

**“Tracing the ecological footprints of our foremothers”:  
Towards an African feminist approach to women’s  
connectedness with nature**

*Lilian Cheelo Siwila*

School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics,  
University of KwaZulu Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

*Abstract*

Throughout church history, the subject of ecology has assumed prominence in church circles with resolutions constantly being reached on how the church can and has responded to the ecological crisis. For example, the early church fathers’ experiences of connectedness to nature created another approach to the Christian concept of ecology of that time. A feminist approach to ecology shows that there has been a good amount of research on the subject matter, especially from an interventional perspective. Despite this positive response, this article argues that if ecofeminism is to be effective in responding to issues of ecology, discourses around African women’s embedded ecological spiritualities need to be retrieved and transformed for the liberation of both women and nature. The article uses ecomaternalistic theory to argue for a need to promote the conceptualisation of the interconnectedness between women and nature. The article concludes by showing that discussions on ecofeminism can take different forms in different contexts. Thus in some African contexts this dualistic approach between women and nature also carries positive aspects that need to be identified as a tool for dialogue on African ecofeminism.

**Introduction**

Most of the world’s religions have responded to the issue of ecology and nature using their different religious paradigms. Christianity, despite being one of the world’s largest religions, has been criticised on the way in which it has been responding to issues of ecology. Despite the criticisms, both Christianity and African Tradition Religions hold beliefs that God or the Supreme

Being as understood in African Traditional Religions can also be found in nature. Although scholarship has acknowledged this fact, there is limited literature on the value of indigenous knowledge to African ecofeminism. This has denied the field its essence and significance, especially from a point of feminist spirituality. At the same time, there is also a need for Christian theology to boost its scholarship on the connectedness of indigenous knowledge systems to ecological spiritualities. A close look at the Christian historical approach to care for the environment and how the Christian communities of the early centuries understood the connectedness of nature, religion and humanity will show that the ultimate purpose for their call was stewardship. Only in rare cases would one see a situation where the connectedness between nature and humanity exalted. McDonagh (1990:167) argues that one of the characteristics of the patristic period was a growing sense among the saints to give nature a special place in their lives as part of their ascetic living. In this article I wish to focus on the need to revisit this kind of approach to nature using an African feminist lens. From a Christian historical perspective, the article draws from the works of scholars such as Hildegard of Bingen and her response to nature, as well as responses from the early fathers of the ecstatic era. Using these historical events, the article calls for a need to rethink the value of the ecological indigenous knowledge of the time and how this knowledge can be used to address the value of the interconnectedness of humanity and nature as compared to the dualistic approach of equating humanity with nature, thus creating critical thinking around new ways of engaging in dialogue on the relationship between nature and women which is visible in most societies. The article begins with providing a detailed approach to conceptualising ecofeminism as a way of providing an analysis of how ecofeminism has been understood in different contexts.

### **Conceptualising ecofeminism**

The conceptual framework for this study is focused on ecofeminism. A conceptual framework is a socially constructed set of basic values and beliefs that influences how we see ourselves and the world around us (Warren 1997). Although ecofeminism can be read as a universal concept, it is also interpreted differently according to context, just as the conceptual framework also seriously takes into account contexts such as, race, gender and class. Third World countries have, for example, developed their own concepts of ecofeminism, which reflect ways in which issues of women and nature are perceived in their particular contexts. Ecofeminism can be described as a challenging multifaceted and multilocated structure. It confronts systems of patriarchy, race and class. Ecofeminism broadens the scope of the cultural critique and incorporates disparate yet radically connected elements. Eco-

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feminists' standpoint reflects various positions that can be transformed through time and place. As is reflected in this article, ecofeminism has also proved to be an effective tool in analysing symbolic interactions, myths, narratives and proverbs for their transformative role in retrieving valuable ecological indigenous knowledge. From a spirituality perspective, Kyung (1994:176) states that ecofeminism draws its resources for struggle from more egalitarian body-affirming, nature-respecting religions, cultures and ideologies. It searches for a spirituality which promotes the immanence of God, the sacredness of this world and the wholeness of body. It aims at rediscovering the holiness of matter which is promoted in many ethnic indigenous religions. Clifford (2001:226), on the other hand, argues that strategies for ecofeminism have taken many forms. Among the chief ones are: creation for local grass-roots movements that struggle to end human domination of nonhuman nature; application of a hermeneutics of suspicion to language that promotes the domination of nonhuman nature, corrected by a holistic and organic vision; affirmation of the sacredness of nature. All these concepts go to show how humanity and nature are connected in terms of harmony and not domination. Therefore, from a Christian perspective it becomes imperative to revisit this kind of approach to discussing nature which was also prominent in the patristic era as recorded through the works of great women such as Hildegard of Bingen.

#### **A church history account of the relationship between humanity and nature**

During the early centuries of the Christian history, dominant Christian tradition focused more on divine human relations. However, there were always a few who called for Christians to look beyond dyad to the wider cosmic order. The apologists developed a theology of nature which was reflected in their way of life. According to McDonagh, these monks saw the wilderness as the indwelling of God, a place where there is inherent capacity to reveal the presence of God. Most of them developed intimate relationships with nature to the extent that they lived in close relationship with dangerous animals such as lions as God's created order. The author records an event when a question was posed to one father. "How dost thou content thyself father, who art thou denied the comfort of books? Father Anthony replied my book philosopher is the nature of created things, and as often as I have a mind to read the words of God, it is at my hand" (McDonagh 1990:166). This type of illustration of the relationship between nature and humanity shows a strong interconnectedness of humanity and nature which was seen as

part of their spirituality.<sup>1</sup> From the seventh century onwards, the Benedictine monasteries established in Western Europe developed a theory where all monks were to participate in manual work besides their usual spiritual routines. This manual work, which was a revolutionary departure from the doctrinal normativity of their time, helped these monks to relate to the natural world and appreciate God's order of creation as they came in contact with nature through manual work (McDonagh 1990).

The last historical scenario I wish to discuss is the work of a famous woman who lived in the eleventh and twelfth centuries called Hildegard of Bingen. The work of this remarkable woman makes a unique contribution to the Christian perspective of her time on ecofeminism. Hildegard of Bingen believed that the "divine is present in the greening of the earth" (McDonagh 1990:173). For her, humanity and nature shared commonalities in their response to the divine. As she celebrated the feminine fertility dimension in her poetries, she pulsated with love for the earth when she compared the great love of creator and creation to the love and fidelity with which God binds man and woman together (McDonagh 1990:173). Jean Evans (2009:2), in her writing of the two ecological prophets, states that:

Hildegard can be seen as an ecological prophet both in her cosmology and in her assertion that there is a profound and life-giving power of lush greenness immanent in all creation, and that the destruction of that wet and wondrous life through sin leads to dryness and death at physical and moral levels. Hildegard's visions, her knowledge of the science of her day and her religious faith gave her the conviction of the interrelatedness of all created things. Her contributions are significant as they present an understanding of the universe as an organic living entity.

These scenarios have informed the background and motivation of this study. What is very significant in these writings and what this study also tries to advocate for is the revisiting of the approach of interconnectedness between nature and humanity as reflected in Christian history.

### ***Tracing the footprints of our foremothers: An African ecofeminist perspective***

Having discussed the church history perspective on the connectedness of nature and humanity, I now bring in the African viewpoint where I begin the

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<sup>1</sup> McDonagh (1990) records an incident where monks such as father Anthony lived ascetic lives where they had to deny themselves of what they called worldly pleasures for the sake of saving their souls.

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conversation with the analogy *tracing the footprints of our foremothers*. As an African woman brought up in a matrilineal context where grandmothers played a very important role to define a girl's womanhood, I identify with the context in which this article is located. A grandmother's presence created an opportunity for girls to observe how indigenous knowledge is passed on from the women to the young girls and how this informed the way in which these women responded to feminist spirituality. The narratives and teachings that are presented in this study reflect the realities of how indigenous knowledge embedded in nature is held worthy by indigenous people and passed on from generation to generation. Thus grandmother analogy is relevant in both the African and Christian historical contexts where great feminists such as Hildegard of Bingen can be alluded to as ecofeminist foremothers of the time who contributed to the debates on ecological studies. Scholars such as Phiri (1996), Chirongoma (2005) and Rakoczy (2006) have written on the connectedness between humanity, nature and spirituality. Their works have in many ways focused on the significance of the connectedness of ecological indigenous knowledge drawn from mythical and symbolic language to African women's spirituality. In order to respond to the challenges associated with this connectedness, this article proposes an ecomaternalistic theory as opposed to ecofeminism theory as discussed below.

#### **Ecomaternalistic theory**

From a feminist perspective, the notion that women are identified with nature has historically been asserted in dominant global philosophical and intellectual traditions. According to Warren (1997), these assertions are further regarded as matters of historical fact accepted as truth. These truths are also kept alive by metaphors that describe women as chickens, cows and snakes, while nature is described as barren, virgin, fertile, beautiful and many other adjectives. Warren (1997) and Ruether (1996) argue that the female is naturalised, while nature is feminised. This historical ascertaining of women as connected to nature has been problematised by some of the ecofeminist scholars who argue that the notion could simply re-event the dualistic wheel of oppression where just as the earth is abused by humanity, so are women. While this may be true in its effect, Kao (2010) quotes MacGregor (2006) and Cuomo (1998) who advocate for the retrieval of feminine principles in addressing the subject of ecofeminism. The authors call this kind of approach earth care or ecomaternalistic theory. Therefore, a simple definition of ecomaternalistic theory will be a kind of concept that uses a maternalistic approach to address earth-caring concepts. Merchant (1996) uses women's daily caring and communal form of care to argue that this kind of approach could sustain their connections with nature. This, however, does not mean that ecomaternalism takes on an essentialist view of looking at this

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connectedness, but that it is cautious of the way in which this connectedness is used and understood. To this end, Cuomo (1998:112–115) states:

Ecofeminists who employ ecomaternalist rhetoric need not be committed to biological essentialism or to any deeper ontology of gender but instead could be seen as social constructionists in relating the feminine virtues of care, connectedness, non-violence and earth sensitivity to women's socialisation under conditions of marginalisation and domination.

A good example of this kind of approach is reflected in the way in which African women, especially those of Zambian descent, have used natural objects to train the girls during initiation ceremonies.<sup>2</sup> Therefore a social constructionist approach to ecomaternalism becomes relevant in addressing how symbols and the language used during these initiation ceremonies have become useful to the discussion on the connectedness between women and nature. The use of a social constructionist approach as compared to essentialism in ecomaternalistic theory also helps to move the theory from its ambivalent state to the position of a realistic reflection of how women in most of our African contexts view their connectedness to nature. In this article I employ this theory to show that when ecomaternalism is used as a social construct, the dualistic approach of presenting nature and women has a positive influence, especially from an African ecofeminist perspective. Thus the need to retrieve the ecological indigenous knowledge embedded in this interconnectedness.

Like any other theory, ecomaternalism has its own setback that needs to be taken into consideration in discussing its value and viability. Eaton's concern over this theory is the essentialisation of women, so as to depict them as categorically better suited than men to live in harmony with the earth. This, in some cases, is due to their biological attributions as mothers, menstruating, or to an intrinsic feminine psyche and archetypal structure (Eaton 2005:23). Kao (2010:8), on the other hand, observes that:

the worry is that the naturalization of women's practices of care would work to impede society's perception of women's abilities by rectifying persistent beliefs that they are better suited for the "private" realm of home and hearth and not the

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<sup>2</sup> The case studies that I have presented in this article are not universalised in Zambia, but they represent 2 of the 73 ethnic groups found in this country. However, owing to the fact that these are the two largest ethnic groups, these practices seem to have filtered through into other groups and are almost recognised countrywide. This was one of the challenges faced by the missionaries who could not draw the line as to in which ethnic group a certain cultural practice would fall.

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“public” realm of society, industry, and civic engagement. The flipside of ecomaternalistic discourse, the “feminization” of nature, could also prove damaging in unintended ways. To illustrate, the popular simile of “earth as mother” could easily backfire in contexts where the ideal of the endlessly self-sacrificial mother [is presented.]

While appreciating the concerns on the weaknesses of ecomaternalistic theory raised by the scholars above, I take the argument of Tovia Page as my defence in advocating for this theory. Page (2007:302) states that ecofeminist scholars within the field of religion tend to focus more on concepts and theories than on concrete practical and particularised case studies. Therefore the proposed model below creates a paradigm shift from what has been viewed as the normative by scholars such as Page. The practical approach employed in this study is drawn from lived experience and case study also reflects the significance of ecomaternalistic theory.

#### **Case studies on symbolic and mythical approaches to women’s connectedness with nature**

Through the use of environmental territorial cults and initiation ceremonies, African Traditional Religions have proved to be useful resources to empower women as agents for sustaining the integrity of creation (Phiri 1996:161–172). Clifford (2001) states that grass-roots movements promoting earth healing in which women play leadership roles give testimony to the fundamental transformation of consciousness on how ecofeminism is defined. According to Primavesi (2000), one of the strongest and most enduring hierarchical distinctions made by society has been that between men and women/nature. This has been paralleled by identification between nature and women. Phiri further points out that in the African world views, human beings exist in relation to the universe. This means that there is a special relationship with God, deities, ancestors, human beings and nature. Although the point raised by Phiri can be universalised, it is also important to note that African understanding of nature has a unique way of viewing the relationship between nature and the cosmology. In most African societies, nature and culture carry symbolic relationships with traditional religions that form the core of that particular culture of the local people in their context. For example, among the Tonga people of Zambia certain animals are not eaten by particular clans, as they are seen as their totem.

Metaphorically most of the African ethnic groups use the names of animals or trees in naming their children.<sup>3</sup> Another way in which this is enforced is through the teachings offered to girls during the initiation ceremonies. African women theologians have criticised some of the components of these teachings to the girls for their patriarchal and oppressive nature (Kaunda 2013). However, using ecomaternalistic theory the article argues that these teachings can also be redemptive, especially in their approach to ecology. Thus using objects associated with nature, I will now discuss ways in which these teachings can be proved useful in the field of African ecofeminism.

Kamaraa (2007:139) argues that in most African societies respect for ecology was considered a prerequisite for human well-being. The basic understanding was that all forms of creation exist in a web of relationships. In this section I have selected the commonly employed objects in initiation teachings that are used to pass on indigenous knowledge to girls to show the value of women's connectedness to nature. As Fonten (2006) observes, the spiritual world manifests itself in landscapes through phenomena such as rocks, trees and animals. During the initiation rites of the Tonga and Bemba of Zambia, metaphors, symbols, myths and objects are used to expose the girls to the value of nature for their well-being and their coexistence with the cosmology.

One of the common myths within the Tonga tradition is that a girl is not supposed to harvest pumpkin leaves before the plant drops off its first flowers. If she does, she risks having premature births resulting in infant mortality. This myth warns the girls against the premature harvest of crops that may result in poor yields. Pumpkin plants are delicate crops and before the plant drops its first flowers, the stem is very tender, therefore the need to handle it with care to avoid breaking the main branch. This myth is associated with childbirth since in this culture childbirth is one of the core values of what it means to be a woman. As such, no girl would wish to be childless as this may jeopardise her marriage and social status in the community. Therefore, in order to guard against bringing such misfortune to her life, the girl will try to adhere to these instructions and attach great value to the pumpkin plant, which in this case is associated with her reproductive rights.

Another vital point is that at the birth of a child, the elderly women use the symbol of a pumpkin stem to celebrate the expansion of the family tree. This is illustrated through a praise song that states that the pumpkin

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<sup>3</sup> Among the Tonga people names such as *Cisamu*, meaning tree, are given to children to symbolise that the child's life is like that of a tree, being vulnerable without the support of parents. Therefore an African child is said to be complete when surrounded by other members of the clan. Those born of families whose mothers had problems with childbirth will be called *Michelo* to symbolise that the child was conceived through the support of herbs given to the mother.



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plant has finally spread its branches everywhere. This praise song is associated with the girls' sexual and reproductive health which is celebrated through the birth of a child. From a negative perspective, the same illustration is also used to warn the girls that when they get married, they are not allowed to monitor the movements of their husbands. This is because a man is like a pumpkin stem; he is free to go anywhere he wishes. From a gender perspective, this kind of teaching promotes promiscuity and patriarchal tendencies that have influenced the spread of HIV and AIDS to the detriment of women who in most cases are the victims of infection. This proves the point that metaphoric language associated with nature can also be used to oppress women.

Among the Bemba, the *musuku* tree is one of the symbols of motherhood. During initiation ceremonies, the girls are expected to perform some rituals under this tree. Two small strings of white beads are tied round the twigs of the tree and the girls are expected to take them off with their teeth and give them to the tutors. This is done to honour the *musuku* tree for its abundance in bearing fruits. Therefore honouring the tree is a way of asking for divine abundance in parenthood (Rusinga and Maposa 2010:72). From an ecomaternalistic framework we can argue that the girls' reproductive health, rights and choices are aligned to the *musuku* tree. The girls who are taught these lessons do appreciate the value of the *musuku* tree and they tend to treat it with reverence owing to its perceived sacredness as a giver of life. In this way, even when they grow up, these girls keep their connectedness to the *musuku* tree and its symbolism of reproductive health which is celebrated as part of their cultural heritage.

Another teaching under the care of nature comes in the form of an *allegory*.

A woman went out to dig up medicine for her sick child and after getting the required roots, she left the hole open. A short while after the incident her husband divorced her for no apparent reason. When she consulted diviners, she was told that the bush queens have stolen her marriage. The hole she left open after digging up medicinal roots was used by these queens as an entry point into her marriage.

On the same topic of reproductive health and wellness, the girls are also taught that when seeking to collect medicine from plants, they are to scrape only the bark of the tree and not tamper with the trunk. If they do cut the trunk, the belief is that they are cutting the lifespan of the person to whom the medicine will be administered. This is because the trunk of the tree is seen as the life support of the tree. From an environmental perspective, the cutting of the trunk of the tree will mean the death of the tree, which may

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later lead to deforestation. As Daneel (1998) asserts, through all these teachings perceptions of evil are inanimately applied to environmental destruction in an indigenous spirit aimed at ecological repair. These teachings also aim at establishing drastic measures against environmental trespassers. As such, spirit mediums can be invoked to inflict punishment on trespassers and in the process the environment is saved.

### **Towards a transformative approach to dialogue on African ecofeminism**

Lorentzen and Eaton (2002), reflecting on women's connectedness with nature, suggest that the ecofeminist epistemological claim follows from the connections noted between women and nature. The fact that women are affected most by environmental problems makes them better qualified as experts on such matters and therefore places them in a position of epistemological privilege. From my contextual perspective, this belief has in most cases accorded women ecological epistemological privilege at the expense of men. For example, in most African cultures women are more exposed to traditional medicines associated with reproductive health than men. This means that culturally women are in a more privileged position to aid in creating new practical and intellectual ecological paradigms (Muthuki 2006:10).

The narratives outlined in this article have proved the concept identified by Muthuki. The narratives have also shown that indigenous knowledge derived from these teachings which are embedded in nature can be used to address issues of sexual and reproductive health when teaching girls. Therefore the ecomaternalistic theory used in this article becomes relevant to address the connectedness of women's sexual and reproductive health and nature. I use this theory cautiously, bearing in mind the fluidity that if it is not well applied, it will fall into the trap of essentialising gender, which will take us back to the dualistic approach that tends to make women more vulnerable to nature than men. As discussed earlier, I opt for a social constructionist approach to ecomaternalistic theory in an attempt to contribute to African ecofeminism theories that uphold ecological indigenous knowledge. Muthuki (2006:10) observes:

Ecofeminism is not a homogenous movement, however, but involves a variety of subject positions that are rooted in different feminist practices. These different practices reflect not only different feminist perspectives (such as liberal, traditional Marxist, radical, socialist, black and Third World feminism), but also diverse understandings of the nature of and solution to pressing environmental problems.

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That is why a paradigm shift to dialogue on ecofeminism such as the one adopted in this article becomes imperative, as it helps us to appreciate the fact that an African ecofeminist perspective can help to destabilise these different subjective positions alluded to by Muthuki and move the argument further to include other forms of addressing ecofeminism. A new approach to African ecofeminism will agree with Muthuki that there seems to be a sense that through recourse to earth struggles, a dual struggle of women is generated from ecological activism as is reflected in the life and work of Maathai and her Green Belt Movement (GBM).<sup>4</sup>

In an attempt to transform the way we address ecofeminism, it is important to recognise that the ecological crisis is a global as well as a local phenomenon in which we are all caught up. Our hands may not be "on the chainsaws", but as Northcott (1996:211) further infers, yet our homes and offices are made as products of modern industry. Shiva (1988:69) observes:

Systems of knowledge on which development activity in the contemporary Third World is based are historically and intellectually rooted in the emergence of the "masculine" science of the scientific revolution ... women's holistic knowledge of forestry, agriculture, food processing, soil and water systems is thus delegitimised and displaced by reductionist knowledge. The ecological destruction of nature thus goes hand in hand with the intellectual destruction of women's knowledge and expertise.

In view of the current ecological challenges that are more pronounced for women than men, there is a need to embrace new ways of engaging in ecological debates. One way is the one proposed in this article, that is, to examine how society has responded to indigenous knowledge derived from the peripheral of our societies. In the case of symbolic interactions such as those identified in this study, there is a need to revisit the education derived from these teachings. The question to ask would be how these teachings can contribute to addressing women's reproductive rights. To what extent can these teachings contribute to discussions on the value of ecological indigenous knowledge to the sustainability of nature, and how can such discussions

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<sup>4</sup> Wangari Muta Maathai was born in Nyeri, Kenya. Maathai was an environmental activist. She won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. She was also the founder of the Green Belt Movement, a grass-roots environmental and social justice organisation in Kenya. The GBM uses tree planting as a strategy for environmental conservation, provision of fuel, clean water and income for rural women. Maathai and the GBM have also used tree planting in pressing for democratic reform in advocacy activities and preventing forest destruction and the illegal allocation of public land (see Maathai 2004). Therefore, Maathai has been a strong force in Kenya's environmental and political arenas. She is also known as *mama miti*, a Swahili name meaning the mother of trees. For more information, see Muthuki (2006:4).

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broaden the dialogue on the field of African ecofeminism, especially in the field of African Traditional Religions?

Second, discussions in this article provoked a need to appreciate the value of indigenous knowledge, especially in today's society where theologians are continuously challenged to seek other ways of practising theology. Our church history theology teems with ecological inscriptions that suggest the value alluded to the connectedness of nature and humanity as reflected in this study. This is because theology itself is an earthly affair in the best sense of the word. Therefore, if religion is to meet the demands of its adherence, especially those at the peripheral of society, there is a need to embrace their value systems. Indigenous knowledge in this case is one value system that has been challenged by modernity and colonialism to the extent that some religions have threatened to do away with some of the practices that carry along valuable indigenous knowledge such as those addressed in this article.

Third is the need to shift our agenda towards the African world view when examining the way in which ecofeminism has been deliberated. This can be done by calling for a more indigenous Afrocentric approach to ecofeminism that acknowledges the contributions of women to ecological debates from an African woman's indigenous knowledge system. In as much as we recognise and acknowledge the presence of literature on how women have been oppressed by patriarchal structures that deem women as subjects of environmental degradation, the ecomaternalistic theory has also proved that there is great value in women's connectedness with nature. Shiva (1988:70) argues that:

to state that women and nature are intimately associated is not to say anything revolutionary. After all, it was precisely just an assumption that allowed the domination of both women and nature ... The new insight provided by rural women is that in the Third World women and nature are associated not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life. This analysis differs from most conventional analyses of environmentalists and feminists.

Therefore, in as much as we appreciate the damaging effect of the dualistic approach to women and nature, we also do well to reflect on how, throughout history, women have positively contributed to the development of nature. Shiva (1988:70), writing from a Third World Indian perspective, observes that the women who participate in and lead ecology movements in countries such as India are not speaking merely as victims. Their voices are voices of liberation and transformation that provide new categories of thought in new exploratory directions. Anna Gnanadason (1994:179) gives us a clear picture of this matter:

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Women and children are mostly affected by environmental degradation due to socially prescribed labour laws that demand for women to do the most strenuous kinds of work related to the resources of the earth. Development strategies implemented in most African countries ensure that women are pushed to the periphery where they engage in daily struggles for survival. And yet we see women as the custodians of nature who have to struggle to preserve the creation in different ways. We often hear government and development agencies attempting to integrate women in this dominant development process using terms like “women in development”, “women and development” and “gender and development” as though women have not been involved in development processes. And yet in their indigenous ways, rural women have for a long time been involved in development processes focused on environmental preservation.

Therefore – as Shiva (1988) states – women and environment issues can be approached from either of the two categories of challenge reflected above. Gnanadason’s view, on the other hand, forces us to reflect on the way ecofeminism has been discussed in our scholarly works. The fact that African women theologians have in some way contributed to creating awareness of the care of creation needs to be acknowledged. According to Gnanadason (1994:184), women’s contribution to sustaining and upholding creation in a life-giving way focuses our discussions on the theology of life. She further points out that ecofeminism at most, emphasises and calls for a life-giving theology that is holistic in nature. She then challenges the limited approach to eco-theology that in most cases values creation only in terms of its use in the marketplace and does not consider its value to indigenous people.

Fourth, the interconnectedness of nature, humanity and culture derived in this study needs to be acknowledged and celebrated in our discussions of ecofeminist theology. Gnanadason (1994:76) points out that:

feminists are therefore calling for an “ecological” ethic emphasizing the interconnectedness between humanity and nature. Affirming this interconnectedness and wholeness, feminists reject the Aristotelian dualisms of body/mind; spirit/flesh; culture/nature; women/men which has influenced Western patriarchs. This hierarchal understanding which has also been adopted by some of the Third World ideologists is commonly applied in the Western world view.

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From an African world view, I argue that the envisioning of health interconnectedness with God, human beings and nature should not remain at the level of empowering images in the world, but should be incarnated in our struggles to appreciate the value of creation through the way we uphold ecological indigenous knowledge. Gnanadason (1994:184) calls for an eco-feminist vision that is focused on interconnectedness among women, nature and the spirit world. The author challenges Christian theology to uncover the fixed relationships between women, nature and God that have existed over a long time.

Fifth, I wish to draw us to the basic insights of Karen J. Warren as outlined by Rakoczy (2006) and add another significant insight that has come out of this study. Rakoczy (2006:302) quotes Rae and outlines four insights which she believes are the core values of ecofeminism:

That the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are deeply connected; That an adequate understanding of these interlinked oppressions demands an understanding of how they are connected; That feminist theory and praxis demand an ecological perspective; That ecological problems can be solved only if they include a feminist perspective.

To this list I want to add that ecological indigenous knowledge which is hidden in rituals has a significant contribution to make in the field of women's sexual and reproductive rights. Finally, there is a need for a continued dialogue between eco-theology and spirituality. Northcott (1996:177) argues that the spirituality of indigenous Africans give full value to creation as a dynamic and highly integrated web of life. It exudes life-giving values from the sacredness of the land to reverence to all creatures. Discussing the cosmic interwovenness of nature and the spiritual world, Kyung (1994:177) points out:

When African and Asian people approach or pass a river, trees, mountains or when they plant ... or harvest, they often ask permission from the spirits of the land ... they do not take from nature more than they need or without asking for what they need for life. They try to return to nature in some other ways what they have taken, as if to repay this debt. Therefore, when we incorporate African ... indigenous spirituality into eco-feminist spirituality, we begin to perceive the meaning of nature, God and humanity in a fresh way.

When our mothers informed us of the value of the hidden meaning in the symbols and objects around us, and the consequences of breaking the law by

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not adhering to these symbols, they did so with an awareness of the presence of the spirit world that can bring either a curse or a blessing. They recognised the connectedness of women's reproductive rights to the presence of God in nature and the work God performs in enhancing the desired outcomes for women's reproductive health. When we incorporate African indigenous spirituality into ecofeminist spirituality, we begin to perceive the meaning of nature, God and humanity in a new way. Nature ceases to be a nonfeeling, dead place and becomes a God-infused and God-breathed place (Northcott 1996:177).

### **Conclusion**

Discussions in this article have shown the fluidity of the field of ecofeminism and the danger of ecomaternalistic theory when used in an essentialist approach. At the same time, the article has also shown how this approach can be used to find an African ecofeminist approach that will uplift the value of ecological indigenous knowledge and its embodiment to women's sexual and reproductive rights. In this article I have demonstrated that embodiment is the way out of dualist ideologies and that there is a need for ecofeminism to value this embodiment. The article has also shown that through embodiment in nature, African women can contribute to environmental sustainability. The article has further argued that the value of the symbols and objects that are used to explain the world around us carry along symbolic language that needs to be retrieved and celebrated. The hidden indigenous knowledge requires analysis and appreciation, especially in the field of sexual and reproductive rights. From an ecofeminist perspective, ecomaternalistic theory needs to be encouraged in our theological debates in search for the value of the connectedness between nature and humanity. The article challenges us to revisit the value of ecological indigenous knowledge in the hope of applying that knowledge to the discussions on African ecofeminism. I conclude this article with the words of Hildegard of Bingen who said that "the universe is like an egg in the womb, meaning God's motherhood of the sphere we call the universe" (Evans 2009:1).

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