

Establishing Connections with the Ancestors through *Umxhentso* Dance

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Benjamin Obeghare IZU
Music and Performing Arts Department
Nelson Mandela University
Email: Benjaminizu@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5314-7215>

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Alethea de VILLIERS
Music and Performing Arts Department
Nelson Mandela University
Email: Alethea.DeVilliers@mandela.ac.za
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7452-5083>

Abstract

Through the ages, ritual dances have been part of human culture. Although artistic, the *umxhentso* dance is a ritual dance performed by the Xhosa *amagqirha* (traditional healers) to establish connections with supernatural beings. During the dance performance, the *amagqirha* enter a state of trance and connect with the spiritual realm. During this state of trance, they seek guidance and vision from their ancestors. The *amagqirha*, in all the Xhosa communities, perform these dance rituals at initiation and healing ceremonies. The objectives of this study were to examine the religious and social purposes of *umxhentso* dance in *amagqirha* rituals and determine how it assists *amagqirha* in establishing connections with their ancestors during ceremonies. This study adopted the naturalistic research approach in studying the *umxhentso* dance during the *amagqirha* ceremonies. The researchers examined, evaluated and assessed the research participants' actions and behaviours in a natural setting within a societal and cultural framework.

Keywords: *umxhentso* dance, *amagqirha*, Xhosa, ancestral veneration, culture

Introduction

Dance is a part of world cultures, and dance traditions sustain and restore civilisations, despite their artistic nature (STEVENSON 2019, 2). Dance traditions also mirror humanity's journey to unify with the power and awe of existence (STEVENSON 2019, 5). The ability of dance to function as a conduit to the afterlife allows people to express and work through emotions in sublimated forms without putting themselves at risk. The emotions conveyed through dance and other cultural traditions are thus easily accessible and explorable through the purposeful action of dancing (KIEFT 2014, 1; MONTEIRO AND WALL 2011, 239).

People dance for various reasons, including hunting, childbearing, worship, harvest, rituals and cultural rites. Each dance expresses a people's culture and has unique roots. As an essential aspect of tradition, dance contains elements of people's cultural traditions and transmits them from one generation to the next.

As a result, dance significantly strengthens cultural identity and plays a critical role in society by preserving a people's way of life (LYKESAS 2017,104). Mlisa states that it is not only dance but also singing that remains a significant part of the religious aspect of African people's everyday activities (2009,43). Akunna highlights an additional element of dance by claiming that traditional African dances have a strong connection to spiritual customs and traditional healing practices (2015, 40).

In traditional African societies in which communities follow indigenous practices, the well-being of the community and individuals within those communities is determined by their interactions with their ancestral spirits. These rituals are widespread across different nationalities. An example of a ritual that connects humans to the spiritual realm is described in Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe describes a Nigerian Igbo ritual in which the male patriarch pours a libation of a few drops of palm wine onto the floor or ground, which symbolically opens a portal in the earth through which the ancestors enter the physical world from the spiritual world under the earth. The gourd master then prays and uses chalk to draw lines on the floor that symbolise the safe passage of the ancestors to and from the spirit world. The kola nut is broken and served among the visible men (humans) and the invisible (spirits), after which the palm wine is served (1957, np).

According to Ngcobo, a ritual is an act that unifies more than just the people who live in the same world; it serves as a channel for communication between people who live in the physical and spiritual worlds (2020, 2). Here, communication is understood not only through verbal conversation but also through involvement in ritual activities. In such encounters, rituals offer a space where the human and ancestral realms can coexist while sharing a mythic experience over meals, drinks, music, handclapping and dance. It is believed that ancestral beings are directly involved in all the participants' endeavours (NGCOBO 2020, 2).

Communities that perform the rituals of connecting with the spiritual realm believe that if they do not obey social rules or anger the spirits or gods, they may suffer misfortune and/or afflictions (MONTEIRO AND WALL 2011, 236). They engage in rituals to connect with and appease the spirits and invoke them to purify community members and heal the sick. In these ceremonies or rites, music and dance are functional components used to summon the spirits (ISABIRYE 2020, 47). According to Nwafor, all communities have ancestors who provide guidance, healing and insight (2017, 37). Through interaction with their forebears, people gain a deeper understanding of the generational blessings and duties they inherit and a sense of purpose and connection with the non-human, spiritual realm. The link between humans and their forebears is not always harmonious, and disobeying ancestors' counsel may result in illness, restlessness and terrifying experiences (LEBAKA 2018, 5). The preceding statement sheds light on how people and their ancestors interact. Lebaka claims that ancestor veneration results from cultural practices connected by a common religious tradition and cultural values. Ancestor veneration has always been a fundamental aspect of human life in terms of religion, culture and society (2018, 5).

Ancestors are venerated based on the belief that they are still living and can still affect the fortunes of the living. This practice is founded on the idea that

the dead remain alive after physical death (NWAFOR 2017, 40; BOGOPA 2010, 1). Hence, respect and fear motivate their veneration (BOGOPA 2010, 1). For many nationalities, this practice serves as the cornerstone of traditional religion. In certain cultures, the aim is to ensure the ancestors' happiness and win their favour for the living. Ancestral veneration's non-religious or social purpose is to foster filial piety, family loyalty and lineage continuity (NWAFOR 2017, 40). To this end, Gelfand contends that reverence for the ancestors should be primarily focused on promoting familial harmony and respect, as failing to do so will make benevolent ancestors turn hostile (1969, 44).

According to Triebel, the ancestors' existence is not disputed in African communities because they are a component of the reality of life. Family members often receive guidance from their ancestors in visions and dreams that they must heed as if the advice was given by their living father or grandfather (2002, 188). The way to cope with the ancestors' influence and authority is through ancestor veneration. The only way to comprehend the concept of ancestor veneration is to understand this dependency — this reciprocal interaction between living people and their ancestors (TRIEBEL 2002, 188).

People's involvement in connecting with their ancestors is determined by the nature of the ritual and their specific, predetermined roles according to the communal practice. Isabirye states that participation in these rituals allows people to identify with the social ceremony and interact with others (2020, 47). These ceremonies often involve rituals and spirituality, with ancestral spirits summoned to intervene in community members' wrongdoing (LEBAKA 2014, 36). As a result, people's ties with the spirits have a role in their overall well-being. Invoking the spirits during these ceremonial rituals occurs through the spiritual performance of music and dance (ISABIRYE 2020, 48).

Lebaka contends that rituals, mythologies and taboos are essential cultural traditions that allow people to express their traditional beliefs through indigenous music, dance, tales, myths and storytelling and are used to foster social cohesiveness and harmony (2022, 92). Traditional healers in the Bapedi culture, like those in other nations, learn a variety of abilities during their rigorous training that helps them communicate with their ancestors through singing, dancing and playing musical instruments (such as drumming) (LEBAKA 2022, 92).

Kieft holds that ritual dance is often used as a technique for getting closer to spirits, encountering the divine and expressing a relationship that already exists in many cultures and spiritual traditions (2014, 1). Monteiro and Wall posit that traditional African dance is linked to ritualistic and traditional healing practices (2011, 247). The fundamental perception is that the mind and body need to be integrated into ritual proceedings to facilitate a connection with the ancestors and to transform and empower individuals. Rituals serve society on many levels due to their holistic structure; they are essential in establishing and maintaining a healthy relationship with the ancestors and providing an alternate, cathartic experience for individuals and the community (MONTEIRO AND WALL 2011, 238).

Monteiro and Wall opine that ritualised dance has long been used to invoke and connect with ancestors and people to reconnect with their animist roots (2011, 237). In this context, ritualised dance refers to being present in one's body while embarking on a spiritual journey, characterised by the apparent induction of a euphoric trance-like state through dancing.

The *umxhentso* dance is performed with singing and drumming accompaniment to invoke the ancestors' spirits and help them to attain a trance-like state during divination among the Xhosa in South Africa during the *amagqirha* ceremonies. May Thandokazi states that the *umxhentso* is a ritual dance used to invite ancestral spirits to participate in a ceremonial rite (2019, 97). Besides connecting with the ancestors, the *umxhentso* dance is also performed to bring people together, heal and celebrate the ancestors.

The *amagqirha*¹ are Xhosa traditional healers and are frequently the first ports of call for many people in South Africa should illness or misfortune befall them (MLISA AND NEL, 2013, 609). They are considered unique in that some traditional healers can identify everyday difficulties and understand the role of divinity in spiritual expression. During a consultation with the ancestors, the *umxhentso* dance provides an avenue for the *amagqirha* to connect with the ancestral spirits to help in their divination work.

Mlisa also states that the interconnection of ritualised dance, singing, drumming and handclapping builds a link to the stirring of the unconscious and develops contact with the ancestors (2009, 207). The mythical influence in the *umxhentso* dance arouses the performers' subconscious. Thus, the person ascends into a state of trance while dancing. Mlisa says that when traditional healers dance during *amagqirha* rites, they feel connected with their ancestors (2009, 214). The spirited state of ritual dance, according to Sandlana, is thought to increase the euphoria that elevates one to a state of consciousness (2014, 544). This is often considered an altered state of consciousness in which the individual enters a trance. The traditional healer is believed to connect with the ancestors while in this state. Emotional depletion or revitalisation, divination, foretelling and the ability to detect pain and solve problems occur (SANDLANA 2014, 544).

Although the *umxhentso* dance performance is highly connected to various aspects of the *amagqirha* religious rites, it has yet to receive in-depth scholarly attention. This study is pertinent in initiating a scholarly discussion about the importance of *umxhentso* dance in the Xhosa culture.

The role of the *umxhentso* ritualised dance in facilitating a spiritual connection with the ancestral spirits among the Xhosa *amagqirha* has yet to be widely reported. This article aimed to gain an understanding of how these connections are established and how the dance performance impacts the *amagqirha* divination work. The objectives of this study were to ascertain the influence of embodied and sounded knowledge through dance to gain and transfer information across time and space, explore the mystical and social functions of the *umxhentso* dance in *amagqirha* ceremonies in Xhosa society and establish how the *umxhentso* dance aids the *amagqirha* to establish contact with the ancestors and attain a state of trance during ceremonies.

Research methods

This ethnographic study was rooted in the naturalistic approach. According to Armstrong, the naturalistic approach is a way of researching social structures

¹ the singular form is igqirha and the plural is amagqirha

whereby the researchers examine, observe, narrate and evaluate individual and group experiences and behaviours within a societal and cultural context (2010, 882). The researchers engaged in prolonged interactions with the participants, analysing their beliefs, practices and attitudes in their natural contexts (REEVES n.d.n. 2013, 1370). Data was collected through interviews, observation, participant observation and the study of extant photographs, videos and audio recordings of the *umxhentso* dance performed during *amagqirha* ceremonies and initiation rites. The study involved 20 participants, including eight *amagqirha*, six initiates and six attendees during the ceremony. During the interviews, the eight *amagqirha* were asked about their experiences, what they did, where, how and why (BABBIE 2013, 250; LEEDY & ORMROD 2016, 160). The *umxhentso* dance performances were also observed during the *amagqirha* ceremonies; they lived their experiences naturally without caring that researchers were in their midst. The benefit was the "naturalness" of participant behaviours instead of conscious actions that could have been performed for the researchers' cameras. As participants in other cultural events, the researchers brought their experiences as additional perspectives. This triangulation of sources, methods and sites brought multiple perspectives to the study and enhanced the obtaining of dense data (NEUMAN 2014, 166).

The researchers employed a transparent procedure to maintain reflexivity (BUTLER-KISBER 2010, 13) by seeking the participants' informed consent to participate in the study, ensuring their anonymity and avoiding any psychological harm befalling them. The researchers used pseudonyms in describing the participants' responses in this article (ALLEN AND WILES 2016, 150; MUKUNGU 2017, 2).

The data transcription and analysis processes were iterative, "working back and forth" (BUTLER-KISBER 2010, 31). Data analysis began during the transcription of materials as the selection of the most meaningful extant videos, audio and photographs involved scrutinising them to ensure they responded to the research questions before transcription (MCGRATH n.d.n 2019, 1005). The researchers then read and reread all the data gathered from the interviews, discussions, observations and extant sources, reflected on how they were connected and began to allocate themes (CASSELL, AND BISHOP 2019, 196). The emergent themes were then compared to determine their interrelationships and connections to the relevant literature, thus identifying major findings.

Findings, discussion and Reflection

Interviews, direct observation and a review of related literature yielded the findings of this study. The outcomes from analysing the religious and social functions of the *umxhentso* dance during *amagqirha* rites and its influence on the *amagqirha* attaining trance and connecting with the ancestors during rituals are described hereunder.

Establishing a connection with the ancestors through *Umxhentso* dance

The *amagqirha* who participated in this study have a long history of performing the *umxhentso* dance at healing, initiation and religious ceremonies and achieving a trance-like state aids them in performing their spiritual functions. During the fieldwork, one of the participants stated that he believes every gesture has a meaning; the dances, the beating of the drums and the invocations uttered by the

amagqirha. The ceremonies and rites entail lengthy stretches of singing, dancing and drumming and eating and drinking. The percussive, rhythmic music and singing are essential elements of the ceremony.

The *umxhentso* dance is undoubtedly the most well-known of the *amagqirha*'s abilities amongst the Xhosa. In personal communication, one of the participants in this study expressed the view that the *umxhentso* dance lifts the consciousness of the *amagqirha* and gets the ancestors' attention (SEPTEMBER 24, 2021). The *umxhentso* dance is a spiritual practice that moulds and transforms the mind, making it more susceptible to the hidden or abstract knowledge sought and relied on by traditional healers.

Amagqirha ceremonies are as much a way of transmitting the thoughts, beliefs and interpretation of the *amagqirha* calling as they are a means of establishing contact with the ancestors. The *umxhentso* dance performance is vital in arousing their intuition because intuition is the most important quality in their divination practices. According to Mlisa, singing and dancing are integral elements of the *amagqirha* way of life, and they employ the *umxhentso* dance to awaken and stimulate their inner being, intuition, religious experience and development (2009, 214).

The *amagqirha* also performs the *umxhentso* dance on ritual occasions, including when treating a patient or during an initiation ceremony. The dancers move around in a circle anti-clockwise, stamping their feet and contorting their bodies to the audience's singing and handclapping. To enhance the mystical, percussive effects of the handclapping, an *amagqirha* apprentice may also beat a drum. The *amagqirha* and their apprentices are occasionally spontaneously inspired to undertake ritual divination while performing the *umxhentso* dance.

Before undertaking divination, the *amagqirha* and their apprentices perform the *umxhentso* dance (HIRST 2005, 5), during which they experience an elevated level of consciousness. The *umxhentso* dance performance, according to Gamedze, becomes a centre of supernatural interaction with the ancestors and aids the diviner in finding healing inspiration (2019, 98). One of the research participants stated that the *umxhentso* dance is at the core of *amagqirha* ceremonies and plays a mythical or magical role in invoking supernatural powers and ancestral spirits. In an interview, Gogo Ximbaxi (pseudonym) stated that in performing the *umxhentso* dance, they walk in their ancestors' footprints. In this way, they feel transcended and united with their ancestors (PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, SEPTEMBER 22, 2021).

Gogo Athandwa (pseudonym) asserts that the "*Umxhentso* dance is the major factor during *amagqirha* ceremonies because it is the tool that we use to connect with the ancestors and, also, they are able to connect with us as well; they give us guidance in that particular ceremony that is taking place" (personal communication, June 16, 2021). Athandwa (pseudonym) states that sometimes while dancing the *umxhentso* dance, "the spirits take over your body as soon as you reach the trance phase. Then they are the ones who are dancing using your body as a medium. That is why you would find yourself *Uxentsa* (dance) in a different way than you normally dance. In that way, they are showing you that they are rejoicing with you and *banani kulomsebenzi* (they are with you/ present in the ceremony you are performing)" (PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, JUNE 16, 2021).

Athandwa (pseudonym) concludes by stating that the *umxhentso* dance is important to Africans, not necessarily only to Xhosa people. Each ethnic group has traditional dances they value, just as the Xhosa *amagqirha* value the *umxhentso* dance because “it shows you who you are, and you are proud of *ubuwenana* (self-concept)”. “*Umxhentso* on its own symbolises who you are. We have different types of dance: *imfene*, *uhubhe*, and then *umxentsho*, performed by *amagqirha ezintlombeni* (spiritual healers in ceremonies). *Umxhentso* by traditional healers is led by *Idlozi Eliphiwa Kuwe* (the spirit that lives in you) and the way *abafuna uxhentse ngakhona* (the way the spirits or ancestors want you to dance). To our Xhosa nation, it is very important to us to know *ubuwenana* (self-concept)” (PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, JUNE 16, 2021).

While commenting on why the *umxhentso* dance is the most important factor during the traditional healers’ (*Amagqirha*) ceremonies, Gogo Amyoli (pseudonym), a practising traditional healer, said during an interview that when performed by the *amagqirha* during ceremonies, it is referred to as “spiritual dancing” (PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, JULY 19, 2021). She also states that the *umxhentso* dance helps the *amagqirha* body and mind to reach a trance state; it is some sort of connection that opens the doorway to the spiritual world. While in a trance, the body, mind and soul connect with the spirits. Amyoli (pseudonym) continues that the *umxhentso* dance is regarded as a stir in the traditional healer’s world. This type of dance is self-taught with the help of your ancestors (PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, JULY 19, 2021).

Gogo Amyoli (pseudonym) shared that other traditional dance types are taught, and a dancer can make a living by being an entertainer and performing worldwide. Still, these dances do not stir the ancestral spirits like a traditional healer performing the *umxhentso* dance during rites and rituals (PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, JULY 19, 2021).

In a personal communication, Akhinzolo (pseudonym), another practising *amagqirha*, states that he has been involved in the *umxhentso* dance since he was young. According to Akhinzolo, the *umxhentso* dance is the main factor in the traditional healers’ (*Amagqirha*) ceremonies (PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, AUGUST 3, 2021). Akhinzolo opines that, as a traditional healer, the *umxhentso* dance connects the *amagqirha* with their ancestors during ceremonies and rituals. The *umxhentso* dance performance also symbolises happiness about the ceremony being performed. The *umxhentso* dance performance is the most important part of the *amagqirha* ceremonies because it facilitates a connection between the ancestors’ spirits and the *amagqirha* (AKINZOLO, PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, AUGUST 3, 2021).

The *umxhentso* dance performance stirs the ancestral spirits during the performance; it revives and connects the *amagqirha* with their ancestors. That is why Akhinzolo (pseudonym) says, “You find someone during the *umxhentso* dance performance blowing the whistle to call and connect fully with the ancestors” (PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, AUGUST 3, 2021).

Characteristics of *umxhentso* dance

Based on the research participant’s responses to the interview questions, the researchers identified characteristics of the *umxhentso* dance. The *umxhentso* dance is performed mostly by the *amagqirha* during ancestral veneration and

initiation rites to invoke the spirits of the ancestors to possess the *amagqirha*. The researchers observed two characteristic movements in the *umxhentso* dance that are described in the ensuing paragraphs.

During *amagqirha* ceremonies, there are diverse variations of the *umxhentso* dance. For example, a less energetic version in which the *amagqirha* rise on the balls of their feet, then descend hard onto their heels, remaining in the same spot but shaking fiercely, is one variation. Another less common version of the *umxhentso* dance is performed on the knees. During fieldwork, the researchers observed that one *amagqirha* kept this up for approximately eight minutes, seemingly without pain or discomfort. She attributed this to the fact that she had gotten away from everything while dancing. In other words, she experienced an altered state of consciousness.



Figure 1: An *igqirha* initiate performing the *umxhentso* dance in the kneeling position

Source: Authors

At the same celebration, one of the *amagqirha*, Gogo Langa (pseudonym), performed a solo dance. She made a stomping move followed by an upward and outward kick but did not bend on her haunches as the previous dancer did. These are individual variations of *umxhentso*, with the dancers improvising on the main *umxhentso* dance pattern with its distinctive steps and moves. During *amagqirha* ceremonies, one will observe numerous variations.



Figure 2: An *igqirha* dancing during an initiation ceremony
Source: Authors

In a personal communication (June 16, 2021), Athandwa (pseudonym) states that there is no set or predetermined sequence that must be used when performing the *umxhentso* dance in an ancestral performance. She opines, “*Uxhentsa ngokwedlozi lakho*” (you dance as your ancestor leads), you might be taught by your Gobela (spiritual leader) how to perform *Umxhentso* but “*xa kufikelwe lidlozi liyazigidela*” (when you are in a trance the spirit arrives and dances through your body), that is when you will notice that *awuwedwa* (you are not alone) in your body (ATHANDWA, PERSONAL COMMUNICATION, JUNE 16, 2021).



Figure 3: Group of *amagqirha* dancing during an initiation ceremony

Source: Authors

Another important characteristic of the *umxhentso* dance performance is the multi-layered atmosphere established during the rites. All the senses are aroused and become part of a combined experience for the *amagqirha*, apprentices and guests, from the colourfully dressed traditional healers and attendees to the incense, ornamentation and the introduction of the drum performance. The drummers execute complicated, polyrhythmic beats with *igubu* and *djembe* drums, played with the hand and a stick, blending seamlessly with the dancer's body, which may dance vigorously and gracefully.



Figures 4 and 5: *Amagqirha* beating the drums with sticks during a ceremony

Source: Authors

The structure, rules and norms associated with the *Umxhentso* dance performance

In accordance with the Xhosa custom, during the *umxhentso* dance performance, the *amagqirha* forms a circle. If the ceremony is observed within the house, it is performed around the *iziko* (fireplace) at the centre of the house. Mlisa says that the fireplace is the sacred spot where the Xhosa ancestors dwell, and it is also the spot where the *amagqirha* observe their traditional rites and rituals (2009, 207). The circle that the *amagqirha* form is equated to a full moon, which is a sign of completion and unity. Dancers are obliged to remove their shoes when performing the *umxhentso* dance to show reverence for their ancestors. The traditional healer's regalia also has various connotations, with the different colours in their outfit being interpreted according to how they are matched.



Figures 6, 7 and 8: *Amagqirha* dressed in their regalia
Source: Authors

Akhinzolo (pseudonym), in a personal communication (AUGUST 3, 2021), states that the *amagqirha* use different regalia according to their hierarchy and the levels in the *amagqirha* practice; the *amathwasa* (initiates) have regalia that differentiates them from the graduated *amagqirha*. The ritual or ceremony to be performed dictates the attire required to be worn by the *amagqirha* and initiates. Standing and sitting positions are assigned based on rank; the person with the highest status stands at the front, while the person with the lowest rank stands at the back. The hierarchy and the order of things are taken seriously and respected. *Amagqirha* are not permitted to perform the *umxhentso* dance simultaneously as the initiates. Each group takes a turn dancing while the other sings and claps hands with the audience to highlight the value of loyalty and respect.



Figure 9: An *igqirha* with her regalia during ceremonial rites
Source: Authors

According to one of the informants, everything at a ceremony has significance, including what the dancer wears, the colour and the symbols it contains, the words spoken, the instrument utilised and the direction the dancer faces.

From unconscious to conscious during the *umxhentso* dance performance

Dancing is one of the most acknowledged methods of inducing altered states of consciousness (KIEFT 2014, 31-32). One of the participants in the study described traits such as being completely present at the moment and absent in thought, as well as losing one's sense of self. In one of the ceremonies observed by the researchers, during the intense dancing of the *umxhentso* dance, some *amagqirha* (traditional healers) exhibited strange behaviour, for example, aggression and unusual body movements associated with fury. This has been referred to as "possession by ancestral spirits" (SANDLANA 2014, 545). Keift posits that through dance, people can experience and express the whole range of human emotions (2014, 29). Traditional healers consider this an indication that the ancestors' spirits were in their midst and had taken over their bodies.



Figure 10: *Amagqirha* dancing the *umxhentso* dance during an initiation ceremony
Source: Authors

This is an unintentional state, according to Stephen and Suryani, in which a "spirit entity or force is considered to have entered or taken over the body of the human host" (2000, 9). This is described by Woods Amberlee as a state in which one's personality is "taken over" by the personality of "another entity" (2009, 24). The person may "have visions, hear voices, find things with unique powers, divination, meditation, and visions" while in this state (STEPHEN AND SURYANI 2000, 9). *Umxhentso* dances allow the *amagqirha* to become voyeurs into the mythical world of the ancestors and, in turn, help the *amagqirha* to manifest supernatural powers they would otherwise not be able to manifest. The *amagqirha* would have to lose consciousness to connect with ancestors in the human form.

This study indicated that the *umxhentso* dance performance is part of *amagqirha* ceremonial culture and ritual proceedings. The performance of the *umxhentso* dance during the *amagqirha* ceremonies demonstrates the religious and cultural significance of ancestor reverence through dance. The findings also suggest that the *umxhentso* dance is performed to establish connections with the ancestors and serves as a link between the ancestors and the *amagqirha* divination efficacy. Through interviews and observations, it was revealed that the ritualised function of the *umxhentso* dance is not limited to establishing a link with the ancestors during rites. Still, it also fortifies the *amagqirha* divination potency by allowing them to communicate with their ancestors and attain a trance-like state to sustain contact with their ancestors.

Anticipated concerns and questions that might emanate from this study

Arguably, a study like this, which depicts how *umxhentso* dance serves as a conduit to the spiritual world and how the Xhosa *amagqirha* use it as a medium to connect with their ancestors, is bound to raise concerns, questions, and

misconceptions. The researchers have put some critical thoughts below to assuage some issues that may arise from the discussions and findings of this study.

Christians may find this study contrary to Christian doctrine and ask, how are cultural traditions linked to ancestral worship compatible with Christianity? Those who hold this point of view tend to forget that some Christian traditions, for instance, Easter and Christmas, contain practices that have roots in pagan rites. The veneration of saints can also be linked to ancestral worship. However, this has been part of Christian practice for so long that we tend to forget the origin. In Africa, missionary works, and the introduction of Christianity has been present since the 1800s. The long history of compromise to accommodate pagan Europe and the UK to convert to Christianity was forgotten by the missionaries who practised the erasure of culture. For them, it was all or nothing. Today, with the benefit of hindsight, we may hold more progressive views and seek ways to accommodate diverse perspectives and practices.

Another concern that may arise is the place of ritual practices in modern society. Cultural practices and the community of those who practice them foster a sense of belonging, provide focus, provide one with a philosophy of life, give one purpose, and give meaning to one's life. Many Xhosa people freely move between Christianity and indigenous tradition. This seamlessness evident in society is mirrored in television soap operas, where characters adopt traditional and Western identities. Hence, we should accept that people will adopt the identities they desire and take what they want from a culture in both their public and private life. To be part of different communities, one must participate in their rituals and practices. It is also likely that a Xhosa community could, in the future, continue with the dances as a cultural practice separate from the actual ritual of invoking the ancestral spirits.

Some people may also ask, why hold on to past indigenous practices? Vital components of culture are represented in the traditions of a people. They aid in building the core and backbone of our society. They serve as a reminder that the past, present, and possible future are all shaped by the history that we are a part of. When we disregard the significance of our traditions, we risk compromising the foundation of our identity. As with other cultural traditions the world over, *umxhentso* dance traditions are a unique expression of the Xhosa people. They illustrate a progression of knowledge and cultural norms across time. They provide a clear view of the *amagqirha* practice's originality.

Therefore, this study encourages Afrocentrism, which is the understanding and appreciation of African cultural practices as subjects of human experience and not as objects, as in the example of the *umxhentso* dance that Xhosa *amagqirha* uses to communicate with their ancestors.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings, we can conclude that the *umxhentso* dance is performed to establish and maintain contact with the ancestors during *amagqirha* ceremonies. The study revealed that in Xhosa society, ancestors play a significant role in people's daily lives and oversee their well-being. The interviews and observations highlighted that the *umxhentso* dance is a substantial factor in *amagqirha* ceremonies. The study also revealed that *amagqirha* and the *umxhentso*

dance, as spiritual experiences through dance, are firmly rooted in Xhosa culture and passed down to successive generations.

Finally, the outcome of this study indicated that research in this area should be considered a continuous process of presenting fresh interpretations of dance's social, religious and cultural significance in ancestor reverence. The researchers expect that scholars interested in ritual dances, African religion and spirituality will find this study worthwhile.

Declarations

The author declares no conflict of interest and no ethical issues for this research.

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This issue is dedicated to our Assoc. Editor and a second-generation member of the Calabar (Conversational) School of Philosophy (CSP): **Prince. Prof Mesembe Ita Edet (1965-2023)**