Interpreting Ecofeminist Environmentalism in African Communitarian Philosophy and *Ubuntu*: An Alternative to Anthropocentrism

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Abstract: The question of what an African ecofeminist environmental ethical view ought to look like remains unanswered in much of philosophical writing on African environmental ethics. I consider what an African ecofeminist environmental ethics ought to look like if values salient in African communitarian philosophy and *ubuntu* are seriously considered. After considering how African communitarian philosophy and *ubuntu* foster communitarian living, relational living, harmonious living, interrelatedness and interdependence between human beings and various aspects of nature, I reveal how African communitarian philosophy and *ubuntu* could be interpreted from an ecofeminist environmental perspective. I suggest that this underexplored ecofeminist environmental ethical view in African philosophical thinking might be reasonably taken as an alternative to anthropocentric environmentalism. I urge other ethical theorists on African environmentalism not to neglect this non-anthropocentric African environmentalism that is salient in African ecofeminist environmentalism.

Introduction

In 2004, the first environmentalist to win a Nobel Peace Prize was an African woman, Wangari Muta Maathai from Kenya. The impact of her ecofeminist environmental ethical ideas—especially on the role of women, children and disadvantaged communities in promoting environmental conservation and building sustainable livelihoods—has been enormous. Her ideas have contributed to what has come to be known as the 'Green Belt Movement'. According to Bron Taylor (2013: 180), this movement has been responsible for planting millions of trees in Kenya since 1977. This kind of enormous work and its influence on African feminist environmental ethical thinking has not been seriously examined in most philosophical works that consider African environmental ethics. Although a lot has been written so far pertaining to the nature of African environmental ethics after the debate of the

existence of African philosophy has been settled (see Ramose, 2003: 3), so far not much literature on African ecofeminist environmentalism exists.

   Against this background, one might wonder what an African ecofeminist environmental ethical view ought to look like, and whether such environmentalism could be taken as a plausible alternative to traditional anthropocentric views in traditional environmentalism. In this article, I advance African communitarian philosophy and *ubuntu* as reasonable premises on which to ground an ecofeminist environmental ethical view as an alternative to traditional anthropocentric philosophies and traditions.[1] Although I do not claim to be exhaustive of this African ecofeminist view because of lack of space here, I spell out and argue for various reasons why African communitarian thinking and *ubuntu* ought to be taken as informing sound ecofeminist environmental ethical thinking in African philosophy.

   While the area of African environmental ethics is still fairly new in African philosophy having taken shape recently in the African post-colonial era, the area of African ecofeminist environmental ethics itself has not yet received much attention. According to Kai Horsthemke (2015: 1), 'until recently very little has been written on the subject'. Except for Tangwa (2004), Murove (2004, 2009), Ojomo (2010, 2011), Behrens (2010, 2014) and Horsthemke (2015), who are much focussed on grounding various underexplored moral and relational ethical theories in African environmental ethics (see also Chemhuru, 2016: 9), very little mention and emphasis on African ecofeminism has been made as an alternative to anthropocentric environmentalism in Africa. Recently, Konik has attempted to bring *ubuntu* into dialogue with ecofeminism (Konik, 2017: 4). However, her transversal approach to the philosophy of *ubuntu* does not take into consideration the inseparability of the philosophy of *ubuntu* from African

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1 In this article, I consider both philosophies of communitarianism and *ubuntu* as closely connected to each other. I will use the term 'African' here to refer to mostly sub-Saharan African communities that are characterized by a communitarian existence that is guided by the philosophy of *ubuntu*. At the same time, I will look at both communitarian philosophy and *ubuntu* as central value systems in African ontology, contrary to Konik (2017) who only looks at *ubuntu* alone.

communitarian existence. In contrast to these important contributions to African environmental ethics, my claim is that African communitarian philosophy and *ubuntu* are plausible grounds for reasonable African ecofeminist environmental ethics. I therefore venture into this critical and underexplored discourse with the intention to examine whether and how African feminist thinking implicit in both communitarian thinking and *ubuntu* could be plausibly interpreted and taken as an alternative to anthropocentric environmental ethical thinking in Africa.

I interpret the African philosophies of communitarian thinking and *ubuntu* from an African ecofeminist philosophical perspective based on finding non-anthropocentric elements in the two ontological value systems. As I bring these two African philosophies of existence into conversation with ecofeminist thinking, I argue that both communitarianism and *ubuntu* could be interpreted as informing a reasonable African ecofeminist environmental ethical view. Such an alternative view could augment the growing literature on African environmental ethics. I do not wish to be interpreted as prescribing a complete solution to the African environmental crisis. However, I will maintain and argue that African feminist environmentalism could also be taken as a possible alternative to traditional anthropocentric thinking that is characteristic of traditional Western philosophical thinking.

I divide this article into four main sections. First, I consider traditional anthropocentric environmental ethical views that are characteristic of Western traditional philosophy, especially as they are mainly influenced by the Judeo-Christian heritage as well as Platonic and Aristotelian thinking. Partly connected with these views, in the second section I also consider the way some interpretations of the unrestricted views on communitarian philosophy and *ubuntu* could be taken as being anthropocentric. In the third section, I make an outline of the social, political and philosophical roots that anchor ecofeminist philosophical thinking in general. As well, I connect ecofeminist philosophical thinking to the African quest for both social and ecological justice. Having done that, I proceed in the fourth and last section to consider how both African communitarian philosophy

and *ubuntu* inform a plausible African ecofeminist environmental ethical perspective. This fourth and last section also further divides into two sub-sections with particular focus on the ecofeminist import in communitarian philosophy and *ubuntu* respectively. Overall, I espouse an African ecofeminist view as a reasonable alternative to anthropocentric environmental ethical thinking characterising traditional philosophy.

Understanding Traditional Anthropocentric Environmentalism

Until the works and influence of Aldo Leopold (1887–1949), Holmes Rolston (b. 1932) and J. Baird Callicott (b. 1941) in the last few decades, the dominant view in traditional Western philosophy has historically been largely anthropocentric. This is due to the influence of various factors such as the Judeo-Christian heritage, and Platonic and Aristotelian thinking. Also, misconceptions and misinterpretations of the philosophies of communitarian thinking and *ubuntu* in African philosophical thinking could be taken as confirming anthropocentric thinking in African philosophy. However, if the philosophies of communitarian thinking and *ubuntu* are sympathetically conceptualised, they actually contribute to sound environmental ethics as I will later establish. This is why Godfrey Tangwa juxtaposes Western and African environmentalism and comes to the conclusion that the former is 'predominantly anthropocentric and individualistic, and contrasted with its African counterpart which is described as eco-bio-communitarian' (Tangwa, 2004: 392).

Despite this tension between Western and African perspectives on environmentalism, for one reason or another, generally human beings have taken the environment, both physical and non-physical, to be *their* environment and in need of exploration and exploitation in order for human beings to fulfil their purposes for life. This is why traditionally environmental ethical thinking has been greatly shaped by anthropocentric thinking. Accordingly, I argue that, 'anthropocentric thinking is basically the assumption of the prioritisation of human interests at the expense of everything else' (Chemhuru, 2016: 16). This is the thinking that is based on the

assumption that human beings have, and ought to continue to have, dominion and influence over all other beings and non-animate beings in the world. The environmental ethical implications of such thinking devalue the environment in all matters to do with ethical consideration when human beings come into contact with various aspects of the environment. In an influential article titled 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', Lynn White (1967) confirms the above view that traditional thinking is inherently anthropocentric, that is, that human beings have generally accepted the human-centred view and approach to ethical thinking. This view has historically shaped the better part of environmental ethical thinking in non-African traditions. However, in the last few decades, there has been a growing body of literature and movements advancing non-anthropocentric environmentalism such as the 'Land Ethic', the 'Deep Ecology Movement' and the 'Animal Rights Movement'.[2]

The Judeo-Christian assumption that human beings are superior to all other creatures on planet Earth has been accused of anchoring traditional anthropocentric thinking in the Western tradition and even in non-Western traditions including the African context. According to White (1967: 4), 'especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen'. As he blames the Judeo-Christian attitudes towards nature for propagating this kind of anthropocentric thinking, White goes further to argue that the 'historical roots of our ecological crisis' lie in Christian attitudes towards nature. For him, 'the Christian dogma of creation, which is found in the first Creeds, has another meaning for our comprehension of today's ecological crisis' (White, 1967: 4). However, notwithstanding this anthropocentric interpretation of Judeo-Christian influence on anthropocentric environmental ethics, a more judicious interpretation of Christianity might be that it propagates a non-anthropocentric view of environmentalism, since in Christian teachings

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2 Although these movements are very important in Western and African environmental ethical thinking, they are not part of my discussion here.

one mainly finds the ethics of love, care, respect and responsibility, all of which could inform non-anthropocentric environmental ethics.

Apart from the above view on the influence of Christian thinking on traditional anthropocentric thinking, Western philosophical anthropocentric thinking is also thought to be mainly informed and influenced by traditional Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, which is interpreted to be largely eudaemonist in orientation. Such a view seems to espouse the anthropocentric view of environmental ethical thinking because of its implicit emphasis on *eudemonia* or 'human flourishing'. Both Plato (427–347 BC) and Aristotle (384–322 BC) seem to espouse an anthropocentric view of environmental ethics that morally privileges humanity over nature simply by virtue of humanity's possession of the faculty of reason. To confirm this anthropocentric view, Aristotle suggests a highly anthropocentric and hierarchical view of environmentalism. For him,

> we may infer that after the birth of animals, plants exist for their sake, and that the other animals exist for the sake of man, the tame for use and food, the wild, if not all, at least the greater part of them for food, and for the provision of clothing and various instruments. (Aristotle, 2001, 1256b: 15–22).

This hierarchical anthropocentric thinking is also implicit in, and taken up in Medieval philosophy by St. Augustine (354–430) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), and in Modern philosophy by thinkers who are responsible for ushering the scientific revolution, such as Nicolaus Copernicus (1472–1543), Francis Bacon (1561–1626), Isaac Newton (1642–1726), and Galileo Galilei (1564–1642). Common among these early modern thinkers is their acceptance of science as the leading tool in getting knowledge about the world around. This approach meant the placement of the human being at the centre of the universe in order to understand it from an anthropocentric standpoint

The African Philosophies of Communitarian Thinking and *Ubuntu*

The African philosophies of communitarian thinking and *ubuntu* are closely related although they are different from each other. The difference lies in the fact that communitarian existence is limited to relations between the

individual and the community in so far as social and political relations are concerned, while *ubuntu* has something to do with a guiding philosophy in such a social and political arrangement based on shared humanity (see also Nagel, 2013: 177). So, communitarian existence could be understood as both social and political, while *ubuntu* is more focussed on the moral and ethical dimension of existence. Although most African communities might be described as communitarian, owing to their emphasis on communal existence as their defining feature (Menkiti, 1984: 171), it is not true that all of them are guided by *ubuntu*. The communitarian view of living is applicable to the larger part of sub-Saharan Africa. On the other hand, *ubuntu* is just a philosophy based on humanness defining most Southern African communities and not necessarily all sub-Saharan African communities (see also Metz, 2007: 323). At the same time, the communitarian view of social organisation and ethics is not peculiar to African communities alone (Masolo, 2010: 222), while *ubuntu* is. Rather, communitarian philosophy dates as far back as the ancient or classical period in Greek philosophical thinking. Markate Daly (1994: xiii) confirms that the view on which 'communal relationships form the fabric of human societies and community-centered philosophy goes back at least to ancient Greece'. On the other hand, *ubuntu* has proved to be a prominent African philosophy of existence based on humanness that binds most communities in the large part of Southern Africa (see also Samkange and Samkange, 1980: 35–46; Ramose, 1999; Metz, 2007). These fundamental distinctions and overlaps between the two philosophies are the reason why I intend to bring both of them into conversation with African ecofeminist environmental philosophy, because they complement each other in various ways.

In African social and political thinking, the first generation of thinkers on African communitarian philosophy—such as Kwame Nkrumah (1994) and Julius Nyerere (1968)—can be credited for espousing the African communitarian view of social and political existence in newly established democracies of post-colonial Africa. However, in contemporary African environmental ethics, the African communitarian view of existence is mainly shaped by the philosophical work of Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984, 2004)

and Kwame Gyekye (1992, 1997). Similar but different to this communitarian philosophy in terms of its import to the metaphysical and moral existence is the philosophy of *ubuntu*. This philosophy is espoused as an African ethical world-view by Samkange and Samkange (1980), and investigated by Ramose (1999), Murove (2009) and Metz (2007), among others. Interestingly, both communitarian philosophy and *ubuntu* point to strong views of communalistic and humane existence despite some element of anthropocentrism in the two philosophies. This is because their main focus is on human communities and humane existence (mostly among human beings), while the environmental ethical concerns come in indirectly.

Apart from the previously mentioned accusations that Western philosophical approaches are largely anthropocentric, the two African philosophies of communitarian thinking and *ubuntu* have also not been spared. Since I do not wish to be romanticising the African philosophies of communitarian thinking and *ubuntu*, I will be brave enough to highlight that they are also not immune to accusations of anthropocentrism. For example, a hierarchical anthropocentric view of environmental ethical thinking similar to that in Aristotle can also be gleaned from the ontological hierarchy of existence that is characteristic in African philosophy (see also Tempels, 1959: 58; Teffo and Roux, 1998: 138). According to this ontology, existing beings form a hierarchy, from the Supreme Being (God), the Ancestors, human beings, animals, down to non-animate beings (Chemhuru, 2016: 104–105). This order is also arranged according to the level of potency and hence could also be interpreted to be anthropocentric in its orientation and import for environmental philosophy.

Overall, I will argue that neither communitarian thinking nor *ubuntu* should be understood from a radical view on which it would appear as if community is an imposition over the individual person(s). Some contrary readings of both communitarian philosophy and *ubuntu* have tended to portray these two philosophies as if they are incompatible with feminist philosophical thinking. According to Mangena (2009: 18) for example, 'the African woman's moral point of view is still far from being respected

because of the whims and caprices of patriarchy which is camouflaged in the communitarian philosophy of *hunhu* or *ubuntu*'. I take Mangena's view as representative of a view of African communitarian philosophy and *ubuntu* that is contrary to mine, because of his scepticism about the possibility of realising feminist thinking in African communitarianism and *ubuntu*. If African communitarian philosophy and *ubuntu* are found to be incompatible with feminist philosophical thinking, then it would follow that no meaningful ecofeminist environmental thinking can be gleaned from such views. However, I seek to oppose these misconceptions of African communitarian thinking and *ubuntu*.

Ecofeminist Philosophy and the African Ecofeminist Philosophical Perspective

In this section, I make an outline of some of the philosophical arguments that seem to anchor African ecofeminist philosophical thinking in general. I examine some of the central arguments to which ecofeminist philosophical thinking appeals, as espoused by Karen Warren (2000) and situate these within the African philosophical context. I consider ecofeminist philosophical thinking in general as a broader feminist view concerned with understanding environmental justice by looking at social structure, while the African ecofeminist perspective is part of this broader perspective, but being particularised in the African context. I seek to critically explore the way these ecofeminist philosophical perspectives could be understood within the context of African environmentalism. I also seek to establish the way in which women, nature and the African traditional environmental ethical epistemologies and ethics of environmental awareness and conservation could be understood as having suffered the same fate at the expense of traditional patriarchal and exploitative thinking based on misconceptions of the values of 'hospitality, compassion, magnanimity and care for the other' (Nagel, 2013: 181) affirmed in both communitarian thinking and *ubuntu*.

In general, ecofeminist philosophy is mainly concerned with understanding philosophies of domination in human societies and their connectedness

with the domination of nature as well. According to Philomena Ojomo (2010: 54),

> ecofeminism as a school of thought in environmental ethics seeks to end all forms of oppression, including the oppression of the environment. It does so by highlighting the interconnections between the domination of humans by fellow humans on the basis of race, gender and class on the one hand, and human domination of the earth on the other.

As a result, this view could be interpreted and understood to hold that the environment and the various environmental problems facing the globe are a feminist issue because the problems of injustice facing women and nature are similar and can be addressed using a similar framework. As Warren (2000: 1) sees it, 'ecological feminists (ecofeminists) claim that there are important connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people of colour, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature'. Hence, the African ecofeminist philosophical view, which challenges all forms of domination and oppression, implies that if the origin of human social and political problems is understood and addressed, then it would also be easier to comprehend and address environmental problems as well.

The above view can be expressed alternatively in a way that would help to understand and appreciate African ecofeminist thinking. Accordingly, African ecofeminist philosophers argue that philosophies of domination, exploitation, separatism, and male chauvinism that are responsible for the suffering, subjugation and exploitation of African philosophy and epistemology, African ethics, African women, African children, the disadvantaged African people, the African poor people, and black African people are also responsible for the exploitation of the environment, and resultant problems like deforestation, desertification, drought, climate change, poverty, biodiversity crisis, wildlife extinction and ill-treatment of animals (see also Warren, 2000: 1). As a result, African philosophy and its ecofeminist philosophy seeks to address the same social and political problems resulting from such oppression and injustice. African ecofeminist philosophy therefore becomes the quest for justice, fairness and equality between and among

human communities and in the way such human communities interact with the surrounding natural environment.

The central African ecofeminist argument here is that social and political philosophies such as patriarchal lifestyles based on domination, colonialism, dualist thinking and the traditional division of society and reality into men/women, black/white, humans/nature are responsible for supporting philosophies of domination, exploitation and colonialism in Africa. Similarly, such kinds of oppressive and exploitative thinking are also thought to support the anthropocentric view of environmentalism. The way oppression and colonialism of African people and their environment have been perpetrated in Africa was based on patriarchal philosophical traditions of domination, oppression and social division similar to those that justified colonialism.

Similarly, in order to confront the environmental crisis facing humanity, various social and political issues to do with human oppression first need to be addressed. Once these feminist issues are addressed, it would be easier to comprehend the environmental crisis because it is also worsened by these social and political issues. According to this view, if the roots of patriarchy, oppression, exploitation, and dualist thinking resulting from traditional philosophies of domination are addressed in society in general, that could go a long way in the search for equality, fairness, justice, all of which are important in solving the various environmental problems facing the world.

Overall, the African ecofeminist argument for environmental ethical thinking is centred on trying to understand environmental ethical issues from a feminist stand-point. It also involves taking a feminist perspective and appreciating African philosophy as a traditionally suppressed and disadvantaged discourse seeking legitimacy and authentic liberation just like various aspects of the environment. African ecofeminist environmental philosophy should therefore take the lead in connecting the story of African philosophy with that of the natural environment in a traditionally, and inherently anthropocentric context. Once this has been done, African ecofeminist environmentalism could be taken as a reasonable alternative to anthropocentric environmentalism. The conclusion is that all

environmental ethical problems that afflict humanity boil down to the oppressed, who are mostly women who largely suffer because of their traditional 'place' in society. According to Warren (2000: 2), it is important to note that 'among white people, people of colour, poor people, children, the elderly, colonised peoples, so-called Third World people, and other human groups harmed by environmental destruction, it is often women who suffer disproportionately higher risks and harms than men'. The ecofeminist view therefore challenges humanity to consider the environment as a serious feminist issue. Otherwise, if social and political problems associated with feminism together with environmental ethical concerns are not addressed, both women and nature will continue to suffer. I therefore take this perspective as I proceed in the next section to examine how this African ecofeminist philosophical perspective can be understood as informing sound ecofeminist thinking following the two African philosophies of communitarian thinking and *ubuntu*.

African Communitarian Philosophy and *Ubuntu*: The Ecofeminist Import

Having considered the ecofeminist perspective from an African philosophical view, I now seek to interpret the African philosophies of communitarian thinking and *ubuntu* from an ecofeminist perspective. As I analyse the African communitarian view, first I consider the matrilineal and ecomaternalist structures of African communitarian societies. I examine how these respective structures of communitarian existence ought to be understood as informing reasonable African ecofeminist environmental ethical thinking. Having examined the ecofeminist import in African communitarian thinking, I then examine the ecofeminist dimension in *ubuntu*. Overall, I argue that these conceptions of society form the grounds for plausible communitarian and humanitarian ecofeminist environmentalism in African communities.

The Communitarian Ecofeminist Dimension

While I have so far maintained that African communitarian societies are mainly patriarchal, I also wish to affirm that the same societies are also

matrilineal (Siwila, 2014: 135).[3] The African communitarian structure and its philosophy are incomplete without the African matrilineal structure and its ecofeminist import. As I establish here, this matrilineal structure plays a very significant role towards inculcating the kind of African ecofeminist environmentalism that I espouse in this article. It has not previously been sufficiently considered that, because of the matrilineal orientation of African communitarian communities, the link between the African communitarian structure and the African matrilineal structure has a very strong ecofeminist dimension. Admittedly, African communitarian ecofeminist philosophical thinking as such has not gone entirely unnoticed. For example, Lilian Siwila (2014: 132) rightly observes that 'there is limited literature on the value of indigenous knowledge to African ecofeminism'. Nevertheless, I think it is crucially important for the matrilineal structure of African communitarian communities to be critically interrogated in terms of its environmental ethical import, as I will aim to do here.

Among most African communitarian societies that are matrilineal in structure, the role that ecofeminist philosophical thinking can play towards informing sound African indigenous environmental philosophy cannot be downplayed. For example, in such communitarian and matrilineal communities, the role of indigenous knowledge of the community and the surrounding environment that is passed down from generation to generation through matrilineal structures plays as very central ecofeminist role to African environmental philosophy. According to Siwila (2014: 135), 'a grandmother's presence created an opportunity for girls to observe how indigenous knowledge is passed from women to the young girls and how this informed the way in which women would respond to

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3 While I have already argued that African communitarian societies are inherently patriarchal, I do not wish to be misunderstood here as now implying that such communities are matriarchal by my reference to the same communities as 'matrilineal'. Rather, it is important at this juncture to highlight that matriarchy is different from matrilineality, since the former is concerned with a social arrangement characterised by female dominance, while the latter has simply to do with maternal lineage. This is what makes me to consider African communitarian communities as both patriarchal and matrilineal. (See also Kwame, 1990.)

feminist spirituality'. Although Siwila looks at the role of such matrilineal structures in African communitarian societies and limits its environmental ethical import to women and girls alone (Siwila, 2014: 135), I would like to argue further and assert that African indigenous knowledge from matrilineal structures ought to be taken as a basis for sound ecofeminist environmental thinking more generally.

Following the African matrilineal structure, one is likely to find a very strong connection between the communitarian matrilineal structure and ecofeminist environmentalism. African ecofeminist environmentalism respects the matrilineal structure since almost all environmental ethical problems affecting African communities boil down to women, who therefore play a central role in inculcating environmental ethical thinking. For example, in African matrilineal and communitarian societies, women, especially the grandmothers, aunts, mothers and sisters are the ones who spend most of their time with young children. As a result, much of the traditional knowledge—particularly to do with the ethics of relational living, respect, empathy, living well and caring for one another—comes from these people through the matrilineal structure. This kind of knowledge and wisdom acquisition also has implications for environmental ethical thinking since these are the same kind of virtues that have import for living well with nature. For example, the content of such traditional knowledge and wisdom that is passed on through such structures typically includes, but is not limited to, various taboos that are aimed towards protecting water sources, plant species, animals and the environment in general (see also Chemhuru and Masaka, 2010). The kind of education which these African communitarian and matrilineal structures of grandmothers, mothers, aunts and sisters impart to the young children (both girls and boys) is more focussed on grooming the individual into a more responsible person as one relates with nature.

Although Siwila (2014: 135) limits the ecofeminist dimension to girls and women alone, my point of departure from her view is that African traditional knowledge and wisdom from matrilineal structures—such as the knowledge and wisdom from grandmothers, aunts, mothers and sisters that is aimed at

ecofeminist environmentalism—cannot be limited to girls and women alone because the feminist agenda represents much more than gender categorisations. For this reason, African communitarian ecofeminist environmental ethical thinking can therefore be interpreted to be reasonably non-anthropocentric although it might be difficult to justify it as a purely non-anthropocentric view.

Apart from the ecofeminist environmental ethical import of the matrilineal arrangement, another ecofeminist view that can be gleaned from the African communitarian view is that of identifying nature with these African women, or simply looking at nature as feminine. Siwila (2014: 135) looks at this perspective to environmentalism as an ecomaternalist approach to environmentalism. In other words, it is the view of incorporating nature as part of the communitarian structure along with human beings but as a feminine being. According to this view, although it is not peculiar to African ecofeminist environmentalism alone, nature is seen as and identifiable with the 'Woman' or the 'Girl Child'. This explains why nature can thus be referred to in feminine terms as 'She' or 'Mother Nature'.

This view could be reasonable interpreted as having a very strong ecofeminist import for the environmental ethical thinking of traditional African communities and even non-African communities. It could be interpreted to confirm the kind of environmental ethical thinking based on respect and reverence which traditional African ecofeminist thinking seeks to inculcate because African mothers and girl children are respected and revered owing to their procreative and other fundamental roles in human societies (see also Mangena, 2009: 26). Similarly, this is the way nature ought to be construed, respected and revered because of its role in sustaining human and non-human life. Interpreted correctly, this view is not attached to any anthropocentric views of the need to safeguard nature. Rather, respect and reverence for nature ought to be understood as emanating from its sustenance of all life in general. So, this could be acceptable as a life-centred approach to environmentalism, as opposed to an anthropocentric environmental ethical view.

Also, the idea of feminising nature in African communitarian thinking has another contribution to reasonable environmentalism. Although it could be interpreted to be quite anthropocentric, this idea involves bracketing women, children and the disadvantaged together with nature so that they can be given respect because of their shared vulnerability to exploitation. As I argued above, it is a fact that nature, women and girl-children have all suffered from patriarchal and exploitative domination for a long time in the history of humanity. So, feminising of nature in African communitarian communities is aimed at inculcating awareness of the need to protect nature as a traditionally vulnerable being.

Notwithstanding this ecofeminist idea of connecting women with nature, some may object because

> 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-invent the dualistic wheel of oppression where just as the earth is abused by humanity, so are women. (Siwila, 2014: 135).

However, my response to this objection would be that African communitarian ecofeminist thinking is not divisive in the way implied by the objection. According to African communitarian thinking, despite nature and women being connected, they too ultimately form a connection with other human beings who ultimately have obligations to respect both nature and women because they are part of the broader community.

The Ecofeminist Import of Ubuntu

Closely connected and inseparably anchored into communitarian thinking is the philosophy of *ubuntu*. As has already been implied earlier, this is generally a Southern African concept of existence that refers to a shared humanity among the various people sharing Nguni dialects (see also Nagel, 2013: 177). Although it is a philosophy binding inherently patriarchal communities together with the natural environment, I seek to interpret its ecofeminist significance to African environmental philosophy.

I argue that it is important to bring *ubuntu* into conversation with African communitarian ecofeminist environmentalism because *ubuntu* is one of the

major defining features of African communitarian way of life. Yet *ubuntu* has often been criticised—unfairly, I think—for propagating a 'manly' virtue because of what are seen as embedded patriarchal expectations in it (see Nagel, 2013: 181; Mangena, 2009).[4] However, I will argue to the contrary and look at *ubuntu* differently. For example, according to the philosophy of *ubuntu*, the individual person cannot be understood as separate from the community. This is why Munyaradzi Murove (2004: 203) thinks that 'the main presumption in *ubuntu* is that the individual is indelibly associated with the community, and can only flourish in *Ukama* [relationship] within the community'. As a result, the philosophy of *ubuntu* must be understood as simply a humanistic philosophy that emphasises the well-being of both human communities and non-human communities which are normally suppressed and disregarded in much of traditional environmentalism due to the influence of a patriarchal mentality. Understood this way, *ubuntu* therefore becomes a feminist ethics. Responding to a question of whether *ubuntu* can be redeemed as a feminist ethic, Mechthild Nagel contends—and I concur—that 'one way it certainly can is to postulate that "manly" virtue is a deliberate or unconscious biased misapplication of the concept that seems so fundamental to what counts as an African philosophy' (Nagel, 2013: 182). This is why, for example, within communities that are guided by the philosophy of *ubuntu*, a good human being is one who treats both human and non-human beings (nature included) in a humane way. This should be an essential feature of *ubuntu* because it entails being considerate, kind, magnanimous and compassionate to various aspects of nature that possess life and some of which are sentient just like human beings themselves. Certainly, it is not enough to simply relate well with human beings while mistreating nature.

The philosophy of *ubuntu* closes the supposed gaps between and among all beings and species in the African moral world because of the thinking

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4 Although I continue to argue and emphasise that *ubuntu* remains compatible with feminist philosophical thinking, I acknowledge the objections that are raised against it for the propagation, by some of its adherents, of some anti-feminist thinking.

that all human beings are *abantu* with *ubuntu*. According to Murove (2004: 207), this means that 'the existence of *muntu* [human being with *ubuntu*] is in *Ukama* [relationship] with the natural world'. This implies that what it means to be, or to exist, is to be the kind of a person who appreciates the interconnectedness between all species that make a relationship with human beings. As a result, *ubuntu* is not based on the philosophy of separatism implicit in the way men and women are thought to be distinct from each other in traditional patriarchal philosophies of oppression and domination that inform strong anthropocentric thinking in much of Western philosophy. The import of this understanding of *ubuntu* for African ecofeminist environmentalism is a greater emphasis on interrelatedness and interdependence among human beings and nature at large. As I have argued elsewhere while interpreting the implications of environmentalism,

> *kuva munhu* (being in general) has moral overtones to the extent of not only depicting existence in the Cartesian sense, but it goes beyond to denote the varying degrees of moral relationships with other human beings (*vanhu*) and nonhuman beings as well. (Chemhuru, 2014: 77).

Interpreting and following the above kind of thinking, *ubuntu* ecofeminist thinking is therefore incompatible with patriarchal, oppressive, dualist and anthropocentric thinking which tends to make divisions between human beings themselves, and between human beings and nature at large. This is why Mogobe Ramose (1999: 157) looks at 'the reductionist, fragmentative and empiricist rationality [...] as being responsible for the serious disturbances to ecology'. As a result, Ramose thinks that the philosophy of *ubuntu* needs to be restored in order to strike the right relationships and balance between human beings and nature. For him,

> the loss of this balance constitutes a violation of *botho*. It is also an indication of the need to restore *botho* in the sphere of the relations between human beings and physical nature. (Ramose, 1999: 157).

Ramose's view can thus be interpreted to imply that the African philosophy of *ubuntu* has an ecofeminist dimension that can be taken as a plausible

alternative to anthropocentric thinking since it looks at nature as being in need of redress through the philosophy of *ubuntu.*

Also implicit in the African philosophy of *ubuntu* is the material ecofeminist perspective. 'Material feminism' is a general feminist trend emerging from 'corporeal feminism, environmental feminism, and science studies' (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008: 18). Material feminism sees systems such as dualism, capitalism and patriarchy as central to the oppression of women, children, the poor, the disadvantaged and the less-privileged, and is also concerned with, and especially focussed on 'race, sexuality, imperialism, and anthropocentrism' (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008: 18). Similarly, African material ecofeminist thinking in *ubuntu* becomes the attempt to understand the ecofeminist argument by looking at the same material conditions or existential conditions that shape humanity's materiality, which involve capitalist and patriarchal frameworks that could be detrimental to sound and non-anthropocentric environmental ethical thinking. Such material ecofeminist thinking implicit in *ubuntu* therefore highlights the materiality within the human community and the materiality in nature. For example, such thinking highlights that unless the African material ecofeminist view in *ubuntu* is understood, human beings will continue to think that traditional anthropocentric cultural and power structures that support the philosophies of dominion, exploitation and inequality are correct. Accordingly, Inge Konik thinks that 'material eco-feminism is a version of ecological feminism premised on the assumption that the material conditions of life—economic and environmental ones—shape power relations, economic and cultural practices, skills and ideas' (Konik, 2017: 4). This is why the African material ecofeminist view in *ubuntu* tries to address these existential material conditions like the materialist, exploitative and anthropocentric thinking in the traditional view that is implicit in the assumption that women and nature are feminine, intrinsically connected, and hence distinct from men.

Because of its emphasis on relational living between and among human beings and other physical and animate aspects of the environment, the African philosophy of *ubuntu* tries as much as possible to whittle down

traditional patriarchal, dualist and anthropocentric views of existence. For example, Oswell Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru and Edward Shizha identify some of the values salient in *ubuntu* which I see as representative of the ecofeminist thinking in *ubuntu*. These are; 'hospitality, fraternity, courtesy, self-sacrifice for the benefit of family and community, kindness, humility, consideration, gentleness, fairness, responsibility, honesty, justice, trustworthiness, hard-work, and integrity and above all tolerance' (Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru and Shizha, 2012: 23). Understood closely from an ecofeminist perspective, *ubuntu* environmental ethics seek to emphasise the need to treat various aspects of nature that have traditionally been considered as morally insignificant—such as non-human animate beings—with care, reverence, kindness and accord them ethical consideration. At the same time, this ecofeminist dimension in *ubuntu* implies that similar values that emanate from the virtues of *ubuntu*—such as caring, goodness and reverence—could also be accorded or ascribed to non-animate aspects of nature such as physical nature, plants and water bodies that do not necessarily have sentience.

Conclusion

By closely looking at indigenous African communitarian communities that are guided by *ubuntu*, I therefore come to almost the same conclusion as Workineh Kelbessa, who argues 'that there is a need, an extremely urgent and ubiquitous need, for the revival of a multiplicity of indigenous and cultural environmental ethics in contemporary societies' (Kelbessa, 2005: 30). Similarly, looking at African communitarian philosophy and *ubuntu*, I have argued that one finds a sound ecofeminist perspective that ought to be seriously considered from African indigenous and cultural communities. Although Kevin Behrens (2014: 65) is not so much focussed on African communitarian thinking and *ubuntu*, he notes that 'contrary to anthropocentric ideas, there is a strong emphasis on the inter-relatedness or interconnectedness of human beings with the rest of nature that is evident in African thought providing basis for a promising African environmentalism'. It is

against this background that I have argued that ecofeminist environmentalism exists in African communitarian thinking and the philosophy of *ubuntu*. Overall, what I have attempted to do here is to flesh out some ecofeminist environmental ethical thinking in the African philosophies of communitarianism and *ubuntu*. I conclude that these African philosophies can contribute meaningful ecofeminist environmentalism that can replace inherently anthropocentric thinking in traditional Western philosophical thinking.

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