# AFRICAN CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES FOR HEALING THE PAST, FOR TRANSFORMING THE PRESENT, AND FOR FUTURE FLOURISHING

#### Introduction

South Africa has a rich tradition of embodied, communitybased contemplative practices, which are deeply rooted in African philosophy. There is a paucity of published research on how these practices have promoted social cohesion, supported resilience and aided human flourishing, particularly during and after the dehumanisation of the colonial and Apartheid eras.

#### **Research Aims**

The Think Tank proposal lists the following aims:

- Categorise African embodied (predominantly arts, movement, and community-based) contemplative practices.
- Develop a scheme of classification of their perceived state and trait benefits.
- Design a collaborative, interdisciplinary research agenda.
- Form a professional learning circle of colleagues committed to community building, knowledge- and resource-sharing, and social transformation through contemplative practice.

#### **Research Team**



Lucy Draper-Clarke, Ruth Levin-Vorster, Tonia Rall, Nonkululeko Busika Front Row Left to Right: Carvn Green, Moeketsi Kgotle. Photographer: Eric Thoka

African Contemplative Practice Facilitators:			
Zola Xashimba - Medicine Man			
Gogo Refiloe Moyo - Sangoma			
Nhlanhla Mahlangu - Choreographer, Dancer, Singer			
Nonkululeko Busika - Drama Therapist, Actor, Academic			
Bandile Seleme - Drama Therapist, Activist			
Moeketsi Kgotle - Drummer, Applied Theatre Facilitator			
<b>Research Retreat Facilitator:</b>			
Warren Nebe - Head of Department, Drama for Life			
Coordinator:			
Lucy Draper-Clarke, Lecturer, Drama for Life			
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Ruth Levin-Vorster, University of Cape Town			
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#### **Transformative Paradigm**

This "paradigm is a framework of belief systems that directly engages members of culturally diverse groups with a focus on increased social justice" (Mertens, 2010).

**Ontological Assumptions**: This research was based in qualified realism, where both universalistic and relativistic thinking co-exist and are evolving. The transformative perspective questions whose belief systems have been privileged in the past, and offers a different entry point into 'universal wisdom'.

**Epistemological and Methodological Assumptions:** In the acquisition of knowledge, we chose creative research as African spiritual traditions are rooted in the arts. The Think Tank team explored the significant meaning, value and place of African indigenous healing practices and participated in the performative rituals, in order to allow for an experiential engagement and a reflective process to evaluate state and trait effects.

To paraphrase Taylor (2013), these researchers "belonging to post-independent nations where indigenous cultures [...] were repressed for centuries by colonial powers, reinvest personally and professionally in their cultural heritage and are motivated to find ways of giving their culture an official curriculum presence alongside the Western modern worldview."

### Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The two participating healers, Gogo Refiloe Moyo and Zola Xashimba, framed the work within the African Arts and Social Sciences, including philosophy, psychology, psychiatry and spirituality. They described their own process of initiation and training to become healers, and explained the concept of *ubizo*.

#### Ubizo

This is an ancestral or spiritual calling. It is usually linked with the calling to be an *inyanga* or *sangoma* (traditional healer), when one needs to *thwasa* (attend initiation and spiritual training) with a *gobela* (teacher). It can also have a secular meaning, in the sense that each individual must follow their own unique purpose in the world, depending on their skills and interests, in order to serve others in the community.



Think Tank Team, coordinated through Drama for Life, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa



## **African Contemplative Practices** Umphahlo

Zola Xashimba and Gogo Refiloe Moyo introduced their presentations with the use of musical instruments, song and herbs (*mphepu* / sage and snuff) to invite and welcome *indlozi*, the ancestors or living dead, into the space in order to seek their wisdom. They were called with head bowed, to show humility, and the traditional healers made it clear that they were ready to listen at a multi-sensory level to the messages of the ancestors.

#### Isicathamiya

This is a music genre developed by migrant Zulu communities combining singing (often call and response) and dance. It enabled an embodied understanding of the history of South Africa, particularly of mine workers living in hostels. The presenter, Nhlanhla Mahlangu has been using this genre in recent years as a way of releasing the trauma of South Africa's violent past.

#### Iintsomi

This is part of the oral tradition rooted in Africa and is often translated as story telling. Nonkululeko Busika explained how the process involves an invitation to participate in a storytelling moment. The participants are part of the story, and while there is a formal structure, it is the energy of the participants that builds the story. Many *lintsomi* moments do not have a clear conclusion, but rather are left open-ended in order to encourage reflection. This oral tradition has been a way of transferring African wisdom to children and the community for generations (Busika, 2016). The traditional praise poem was also integrated into the presentation, through dyad work, for the purpose of deep encounter with one other.

Video on www.dramaforlife.co.za/courses/african-contemplative-practices

### Umgidi Wokulingisa

This has been translated as a dramatic stamping ritual (Seleme, 2017) which leads to an altered state of consciousness, or trance, in order to remove the usual barriers between the living and the living dead. Framed within a drama therapy context, Bandile Seleme has used the practice to bring the energy of loved ones into the circle, enabling deep healing and connection.



Preparing for Umgidi Wokulingisa, the Octagon, Tara Rokpa Centre

#### Djembe Drumming

This practice is carried out with a sense of moving into conversation, and enabling the drummer's intention and words to be transmitted through the vibration of the drum. Moeketsi Kgotle explained how this allows for a conversation to be held between the drum and the drummer, and within the whole drum circle community.

The word *ngoma* has a meaning similar to vibration or resonance, which allows the transmission and receiving of messages. It is the root of the word *sangoma*, the healer who is able to receive messages from the ancestors, and also the word for the skin of the drum, as well as a type of dance.



#### Findings

After each practice, the participants and facilitators reflected on the key aspects, as well as the temporary state, and longer term, trait changes, that they experienced.

Key Aspects	State Benefits	Trait Benefits
Intention	Energy	Energy
Humility	Guidance/Clarity	Guidance/Clarity
Invitation	Joy	Peacefulness
Relationship	Receptivity	Compassion
Movement	Connection	Wisdom
Arts-based	Social Cohesion	Joy
	Attunement	Resilience
Table 1: Key Aspects and Benefits of African Contemplative Practices		

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From the transformative paradigm, the participants agreed that the overall aspiration for the research project, going forward, was:

- Umkhiqizo wo lwazi the production of indigenous knowledge/wisdom
- Integrating Paradigms of Wellbeing/Wellness
- Sustainable Wellbeing through Arts-based Practices
- Returning to Reclaim the Forgotten Familiar (IKS)
- Healing the Mind by Returning to the Body's Wisdom
- Transforming Sorrow, Cultivating Joy

#### **Future Research**

- Creative and Performative research, exploring the impact of rituals, practices and performances on both the facilitator and the participants.
- **Qualitative research**, using phenomenology and thematic analysis, to identify state and trait benefits of African arts-based therapies and contemplative traditions.
- **Quantitative research**, in collaboration with the neuroscience community, exploring the impact of these relational, embodied, movement-based practices on the brain.

#### References

**Busika, N.F.**, 2016. A critical analysis of storytelling as a drama therapy approach among urban South African children, with particular reference to resilience building through *lintsomi*: *lintsomi* story method a dramatherapy approach (MA dissertation).

Mertens, D.M., 2010. Transformative mixed methods research. Qualitative inquiry, 16(6), pp.469-474. **Seleme, B.**, 2017. Using *umgidi wokulingisa* (dramatic stamping ritual) within drama therapy to provide an accessible therapeutic space for cultural beings with an African worldview (MA dissertation).

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