuse of God's creation.

It is not possible to understand the harm that has been done to the land and to women without looking at the first two chapters of the book of Genesis. These chapters tell a story about how God created the Earth and all that exists. Chapter 1 in the book of Genesis closes by affirming that all of God's creation was very good (Gn 1:31)²³. Chapter 2 tells the story of a beautiful garden that was known as paradise and where the first created man and woman lived as one flesh until the day they rebelled and disobeyed God's commandments. As things went well, they dropped their guard on the land and caused misery which, since then, is affecting the entire creation (Gn 3:17-19).

Oppression is, therefore, a sin practiced by human beings, and it affects God's entire creation. Mozambicans know and live under the consequences of oppression characterised by severe droughts, cyclones, pollution, over-harvesting, deforestation and other human activities that prevent the land from producing 'milk and honey' as promised by God (Dt 6:3). In Mozambique, women live under oppression resulting from shortage or lack of land from which they can produce food and acquire money for their own sustainability and that of their children and loved ones. Women are equally oppressed by domestic violence, cultural and religious practices that are harmful to their life, their children and other relatives. As indicated, the Bible is the source from which we learn about God's walk with human beings; it is therefore important to find out how it deals with the issue of oppression of the land and of women.

23. All Bible citations are from The Holy Bible, New King James Version.

■ Oppression in the Bible and in the church

Some examples of oppression that have been inflicted on the land and women, are found in biblical passages. These passages were and continue to be read and accepted as they appear. The problem faced by biblical scholars is the existence of violence which appears justified in the Bible. It is important to explain that the Bible is an ancient book that narrates the history of a chosen nation and how this nation was related to God. The Bible shows that most of the time, the chosen nation used violence against its neighbour and that God condemned that attitude (Creach 2013). The word of God cannot be the object of criticism, and this principle has prevented prominent scholars and the church from being eye openers and people's liberators. Oduyoye (1998) affirms that it 'is irresponsible for the biblical scholar to ignore such readers because there is overwhelming evidence for the pivotal role that the Bible plays in most communities of faith'. Oduyoye's affirmation is correct because it helps those who are compromised in interpreting the Bible towards healing, liberation and transformation. Thus, the birth of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter Circle) turned this tide when it allowed her members to develop other ways of reading biblical texts through the lenses of gender. This opportunity allows academics, priests and Bible' students to interpret and challenge violence that is found in the Bible, opening new ways towards care and trauma healing of the women and the Earth.

Unfortunately, in Africa, we continue testifying the proliferation of those who are delighted in using biblical oppressive passages to continue oppressing those whose life remain and depend on biblical norms. Departing from the understanding that the Bible contains passages that support oppression, this chapter shares some passages that negate rights of women, as a way of denouncing and condemning oppression that is found in religious and cultural contexts of the ancient Hebrew people.

The gender method of reading Hebrew Scriptures allows me to affirm that some of the biblical passages identify women through their husbands, fathers, son's or brothers.²⁴ Hence, as the property of men; women could be taken as war trophies (Nm 31:9ff.) and girls could be sold by their fathers. Naive interpretations of such scriptures are negative and harmful to women because they violate women and girls' human rights. There are Hebrew scriptures that contribute to the marginalisation and oppression of barren women. Such scriptures highlight the fact that women were important only for their maternal roles and, those who could not bear children, were marginalised and oppressed (Gn 29:31; 1 Sm 1:5-11). Women were also excluded in the numbering of the

24. Genesis 10 lists Noah's grandsons by mentioning only the names of their fathers but, the names of their mothers and daughters are totally ignored. Similar examples can be found in other texts that mention the numbering of Israelites or their genealogies.

Israelite population. Only their husbands and sons were eligible (Nm 1:1ff). This was a discriminatory, unjust and oppressive process because women were treated as objects and as nobodies, although they had a responsibility to care for the family and the whole community.

The world justifies the oppression of women using Scriptures such as (Gn 3) where God said to Eve: 'I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you' (Gn 3:16).

Biblical scholars agree that God's punishment was interpreted according to the prevalent culture that attributed inferiority of women in relation to men (Laffey 1994:41). Laffey's response is one of the examples mostly used but this affirmation has been challenged by prominent biblical scholars. Ruether (1998:7), for example, argues that 'the domination of men over women is in no way God's original plan for creation or the fruit of female sin, but rather reflects the propensity to domination that was and continues to be the primary expression of sin'. Reuther is right because in some parts of Africa, particularly Mozambique, women's role was that of a priestess but, missionaries who replaced the first local evangelists, removed them from the pulpits arguing that: 'Women's conversion are nothing more than nervous' crises' (Chirinda 2007:15). Because of this belief, some African Churches are failing to introduce and implement reformation on controversial issues such as women' ordination, because that disrupts the patriarchy imbedded in Christian Churches. It is important to highlight that the church struggles with patriarchy in Africa because the majority of African societies are patriarchal. This is confirmed by Phiri (2007:12) as she argues that the majority of African societies including churches follow the patriarchal structure because the Jewish culture of the Bible is also patriarchal and is used to justify androcentric and hierarchical institutions. Phiri highlights that this failure back dates to the missionaries is affirming who initially implanted structures that oppress women. This attitude helps to understand the prevailing situation in most African Churches.

■ Oppression as found in culture

Cultural anthropology in Mozambique defines a woman 'as a chicken to feed visitors' [*wansati ihuku ya ku khomela vayeni*] (Chirinda). This definition is, per se, sufficient to understand how women are being oppressed. Women themselves repeat this expression to their daughters without shame. This reality reveals their blindness, ignorance and incapacity of analysing expressions, attitudes and intentions meant to oppress them. This is so because culture encompasses a vast variety of gross violations of women's bodies and minds (Pickup, William & Sweetman 2001:78). Pickup's comment demonstrates the fact that women are easily manipulated because they are unable to see and understand all the monstrosities that are inflicted upon

them by their husbands, brothers, uncles and even by their sons. Hence, culture blinds and prevents them from seeing the fact that culture is toxic to their bodies. Culture is defined as distinctive patterns of ideas, beliefs and norms that characterise the way of life of a society or a group, and the relations between its members (Kangwa 2017:36). Culture is dynamic but societies treat culture as static by preserving harmful practices as normative.

In situations where women feel that something is not normal, they tend to suffer in silence because of their inability to question and fear of being misunderstood. However, some people accuse those who complain that they are being suffocated by culture as bad and toxic to the community. In some cases, women believe that they are bad, and are forced to repent by pleasing men, their fathers, brothers, uncles and religious leaders. They continue to be the 'chicken that feeds visitors', they do not have a right over their bodies or lives. Therefore, defining women as chickens to feed visitors, means that they have to accept rape, oppression and violence as normal because chickens are raped by all kind of cocks. Expressions like these place women in a vulnerable and shameful condition in all their life's aspects. Generally, women find it hard to identify their oppression.

■ The intersectionality of the oppression of women and land

Land and her flora and fauna is as old as humanity. Adam was put in the garden of Eden in order to tend and to keep it (Gn 2:15). When a man (Adam) and woman (Eve) sinned, the ground was cursed (Gn 3:17b). Since then, human beings were to work hard in order to produce their food but, farming that was conceived to feed a family unit, was transformed into subsistence farming. From that time, man's relation to the soil was profoundly changed. Man is no longer considered as part of nature but is an exploiter (White 1967:1205). White's affirmation is confirmed by the wider experience of African countries that endured colonialism and wars. Many families who had small plots in fertile lands for their maintenance lost them to the hands of explorer's who wanted them for mechanised farming. This kind of agriculture is violent and oppressive to the land because it depends on the use of pesticides and of chemical products with the aim of multiplying the production.

Abusive and prolonged use of fertilizer's in farming negatively affects the land's capacity of producing food. This is an example of what is happening in Chókwe, Mozambique, whose land became acidic, sterile and ceased to produce rice as it used to. I can affirm that in many parts of Mozambique the land is threatened by the destruction of natural vegetation, trees, animals, water supplies, and the dumping of poisonous waste. The seasons are no longer consistent, sometimes it rains or sometimes never; as a result, seasons are no longer recognised.

The shortage of rain in Mozambique is oppressive to the land that is thirsty and resulting in deforestation which affects human beings, animals and the whole of nature with consequential collapse of biodiversity. Pollution is another activity that oppresses the land by causing global warming. The implications of global warming affect many aspects of life such as food security, clean and safe drinking water and droughts. The oppression of land is parallel to the oppression of women because of dominion. The dominion of land is intensified by overpopulation. Omenya (2011:9) acknowledges the fact that the growing population competes for a diminishing ecosystem resources, health challenges, lack of climate resilience of infrastructures and threats to wildlife.

Biblically God spoke through the voices of prophets and challenged humanity to act as responsible stewards towards nature and this included the care of the land where they produced food, because of its fragility. Isaiah did not hide the fact that human sin was responsible for the deterioration of the land because of the way it was oppressed and stated (Is 24):

The Earth mourns and fades away, the world languishes and fades away; the haughty people of the Earth languish, the Earth is also defiled under its inhabitants, because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore, a curse consumes the Earth, its people must bear their guilt. (vv. 4-6)

Surely God used Isaiah to call humanity to reflect on their practices and attitude towards the Earth. He wanted them to stop oppressing the land on which their survival depended. He also emphasised the fact that the land deterioration was a result of their disobedience to God because since they were still in the desert, God thought them to love and to care over the land as can be found in Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:5-6, 23-24. Exodus and Leviticus teach us that the land is God's creation and has the right to rest. This rest will allow it to produce more food that will feed the poor and animals. God was teaching his people to be responsible caretakers. The same is being taught to us today.

African women are the primary land tillers. Their stories are connected to the land where they live and where they produce food, fetch firewood, dig wells and, where they sleep after death. For women, the land is their sacred home. Therefore, the oppression over the land affects and oppresses them. Secondly, women' survival depends on the land' availability. Survival of the majority of poor women living in rural and urban parts of Africa depends on agriculture from which they can have food and money to maintain their families and children. Hence, the spread of diseases such as HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases, cause more pain to women when they do not have access to land or lose it to the hands of the powerful. In such situations, both the land and women cease to produce, putting in danger the survival of the poor and marginalised people. Mugambi (2012:16) stresses that humans have a great capacity to think, which should remind them of their dependence on

nature but pride prevents them from appreciating the wonders of creation. Lack of appreciation and care over nature cause oppression not only over the land but also over human beings represented here by women's faces. My understanding is that stewardship given to humanity is global, meaning that it has to be addressed to the whole creation including social and economic injustice issues. It was evident that women constitute a big part of those who suffer from land oppression.

■ African and Christian concepts of God as connected to nature

Africa is a continent with people who are naturally religious. Africans believe that there is power that comes from Heaven. This power reaches the Earth in the form of rain, thunders, locusts, droughts and many other manifestations that their familial gods are unable to provide or demonstrate. Christianity is believed to have come to Africa through missionaries; in reality, Africans knew that there is God in the supreme world before missionaries came to this continent.

■ African concepts of God as connected to nature

To explain the African concepts of God, I begin by sharing my experience on how Africans defended their farms from attacks of insects and other calamities. When locusts were destroying farms, women organised themselves, chose a day and hour that before the raising of the sun, they march around their cultivated portions of land while singing songs that chased away all the locusts. These songs evoked the Heaven to protect their properties from the attack of locusts and other kinds of insects. This highlights the fact that African traditional leaders used to act immediately in times of calamities in order to protect people's life and to maintain stability of families and society as a whole. According to Mbiti (2012), Africans understand God as omnipotent and a sustainer of life. This definition informs and guides attitude in times of hopelessness and disasters like shortage of rain. Giving an example, Mbiti (2012) wrote that the Gikuyu tribe turn to God in times of major crises such as epidemics, droughts, calamities and wars. That tribe makes sacrifices for rain and prays for God's intervention with rain and prosperity (Mbiti 2012:22-26). Because God is connected to nature, when they cry to God and make sacrifices for the droughts to end, God will command the land to produce and feed the people and the land will produce enough to feed the people. These sacrifices are also common in Mozambique and other Southern African countries. Traditional leaders in Mozambique organise people to pray for rainfall to cleanse their land in times of droughts or locusts. By sending locusts away, women act as Heaven's agents because they are aware of the incapacity of their familial gods in sending away these destructive insects.

It was unfortunate that in moments of crises, like the shortage of rain and droughts, those who had already embraced the Christian faith failed to demonstrate how God loved humankind even in adverse situations. The majority of Africans continue to regard rain as a great blessing from God because when the rain fails to come in due season, the Earth suffers from thirst, the ground parches and animals die. In such situations, people cry for God's compassion and he responds by sending rain. Then, people believe that God is the rain giver as demonstrated by Mbiti (2012) when he affirms that the Hottentots, the Akan, the Bavenda and many other African tribes consider God as being the rain giver and the master of rain. These people associate the rain with God so intimately that when it rains, they say God rains or God falls. Thus, people regard rain as God's symbol of blessing the Earth and mankind.

However, and according to Mbiti, African interpretation concerning calamities diverges. He stresses that the Bavenda, the Tonga, the Lango and others regard locust invasion, floods and other calamities as punishment from God. However, the male, Nyanja, Ngoni and Suk consider calamities to be sent by God, but they can do nothing about them because God is always right. The above two groups differ considerably from the Jie and the Teso who affirm that God intervenes to avert calamities because Godself is benevolent; therefore, there is another divinity that sends them calamities (Mbiti 2012:156). Karamaga is helpful because he confirms that the African concept of God can inform the way in which climate change phenomena can be dealt with.

The African concept of God results from a long debate involving both Western missionaries and African scholars. Karamaga (2013) presents four categories, all of them stressing the existence of the unique God as follows:

- ‘*Nzambi*’ and its variants are found in the large part of Africa south of the Sahara and it means ‘the supreme God who manifests Godself through His/ Her word or actions’.
- ‘*Leza*’ and its variants meaning ‘the Almighty who says and accomplishes what She/He says. The first who comes from Godself’.
- ‘*Mulungo*’ and its variants meaning ‘the Link. Giver of Life. The Engineering God’.
- ‘*Nkulu*’ and its variants meaning ‘the first ancestor, the Eldest of elders and, therefore, the Biggest’.

■ Christian concepts of God

According to the World Christian Encyclopedia, in 2002, it was estimated that Christians form 40% of Africa's population (Barret 1982) but, nowadays, Christianity has expanded extensively through the work of evangelists and African missionaries. One of the concepts found in the Bible concerning God is that his existence is never questioned (Ps 10:4, 14:1, 53:1).

The Earth is God's creation and it is the first-born creation of God with the heavens. When humanity oppressed the Earth, they also oppressed the Heavens, which is the Kingdom of God. The Gospel of Mark 1:15 says: 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel'. Mark teaches the Christians of today to stop oppressing the land, because by doing so they are oppressing the Heaven which is home to God and a twin to the Earth. Mark's call shows that God is still patient, but our repentance is the sign he wants restoration and reconciliation of humanity and the land which forms the Earth that is home to humans, flora and fauna and the Heaven which is home to God. Repentance of the leadership and Christians will make God heal the land as well as women from oppression. The Gospel of John teaches humanity a concept of God who loves human beings and the world. God's love over human beings makes him/her want them to live by his or her side after their earthly death (Jn 3:16). John continued his speech saying that God loves the world and wants it to be a safe place (Jn 3:17). If we interpret and link this passage to the present environmental crises, we understand that human beings failed to love nature and they continue to fail.

The concept that teaches us that God is the creator of all that exists, reminds us that God is eternal, knows everything and nothing is hidden for him or her, is also powerful. Therefore, we can affirm that Christian concepts of God recognise that God is the source of all life (physical, visible and invisible). Because of these concepts of God, the Christians believe that those who affirm the existence of other superior gods are part of the fools. Christianity fails when it does not focus its education on issues of creation as the sovereign work of God. Christianity also fails by not focusing on the creation and human beings as the centre of God's work. This failure is punishing humanity today.

Therefore, Christianity is called to change and to begin to promote Christian education centred on the creation and human beings as the sovereign work of God. African and Christian concepts of God appoint Godself as the creator, giver and sustainer of life and can be considered as father and mother of all. Humankind's behaviour is all that needs to change in order to see manifested all God's promises and attributes. The change is possible if the church begins to promote education centred on care over all creation as commanded by God.

■ The role of the church towards the liberation of both the land and women

Since times immemorial, the church has been called to align its actions with those of the good shepherd or steward. This call is patented in the gospel of John when he announces Jesus as the good shepherd who has come so that we may have an abundant life. According to Jesus' example, people of the

church are called to be sensitive to ecological balance and to respect it. African and Christian concepts of God clearly highlight the fact that any violence against nature is a sin against the creator because the Earth and Heaven are twin creations of God and they represent God as the creator. Therefore, environmental issues must be the concern of the church. Mugambi (1997:56) states that the gospel has reached many people in Africa as very bad news because of the way in which it was introduced to them. The environmental crisis in which the world is now plunged may be a result of how Christian education over the land and women was introduced and stimulated. Therefore, our reflections on creation theology are encouraged to adopt new and creative ways in order to save life on Earth.

When we deal with creation theology, we are reminded that our God, the creator of all things, is a listening parent. More than four centuries after the entering of God's chosen nation to Egypt (Gn 46:26–27), God listened to their cry against oppression by Pharaoh, as a listening parent (Ex 3:6–8), God then delivered and redeemed them through Moses. This God is the one who stills listens to our cries and prayers and responds by giving us the hope of liberation from oppression that is preventing the land and women from flourishing.

There is hope because God's big promise is announced in the last book of the Bible, when Godself declares that he or she who sat on the throne said (Rv 21:5): Behold, I make all things new. Moltmann (2012:10) affirms that according to the good news brought by this shining light, we read the Bible as the book of divine promises and hope for all creation in the horizon. Indeed, it is the hope that our Lord listens to our cries and make all things new that we are not keeping silent, but persist in knocking so that one day the land and women could be set free. It is important however to keep in mind the fact that liberation is a process. This process has to attack the root causes of oppression of both the land and women found in the Bible, the church and in culture.

■ Conclusion

I conclude this chapter by recognising that as the Christian church in Mozambique we failed to be the light on issues of stewardship of God's creation. Our attitude over the land and over women is life threatening. This affirmation results from evidences demonstrated by this research. If the Mozambican church and members are to see positive changes on God's creation, there is a need to repent and to act according to God's ways. Therefore, I suggest the following recommendations:

- The church is called to speak out stressing the importance of environmental issues.
- The church is called to promote Christian education focused on Theology of Creation.

- Church members need to be educated on spirituality and cultural understanding of life and creation.
- The church is called to teach members to give rest to the land as found in Scriptures.
- There is a need of developing theological education curricula on care of God's creation.

Water deficiency, poverty, ecology and *Botho* theology in Botswana

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■ Introduction

Water deficiency in this chapter is defined as limited accessibility of water and limited ability to clean, safe water. According to Mekonnen and Hoekstra (2016), globally, millions of people experience severe water scarcity throughout the year. Similarly, the southern side of the globe is experiencing severe water

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scarcity throughout the year. Meanwhile, there is rapid population growth especially in urban areas, demographic changes, climate change, environmental hazards and poverty.

While there are interactions between water scarcity, poverty and ecological crises, most of the research on water scarcity in developing countries such as Botswana mostly focuses on physical water scarcity (Mogomotsi, Mogomotsi & Matlhola 2018). The impact of poverty and environment hazards aggravate the impact of water insecurity on health (Adams, Stoler & Adams 2019). This is because without efficient accessibility to water, we cannot grow food, build houses, stay healthy, be at school and cannot keep working. Without water, the possibility of staying out of poverty is very slim. Therefore, there is a need to explore the links between water, poverty and ecology in developing countries. This is especially important in highlighting the role of various stakeholders, especially churches, in addressing water scarcity.

This chapter aims to contribute to the mainstream *Botho* philosophy and issues of poverty as integral components in Christian ministry by seeking to answer the question, ‘why should the water and ecological crisis be a matter of theological concern for the Church in Botswana?’

■ Water deficiency, poverty and ecological issues in Botswana

Botswana is often viewed as a successful country in sub-Saharan Africa. The country was one of the poorest countries in the world before the year 1966. The year 1966 marks the turning point of Botswana. This was when the country gained independence. The discovery of diamonds in Botswana led to the stability and strength of the economy transforming the country into an upper-middle-income country (Martin 2008). In the past 40 years, Botswana’s economy became the fastest-growing in sub-Saharan Africa and the world in general with an average annual growth rate of 7% (Mogae 2005). The country’s exploitation of minerals has led to the rapid growth of all sectors of the economy (see Mogomotsi 2019).

However, the 2007/08 economic recession has proved the vulnerability of the over-dependence on the mining sector (cf. Mogomotsi 2019). The economy declined because of a decrease of demand for diamonds by 3.7% in 2009 (Khama 2010). While mining is the main national economic activity, it is not practised by ordinary rural Batswana. Agriculture, especially subsistence farming, is the main source of community livelihood for rural Batswana. It is clear that ‘agriculture is the largest sector in most African economies accounting for a large portion of production and a majority of employment’ (Yeboah 2016). In most developing countries, agriculture and agriculture-related activities are sources of employment and considered as the best vehicle to reduce rural poverty (Machethe 2004). According to Machethe

(2004), 'agriculture contributes to poverty alleviation at rural, urban and national levels in four ways namely: reducing food prices; employment creation; increasing real wages and improving farm income'.

Even if that is the case, Botswana has a highly unreliable rainfall, experiencing drought causing high animal mortality and crop failures. The value of the lost crop and animal mortality was P34 million in 1983 alone (Toteng 2002). Many people during those years relocated to towns in search of a better life. The country's average annual rainfall in the Southwest area where the capital city is situated ranges from 250 mm and beyond; on the other hand, the north side of Botswana receives rainfall that ranges from 650 mm and beyond. It had been reported that Gaborone is among urban centres that are supplied with 90% of surface water (Central Statistics Office 2009).

The capital city of Botswana, Gaborone, at one point was deemed to be one of Africa's fastest-growing cities. Since its inception, the city has been continually expanding to the point that it currently has more than 300 000 residents. There has been growth in economic activities in surrounding villages of Tlokweng, Mogoditshane, Mochudi and Ramotswa. Although it is scarce, water remains a vital source of Gaborone's economic development. The more the economy grows, the more is the water demand (Zhou & Masandire 1998).

Even though Gaborone and its surroundings have dried up, dry land arable farming is a useful activity in these areas. This kind of farming is practiced mainly away from the river where open fields are made by the removal of vegetation. There is no irrigation farming, farmers depend on the availability of rainfalls. However, it has been years since Botswana received sustainable rainfall in these areas. According to the UN's IPCC, by the year 2050, Southern African countries such as Botswana will experience a decline in rainfall by almost 10% by 2050 (IPCC 2014). The 'projected significant decline in rainfall implies substantial imminent risks to agricultural and other livelihood activities that are dependent on water resources, weather conditions and the natural environment' (Mogomotsi, Sekelemani & Mogomotsi 2020:442).

Apart from arable farming, pastoral farming is also largely practiced in Botswana. Livestock keeping is an important livelihood strategy for smallholder farmers in Botswana. Botswana is a cattle ranching country which forms the economy's backbone in the agricultural sector after diamonds and tourism (Duffy & Moore 2010). This increases demand for water consumption to sustain national livestock production for exports. On the other hand, an extreme water shortage in Gaborone and surroundings limits the livestock's contribution to livelihoods.

According to Toteng (2002), lack of water and grazing is the major constraint to livestock production. The deterioration of grazing capacity further reduces livestock numbers. Lack of water makes them particularly vulnerable to a lack of food and poverty. Field (1997) argues that 'the degradation and exploitation

of the Earth could alter the complex inter-relationships of the biosphere and humanity excessively'. McFague (2000) rightly points out that human well-being and nature's health are intrinsically connected.

The provision of sanitation is not convenient for all household members mainly women and children. Other vulnerable groups include people with disabilities and minority ethnic groups that are often discriminated against. These people are also most at risk when it comes to access to water. In a traditional Tswana setting, collecting water and ensuring that there is enough water for household use is usually the work of women and girls. This, in addition to other household duties, can make women and children suffer in terms of illness and lost opportunities (United Nations Environment Programme 2012). Collier, Conway and Venables (2008) maintain that climate change has a strong influence on the health of people who are vulnerable, living in poverty and having the lowest capacity to adapt to harsh life situations.

As reflected upon, the crises are real for women and children every day. Moreover, women and children lose a lot of time gathering water and would not have much time for other things. If the water solution is put in place, people could practice sustainable agriculture. Children could focus on education when their parents may focus on taking care of family needs and expanding their economic activities. There is indeed so much gain if water is made accessible to all.

According to Momsem (2004), gender is a social construction and attributes of being masculine and feminine 'are acquired by culture and traditions in our society'. On the other hand, Haddad (2003:429) maintains that gender informs societal relationships between women and men, girls and boys in terms of power and informs the day-to-day interactions of social institutions 'such as the family, religion, culture, and education'. Therefore, the church is called to strive for justice for all and to participate in water issues; it is called to make possible the restoration of the dignity of all human beings and the whole creation.

■ The causes of the water crisis in Botswana

As a landlocked country, Botswana is detached from seas and oceans (cf. Beaulier & Subrick 2006). The only source of water is rainfall and this is affected by the current weather patterns which have become unpredictable. The small amount of water that Botswana had been receiving is lost in many ways including infiltration, flowing away across borders by rivers, evaporation, etc. The little that is left available to Botswana is accessed through reservoirs or dams and wells or boreholes. Most of the water used in Botswana is surface water. This water is consumed through domestic use and commercial use, that is, construction, irrigation and life-stock. In the greater Gaborone area, there is a growing water demand attributable to the growing economic performance

in this side of the country. This suggests that people in Gaborone and surroundings need more water than what is available to them (Beaulier & Subrick 2006).

The government of Botswana tried to address this situation by getting additional water from the northern side of the country. This water is transferred through the North-South Carrier pipelines. However, given the increasing water demand, the situation is not sufficiently addressed. In cases of an extreme shortage of water, many households can go days without water in the capital city and the surrounding areas.

As indicated, among other things, the crisis in Gaborone and surrounding is aggravated by the prevailing economic system, increased and unsustainable agricultural and industrial use of water, over-consumption and water waste. In addition to the above factors, climate change and population growth are the reasons for the present crises (Toteng 2008; Wilson & Bryant 1997). As the economic conditions improve the earth is exploited and thus leaving earth wounded (Bretschger & Pittel 2020). The church is then called to redeem the earth. McFague (2000) rightly argues that as human beings, we have a covenantal relationship with God to protect nature.

In an attempt to deal with the water crisis in Botswana, the public is advised to dig up boreholes. Borehole water is abundant in Botswana although developing it is costly. Even though it is costly, it is long term (Zhou & Masundire 1998). It is with this background that it could be argued that during the phase of water crises, the poor will become poorer firstly because of the lack of financial resources to dig up boreholes. Secondly, because they will be forced to buy water from those who have boreholes. The poor are then impoverished by paying for water. The government of Botswana is currently spending more money on transferring water from the north to the Southern and South East side of Botswana. Prices of water are bound to increase. In this regard, the consumers are to be empowered on water usage because unsparing of water may have financial implications on them and the government.

In summary, many people in Gaborone and its surrounding face severe water shortages, several factors contribute to water scarcity in Gaborone and surroundings. Effects of water scarcity include lack of pastures for animals, poverty, ecological degradation, marginalisation of women and children and possible outbreaks of cholera in the area, which risk causing significant loss of life. Although these effects are linked with limited accessibility of water, the exact mechanisms have not been fully understood. The church is therefore challenged to realise that water is essential for life and a key issue to eradicate poverty and restore ecological degradation. The needs of the poor should not be taken for granted. It is time for the church to stand in solidarity with the poor.

■ Three levels of ecclesial praxis

As mentioned above, the church is called to stand in solidarity with the poor hence *imitatio Christi* [imitate Christ]. Jesus' ministry is characterised by solidarity with the poor. Jesus came to rekindle the spirit of *Botho*. Being in solidarity is *Botho* in action. Arias and Arias (1980) argue that the discovery of the poor is the discovery of the gospel. Moltman (1975) similarly argues that *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia* [where Christ is, the church is also]. Actions of the church must be in three levels: relief, development and advocacy.

■ Relief

The first thing that the church can do is provide relief. Relief cushions the harsh conditions under which the people are leaving. This may refer to providing water storages, digging group boreholes and supplying water to the poor. This is what happened in Acts 2:41–47. According to this text, feeding and clothing the poor is the gospel preached with action. Relief only cushions poverty; it is a temporary arrangement that would not lead to appreciation of self-worth.

■ Development

The first stage has to do with what the church does for the people. The development stage is to do with what the church does with them. This level enhances people's feeling of self-worth as it involves making them participate in improving their lives. In this regard, the church could use its resources to empower the people through developmental programs. For example, people could be trained in water-saving and sustainable water usage. Development could lead to poverty alleviation and employment opportunities where there are no sufficient funds from the church.

■ Advocacy

Advocacy is understood in this study as empowering the poor to liberate themselves. The church will join them in their cry. The church is called to exercise its prophetic ministry by questioning structures that influence poverty. According to Moltman (1975:79), 'The opposite of the poor in the Old Testament is the man of violence who oppress the poor, forces them into poverty and enriches himself at their expense'. In this chapter, poverty is thought to be exacerbated by the shortage of water. Water deficiency is caused by climate change and consequently, people become poor. Because of climate change, the ecosystem and access to natural resources such as fertile land and water become futile.

As discussed, some people such as women and children are mostly affected by the water situation in Botswana. Furthering education and participating in

economic advancement activities is denied to them. If social justice is not realised, women and children would remain sidelined. The economic system should be transformed to ensure fair distribution of resources and power structures. The church should react to the cause of economic justice. This is about addressing structural factors essential for overcoming poverty, factors that deprive women and men their dignity, rights and entitlements.

■ **Botho ethics and philosophy**

Botho or *Ubuntu* is understood as ‘humanity’. It has to do with what it means to be human or what it entails to find growth or fulfilment (Shutte 2001). Broodryk (2008) describes it as the ideal trait of being human. *Botho* has to do with being human to each other or recognising another person’s humanity and the interconnectedness of our lives. The rationality extends to all heavenly, earthly and creaturely realms. Our discussion is grounded in a relational approach to water deficiency. According to Jepson et al. (2017), a ‘relational understanding of water deficiency accounts for the role of broader social and political engagement to enable access to water’. This study suggests that the Tswana model of *Botho* is to be used by the Tswana church to authentically address the water crisis in Botswana. It is clear from the above discussions that for poverty to be addressed in the context of Gaborone and its surroundings, the water and ecological crisis should be attended to. As Batswana, we have our traditional culture that can serve as our sources for pastoral ministry. It is indisputable that the Bible is the primary source of pastoral ministry in Botswana. Among different sources of pastoral ministry in Botswana is culture. The Tswana culture teaches that ‘motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe’ which is loosely translated to mean ‘a person is a person through and with other persons’. *Botho* takes into account that one is not born in a vacuum, but rather, one is born in a community, including both human and non-human entities (Ramosé 1999).

This Tswana ethical value appreciates the interdependence and the interrelatedness of all earthly, creaturely and heavenly realms. No entity can survive on its own; therefore, human beings are implored to appreciate the worthiness of the other. Men, women and children depend on each other in as much as we depend on the world around us. The concept of *Botho* calls the individual to be responsible towards one’s neighbours and indeed the whole community including everything on earth. Failure to understand this community principle can lead one to losing one’s humanness.

God is the creator of all things and human beings are mandated to take care of God’s creation (Gn 2:15). Theologically, the church is called to care for God’s creation in its wholeness. This includes sensitising the community for change of attitude and practices towards creation. In the discussion above,

most of the pain caused to the creation is caused by the unjust activities of those who hold power. Human beings and non-human beings who did not take part in the ecologically destructive activities suffer most.

Ruether (1992) rather questions the tradition that encourages the hierarchy of human beings over the rest of the creation. She disregards the view that existing creation forms a hierarchy, from God, the ancestors, human beings, animals, down to inanimate beings. It is imperative that human beings should not assume a sense of entitlement over non-human entities to avoid exploitation (Ruether 1992). Social domination is equally bad as it causes unnecessary inequalities and injustices. Ojomo (2010) maintains that all forms of oppression, including the exploitation of the environment should end.

Domination of other human beings based on race, class and gender, as well as human domination on non-human entities, should also end. Accordingly, these scholars argue that the tradition of domination, separatism, patriarchy and exploitation are responsible for the suffering of the vulnerable people such as the poor, women, children and the environment. In other words, the writers discourage one-sided hierarchical arrangement and absolute dependence. Creation should instead be understood as a construction and maintenance of interdependent creaturely and heavenly realms (Welker 1999). In that way, there would be realised fruitful associations of different interdependent entities. There would be a sense of accountability if human beings could realise that they cannot survive without other creaturely and heavenly entities.

A human being is a relational animal. An acceptable relational living, as per the concept of *Botho* is 'measured by one's relationship to family, community, the environment and the divine powers that is, ancestors and God' (Dube 2009). The church is therefore mandated to assume the responsibility of dealing with the ecological crisis and providing 'a robust foundation for socio-ecological actions linking social justice and ecological health as the essence of environmental justice' (Dawson et al. 2017). The pain of the people is connected to the degraded ecosystems. Therefore, alleviating human pain is connected to the alleviation of ecological degradation. This study argues that Christians should work together by identifying the needs of the people and the environment, shared values and challenges. It is a Christian call to set up achievable goals to address Earth's concerns through different activities and projects.

Botho philosophy had been chosen as a factor in the water crises issue because it could be a guiding principle for our economy. There is a need for human-centred economic policy that is also kind to the environment. That should be *Botho*-based economy. The church should, therefore, be a wheel of economic development, justice and ecological transformation.

■ Conclusion

The water crisis in Botswana is a matter of life and death. There is no living being on planet earth that can survive without it. It is a prerequisite for the well-being of human beings as well as for the preservation of the environment. Simply put, where there is no water, there is no life. It is now the time when the Church in Botswana is compelled to assume its mandate of being a healing, transformative, therapeutic and liberating community. As a privileged entity, the church should authentically address the water crisis in Botswana through three levels of ecclesial praxis.

It is recommended that the church should actively participate in developing water sources such as boreholes, underground water storages and dams. The church should also take part in negotiating usage and conservation of transboundary water resources such as the Okavango, Zambezi, etc. The church should also actively participate in water resource management and utilisation. The clergy and theologians should seek membership of the Board of Directors of Water Utilities Corporation in order to participate and spearhead issues on fair and equitable distribution of water. Further, the church should actively participate in furthering education on water saving and optimal water usage. The sustainable management of water must involve people at the grassroots. As the primary users of water, women should be encouraged to participate in decisions related to water management.

PART 3

Mother Africa and her daughters' (in)fertility

Wasting ‘Womb’: Towards a constructive and inter-relational eco-public theology

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■ Introduction

Ecological deterioration and degeneration is a crisis that ought to be responded to swiftly. Humans are social beings and are, therefore, interconnected through relations to all that is, in this world. The interconnectedness to the Earth and everything in it indicates a form of integral dependency with it. Her degeneration therefore affects the well-being of humans. The constant involvement with nature points to the human responsibility of reversing the ecological deterioration. Efforts towards reversing the degeneration point to a shift in our perception and attitudes towards the Earth and life in general. The involvement touches on human actions and their internal parameters of decision-making, that is, rationality

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and choices as appertains destruction. This endeavour calls for an involved ethical response. An ethical response that touches on every level of our existence in terms of being, decision-making and concern for future generations.

Admittedly, ecological concern is not a new concept. Globally, everyone is realising and experiencing the effects of climate change, global warming among other effects. Humanity is waking up to the fact that we are now demanding more from the Earth than she can offer. It is a reality that current human activities that were once comfortably sustained by the Earth are no longer sustainable. Humans' current life is compounded by both fear and great hope. Intensified concerns of climate change and global warming give rise to poverty in an ever-increasing population that bundles humanity into a cocoon of thought.

The human realises that it is not about being the master or the lord of the Earth but being part of the whole. The theology of dominion and stewardship thus becomes redundant in its very own face. An embrace of ecocentrism becomes a vital option. Ecocentrism alludes that the Earth and all its systems are not just for humans to do with it as they would. It rather places them into an interrelated system of the whole that calls for respect for all that is, and that sustains and gives us life (Washington et al. 2017). This is an interdependent relation and not miscued dependence of humans on the Earth. Humans need her (Earth) more than ever before. Ecocentrism thus dethrones humans from the pinnacle and replaces them into the interrelated complex Earth system in which they are a part (Molnar et al. 2010).

The pain of the reality pesters our minds for more: involvement, participation paradigms and constructive insights for a shift of repair towards a promising and sustainable Earth community. In order to achieve this, four aspects ought to be effected. Firstly, there should be a prioritisation of reconnecting people and the land in our present culture; secondly, consider supplementing existing theories on ecological crisis or develop an alternative theory that gives a high propriety to an ecological sustainable future for the Earth; thirdly, develop an alternate theory that is consistent and conversant with the facts of ecology and finally, the alternate theory and ethic should be based on both integration and partnership with God, woman and nature (Musili 2018:54).

Attempts to affect the four aspects, that is reconnection of people to land, practical response to ecological crisis, contextualised thoughts and a new ethic that looks towards a partnership with us, God and nature, are endeavoured in this chapter. It is a global civic obligation to improve human life in all its dimensions. In *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World*, Maathai (2010) brings about this interconnectedness between humanity and the environment, a concept that Pope Francis (2015) advances

in his second encyclical *Laudato Si* [Praise Be to You]. Any effort towards the Earth's conservation ought to embrace interconnecting and inter-relational components that bind humanity and the ecosphere together as they 'care for their common home' (Pope Francis 2015). Maathai notes 'the physical destruction of the Earth extends to humanity' too (Maathai 2010:16). The destruction hurts and clips away humanity's health by creating physical, psychological and spiritual injuries (Maathai 2010). The chapter seeks to point human efforts to a worthy course of repositioning us back into the ecosystem albeit symbolically. It pulls in the interconnectedness concept with an affirmation of assimilating public theology into it because in as much as our consciousness embraces conservation tendencies, unless we express it outwardly and to the public, it just remains to be an ideology that serves no purpose without being effected.

Chronologically, the chapter discusses the imagery of a 'wasting womb' to the degenerating Earth. As noted earlier, wasting Earth 'hurts our health physically, psychologically and also spiritually'. The imagery is scrutinised from the ancient times' conceptualisation of femininity of the Earth - Mother Nature or Mother Earth. The endeavour is twofold: firstly, it alludes to a very feminine endeavour to safeguard the Earth, an exercise that ought to include all humans created in God's image and likeness. Secondly, it points to the uptake of contraceptives, as solely a women's responsibility in halting the growing populations in the world, that is, straining Mother Earth. The concept of wasting womb and contraceptive use is discussed in light of the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and women's imposed involvement in their daughter's uptake of contraceptives. The contribution of these socialising agents is evaluated over and against the capability of the 'wombs' right to generate and regenerate life.

Hindering challenges to the advances of ecofeminism are highlighted. In this section, a critical address to the abortive attempts of opening us to a renewed and all-inclusive ecological mindfulness and sensitivity is undertaken. Finally, the chapter endeavours into an all-inclusive, constructive and public-oriented eco-theology that appreciates our interrelatedness.

■ Symbolism of Mother Earth to a 'wasting womb'

Symbolism of the Earth for women's fertility is not a new concept. Early matriarchal mythology conceptualised the woman as the source of fertility just like the Earth (Malinowski 2007). The middle age belief systems held to the sole belief that the Earth was bountiful, propagative and fostering just like women, and that the whole of creation was safe under her caring arms (Pahlevan 2011). According to Ardakani et al. (2016:2), the ancient gods had a

feminine gender.²⁵ It is from this concept that expressions like 'motherland' or 'mother country' emanated. At the time, the name mother referred to human mother (woman) and was generalised to refer to the Earth. From then on, references made to the origin of creation hinted to the mothering of nature, universe and land, terms which were adopted in subsequent literature (Brice 1998; Gill 1991; Lovelock & Lovelock 2000; Roach 2003).

The capability of women to bring forth life was likened to the Earth's natural ability of generating new life by the ancients (Ardakani et al. 2016). It is this natural ability of the Earth to incubate and bring forth life that earned the metaphorical representation of a 'womb' in the ancient era. According to Heyden (1981), wombs were symbolically complex spaces in some Mesoamerican societies.²⁶ There were also instances of cosmic worship or womb worship in which the cosmic mother²⁷ was well-regarded as the ultimate reality from which all life was born while continuously returning to her for regeneration (Heyden 1981).

Both 'wombs' (woman and Earth) convey the notion of generation, degeneration and regeneration. The shared ability to bring forth life is homogeneous, and their harmony has existed for a long time. Both the old masculine and feminine beliefs alike considered the Earth fertile, reproductive and nurturing. All creatures, living and non-living are considered safe in her nurturing arms; hence she is applauded for her nurturing capability (Ardakani et al. 2016). Pope Francis (2015:no. 1) in a similar vein likens the earth to a 'sister' – in whose life we all share, and as 'a beautiful mother' who is always ready to embrace all in her open arms. As a result, women and nature have come to be associated in almost every society. According to Plumwood (2002), the cultural association of women with nature has resulted into 'othering' of both, which has in turn led to oppressive strands.

The twin connection between exploitation and degradation of nature and oppression and subordination of women emerged in the 1970s. A French feminist, Francois d'Eaubonne coined the word 'ecofeminism' as one of the feminist theories in understanding ecology and the challenge of patriarchal power (Ruether 1975). Ecofeminism thus analyses 'the historical experiential, material, symbolic and theoretical connections between' these 'twin oppressions of women and nature'. It declares 'nature to be a feminist' issue

25. The following are some ancient gods of fertility that allude to a connection with mother-Earth: Demeter is a Greek goddess of harvest and fertility of the Earth; Venus is a Roman goddess of love, beauty, sexuality and fertility; Heryshaf is an Egyptian goddess of creation and fertility; Asase ya is an Earth goddess of fertility among the Ashanti people and Oshun is goddess of beauty, love, prosperity order and fertility in Africa.

26. Among the Nahua community, the womb was ideally manifested in bathhouses and caves. These were conceptualized as feminine spaces that enabled continuation of human and spiritual creative processes.

27. The idea of cosmic mother is too vast to be handled in this work. For more insights into the concept, see <http://thegreatlearning.tripod.com/mother-for-mothers.htm>.

because of an understanding of gender-based oppression, thus problem focused in orientation towards a transformation (Ruder & Sanniti 2019:4).

The focus on equating women with the Earth is in itself problematic because the Earth is permeated and utilised by all people for valuable livelihood. Further, the concept of bringing forth life, nurturing and caring are interrelated partnerships of both sex and gender competencies and capabilities. A sustainable advance to sort the Earth's degradation challenge calls for an intersectional approach.²⁸ The symbolism of the womb is fitting in the intersectional approach because contemporary women have also taken to themselves the duty of controlling their rate of childbearing by taking contraceptives. They also administer contraceptives to their non-suspecting teenage daughters, for fear of being reprimanded as bad examples to their daughters by the androcentric communities within which they live. Just as all humanity has impacted on the degeneration of the Earth's 'womb', so are women who shatter their daughters' dreams of ever generating new life!

■ 'Wasting womb' and contraceptive use

It is from this backdrop that contraception is cast as an easy and direct method of reducing population growth in the world. Hubacher and Trussell (2015:420) define a contraceptive as 'a product or medical procedure that interferes with reproduction from acts of sexual intercourse'. Dhont (2010) argues that the advent of birth control was fuelled by the global need to solve the pressing problem of over population in the early 1960s. This ideology assisted in grounding similar opinions that leaned on contraception use. From its inception, birth and population control were alluded to be majorly a women affair because they are the ones who are said to be directly in touch with motherhood (Quarini 2005). This inculcates a form of bias on the part of women to a point of almost exempting men from the inter-relational affair of procreation as alluded by Pope Paul VI (1968:no. 8) in *Humanae Vitae* [On Human Life]. In Africa, marriage and procreation are interwoven; being married is equated to an inclination for reproduction (Abasili 2011). Even though most African traditions and the church hold on to the interrelation of both man and woman in procreation, the women still carry the burden of adherence to the contraception modes.

In most of the African traditions, the size of the family as reflected by the number of children one had as well as the spacing of the said children was attained using indigenous methods of birth control. Some of the notable methods used included abstinence, uptake of selected herbs, prolonged breastfeeding, withdrawal as well as wearing of coloured wrist and waist

28. Intersectionality refers to overlapping components in a subject's person, identity, life and being that expose and/or create openings for them to be marginalized; see Nash (2008:1-15).

bands according to a woman's cycle among other methods (Moroole et al. 2020). Different colours were used on the beads to denote the safe and unsafe days of the woman's cycle, which both the husband and the wife were supposed to know and agree on (natural method). The partnership stands out even on the part of the husband opting for the withdrawal method, though it is ideally one of the most unreliable methods given the entrenched chauvinism in most men.

Notably, the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church embraces rhythm or natural family planning methods, which allude to the partnership (Pope Paul VI 1968). While in agreement with the African traditions and the church, there stands a bias in the partnership, where the woman bears the bigger responsibility. In the African tradition, women would opt to breastfeed longer, religiously take herbs, find ways and tactics of abstaining as well as understand the time-indicative meaning of the coloured beads. Even though the women's freedom to choose is implied, structural injustices permeate biased partnership. The documents of the Roman Catholic Church though unconsciously point to such a bias. For instance, in Pope John Paul II's (1993: no 55) apostolic letter on the dignity of women, he noted that 'motherhood involves a special communion with the mystery of life, as it develops in the woman's womb'. John Paul II through noting of the communion attached total responsibility of all human beings to women. He (John Paul II 1995) reiterated the same concept in *Evangelium vitae* [the Gospel of Life] no. 99, though exemplifying the inter-relational component that is evident in bringing forth new life, the women take the bigger share of responsibility in the interrelationship. He (John Paul II 1995) stated:

A mother welcomes and carries in herself another human being, enabling it to grow inside her, giving it room, respecting it in its otherness. Women first learn and then teach others that human relations are authentic if they are open to accepting the other person: a person who is recognized and loved because of the dignity which comes from being a person and not from other considerations, such as usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty or health. This is the fundamental contribution which the church and humanity expect from women. (n.p.)

Positive and right as he would be, a keen insightful eye would not fail to capture a missing link as appertains the role of the other partners being embraced. In as much as contraceptive use became an avenue and tool of empowerment to women, the notable bias emanates from the subjected sole responsibility on the women's part with regard to their uptake. There is also an unbalanced inter-relational partnership with their male counterparts which has in turn been replicated on Mother Earth. In different studies conducted in Kenya on the assessment of contraceptive uptake among men who are sexually active, it was found out that men tend to be inconsistent in adhering to contraception (Ndwigga, Maiyo & Bosire 2016; Ochako et al. 2017). Inconsistent uptake on the part of men hurts women because 'in most cases

[it] results in unwanted pregnancies among their women' which is demeaning (Ndwiga et al. 2016:5). Humanity in their daily dealing have participated in self-driven activities that degenerate the Earth for short-term benefits.

In any case, we cannot infer based on one group of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequence of such interference to the concerned party as well as the other areas, such as the well-being of future generations. Women bear the burden of spacing the birth of their children, by taking contraceptives. Sometimes, they are forced to take contraceptives secretly without the knowledge of their spouses. As much as women have sexual reproductive rights, it is not all women who are free to exercise these rights because of factors such as inaccessibility, ignorance and denial by their husbands among other factors that hinder them from exercising this right. The silence surrounding sexual reproductive health rights needs to be fought. As captured in one of Wangari Maathai's famous quotes, 'human rights are not things that are put on the table for people to enjoy. These are things you fight for and then you protect' (Maathai 2006:291-292). In the same spirit, Pope Francis (2020) in his third encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (on fraternity and social friendship) calls upon all humanity to fight selfishness by exploiting our capability to love universally. By doing so, the pope creates an opportunity to go 'outside the self' in order to find 'a fuller existence in another' (Pope Francis 2020:no. 88).

Parenting is another nurturing duty that is pegged on women. In most of our cultures, women solely bear the burden of bringing up morally upright girls who are socially affirmed. When girls give birth before marriage, the mother is usually reprimanded and looked down upon as being a poor parent. To avert the poor social image, the older women have specifically gone to the extent of putting their girls on different forms of contraceptive methods, so as to enable them to finish their studies and also guard their social image. Selfish as it sounds, it is also a short-term benefit and an alluded avenue towards empowerment. Even though the motive is right given the apparatus and circumstances at hand, the consequences may be saddening especially when the side effects of the contraceptives prevent the girls from giving birth in the future!

Contraceptives can have adverse effects on the womb of women depending on the type in use. Some of the effects include irregular menstrual periods, depression, nervousness, hair loss, a decrease in bone density, nausea, increased appetite, migraine headaches, increased appetite, blood clots, weight gain and puncture on the uterus (Cleland et al. 2012). All these effects affect the well-being of women and deter them from living healthy psychological and emotional lives among other dimensions of their lives. The same is impacted on the Earth, through the non-organic pesticides and fertilizers that we use to maximise yields. As the Earth is degenerating, so are

the women's capabilities of regenerating – bringing forth new life or even enjoying their lives to fullness. The slow uptake of contraceptives by sexually active men pushes the burden on women and girls making it a biased ideology as though they are exempted from childbearing. Childbearing is an all-inclusive-inter-relational affair that all should participate in.

Our common home – the Earth is a gift given to all of us by God the creator to inhabit creatively and responsibly. We all need to care for the environment and this has been entrusted to both men and women (Benedict XVI 2008). Consequently, alongside the ecology of nature, we need to be sensitive to 'human ecology' which in turn demands 'social ecology', a concept that alludes to the interconnection and interrelation 'between natural ecology – respect for nature and human ecology' (Francis 2015; O'Leary 2007) – not women ecology! Men ought to be closely involved in this endeavour.

To desist from a biased interpretation of contraceptive use, a critical evaluation is called for. In as much as it can be affirmed that human beings consume more resources than the Earth can credibly replenish; and that population control has to be a part of any global plan to combat environmental deterioration, pegging it on women is demeaning. Further, bracket blame on global population as the major strain on the ecology misses the mark in a world that is characterised by rising affluence (Adua, York & Schuelke-Leech 2016). In fact, industrialised nations are emitting more carbon than the earth can replenish thus leading to climate change global warming and its adverse effects. The effects of industrialisation may not with a higher degree lead to increased fertility rates in either part of the globe owing to the side effects of most of the consumed industrial products (cf. Brewster & Rindfuss 2000:271-296). Casting contraceptive uptake as a remedy to overpopulation, stressed resource pool and mounting carbon emissions misdiagnoses the problem and unfairly heaps the responsibility on women.

According to Galavotti and Williams (2017), global inequalities witnessed in resource consumption, political power and health care access are key determining factors in ecological degradation reversal. Heaping responsibility on women alone blinds our minds from creatively engaging with the glaring problem that has an inter-relational face. The power differences that men impose on older women with regard to contraceptive use are in turn replicated in case of their (women) growing daughters without their consent. The mothering nature of women is turned against them by their companions who are supposed to co-parent. When a young girl becomes expectant, it is the reputation of the mother that is hurt and downgraded in most communities. The same can be likened to the exploitative activities and non-biodegradable chemicals that we use on the Earth without its 'consenting'. The imposed silence when one's decision is called for alludes to a failed duty and a deserved right (cf. Sia, Gupta & Rakh 2020). Contraception uptake hence becomes a

human right of empowerment and not necessarily a tool for population control (Lee 2000).

Contraception use involves an inter-relational communication and negotiation both between the fathers, the mothers, the daughters and with a health professional. The option and choice to use contraceptives is as a result of multifaceted mental, emotional, physiological, economical and psychological deliberations convoking knowledge, beliefs and traditions from divergent cultures as well as scientific and sociological education (Obwoya, Wulifan & Kalolo 2018). It is an exercise that points to the multi-dimensionality of humans in their uniqueness, a uniqueness that accords them freedoms and liberties to make choices that are for the common good of all. The path is geared towards realisation of the sexual reproductive health right, not only of use of contraceptives but also of knowledge as an empowerment tool in negotiations.

The concept of the ‘wasting womb’ thus denotes a twofold illustration of meaning: that of pegging contraceptive use as actively as a women’s affair in solving the global population and to misguided non-effective strategies of solving ecological crisis that have no major impact. The fight of ecological deterioration should be conducted inter-relationally, incorporating all who inhabit and call the earth their ‘home’. All actors, men and women of good will have to work together for successful reversal of the challenges faced by humanity with regard to ecological degradation and reproduction.

■ Ecofeminist strained emancipation

The battle for ecological sustainability is intrinsically intertwined with the daily struggles for women’s liberation and other forms of social justice that all encounter. Ecofeminist efforts towards the emancipation of exploitation of and domination of women and environment, though laudable have not been without challenges.

Ecofeminists perceive the domination of women as stemming from the same ideologies that bring about the domination of the environment. As a result, different strategies, discourses and theories put in place to address the challenge of environmental degradation have with bias downloaded the responsibility to women and their sympathisers. Barry (2015) for instance points to the concept of addressing the environment as ‘Mother Earth’ to allude to the idea that the Earth is a motherly figure because it reproduces and nurtures us. The analogy is enlightening and reassuring to all humanity because it is right and factual, but it is demeaning to women in the face of deteriorating ecology.

Resurrección (2013) challenges the discourses that connect women to the ecological challenge. She notes that those discourses have a potential risk of placing the burden of ecological maintenance unto women only while letting

men go scot-free. For instance, to sort out the impact of overpopulation, that was thought to be straining the ecology, contraceptives were introduced under the guise of empowering women in spacing their children and also determining the number they would have. This is edifying and emancipatory because women and girls bear much of the responsibility in nurturing babies and raise them to be responsible grown humans. While in reality, it is a bearing of responsibility for the ecology, as though she were Earth's sole proprietor and partner in reproduction. According to Dunlap (2010) and Molnar (2010), the earth-fertility connection is significant for the economically disadvantaged rural communities, whose livelihoods are intricately linked to the earth and burdens of population.

Most preventive and intervention development policies regarding environmental care have been influenced by this discourse. This reality not only risks further degradation as women have undergone over the years but also fuels a new problem into climate politics. Following this argument, women identities are presumed to be fixed, centred, globally uniform and snarled to nature. This, however, does not posit the reality because, class, race and culture are powerful variants and determinants in climate politics. For instance, in an African setting, women trek for kilometres in search of water and firewood necessary for running their home, which is completely different for Western women, who may have differing challenges. They generate global differences that must be taken into account. The categorisation of 'women' as conventionally pluralistic, 'a homogenous group results in a theorising process no better than that of the traditional, androcentric approach' (eds. Parpart et al. 2000:10).

According to Annan (2009), 'climate change is the greatest humanitarian challenge facing humankind not [women alone] today'. It is a challenge that has depicted grave injustice at its heart with regard to gender disparity. The conceptions of nature as feminine and personified in goddesses as well as sacred female-shaped figures in the old times allow us to conceptualise the analogy between the 'subjugation of the Earth and that of women' (Catsikis 2009; Gersch 2013). Issues of subordination, appropriation and exploitation of women as well as nature are interconnected, connections that have resulted in ethnic and racial minorities (eds. Phillips & Rumens 2015). Hierarchical power structures evident in patriarchal and sexist societies ought to be negotiated with, in order to realise justice and liberties from all structures that degrade and exploit women. The negotiation suggests a sensitive awareness and mindfulness that these systems cannot be tackled in isolation but is an equitable complementary interpolation.

The patriarchal power-packed regime has repressed women in the families and has subjected them to be nurturers of the Earth. Just in the case of contraceptive uptake, the husbands who openly accept contraceptive use,

make it the responsibility of the wife. Men shun contraceptive use, in spite of their availability, up to including the simplest forms like using a condom. The association of women and Earth is so deep-rooted that the negative impact of the Earth affects them directly. For instance, when their male counterparts fell down trees and burn charcoal for economic returns they just wait for a share, because women are not allowed to cut down trees. While this is a direct detrimental activity on Earth perpetrated by men, the use of the charcoal is pegged on women's role of cooking. In this case, the women are said to fuel deterioration of the ecology though indirectly. The active participant is let off the hook by premising the outcome as fulfilling men's responsibility of fending for the family. Further, in some African communities, trees belong to men; women are not allowed to plant trees, an exercise that is thought of as a reserve for men (Fortmann 1985; Okigbo 1980; Rocheleau & Edmunds 1997). In other communities, women are only allowed to plant fruit trees for household use. However, when the fruits are plenty and need to be sold, then the trees are repossessed by men (Okigbo 1980; Rocheleau & Edmunds 1997).

It is amidst these challenges and injustices that Wangari Maathai, a woman environmentalist and human rights activist started a Green Belt Movement (GBM), as a paradigm that integrates holistic principles that would nurture the Earth. The GBM is continually dedicated towards contending deforestation in Kenya. It later became a platform for women's empowerment through civic education and environmental stewardship (Ochwa & Onyango 2018). Wangari Maathai successfully fought repressive cultures that deterred women from planting trees, and she reiterated that 'one never needed a diploma to plant a tree'. Maathai shook the political elites who contributed to exploitation of indigenous forests.

The dualism in economic power imbalances is also reflected in nations as far as ecological degradation is concerned. Decades of carbon emission have been pegged on economic aptitude of 'richer' countries to the detriment of the 'poor' (Ellis, Baker & Lemma 2009; Harris & Roach 2017; Knight et al. 2014). The inequality begs the question whether the developing nations, especially in Africa, should sacrifice their growth to save the Earth? In as much as the poor nations are hit the hardest by climate change and global warming, their contribution is the least (Ellis et al. 2009; Harris & Roach 2017; Knight et al. 2014). Conceptions of climate justice, obligation and responsibility call on the richest economies to recognise that human's survival is not based on monetary value, but on protecting the environment within which riches gain value. New and fresh agreements on carbon emission should thus be hinged not on a nation's economic standing but on the impact the emission will have on its own land.

Power blockading with respect to contraception use among teenage girls is not patriarchal but women-oriented. High rates of teenage pregnancies

witnessed globally have pushed mothers to be pro-active in handling their daughters' lives. Majority of contemporary women confess to introducing their daughters to the use of contraceptives because they have internalised socialised tendencies that the young girls cannot negotiate emotional and social relationships. Uptake of contraceptives at a tender age can however diminish the chances of conception once the girls are ready for procreation. This contravenes the expected outcome of a 'fertile' womb to continue with generation of new life. Just as the Earth 'womb' is exploited, so is a girl's womb.

In Africa, 'children were seen as social security and economic assets and parents took pride in having many of them (Idang 2015:109)'. Thus, bearing of children was and is still treasured, even though among few contemporaries. According to Kimathi (1994:82), 'a woman's glory is crowned in child birth'. Barrenness and childlessness is never tolerated in Africa. It is actually believed that is a command from God. Mbiti (1969:104) notes that 'from the very beginning of human life, God commanded or taught people to get married and bear children'. Inability to bear children in Africa is a great humiliation, because childless women encounter unfavourable treatment from their society (Donkor 2008). Pointing to the expected regeneration concept, Oduyoye (1995:45) notes that 'for Africans every newborn is an ancestor returned'. Failure to continue your family lineage amounted to reproach. Childlessness thus becomes a weapon for repression, abuse and marginalisation of women (Baloyi 2017). The repression will not just come from men but will also emanate from women themselves. Old women and mothers-in-law use extremely harsh language or words regarding women who cannot bear children resulting in low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority.

In as much as childlessness and barrenness is another gender inequality issue in Africa, it is emerging as a result of women's power imbalance. This is a result of selfishly motivated decisions taken by women-mothers who exercise their authority over their daughters in the name of love and emancipation. The decision to take or not to take contraceptives is subjectively arrived at. It is a long moral process that ought to consider both long- and short-term goals albeit subjectively. It is thus unethical to impose their uptake on someone regardless of one's power and status because it undermines their right to choose. Power imbalances thus strain the ecofeminists' efforts in the emancipation of the 'wombs'.

In this regard, current resistance, or our inability to recognise our interdependence upon each other is plainly reflected in our inability to acknowledge the extent of humanity's dependence on each other and on the Earth. Responding to the menace of climate change cannot be resolved by new technology, strategies and policies informed by androcentric mindsets, governance and economic allocations from the 'rich'. They also require a mega and broader cultural shift to examine human's interiorities and sensitivities

important to a prolific and actualised living. It calls for a rationalised, discursive and intentional attentiveness to the present moment of failure towards an essential shift in consciousness to ensure an integral ecological sustainability (Laininen 2019; Wamsler 2018).

The integral ecological sustainability calls for all-encompassing efforts and ‘spiritual values’ from all the relations that interact and relate with Mother Earth (Maathai 2010:26). Core values are subjectively borne, though exercised publicly for replication. The GBM’s website highlights the core values that drive their zeal to conserve the Earth. They include ‘love for the environment, gratitude and respect for Earth’s resources, self-empowerment and self-betterment, the spirit of service and volunteerism’ (GBM 2020). It is thus, through the internalisation of these values and their subsequent public practice that we can adhere to the God-given responsibility of subduing the Earth. This is a concept that attunes conservation struggles to public theology (De Gruchy 2007).

■ Inter-relational mindfulness on Mother Earth towards an eco-public theology

The adverse effects of human-forced climate change and ecological degradation of the Earth are directly felt by none other than humanity. Even though the other biodiversity experiences the rot, the pain of loss, lack, guilt of exploitation and wonder on mechanisms of repair have become an unshakable burden on the shoulders of humans. Biodiversity refers to homo sapiens, the vast array of living organisms that inhabit the Earth, as well as the valued interactions that exist amongst them (Newbold et al. 2015). The absence of these organisms, ecosystems and ecological processes means that human life and societies cannot be in existence. We are thus, so interdependent on each other’s being, that we cannot dispense the inalienable right to life, for all that is. The argument is premised on mindfulness which is a valued spiritual reconnection of humans with him or herself, the creator and nature. It alludes to a mindful concern on our intentional actions and their subsequent consequences both to us and to Mother Earth.

The livelihood of the entire biosphere is dependent on relationships of service, that in most cases go unrecognised, hence unappreciated. Human’s gift of rationality ought to naturally point to the inter-relationality for a sustainable co-existence. Degradation of the Earth points to a failed realisation of the interrelationship and an ignorant and selfish exploitation of the biosphere. Crotty (1998) puts the concept into this perspective:

All knowledge and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and transmitted with an essentially social context. (p. 42)

It is in this backdrop that human's action and reaction in the world are of utmost importance.

Human action is guided by motivation or intention that is the values and beliefs of a moral agent depending on the life situation or circumstance that she or he finds him or herself in. Values and beliefs inform faith and decision-making processes leading to a moral human act. The outcome of a human act affects him or her directly as a social being, be it objectively or subjectively. The call to act in living out our day-to-day lives demands cognizance of our surrounding and relations. The exploitation and conservation of our environment points to the interaction that will ensue or has ensued over time. In order to balance our co-existence, ethics – philosophical science of what ought to and ought not to be done – comes to the fore.

Ecological conservation calls for an ethical concern on what is of value to the inter-relationships. This provides room for a science of informed decision-making processes on actions appertaining to ecology – Eco-ethics. It points to acting as responsible guests and care holders in this common household that we all share our living – Earth (Bhatt 2018). Eco-ethics calls for human responsibility in living out his or her day-to day activities in an integrated web of past, present and being mindful of the future generations. The expected responsible consideration of relationality to all that impacts on our lives alludes to a capacity and capability of performance related to values of common good and justice to life. It is an appreciation that everything, both living and non-living play a role in our existence as we also affect their existence. The eco-ethics concept becomes foundational in achieving intergenerational sustenance of the Earth if consciously adhered to. Living under the guidance of eco-ethical principles of minding the Earth that will be handed over to future generations would stem out Maathai's worry as she laid it out that 'the generation that destroys the environment is not the generation that pays the price'.

Human consciousness and mindfulness is not devoid of ones surrounding. It is necessitated by a power that claims origin of the ecosphere. The recognition of a power holding all in place, generating, degenerating and regenerating opens man into a spirituality of concern. The spiritual awareness of ecological changes commands a reaction – positive or negative depending on the intentions and motivations of reaction. It has been noted that humans' reactions on the Earth have been money driven, power driven, opportunity and value driven, springing forth mixed outcomes (Howell & Allen 2017). With regard to utilisation of the Earth, we are called upon to strengthen eco-spirituality that affirms spiritual consciousness as the highest form of a relational awareness between the creator of the Earth, man and organisms – both the living and non-living. Our actions should thus be an expression of faith and a response to the creator's alliance in sustenance. It is an alliance of spiritual awakening espoused

in a clause that ‘the future of the planet concerns all of us, and all of us should do what we can to protect it. As I told the foresters, and the women, you don’t need a diploma to plant a tree’ (Maathai 2007:138).

In keeping with the alliance, there is a need to bundle human actions within a value and faith-based context. It is a recognition that we are not owners of the Earth, but that we are caretakers or stewards whose interaction with it has caused regrettable effects. Critical thinking about the meaning and truth of self-understanding and practice in it points to contextual eco-theology. Contextual eco-theology appreciates the existence of many religious perspectives, cultures and world views that are also transfixated by the degrading ecology. The realisation that we all share the Earth in our existence regardless of our religious affiliations, firstly, creates room for incorporation of all theological disciplines and practices in eco-theology (Sindima 1990a). Secondly, it calls for consideration of prevailing contexts in our societies up to including cultures, economy, politics, technology, media and ideologies. The contexts within which every human lives in has a dimension of conserving the environment. If you are in a context you cannot plant a tree, then you can use green energy in either cooking or in your movement.

The inter-relational and intertwined concepts of the human that include mindfulness, eco-ethics and eco-spirituality in relation to sustainable utilisation of the Earth suggest a theology that is applicable in the public sphere. The three concepts posit a phenomenological understanding of subjective consciousness that influences and is influenced by all that is around us. The subjective intentionality of a human is always attuned to what is of value to the self. Self-consideration and self-love in moral decision-making, in as much as they are important in depiction of character, can lead to selfishness. Acting out of selfish intentions and motivations would easily drift to exploitation and biases that are being witnessed on the Earth and women’s wombs. Power, economic or money and opportunity driven human actions drawn from subjectively held worldviews do more harm to the environment. For instance, when humans fell down trees to pave way for greenhouses that practice mono cropping (tomato farming) for selfish economic purposes (subjective), we critically blind ourselves to the impartial benefits that include bird’s shelter, firewood, shade, biodegradable manure and holding the soil together among other multiple advantages that the trees provided to the Earth.

It is from this backdrop that appreciation of our diversity in our interconnectedness calls for a critical thinking and self-understanding in acting within the public sphere. Kim (2011) notes that public theology is:

Christians engaging in dialogue with those outside church circles on various issues of common interests. It involves urging Christians to take the opportunity to participate in public domain in secular democracies and to converse with other citizens on issues wider than religious matters. (p. 4)

In face of the contemporary reality of ecological exploitation, public theology directs an expansion of our spiritual prospect towards an embrace of all that is affected. It calls for a practice-oriented move from a religious into a plural, multi-cultural, multi-religious, political, economic, ethical and even globalised and secularised world. It is a call to an inter-relational dialogue premised on both direct and indirect impact of ecological degradation that is threatening our livelihood.

Eco-public theology in this case suggests an all-encompassing sphere, where no one is left unconcerned of the Earth ills. While acknowledging differing contexts and social standings, ecological deterioration impacts have not respected our excuses – women discrimination, poverty, power imbalances and overpopulation among others. The Earth impenitent attitude to the biosphere calls for unremorseful reactions towards deconstruction and reconstruction to the challenges that draw us back. It is not women alone who have to bear the effects of contraceptive use, men too ought to participate in reproductive decision-making as equal partners in co-creation. In cases where we do not rethink our bloated and diminishing egos, laying blame on others and situations, the Earth will just be 'a wasting womb'. Public-oriented responsibility calls for concrete-context-based methodologies and hermeneutics that are in line with one's situation as they drum for values of equity, justice and responsibility for all. By upholding sensitivity to this mutually inclusive, contextual deconstruction or reconstruction as well as anticipated dynamic inter-relational dialogue, the values of justice, freedom of expression, and human rights can be ensured.

■ Conclusion

The problems and facts of ecological deterioration are of global dimension and immediate environmental concern. All living and non-living creatures on this Earth have felt its devastating impact. The adverse impacts of ecological degradation have spared nobody, regardless of gender, race or class. The efforts that have been put in place, though laudable, have missed the inter-relational component within every human's subjectivity. Contraceptive uptake calls for concerted efforts for all sexually active men, women and girls if sexual reproductive health rights are to be a reality. All-inclusive efforts are called for even in conservation of Mother Earth, regardless of sex, gender and/or race. Generation and regeneration of life in all spheres is a partnership-oriented endeavour, both for women and the Earth. Eco-ethics, eco-spirituality and mindfulness all point to a subjective attitude of dependency that can be solved within respective contexts only if they are embraced and worked out publicly. In order to overcome and restore the sustenance of the Earth, new lens of mindful inter-relationality within our distinct contexts comes handy. Deconstruction and reconstruction of oppressive attitudes as well as biased

motivations or intentions of subject's moral action ought to be handled critically within a public sphere. Eco-public theology points to a critical interrogation of the multiple theologies within differing religions in Earth's conservation. Subjective values and virtues of equity, justice and a sense of responsibility cultivated relationally are promising towards ecological conservation and sustenance. Ecofeminists and all people of goodwill, committed to ending the menace of ecological degradation on Mother Earth, ought to put into consideration relationships that exist amongst the whole. The repressive components fuelled by patriarchy, power imbalances and selfish capitalistic motivations have to be dealt with contextually. It is a global civic duty to conserve Mother Earth and preserve the 'womb'.

Women's reproductive and natural environmental health: An African ecofeminist pastoral care praxis from the Ndebele, Zimbabwe

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■ Introduction

The connection of the environment and feminine reproductive health may be assumed to be an 'old wives' tale'. However, this is a reality for the Ndebele in Matetsi, Zimbabwe who strongly protect the natural environment in order to

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protect the reproductive health of the community. A person caught cutting down trees or destroying some herbs in Matetsi is accused of destroying the reproductive health of the community. It is every traditional or conservative family's desire to be biological parents, grandparents and to have biological siblings. For this to happen, women lead initiatives of protecting the natural environment because it is a reliable source of herbs that heal reproductive health challenges and secure their fertility. This then rejects Simone De Beauvoir's essentialist argument that motherhood is a choice or a free will ([1997] 1949). For the Ndebele of Matetsi, motherhood is essentially instinctive and a phase that every traditional woman wants to experience or accomplish; thus, they may do anything in their power to fall pregnant and mother children. Although instinctiveness of motherhood is debated by feminists, African women theologians from the African ancestry argue that in African contexts motherhood is attached to social status and social respectability (Dube 2007; Kolawole 1997). This motivates women to do anything in their power to achieve this status.

Reproductive health in Matetsi is monitored and nurtured in early childhood and reaches a peak in adolescence through the different rites of passage. It is woven into the natural environment where both girls and boys are encouraged to eat natural herbs with porridge for reproductive and other health purposes. It is believed that herbs enhance fertility by sustaining the body in its original and healthy state so that it is ready to produce babies (Maroyi 2017). In Matetsi, reproductive health, particularly fertility is not feminine, but every individual's fertility is celebrated except for girls and women with disabilities (see Chisale 2018). The WHO (2018) defines reproductive health as:

[A] state of physical, mental, and social well-being in all matters relating to the reproductive system. It addresses the reproductive processes, functions and system at all stages of life and implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life, and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when, and how often to do so. (n.p.)

As much as the WHO definition is holistic, however not everything in the definition is relevant for the community of Matetsi. In Matetsi, reproductive health is connected to the capability to produce biological children. Women and girls' reproductive health is prioritised over other health issues. The community is concerned about the reproductive health of girls who like climbing trees, riding donkeys and playing rough sports that are assumed to be masculine. Such girls' sexualities are queered as it is believed that rough sport destroys the womb. The queering of sexuality because of rough sports made headlines in the media after Caster Semenya, a South African middle-distance runner and sprinter was forced to undergo gender verification testing in 2009 after she gloriously picked up a gold medal breaking the world record (Dworkin, Swarr & Cooky 2013). Most people from European countries argued

that it was impossible for a woman to run that fast, thus they labelled Semenya as a fraudulent, deceptive boy masquerading as a female (Zaccone 2010). This was made worse when Semenya's results were leaked to the media, in September 2009 and the Mike Hurst of Australia's Daily Telegraph reported that Semenya had 'male sexual organs' and 'no womb or ovaries' (Hurst 2009). The queering of Semenya's gender and sexuality highlights the fact that society primarily constructs the role of a female body for reproductive function. In a female body, the womb and ovaries are expected to be soft and fragile.

The Semenya case justifies communities' fears for a girl child who is often involved in rough sports. In Matetsi, although both girls and boys are prepared for the role of creation, through herbal medicine and other social and cultural roles, the females and males are not treated equally. Herbs are believed to play different purposes in gendered sexual bodies. The male body uses herbs to strengthen muscles, boost sperm production and stamina. The female body uses herbs to cleanse the immune system, sustain the health of the eggs, cleanse the womb and keep the woman fertile. Tabong and Adongo's (2013) participants from Northern Ghana confirm the significance of herbal medicine in fertility interventions (see also Maroyi 2017). The prioritisation of fertility in Matetsi has encouraged the community to share knowledge on the role of the natural environment, particularly herbs, in health and the protection of fertility. The intersectionality of human and environmental health has attracted theologians focusing in AIKS to explore the connectedness of nature and African spiritualties (Phiri 1996; Siwila 2014); the Bible, ecological justice and gender constructions in the African context (Masenya 2010); and nature, African traditional religions and gender constructions (Chirongoma 2005; Kaunda 2016). The introduction of UN SDGs increased scholarly interest in the intersectionality of human well-being and environmental or ecological justice.

The introduction of the SDGs revealed the seriousness and agency of ecological justice for the continuation of life on Earth. There is a consistent call that development and industrialisation should be conscious of the future generations' needs. Borrowing from the Griggs et al. (2013:305) definition of how 'development [should] meet the needs of the present while safeguarding Earth's life-support system, on which the welfare of current and future generations depends'. As a result, research on ecological justice's strives to explore how developmental praxis can embrace the intersectionality of human and the Earth's well-being (Schleicher, Schaafsma & Vira 2018) for current and future generations. From a theological approach, SDGs remind every human being on Earth about the integral role of God as Godself is embodied through the relationship that humans have with creation, particularly the Earth. In this relationship, God is a parent who out of love justly rules over the Earth and everything in it.

The relationship that God has with the Earth is not destructive and domineering, but it embraces justice for all creation to relate and depend on each other for survival. The continuation of this relationship is guaranteed by the blessing to be fruitful and multiply in number. In this blessing, God reminds humanity of their creation role on Earth as mothers and fathers on one hand and as stewards and caregivers of the natural environment on the other (Gn 1:28). The interdependence of humanity and the environment means that both are intrinsically worth. Scientific evidence shows that the pollution of the environment affects the reproductive health of humans (Bhargava et al. 2017). This on its own is motive enough for theology to defend the natural environment because it plays a strong role in the fruitfulness and multiplication of humans on Earth.

To contribute to the defence of the natural environment, African women have explored their imaginative theologies of nature, fertility and motherhood (Odugyoye 1999; Siwila 2015). These imaginative theologies do not explicitly reveal the role of men in the intersectionality of nature, fertility and motherhood. As a result, this article follows a non-empirical, philosophical approach to integrate African ecofeminist and pastoral care praxis. It seeks to present how the interconnectedness of reproductive health and the environment by the community of Matetsi invokes environmental ethical concerns. This article is divided into four sections: firstly, is the critical discussion of how and why African ecofeminist theology is integrated with pastoral care praxis in campaigns for reproductive health and the natural environment. Secondly, is a presentation of the African ecofeminist pastoral care praxis story of Matetsi. Thirdly, is a critical discussion of the anthropocentric thinking and complexities that emerge from the interdependence of the reproductive health and the natural environment. Fourthly, is a theological reflection of the interconnectedness of reproductive health and the natural environment. Lastly are the concluding remarks.

■ African ecofeminist theology and pastoral care of the environment and women's reproductive health

According to Rosemary Ruether (2012):

[E]cofeminism or ecological feminism examines the interconnections between the domination of women and the domination of nature. It aims at strategies and world views to liberate or heal these interconnected dominations by better understanding of their aetiology and enforcement. (p. 23)

Ecofeminism is interpreted differently depending on context, particularly the issue of race, class, gender and culture. Siwila (2014) highlights this diversity as she argues that third-world feminists have developed their own concepts of ecofeminism, which reflect ways in which women and nature are connected.

There are diverse ecofeminisms that are linked to the different feminists' strands that emerge from different worldviews and politics. Ecofeminist theology emerges from theology and is concerned with the sacredness of women and nature. Thus Rakoczy (2012:400) states that 'the foundation of ecofeminist theology is therefore the promotion of the dignity and worth of all of creation'. She emphasises the connection of creation as 'a circle of life which lives in the Spirit' (Rakoczy 2012:400). Her argument resonates that of *Ubuntu* philosophers such as Sindima (1995:127) who conceptualises *Ubuntu* as 'the web of life' and Shutte's (2001:12) interpersonal network of life notion.

As a result, African ecofeminists theology resonates *Ubuntu* where creation is interdependent and weaved together as a web of life. For this reason, I deliberately added 'African' to the ecofeminist theology because African feminism rejects the separation of men and women (Mekgwe 2008), as they argue that men and women fought colonialism side by side by promoting communal perceptions of humanity in the liberation struggle (Mama 1997:47). Wangari Maathai is among the African ecofeminists who emphasises a strong link between African feminism and African ecological activism by exposing how patriarchal and neo-colonial structures hurt the continent through the GBM, her initiative won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 (see Maathai 2010).

In this chapter, I join non-essentialists ecofeminists on the fact that women's connection to nature is multifaceted. Informed by African ecofeminism the oppressive connection of women to nature is a Western colonial perception that ignores African women and men's partnership in the protection of the environment. It also ignores the diversity of African women between those from rural areas and urban areas. The former easily and positively identify with nature, while the latter's connection to nature is that of consumerism and development. In this chapter, African ecofeminism hermeneutics are informed by the perceptions of rural women from Matetsi on the role of nature in human's reproductive health. From these perceptions, I extract alternative African ecofeminist theologies that are life-affirming and can be used to contribute to the liberation of women's bodies while preserving the natural environment. Warren (1987) reminds us that we cannot always have an ecological crisis as an addendum to feminist's concerns, but rather we need an alternative epistemology and anthropology to emerge in our critiques of the connection of women to nature (Warren 1987:4). The important connections on the oppression of women to nature have been exhausted by feminists and gender scholars interdisciplinary; this is the time for us to use the positive relationship we have with the natural environment to invoke environmental ethical friendly health strategies.

We can do this by presenting practical examples where women protect nature through blood and sweat in order to protect the well-being of the community. Alternatively, we can respond to Wangari Maathai's call to stop talking and act. In one of her inspirational quotes, Wangari Maathai says: 'until

you dig a hole, you plant a tree, you water it, and make it survive, you haven't done a thing. You're just talking'. This is comprehensive enough to provoke praxis. This chapter purposely integrates African ecofeminism with pastoral care to present practical examples of African ecofeminist pastoral care praxis where African women display ecological consciousness in nurturing the reproductive health of the community. Pastoral care praxis in this chapter refers to the theory and praxis of care that 'seeks to serve creation as it "interprets human needs"' (Steyn & Masango 2011:4). Pattison (1993:8) conceptualises pastoral care as a historical practice that is 'pluralistic, variegated and flexible according to needs and circumstances, as well as having an identifiable, care of healing, sustaining, reconciling and guiding', that is extended by Christian communities to other creation. Pastoral care and ecofeminism are two sides of the same coin because in a way they both promote the ethics of care that emphasises obligation to others by cultivating sympathy and empathy, sensitivity and responsiveness (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984). The objective of ecofeminism and pastoral care is to fulfil John 10:10 where Jesus came so that all live life to the fullest and this life is realised if the ethic of care and love is activated to promote healthy relationships and interdependence between humans and God; humans and other humans; and humans and other creation.

■ The African ecofeminist pastoral care praxis: A story of the Ndebele from Matetsi²⁹

Lack of a local health clinic in Matetsi has encouraged this community to primarily rely on herbal therapy for as long as the community existed. To prevent illness, children including adults are encouraged by grandmothers to eat porridge mixed with herbs such as *intolwane* (*Elephantorrhiza elephantina* or elephant root) and *umgugudu* (*Elaedendron matabelica*) to prevent *ingubhane* (an illness that causes headaches, backbone pains and bloating). These herbs are eaten by both boys and girls alike. This resonates with Siwila (2014:135) in her discussion of ecofeminism from an African standpoint, where a grandmother is significant in transferring indigenous knowledges to the community and how this informs the way women respond to feminist spiritualities. It is clear that the lessons that are instilled on children have a deep impact in their adulthood lifestyles.

The community's reliance on herbal therapy has encouraged them to protect their natural environment through 'blood, sweat and tears' in order to preserve herbs for the current and future generations. There are regulations and laws put in place for anyone to access or pick herbs in the territory of Matetsi.

29. The author of this chapter originates from Matetsi and is aware of the laws governing that community because she also advises the village head and serves the Church as one of the ordained clergy.

These were implemented when the women of Matetsi discovered that their herbs are becoming scarce because of unprofessional picking and random cutting down of trees by those who sell herbs in cities. This encouraged women to start campaigns for regulating the picking of herbs, cutting down of trees and hunting of wild animals as some wild animals' dung are also recommended for their health benefits. The motive of the campaign was that over-picking of herbs and random cutting down of trees and hunting of wild animals is threatening the community's health and fertility to be precise.

Women told the Village Head and his Council that there are people 'abakakela emthonjeni womphakathi' taken from the saying *ungakakeli emthonjeni onatha kuwo* (loosely translated as 'do not defaecate in a drinking well'), the English saying is 'do not bite the hand that feeds you'. This was used to explain the seriousness of deforestation and over-picking of herbs that affects the well-being of the community. They told the Village Head's Council that the consequence of destroying the natural environment is that it affects the community's capability to have more children to continue their lineage. As this affected the community's future, a unanimous decision was taken to regulate the picking of herbs, cutting down of trees or hunting of wild animals for any purpose in the territory of Matetsi. The regulation stipulates that anyone who wants to pick or dig herbs, cut down trees and hunt wild animals should receive a stamped letter from the Village Head of the community who gives permission to do so.

There is also a regulation where some herbs are only allowed to be picked or dug by licenced and authorised traditional healers who have knowledge of protecting significant indigenous trees for health purposes. People illegally picking herbs, cutting down trees or hunting wild animals are prosecuted. All these red-tape measures were enforced because of the significance of indigenous plants and wild animals to the health of the community, particularly their reproductive health. The interdependence of nature and human health seems clear in this community. Thus, praxis is communal, where the whole community of men and women unite in the preservation of both nature and reproduction health because children are not only women's pride but men's too because a child increases a man's status as much as it does for a woman (Tabong & Adongo 2013:1).

■ The complexities and anthropocentric implications of reproductive health and environmental interdependence

Pastoral care emphasises the cure of souls (Lartey 2003) through healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciliation, nurturing, liberation and empowering in existential situations. The motive of the community's regularisation of the

picking of herbs, cutting down of trees and hunting of wild animals was primarily for community' health purposes that indirectly led to the preservation, sustenance and nurturing of the natural environment. Pastoral care is not solely the curing of human souls, but it includes the curing of non-humans through reconciling non-humans with humans. From a religious and faith approach, it means promoting morality and environmental stewardship by encouraging care for both humans and the natural environment. Conradie (2006:186) argues that the role of Christian pastoral care is to promote 'ecological notions of parenting, teaching, counselling, therapy and holistic healing'. Louw (2015:134) calls this 'green spirituality' where pastoral care indicates stewardship to reveal the shalom of creation and to exercise husbandry. Stewardship in this chapter entails connecting African ecofeminism and African pastoral care understandings of ecology into a matrix that promotes an environmental ethical reasoning that justifies the positive interconnectedness of nature and humanity.

The notion of the interconnectedness of nature and humanity is supported by the African communitarian approach that emerges from *Ubuntu* where everything is interdependent. The interdependence of all creation, humans and non-humans, that is promoted by *Ubuntu* rejects the anthropocentric perceptions. It is however true that where human and non-human are connected, anthropocentric views are likely to emerge. Chemhuru (2018) confirms this in presenting the idea of ecofeminist environmentalism that exists in African communitarian thinking and the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Chemhuru (2018:20) sees the communitarian principle and moral ethic promoted by *Ubuntu* as an antidote for the justice of non-human creation that has traditionally been undermined and considered as morally insignificant to be treated with care, reverence, kindness and accord them ethical consideration owed to them. Chemhuru (2018) however acknowledges the fact that any relationship between humanity and nature is not immune to accusations of anthropocentrism.

The idea that the natural environment forms part of humanity's healthy lifestyles should be explored so that nature will be granted the same dignity that is granted to human beings. The nature-reproductive health relationship is crucial, for it guarantees the sustenance of the ecosystem and the forest. From an Earth-centred approach, nature is definitely the womb of life and humanity is the fruit of nature 'from dust we come to dust we shall return' (Gn 3:19). There is no clear basis for the baby to destroy the womb, lest she or he will not survive to see birth. Theologically, the Earth is our mother representing God's womb for all creation. God's use of Mother Earth as God's womb offers all creation, human and non-human the gifts of salvation, unveiling the divine motherhood of God. Rakoczy in dialoguing with the work of Sallie McFague (2004:77) titled: *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, argues that the motherly nature of God 'describes a particular

kind of divine love, divine action, and relationship to the world'. Louw (2015:127), from a pastoral care approach, argues that healing should develop and cherish a nurturing interaction with our great mother, Mother Nature. This interaction and relationship breaks the hierarchies that exist in the world and promotes interconnectedness, where pastoral care praxis of the healing of humanity is interconnected to the ecological sustaining and nurturing of the natural environment.

From a natural environmental centred approach, the matrix that reveals a liberating connection of humanity and nature through herbal medicine is threatened by Christians who reject the use of herbs for healing. Such Christians perceive the use of herbs as ritualistic and promote anthropocentric thinking. This has been long observed by White (1967:4), who argued that 'Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen'. The rejection of herbs for body healing actually exposes nature to destruction because humans do not see the significance of their existence; some are just randomly destroyed because they are believed to be useless weeds. Such beliefs lead to the negligence and destruction of the natural environment and her health benefits for humanity. It leads to the negative dominion of nature. Although there is no clear church doctrine on the use of herbs some Christians find it difficult to use herbs. Hulela and Thobega's (2013) findings confirm the fact that the majority of Christians do use herbs for healing purposes, while some influenced by their religious leaders reject the use of herbs. An environment-centred approach should confirm that God created nature in connection to the human body so that the two can heal each other: when nature is injured, the human heals her as such when the human's body is not well, nature heals the human's body. There are no weeds or useless creation; each creation was created for a purpose in the continuity of life. The ecofeminist pastoral care praxis from Matetsi reveals this, where everything and everyone is equal and depend on each other for survival.

The involvement of men in interventions against the destruction of the natural environment in Matetsi for the sake of reproductive health confirms the non-dualism of pastoral care praxis in African communities. This confirms Kaunda's (2016:192) argument that women are not the only ones connected to nature; he contends this by describing eco-masculinity that explains the interconnectedness of men to nature. Because of this connectedness, Kaunda then proposes for ecogender theory. Like the majority of African gender scholars, Kaunda argues that the alienation of men from the environment was a colonial quest to restructure the social order. Similarly, Oyewumi (2002) clearly rejects the gender constructions in African contexts as she argues that it was a colonial agenda for teaching biological determinism among Africans who otherwise lived in mutual relationships. It is therefore clear that the women-nature connection has been corrupted by colonialists who argued that in essence women are more connected to nature than men. In such cases,

women's bodies and nature are typically the terrains upon which patriarchal tendencies of domination and oppression are exercised. In such cases, the interdependence of non-humans and humans is crooked and anthropocentric.

■ Towards an African ecofeminist pastoral care praxis

This chapter tries to advocate for an African ecofeminist pastoral care because it displays strong emphasis of the interconnectedness of human beings with the rest of nature that invoke environmental concerns. The interconnectedness between nature and humanity is acknowledged by Behrens (2014) who argues that:

[C]ontrary to anthropocentric ideas, there is a strong emphasis on the interrelatedness or interconnectedness of human beings with the rest of nature that is evident in African thought providing basis for a promising African environmentalism. (p. 65)

This emerges from the community of Matetsi where their health praxis explicitly connects the health of humanity and the natural environment.

This community acknowledges that health is symbiotic to the eco-psychophysio-and spiritual being. Their praxis confirm that Earth and humanity cannot exist and function separately. As a result, I argue that African ecofeminist pastoral care praxis that emerges from the community of Matetsi is linked to *koinonia* as described by Daniel Louw (2008) and Magezi (2006). These pastoral care theologians argue that in *koinonia* the acts of fellowship and caring create a living network of caring relationships within communities of faith (Louw 2008) and the environment. Magezi (2006:507) an African pastoral care theologian argues that *koinonia* 'provides a system of support that may substitute or function parallel to the traditional communal system to effect healing'. The traditional communal system that effects healing guards the source of health which exists in the womb of the Earth, such as herbs and other natural indigenous medicines. The communal system of healing is not only therapeutically oriented, but it is action and result-oriented. It is based on Jesus's ecological focus in his ministry, where human life and nature are intertwined in parables and his healing acts. In this chapter, I chose reproductive health, because it was the primary health issue that led to the regularisation of the picking or digging of herbs, cutting down of trees and hunting of wild animals in Matetsi invoking an ecological concern in this community. The story of Matetsi suggests that for the sake of ecological justice, communities should be conscientised of the health benefits embedded in the natural environment.

If communities are aware of the benefits of the natural environment including plants and animals that are considered as weeds and worthless, then it will be possible to have a garden of Eden on Earth. Herbal knowledge from Matetsi invokes the moral and ethical principle of *Ubuntu*, where a person

does not exist in isolation to other people and creation. The community of Matetsi's efforts were encouraged by *Ubuntu*, where everyone lives in good relationships with their creator, each other, the self and all other creation. Steve De Gruchy (2004) explains this well in his description of shalom as:

[D]welling at peace in all our relationships at four levels: with God, with creation, with other people, and with ourselves. It also involves an enjoyment of one's relationship. It means to delight in serving God, to delight in our physical surroundings, to delight in community, and to delight in what it means for oneself to be a child of God. (pp. 1-2)

For De Gruchy, shalom provides a theological grounding for the involvement of the Christian community in the protection of all creation. In *Ubuntu* and shalom, the community is the custodian of everyone and everything, human and non-human including nature which is the womb of our Mother God. This praxis is parallel to Jesus Christ's ministry as it focused on all creation having life in fullness (Jn 10:10) and Jesus was explicitly connected to nature from birth in Earth (born in a manger) to ascension to Heaven (lifted by the cloud).

The communal response towards the conservation of nature for the community's health purposes disrupts patriarchy by equally uniting men and women in ecological consciousness. It also disrupts the feminisation of pastoral care and the ethics of care. The role that men and women play in connecting the community's reproductive health to nature implicitly invokes the environmental ethical concern rather than the anthropocentric view. Although pastoral praxis' focus was initially on the reproductive health of humans, the environment as the healing source of the reproductive system benefited from the interventions put in place to protect her. Chemhuru (2018) argues that the anthropocentrism that emerges from *Ubuntu* and the communitarian philosophy is the result of these philosophies' main focus being human relationships and existence, but still the environmental ethical concerns come indirectly. This clearly emerges from the community of Matetsi's ecofeminist pastoral care praxis as they protect the human reproductive health system through herbs; the natural environment benefits through sustenance and nurturing so that she continues to supply herbs. This captures Rakockzy's (2012:400) definition of ecofeminist theology as the promotion of the intrinsic dignity and worth of all creation.

■ Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to highlight the positive interdependence of humanity and natural environmental health that promotes ecological concern, as it emerges from African ecofeminist pastoral care praxis that emerged from the Ndebele community of Matetsi. Although it is difficult to avoid anthropocentric undertones in human-nature interdependence, the praxis from Matetsi highlights the fact that African communalism and interdependence

of human health to the natural environment encourage the natural environmental ethical concern. It is clear that the health approaches of communities like Matetsi implicitly and explicitly trigger ecological concerns. Thus, religious faith communities should in their pastoral care praxis of 'green spirituality' acknowledge the significance of health benefits that come from nature to be able to activate natural environmental concerns in communities.

Fertility of women and Mother Earth: An Ethiopian theological perspective

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■ Introduction

Ethiopia ranks after Egypt and Nigeria as the third most populous nation in Africa. Other sources indicate the current population to be over 100 million but the official figure is 80 million people of which 85.3% of the entire population lives in rural areas. This ancient country is highly religious with 43% Orthodox Christian, 33.9% Muslim, 18.6% Protestant Christian, 2.6% Traditional Religion, 0.7% Catholic and 0.6% others (Central Statistics Agency Ethiopia 2007). Like other traditional societies in Africa, Ethiopian society lives under patriarchal structures that usually limit the role of women to the home.

Traditionally women are praised for their role as house makers and celebrated as mothers. Depending on the culture of a given ethnic group, the

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status accorded to women might vary slightly. Nevertheless, even before the feminist consciousness impacted the African academy, there were notable Empresses (such as Zawditu who reigned from 1916 to 1930) and princesses (such as Taitu, wife of Menelik II who reigned from 1889 to 1909) and they played a key role in the political and ecclesiastical affairs of the nation. Even more remarkably, in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, some women rose to prominence in teaching *Qene* (Poetry) in the traditional school and others were elevated to sainthood by the church. For example, Emahoy Gelanesh of Gojjam was so well-versed in the traditional education of the church that students flocked to her from near and far and she taught for 50 years (Tesfaye n.d.). Another example is a 17th century nun St. Welete-Petros, who was elevated to sainthood by the church for her role in defending the ancient Orthodox faith from European incursions (Belcher & Kleiner 2015). Ethiopian women's role in ardently defending the faith is also witnessed by the Jesuit missionaries whose attempt to convert the church of Ethiopia from Alexandrian to Latin Christianity failed because of the noble women (Belcher & Kleiner 2015). Women not only defended their Christian Orthodox tradition, but they also played a crucial role in establishing monasteries and churches, thereby indirectly contributing to the protection of forests and the environment. Among others, Empress Menen (wife of Emperor Haile Selassie I who reigned from 1930 to 1974) is credited with renovating and endowing many Orthodox churches (Haregewein 2011).

Notwithstanding the prominent position women held in the theological and political history of Ethiopia, the other side which is far too common needs to be told. In most cases, an Ethiopian woman commands little respect compared to her male siblings. According to Wilder, Bogalech and Mengistu (2007:5), 'as soon as a young woman is able, she takes the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings through preparing their food, fetching water and firewood'. In her study on Arsi Oromo, Sena Gonfa (2008:x) laments about numerous 'ancient' Ethiopian proverbs that depict women as 'weak and dependent, illogical, irrational, irresponsible, ignorant, jealous, unfaithful, unreliable and unpredictable, and as inferior members of their community'. This is not to suggest that there are no more positive Ethiopian proverbs about women. Rather, the numerous negative ones have greater impact on the mindset of little girls and women and hence affect their flourishing more than the positive ones. There is also another proverb which says *Setena meret yemaychilut yelem* (ሰተና መለት የመግቻንት የለም) [There is nothing which a woman and the Earth cannot withstand]. This seems to suggest that women can take on anything – testifying to their resilience; meaning that whatever is done to a woman and the Earth, they will resist and survive.

As is common in such a traditional society, ownership of land and decision-making on its fruits is mostly assumed by men. In the limited instances where

women do own land, they can lose when they divorce or migrate (Fekerte 1991). Getting married and bearing children is taken for granted. Having a girl child is important for mothers, simply because they count on her help with household chores (which women most of the time do singlehandedly) on top of other chores including working on the land. Carrying the family's name, however, makes boys more preferable. Needless to say, infertile women (and sometimes those with fewer children and who give birth to girl children only) suffer spiritually, emotionally and at times physically even when biological evidence is not sufficient to verify the cause of their blame.

Studies show that land degradation is a matter of great concern which among other factors has plunged the country in a cycle of famine. The scarcity of food that follows affects women and children the most. As a highly religious society, fertility or lack of it (be it of human beings or the land) in Ethiopia is mostly associated with the blessing or wrath of God (Kebede et al. 2007). There is a glimpse of hope, however. The salutary actions of the 2019 Nobel Laurette Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in appointing women to hold 50% of his cabinet and leading the movement of planting 350 million trees in a day with his green legacy initiative is raising hope for re-visitation of the condition of women and Earth. His actions recognised women as major players in the development of the nation and brought to the forefront the need to address environmental degradation. This chapter looks at the traditional reactions towards infertility in general and interrogates the church's response in particular especially during this rising peak of the Anthropocene.

■ Analytical framework

The woman-nature link has both been celebrated and critiqued by environmentalists. Even within ecofeminist traditions, there are varying approaches to linking femininity with nature (Cabo 2011; Swanson 2015). The basis of ecofeminism, however, is the connection between ecology and feminism. It is a conceptional call to action for gender and ecological justice. As a theological concept, ecofeminism emphasises the idea that we are interconnected and interdependent as humans and the rest of creation, ecofeminists refer to as Mother Earth. The critique of ecofeminism is its possibility of error on grounds of 'biological existentialism', that is, by connecting women to Mother Earth it intricately places the onus of preserving the Earth (and the house or home) solely on the feminine (Mbano-Moyo 2009). I use what Fulata L. Moyo refers to as 'indigenous African ecofeminist ethics' which calls Christians to live the Christian gospel in such a way that it becomes part of healing and restoration from woundedness caused by ecological and gender injustice especially in the face of infertility of both human beings and Mother Earth.

■ Fertility of women

■ Fertility and identity

Traditionally, African women's identity is connected with their role as wives and mothers. As the unwritten law of the society views a woman as 'incomplete unless married and with children' (Cox 2013), women are accorded little respect apart from these roles. Therefore, people continue to inquire when a woman is planning to get married and to have a baby. Oduyoye's experience is a case in point. She writes that regarding her childlessness, people have said to her, 'Don't say "no," say "not yet"' (Oduyoye 1999:8). The possibility of women not having biological children does not seem to cross the minds of people (Cox 2013).

A study conducted by Balcomb et al. (2017) among Orthodox Christians, Evangelicals and Muslims in Addis Ababa indicates that marriage is considered as sacred. Most of the participants are of the opinion that childlessness should not lead to automatic divorce because children are a gift from God and, as a gift, their coming in a family can only be determined by the giver, God. Therefore, in case of childlessness, prayer and endurance are the prime ways of dealing with the challenge. However, the findings of the same research showed that childlessness shakes marriage and can lead to separation and even divorce. Unlike Christians, Muslims seem to have less difficulty handling infertility. Similar to the customs of the ancient world (Cox 2013), it is quite acceptable for them to have children with a second wife (Balcomb et al. 2017).

Mostly, childlessness is blamed on women who in most cases silently accept it unlike men would (Cox 2013). In some cases, there are people who cannot even imagine that males can be infertile (Kebede et al. 2007). At times childlessness is interpreted as showing that the woman was promiscuous, or even that she had multiple abortions prior to marriage (Oduyoye 1999). It is not just the society; women themselves are socialised to take the blame for many things including infertility and many other wrongs, even suffering silently from abuse of all kinds. A research conducted in the Amhara region in the Northern part of Ethiopia showed that childless women were disrespected, viewed as worthless and incomplete (Tinsae 2009). As is common in many traditional societies, the worth of Ethiopian women is tied mainly to their contribution at home as wives, mothers and home makers (Seblewengel 2016). Women, therefore, find it very difficult to get on with their lives if childless whether barren or if not able to have more children.

■ Fertility and access to land

Even though the Ethiopian Constitution recognises gender equality (Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 1995) and the

rural land administration legislation which was enacted by the government entitles women to own rural land (Hussein 2014), ancient oral customs seem to prevail over it. Almaz (2007) observes that women have limited access to and control over land. Even in the few instances where women have access to land, there is no evidence that they benefit from it simply because men control the land, other household assets and income. According to Almaz, female-headed households can be severely poor. In order to support their children in the absence of the father, or to have additional income, women sell traditional alcoholic drinks and firewood (Almaz 2007). We shall discuss later the cyclic nature of poverty, selling fuelwood and its impact on land degradation.

Even though full control of land is difficult to attain, studies show that women who have children have a better access to land (Fikir 2011). In fact, the more children they have, the better the access they can have. Sadly, women who are infertile are neglected or divorced sometimes without any hope to share the resources even those that were acquired during their marriage (Fikir 2011). The Family Code, however, rules that common properties are to be divided equally between the spouses (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, The Revised Family Code 2000). Fertility, therefore, secures social standing, is tied to means of livelihood, and serves as an assured retirement plan for women in Africa.

Fertility and faith

In addition to robbing women of material gains, social and physical security, infertility also casts doubt on the depth of their spirituality. In this section, some of the interpretations given as regards to why childlessness and the solutions are discussed. Firstly, infertility is associated with God as the giver and withholder of life. Often, God's act of withholding is associated with God's displeasure. According to Cox, infertility was a sign that a woman had somehow displeased God. For Cox conceiving a child confirmed God's joy about the woman and it assured her of her place in the ancient household (Cox 2013:3). Some still believe that infertility is a sign that God was displeased with them (Fikir 2011). The stories of the matriarchs in the Old Testament such as Sarah, who were infertile but were visited by the Lord later in life, give hope to childless women. Oduyoye (1999:115) asserts that it is unfortunate that 'Christianity does not seem to have stories from which the childless can draw strength'. It is interesting to also note that the Bible does not attribute barrenness to men, and therefore, do not also speak about the visitation of God upon infertile men. The Psalmist and Hannah praise God as the one who gives children to the barren woman (cf. 1 Sm 2, Ps 113:9). Here we see how the act of God in making the barren woman becoming a joyful mother of children and therefore ensuring that her marriage is sealed. Thus, it is only God who can obviate the situation.

Secondly, infertility is believed to be caused by malevolent spirits and an evil eye. The evil eye is associated with envy over a number of things. Finneran (2003:429) notes that 'the most important times for evil eye attack include: meal times, illness, pregnancy, cattle-growing and crop raising'. Among the followers of Ethiopian Orthodox, 35% believe in the bad effect of the evil eye (Pew Forum 2017). This power of curse or spells to harm others is said to be lower in Ethiopia compared to other African countries (Pew Forum 2017). In some cases, this curse is also associated with possession by the Zar³⁰ spirit which among other things is believed to sterilise people (Fikir 2011). Finally, some even associated barrenness with failure to have undergone female genital mutilation (FGM), thereby by implication, they provide a justification for this horrendous practice of mutilating girls (Fikir 2011).

There is little awareness about medical interventions to cure infertility. Even those who believe that it is curable still maintained that it was based on God's will (Kebede et al. 2007). Among the countries surveyed, majority of Orthodox Christians believe that the circumstances of one's life are largely predetermined (Pew Forum 2017). Such belief can result in a fatalistic outlook on life and demotivate any effort to obviate the situation. When childlessness is associated with divine disfavour the general expectation is that appeasing the gods averts the situation (Sewpaul 1999). Needless to say, there is a tremendous apprehension over harm brought by malevolent spirits and jealous people (Finneran 2003). Depending on their faith, therefore, people use various mechanisms to protect themselves and their flock and fields from attack by evil spirits and human beings under their influence (Kibor 2006).

The Oromo (the largest ethnic people in Ethiopia) women seek blessing from older mothers and/or performing religious ritual in which they pray to a female goddess Atete (Hussein 2004). Ironically, the prayer offered on behalf of the infertile woman among the Arsi Oromo includes the following phrase 'May she next year bear a baby son who inherits the homestead!' (Hussein 2004:112).

The Orthodox Church followers avert infertility by drinking and being immersed in *Tsebel* [holy water]. There are sacred fountains that are reputed for their cures to infertility. At times infertile women stand in front of people in the church carrying the book entitled Miracles of Mary and receive their blessings (Fikir 2011). Making vows to angels and the saints is also common. In their desperation, women also visit diviners or herbalists who identify themselves with Islam and Christianity. Such visits can be costly and result in the prescription of various rituals. Sometimes desperate infertile women end

30. It is a *spirit* possession cult found in the Horn of Africa, and some of the countries in the Middle East. There are people who look at the Zar spirit as demonic, but there are others who believe that it has its origins in God; ordained to protect and guide humanity.

up being sexually abused by diviners, spiritualists and even medical personnel (Fikir 2011).

Turning to God for solution is a common practice among Evangelicals. Usually, the desired cure is mediated through prayer by ministers in the church. Some are reputed to be specially gifted to heal infertility. Childless women are encouraged to believe that God works miracles. One pastor invites barren women to come to the stage and upon praying for them he would ask them to take off their coat, or shawl and hold it by faith as if they are carrying an infant (Balcomb et al. 2017). While there are success stories upon prayer and conducting other religious actions, there are also unsuccessful stories. When infertility is not cured, some women want the church to give a blessing to the husband to have a child from another woman and raise the child with his wife. Again, the underlining assumption is that it is the woman who is infertile (Balcomb et al. 2017). Even though there is no evidence that churches entertain such requests, their silence promotes the view that childlessness is a 'shameful and pitiable void' (Oduyoye 1999:115) that subjects women to much pain.

One can argue that all this suffering that childless women accept actually is part of the fact that patriarchy as a system of domination in Ethiopia needs to be systematically challenged. The current government's elevation of several women into political leadership positions is a good sign of progress towards gender justice. The expected hope is that these women will be able to challenge such stigmatisation of childless women and take a more scientific approach to address childlessness. Moreover, an African indigenous ecofeminist ethics should also imply that motherhood is not only biological but can also be through adoption especially because Ethiopia is not short of homeless orphaned children who need love to become responsible citizen.

As ecofeminist ethics are based on the acknowledgement of the reality that the feminine in patriarchal communities are often the most disadvantaged; in this section, we will move from the human infertility to that of the land – that, in Ethiopia, is interestingly also attributed to an act of God. There are numerous sayings and proverbs in Ethiopia which underline both God's sovereignty over all as well as hinting on the helplessness of human beings in the face of natural disasters. For example (Azeze 1998):

‘አኅበ፡ የልሁ የልሁ ምቃ የልሁ የልሁ እብከሁ አያዥለሁ እንደሸት ልሁታልሁ ተዘረዘሩም እናዚሁ ቅብቅበ፡ ያውራልሁ	It never rains but pours; It never shines but scorches; Dear God, what do you want me to do? If You wish to till it Yourself, Here! Here is [my] farm, I am leaving it for you!. (p. 126)
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Such attribution of disaster and deliverance from it to God is not unique to Ethiopians. In 1616, there was an epidemic in the Northern part of Ethiopia

which wiped entire villages of Orthodox Christians, but followers of Catholicism were spared. Writing about the catastrophe, a Portuguese missionary Aloysius de Azevedo described it as a sign of divine favour on Catholics as followers of the true religion (Azeze 1998).

As the first to suffer the consequences of bareness and infertility of land, women can play a frontline role in searching for and applying various protection mechanisms and remedies. The sole attribution of infertility of women and the land to the supernatural seems to have limited the society from seeing its role in addressing them. It can also lead to a defeatist attitude altogether. In other words, the role of human beings can be diminished.

■ Women as playing an important part in land conservation

There are lots of efforts towards curbing soil degradation but with little acknowledged input from women. The need for involving women has been emphasised by various bodies including the UN (2002). Karanja argues that participating women in the interventions on environmental issues at all levels is a must, not only because women are most affected but also because doing so ensures their equal participation in decision-making. She also bases her argument on the fact that involving women would bring more sustainable solutions to the problem because they are responsible for ‘subsistence farming’ in Africa and unlike men, often because of their motherhood responsibilities, they usually cannot relocate during natural disasters (Karanja n.d.).

Even though women consider having children as ‘a unique privilege’, their mobility is restricted because of having to care for them and the complications during birth continue to claim their lives (Karanja n.d.). Moreover, the dire state of women affects the whole community simply because they bear the responsibility of caring for their children, the elderly and the infirm. Among other methods, conservations projects use offering health care as ‘a potent entrée into a community and increase people’s willingness to work with [them]’ (Wan, Colfer & Powell 2011:379).

Involving women in decision-making and in addressing their rights and ensuring their safety can result in the well-being of the entire community. Studies show that when their right to own land is respected, women are more active and effective than men in soil conservation. For example (USAID LANDLINKS 2016):

[/]n Rwanda, women with formalized land rights were 19 percent more likely to engage in soil conservation, compared to 10 percent among men. In Ethiopia, an increase in land allocated to women decreased household food insecurity by 36 percent. (n.p.)

Moreover, Wan et al. (2011) highlight the fact that women's customary use of nature for fuelwood, herbs, game meat, fibres and wild fruits motivates them to be repositories of considerable ecological knowledge. Women are also proven to have most reliable knowledge about the availability for and appropriate location of sources of water so that well digging projects are strongly advised to consult with them (Commonwealth Secretariat 1996).

As most of the fuelwood carriers are women, they 'are the logical parties to involve in efforts to address these interlinked issues' (Wan et al. 2009:379). Wan et al. cite Kidanu's argument in the study regarding the links between climate change and population in Ethiopia ' [...] that increases in population were the major cause of deforestation in their forests, leading in turn to climate change' (Wan et al. 2009:379). Daniel et al. (2015) make a similar observation that controlling fertility gives freedom to mothers, enables parents to provide a better care for their children and limits hunger. In a similar manner, the land will be restored when it is used responsibly (Daniel et al. 2015).

It is also vital to educate and empower women to control their own fertility because researches show that soil degradation and poverty can partly be addressed if population growth is controlled (USAID LANDLINKS 2019). Going about empowering women, however, requires extra effort mostly because of the demeaning words and actions women were subjected to for time immemorial. The Ethiopian Constitution recognises this and article 35 stipulates (Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 1995):

The historical legacy of inequality and discrimination suffered by women in Ethiopia taken into account, women, in order to remedy this legacy, are entitled to affirmative measures. The purpose of such measures shall be to provide special attention to women so as to enable them to compete and participate on the basis of equality with men in political, social and economic life as well as in public and private institutions. (n.p.)

Using the African indigenous ecofeminist ethical analysis, one can argue that women's experience of their rights being denied makes them sense more deeply their interconnectedness and interdependence with the Mother Earth as compared to men. Their fight to restore their dignity as created in the image of God gives them insights and empathy to also fight for ecological justice. It is, therefore, at the best interest of the nation to bring on board women fuelwood collectors in the effort to conserve the soil and protect the environment. After all, it is women who sustain the community in one way or another. As the British MP Vera Baird lamented, however, despite the egalitarian constitution Ethiopia has and the fact that the role of Ethiopian women in the society is well-chronicled, women's status continues to receive less attention (Baird 2004).

■ Way forward

■ Embracing indigenous and ancient wisdom

As John Mbiti argued decades ago, the intense religiosity of Africans is attested and celebrated by many other African theologians. Such notorious religiosity provides a space to discuss various forms of changes (Tarusarira 2017). It also provides religious reasoning to all kinds of rituals and practices even those that end up being harmful to women. An example is the rationale behind practising FGM among the Argoba in Ethiopia. It is believed that the prayers of uncut women will not be answered by the divine (Seblewengel, Daniel & Workneh 2007). It can be argued, therefore, that in Africa, culture, religion and life are intricately connected. Approaching ecological injustice and concerns about human and land fertility can be more effective when addressed intersectionally with indigenous beliefs about nature and our interconnectedness and interdependence with it. In the words of Tarusarira (2017):

[At] the foundation of the African cosmovision lies a deep reverence and respect for the natural world. Human beings are seen as being spiritually connected to all that happens within the greater frameworks of nature. (p. 408)

There is significant evidence of Ethiopian indigenous societies practicing the preservation of natural resources, living in harmony with nature and celebrating women's vital role in this process. The Oromo people, for example, believe in the co-existence of woman and nature as interconnected and interdependent. Women are believed to be closer to nature in their role of bearing and caring for and nurturing life (Hussein 2004). The prayers of women are also highly valued as being more effective than those of men, especially during natural and/or human-made disasters.

According to Geremew and Hunduma (2018), in the indigenous religion of the Oromo of Hararghe, it is believed that human beings have a kinship relationship with nature. It is strongly believed that disrupting the harmonious relationship with the environment can invoke divine wrath thereby resulting in draught, famine, disease and war. Members of this community refrain from cutting trees unless it is necessary and for each tree cut, they express their condolences by putting green grass on the remaining parts of the tree with the prayerful hope that it will quickly recuperate. Further, Geremew and Hunduma (2018:10) add, 'Hence, trees are preserved not only for their shade, majestic look, but also for their conservation impact on their environment'. I understand that the implications of Genesis 1:26 (what ruling over creation entails) are subjects of much debate. However, the recognition that nature is our kin and therefore we should care for it and use it responsibly is an important spiritual ethics that calls Ethiopian Christians for deeper reflections and learning from the indigenous religion of the Oromo people.

Moreover, organisations that embark on various activities towards conserving the environment should integrate these indigenous ethics of kinship and care. Tarusarira (2017:410) remarks, 'Integration refers to respect and acknowledgement of the religious beliefs of the people to ensure their programmes are not antagonistic to the beliefs of the people'. Tarusarira also highlights the fact that traditionally the blessing of the ancestors and/or traditional medicine people is sought prior to engaging in any activity. He observes that Africans seem to lack confidence and commitment unless rituals are carried out. 'Such engagement tends to depict the African as inherently lacking human power' (Tarusarira, 2017:409). One may or may not agree with the need for such utter dependence on the spirit world and its mediums. However, toiling to bring about lasting change in the absence of religious engagement (be it traditional or ecclesiastical) can be insurmountable.

The eco-theology of Oromo indigenous religion embodies the African indigenous ecofeminist ideals, including Oromo people's acknowledgement that human life depends on the existence of the Earth (Geremew & Hunduma 2018). The emphasis on the beauty and harmony of nature and the need for human beings to care and co-exist responsibly with nature articulates a biblical revelation, which teaches that creation is a marvellous handwork of God and that human beings are to work hard responsibly (cf. Ps 8; 2 Th 3).

Eco-theology and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

In the northern highlands of Ethiopia there are forests that are revered by the followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Goodin, Alemayehu and Lowman (2019) observe that each monastery and church is a home to a forest. Hermits live deep in the forest secluded from people and the locals call them invisible saints. The hermits pray and intercede for the people. Because of the spiritual values attached to the forests, locals consider them as holy and refrain from cutting trees even during drought and famine. The forests also 'serve as the final resting place of priests, monks, and nuns who have been buried there over many centuries' (Goodin et al. 2019:15). Followers of the church, therefore, show great dedication to preservation and extension of the forests in sacred grounds. On the contrary, reforestation programs outside the holy grounds enjoy little support.

The authors observe that more than their economic benefit, the status of the forests as Holy sites motivates people to protect them (Goodin et al. 2019). The motivation of the faithful to protect the forests, therefore, stems from considering the ground they are rooted in as sacred. In the ecclesiology of the Orthodox Church, the compound of the church where prayers are offered, the faithful come to worship and the remains of the saints are put to rest, is believed to be the abode of God. The church has a strong stake in the survival of indigenous plants 'including olive trees (*Olea europaea* ssp. *africana*)', which

the gardens typically feature due to their prominence in the Bible' (Lett 2019). The irony though is that the poor fuelwood collector women and the land outside of the sacred grounds of the church seem to be given little attention. It seems that the ancient church has effectively taught its followers to 'engage in socially approved activities which had more religious and cultural implications than material life and wealth' (Baye 2017:424). Almsgiving, for example, is common because this is highly emphasised for the attainment of righteousness. Wealthy Orthodox Christians prepare a big feast at least once a year in the name of a saint or an angel and feed the poor – that is considered as generosity. Beggars are not usually found on the doorsteps of evangelical churches but at the Orthodox churches.

The effort of the church to protect the forest in its vicinity is exemplary. One cannot help but imagine the change that would arise if all church traditions intentionally kept such sacred groves, and if such a strong commitment overflowed to include the surroundings outside of the sacred grounds. The faithful Orthodox believers do not tolerate anyone who dares to break a branch of a tree in the vicinity of the church or monastery but are yet to work on standing up for the God-given rights of women and make organised effort to help poor women fuelwood collectors get on their feet. If the ecclesiology of the ancient church is re-examined and the environmental protection made to extend beyond the boundaries of the church, if reflections are made on followers of Christ as temples of the living God, the deadly effects of environmental degradation and the suffering of women as a result might be minimised.

Even though it seems to be limited to the compounds of the church and monasteries, the strong commitment of the Orthodox followers to care for the trees speaks to Evangelicals who preach that the Earth is the Lord's but may not pay much attention to the environment. The generosity of the Orthodox followers is commendable. However, the church's theology of sacred ground needs rethinking in light of the whole Earth and all that is in it as belonging to God and therefore, this should include protecting the sacred lives of women.

The redemption of creation

Christianity at times is accused of giving a licence for the exploitation of creation (World Evangelical Fellowship 1992). If not interpreted and understood correctly, some passages might be used wrongly. For example, passages such as 2 Peter 3 which says:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the Earth and everything done in it will be laid bare (v. 10; NIV)

Also, Philippians 3:20 saying ‘But our citizenship is in Heaven’ can be used to hinder efforts towards the care of creation. Working towards examining and correcting one’s creation theology is foundational because actions towards protecting or neglecting the Earth flow from it.

The story of having trees cut down that were believed to be abodes of demons is part of the monastic movement of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Dudley, Higgins-Zogib & Mansourian 2005). Evangelical churches too have a history of power encounter on which they engaged in cutting down trees which were revered by communities as objects of worship. Such an action was used to prove the powerlessness of Satan in the face of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Seblewengel 2019).

In a study conducted among Evangelicals, Orthodox and Muslims in Addis Ababa, the participants were asked, ‘If you or someone else wanted to cut down a tree (e.g. on your property) that was considered sacred, what would you do?’ Some of the evangelical participants associated the term sacred with a pagan worship and cutting down the tree as appropriate power encounter. Few said that they might keep it for environmental reasons. As hinted above, in the history of evangelical movement, reverence towards nature is associated with pagan worship which was greeted with a power encounter resulting in the conversion of multitudes (Balcomb et al. 2017).

The needed involvement, at least in the part of Christians is to engage the teaching of the Bible about the care of creation. God is not to be identified with creation. Nearly 30 years ago, Evangelicals saw the need to come out and state their position on the relationship between God and creation and the responsibility of Christians in creation’s care. They (World Evangelical Fellowship 1992) attested that God is distinct from nature:

[Y]et deeply involved in it. This involvement arises not from natural necessity (as though the Earth were God or part of God) but from the triune God’s free love and grace. God the Son, as the eternal Word, gives form to all creatures, and became human flesh, with which all creatures are interconnected; while God the Spirit breathes energy into all. (p. 27)

The Bible also teaches that the fall affected not only human beings but the entire created world. In his exposition of Romans 8:20–21, Desta observes ‘God’s judicial decision was pronounced against creation because of Adam, because of humanity’ (2019:57). In this passage, Paul writes how creation groans waiting for its redemption just as Christians wait for the redemption of their bodies. Objects of oppression on the one hand and the subjects of ‘groaning’ and ‘crying out’ on the other are both humanity and creation (Desta 2019:59). Desta supports the argument that the redemption of humanity involves the redemption of creation as well (Desta 2019).

The created world and human beings, therefore, are interconnected. It goes without saying that the church needs to be intentional about making social

issues part of its public theology that is articulated in life through liturgy, prayers, sermons, etc. Offering prayers for the infertile, the environment, the oppressed girls and women and being intentional about having sermons on these and related themes can sensitise the Christian believers and society as a whole about the care of creation and the plight of the oppressed, the majority of which are women. Churches, therefore, need to strengthen the tie between diakonia (the development wing) and spiritual nourishment ministries because these are part and parcel of Christian spirituality that in turn empower women sustainably. A notable effort is made by the Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church which has numerous projects. Some of the projects successfully covered barren lands with green forest (Aklilu 2003).

■ Theological reflections on infertility

As is common in the rest of Africa, many Ethiopians maintain that 'a woman's primary role is motherhood' (Cox 2013:14). Oduyoye indicates the value of seeing procreativity differently, where the childless could claim that their lives were lived as a doxology to God, and their creative command became 'increase in humanity' (Oduyoye 1999:118). Multiply the 'likeness to God for which you have the potential' (Oduyoye 1999:118). Multiply the 'fullness of humanity that is found in Christ' (Oduyoye 1999:118). Fill the Earth with the glory of God. Increase in creativity. Bring into being that which God can look upon and pronounce 'good', even 'very good' (Oduyoye 1999:118).

In her discussion on the theology of fertility, Cox rightly observes that infertility harshly illuminates our finitude. Children are a gift from God, but God could withhold that gift (Cox 2013). She bases her argument on the fact that Christians are adopted children of God (therefore are brothers and sisters). According to her this truth should enable us to look at adoptive parenthood as equal to the biological one. She adds, 'we have to hold in tension the importance of biological connections with the Christian belief that life-giving love transcends biological connection' (Cox 2013:11).

Christians, therefore, are to accompany infertile couples in the journey not as those who have the answers, neither with an attitude of fixing the broken, but as fellow pilgrims. God is praised as the one who makes fruitful the barren land (Ps 107, 104) and the barren woman (Ps 113).

■ Conclusion

Even though nearly all of the Ethiopian population is religious, little attention seems to be paid towards the plight of women and environmental degradation. Women's own fertility or that of the land, therefore, continues to affect them physically, spiritually and emotionally. Despite the wealth of knowledge that women have about the environment and are primarily affected by its

degradation, they have little say over efforts to conserve the land. This chapter echoes the argument that churches need to break their silence over the oppression of women and the Earth.

We have seen that the general attribution of infertility to the supernatural seems to contribute to society taking little or no responsibility to address both. As a way forward, it is argued that churches and society at large can learn from indigenous perceptions and women's perspectives towards the care of creation and the protection and defence of women's dignity and rights. The belief of indigenous (traditional) communities about their understanding of being interconnected and interdependent with creation as Mother Earth is worth learning from. Secondly, a critical reflection on the Orthodox Church's theology of the church as the abode of God and the consequent protection of land can serve as a starting point for a conversation about the care of creation. Similarly, the theology that believers are God's temples and that God is the author of life can also challenge the attitude of Christians towards childlessness. In the same vein, it is also vital to educate and empower women to control their fertility because soil degradation, which is partly caused by deforestation, can partly be addressed if population growth is controlled.

The church in Ethiopia, therefore, needs to break its silence over infertility by ministering to the childless, advocating for women whose worth is attached to their marital status and having children and actively participating in the effort to curb environmental degradation. Such an active participation includes mainstreaming creation care by addressing environmental protection and issues that have to do with human fertility in the liturgy, prayers and sermons in the church.

It is fitting to conclude by going back to the Amharic proverb which asserts *Setena meret yemaychilut yelem* (ሰተና ሚሩት የማይችሉት የለም). With our African indigenous ecofeminist ethical analysis, we will stick to the meaning that 'there is nothing that a woman and the Mother Earth cannot withstand'. This proverb, therefore, testifies to the power of women and nature to be able to defy oppression and be resilient in the face of all the odds in the Ethiopian patriarchal context.

Mutual stewardship and the ethics of the environment: Ikare women as a case study

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■ Introduction

Resources obtained entirely from nature have been of tremendous use in maintaining and sustaining the human race. Over time, this dependence has resulted in a parasitic relationship that has led to the exploitation of nature to a detrimental level. The result of this parasitic relationship between nature and the human race is the cause of the global environmental crisis and natural disasters. With no end in sight to the consistent abuse of nature's resources, the environment is becoming toxic even for human habitation as nature's cycle of replenishment is being consistently disturbed by human activities such as deforestation, hunting and poaching to mention a few.

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This connection between the Earth or more specifically nature and the woman is partly what ecofeminism is about. Ecofeminism combines feminism and ecology into a form that sheds light on the subjection of the female gender by the male gender as well as the dominance of nature by human beings (Rakoczy 2012). Siwila (2014:132) is of the opinion that third-world countries have developed their own concepts of ecofeminism which reflects ways in which issues of women and nature are perspective in their particular context. Thus, she describes ecofeminism as a challenging multifaceted and multilocated structure which draws on the basis that some ideologies such as sexuality do not only authorise the oppression on human but also sanctions the oppression of nature (Greta 1993:12). Nature has been expressed in feminine terms, such as 'Mother Nature', 'virgin soil', 'rape of the land' and 'barren land', expressing the shared connection between women and nature in matters of the lived experiences of women in a patriarchal world. This opinion has been questioned by authors on the ground of the influence of colonisation on the African mind (Chammah 2016).

Understanding the environment is pivotal to the knowledge of how to care and sustain it. Caring for the environment and at the same time replenishing nature is far enormous than expecting it to be done by a gender. Considering the evident patriarchal manifestations in typical African settings, where the male gender is usually expected to always be at the fore of affairs in all instances, but in matters of care of the environment, this responsibility has been found to fall almost entirely on the shoulders of the female genders, while in actual fact as this study tries to show, the care and nurture of the environment should be the responsibility of both genders on the basis of mutual stewardship.

The people of Ikare-Akoko (a Yoruba people from Ondo state) are a people with equal opportunities for both genders with particular reference to the care of the environment. That more responsibility is given to the female gender when it comes to the environment is a reflection of the basic African concept and socialisation that expects that aspects such as nurturing and care be left exclusively to the female gender. Despite this, the chapter shows that both genders are usually called to work out the care of the environment in Ikare-Akoko as mandated by God in sacred texts, but women seem to be the only ones bearing this responsibility more than men. Thus, the chapter describes how both genders in Ikare care for the environment even though in the traditional sense it is only the women and girls who are socialised to care.

■ Ethics of the environment

Ethics is generally conceived as a branch of philosophy which deals with the right and wrong behaviours. The essence of ethics is to provide guidance for proper living and how to take and make reasonable decisions in

the face of alternatives. In the early part of 20th centuries, philosophers did not do much in the field of applied ethics but spent time on theorising with no clear practical implications. This led to considering applied ethics as a major part of ethics or even as another branch of philosophy. The growth of applied ethics in the 1960s and 1970s changed this perception as ethics was brought into central human issues. Early writings in environmental ethics and medical ethics did not just expand the scope of acceptable topics in philosophical ethics but also calls to question the value of armchair ethical theorising separated from life application pertaining to practical problems.

According to Nils Freytag (2016), the:

[C]oncept of the environment is relative in the sense that it not only applies directly to the natural but also the social space surrounding the living being hereby forming a more holistic descriptive frame. (p. 2)

Environmental ethics is a branch of philosophy that talks about the moral interactions between humans and the environment (both living and non-living) as well as that of the status of the environment itself and its non-human substance (Brennan & Lo 2002). Thus, as a field, it deals in human beings' ethical relationship with the natural environment. The increased agitations on how to define human moral relationship with the rest of the world opened the way for environmental ethics to be developed as a field of study. The commencement of environmental ethics did not take off fully until the 1970s when there were increased agitations based partly on the developed consciousness of the environment and social movements in the 1960s which brought about questions on how to define human moral relationship with the rest of the world. Even at the inception, theorists found it difficult to generate theories that adequately explained the relationship between the humans and the nature. Earlier theories in this respect were criticised based on anthropocentrism and eco-centrism.

Sitze (2016) suggests that religion, social economic structures, science and technology are root causes of environmental degradations. The human species have been considered as the most destructive as their actions have been considered detrimental to the environment. This is seen in the exploitative attitude born out of dominance which the religion suggests as the relationship that should exist between humans and the environment. White asserts that religious world views have a direct impact on human behaviours. Although White started this argument on the exploitative tendencies inherent in Christianity, it should be noted that hierarchy need not necessarily lead to overexploitation (Boersema, Blowers & Martin 2008). It should also be noted that at the core of Jewish environmental ethics is the belief that human beings are accountable for the natural world. The ethics of responsibility follows from the dual aspect of creation recognising human beings as created entities and being created in the divine image teaches that the care of nature is a responsibility to be carried out by humans (eds. Tirosh-Samuelson & Baskin 2011:211).

Contrary to opinions that argue the anthropocentric nature of Judeo-Christian religions, the distribution of nature's wealth is a religious issue and as such Jewish environmental ethics recognises the fact that the 'corruption of the society is associated with the corruption of nature'. This shows the relationship between human beings and nature.

Social economic structures put in place have an impact on the environmental degradation. Sitze (2016) explains how the structured and controlled communist system's production did not care about the harm they made on the environment; their concerns were mainly the profits they make out of production rather than the well-being of the environment. Compared to other societies with less production or industrialisation, production meant little and there was no difference on who controls the means of production or ownership of properties. Technology has been considered as a major contributor to the degradation of the environment. Civilisation has and is still often characterised through growing industries and production. The aftermath of this is the gradual degradation of the environment. But in all, as recommended by Arthur Waskow, there is a need for humans to cultivate the willpower to exercising modesty in the consumption of material resources with feasible profitable expansion (eds. Tirosh-Samuelson & Baskin 2011:211).

■ The concept of mutual stewardship

At the centre of how to treat and give back to the Earth is religion. An interfaith initiative on climate by the WCC was an effort comprising but not limited to Buddhist, Hinduist, Judaist and Muslim, advocated for stewardship of all humans in response to the global climatic change. This further asserts (eds. Rozzi et al. 2016):

[T]hat humans are not owners of the Earth but care takers. Mary Evelyn pinpoints that religious traditions emphasize and share essential values such as reverence, respect, restraint, redistribution, responsibility, and renewal, as important to the care of the environment. (p. 31).

These essential values were also adopted by the Earth Charter initiative started by the UN but completed by the global civil society initiative and finally launched as People's Charter on 29 June 2000 (The Earth Charter Initiative 2016). The values adopted and matched with six corresponding components are 'Cosmological context, Ecological integrity, social equity, economic justice, democracy and non-violence and peace' (eds. Rozzi et al. 2016:31). What then is stewardship? According to Charles Butler, stewardship is when we utilise and manage all God's resources for the glory of God and the betterment of God's creation (ed. Butler 1991). Etymologically, 'stewardship' is derived from two Greek words, *epitropos* meaning 'administrator, leader or coordinator'. In the scope of governance, it means governor or minister. In the New Testament, it means 'guardian', as in Galatians 4:1-2. The second Greek

word is *oikonomia* which is a combination of two words: *oikos*, meaning familial and *nomos* meaning law or rule. In ancient culture, *oikos* and *nomos* used together referred to the administration or management of a household. A steward or *oikonomos* was the ruler of the house but was not the ultimate ruler (Peel 2008; Sitze 2016:17). There were between 18 and 23 instances of 'stewardship' in the New Testament, depending on the translations.

Peel (2008) reveals that a household *oikos* in the:

Greco-Roman culture was not just a family group or habitation but the fundamental financial unit of the community which included everyone who lived in or worked at the house or estate. The Steward was usually a slave to the head of the house in New Testament times. (n.p.)

Despite being a slave (Peel 2008):

[H]e was second in command, authorized to manage the whole family affairs. The essence of stewardship goes two ways; the resources are owned by one person and entrusted with the other person. (n.p.)

The person entrusted with the resources is the steward.

The core essence of the biblical perspective to stewardship stems from the belief that God owns all and man has been entrusted to manage everything in a manner that will bring honour to God and impact eternity. God's ownership of all can be buttressed in Revelation 22:13; Job 4:11. Thus, Christian stewardship refers to the fact that Christians have been commissioned into maintenance and judicious usage of the gifts that God has bestowed on humanity.

Mutual stewardship stems from the very beginning of creation when God created man and woman in the same image and likeness with Him, depositing equal talents involving the same responsibility and expecting equal accountability. As equal image bearers of God, both men and women are called to equal responsibilities of stewardship of the Earth and all its resources on the behalf of God. The general responsibility of a steward includes being faithful, wise and responsible. Stewards are not to be found wasting or abusing the resources that have been placed in their care but rather expected to exercise self-control and proffer solutions to problems. Stewards know that all creations are important and valuable to God and it is expected of stewards to also treat those things as valuable.

■ African culture and gender norms

The African culture is mostly a patriarchal culture. Women are more tended to care aside from the fact that as Africans, girls are socialised to care for the environment and those around and in it. Men have a sense of self as being separate whereas women have an interconnected sense of self. Further explained, these notions of self are the bedrock for two distinct ethical systems. On a closer look, the separate self is piloted on the guiding philosophy

of rights or justices while the interconnected self makes ethically right decisions driven by a sense of responsibility and care.

Thus, men are found to focus on rights while women tend towards care giving. The foundation of these conceptions and resultant ethical systems that follow are uncertain whether they are innate or culturally learned but a cursory look at both genders reveals a particular emphasis on certain attributes that characterises them. Although the effects of socialisation are evident as external, it is preconceived that socialisation helps to accentuate the already innate traits in each gender. For instance, the male gender is characterised with strength and vigour and thus having them socialised along the areas of provider and defence is like bringing what is innate to effective use. Same goes for the female gender as they are seen to be naturally nurturing in character and thus being socialised along this area is like making them properly fit to occupy that which they are naturally meant to fit. The contention arises when each gender is not allowed to choose and determine where they want to function but rather have social, cultural and religious restrictions placed on them which force them to align to a particular expected norm.

Thus, in addressing the issue of gender and the environment in line with responsibilities, knowledge of the fact that men and women are usually not treated the same way but are divided based on certain factors such as religion, age, social status, ethnicity and even sexual orientations obtained from socialisation helps determine the links between gender and the environment. Women play critical roles in managing the natural resources as care givers and are the most affected by environmental degradation.

Gender norms have been seen to greatly influence the impact each gender has on the environment and also dictate how much access to power over natural resources. Keleher and Franklin (2008) conceptualise gender norms as values and attitudes based on social roles and behaviours. It is accepted generally in various cultures that women are care givers and men are providers and protectors. According to this norm, men occupy the breadwinning role in the family while the women occupy the caregiving role. Although men are beginning to occupy the caregiving role, the family care giving still remains with the women.

In most African traditional communities, the girl child is socialised in line of care of the environment that she lives in, aside from that, in the typical setting, women are excepted to cook with combustible firewood that is obtained from the trees that have been cut down and cut into pieces for fuel. Women use trees that are already dry hence their use of wood for fuelwood does not harm the environment compared to the industries that cut trees for industrial purposes. The people of Ikare-Akoko, Ondo State would be studied as a case study of a Nigerian community and its care for the environment.

■ Historical overview of Ikare-Akoko

Ikare was founded by Agbaode, an Ife Prince, one of the many children of *Oduduwa*, the progenitor of the Yoruba race. Agbaode left *Enuowa* quarters in Ile-Ife during the 13th century with members of his family during the dispersal of the princes to other territories to found their own settlements. Guided by the *Ifa* oracle, the sons of Oduduwa, which are, Ooni of Ife, Alafin of Oyo, Deji of Akure, Ewi of Ado-ekiti, Awujale of Ijebuland, Alake of Abeokuta, Owa of Idanre, Owa of Owo, now Olowo of Owo and Prince Agbaode took on the title of Owa Ale of Ikare, all went in search of territories they could call their own. All the princes were not *Obas* [Kings] until they were able to find their own settlements.

Ikare got her name from the weaver birds on the tree on the top of the hill Agbaode that his people stayed under. Weaver birds are called 'Akere' among the people. This tree is known as 'Igi-Akere' because of the presence of these birds. Thus, the town Ikare got her name from here. It was recorded that when Agbaode left Ile-Ife, he came out with some prominent chiefs who included, Olona, Oshodi, Olowu Alaja, Olotun, Olikun, Olokoja, Oloyimmo, Adunlu, Akuko, Asii-Iyama, Deji, Ofua, Olisa and Elekan. They first settled ontop of a hill which today is referred to as the *Oke-Ibaa* (the progenitor's hill) and as guided by the *Ifa*, who told them they would find a brook on the top of the hill. They got the hill and found a brook, called *Omi Atan*, meaning water that does not dry. The two hills are a stretch of hills with two conical tops and between them is a valley (Oripeloye & Akeredolu 2010:16). The taller one is the male, the shorter one is the female, hence the cognomen, 'Omo Oloke Meji Takotabo'. This hill served as a protection to the people against invaders and wild animals.

Ikare is a predominantly agrarian town with the majority of the population being farmers. Cultivation and trading in cash crops such as cocoa, kolanut, coffee and cotton is a major source of income. It also has tourist attraction points such as the *Owa -Ale Hill*, *Omi Atan* spring, *Oju-Oyo*, Agolomolodo Mausoleum, Orimolade Mercyland and Mansoleum, *Aringiya* Brook and Awara dam. There is a cross-section of people from various tribes as well, such as the Igbos from the East, Hausa-Fulani traders from the North who have aided the development of the town.

■ Women in Ikare

Ikare accommodates both genders in the operation of things. This is shown even among the members of Owa Ale Chiefs, women are given positions. The Yeye Onile Aje, Asiwaju Obinrin, Yeye Atobase, though honorary is to show that the Council of Chiefs is not gender biased. Activities that women conduct are frying of *garri* [fried cassava] using the traditional means of energy, firewood. The major means of cooking meals is also firewood. All these have

been said to deteriorate the natural environment; however, in reality, firewood used by women does not contribute to natural environmental deterioration. Women use dry wood for firewood and this wood mainly comes from trees that were cut for industrial purposes by men. The effect of tree felling for industrial purposes is the major cause of deforestation and erosion.

Availability of water: the care of the environment includes the provision of clean and drinkable water to the household. Women and girls play a central role in the provision, management and safeguarding of freshwater as a natural resource and they also play crucial roles in the area of sanitation and for maintaining a hygienic home (Sida 2016:2). This burden of provision of water falls entirely on the shoulders of women and girls who are expected most times to go through extreme lengths to provide especially during dry seasons. The cleaning of the surroundings to make sure that air pollution is not experienced. Despite the availability of wells and the bore holes as major supply of water in the homes, the responsibility of making available water for use is placed predominantly on the female gender in Ikare-Akoko.

However, the use of energy by Ikare women implicitly causes environmental degradation. Ikare women are predominantly reliant on the use of natural resources as sources of energy supply. The use of wood, charcoal and other agricultural wastes as primary sources for energy is seen and considered as a cheap source of energy supply; thus there is hardly a house where this is not being used. Not only do the fumes from the burning of the wood or charcoal lead to air pollution and eventual contribution to the depletion of the ozone layer, they also contribute to health problems, such as respiratory infections and ophthalmic issues. Most *garri* making spots rely on firewood as a source of energy. The process of palm oil extraction is also wholly dependent on the use of firewood. Although women rely on dried wood for firewood, they are forced to cut down trees so that they get enough firewood for energy. This from time to time would result in deforestation, a major environmental problem. One tree felled is too many trees felled, because it causes soil erosion which is usually a major problem in most areas in Ikare-Akoko.

Ikare is an agrarian town with major sustenance from the cultivation and sale of farm produces. Women are involved in agriculture like their male contemporaries and even export cash crops like kola and cocoa. The work they do in farming brings them close and in connection with the environment and natural resources that are used to provide sustenance for their families. On the other hand, the use of chemicals in fighting pests in Ikare has brought destruction to the environment. In wet seasons, these chemicals are transported by water and destroy the natural habitats and aquatic creatures in the rivers. Examples of the destruction of the aquatic environment abound because local communities use swampy locations for agricultural purposes. The cultivation of fishes using natural heathen ponds serves a means of

sustenance. Fish farmers experience losses when their ponds get flooded or when there has been use of chemicals within the vicinity of their ponds and erosion or water carries these poisonous chemicals into their ponds killing fishes and other aquatic animals cultivated. Despite the centrality of care of the environment being given to women, they are accomplices in the destruction of land as they rely on firewood or energy for household and business chores as they fry *garri* for sale. This then challenges the community of Ikare to cultivate mutual stewardship to save and protect the environment.

■ Towards mutual stewardship in protecting the natural environment in Ikare

In as much as actions that contribute to the degradation of the environment are perpetuated by both genders, the responsibility to care for the environment should be borne by both genders. As a result, stewardship should be a mutual responsibility where everyone should be the keeper of the Mother Earth. Stewardship awareness programmes should be introduced in rural communities as much as industrialised communities to protect the environment and in turn protect community members' health. There is a general conception that nature is meant to serve and be used and would restore itself appropriately without any help. Local social group enlightenment programmes should be created which would be aimed at circulating environmental care strategies like tree planting and restoration of the natural resources through such means as recycling or greenhouses. Environmental stewardship education should be introduced to create the necessary awareness to both genders from an early age especially in the school curriculum.

The gendering of Mother Earth as the womb of God should encourage and motivate all humanity men and women, boys and girls to jealously defend Mother Earth as they would defend their own lives. Mutual stewardship is promoted by *Ubuntu* that stimulates mutual responsibilities in communities. *Ubuntu* is an African ethic where everything is interdependent, none is existing in isolation. The mutual stewardship that is suggested by this chapter is based on the interdependence of African communities on Earth, other creation and each other. As much as humans and other creation depend on Mother Earth for food, shelter, warmth, oxygen (life) and all other important components of life, so is the Earth dependent on humans and other creations for her survival. There is no hierarchy in this stewardship; all have a responsibility towards life.

■ Conclusion

A lot of discussion has been done on establishing the links between the female gender and nature and the core of this article which is to bring to light that the care of the environment cannot be considered to be the sole responsibility of

a single gender. Ecological care is next to godliness because God created Heaven and Earth and commanded humanity to be responsible in caring for and nurturing the Earth. Despite the patriarchal settings dominant in Ikare-Akoko, the care of the environment should fall on both genders, because their survival is linked to that of the Earth, the death of Mother Earth means the death of humanity and other creation. Stewardship education should be targeted at enlightening the people and creating awareness of the link between the humans and the environment which is the goal of ecofeminism.

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The theological role of African women and men in sustainable development and environmental justice strongly emerges in this anthology. Picking up the theme and metaphor of the 5th pan-African conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter 'Circle'), 'Mother Earth and Mother Africa', this anthology titled *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Theology* presents original and innovative research by scholarly members and friends of the Circle. The main contribution of the volume is its multi- and trans-disciplinary exploration and reimagining of human relationships to Earth from an African ecofeminist and ecowomanist theological perspective. It engages in critical conversations of re-interpreting and reimagining African cultural, religious, theological, and philosophical perspectives on gender and the Earth. The aim is to construct Earth-friendly relationships in the face of the growing global environmental crisis. Scholarly voices of African women and men from fields such as Theology, Environmental Law and Policy, Tourism, Agricultural Science and Natural Resources and Economics are reflected in the volume, which consists of three parts: (1) *Creation, the Trinity, and Mother Africa*; (2) *Caring for Mother Africa*; and (3) *Mother Africa and her Daughters' (In)Fertility*. Each of the eleven chapters in the volume presents the metaphor of Mother Earth, Mother Africa, and gender relations, with the aim to explore life-affirming, life-enhancing human relationships to Earth from the author's particular area of specialization and context.

This book is a worthwhile and unique recognition by the Circle of women's importance and the continent of Africa. This is recommended in academia where great minds combine their efforts and put forth ideas in a book in honour of the surroundings that have silently shaped us and provide us with unique resources which include life and minerals. This is an unequalled heritage that must be celebrated at a time where Africa has been undermined, negatively discussed, and avoided, yet has produced daughters and sons who acknowledge their roots in order to honour them. The theology of Mother Earth and eco-feminist theologies as discussed in this book redefine the human relationship with the Earth. The overall topic, 'Mother Earth, Mother Africa & Theology', is ideal in an environment where women are faced with many challenges, including abuses and violence during the COVID-19 pandemic as they have encountered in the still impactful HIV and AIDS pandemic, yet they are a pivotal part of human life's equation. The collection of essays has discussed important issues under different topics in a bid to recognise and ascertain the uniqueness and unusual association of the African continent and the woman. This makes the book a unique reference for theology, particularly African Christian theology and Africana Womanism.

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