MOTHER EARTH, MOTHER AFRICA & AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

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LIBERATING EARTH AND WOMEN IN POSTCOLONIAL WORSHIP SPACES IN GHANA

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Abstract

"The African is notoriously religious and takes his religion everywhere", says Mbiti (1969). Africa had solid religious beliefs and institutions, before colonisation brought Christianity. It was an all-embracing religion that was at the very fibre of the lifestyle of the African. Having revered Earth as the substance of creation, amongst other things, and seeing women as like Earth in the formation of life, the destinies of women and Earth have been linked together in the religious spaces of indigenous African worship and culture. In the sites of worship, in the language and objects of veneration, Earth was prominently featured and hence the lifestyles of the people would reflect this kind of veneration of Earth. This chapter seeks to interrogate the changing place of Earth in the journey from indigenous African worship from the time before the introduction of Christianity to contemporary African Christian worship, as well as how it affects the space and place of women. This will be addressed through an ecowomanist approach. This chapter proposes a rediscovery or reimagination of African Christian worship as a place for Earth participation by introducing Jesus into African indigenous Earth-centred worship. This proposition will be viewed through an ecowomanist reading of John 11:18-20, drawing attention to the garden as the site of the first worship of Jesus after his resurrection, woman as the first worshipper, and the gardener imagery as the first object.

Introduction and background

When I initially encountered ecotheology at the World Communion of Reformed Churches' Global Institute of Theology (GIT) a few years ago, I was a first-year student at the seminary. It was my first meeting with the field of theology. I was very enthused and sufficiently confused. I was also very curious and mortified at the same time. First, I was not familiar with ecological issues; secondly, I had never considered

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that ecology was or could ever be a theological issue, much less a church concern. I was utterly surprised, however, to see how much they would interact, theology and ecology. I felt many things – chagrin at my pastors for never mentioning issues around this in church, for keeping me and others stuck to a heaven-bound theology, upset with my one-year’s worth of theological education for not having awakened me to this earlier – and then an urgency to go back and let everyone know about it. And then I returned to Ghana fresh from the GIT ...

How was this ‘letting everyone know’ supposed to be accomplished? I had no idea. How was the church to be informed? I was lost and reflected on the question for a long time. This situation accounted, in part, for engaging in an ecological study of my church liturgy for my Master of Divinity studies. During my research, I came to the realisation of yet another intersection, the issue of gender and gender-based violence and how it is linked with violence against Earth. This chapter, therefore, is an attempt to engage the three areas of gender, ecology and worship by exploring the spaces of indigenous African worship, with particular reference to Ghana. It examines the link between women and Earth, and the role of women in the sacred worship with a focus on cultural practices that embrace or reject gender-based violence. Employing an ecowomanist approach, the chapter also examines the participation of Earth and women in colonial and postcolonial African Christian worship spaces by looking at Western mission churches and African Initiated Churches in Ghana.

This section of the chapter will interrogate how the postcolonial worship space accepts or rejects violence against women and Earth. Finally, the chapter will suggest a reimagination of African Christian worship as a liberating space for women and Earth by offering an ecowomanist reading of the resurrection narrative in John 20:11-18. This reimagining will draw attention to the garden as the site of the first worship after Jesus’s resurrection, and the gardener imagery as the first object, noting also a woman as the first worshipper in this setting. I will propose revisiting the Earth-centred worship of indigenous Africa in Christian worship today by re-looking at our sites of worship, our language as well as our veneration of all of God’s creation as co-gardeners with Jesus, the Christ, hoping to generate a theology that liberates both the Earth and African women from violence of any form.

Ecowomanism as a framework

Harris (2017:27) explains that ecowomanism “centers the religious, theological and spiritual perspectives of black women and women of color as they confront multilayered oppressions such as racism, classism, sexism, and environmental injustice”. This chapter, in exploring the spirituality of indigenous Ghanaian society as well as women’s involvement and Earth participation, will employ an

ecowomanist perspective in its analysis. The research will lean towards a postcolonial ecowomanist analysis of Ghanaian worship spaces and will propose that we revisit indigenous religions in our Christian worship spaces, but from a liberating perspective for women and Earth. An ecowomanist reading of John 20:11-18 will be offered as a theological starting point for the research. An ecowomanist reading has been defined as entailing a multidimensional approach that seeks to read texts in the light of the intersection of the domination over Black women and other women of colour and the domination and abuse of nature (Kebaneilwe, 2015).

This methodology is appropriate for this research, because it deals with a particular case of women in the context of Ghana and their experiences of subjugation and its link to the exploitation of Earth. The research concerns itself with the spirituality of Africans, specifically Ghanaians, and the place of women and Earth, and how these have seen changes through the period of colonialism to the modern age. An ecowomanist perspective will help the research in its exploration of the multi-layered oppressions that comes from within the spirituality of the indigenes, that comes about as a result of the social location of a Ghanaian black woman in the colonial milieu, and that comes about as a result of a colonial heritage in the midst of half-hearted indigenous practices.

The spaces of indigenous African worship

Africans are as much a product of their religion as they are a product of culture, because the two are inseparable. As Kanyoro and Oduyoye (2005:1) note, we live on a “continent where religion shapes the life and thinking of the people”. No wonder Mbiti (1969) would remark that Africans have been known to be notoriously religious and that Africans do not know how to exist without religion. African Traditional Religions (ATRs) have variously been misunderstood by colonial Christianity as savage, polytheistic and pagan (Okeke, Ibenwa & Okeke, 2017). This colonial view was derived from ATRs’ belief that the spiritual dimension of life permeates the entire natural world and their awareness of human beings as part of a spiritual complex where each component of the natural world has its place. This belief leads to assigning sacramental value to things in nature such as bodies of water, forests, trees, hills and mountains. African indigenous traditions have, therefore, always had a healthy reverence for everything in nature, which has culminated in a culture which usually takes care of Earth. This is because some of the so-called ritual demands of nature (or gods) stem from indigenous knowledge of the land and what it requires to keep it fruitful and improve its capacity to support humanity. Examples can be seen in the allocation of certain forests as to be treated as sacred groves where no one could cut down trees or farm, land areas where only certain crops should be

planted, water bodies whose spirits abhorred impurity and would visit punishment on whole townships if filth were put into them, etc. (Acheampong, 2010).

Alolo (2007:47) notes that “[i]n ATRs, though both men and women generally participate in religious activities and make spiritual contributions to the wellbeing of their lives, families and societies, these religious roles are often distinct, operating on different planes”. In many cultures in Africa, men are traditionally the spiritual leaders of the society at various levels (Afsi, 2010). Scholars are divided on the validity of this assertion, with some holding the view that women had equally prominent leadership roles in the religious, political and economic structure of traditional society (Amoah-Boampong & Agyeiwaa, 2019; Akyeampong & Obeng, 1995), yet others would acknowledge these roles but still affirm that men ultimately took the leading role (Oduyoye, 2005; Oduyoye, 2000; Kilson, 1976), a position that this chapter argues from. Falola and Amponsah (2012) discuss the various dimensions of these intricate dynamics in their book *Women’s Role in Sub-Saharan Africa*. As spiritual leaders, men usually lead rituals, especially in public spaces, but women were never far from the rituals. Women also engaged in rituals, but their involvement was confined to private spaces (Alolo, 2007). Women were usually found in shrines and places of worship serving as priestesses, shrine servants and preparers of ritual meals. In some cases, especially with transitional rituals for women, we find women officiating. Asamoah-Gyadu (2005:55-56) asserts that “in the traditional religions of Africa generally, women dominate the priesthood, a vocation acquired principally through possession by a deity”. Hence, women are seen as people who usually and frequently experience the divine through spirit possession, thereby becoming mediums who bring the message of the spirit world. Yet it is men who actually hold institutional and political authority. Alolo (2007) notes that in ATRs ideas and practices reveal three basic social principles: the subordination of women to men, differences between females and males, and the complementarity of males and females.

The continuity and survival of society preoccupies Africans, hence the two elements that are the sources of survival and procreation, that is Earth and women, require special attention. There are many rituals to ensure that nature, which was sacramental as well as the very source of livelihood, continued to flourish and remained favourable to the needs of humankind. In the same way, women underwent many rituals to keep them mindful of their role of procreation and of their duty to fulfil that role. In the next section, I explore the interconnectivity between Earth and women, looking at the negotiation of the tension between reverence for nature and patriarchal undertones.

Women and Earth in traditional Africa: A mould from the same clay

In viewing the spaces of traditional African religion and culture, we come to appreciate the role played by nature as sacramental and revered. This is because of the belief that nature is possessed by spirit beings or gods who are in control of the various aspects of life such as rain, harvests and fruitfulness. Elements of nature like land, water and the forests were seen as being the custodians of life itself as they provided the necessities for the survival of the human race. Many rituals were thus performed in homage to these 'deities' to ensure that they continued to provide for human survival. Rituals would therefore appear to be an attempt to control the elements of nature by maintaining harmonious relationships with the deities involved. Boateng (1998:45), writing about Ghanaian indigenous culture, affirms that "Earth has a spiritual power and that it is her spirit that makes plants grow; besides, she has the power of fertility". Resources such as land, water and forests have enjoyed being the sites and objects of indigenous worship, because they are inhabited by spirits that are conduits to the Supreme Being known to the Akan of Ghana as *Nyankopon*. In the language of worship, we also find that these spirits are continually referred to, for example, in the pouring of libations.² *Nyankopon* is first mentioned and then *Asaase Yaa* (Mother Earth) is mentioned next, indicating the significance attached to reverence for Earth (Yankah, 1995). Names of other spirit forms, like river gods and forest gods, may also be mentioned alongside those of ancestors. Again, in terms of language, the reference to Earth as *Asaase Yaa*, implying "Mother", indicates the regard for Earth as provider and sustainer of life (Boateng, 1998). Akan spirituality perceives Earth as a life-giver, an entity that has the ability to reproduce. Earth, therefore, is a woman and her fertility is revered because it is the source of sustenance and reproduction. The spiritual connection between *Asaase Yaa* (Mother Earth) and women in Africa cannot be overemphasised. They are moulds from the same clay.

Traditionally, in Ghana, especially amongst the Akan, men assumed custodianship of land. Land and land resources are vested not in individuals but in clans or lineages, and these clans are headed by men. Men therefore hold custodianship on behalf of the community. In terms of the land, women had the right to use land resources because they were part of the community. Women, who are burdened as mothers with the responsibility of procreation, nurturing and caring for the community, are usually dedicated to Earth and its ability to play its role in the survival needs of the community. Women therefore ensured that the rituals for the wholeness of Earth were observed to safeguard community survival.

2 Libation is the offering of a drink, a pouring out of a small quantity of wine, water or other liquid in a ceremonial act. Culturally, it is a form of prayer, both individual and communal.

Oduyoye (2005), in addressing patriarchy's manifestation in African rituals, asserts that traditionally, the rituals for women are more than that for men, which may be evidence of the superior spiritual strength of women compared to men. The rituals for women appear to be intended to constrain the use of such strength in the favour of men. Edet (2005:26) also notes that "women's rituals in Africa fall under ritual ideology which aims at controlling, in a conservative way, the behaviour, the mood, the sentiment, and the values of women for the sake of the community as a whole". The menstrual blood of women was the object of great mystery as it was celebrated as evidence of womanhood or ability to reproduce. However, at the same time, it was also seen as dangerous, unclean and capable of weakening the male species (Adasi, 2016). When women did not submit to these rituals, this was seen as breaking the wholeness of community and especially bringing misfortune to the male species. For men to progress and find wholeness in community, they must ensure that the women were conforming to all the rituals that were designed to keep women under subjugation. Sometimes, in ensuring this, violence against the woman was legitimised. Baden, Green, Otoo-Oyortey and Peasgood (1994) have observed that there is evidence to show that women themselves feel that certain kinds of behaviours on their part, which did not conform to the expected submissive roles, could be expected to lead to domestic violence and were therefore unwilling to report such violations to the authorities. It may be these same expectations that women have and the burden to maintain community wholeness that may have led women to be burdened again with rituals for maintaining the wholeness of Earth itself. It is easier for women to appreciate that rituals for Mother Earth, when not performed, may in like manner lead to some form of brokenness in society. While these rituals purported to ensure the wholeness of community, the wholeness of the woman was sometimes not factored into the 'complex calculations' of the wholeness of community. The wholeness of the woman was irrelevant.

Rituals involved in the *Trokosi* system, popular amongst the Ewe tribe in Ghana and the Gambaga witch camp in northern Ghana, are examples of rituals that do violence to women in the name of maintaining community wholeness. The system of *Trokosi*, which literally means 'slaves/wives of the gods', is the practice where a family offers a young virgin girl to the fetish priests to serve for a number of years or for a lifetime because of a crime committed by a member of the family. Such girls help in rituals at the shrine, as well as service the home and bed of the fetish priests. This is to ward off any evil that may befall the family. Issues around the Gambaga witch camp and others like it are even more complicated. Women, usually elderly, are dragged there by family or flee to the camps after being accused of witchcraft in the event of particular misfortunes befalling the family. The camp priests at Gambaga would go through some rituals and declare these women truly witches as accused

and the women would have to accept the verdict. In Badoe's (2012) article on the witches of Gambaga, men's perception of women is summarised as follows: "*Abukari* (a camp priest) intervened again: 'Women are by nature witches,' he explained patiently, 'while men are more likely to be thieves.'" Other ways that women are abused is through puberty and widowhood rituals. Community wholeness is usually the objective of all this violence. A woman who submits herself to these and does not resist is revered.

While Earth is a spirit and has transcendental value because of its ability to ensure the sustenance of life, the traditional Akan also ascribe motherhood to Earth. Women are highly valued for the essential role they play in the continuity of human life through reproduction. Religious rituals are observed for both Earth and women to maintain sustenance and continuity. Women feel a special bond to Earth in ensuring that such rituals are not broken. In the following sections, I examine colonial and postcolonial worship spaces and how they have embraced and rejected the sacramental places of Earth and women in indigenous African worship.

Colonial religion and impact on Earth and women

The history of colonialism in Africa, and in Ghana in particular, is also the history of Christian churches that were established by Western missionaries. Historic mission churches (HMCs), or mainstream churches, is the term used refer to those churches whose presence is a direct result of missionary activities during the period of colonisation. In Ghana, mention can be made of the Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, the Methodist Church Ghana, and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ghana, amongst others. The Western missions that founded these churches had beliefs and practices that demystified the taboos and norms that defined the culture of care for the environment. In this way, the fear that used to be attached to observing taboos and observing rituals related to Earth was lost. They also demonised many of the rituals that were performed to preserve the sanctity of Earth and hence the wholeness of community. Therefore, apart from the fear being lost, the new Ghanaian Christians began to see those rituals as evil and having no value in sustaining community wholeness. The missions introduced an eschatological religion that was more interested in life in heaven than the life on Earth, and hence did not place much emphasis on conserving nature.

For most of these aforementioned churches, women had their place in the worship service, but it was certainly not in the ordained ministry or in the hierarchies of leadership. Women have been involved in evangelism, Bible study, literacy programmes, teaching, nurturing the children's ministry, and financial support of the church (Adasi, 2016). Women were mainly schooled by other Western women,

who were their colonisers, in how to make good supportive and submissive wives to their Christian husbands. This kind of education did not prepare women to take any kind of lead or administrative roles in church or worship. The double disempowerment of women in this situation is that they were also not prepared, with this kind of education, to take their place as co-owners of land, in community with African men, within the scope of the new ways in which land was administered and used in colonial Africa.³ This was a far cry from the indigenous religions where women could lead rituals and become priestesses and mediums.

These points are not to suggest that all the churches' practices were negative towards women and Earth, but they indicate that the sacramental rituals that indigenous religion performed on account of women and Earth were minimised or completely rejected. Colonialism took away from the land, because it dispossessed it of its sacramental value. In the same way, it took away whatever sacramentalism was attributed to women in the religio-cultural indigenous environment by introducing religious systems in which there was no place for women in mainstream worship.

Postcolonial worship spaces and the place of women and Earth

The struggle for independence in Africa was a struggle to gain back control of the land from colonisers (Sackeyfio, 2012). It was no less a struggle for the freedom for an enslaved land as for an enslaved people. However, if women had traditionally been linked to the land, during the struggle for independence the people had clearly lost their memory, for the place of women was defined by a lack of reverence for and further subjugation to the male figure after independence (Klingshirn, 1973). Earth was liberated, but not along with its sacramentality as this was lost to colonial religious influence. Mainstream churches, although they had struggled for church autonomy during the independence struggle, retained a legacy of Western theologies, liturgy and practices in which there was no place for reverence of Earth. Such reverence was seen as unchristian. Members of mainstream churches who attempted to infuse indigenous culture into Christian worship were resisted to the point where they had to leave the churches or were excommunicated. Churches initiated by Africans were thus formed by some of these people as a way to resist the Western hold on Christian

3 In precolonial Ghana, land was not owned or managed by one person but by a clan or family head in a land tenure system. Members of the clan or family had access to the land use and were all communally responsible for keeping every ritual demand of the land. Strangers underwent necessary rituals to be accepted into the family before clan land was allocated to them. Colonial powers did not understand or appreciate this and brought their own modes of ownership and land use, which was usually based on economic value. They transplanted their Western ways of land ownership and management to Africa through land reforms where land ownership was individualised. Commodifying land was a way of disempowering Ghanaian women from ownership and use of land as they are economically disadvantaged (Boateng, 2017; Quansah, 2012).

worship. These churches, also known as African Initiated Churches (AICs), have been established as a way to resist the colonisation of religious spaces and reconnect with African spirituality. I will examine the AICs to discover the place of *Asaase Yaa*⁴ and women. I will also subsequently examine the space of colonial religious practices in a postcolonial environment that had been influenced by the AICs with a view to discover how the place of women and Earth had evolved.

African Initiated Churches

African Initiated Churches, also called African Independent Churches or AICs, are churches that sprouted as a way of bridging the gap between mainstream churches and the African cultural world view. Oduro (2016:3) indicates that AICs are so called because

[m]ost of them initially, clamoured for religious independence from the western mission-founded churches. Consequently, many leaders of the AICs either left western mission-founded churches in protest or were excommunicated by leaders of the western mission churches. The chief objective of their struggle for religious independence was to worship God and formulate theology in the context of their worldview, culture, environment and pre-Christian religious experiences.

In AICs, the emphasis is on Holy Spirit experiences and hence mysticism. This has led to their being given the name *Sunsum Sore* (Spiritual Churches) in Ghana. Examples of AICs include Church of the Lord (*Aladura*) of Nigeria, as well as the Musama Disco Christo Church, Church of the Twelve Apostles, Kristo Asafo (Christ Reformed Church), and Memeneda Gyidifo (The Saviour Church), all in Ghana. All of the churches listed above are breakaways from mainstream churches or Western mission-founded churches (Oduro, 2016). AICs blend the practices of African Indigenous Religion with Christian worship in an attempt to create an authentic African religion.

AICs believe in faith healing and therefore emphasise praying to God for healing instead of going to the hospital or using medicines. In their faith healing, we find the use of traditional methods and use of nature's resources, which means that nature is accorded some amount of transcendental value. For example, blessed rain became a source of curing influenza and bubonic plagues through the prophecy of Sophia Odunlami of the *aladura* faith (Oduro, 2016). Also, holy water, salt and spirit-directed herbs have been used in faith-healing processes (Oduro, 2018). These natural elements were seen as agencies of healing; that is, the Spirit, through prayer, uses these elements to heal. The practice of faith healing in this way mimics indigenous

4 I use *Asaase Yaa* here instead of the usual Earth to show that I mean Earth in the perception of Traditional African worship: Earth as revered, as life-giver and sustainer, and as a spiritual force.

cultural healing practices where nature's resources are used. AICs, however, cannot be said to hold the same reverence for nature as ATRs do. AICs preach and teach that people must break away from their indigenous gods.

However, because of their emphasis on the Holy Spirit, AICs are more spiritual in the way Africans are spiritual and this translates into prophesying under the power of the Spirit, extended and extempore prayers, fasting, speaking in tongues, drumming, and dancing. Many of these activities of AICs' spirituality included women. Even though male dominance in the forming of AICs can be seen with the likes of Wade Harris, Samson Oppong, John Swatson, William Egyanka Appiah, etc., mention is also made of women who were significantly involved in the development of AICs like Grace Tani, Christiana Abiodun Akinsowun, and Hannah Barnes (Novieto, 2013). As Asamoah-Gyadu (2005:59) notes, "[t]hrough the ministry of the Sunsum sore (Spiritual churches), women broke free of the auxiliary, marginal and subservient role fashioned for them in the various traditional Western mission denominations." In many of these churches, women are usually at liberty to use their gifts and graces as given by God without the traditional roles assigned becoming a hindrance. The efficacy of the ministry of women in such religious spaces is affirmed through the evident leadership roles women play, especially as prophetesses, mediating the divine to congregants. Yet in some AICs, notably the Church of the Lord (*Aladura*) in Ghana, women who are on their period have had to sit at the back of the church because they are regarded as unclean (Oduro, 2016). AICs are doing their bit in indigenising worship, but not necessarily with a view to building a sustainable relationship with Earth or liberating women.

Postcolonial mainstream churches' worship space

The success rates of the AICs in indigenising worship has led to increases in their attendance numbers and have given mainstream churches something to reflect on. Mainstream churches are therefore taking significant steps to put in place reforms to make their worship more suited to the culture of the people. Thus worship forms such as extempore prayer, praying in local languages, clapping, singing local choruses and dancing were adopted. We also find mainstream churches indulging indigenous culture by opening up more for practices of ATRs like creating space within their worship services to have the chiefs and people of a town to have a thanksgiving service with the church for a successful festival, as well as acknowledging chiefs by creating designated seats for them in their places of worship. Others have also created church liturgies for some traditional rituals. We can, for example, speak of widowhood rites that the churches have adopted into their liturgies.

Concerning women's participation, mainstream churches in the postcolonial period have battled with the inclusion of women in worship, even though women have

taken up more important roles in their worship over the course of time. In the case of Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG), for example, it took over twenty years to take a decision to ordain women (Opare-Kwakye, 2018) and even after such a decision was finally taken in 1976, the ratio of women to men in the ordained ministry leaves much to be desired. One of the reasons for the lag in taking the decision, according to Adasi (2016), was that women were believed to be unclean and capable of making everything else unclean if allowed to minister. The situation of the PCG is not much different from the other mainstream churches in Ghana, which currently ordain women. An important point to note is the traditional roles that ordained women have played in the church. For example, ordained women are expected to be silent⁵ associate ministers, or to take up chaplaincy roles in hospitals and schools, and attend to issues affecting women. But the situation keeps improving, although slowly.

The attempts of AICs to build an African-oriented worship and the adjustments being made by mainstream churches to bridge the gap between their Western heritage and authentic African worship are commendable and moving in the right direction. This is even more so in a world where climate change and an imminent irreversible disaster for humankind unfolds ever so rapidly and urgent calls are being made for mitigation measures. Progress made in development is damaging indigenous spiritual systems; Westernisation has dampened African sensitivity to nature and is still present in neocolonialism. Thus, Christians must turn to the scriptures to find resources within it that teach us to develop our sensitivity to the environment that sustains us. Therefore, to lend even more impetus to the need for Christian religious spaces in Africa, notably Ghana, to continue to explore safer and more liberating practices towards women and Earth, this chapter hopes to add to already existing theologies (Kebaneilwe, 2015; Dube, 2015; Masenya, 2003) by offering an ecowomanist reading of the resurrection story of John 20:11-18.

An ecowomanist reflection on John 20:11-18

The book of John is a fascinating book by many standards; however, this researcher's fascination with it is based on the book's copious use of ecological terminology. For example, in the seven 'I Am' sayings alone, five of them employ ecological terminology: bread, light, shepherd, vine and life. The incarnation also offers its own ecological inference by suggesting that the divine became a part of Earth community. Imagery such as garden, water, bread, sheep and others engage ecology in ways that

5 Adasi (2016:99) records the words spoken to Reverend Dora Ofori Owusu, the first ordained female missionary of the PCG at her ordination as "[r]emember you are a woman and you would better keep silent".

cannot be missed. In line with African spirituality, the place and events of Jesus's resurrection from the dead are worthy of being accorded a sacred space.

In the resurrection account in John 20:11-18, three things of interest come together: the resurrected Jesus, the garden where he first appeared, and the person to whom he first appeared and who first worshipped him – a woman. Using a reverse hermeneutical approach,⁶ we read Black indigenous African culture into the texts and propose that African Christian Worship revisits an Earth-centred worship and takes a liberating stand for women in spaces of worship.

John 20:11-18 is the account of Mary Magdalene's return to the tomb after she had gone to report the Lord's disappearance to Simon and the other disciple, and they had come to look and left the scene. In the passage, we note some important points. Mary persisted at the scene and was unafraid to show her emotions (John 20:11). Mary had a keener sense to perceive the angelic presence and also communicate with them (John 20:12-13). Jesus's first post-resurrection appearance was to a woman (John 20:14). Jesus was taken for the gardener by Mary (John 20:15). A woman was the first to worship the risen Jesus by calling him 'Teacher' not 'Master' (John 20:16). And the first person to be commissioned to spread the message of the gospel was a woman and she was commissioned by Jesus (John 20:17).

That Mary Magdalene stayed behind and wept displays a marked trait of women as more 'heart than head', a trait that has been frowned upon by a male-dominated world as illogical and weak. Yet, it is such a 'weak' moment that Jesus chooses to honour. Mary Magdalene's persistence in searching for the body of Jesus is striking, especially in relation to the two disciples who had gone home after finding Jesus's body missing (Varghese, 2009). Some commentaries, as in *The preacher's outline and sermon Bible* (Leadership Ministries Worldwide, 2000), tell us that Mary saw the angels in the tomb, while the two disciples who had come earlier did not (John 20:1-10), because the angels came in later. But I choose to argue that Mary was more tuned in to the spiritual, which is why she saw the angels and the two disciples did not. This is consistent with how Africans have traditionally seen women as more open to the divine and, therefore, have served more in the role of diviners and priestesses. It is curious then that Mary, with that heightened sense of awareness, still supposes Jesus to be the gardener, whereas she had not thought of the two angels as gardeners. I submit that Jesus's posture could only have been one of tender care towards the garden in which they were standing for Mary to make such an assumption. The controversial chapter by Audlin (2016) points out that the text

6 For the purposes of this chapter, we will explain a reverse hermeneutical approach as reading the text, not particularly to determine what the author meant, but with a contextual approach from an ecological perspective but that will also read Black African indigenous culture into the text.

makes no reference to a mistake having been made on the part of Mary in thinking Jesus was the gardener, but that this had been read into the text by interpreters. The fact that Jesus did not correct her but only called her by name leads us to this conclusion. Also, Mary's response was not 'Lord' or 'Master' but 'Teacher', which shows us that at that point Mary recognised the risen Lord as someone who was instructing her. Can we therefore learn from the Teacher who attends to the garden as first priority after resurrection? Perhaps women's concern for land and land rituals in the African cultural milieu may be explained with this lesson that Jesus taught the woman on such an august occasion! Referring to Jesus as Teacher also ensures that we do not miss the point that Mary was a disciple of Jesus. Finally, Jesus commissions her to go carry the good news to the disciples; she was the apostle to the apostles.

There is no denying that Jesus had acted in a contrary manner in doing the things that he did. First, tending to the garden upon his resurrection, while telling humanity not to cling to him as he had to go to the Father (John 20:17); humans always believe we are more important in the hierarchy of things than the rest of creation. Second, Jesus did not resent staying at the tomb and receiving his first act of worship there in such an unlikely place. Jesus could have chosen to go to the temple, but instead he chose the garden. In his lifetime, he has always occupied such unlikely places: at his birth, he was found in the stall of animals; at his arrest, in the garden; at his transfiguration, on the mountaintop; in his prayer times, in the garden and in hills. Perhaps Christians will have to think again about the way we have looked upon indigenous sacred places of worship as evil. Perhaps we could employ a botanically inspired theological hermeneutic to decode indigenous practices and stories to discover their environmental value, as Pu (2017) suggested, to reclaim the knowledge of sacred sites of indigenous religions.

Jesus also commissions a woman to share such weighty news without expecting her to be different from what women are expected to be – that is weepy, persistent, afraid and excited. Who women are does not make them the weaker sex or inferior. The world today has no time for who women are, and many women who excel and find themselves in places traditionally reserved for men sometimes have been forced to reject their true nature and act like men. In the midst of the patriarchy of Israel at that time, Jesus chose the women, showing that women are not intrinsically weak or inferior, or the bane of the male species. The story of the fall of humanity has often been referred to in justifying the need to curtail the strength of women. But this researcher maintains that, if Eve introduced Adam to the apple, Mary Magdalene and the other women (in the other resurrection narratives in Matthew, Mark and Luke) introduced the new Adam to men. If men, since the fall, have feared women and therefore sought to subjugate and tame them, men, after the resurrection, should celebrate women and encourage their strengths and potential.

The call of Jesus at the resurrection is a call to an Earth-centred worship, one that not only reveres Earth for what it can give to the human race but for Earth's sake, for being a creation of God for which God also cares; not revered for its fertility only, but seen in terms of being a part of all that the love of God has redeemed. The redeemed person must therefore be seen to celebrate their redemption alongside Earth. Women's productivity and sexuality are also to be celebrated and not something to be feared. They have to be given every opportunity to be all that they can be spiritually, emotionally, intellectually and physically as this is what brings about wholeness in a broken community. To proclaim Jesus as Lord would then mean to give the space to women to assume their full potential; it means to recognise that Earth-care is not about taming Earth but about existing in community with Earth.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to trace the changing place of Earth and women in African worship spaces, beginning with an exploration of the worship spaces of indigenous African worship and then considering postcolonial African Christian worship spaces in the particular case of Ghana. I have discovered that indigenous religions in Africa had a healthy reverence for, and assigned sacramental value to, Earth and women because of their ability to ensure survival and fulfil procreative needs as well as their close connection to Earth. Patriarchal undertones in indigenous culture, however, ensured that women were subjugated to the male figure through various rituals, taboos and religious injunctions, and they suffered violence as a result. Colonialism further entrenched the subjugation of women by stripping away any reverence they may have enjoyed and also took away the sacramentality of Earth in the culture of the people. Hence, postcolonial worship spaces have tendencies towards anthropocentrism and patriarchy. I have proposed, through an ecowomanist reflection on John 20:11-18, that African Christian worship should revisit an Earth-centred worship and embrace liberating perspectives for women as Jesus teaches us in the gospel narrative.

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