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## **Redefining ‘closeness to nature’: An ecofeminist analysis about women herbalists in Corfu, Greece.**

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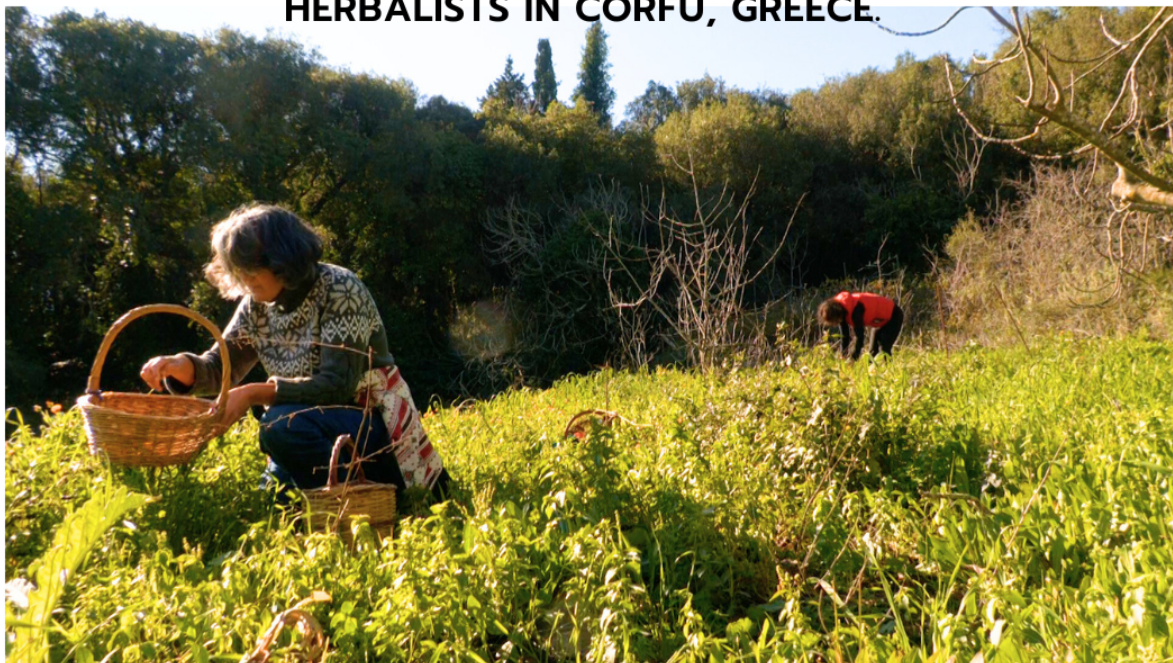
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## **REDEFINING 'CLOSENESS TO NATURE'**

### **AN ECOFEMINIST ANALYSIS ABOUT WOMEN HERBALISTS IN CORFU, GREECE.**



**THALIA PINIDIS**

# **Redefining ‘closeness to nature’**

**An ecofeminist analysis about women herbalists in Corfu, Greece.**

**Master Thesis**

**Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology**

**Visual Ethnography**

**Leiden University**

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This thesis is part of the master's program Visual Ethnography and consists of two parts: this article and a 30-minute film.

In the tradition of visual and multimodal ethnography, I contribute to the discipline with the film, *In Your Hands, In My Hands*. The film follows a story of Eleni and Dimitra, who are herbalists in Corfu. Through different stages of performing herbalism the women take the viewer by the hand while sharing their perspectives on herbalism, intergenerational knowledge and womanhood. The plants are a way for the women to feel grounded, independent and free. Connecting with past generations allows the women to gain knowledge about survival skills, that is crucial in their experience to escape their demanding caring roles in daily life.

Throughout this article I intent to do justice to the lived experiences of the research participants by engaging with quotes from their interviews or interacting with conversations I have processed. The film carries components of the argument of this article that relates to the different categories within herbalism, the intergenerational aspect of traditional knowledge and the independence of women.

## **Abstract**

Ecofeminist debate around ‘women as closer to nature’ centers the intersection between gender and climate. This assumption is put as unreliable, however ethnographic findings reveal that women of the Greek island Corfu redefine ‘closeness to nature’ through the practice of herbalism. This study shows a nuanced depiction of the relationship between women and the natural environment, by reevaluating notions of care and labor. Through ethnographic methods based on participant observation, in-depth interviews and filming, data is obtained. The data shows that the women of Corfu use herbalism as a means to be independent from their demanding role as caregivers; traditional knowledge is based on connections with past generations that refer to survival skills; herbalism teaches how mainstream society can live more sustainable. Concluding, herbalism is more than a practice. In the context of Corfu, herbalism critiques capitalist economies and creates a sustainable relationship with the natural environment. Through redefining labor and performing care as herbalist practice, lived experiences refine discussions on ‘women as closer to nature’.

Keywords: herbalism; ecofeminism; traditional knowledge; sustainability; care; labor; herbalism; medicinal herbs; Corfu; Greece; survival skills; intergenerational; ethnography

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## **I Introduction**

*I woke up in the room of Eleni's son who had already moved out. After opening the windows, I took a deep breath to smell the trees, the flowers and the breeze that came by. Even though it is January, it feels like spring to me compared to the Dutch winter. Extending my gaze from the garden to the horizon, I look at the silhouette of mountain Pandokrator. I wonder if we will go up the mountain today to collect plants since Eleni told me this is her favourite place of the whole island.*

*After refreshing, I went down the stairs to the living room. Eleni was waiting there for me with homemade pancakes and herbal tea. She took care of me, expressed mostly in food, but also in words. She wanted to make sure I was feeling comfortable and asked me all the time if there was anything I needed. Every morning we started talking in Greek, 'Kaliméra, ti káneis?' [Good morning, how are you?]. Unfortunately, my father never taught me the language. However, Eleni is a wonderful teacher, just like she shares her knowledge on herbal medicine with passion to the Corfu community.*

*The same week, we went up mountain Pandokrator to collect calendula together with Dimitra, a close friend of Eleni. Most of the time, I spend with these two women since they were eager to teach me all about their herbal knowledge regarding medicine and food. Because the sun was out, it was possible to collect the flowers. That day, Dimitra was awake for a long time already she told me. Even though it was only 10AM. She made breakfast for her family, washed and fed her father-in-law and brought her 16-year-old son to school. During the collecting of calendula, the women joked around about their husbands, shared their knowledge about the plants or were simply silent.*

*On the way back home, Eleni told me "it is no coincidence there are mostly women in my herbal classes". She explained the women go to the plants to get out of their daily obligations - together or alone. With that note, she also referred to herself.*

### **Ecofeminist gaze towards herbalism**

Based on a ten-week fieldwork period on the Greek island Corfu this ethnographic study is performed. Spending time with women experienced in herbalism and learning how to make traditional medicine and food, resulted in insights in the lived experiences of the women of Corfu. This study is based on eleven research participants that all have different ranges of experience with herbalism.



There is not one static definition of herbalism, therefore I approach this practice as a dynamic phenomenon. Despite its grounded ancient history (Nebel et al. 2006), every herbalist practices in her own manner. As Conway (2005: 108) describes, herbalism is often classified as ‘alternative therapy’, and a modern practice that is executed in diverse, ever-changing cultures. The research participants communicated their trouble in defining this practice. After an interview with Eleni, she expanded on a thought about defining what is at the core of herbalism. Eleni, the most experienced herbalist I have met, expressed ‘being a herbalist’ as follows:

*“So, my definition of a herbalist is someone who is committed to the relationship with the plants to be of service to the community. This is not an official definition but what I consider a herbalist after all these years in the field”* - Eleni (February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

Besides the relationship with the plants, I consider herbalism as part of traditional knowledge, because this practice "has been an integrated part of a culture for about a generation or more" (Ogoye-Ndegwa 2003:69). Traditional knowledge about the plants in the whole Mediterranean stems from ancient times, however the knowledge is rapidly disappearing (Nebel et al. 2006: 333; Łuczaj et al. 2012). Stenhock et al. (2018) argue that because of the long history, knowledge about collecting wild plants for medicinal or food purposes is considered part of the cultural identity of Greece. This examines to what extent herbal knowledge is deeply rooted in the country. Moreover, the fact that this knowledge is disappearing illustrates a concern of the women of Corfu. As result of this knowledge gap between generations, the women try to restore this through several means (e.g., studying clinical herbalism; interviewing elderly women; sharing herbal knowledge to new generations).

*“But now the last generations here are trying to see what they want to keep from the the tradition and bring the tradition back, even with herbs.”* – Dimitra (February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

Dimitra examines how traditional knowledge about herbalism is being lost, however the women are trying to restore this knowledge. The loss of knowledge illustrates the importance of performing herbalism.

Based on observations and the lived experiences of the research participants, this study focusses on herbalism in two facets: traditional medicine and food. Sometimes ‘traditional’ and ‘herbalism’ are used interchangeable. For example, using nettles in spanakópita, a traditional dish, can intentional be used as remedy.

In the practice of herbalism, the relationship between the women and the natural environment is at stake in practicing herbalism, as Dimitra explains.

*“Herbalism is my life. It's the connection with our environment. And the connection that we can live with that. And I personally cannot live without that. And it's the environment that talks to you and*

*says so many things to you and messages to you. And through that we can find our other self [...]*” -  
Dimitra (February 15th, 2023)

Nissen (2008: 76) explains Western Herbal Medicine (WHM) as “the practice of herbal medicine that uses plants largely native to Europe, within a philosophical tradition arising from European thought”. I believe this definition resonates with the approach to herbalism of the research participants. Medicinal herbs are used personalized and focused on a full body healing. Eleni explained how characteristics of certain plants might be a match with the characteristics of certain persons. Besides, there is a larger theoretical framework in which (clinical) herbal medicine is being produced. Such explanation echoes Nissen (2018: 76). She illustrates WHM as individualized health care, considering a person’s lifestyle.

Because the women experience a connection between the natural environment and themselves, I explore herbalism through an ecofeminist lens, specifying on debates around the assumption of ‘women as closer to nature’ (Plumwood 1993: 19). Based on the statements of the research participants about their experience as connected to the natural environment, it appeared relevant to study this experience considering ecofeminist discussion. I bring nuance to the discussion on ‘women as closer to nature’ based on ethnographic engagement with the research participants. The implication of ‘women as closer to nature’ is perceived as wrong within ecofeminism (Plumwood 1993; Perkins 2007; Vandana and Mies; Haraway 1987), however the women of Corfu make great effort to have a close relationship with the natural environment.

Plumwood explains in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993: 19) ‘women as closer to nature’ as a naturalizing vision on women as emotional beings, that is associated with ‘nature’. Plumwood (1993: 33) contrasts such stereotyping by illustrating a dualism. She claims men are associated to ‘culture’ instead of ‘nature’. Ecological economist Perkins (2007:230) elaborates that culture is perceived as a rational superiority opposed to an emotional being.

The association of ‘women as closer to nature’ is based on dominating gender structures in society reflecting the dichotomies men/women and men/natural environment. Therefore, there is an intersection between gender equality and ecological facets. Warren and Cheney (1991: 180) explain this intersection as an overlap in abuse. Meaning, women and the natural environment have a comparable inferior position when it comes to socioeconomic structures in the Global North. This inferiority expresses itself through the devaluation of women’s labor (Brennan 1997: 178) and care (Biesecker and Hofmeister (2010: 1704). Thus, ecofeminist vantage point implies that ‘women as closer to nature’ is wrong, because women are portrayed as inferior opposed to men.

Anthropologist Nissen analyzed herbalism through a framework of ‘naturalness’, which illustrates how herbalism is perceived as ‘natural’ act (2015:165). This implication is important in terms of

ecofeminist ethics, where connections between ‘nature’ and inferiority are exposed. Including perspectives of the women herbalists of Corfu shows the importance of herbalism in mainstream Greek society. Herbalism taught the participants to be aware of the natural environment and how to treat it with respect. The women practice different principles of respect that contribute to a sustainable relationship with the natural environment, critiquing capitalist economies.

### **Expanding care and labor**

Adding on the discussion of ‘closeness to nature’, I offer insights on lived experiences on feminist notions of ‘care’ and ‘labor’. Relating to the practice of herbalism, the women of Corfu do not get paid by making traditional food or medicine, initially. During the fieldwork period, Eleni and Dimitra decided to sell some herbal products. However, the analysis of ‘care’ and ‘labor’ focuses on the positionality of the women in their households and the comparison in performing herbalism. Caring practices include household activities (Mies 2014: 257), nevertheless herbalist practices are not recognized as work because of legal issues.

*“And herbs they are here to help me again, because even with the difficulties, the legal difficulties, that they are in the Western societies in order to work with herbs, they may give me a job, they may give me something to do that I will be able to do with the health problems I have [...]”* - Eleni (February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

Eleni and Dimitra are limited in selling herbal products, because of legal issues. Therefore, the women try to get involved in the paid economy, however their caring practices are not acknowledged as labor. Women’s domestic work is throughout history excluded in capitalist economies (Shiva 2014: 15). I want to stress that capitalist economies refer to paid labor based on feminist literature that include unpaid labor into such economic systems. (e.g., Jochimsen and Knobloch; Biesecker and Hofmeister 2010; Vandana and Mies 2014).

Ecological economist Perkins (2007: 230) elaborates on the invisible work of women in the economy that are based on ‘caregiving’ – which often is unpaid work. Just as Brennan (1997: 178) describes, domestic work done by women is not recognized as labor, because rooted in Marxism labor-surplus could only be achieved in the workplace and not in the household. Therefore, Perkins (2007: 232) points out different methods to change this economic system. The most prominent tactics are the acknowledgement of invisible labor (Biesecker and Hofmeister 2010: 1705) and recognizing women as vehicles in economic systems through the unpaid work of caregiving (Rubin 1975: 167). Trigg (2014: 176) summarizes how feminist theory has argued about the vulnerable position of women in households, because of their exclusion in the capitalist economies. Jochimsen and Knobloch (1997: 109) emphasize this later point further, by creating an opposing model in which ‘caring activities’

take up a third of capitalist economies. This model establishes an equal power relationship between men/women/natural environment. As Brennan (1997: 178) explains, the natural environment is not a passive commodity. The natural environment produces energy, therefore it is at the core of the existence of labor power. In line with Brennan, feminist and environmental philosopher Oksala (2018) clarifies how capitalism is centered in arguing the intersection between climate and gender. She examines that the economic system, referred to as capitalism, facilitates gender inequality and environmental damage (Oksala 2018: 221). She describes a process of exploitation that is at core of ecofeminist critiques. Oksala introduces the term ‘primitive accumulation’ (2018: 220), that points out capitalist actions that exploit ‘free’ resources and labor. This results in expropriation of women and the natural environment. Alike, Perkins (2007: 227) argues that economic systems exclude both the natural environment and unpaid work. This exclusion of women and the environment is interconnected according to Plumwood (1993: 22). She examines how women ‘are’ the environment, because women shape conditions in which men can achieve their paid work. Adding on this discussion about labor and care, I argue that the women of Corfu revalue labor and care through herbalist practices. Broadening notions of labor and care, allows a critique towards capitalist economies, that is based on patriarchal relations as illustrated above.

### **Creating close relationships**

Through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, participant observation and filming methods I collected ethnographically driven information about the research field. (Eco)feminists – such as Plumwood, Perkins, Hanchett, Salleh, Shiva, Mies, Warren and Chaney – are pushing against capitalist economies in which most societies in the Global North operate. Their studies offer new perspectives on gender divisions and sustainable economies.

Contributing through ethnographic evidence to the discussion on ‘women as closer to nature’, clarifies the intersection between gender and ecological sustainability. Ecofeminism is based on a similar and intertwined exclusion of the natural environment and women in economic processes. This reflects the research participants who built relationships with the natural environment, practicing herbalism. As Hanchett (2016: 7) argues, anthropology needs visions on sustainability of local peoples and the skills to reinforce human survival. Therefore, the lived experiences of the women of Corfu are considered relevant. Through interacting with lived experiences, I will explore the research question: *How do women herbalists in Corfu engage with each other and the plants they work with?*

This article adds nuance to feminist debates about ‘care’, ‘labor’ and the externalization of women and the natural environment in mainstream society. Nonetheless, I argue that through herbalism

women have a ‘close’ relationship to the natural environment, by reevaluating labor and caring activities that herbalism as practice entail. Such reevaluation leads towards a critique against capitalist, patriarchal wage labor and creates the opportunity for a sustainable relationship with the more-than-human world.

First, in chapter II, I will point out background information about Corfu’s ecosystem, tradition of women herbalists and the socioeconomic situation of the island. In chapter III, I explain the ethnographic methods I implemented (semi-structured interviews; participants observation; filming). Chapter IV lays out the first part of the analysis, in which the research participants redefine ‘closeness to nature’ regarding healing, communication and an overall lifestyle. Chapter V justifies the second part of the analysis, that extends notions of labor and care by adding perspectives of the women of Corfu. Spelling out the meaning of survival skills in relation to positionality of the women in their household, independence regarding gender roles and capitalist economies is maintained that reflect sustainable treatment of the natural environment.

*“Since I started being with plants and the more you get into that the more you love it and the more you want to preserve it and the more you want to take care of it.” - Ifigenia (January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023)*

## **II Context Corfu**

### **Changing ecosystem**

Corfu is the second largest of the Ionian islands in Greece. The island is situated between the Greek mainland, Albania and Italy.

*“We have an amazing ecosystem with the beaches, the sea and amazing forests, flowers and orchids. We have incredible species. Native orchids just there. Wild ones. You have this incredible ecosystem with birds, animals and flowers. Why you want to destroy it with another all-inclusive?” - Ifigenia (January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023)*

Like Ifigenia examines, Corfu has a rich ecosystem inhabiting many indigenous species (Stille et al. 2021). Therefore, the island is famous for its colorful flora and fauna with an enormous number of wild plants (Corfu Gids 2021). The natural environment of the island is the reason to live in Corfu, many research participants mentioned. Unfortunately, the climate has changed over the past years. Research participants indicate that the seasons are not what it used to be. There are not four seasons as

it used to be, but two. Besides, participants stated the rainfall has decreased a lot. What this means for the natural environment is uncertain, however many expressed their worries for the island.

Besides climate change, the island is polluted by the effects of tourism (Stille et al. 2021). I observed the whole coastline is full of hotels, as Ifigenia referred to. Many areas in Corfu are disappearing because of the construction of hotels. Some participants told me that not only the tourists, but also the touristic companies abandon garbage which entails plastics.

*“I'm afraid of losing all these environmental gifts. Because we are losing them. Sometimes because of the pesticides and everything. Even more in this area. It's very touristic. So, I'm afraid of losing the place.”* - Eleni Armeni (January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

Not only do the research participants worry about the damage of ecosystems, but the women also expressed the issues tourism pollution brings for practicing herbalism. It is hard to find places to collect plants that are not polluted or privatized. Łuczaj et al. (2012) confirm the struggle of land access for collecting plants. The authors argue availability of plants is also a challenge due to changing ecosystems and intoxicated soil in Europe (Łuczaj et al. 2012: 360). Therefore, it becomes clear the women care for the natural environment because it is changing.

### **Women herbalists restoring traditional knowledge**

Historically, herbalism has its roots in ‘folk healing’ (Hoffelt 2015:136), which entails one person in a community who possesses most of the traditional herbal knowledge to heal the community. As women were positioned as caregivers they had to learn all ‘tricks’ to use the plants as medicine, referred to as ‘domestic medicine’ (Hoffelt 2015: 136). Therefore, herbal knowledge was mostly situated with women. However, when feudalistic systems got replaced by capitalism during the Industrial Revolution, the authority of women herbalists was undermined by the upbringing of the pharmaceutical industry (Hoffelt 2015: 137). Ragavan (2001) specifies the rapid loss of traditional knowledge in the time period just after World War Two. She refers to an industrial growth in which the practices that were performed are called ‘intellectual knowledge’ in contrast to traditional knowledge. There is an existing tension in which intellectual knowledge is ascribed to ‘Western’ or often called ‘more developed’ countries and therefore considered more important than traditional knowledge (Ragavan 2001:1-2). Greece is geographically located in the Global North but still has a strong inherited tradition relating to the use of plants, which is considered disappearing knowledge. I suggest Greece therefore is positioned in a confusing position between dichotomies as ‘Global North/Global South’ and ‘modern/traditional’. The country is situated in the Global North, despite still recently based on traditional knowledge regarding the use of plants. Multiple studies plead for a

restoration of traditional knowledge (Nebel et al. 2006; Stenhock et al. 2018; Ragavan 2001; Tang and Gavin 2016). Tang and Gavin (2016) argue that it is urgent to share traditional knowledge to prevent ecological biosystems to collapse any further. Amiott (2003: 6) adds on this argument by stating a relationship between disappearing ecosystems and disappearing traditional knowledge, considering this knowledge as a 'lifestyle' (Amiott 2003: 5). Thus, appreciating traditional knowledge regarding plants does not only have sociocultural benefits (e.g., preserving Greek identity), traditional knowledge also implies ecological benefits (e.g., preserving local biodiversity) (Stenhock et al. 2018; Tang and Gavin 2016; Amiott 2003).

Nowadays there are not many herbalists left in Corfu, Eleni explained to me. Eleni as my main informant and host during the fieldwork period, explained there is only one other herbalists in Corfu. However, they are not in any contact because the women approach the practice in different manners. Eleni and one other participant are clinical herbalists – which entails that they have studied in the United States to get a degree in clinical herbalism. All participants got (some of) their experience in herbalism through Eleni. She is a herbal teacher in Corfu. She used to teach in an institution where free classes were arranged. Her classes were quite popular and some of Eleni's students became close friends of her. Four of the research participants already had access to some knowledge through their grandmothers. The participants all practiced herbalism occasionally, mostly for smaller purposes – such as colds and coughs.

### **Socioeconomics**

Some participants argued that Corfu wasn't affected by the financial crisis of 2002-2011 as badly as the mainland because many people work in the touristic industry. However, I do not aim to trivialize the financial crisis since it has an extensive impact on the entire country in terms of unemployment and poverty. The most recent employment rate given by OECD (2023) of Greece is 60.82 out of 100. This number means the extent of accessible labor is being used. Greece has a total poverty rate of 0.115, that is relatively much compared to 0.083 of for example the Netherlands (OECD, 2023). This ratio states the number of people who live below the poverty line, based on households' income of the specific country. Besides, according to European Commission (2021) the unemployment rate is the highest among women. Associate Professor of Mediterranean studies Maris (2021:445) stated Greece is coping with major social and political struggles regarding unemployment and the health care sector. The financial crisis has resulted in distrust towards political institutions, nevertheless, the Greek population did not lose trust in one another (Ervasti et al. 2018: 1222).

Contextualization of Greece's socioeconomical struggles are important for this research, since herbalism is referred to as 'survival skills' by the participants. Especially in times of crisis, herbal

skills and knowledge are urgent (Łuczaj et al. 2012: 360). Such herbal knowledge reflects the independence of the women of Corfu and their philosophy that crises, as mentioned above, would affect the participants as less as possible. I argue that because by practicing herbalism the women can move outside of capitalist economies, which brings them the independence they seek. Therefore, it is important for the women herbalists to treat the natural environment with care to be able to provide from the environment in a sustainable manner.

### **III Methods**

This research is conducted through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and filming methods.

#### **Semi-structured interviews**

During a fieldwork period of ten weeks, ten in-depth interviews were conducted. The interviews took place in January and February 2023. Through my host, Eleni, I recruited people with experience in herbalism. From the ten interviews, two were men and eight identified as women. However, this article focuses on the experience of the women participants, because I analyze the assumption 'women as closer to nature'. Most interviews were taken in Eleni's house, because many participants wanted to spend time with Eleni before or after the interview. For three interviews I have traveled towards the homes of the participants.

The interviews gave me the opportunity to get rich insights in motivations, norms and values of the interlocutors regarding herbalism. The interviews created a broader understanding of what herbalism entails, contextual and environmental information about Corfu and the positionality of women in Greek households in terms of labor and care. The in-depth interviews helped this study to absorb 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973: 21). This includes detailed perspectives that reduce misunderstandings, however I stress that my interpretation of the data is inevitable. Not only do in-depth semi-structured interviews fit ethnography well, but this method is also referred to as a 'feminist method' (Bryman 2016: 488). This entails a reciprocal relationship between interviewer and interviewee, including women's perspectives and equal relationships.

All interviews are audio (and eight video) recorded and transcribed by me. To analyze the data I used thematically organized codes, that match the theoretical concepts of this research (herbalism; ecofeminism; traditional knowledge; sustainability) including subthemes (plants; (mental) healing; women; care; freedom; independence; food; medicine; oral knowledge; embodied knowledge; respect). I rely on Eleni's expertise as herbalist that there are only a few persons that identify as



herbalists on the island. A narrow focus has been beneficial for building close relationships based on reciprocal trust. Therefore, I believe the participants are a valid reflection of those with herbal knowledge in Corfu. Since I do not imply to generalize the results of this study to a larger population, I believe the sample is accurate.

### **Participant observation**

Through participant observation I captured subjective experiences of my own. The places where I practiced this method were the homes of the research participants, the places we visited to collect plants and a bazar to sell herbal products. Primary places include mountain Pandokrator, the forest, Dimitra's field and the bazar. Participant observation helps this study to represent the social world (Emersen et al. 2001: 352) of the women herbalists of Corfu, that happened in the specific setting while I was present.

The fact that I stayed in Eleni's household the entire fieldwork period, gave me the opportunity to observe a Greek household from within, whilst interacting with the members – Eleni and her husband, Theodoros. The household became one of the most crucial sites to observe that revealed structures related to gender, labor and care. The field notes I wrote allow me to reflect on my own positionality (Bryman 2016: 440) in the household as well as analyzing ordinary as well as striking behavior in the house. I wrote fieldnotes on a day-to-day basis that selected descriptions of conversations, situations, people and my own experiences. This involved active engagement of sensemaking and interpreting situations (Emersen et al. 2001: 353).

Not only did I participate in the household, but I have also participated in the practice of herbalism. I joined the interlocutors whilst collecting plants and the women taught me how to make medicines or traditional food from the herbs. I spent less time collecting plants than expected, because my research participants are dependent on the weather and the needs of their family members. During the activities I have observed and participated. While collecting, I was part of an intergenerational process: traditional knowledge. I became part of the transfer of knowledge as the women are two generations above me. Participating in herbalism activities helped me to understand the categorization of herbal practice, the principles of respect that are performed and the relationship between the herbalists and plants. This relationship is insightful for interpreting the meaning of herbalism and its consequences in the daily lives of the women.

### **Filming**

Film contributes to creating space for voices in an intimate form opposed to written text (Nichols 2017: 105). I use ethnographic film as a collaborative and reflexive tool (Pink 2021: 125). Taking on a reflexive and participatory role, creates contextualization about my own positionality and will show

the engagement with the interlocutors in image (Nichols 2017: 109). Filmmaking implies decision making – choosing frames, settings, editing and narration – in which I include my own inevitable biases. Just as Lawrence (2020: 79) describes participation, collaboration and reflexivity are key through meaningful relationships and awareness of the self. Gaining herbal knowledge from the women through working together with the plants in relation to my positionality as member of Eleni's household provided insights about herbalism, traditional knowledge, and the care/labor positionality of women in Greek households.

Filming supported me to create boundaries to what extent I participated in activities and where I passively observed. According to Suhr and Willerslev (2022:286) the camera becomes a stretch of one's senses. The camera assisted me to extent my observations to pay focused attention. I used filming as a method to capture informal conversations and interviews, to closely look at herbalism as a practice and to grasp a sense of relationships between interlocutors and plants.

I aimed to observe conversations to capture the ground of relationships. Considering the comfortableness of the research participants, I started filming after three/four weeks of fieldwork. I believe this decision has contributed to footage of the participants being untroubled with the presence of me or the camera. Zooming out, I intent to show an overall view of the lifestyle of the women of Corfu. I portray the women of Corfu in the environments that are essential for their practice and identities as herbalists. Moreover, I tried to create awareness of the images I captured with the protagonists. For example, I showed the camera position (I turned the display on the camera to show them what I saw) like Spray accomplished in *Record* (2017). Spray showed her protagonist the exact frame she was shooting. This creates a mutual understanding of what the filmmaker captures. Besides, I presented selected footage to the protagonists to get direct feedback and to give an insight in how I perceive their social world. This resonates with my belief that anthropology is not about finding the 'truth', but to think a long with existing ontologies.

In Eleni's house when regular routines were carried out, I decided to not record. Therefore, I did not film Eleni's husband or her role as caregiver in the household. I believe, this caring role is not containable in this film and is important as an invisible component in the film. Suhr and Willerslev (2013: 4) argue that the creation of a gap, creates an interesting absence. Because it is impossible for me to grasp all labor the interlocutors execute, this will remain invisible. Only the women themselves know the weight of their labor. Besides, I do not wish to portray the women as stereotypes, but I aim to show their personal stories that are filled with strength and talent. The film aims to acknowledge the invisibility by the metaphor of hands and accompanying speech of the protagonists. The returning hands represent the weight of responsibilities; hard labor; appreciation to traditional knowledge regarding herbalism.

Tsing et al. (2019) argue anthropologists need to pay more attention to relationships between humans and more-than-humans, because such depictions can offer sustainable suggestions, without romanticizing situations. Therefore, I zoom in on the relationship between the women and the natural environment. Through healing, communication, principles of respect and an overall lifestyle I explore this relationship in the first part of the analysis.

### **III Outside**

Herbalism is a multisided practice. Plants provide different needs where humans are dependent on, such as medicine, food, fire or material resources (Amujoyegbe et al. 2012). The practice of herbalism is ascribed as ‘basic survival’ skills by Łuczaj et al. (2012). Based on observations, there are three parts of herbalism identified: collecting plants, making traditional medicine/food and sharing knowledge. This section will discuss the parts of herbalism that are situated outside – entailing the collecting of herbs. I base these categories on my experience of herbalism with the main informants of this study, Eleni and Dimitra. The participants usually collect plants in their gardens, on mountain Pandokrator or in the forest. In the following analysis I will discuss perspectives of the women’s experiences as ‘closer to nature’ in relation to their presence in the natural environment.

#### **Healing**

Spending time in the natural environment is a big part of herbalism for the research participants. In order to make herbal medicine or food, one first needs to collect the plants. Every participant shared a similar feeling when one collects herbs. For others this feeling extended throughout other parts of herbalism, such as making medicine. Kamboj (2000: 35) argues that herbal medicine is more than physical healing, namely a therapeutical experience embedded in medical systems based on generations of knowledge. This same experience of herbalism is referred to as ‘relaxed’, ‘calm’, ‘therapeutic’, ‘therapy’ or ‘healing’ by the research participants. Because not everyone practices herbalism in the form of making products, the mental state of mind I refer to applies mostly to collecting herbs.

*“All my stress goes out when I go out. When I go to the village to the place where is calendula now, an area from here to the road. It's all yellow. You see it and you relax. It's very nice” - Natassa (January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023).*

*“It was the feeling it's like when you do something it's really healing. Soul and body and everything. Like a hug, like you know mother nature came here to heal your body. It was perfection”* - Chrisa (January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

*“It's this happiness I feel the moment I harvest. It's like I meditate at this moment”* - Roula (January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

The statements mentioned above, refer to ‘healing’ in a context other than physical. Plants as resource can physically heal physical health issues (Conway: 2005: 187). However, the type of healing Chrisa implies, is not the result of a cream, oil or tincture. This therapeutical experience evolves because of the time consumed in the natural environment and the relationship the women have with the plants. Besides the physical benefits of plants, the mental benefits are part of the motivation of herbalists to engage with the plants. Many studies are focused on the physical benefits of plants (e.g., Conway 2005; Crellin and Philpott 1990; Builders 2019; Inui 2016), nevertheless it seems that the herbalists themselves and their beliefs are often unacknowledged. All participants express positive influences from spending time in the natural environment, that refer to healing experiences other than physical.

### **Communicating with plants**

The research participants collect plants intuitively. When I collected herbs with Eleni and Dimitra, they showed me that they do not collect plants with a set up plan. Sometimes, the women do not pick any plants at all. Eleni explained that it depends on the environment. If the environment is a ‘spiritual setting’, Eleni would not interfere. Once we went to a cave that was situated in a mystical atmosphere because of the fog. Eleni told me this is exactly such a place she would not collect any plants. Not only the atmosphere is dependent on the collection of plants, but communication is also key in the process of collecting. For example, Fotini expresses her communication with plants in the form of gratitude.

*“When I collect herbs they give me the herb, but I don't give back. It's not a relationship that I take and I give. I think it's that I always take. I'm thankful for it. So, I say 'thank you' for it. I'm happy to see you, thank you for giving me what you have to offer to me”* - Fotini (February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

Not only do the participants communicate with the plants. The women also explained how the plants communicate to them. Often, the plants ‘tell’ them to collect. For example, Natassa illustrates how herbalism as a practice is not necessarily reciprocal.

*“I think it's calling me to collect, to cut some leaves or whatever. Make something. In a few days or weeks this thing that I made will help me in something, with a problem I think. [...] But plants don't want anything, they just offer you”* - Natassa (January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

The relationship between humans and plants is at the core of herbalism, as phytotherapist Hoffmann (2003) argues. The relationship consists of a recognition that humans are dependent on the ‘plant kingdom’. Just as Amujoyegbe et al. (2012: 345) argues ecosystems and human economies depend on plants. The view – that humans are only part of the plant kingdom – resonates with the research participants. The plant world ‘offers’ us food and medicine as Natassa illustrates, thus humans need to be ‘grateful’ as Fotini expresses. I believe acknowledging humans’ dependency on plants happens in the way of communicating with plants for the women in Corfu. This act of communication is a form of expressing the relationship with the plants and the broader connection between the women and the natural environment.

### **Principles of respect**

Respect was a reoccurring phenomenon that came up during all interviews when discussing the relationship between participant and the natural environment. Observing actions that resonated with what the women told me, helped to create an insight in the sustainable relationship between the women and the natural environment.

Hence, I wish to establish a clear understanding of the anthropological context of sustainability. Anthropologist Tsing (2015:31) emphasizes how human beings have used capitalist economies to exploit natural resources. Stating that humans created resources out of other humans and more-than-humans throughout the existence of capitalism. Not exploiting any entity, is according to Langley and Mellor (2010: 49) a sustainable economy. Anthropologist Hanchett (2016: 7) states that a sustainable lifestyle includes a certain influence of social and cultural structures on people’s transformative or coping strategies and concern of ‘resilience and vulnerability’. She introduces the concept of ‘social sustainability’ that highlights the urgency for change in exploiting systems towards a long-term perspective of humans regarding the livability of new generations (Hanchett 2016: 5). Stone (2003: 96) argues that sustainability within anthropology often is statically analyzed. She strives towards an anthropology that includes the perceptions and lived experiences of the people one studies with. Therefore, I discuss the actions the research participants take that reflect a sustainable lifestyle. All behavior is motivated out of the value ‘respect’. Such behavior offers insight in the relationship between the women and the natural environment and its sustainable manifestation. A pattern of principles unfolded during the interviews and observed activities.

## 1. Don't collect more than you can work with

It takes a lot of effort to process the herbs. This happens directly after the participants arrive home. The first step to process plants can be for example washing or drying. One should not bring more home than there is capacity for the individual to work with. Besides, one should not collect big quantities, but collect bits to interfere as less with ecosystems as possible.

*“Respect, you can show it in many ways to collect just the quantity that you want and not everything that there is in the environment. And to show the love that you have for that and it will understand”* - Dimitra (February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

Dimitra illustrates how one is sensitive for the number of plants that is collected. Therefore, communication with the plants, again, is key for the participants. This communication can be verbal, but it also expresses in actions of respect.

## 2. Don't harm the natural environment

When a herbalist is outside this basic rule applies in different manners. First of all, one cannot leave garbage in the places where she collects. However, this rule applies in more subtle ways that requires more knowledge about the growth process of the plants. For example, usnea is a plant that grows on different branches that is used as an antibiotic. The growth process is relatively slow. Therefore, the unwritten rule is to only collect usnea from branches that have fallen from the trees. Because the usnea will be destroyed eventually when it cannot reach the natural light anymore. This example illustrates how herbalism offers knowledge that leads to a sustainable relationship with the natural environment.

*“Since I started being with plants and the more you get into that the more you love it and the more you want to preserve it and the more you want to take care of it.”* - Ifigenia (January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

Ifigenia examines how one cannot harm the environment, but one takes care of it if she is practicing herbalism. Therefore, herbalism creates a sustainable relationship with the natural environment.

Snodgrass et al. (2008: 355) states that those who practice ‘herbal healing’ - as part of herbalism – are protecting their natural environment since their identity and well-being is dependent on this. Thus, I argue that the research participants care for the environment of Corfu, since it is part of their identity. As the women believe they are part of the same existence, it's a rather rational choice to not destroy the natural environment. During an interview with Eleni (February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023), she has put this argument in the following words:

**Eleni:** You are more aware and it [the natural environment] is your home and it is you. You, you are not something different than the rest of the island here. What if the island suffers? You suffer and you know that because you may suffer and don't know why. But if you live close to nature, you know that is the reason why.

**Thalia:** So, if you destroy nature, you destroy yourself?

**Eleni:** Exactly.

### 3. Give back

When the participants collect plants they try to give back to the particular place the women collect. I observed during all times we collected plants, the participants tried to make this practice a reciprocal act. This happened in the form of sprinkling nuts or seeds in the natural environment. In this way, birds can eat – that are viewed as part of the environment just as the plants or the women themselves. During my interview with Despina she illustrated a scene where she found a mistletoe when she was not planning to collect. She said the mistletoe was communicating with her. It grew in a height that is not common for the mistletoe.

*“I wasn't prepared to offer something, so I pulled some of my hair and tried to offer something because you can't take a medicine without offering something.” -Despina (January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023)*

All three principles of respect are inherited in an overall awareness. Multiple participants argued that herbalism has taught them to be more aware while being in the natural environment. Some explain that they are unable to not see plants. Their worldview has broadened in the sense that they recognize plants consciously and unconsciously. Moreover, herbalism has taught the participants awareness of their position towards the natural environment. The women believe they are part of this environment, therefore they treat the places they visit with care. For some this means to not step on the plants or not leave garbage. For others this means to sprinkle seeds or express their affection towards the plants.

*“Why do I go and cut the life? I was always feeling that. But you don't realize. With herbs, you stop pretending that you don't know you are doing something bad and you stop” - Chrisea (January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023).*

This statement by Chrisea illustrates how one cannot destroy the environment, once one is aware of its existence. When an individual does not view the natural environment as ordinary but experiences it as if she is part of it, this changes the engagement with the plants.

*“The more awareness you have of your environment it is like your life becomes more enriched, your life becomes more deep, your life becomes bigger, and the sense of ourselves is more enriched and bigger”* (Eleni, February 14<sup>th</sup>)

This statement by Eleni illustrates how ‘the sense of ourselves’ relates to the perspective of being part of the same natural environment and the awareness that comes with this presence in the natural environment.

Hofmeister and Biesecker (2010: 1706) address the issue of ‘natural capital’ - where the natural environment is often perceived as stock, not as an active, dynamic and changing phenomenon. When economic systems look at the natural environment in this sense, it overlooks an intertwined relationship between humans and more-than-humans. Human behavior inevitably changes the natural environment (e.g., loss of biodiversity; climate change (Hofmeister and Biesecker (2010: 1706))). Therefore, Hofmeister and Biesecker (2010: 1706) plead towards a conscious reconsideration of natural resources in economic context and its relationship to humans. For example, if humans consider themselves part of the natural environment – as the women in Corfu – instead of viewing the environment as commodity this could lead to a sustainable engagement with the natural environment. Besides, the role of herbalism and traditional knowledge is threatened by big companies that do view plants as commodities (Jagtenberg and Evans 2003: 322). Thus, I argue herbalism brings the women an awareness in behavior towards the natural environment, resulting in care for this exact environment. Treating the natural environment with care creates a sustainable relationship between the women and the plants, that contrasts the economic driven visions on the natural environment.

### **Lost connection**

All research participants live in Corfu for many years (10+). Seven of the participants did not live on the island all their lives. Therefore, they made a conscious decision to live here. One participant came initially because she went to the Ionian University, but others came for the natural environment. Most participants told me they prefer to live in the countryside over the city. Five interviews went into a direction about the dichotomy city/countryside. The participants illustrated a division between people who live in the countryside and those who live in the city. Multiple conversations pointed out that people in cities have lost the connection with ‘nature’. Some gave examples of the plants, animals, mountain or rivers to refer to the natural environment.

*“City people enjoy being in nature, but they don't know really how to interact with nature”* - Despina (January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023).



I interpret such arguments as a comparison in lifestyles. Mies (2014: 255) states that a consciously chosen different (than mainstream society) lifestyle, can lead to ‘consumer liberation’. This liberation entails to not be dependent on capitalist markets, but to be able to rely on oneself. To reach this, humans must choose different tools to make them feel satisfied – that are not doing harm; do not alienate the relationship between humans and the natural environment; are not built on patriarchal systems (Mies 2014: 255). The women herbalists of Corfu expressed their wish to live self-sustainable. I believe this wish and the contribution of herbalism are in line with the ‘countryside’ lifestyle the participants refer to. If humans could choose their own lifestyle, Hanchett (2016: 8) argues, humans will probably choose non-material values as most important conducts of well-being. The research participants have chosen their own lifestyle, that reflect spending much time in the natural environment and for some to spend time making traditional medicine/food. The women chose consciously to have agency over their choices about how they spend their time.

When I asked my participants how to view hierarchies between humans and more-than-humans, many found this question odd. Two of the participants provided me with a metaphor of how they see the relationship between humans and plants, and one contributed a direct explanation.

*“Everything is a bowl of soup. Like the earth. Everything is mixed. I don't feel anything is greater than the other. People and plants”* - Despina (January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

*“I feel like I'm in this small piece of this big hug. This gaze, if someone thinks that this hug is dominant, no [disagreement]”* - Eleni Armeni (January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

*“[...] you go to the root of nature. How nature really works and I'm part of nature. So, it's my component. I am nature. I have the same laws”* - Chrisa (January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

These statements illustrate a belief that humans and more-than-humans are part of the same existence. One is not valued above or underneath the other. Despite, the participants make a distinction between ‘city people’ and ‘countryside people’ in which a dominant preference for countryside lifestyle is implied.

*“I think all the troubles start because we have separated ourselves from nature, because we have closed ourselves in these towns full of cement and in these four walls and we have destroyed our relationship with nature”* - Eleni (February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

Eleni's statement captures the disapproval of a city lifestyle. However, the issue appears more nuanced than a distinction between 'city/countryside people'. As Langley and Mellor (2002: 51) argue, it is not 'human nature' to make capitalist-based decisions. It is politically constructed to act according to economic norms. This behavior is disadvantageous for especially women, since the mystic 'economy' is in general interpreted as a reflection of humans. However, this construct is operating as reflection of the 'rational, economic man' (Langley and Mellor 2002: 52).

Therefore, I argue the women act upon a sustainable lifestyle, compared to mainstream society. Because the women do not fit in capitalist economies, they find meaning in their relationship with the natural environment. In that sense, women are 'closer to nature', however the research participants redefine such assumptions. They are not 'closer to nature' because they are stereotyped as 'emotional beings' (Plumwood 1993: 19). The women define 'closeness to nature' through practicing herbalism. Their relationship with the natural environment is manifested in healing, communication, care and an overall lifestyle.

The second part of the analysis will dive into herbalism performed inside the houses of the women of Corfu. This categorizes making traditional food or medicine. I have engaged with Eleni and Dimitra throughout the processing of plants. Through this practice I focus on broadened notion of 'labor' and 'care' and how the women critique capitalist economies.

#### **IV Inside**

*One sunny afternoon I spend time with Dimitra in her kitchen making trahana (τραχανά) – a traditional pasta in which herbs are dried and preserved. She was excited to teach me how to make this dish which originates from the North part of Greece, just as my ancestors. As I told her my great-grandmother used to make trahana as well, her face turned into a big smile. I looked at Dimitra making the dough. Her apron was covered in flour. I asked her if she had learned how to make this recipe from her mother. She answered 'Yes, and my mother learned how to make this from her mother'. However, her mother did not have herbal knowledge, as her grandmother did. She told me about her family history while flattening out the dough. Between telling me this story and working with the dough she made sure I was paying attention towards the process of making the trahana. She told me how the past generations had much knowledge about the preservation and cultivating of food, because her family comes from a poor village with harsh winters. In order to have enough food for the wintertime, in September the women were preserving many vegetables to survive during the upcoming season. When I asked Dimitra why such traditional knowledge is being lost, she was speaking with a serious tone of voice.*

*“They wanted to have an identity of something else. Greece until 1950 was a country with many fights, wars, everything. And after that, they wanted to be something else. Not like before. So the best thing was to be like the Western civilization. [...] They didn't want to belong to the East. They wanted the West. But now the last generations here are trying to see what they want to keep from the tradition and bring the tradition back, even in herbs.”*

*Communism, that ‘belonged to the East’ was an ideology people got murdered for during the period of war. After the 1950’s, peace was finally maintained in Greece and the generation of Dimitra’s parents wanted to have a better life than their ancestors. Many people moved abroad - like my grandparents – or moved to cities and started working in tourism or for other big companies. In the meantime, Dimitra let the dough slide through the pasta machine. She continued to make her argument.*

*“I always remember my grandmother singing when she was making dried things. How safe she was feeling when she had to feed us. Because she had something, she didn’t need to buy something. And this is what I feel now. I’m very proud when friends are here, and I can say ‘I made this pasta’ [...] The new generation might not even know what trahana is.”*

*Dimitra keeps traditional food and preservation techniques alive through the knowledge of her ancestors or she educates herself to fill in the gap of the last generation. She critiques a capitalist economy in which people aim for ‘easy money’ and become ‘lazy’ as she explained to me. Even though practicing traditional knowledge is physically demanding and time consuming, Dimitra implies to rather be poor and be independent from, for example, supermarkets than to be rich and must always buy her food.*

### **Survival skills**

*“[...] we need this knowledge to have our food, to forage our food or medicine also, and to have the skills and the knowledge. This is a kind of strength for us. We need the, this knowledge. You need to, survival skills in a way, because we're more stronger. And if we have more time for us, and not only work, for money, we can be better persons and have more quality time for us” - Dimitra (February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023)*

Multiple participants referred to traditional herbal knowledge as survival skills, because as Dimitra examined, herbalism gives one the power to feed and heal oneself and others. This believe resonates with Mies’ argument in *Ecofeminism* (2014: 254). She proposes an alternative interpretation of a ‘good life’ which is based on the slogan ‘less is more’. This philosophy is filled in with values such as

self-sufficiency, creativity, communality and respect towards humans and more-than humans. Mies (2014: 254) continues her argument by stating that not only poor countries – that might not have a choice – but also rich countries should adopt this philosophy. I believe that the economic situation of Greece is an important factor for the urgency that the participants feel to engage with their survival skills. In times of crisis (recently, the energy crisis) such skills appear to be important (Łuczaj et al. 2012: 360). Besides self-sufficiency, experiencing independence and freedom are results of practicing herbalism for the research participants. The women expressed how herbalism influences making decisions of their own, concretely to choose spending time practicing herbalism.

*“The fact with the plants, I have a better understanding of myself and of what I really believe and how I want to live. This is another way of being free. There are many ways that plants can help you in nature. Not just plants. Nature can help you to be free”* - Eleni (February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

*“Even if you go out to search for them [plants], that's a care for yourself. [...] I go out of the house and I recognize them [plants] and I feel all these kinds of feelings. Freedom, nice feeling. That's a cure”* - Eleni Armeni (January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

*“I will find my food in nature. I will cultivate. I can heal some things for my kids, for myself. If I will fall, I can. I know what to do. How to clean my wound and what to do with it. I don't speak about doing a surgery. But all these things that they come up every day and they make people feel that if you have this knowledge, you feel that you are grounded. You know who you are, that you know what you can do, and you are free to make choices”* - Eleni (February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

Practicing herbalism creates the opportunity for the women to care for themselves, instead of their families. They do use herbal skills for their families, but consciously spending time with such activities is experienced as a form of freedom. ‘A cure’ as Eleni Armeni describes, refers to healing not in the physical sense but as therapeutic. When the women choose to spend their time practicing herbalism, they choose to spend time for themselves which means that they can be themselves. Their identity extends during such activities from mother, (house)wife or caretaker to herbalist. Some refer to themselves as herbalists, but many do not. However, the women still experience a moment in time to be a person outside of their gender roles.

*“But the greatest healing is that they give me an identity. I am not a housekeeper, a woman that nobody knows who she is, what is interesting about what she loves. She is just there to cook and clean and take care of the others”* - Eleni (February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

Therefore, I argue that herbalism, as part of traditional knowledge, is a form of survival skills. Survival skills create a positionality for the women to be independent from capitalist economies, because they can provide food and medicine for oneself and their families that relates to feelings of freedom. Besides, herbalism creates a space for the women to have an identity outside their gender roles.

### **Caring role**

*“We always have to do things. We have to raise up our kids and when the kids are big, the parents grow up. So, you have to take care of your parents. Afterwards your kids have kids. So, you always are with people to do. This is how a typical Greek home is. The women still are in the kitchen. In my generation they do”* - Fotini (February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

Some of the women participants have expressed their disagreement with the gender norms of their household. Such gender norms include that women are taking care of the family and the household, as is implied in the statement by Fotini. Others, did not seem to mind the structure in which they were mostly cooking, cleaning and caring for the family. There are a few participants who did not recognize such gender norms, however I observed that every household I visited operated in a similar way. Women cooked and took care of the guests (e.g., making drinks, setting the table). All participants expressed disagreement towards the division of chores in ‘a typical Greek household’. Nevertheless, not all women expressed this same disagreement about their own household. Some justified this with statements as:

*“It's our fault that we are still in the kitchen because we believe that we do it better than our husbands anyway”* - Dimitra, February 15<sup>th</sup>).

Others are trying to change such gender roles, like Chrisa:

*“You can't be working and mother. It's too many. Too many jobs. But many men prefer the lazier life. In Greece we - me and my friends - say take care of the boys. Don't let them be like the previous ones. They have to wash the dishes, to cook. It's nice. Everybody, everything.”* - Chrisa (January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

### **Eleni's household**

*Theodoros, Eleni's husband, has two chores in their household: taking out the garbage and bringing wood in the house for the fireplace. However, often he doesn't do his chores which annoys Eleni. She asks him multiple times and when he doesn't do his chores, Eleni does. Unfortunately, these chores are physically too heavy for Eleni because she is struggling with health problems. One day, I woke up*

*and I saw Eleni limping. When I asked about her leg, she told me it was because of carrying the wood the night before. Theodoros watched her carry the wood and this made me frustrated. How could he watch his wife struggle while he's sitting in his chair? From this moment, I decided to take upon Theodoros' chores because I feel bad for Eleni. Whenever I do his chores, he just smiles at me. He doesn't thank me or takes it over. I think he is used to be taking care of. Eleni wakes him up, makes his food, brings him to work, makes the fire, does the dishes, and so on. For Theodoros this is 'the way things are' - as I feel when Eleni takes care of me. I intuitively started caring for Theodoros too – with minor things. For example, I wash his dishes, give him a glass of water and make the fire. I don't do this for him, I do this for Eleni because I can see it is hard on her.*

*After some time, I started feeling strange about doing such things for Theodoros. It is not reciprocal and I feel like he expected this from me. I don't want to take care of Theodoros, I want to take care of Eleni. I learned that Eleni's caring role over me made me uncomfortable, because she already has a extra burden. She has cared for her children, her sick mother and her husband all her adult life. I don't want to be another burden for her. When I hear her disagreement with the role of women in Corfu households in general, I feel like an extra weight despite my contributions.*

### **Invisible labor**

In the vignette examined above, it becomes clear that Eleni performs much labor in her household. She represents one of many women. Her husband does not see this or recognize the value of this work. Perkins (2007: 227) characterizes unpaid work as 'systemic externalization'. With externalization she refers to women and the natural environment as well as unpaid labor. Perkins continues her argument by stressing the need for acknowledgement of unpaid work. However, to not try to fit women in existing economical system but to transform the system into a sustainable economy (2007: 229-231).

Important to point out is that Perkins (2007:230) perceives 'caretaking' as labor – as in feminist discussions on labor and care. Biesecker and Hofmeister (2010:1707) argue that economics should revalue the caretaking labor of women, because this is perceived as 'reproductive'. Reproductive in the sense of creating new life. Nevertheless, the authors point out that productivity (creating commodities and service) and reproductivity (creating life and care for humans/more-than-humans) are intertwined, therefore necessary to value and reconsider in capitalist economies. I argue that separating caring activities from economic systems, is itself a naturalizing and stereotyping act. Women are perceived as passive actors in society, while in fact many women are the core of the economy (Rubin 1975: 167). If women decide to stop doing this unpaid labor, paid labor would not be

possible to achieve. If Eleni did not care for Theodoros and their household, he would not be able to work. Moreover, Salleh et al. (1997: 25) argue that women are in the position to change economic structures into sustainable structures, because women have more experience ‘working’. The authors state that women, globally, take up 65% of all the existing work, however only 5% of them is paid.

Considering the women of Corfu, they are often excluded from economic society. Once, I heard a joke Eleni made that appeared meaningful for this argument. We spend time in Dimitra’s household together with their husbands. Where we, the women, were preparing food in the kitchen, the men stood in the living room looking at the computer. Eleni went to the living room and when she got back, she laughed and said ”I joined talking business”. This joke implies that it is not up to women to ‘talk business’ or play a role in economical facets of their households.

However, unpaid work entails a lot of responsibility. Not only as women, but also as herbalists. Herbalism - and therefore herbal medicine – is often views as ‘alternative’ healing (Conway 2005: 183). Mainstream medicine and herbalism share a great part in their history since mainstream medicine still operates with the usage of plants (Conway 2005: 185). However the shared material, Eleni explained there is a discrepancy in law between a herbalist and a doctor or pharmacist. Eleni is still afraid to make herbal medicine in liquid form because she is not protected by law as employees in the pharmaceutical industry. Besides, herbal medicine doesn’t work the same way as mainstream medicine. It is not the responsibility of the herbalist how much medicine one takes and when to take it. It is a relationship between the medicine-taker and the plants, that relies on a reflection of one’s body, as Eleni explained. Therefore, it is hard for herbalists to share medicine in mainstream society because the role of an individual’s responsibility is not shared in the philosophy about personal health care. The women already carry the extra burden of their gender roles, thus they use practicing herbalism as a care for themselves or close relatives.

### **Creating independence**

The economic situation of Greece, due to the energy crisis, has been unfortunate for the women. Even though their husbands work fulltime, the energy bills are higher than ever, according to the participants. Therefore, the women imbed themselves in the households’ finances. The motivation to practice herbalism was never to earn money, which is why the women feel uncomfortable to sell their products. Despite feeling uncomfortable, the women were certain that it is righteous to start a small business with their herbal products. Eleni expressed her belief in how the plants offer her independence, and this time to let her make some money in order that her family does not have to suffer.

*“I somehow feel, it’s like the plants they whisper to me that our way to help you right now is to help you cope with the difficulties of life by having the money you need” -Eleni (February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023)*

This statement by Eleni refers to the close relationship she has with the plants, that allows her to create independence for her family in a different manner, namely financially, without harming the natural environment.

Trigg (2014: 175) illustrates how women from ‘the second shift’ feminism in the 1920’s strived towards gender equality through financial independence. Upper-class feminists struggled because they had to adopt in a ‘men’s world’. Legally, it was a challenge for a married woman to have a paid job. However, to have a paid job meant that one had to operate in a patriarchal atmosphere where masculinity is the norm. Paul and Langley (2010: 50) continue this argument, nevertheless in a recent timeframe. The authors argue that societies norm is based on men, implying women are a diversion of the norm. This statement is notable from an economic viewpoint when ‘women’s work’ (i.e., caretaking activities (Jochimsem and Knobloch 1997) is apparently unconsidered (Paul and Langley 2010: 50).

Through illustrating the relationality between the financial context and independence, I want to stress that the women engage with herbalism to be independent in a multifaceted manner. Despite their financial dependence on their husbands, they do not aim for financial independence from their households. The women view making money from herbalism as an addition to the financial situation of their household. Thus, on the one hand the women aim to additionally provide for their families in terms of money, food and medicine. On the other hand, the women practice herbalism as care for themselves because the practice enables the women to escape their demanding caring gender role within their families.

I want to stress that, we feminists, must focus on an intersectional phrasing about women’s independence. As Mies (2010: 220) states, if we strive towards the autonomous woman, capable of self-determination we must also criticize exploitative economic relationship outside the Global North – from which women themselves benefit.

Therefore, I argue care is taken for oneself according to Eleni’s philosophy, as the plants care for the body. Herbalism creates a space to make decisions over one’s body that are for the health of the woman herself, that liberate her from the gender roles that are other than mother or (house)wife. To liberate a woman from oppressive male/female domination is to be self-determined about one’s body (Mies 2014: 221). I state that the women of Corfu are revaluing care and labor through practicing herbalism. Therefore, the participants acknowledge the importance of their caretaking activities and use herbalism skills to create independence from their gender roles in the household and expectations



from the capitalist labor market. Based on traditional herbal knowledge, the women connect previous generations by taking the knowledge of previous generations into account.

## V Conclusion

I aim to create nuance in ecofeminist thought about ‘women as closer to nature’ by engaging with the literature through an ethnographic case study. This context entails the perspectives of the women of Corfu with experience in herbalism, based on the notions ‘labor’ and ‘care’. The ethnographic evidence points out that the initial research question is not as relevant for this discussion as anticipated. Hence, the research question *How do women herbalists in Corfu engage with each other and the plants they work with?* is transformed in the following: *How do the women herbalists of Corfu experience their relationship with the natural environment?*

Based on a fieldwork period of ten weeks, this study focusses on two categorizations of herbalism: outside and inside. Outside, refers to the collecting of plants. The women of Corfu redefine ‘closeness to nature’, through practicing herbalism. The participants find meaning in their relationships with the natural environment. While collecting plants, this is experienced as healing. Besides the physical effects of the medicinal properties of the plants, the collecting has a therapeutic effect on the mental state of the women. Through communicating with the plants, a relationship with the plants is established that reflects the dependency of humans on plants. The women act in the natural environment according to principles of respect, that are guidelines to treat the natural environment with care. Acting upon these principles contribute to a sustainable lifestyle, critiquing capitalist economies where women’s labor remains unacknowledged.

Building on the acknowledgement of women’s labor, ethnographic engagement with the research participants shows that the women contribute with broadened notions on ‘labor’ ‘and ‘care’. The women revalue the performance of the interactions within their households as well as the natural environment. Practicing herbalism inside their houses, by making traditional food and medicine, reflect how the women use ‘survival skills’ to make independent choices over their lives through a restoration and appreciation of **traditional** herbal knowledge about the plants. Independence for the research participants affects the gender roles in their households and in capitalist economies.

Herbalism offers an escape from demanding caring roles in the household and the positionality of women in capitalist economies. Moreover, herbalism critiques such economies by showing how sustainable relationships with the natural environment are maintained through a ‘closeness to nature’.

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