



## Rediscovering Ecological and Gender Values in the Shimunenga Ceremony: An Eco-Feminist Analysis

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates gendered and ecological values found in the Shimunenga traditional ceremony of the Ila-speaking people in Zambia. Historical, anthropological and eco-theological research highlights the significance of sacred sites and traditional ceremonies in fostering environmental stewardship and respect for God's creation. However, European missionaries such as the Primitive and Wesleyan Methodists often dismissed ecological values found in African culture. By employing eco-feminist theory as an analytical tool, this paper examines the gendered and ecological values inherent in the Shimunenga ceremony. Data for the study was collected in Maala village in the chiefdom of Mungaila using interviews and participant observation. The paper argues that Shimunenga ceremony embodies practices and principles that can promote egalitarianism and contribute positively to environmental stewardship in light of the current ecological crisis.

**Keywords:** Ecology, gender, climate change, Shimunenga, patriarchy, Zambia, ecofeminism, traditional ceremony, environmental stewardship.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

There is a strong agreement among nations that climate change poses significant challenges to health and socio-economic progress for humanity in this century (Molewa 2017). The Earth has warmed significantly over the last century. The 2016 report by the US Global Change Research Program indicates that rising temperatures, increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events and rising sea levels are already creating upheavals for people's lives (US Global Change Research Program report 2016).

It has been established that human activities such as mining and deforestation contribute to the release of more carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) into the atmosphere. Around one-fifth of global greenhouse gas emissions come from human activities such as mining that produce carbon pollution (Palmer & Finlay 2003: xiii; WWF Australia 2016). Reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) present compelling evidence that the Earth is experiencing a significant temperature increase and human activities such as mining and deforestation are the primary cause of this warming trend (IPCC 2007, IPCC 2013). Shogren (2014) further elaborates on this critical issue, emphasising that the planet has already begun to manifest the detrimental impacts of anthropogenic climate change such as heat waves and decreasing snow. Regions across Asia and Africa are facing unprecedented heat waves while North America and Europe are enduring heavier precipitation events such as rain and snowstorms (Shogren 2014, IPCC 2013). This evidence highlights the immediate and alarming consequences of climate change, necessitating urgent and multifaceted action to mitigate its impact.

In 2000, Maurice Strong, then Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, emphasised the critical role human beings can play in addressing the negative impact of climate change (Palmer and Finlay 2003: xiv). This urgency has motivated environmental experts and activists to call for a multi-sectoral approach in responding to the climate change. The potential influence of the world's religious institutions has also been highlighted (Palmer and Finlay 2003: xiv). Religious organisations and faith leaders are encouraged to use their resource such as sacred texts and doctrines to actively engage in addressing global warming and the ecological crisis. Palmer and Finlay (2003) contend that the world's religions possess resources that can contribute to environmental stewardship, including storytelling, traditional ceremonies, cultural celebrations, spiritual guidance and community activism (Palmer and Finlay 2003).

By leveraging their moral authority and community networks, religious leaders and their institutions can play a vital role in mobilising action for environmental stewardship and ecological responsibility.

For example, Christian theologians and biblical scholars play a significant role in advocating for the fight against global warming and environmental harm. (Habel & Trudinger 2008). These scholars have delved into Christian traditions and biblical texts to bring valuable perspectives and insights that highlight the importance of preserving the planet earth as a home for human and nonhuman forms of life. They have developed eco-friendly approaches to biblical interpretation to reinforce the biblical mandate for Christians to protect the earth (Habel & Trudinger, 2008). In this context, eco-feminist theologians provide a critical perspective by challenging traditional Christian interpretations and hermeneutics that perpetuate patriarchal views and marginalise the natural world (Ruether 2011:354-363; Ruether 1996). They argue that the issues of environmental degradation and women's oppression are intertwined (Ruether 2012:22). They advocate for an egalitarian community that prioritises the protection of both women and the mother Earth. Through these diverse eco-theological approaches, the role of faith and spirituality in promoting a holistic to the current ecological crises is highlighted and emphasised.

In Africa, the intersection of gender, ecology and religio-culture has gained significant attention from eco-theologians and feminist scholars (Siwila 2015; Phiri 1996). These draw on anthropological research to search for gendered and eco-friendly values in African culture. Anthropologists have shown that sacred sites and traditional ceremonies were important in the preservation of the natural world during pre-colonial times in Africa. For instance, Terence Ranger's analysis of territorial worship and shrines in Central Africa shows a shared religious culture among the Mang'anja, Chewa, and Tumbuka speaking peoples which played an important role in the preservation of the natural world (Ranger 1973:583). These tribes had sacred sites that supported agricultural and ecological systems.

Territorial shrines served as institutions of worship, with a primary focus on the agricultural, ecological and moral wellbeing of the community (Van Binsbergen 1981:101). Rituals and communal prayers central to rain-making (or rain-calling) were incorporated in the worship system to ensure agricultural-ecological success and the overall wellbeing of the community. In present day Zambia, scholars such as Elizabeth Colson, Thayer Scudder, and Dan and Carolyn O'Brien have illustrated the ecological significance of Tonga religio-culture (Colson 1977; Colson 1971; Colson 1997; Scudder 1962; O'Brien & O'Brien 1996, Machila 1989). These scholars have documented various cultural practices and principles that promote ecological and cultural wellbeing.

Emphasising rituals performed by the Tonga at the shrine (Malande) to promote ecological wellbeing, Machila (1989:30) states:

Therefore, to ensure the success of the agricultural cycle the Tonga performed various rituals at Malande. Those included rituals of thanksgiving, prayers for good crops and rainfall, and droughts, and rituals to eradicate epidemics and protect crops from rodents. There were two major annual rituals one at the beginning of planting season and the other after harvesting.

Machila (1989:30) shows that the Tonga speaking people perfumed rituals at shrines to ensure the successful ecological and agricultural cycle. Two significant annual rituals were performed: one to mark the beginning of the planting season and another to offer thanksgiving to God for the harvest. The rituals included prayers of gratitude, request for favorable weather and prayers aimed at requesting God to mitigate adverse conditions such as droughts and floods, as well as protection from diseases.

This body of knowledge underscores that cultural and religious practices among the Bantu-speaking people are not mere cultural expression. They embody values and wisdom for environmental stewardship and ecological wellbeing. The rituals are deeply rooted in indigenous knowledge systems that are tested over generations and can offer valuable insights in the context of climate change and the current ecological crisis. As highlighted by Machila (1989) and Siwila (2015), indigenous Tonga culture is rich in rituals, ceremonies and practices that play an important role in preserving the natural world. The reverence for trees, forests, certain animals, pools, mountains and extraordinary natural phenomena shows a religious fabric and spirituality that emphasises the relationship between the wellbeing of humanity and the preservation of their environment. However, while substantial research has focused on the ecological and gendered values among the Tonga-speaking people of Zambia, there remains a notable gap in research regarding the Ila-speaking people of Zambia. This article addresses that gap by exploring the ecological and gendered values found in the Shimunenga ceremony of the Ila-speaking people.

## 2. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL-THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper draws on data collected through empirical qualitative research conducted in the Namwala district. Qualitative research is a methodology of research which focuses on gathering people's beliefs, perceptions and opinions based on their lived experiences in specific contexts (Dawson 2007: 28). Semi-structured interviews and participant observation were used as methods of data collection.<sup>1</sup> Semi-structured interviews are qualitative method or tool of data collection in which the researcher asks the respondent both predetermined questions and open questions (Dawson 2007: 28). Using this method, information on Shimunenga ceremony was collected from traditional leaders and senior members of the community, including Chief Mungaila at his palace in Maala. Further, Participant observations were made during the Shimunenga ceremony held from 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> October, 2017. Participant observation is a method of data collection in which the researcher immerses themselves in the phenomenon or cultural ceremony to learn from the participant (Dawson 2007: 28). The data collected from both interviews and Participant observation gives insights into the cultural practices of the Ila-speaking people that have often been overlooked in existing research.

Engaging with traditional leaders such as Chief Mungaila enabled the researcher to have access to a wealth of knowledge and insights which reflected the values, traditions and belief systems of the Ila-speaking people. This was helpful in trying to understand the broader gender, theological and ecological implications of Shimunenga ceremony. Additionally, Participant observations made during the Shimunenga ceremony enabled the researcher to understand the artistic expressions and rituals that characterise the Shimunenga ceremony. To analyse insights from the data collected, eco-feminism is employed as a theoretical framework. Rosemary Radford Ruether (2012:22) defines ecofeminism as a movement that explores the interconnections between the oppression of women and the degradation of natural world (Ruether 2012:22). This perspective is important for understanding how religious and social patterns within cultures can either perpetuate anti-nature attitudes or foster an understanding of the interconnectedness of all forms of life on Earth. In the ensuing analysis, the paper will discuss the origins and the form and practice of Shimunenga ceremony to show how they reflect the gender and ecological perspectives of the Ila-speaking people. By exploring these dimensions, I hope to contribute to the discourse on African indigenous knowledge systems and practices and their significance in contemporary eco-theological discussions.

## 3. ORIGINS OF THE SHIMUNENGA CEREMONY

The Shimunenga ceremony is a cultural event celebrated annually by the Ila-speaking people of Zambia. The ceremony is held in Maala village in the chiefdom of Mungaila (Sumaili 1994). This ceremony occurs between September and the end of October and serves as an important expression of the traditions and beliefs of the Ila-speaking people (Sumaili 1994). The Ila-speaking people inhabit the Namwala district located in the Southern Province of Zambia. Before the arrival of European missionaries and travelers, little written documentation concerning their history existed. The insights into their cultural practices and history have been derived from oral traditions, including riddles (tulabi), folktales (twaano, ingano), proverbs (tushimpi), and songs (inyimbo). The earliest documented accounts by European travelers, such as Holub and Selous in 1886 and 1888, provide some references to the Ila (Kandyata 1991:20). More detailed anthropological research was subsequently conducted by Edwin Smith, a Methodist missionary and Andrew Dale, a colonial government official, resulting into their published work in 1920 (Smith & Dale 1920).

The Ila-speaking people are part of a broader ethnic classification known as the Bantu-Botatwe, which encompasses the Tonga-speaking communities of the plateau and Gwembe Valley, the Ila-speaking people, and the Lenje-speaking people (Siwila 2015:140). Researchers Timothy Matthews, Andrew Roberts, and J.H. Chaplin suggest that the Bantu-Botatwe originated from Bantu-speaking groups migrating into southern Zambia around the first millennium CE (Mathews 1976; Roberts 1976; Chaplin 1960). Chet Lancaster(1974:724) further argues that the Plateau Tonga may trace their origins back to the Luba-Lunda Empire in present-day Democratic Republic of Congo, while the Tonga of the Gwembe Valley are thought to have migrated from the Rozvi Empire, located in present-day Zimbabwe. Smith and Dale(1920:18) and Kandyata (1991:18,21), on the other hand, suggest that the Ila-speaking

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communities came from East Africa, traveled through present-day Zimbabwe, crossed the Zambezi River and finally settled in present-day Southern province of Zambia (Smith & Dale 1920:18; Kandyata 1991:18, 21). These varying narratives of origin highlight a shared heritage south of the Zambezi River, contributing to the cultural similarities observed between the Ila and the Tonga of the Gwembe Valley (O'Brien & O'Brien 1996:525).

Distinct from tribes of the Luba-Lunda dynasty, the Ila-speaking people, like other Bantu-Botatwe communities, historically lacked a centralised political structure. Alternatively, they had priests and priestesses who performed rituals aimed at ensuring agricultural and ecological wellbeing. This may account for the absence of detailed oral traditions or myths elaborating on their migrations into modern-day Zambia (Kandyata 1991:20). The arrival of more politically organised Bantu tribes from the Luba-Lunda Empire and the Zulu Kingdom post-1400 CE prompted the Bantu-Botatwe to develop new forms of political organisation. As noted by Dan and Carolyn O'Brien, these tribes began to use rain making (rain-calling) rituals, rallying around leaders who functioned as priests and priestesses during agricultural and ecological rituals to establish communities capable of defending against invasion from rival tribes and European colonizers (O'Brien & O'Brien 1996:519-20). In the context of the Ila-speaking people, the Shimunenga ceremony emerged as a crucial ecological and religio-political practice.

According to oral traditions, Shimunenga (also known as Mwanamunambala) was a traditional priest-healer who originated from the Kaundu area near the northern Kafue River in Itezhi Tezhi district. Together with his brother Moomba and sister Nachilomwe, Shimunenga migrated to Busangu village in Namwala. Notably, he is said to have committed fratricide against Moomba, using his sister's baby's flesh to prepare the medicine that purportedly secured his victory in their conflict. Following his ascendance as a powerful leader, Shimunenga instituted an annual feast to commemorate his rise and bless his people.

After his death, Shimunenga transformed into a revered ancestral spirit, entrusted with the ecological wellbeing of the community. As a result, the Ila-speaking people started to observe the Shimunenga ceremony - calling upon Shimunenga to bless them with good rainfall and abundant harvest. Edwin Smith (cited in Van Rinsum 1999:362) notes that Shimunenga transitioned into a 'muzhimo' - an ancestral spirit. Within Ila cosmology, Shimunenga is revered as second only to Leza-God (Sumaili 1994: vi).

The aforementioned tradition surrounding the origins of the Shimunenga ceremony points to a period around 1400 CE when the Ila-speaking people began structuring themselves around rituals of rain-calling and ecological sustainability. An examination of the origins of Shimunenga ceremony brings to light gendered and ecological values which are deep-rooted in religious beliefs and social systems of the Ila-speaking people.

To begin with, the oral tradition about Shimunenga ceremony highlights gender roles and principles among the Ila-speaking people. In particular, the influence of male figures in leadership and authority is evident in the tradition. Shimunenga, the priest and steward of agricultural and ecological rituals, represents a patriarchal figure and a complex interplay of gender dynamics found in many African cultures. Shimunenga's story itself showcases patriarchy and masculine power through the act of fratricide. The story emphasises Shimunenga's violence against his brother, Moomba, to secure his dominance. This act shows how male strength and aggression are celebrated in many patriarchal African cultures. It illustrates how leadership and power within African culture are linked to male aggression and territorial conquest. In many African communities, including that of the Ila-speaking people, such foundational myths often set a precedent for male authority, which reinforces the idea that leadership, even in a spiritual, agricultural or ecological context often rests on patriarchal patterns.

Secondly, the narrative is male-centric. It pushes female characters to the margins. Nachilomwe is presented from the perspective of Shimunenga. Her role is not depicted in a way that challenges patriarchal norms. Instead, her involvement in the fratricide story positions her as a passive element in Shimunenga's rise to power. While women were part of the ceremony, their roles are not always documented and are often overshadowed by male figures like Shimunenga. This shows how male authority and dominance are regarded as a norm in many African cultures. Thirdly, the ecological significance of the Shimunenga ceremony is paramount. It intertwines the community's cultural identity with their environmental context. The ceremony is punctuated with prayers and rituals aimed at asking God to bless the community with a successful agricultural year, good health and friendly weather conditions.

The ceremony's intercessions and rituals which invoke Shimunenga's spirit for blessings of rain and agricultural abundance reflect a gendered division of roles. Men are depicted occupying positions of leadership and performing key rituals while women are depicted performing domestic roles and duties that are considered feminine such as caregiving and nurturing. Such gendered compartmentalisation of roles aligns with broader patriarchal structures seen across various African cultures where women's contributions are essential yet less visible within the public celebration of such traditions.

The transformation of Shimunenga into a spirit responsible for agricultural and ecological wellbeing establishes a direct link between ancestral veneration and environmental stewardship among the Ila-speaking people. The recognition of spiritual figures as protectors of nature underscores the importance of ecological sustainability in the fabric of African culture. This traditional knowledge and reverence for the environment illustrate how their practices not only aim to secure material well-being but also to maintain harmony with the natural world. It reflects their intrinsic understanding of ecological balance.

Lastly, the absence of detailed oral traditions regarding the Ila's pre-colonial migrations may partially come from a culture that privileges certain voices - predominantly male - over others. The oral traditions that persist are largely shaped by male perspectives which marginalise women's narratives and historical contributions. This selective preservation of oral traditions reflects a broader patriarchal bias that persists in many African communities where women's stories and roles are often sidelined. This is also evident in the form and practice of Shimunenga ceremony.

#### **4. FORM AND PRACTICE OF SHIMUNENGA CEREMONY**

In pre-colonial times, the Shimunenga ceremony was held between April and June (Jaspan 1953). This coincided with the period when cattle were taken to the grazing lands in the Kafue Plains (Jaspan 1953; Sumaili 1994). During this time, people gathered at Nalubwelubwe which was located on the banks of the Kafue River. Celebrations typically included only sour and fresh milk. The consumption of beer began at a later date. As already noted, the ceremony is now held between September and the end of October.

As Jaspan (1953) and Sumaili (1994) note, Shimunenga is regarded as a spirit that inhabits a selected medium, who serves as an intermediary in conveying messages from Shimunenga to the community. This medium also conveys the people's messages to Shimunenga. The messages from Shimunenga often pertain to the rains, good harvest, good weather conditions, pestilences and impending calamities. Additionally, the medium discusses potential solutions to the problems the community having. When possessed by the spirit of Shimunenga, the medium would remove their clothes and move through the village announcing Shimunenga's presence. This practice continues to this day. The first person to have been possessed by the spirit of Shimunenga was Shimwiiza, followed by Chikaanga, and then Ngungula. The current medium is Ibulale Mpulu. These individuals determine the date of the Shimunenga ceremony and provide other important instructions for the celebrations.

The Shimunenga ceremony lasts for three days. Prior to the ceremony, two types of beer are brewed. The first is called bulongo, which is brewed on Wednesday and used in thanksgiving rituals on Saturday to appease the rain spirits. Bulongo is associated with Bulongo, an intermediary between Leza (God) and the Ila ancestral spirits, and is also linked to ecological well-being (Jaspan 1953:41). Women go around the village collecting a cob of maize from each household. This collected maize is used to brew the beer for the ceremony on Saturday, some of which is dedicated to thanking God and the ancestors for a good harvest during the year.

The second type of beer, nachilomwe, is brewed on Thursday in memory of Shimunenga's sister, whose baby was sacrificed by Shimunenga to create medicine for war. As people drink and celebrate with this beer, they commemorate Nachilomwe as the mother of their lineage, honoring her sacrifices during times of war and hardship. To initiate the ceremony, the guardian of the shrine brings beer to the sacred grove on Thursday evening (Sumaili, 1994:13). Inside the shrine, gourds and small clay pots represent the ancestors and rain spirits. Beer is poured into these vessels, and prayers are offered for blessings and good rains. Rituals and prayers continue at the shrine on Saturday.

Friday marks the first day of the ceremony, known as Women's Day. Women roam the village, singing and dancing. The paths leading to the sacred grove become crowded with women as they sing and clap their hands (Van Rinsum 1999:362). Their songs protest against male dominance in marriage and society, often mirroring those sung during women's puberty initiation ceremonies. Women carry out

most activities, while men listen from the sidelines. On this day, the chief and elders discuss important community affairs. One of the songs they sing includes:

Olololo, namumbule kamwale,      Show the girl the arts of love,  
Ololo, mulumyo tapewa cikanda      Her husband needs a skin to lie on  
Olololo, namumbule kamwale,      Show the girl the arts of love,  
Ololo, mulumyo ngwacifuwa!      Her husband is not a man, but bone!

The lyrics suggest that women should be well-versed in sexual matters, reminding them that some men may lack skill and strength during sexual intercourse. A skilled woman is, therefore, expected to know how to handle her partner during sexual intercourse to ensure mutual satisfaction. This song serves as a critique of men who desire intimacy but fail to fulfill their family responsibilities. Another song, called “Kalombwana” (Young Man), mocks men who aspire to be the head of their families but cannot manage household affairs. This song calls for justice in society. Together, these songs reflect the political, religious, economic, social, and ecological aspects of Ila-speaking culture.

Saturday - designated as a day of rituals - sees the community gather at the shrine located in the sacred grove, where women participate in rites that pay homage to the ancestors by throwing sticks into the shrine. These acts are part of the rituals and prayers that call for the rains as well as celebrating Shimunenga’s historical victory in battle. Shimunenga’s triumph is regarded as a pivotal moment that secured the independence of the Ila-speaking people. During these proceedings, the guardian of the shrine, alongside the women, actively participate in rituals and prayers. On Saturday, Shimunenga prescribes remedies to address social injustices. Penalties for serious offences are stipulated to emphasise the ceremonial balance between spirituality and law. Traditions such as the sacrifice of a cow for certain crimes are maintained to ensure communal restoration.

Clearly, community leaders well versed in Ila traditions such as Chief Mungaila recount that the original ceremonies included ritualistic sexual acts between the chief, serving as the ritual husband, and an appointed woman, believed to promote agricultural fertility. This aspect underlines the deep connections between cultural rites and the agricultural practices of the Ila people.

The ceremony reaches its climax on Sunday with the display of cattle. Cattle symbolise wealth and prosperity (In’utu 2013:47). This exhibition serves as a public tribute to Shimunenga for their blessings. The chief, adorned in leopard or lion skins to signify their authority, is paraded before the community, accompanied by songs of praise from women. As the ceremony concludes, prayers of thanksgiving are offered, celebrating the blessings of fertility and agricultural abundance bestowed by Shimunenga.

The form and practice of the Shimunenga ceremony show how it intertwines aspects of gender, patriarchy, and ecological awareness. To begin with, gender roles in the Shimunenga ceremony are depicted in the form and practice. Women play a central role throughout the ceremony, especially on Women's Day, where their presence and participation are showcased. The songs sung by women serve not only as entertainment but as a medium of protest against male dominance. For instance, lyrics that advise women on love and relationship dynamics critically address men's failures in fulfilling their familial roles. This cultural practice reflects an underlying dynamic where women's voices serve as both instructional and corrective.

The participation of women in the ceremony demonstrates a form of empowerment in which they claim agency over their identities and desires within a traditionally patriarchal society. Their gatherings, singing and dancing in public spaces challenge existing gender norms and facilitate a form of communal expression. Additionally, practices such as the collection of maize for brewing beer underscore women's indispensable role in agricultural productivity and community celebration, which reinforces their importance in sustaining cultural practices. Secondly, while the ceremony showcases women's contributions, it also underscores the community's prevailing patriarchal structures. The men, particularly elders and chiefs, are portrayed as decision-makers who discuss important community affairs while women express their thoughts through song and dance. This division of labour reflects a broader societal structure where men occupy positions of authority, despite women's significant involvement in the rituals.

The historical elements mentioned, particularly the role of the chief as a “ritual husband,” further exemplify the intertwining of gender and hierarchy. This ritualistic practice, which included sexual acts believed to promote agricultural fertility, highlights how patriarchal power dynamics were historically embedded in the

community's practices. While the chief's role symbolises power and masculinity, it concurrently reduces women to bearers of fertility and reflects how patriarchal values shape ritual, spiritual and social order.

Thirdly, the Shimunenga ceremony is connected to ecological wellbeing, agricultural cycles and community well-being. The rituals that involve brewing beer from maize collected by women symbolise recognition of the land's contributions to sustenance and are intertwined with spiritual beliefs toward ecological well-being. The practice of brewing bulongo, which honours the rain spirits, emphasises the community's dependence on and respect for agricultural fertility, as rain is crucial for successful harvests.

The symbolic acts performed within the sacred grove, such as pouring beer into vessels representing ancestors and rain spirits, reinforce the connection between spirituality and ecological stewardship. These practices illustrate an inherent understanding of the interrelationship between human activity, agricultural success, and the need for sustainable practices. This shows that the Ila people values ecological harmony alongside their cultural rites.

### 5. ECO-THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SHIMUNENGA CEREMONY

The Shimunenga ceremony is a profound cultural event for the Ila-speaking people, celebrated for four crucial purposes: invoking the rains, expressing gratitude to God and ancestors for the harvest, showcasing the community's wealth through cattle, and honoring the legacy of Shimunenga and his sister Nachilomwe. Understanding the eco-theological implications of this ceremony reveals the deep interconnection between spirituality, ecology, agricultural cycle and community values within the Ila society.

At its core, the Shimunenga ceremony serves as a plea to God and the ancestors for rain, pivotal for successful agricultural endeavors. Held in October, just before planting season, the ceremony includes rain-calling rituals conducted at sacred sites believed to be the dwelling place of Shimunenga and the rain spirits (Van Rinsum, 1999:362). The ecological significance of these rituals is underscored by the strict prohibition against cutting trees in the sacred shrine, illustrating a commitment to preserving the natural environment essential for sustaining a healthy ecosystem and promoting good rainfall. This reverence for nature reflects a worldview that perceives the natural world as sacred and integral to human existence, countering the exploitative tendencies often associated with modern practices (IPCC 2007; IPCC 2013).

Regrettably, the advent of European missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries disrupted these eco-friendly practices. Lacking an understanding of the Ila-speaking people's religio-culture, missionaries dismissed the ceremony as mere fetishism and paganism (Van Rinsum 1999:362,365). Their campaigns against traditional practices not only undermined spiritual beliefs but also disregarded the environmental wisdom embedded in them. Edwin Smith, a Methodist missionary, articulated this sentiment when advocating for the destruction of the sacred grove, viewing it as an obstacle to Christianity.

Smith (cited in Van Rinsum, 1999:365) remarked:

I worked to build a large handsome Church directly confronting that sacred grove, a Church that should stand as a daily witness to the better things. And I wanted to see the day dawn upon which the people would themselves hew down that grove and leave the Church standing alone, a symbol of victory.

Despite this, the Ila-speaking people maintained their commitment to the Shimunenga celebrations, often invoking Shimunenga for rainfall even as they participated in church services (Van Rinsum 1999:365).

The second primary purpose of the Shimunenga ceremony is to offer thanks for the harvest. During this time, the community brews beer and gathers to celebrate the agricultural bounty, emphasizing a communal identity rooted in gratitude and mutual sustenance. This ritual reinforces the notion that human existence is intimately connected to a network of relationships involving God, ancestors, spirits and the land itself (Zvarevashe 2005:15). The chief plays a pivotal role by blessing the seeds for the upcoming planting season, ensuring a harmonious agro-theo-ecological cycle from planting through to harvest.

Additionally, the display of cattle during the Shimunenga ceremony symbolises the wealth of the Ila-speaking community, particularly in the cattle-rich area of Maala in Namwala. Cattle, representing both economic status and cultural identity, are crucial for wealth accumulation through various means including agricultural surplus and traditional exchanges (Rennie 1984). These animals hold a sacred place within the Ila worldview, where their significance transcends mere economic value, highlighting the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life as expressed in proverbs underscoring the cultural importance of cattle.

Moreover, the remembrance of Nachilomwe, Shimunenga's sister, serves to honor women's contributions within the community, reflecting the matrilineal structure of Ila society. Women are active participants in the ceremony, brewing the beer, singing songs, and engaging in rituals that emphasize their connection to Mother Earth. Siwila (2015:143) notes that women's participation at sacred sites is vital due to their interdependence with the earth's reproductive processes. This context elucidates how gender dynamics within the ceremony offer opportunities for women to reclaim agency and express cultural identity.

Interestingly, the cultural understanding of sexuality within the Shimunenga context diverges from many other African traditions. While sex and menstruation are often seen as contaminants of sacred spaces, the Ila-speaking people embraced a different perspective during the ceremony, viewing ritual sex as a catalyst for ensuring fertility both in the land and among the people. This contrasts with broader cultural taboos regarding sex and menstruation, suggesting a unique appreciation for the life-giving properties of these acts (Simkins 2014:40).

The missionaries, bound by their own cultural perceptions, failed to grasp the significance of these practices. They sought to eliminate what they considered sinful aspects instead of engaging with and transforming the elements that did not align with Christian teachings while preserving those promoting ecological balance and the positive portrayal of women (Rennie 1984:534-36). A more thoughtful approach might have involved advocating for fidelity in relationships while recognising sexuality as a divine gift, as suggested by African women theologians like Fulata Moyo and Isabel Apawo Phiri (Moyo 2005:136).

The positive perception of sex and menstrual blood among the Ila-speaking people highlights an important opportunity to empower women in contemporary society, a context where they often face discrimination rooted in the erroneous belief that menstrual blood can defile the sacred. Within the Ila cultural framework, women historically played significant roles during rituals at sacred shrines, which reflects a constructive attitude towards their sexuality and the natural processes of their bodies. Moyo articulates that Christian leaders must engage in developing a theology of sexuality that recognises the importance of sexual intimacy within the bounds of committed relationships, suggesting that such intimate experiences can be an eschatological foretaste of divine presence (Moyo 2005:136; cf. Kurian 2004:432). This notion aligns with the idea that the rejection of the Shimunenga ceremony by European missionaries - as sinful- was misguided. The missionaries, grounded in a Eurocentric worldview, overlooked the profound ritual significance of sexuality within this traditional ceremony (Rennie 1984:534-536). A more constructive approach would have involved retaining the positive elements of the ceremony that foster ecological wellbeing and a respectful attitude towards women while addressing aspects that could undermine fidelity in relationships. One specific element of the Shimunenga ceremony that may have been appropriately modified is the practice of engaging in sexual acts within non-committed relationships. Given the current challenges posed by sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS, such practices can perpetuate harmful health outcomes, warranting a critical reassessment.

The interconnection between human life and the divine, as expressed through rituals, exemplifies the inseparable relationship between the Ila-speaking community, their ancestors, and God the Creator. At the Shimunenga ceremony, individuals communicate with both Shimunenga and the Creator. This intimate understanding of divine presence has been noted by African eco-theologians (Setiloane 1976; Setiloane 1986; Chimhanda 2014). Further, Van Rinsum critiques the tendency of Western missionaries to depict spirits as intermediaries, arguing that this interpretation fails to align with the African worldview. Instead, he asserts that *mizhimo* (spirits) should not be misconstrued as mere intermediaries but understood as integral components of the community, thus reframing the role of ancestral figures within the ritual context (Van Rinsum 1999:358).

The Shimunenga ceremony shows how the spirituality of the Ila people is interwoven with ecological consciousness. The rituals affirm the inseparability of human existence from the divine, the ancestors, and the natural world. The spiritual hierarchy recognised by the Ila-speaking people, with the Supreme Being (*Leza*) at the apex, presents a worldview that has been misinterpreted by colonial narratives as distanced from individual affairs (Smith & Dale, 1920:196; Van Rinsum 1999:358). The ceremony serves as a reminder of the collective responsibility toward the environment and community which reinforces the notion that reverence for nature and a sense of social justice are intertwined. Finally, the Shimunenga ceremony empowers women to challenge patriarchy through their active roles, asserting their rights and identities within a cultural framework that has historically subjugated them. This strength and assertiveness during the celebration illustrate a broader cultural resilience against

patriarchal values. It reaffirms that women's voices are essential in redefining societal norms (La Fontaine 1986:164). Through these collective expressions of faith, gratitude and resistance, the eco-theological significance of the Shimunenga ceremony endures. The ceremony offers valuable insights for contemporary dialogues on spirituality, ecology and gender equity in Africa, and Zambia in particular.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This paper has shown the critical intersection of ecology and gender within the Shimunenga ceremony of the Ila-speaking people. It has contributed to a deeper understanding of African religio-cultural practices that have gender and ecological values. African theologians, such as Chuba (2011:12) and Phiri (1996), have argued for a deeper exploration of African cultural elements that can enrich African Christianity. They note that European missionaries largely overlooked the rich religious thought and practices of the Ila-speaking community, thereby missing crucial insights into their ecological perspectives.

The Shimunenga depicts cultural practices that foster the ecological and agricultural sustainability of the community. It not only solidifies the social fabric of the Ila community but also engenders a collective sense of responsibility towards the environment. Through ritual participation, community members - regardless of gender - are united in a shared purpose that promotes agricultural success and ecological health. The rituals performed during the Shimunenga ceremony encompass vital aspects such as good health, fertility, and successful rainfall, thereby affirming the interconnectedness of human existence and the natural world (Fowler 2000:234).

Additionally, the Shimunenga ceremony reflects deep-rooted patriarchal structures among the Ila-speaking people. It shows that traditional rituals are cultural practices are often shaped by gender dynamics that can marginalise women. Recognising these dimensions is crucial for a more equitable interpretation of the ceremony's ecological contributions. Integrating the values of the Shimunenga ceremony - such as the sacredness of nature and the moral obligation to care for it - into contemporary Christian frameworks can enhance Christian response to climate change and the broader ecological crisis.

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**Informants (selected)**

Victor Chaande (Chief Mungaila), Interview with the author and Mable Nyirongo on 24<sup>th</sup> July 2017 at the chief's palace in Maala.

Shimani Shitongo (village headman), Interview with the author and Mable Nyirongo on 24<sup>th</sup> July 2017 at the chief's palace.

Synod Kasanga, Interview with the author and Mable Nyirongo on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2017 at the chief's palace.

Morris Katambo, Interview with the author and Mable Nyirongo on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2017 at the chief's palace.

Idah Shibwela, Interview with the author and Mable Nyirongo on 12 August, 2017.

Bessy Shimungalu, Interview with the author and Mable Nyirongo on 12 August, 2017.

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