Ubungoma And Izangoma Online: Debating Authenticity And Authority On Social Media

Lindiwe Khuzwayo[i] and Cherry Muslim[ii]

SHORT BIO

[i]Dr Khuzwayo is a Senior Lecturer at The University of South Africa (UNISA) located in the departments of Religious Studies and Arabic. Her research interests are in gender, sexuality, sexual diversity, indigenous religions, and indigenous knowledge systems.

[ii]Dr Cherry Muslim is Senior Lecturer at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) located in Theology and Religion in the School of Arts. Her teaching focuses on digital religion and Islam/Muslims in contemporary society. Her research interests lie at the intersection of digital religion and Muslim gendered online activism.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
[i]The University of South Africa (UNISA)
mkasilp@unisa.ac.za

[ii]University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa
Muslim@ukzn.ac.za

ORCID
[i]https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7147-345X
[ii]https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3426-742X

SUBMISSION DATE
20/04/2026

ACCEPTANCE DATE
22/05/2026

DOI
https://doi.org/10.36615/26706677

ABSTRACT

Ubungoma is a calling or a gift that enables communication with ancestors and the divine and the healing of illness through traditional methods. Historically, it has been a respected practice requiring commitment and discipline. In recent years, however, particularly among younger female izangoma trained in South Africa's democratic era, ubungoma has become increasingly commodified through social media platforms. What began as the advertisement of healing services has evolved into a broader online consumerist phenomenon.
Prominent young female izangoma, such as Gogo Skhotheni and Gogo Maweni, have gained significant visibility on TikTok and YouTube, publicly competing for audiences and revealing aspects of traditional healing that were once considered sacred. While often framed as knowledge-sharing, such disclosures may expose vulnerable individuals to practices they do not fully understand. The rise of online marketing has also attracted those drawn to trending content rather than the ethical foundations of traditional healing, contributing to confusion about the role and the authority of izangoma.
Drawing on observations of TikTok and YouTube, this paper examines how contemporary female traditional healers promote ubungoma as a business. It asks whether the online disclosure of sacred knowledge compromises the authority and authenticity of ubungoma in ways that accommodate consumerism and commodification, rather than prioritising community health and wellbeing.

KEYWORDS
Ubungoma; traditional healing; female izangoma; digital religion; social media; commodification; indigenous knowledge

Introduction and background

The social media turn has ensured that more than two hundred healers have signed up to "Gogo Online", a platform established during Covid-19, with

© Author(s)
ISSN 2707-2991

some calling themselves "new age izangomas"[1] advocating for African spirituality, selling traditional healing products, and conducting divination through WhatsApp, Instagram and other online platforms. Moreover, social media platforms have an abundance of reels, videos, podcasts, websites, and pages that encourage and promote not only the sharing of *ubungoma* but, also, the teaching of ritual practices online. It is against this growing traction of online *izangoma*, that we ask: in what ways does online sharing of sacred and secret traditional healing practice compromise its authority and authenticity to accommodate consumerism and commodification?

In an opinion piece in the Mail & Guardian,[2] Feziwe Ndwayana – a graduate student from the University of the Witwatersrand who underwent *ubungoma* – states that countless people on social media are questioning "Why are there so many traditional healers? It seems to be fashionable". He argues that the combined challenges of unemployment, poverty, and inequality have led to community vulnerabilities being abused in two ways: (i) by scammers that are taking advantage of people's economic circumstances, stating that the rituals must be performed at great cost to appease the ancestors by undertaking *ukuthwasa;* and (ii) by legitimate healers falsely diagnosing desperate people because of consumerist and materialist cultures. In another opinion piece in the same newspaper, Mamali[3] opines that:

> The cultural respect for African rituals and sacred spaces is becoming sullied by social media clownery. The respect and dignity of cultural practices, rituals and African healing that we inherited from our parents is in tatters. It is a foregone conclusion that future generations will inherit the hollow ashes of our sacred traditions.

1 AFP, "How SA Sangomas' Ancient Healing Work is Going Digital," *Inside Politics* , June 3, 2021, https://insidepolitic.co.za/how-sa-sangomas-ancient-healing-work-is-going-digital/.

2 Feziwe Ndwayana, "There Are Many Reasons for the Increasing Number of Traditional Healers," Mail & Guardian, November 1, 2022, https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/opinion/2022-11-01-there-are-many-reasons-for-the-increasing-number-of-traditional-healers/.

3 Gatyeni Mamali, "Social Media Sullies Sacred Values in the Chase for Clicks and Views," Mail & Guardian, July 23, 2022, https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/opinion/2022-07-23-social-media-sullies-sacred-values-in-the-chase-for-clicks-and-views/.

This, he argues, is due to the commercialisation of African culture through contracts for reality TV and the highest bidder for content creation. As a result, Mamali submits that these economic ventures have become detrimental to the *izangoma* initiates, particularly the youth. Turning to social media for cultural and educational knowledge about *ubungoma* and identity provides nothing more than "an insipid watered-down version because we are chasing likes and clownery".[4] On the "Spiritual Journey of Spirit Initiates" Facebook page,[5] Isithombe se Dlozi claims that:

> Most people are being scammed because they think 🤔 "Celebrity Izangomas/Prophets" will help them…There's a reason why ancestor's things are kept a secret 🤫and there are certain things you can share on social platforms as a Sangoma/Prophet and others you strictly cannot 🖕🏾(Sephiri sa Modimo le Badimo). It's just that these days everyone wants to be relevant and be deemed powerful 🏃🏾.

Gogo Dineo Ndlanzi, who founded the Institute of Traditional Healing, supports this argument. Although, she is also an *i-sangoma* (online *sangoma)*, Gogo Dineo contends that our current fluid lifestyles rely on portrayals of life seen on social media, particularly Instagram. As such people "aspire to materialism, to be social influencers, hence, we go and do *ukuthwala*".[6]

Social media discussions on *ukuthwala* (rituals for acquiring wealth) presented in this paper were initiated and largely driven by female *izangoma*, particularly Gogo Maweni, Gogo Skhotheni, and Gogo Boujee, whose engagements on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube first focused on promoting healing practices and sharing experiences, but later expanded into broader debates on *ukuthwala* and the secrecy surrounding healing knowledge. While the discussions were later joined by male *izangoma* and

4 Mamali, "Social Media Sullies Sacred Values."
5 Isithombe se Dlozi, "The Spiritual Journey of Spirit Initiates," Facebook, 30 May, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/groups/1094740131181070/posts/1442237589764654/.
6 Thobeka Phanyeko, "An In-Depth Look at African Spirituality," GQ South Africa, 2021, https://www.gq.co.za/culture/an-in-depth-look-at-african-spirituality-5b366d56-96c8-45bc-a5dd-397bc8df6d89.

izinyanga, the men were largely responding to the online discussions already in circulation.

By presenting these female traditional healers discussions, this article contributes to knowledge on traditional healing by emphasising the crucial role of female *izangoma* in fostering discussions about traditional practices. Researchers in this field utilise these conversations to critically analyse their authenticity from both academic and community perspectives, aiming to bridge the gap between traditional healing and contemporary understanding. By prioritising the voices of young *sangoma* within African communities, this study enhances the visibility and credibility of traditional healing, countering oppressive narratives about indigenous knowledge and challenging stereotypes. Additionally, it addresses the dynamics of commercialisation and competition in the field, encouraging academic discourse that empowers women's voices in knowledge creation. Ultimately, it demonstrates that female *izangoma* are central to articulating authority and authenticity in the sharing of traditional knowledge within contemporary *ubungoma* discourse. Analysing information from young *sangomas* provides an opportunity for public knowledge to be critically examined and for academic knowledge to be produced.

Understanding ubungoma and ukuthwasa

The field of traditional healing in South Africa encompasses a range of practitioners, including *izangoma*, *izinyanga* (herbalists), and *abathandazi* (spiritual prayer healers) who, together, contribute to the healthcare system. *Isa-ngoma* (singular) and *iza-ngoma* (plural), as Billy, Wahjuwibowo, and Wongkar note, "are individuals who provide healthcare services based on indigenous knowledge, practices, and remedies passed down through generations".[7] *Ubungoma*, however, is distinctive in both its intensity and sacredness, requiring practitioners to undergo *ukuthwasa* (initiation) after accepting their ancestral calling, or *ubizo*. Mjoli stresses that "Ubungoma is a branch of South Africa's Indigenous Knowledge Systems that emphasizes African Spirituality or divinity".[8] The framework of *ubungoma,* therefore,

7 Andreas Wahjuwibowo and Melani Wongkar, "TikTok, Religion, and Misinformation among African Youth," Digital Religion Studies 3, no. 1 (2025): 1-10.

8 Zingisa Noluvuyo Mjoli, "The Question of Genre Classification in the Drama Series 'Ubizo: The Calling' (2007)." (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 2022), 11.

positions itself not as an individual choice but as a divinely bestowed service to the community.[9]

Traditionally, *izangoma* operated under spiritual authority, serving as intermediaries between ancestors and the living. Their role, particularly within the Zulu context, was to divine, heal, and guide families in ritual practices.[10] As Siwani explains, the *sangoma* is a communicator with the ancestors, a function that is "inherently a religious activity, even if it is rooted in cultural tradition".[11] Such responsibilities highlight the sacred foundation of *ubungoma*, which requires respect, mentorship, and ethical conduct. Training under initiation ensures that an *ithwasa* (initiate) is equipped to balance the powers of light (*ukukhanya*) and darkness (*ubumnyama*) as, according to Mlisa, "it is not possible to combine ubumnyama (darkness) and ukukhanya (enlightenment)".[12]

Practices such as *ukuthwala* and *ukuthwebula*[13] constitute secretive knowledge within traditional healing systems. As with any health practice, there are both ethical and harmful forms of healing. Certain rituals are associated with malicious or dark spiritual forces and are understood to have the potential to cause harm in human life. Because of the dangerous nature of such knowledge, historically it has not been discussed publicly. This principle is reinforced during *ukuthwasa*, where initiates are taught that some medicinal herbs and ritual practices carry greater spiritual and physical risks than others.

The shift to online spaces, however, has disrupted these boundaries. Traditionally, sacred practices were shielded from public view and

9 Nkosazana Mlisa, "Ukuthwasa Initiation Ritual as a Practice of Incorporation into the Ancestral Healer Profession" (PhD diss., University of Fort Hare, 2009).

10 L. P. Mkasi, "A Threat to Zulu Patriarchy and the Continuation of Community: A Queer Analysis of Same-Sex Relationships amongst Female Traditional Healers at Inanda and KwaNgcolosi, KwaZulu-Natal" (MA thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2013), 18

11 Sethembile Siwani, "The Politics of Revealing: Art, Ancestry, and Secrecy," African Arts 49, no. 2 (2016): 12-20.

12 Mlisa, "Ukuthwasa Initiation Ritual", 170

13 *Ukuthwebula* refers to the use of evil forces to extract original life-force of a person and involves both physical and spiritual witchcraft. K. Geldenhuys, "When Cultural Beliefs Turn into Crime: The Witchcraft Issue," *Servamus Community-Based Safety and Security Magazine* 109, no. 6 (2016): 24-31.

conducted within the *isigodlo* or *umsamo*, spaces that were tightly controlled to safeguard ancestral presence.[14] Nene describes the *umsamo* as "a special and sacred place inside a traditional Zulu hut that is used as both an altar and a repository of a family's (traditional healer's) precious items". [15] Historically, only family members and formally-introduced outsiders could access such spaces. Today, however, digital platforms increasingly collapse these boundaries as sacred knowledge, rituals, and even the *umsamo* itself, are displayed on social media and television.

This exposure transforms a sacred epistemology into consumable content. The deliberate unveiling of ritual spaces erodes the reverence traditionally afforded to ancestors while simultaneously recasting healing as performance for digital audiences. Wood reminds us that ancestors may manifest as symbolic animals, such as snakes or pythons, but online such symbols are often sensationalised for attention rather than preserved with secrecy. [16] In this way, ancestral manifestations risk being reduced to visual spectacle for digital consumption.

Contemporary traditional healers (*izangoma zanamuhla*) diverge significantly from those of the past. As in various religious spaces, both institutional and informal, religious practices contend with several influences, such as technological advances, inclusive of social media, and artificial intelligence (AI). While change is inevitable as societies evolve, there are people in all faiths who oppose the use of technology that might compromise or "expose" sacred knowledge. Traditionally, *izangoma* were known foremost as healers, their vocation rooted in the healing and restoration of both body and soul. The sacred foundations of *ubungoma,* therefore, demanded that every expression of the practice serve communal wellbeing. Transformation within *ubungoma* should deepen its healing mandate rather than dilute it. However, the rise of social media platforms has unsettled this balance.

14 Siwani, "Politics of Revealing," 68

15 J. Nene, "Ukuhlonipha and Ukuhloniphana among the Zulu Traditional Healers," Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences 43, no. 3 (2016): 1629-1637. https://archives.ju.edu.jo/index.php/hum/article/view/7525

16 Wood, Felicity, "The occult, the erotic and entrepreneurship: An analysis of oral accounts of ukuthwala, wealth-giving magic, sold by the Medicine Man Khotso Sethuntsa," *Alternation* 15, no. 1 (2008): 338-366.

While digital spaces have provided a platform for *izangoma* to reveal their healing powers and showcase their work, they have also moved beyond this by sharing elements of ritual practice that were once kept private. Such visibility can affirm cultural knowledge and connect practitioners with broader audiences, however, it also risks reducing sacred practices to consumable content and exposing dangerous information to young, immature *izangoma*. Some healers harness online platforms to honour their calling, but others misuse them, forgetting that visibility is double-edged; social media can elevate but it can just as readily erode the integrity of sacred traditions.

The rise of social media and religious practice

Media, in its variety of forms, has an undeniable role in the negotiation and expression of religious practices and identities. Indeed, it has the potential to disrupt traditional power hierarchies where practitioners gain greater agency over their lived expressions of faith and religious practice. Moreover, digital media also provides a space for the articulation and discussion of religious discourses that, in turn, enables the creation of a "third space" where religious communities can form non-mainstream identities.[17] Podcasts, TikTok, and YouTube interviews are considered such "third spaces". Nancy Baym's *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*[18] provides important insights into how social media platforms shape the content and style of religious expression. For example, TikTok's emphasis on short-form video content, visual aesthetics, and algorithmic distribution creates both constraints and opportunities for traditional healers. Zizi Papacharissi's[19] concept of "networked selves" and Campbell's[20] "networked communities" help explain how *izangomas* construct their identities on social media platforms, noting how the importance of creating engaging content for algorithmic distribution may pressure traditional healers to sensationalise or commodify practices that are traditionally kept private.

17 Giulia Evolvi, "Hybrid Muslim Identities in Digital Space: The Italian Blog Yalla," Social Compass 64, no. 2 (2017): 223.

18 Nancy K. Baym, Personal Connections in the Digital Age, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

19 Zizi Papacharissi, A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites (New York: Routledge, 2011).

20 Heidi A. Campbell, "Digital Religion as the Networked Spiritual Infrastructure of Our Religious Futures," in Redefining Spiritual Spaces in the Age of Technology: Innovations and Pitfalls (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025), 67-80.

Furthermore, Van Dijck's[21] analysis of "connectivity" reveals how commercial imperatives shape user behaviour. The monetisation features on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube create economic incentives for traditional healers to share previously guarded knowledge, increase status, or invent new elements to elicit responses from the viewers. This commodification of sacred knowledge is further highlighted by Terranova's[22] concept of "free labor" in digital economies that provides a framework for understanding how traditional healers' knowledge becomes commodified through social media platforms. While healers may gain followers and potential clients, platform owners capture the primary economic value of their content. Gerlitz and Helmond's[23] analysis of the "affective economy" of social media reveals how emotional engagement becomes a form of currency that incentivizes practitioners to create increasingly dramatic or controversial content.

However, in this digital era, behaviour is increasingly monitored through forms of constant, often invisible, surveillance and digital control. Within the digital sphere, gender plays a critical role in shaping, reproducing, and intensifying how individuals are monitored and disciplined online, thereby restricting autonomy and participation. Algorithms frequently reinforce these gendered biases through discriminatory patterns that influence the visibility, amplification, and commodification of certain voices, raising important questions about power, control, and inequality.[24] As Ogugbuaja and Akpan argue, algorithmic content shapes “exposure to religious ideas, influences belief interpretation, structures community participation and transforms perceptions of religious authority”.[25] While these digital environments can create new opportunities for engagement, they also risk marginalising particular voices and contributing to the commercialisation of religious

21 José van Dijck, The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

22 Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,” Social Text 18, no. 2 (2000): 33-58.

23 Carolin Gerlitz and Anne Helmond, “The Like Economy: Social Buttons and the Data-Intensive Web,” New Media & Society 15, no. 8 (2013): 1348-1365.

24 Rustum Ali, Farooq Abdullah, and Muhammad Shoaib, “Sociology of Digital Control: Datafication, Online Surveillance, and Gendered Norms in Everyday Life in Higher Education in Pakistan,” Journal of Management Science Research Review 5, no. 1 (2026): 246-265.

25 Ephraim Makuochukwu Ogugbuaja & Idongesit Ededet Akpan, “The Impact of Social Media Algorithms on Religious Belief Formation and Community Engagement,” *Journal of Humanities and Social Policy* 12, no.1 (2026): 147

authority by privileging those who are most visible within platform economies.

Questions of materiality further complicate the study of digital religion. Promey's[26] conceptual framing of "sensational religion" examines how religious practices adapt to new media environments while retaining links to material traditions. For traditional healers, the challenge lies in conveying the materiality of their practices through digital media, where embodied rituals and sacred objects may be reduced to images or performance. Catherine Bell's[27] theories on ritualization provide additional tools to understand how traditional healing practices are transformed when staged for social media audiences rather than within communal, embodied contexts.

In African contexts, scholars have emphasised how digital practices reshape local traditions and cultural expression. On one hand, David Chidester's[28] notion of "wild religion" in digital spaces provides insights into how sacred practices become transformed when mediated through commercial platforms, whereby the commercialisation of *ubungoma* on social media can be seen as a form of "wild religion" that challenges traditional boundaries. On the other hand, Miriam Maina's[29] research on "digital cultures in Kenya" shows how African communities creatively negotiate the intersection of traditional practices and digital technologies. Studies of "hashtag activism" in South Africa demonstrate how social media platforms also serve as spaces of cultural and political expression. In this light, the use of TikTok by traditional healers can be understood as a form of cultural activism that resists and redefines historical marginalisation. Wasserman's[30] work on "popular media and democracy in Africa" further underscores how digital platforms provide the opportunity for previously excluded voices, including traditional practitioners, to gain visibility beyond mainstream media representation.

26 Sally M. Promey, Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).
27 Catherine Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
28 David Chidester, Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).
29 Miriam Maina, “Digital Cultures in Kenya: Local Practices, Global Platforms,” Journal of African Media Studies 9, no. 2 (2017): 233-249.
30 Herman Wasserman, Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa (New York: Routledge, 2011).

However, there remains a significant gap in African-centred scholarship on how traditional healing practices, such as *ubungoma,* are being transformed through social media platforms. This gap presents an important opportunity for indigenous researchers to examine these developments from culturally grounded perspectives that move beyond Western theoretical frameworks and attend to the complex negotiations between traditional spiritual practices and digital commercialisation.

Scholarship reveals that the transformation of *ubungoma* practices through social media represents a complex intersection of traditional healing systems, digital media dynamics, and postcolonial cultural negotiations. The theoretical frameworks of digital religion, materiality of religion, and postcolonial theory provide essential tools for understanding these transformations while simultaneously exposing significant gaps in scholarship that future research could address. Most notably, the commodification of traditional healing knowledge on platforms like TikTok raises fundamental questions about cultural authenticity, spiritual authority, and the protection of indigenous knowledge systems in the digital age.

Digital research methodology and Indigenous knowledge systems

This study employs a qualitative digital research methodology, drawing on extant data sourced from TikTok and YouTube to explore the commodification and exposure of *ubungoma* practices by modern *izangoma*. The approach integrates digital ethnography including thematic and textual analysis and Indigenous research ethics in recognition of the cultural and spiritual sensitivities surrounding African traditional healing knowledge shared online.

Digital ethnography, as theorised by Pink et al.,[31] provides the foundational methodology for engaging with the online presence and practices of *izangoma*. This approach recognises that digital platforms are not merely spaces for content dissemination, but social fields where cultural meanings, performances of authority, and knowledge transactions occur. Specifically,

31 Sarah Pink, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi, Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice (London: SAGE, 2016).

the study uses asynchronous digital observation[32] of publicly accessible content on TikTok and YouTube focusing on South African *izangoma* with active digital personas.

Extant data, typically collected from online platforms, is defined as content that exists independently of the researcher's influence.[33] The dataset for this research includes:

- TikTok videos under hashtags such as #ubungoma, #gogomaweni, #gogoskhotheni, and #ancestralcalling;
- YouTube videos (recorded podcasts), livestreams, and online interviews with high-profile *izangoma*.

Given TikTok's algorithmic logic of virality and performance,[34] a purposive sample was curated to include accounts that demonstrate high engagement, performative authority, and explicitly references healing practices and the commodification of such. These accounts were selected to reflect the popularity of the *izangoma* and generational interpretations of *ubungoma* within the broader South African community, with attention to both self-proclaimed and community-recognised practitioners.

The study employs reflexive thematic analysis [35] and textual analysis.[36] Thematic analysis is used to identify patterns across the dataset, such as the commodification of sacred knowledge, performative healing, digital branding, and audience confusion or resistance.

32 Alessandro Caliandro, "Digital Methods for Ethnography: Analytical Concepts for Ethnographers Exploring Social Media Environments," Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 47, no. 5 (2018): 551-578.

33 Janet Salmons, Doing Qualitative Research Online (London: SAGE, 2017); Luke Sloan and Anabel Quan-Haase, eds., The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods (London: SAGE, 2017).

34 Crystal Abidin, "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours," Cultural Science Journal 12, no. 1 (2020): 77-103.; Diana J. Zulli and Darren Zulli, "Extending the Internet Meme: Conceptualizing 'Memetic Media' on TikTok," New Media & Society 24, no. 8 (2022): 1872-1890.

35 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide (London: SAGE, 2021).

36 Norman Fairclough, Language and Power, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015).

Although the data analysed is publicly available, ethical considerations were guided by digital research ethics[37] and decolonial Indigenous methodologies.[38] This involved reflexive attention to how sacred knowledge is represented and avoiding the extraction or decontextualisation of Indigenous epistemologies for academic gain. In line with relational accountability,[39] care was taken to not reproduce content that could endanger or misrepresent practitioners, especially in contexts where traditional healing is already marginalised or misunderstood.

The researchers' positionalities as academics engaging with African Indigenous spirituality in a postcolonial digital landscape, where one is a practicing *sangoma* and a scholar of religion, and the other focuses on the scholarship of digital religion are critical to the study. Reflexivity is maintained throughout, particularly in interpreting tensions between public visibility and cultural secrecy, digital entrepreneurship and spiritual vocation, and the commodification of *ubungoma* for algorithmic gain. While the academic *sangoma* recognises the need for critical reflection, she also acknowledges that her insider positionality occasionally influences her analytical interpretations. In these moments, the co-author plays an important role in holding her colleague accountable and drawing attention to potential biases in the analysis.

Ubungoma online: Debating authenticity and authority

As detailed above, the data for this research was collected from both TikTok and YouTube videos (recorded podcasts): the TikTok videos provided the background for the research through evidence of how *izangoma* share practices of *ubungoma* online while the YouTube videos presented the arguments of two selected *izangoma*, illustrating the debate around these

37 Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan, with Charles Ess, Laurel S. Townsend, and Claire Wallace, Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0 (2016), https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf.

38 Bagele Chilisa, Indigenous Research Methodologies (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012).; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples, 3rd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2021).

39 Shawn Wilson, Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods (Black Point, NS: Fernwood, 2008).

contested online practices. The extant data from the latter videos provided the core data for this discussion.

All collected data has been translated and summarised into a coherent discussion, enabling the reader to follow the logic of each podcast. Six podcasts form the basis of this discussion: *Babu Dokotela in Ukuthwala Stories, Gogo Maweni in The invisible snake, Gogo Skhotheni in Red Flags of Abantu Abathwele, Kukhona Izangoma Ezithwele* (the speaker in this podcast will be referred to by the pseudonym Rato), Mkhulu Manzolwandle, and Boujee Gogo.

- Ukuthwala Stories Videos Featuring Babu Dokotela 2024 on National TV[40]
- Gogo Maweni, The invisible snake [41]
- Gogo Skhotheni, Red Flags of Abantu Abathwele Revealed [42]
- Kukhona izangoma ezithwele [43]
- Boujee Gogo 2023 New Age Social Media Izangomas|Beef|Misdiagnosis etc Ep03/Navigating Spirituality[44]
- Mkhulu Manzolwandle 2025 What is killing Ubungoma: Self-Initiates[45]

40 Nationtv_sa, "Ukuthwala Stories Videos Featuring Babu Dokotela 2024 on National TV," TikTok, 11 July 2024, 4min., 10 sec., https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?&q=Ukuthwala+nge+ring%23National+TV_SA%23minzo&&mid=4391EDD60E93C83670174391EDD60E93C8367017&&FORM=VRDGAR

41 Recastsa, "Gogo Maweni, The invisible snake" TikTok, 9 November 2023, 1 min., 6 sec., https://www.tiktok.com/@recastsa/video/7299352767263526150

42 linfomyeni, "Red Flags of Abantu Abathwele Revealed," TikTok, 2 November 2023, 1min., 38 sec., https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=3.+Gogo+Skhotheni%3a+Red+flags+of+abantu+abathwele&mid

43 "Understanding Izangoma Ezithwele in SAMA28," TikTok https://www.tiktok.com/@leratomatiwane0 #SAMA28 | TikTok

44 Boujee Gogo, New Age Social Media Izangomas|Beef|Misdiagnosis etc Ep03/Navigating Spirituality, 2023 YouTube, 17 July 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch (the video is no longer accessible). The Wayback Machine https://web.archive.org/web/20260000000000*/Boujee%20Gogo%202023%20New%20Age%20Social%20Media%20Izangomas%7CBeef%7CMisdiagnosis%20etc%20Ep03/Navigating%20Spirituality does not have this video archived. 17 July 2026.

45 Mkhulu Manzolwandle Media, "What is killing Uboungoma: Self-Initiates," YouTube, 17 Jul 2025, 31 min., 46 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vqcf_Imsd5I

Babu Dokotela, a prominent herbalist and outspoken healer, openly discusses *isithwalo* across his social media platforms and podcast. He confirms that healers can perform *isithwalo* and identifies specific locations where it can be sought, while suggesting that church leaders secretly use *muthi* despite publicly condemning it. The laughter this topic generates reveals the hypocrisy surrounding pastors and traditional medicine. Dokotela warns against healers who claim *isithwalo* is affordable, emphasising its high cost and rarity in genuine form within South Africa. He describes its various manifestations, including rings worn on specific fingers to attract wealth on designated days, drawing parallels to pastors who strategically increase offerings on Sundays.[46]

Gogo Maweni, a businesswoman, *sangoma*, and popular TikTok personality, was once allied with Gogo Skhotheni before their relationship soured into rivalry. She confirms that *izangoma* perform *isithwalo*, particularly noting that the snake form requires exceptional skill beyond most South African *izangomas*' capabilities. According to Maweni, the snake remains invisible to everyone except its owner. She also claims that *isithwalo* services can be accessed internationally. Maweni openly acknowledges her ability to perform witchcraft, including protective "back to sender" practices.[47] Gogo Skhotheni, a young *sangoma* with an active social media presence and several *amathwasa*, engaged in a bitter rivalry with Gogo Maweni that included accusations following her baby's death. Despite apparent reconciliation attempts in various podcasts, tensions persist. Skhotheni speaks candidly about witchcraft and *isithwalo*, noting telltale signs in practitioners, such as childlessness, poor hygiene, polygamy, promiscuity, or walking barefoot. She claims the *isithwalo* snake literally consumes a woman's womb, causing infertility. Her unconventional behaviour includes claiming three husbands, pursuing a DJ career, and eventually abandoning *ubungoma* for Christianity, though critics suggest she fled her *ukuthwala* obligations.

In contrast, “Understanding Izangoma Ezithwele” is a young man's warning about fraudulent practitioners, likely referencing Skhotheni indirectly. He

46 This confirms that Pastors use *isithwalo* even though they reject the use of traditional medicines.

47 Witchcraft exists in traditional healing, however, this ritual is performed in two ways. First, when one intends to harm someone with no reason, and second, when one is trying to protect themselves against someone who wants to harm them.

argues that most TikTok *izangoma* are inauthentic, driven by fame and money rather than genuine healing calling. True healers, he maintains, avoid publicity and refuse commercialisation. He exposes how some *izangoma* exploit *isithwalo* to attract *amathwasa* and generate wealth, effectively operating scams while training apprentices under dark spiritual influences. When these practices inevitably backfire, these *izangoma* flee to churches for protection, undermining the public faith in authentic traditional healing. He emphasises that legitimate healers invoke God and ancestors rather than demonic forces and never use medicine to cause harm, urging vigilance against those who lead others into spiritual darkness.

Boujee Gogo actively discourages followers from comparing contemporary *izangoma* with traditional practitioners, arguing that such comparisons perpetuate harmful stereotypes. She contends that younger *izangoma* are unfairly dismissed as inauthentic due to three key factors: their failure to conform to conventional visual expectations of *izangoma*, their mistakes resulting from disrupted *ukuthwasa* lineages, and their patients' inadequate participation in the healing process.

Mkhulu provides an overview of self-initiation and *ubungoma*, examining how this indulges misrepresentation and lack of knowing as compared to those who undergo rigorous rites of passage and mentorship. He maintains that ancestral rites of initiation are necessary and that self-initiates may be self-activated spiritual healers but are not initiated into *ubungoma*.

Analysing the debate

Social media offers healers new opportunities but also exposed once-private practices. *Izangoma* began sharing rituals previously reserved for the initiated. Siwani[48] questions why artists now “show and tell” what was considered secret. Masango[49] notes that while access to sacred medicine traditionally required initiation following a genuine calling, some individuals now pursue initiation without such a calling, driven instead by curiosity or personal ambition. On digital platforms, some healers boast of their powers and compare themselves with others. A serious consequence of this

48 Siwani, “Show and Tell.” 14

49 Maake Masango, “Initiation and Healing in African Traditional Religion: Boundaries and Challenges,” Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae 45, no. 3 (2019): .

behaviour is observed by Mlisa[50] who argues that competition blurs the line between *isangoma* and herbalist, with some herbalists using any medicine, even deadly means, for clients. Mlisa[51] asserts:

> All people who need to thwala (acquire wealth) are understood to buy such powers as they are not inborn gifts. It is also associated with evil forces, specifically an evil snake (ugqoloma), which is used as a means of sustaining such wealth. Contrary to the common opinion that the snake ensures wealth, amagqirha claimed that the snake occasionally has to be fed human blood, and therefore a member of the family is often used as a sacrifice.

These public displays fuelled tensions with accusations of dark spiritual practices and questions of authenticity. Concerns arose about whether healing gifts were genuine or enhanced by unnatural forces, especially given the unusually high numbers of initiates trained by certain *izangoma*. Some once-collaborative healers now publicly accuse each other of witchcraft and *ukuthwala* rituals.[52] Becoming a *sangoma* traditionally followed initiation and mastery of medicinal herbs. Yet, as Promey[53] suggests, herbs meant for healing can be tools of harm depending on intent. This tension surfaces online where many *izangoma* openly discuss witchcraft to gain influence. In another debate, Siwani[54] questions why boundaries are crossed in revealing secrets. Many claim to hold "extra power," though their sources are unknown. Mlisa[55] links this to *ukuthwala* wealth rituals, often associated with evil forces such as the snake (*ugqoloma*) that requires human sacrifice. While rooted in isiXhosa contexts, the same applies in Zulu settings where financial desperation drives the interest in such practices.

Accounts of powerful herbalists such as Khotso, said to have been born in the late 1800s and died in 1972, who was renowned as both a wealthy and powerful practitioner celebrated for his magical abilities, illustrate how envy and rivalry often shape the relationships and interactions among healers.

50 Mlisa, "Ukuthwasa Initiation Ritual," 93
51 Mlisa, "Ukuthwasa Initiation Ritual," 294
52 Sipho Nyundu, "Traditional Healers and the Business of Healing: A Study of Ubungoma in Contemporary South Africa," South African Review of Sociology 49, no. 4 (2018): 2
53 Promey, Sensational Religion.
54 Siwani, "Show and Tell,"14
55 Mlisa, "Ukuthwasa Initiation Ritual," 294

Mlisa[56] recalls that while Khotso refused to sell *ukuthwala* powers, he granted protection and strength to some initiates. However, the online spread of such practices poses risks and limits the protection that was once part of the process. The heavily engagement on platforms like TikTok by young people render them vulnerable to misinformation.[57] As Maluleka and Nkwe[58] warn, easy digital access fosters both curiosity and danger, particularly regarding medicines for revenge, curses, or wealth acquisition. Mlisa[59] explains that even using herbs to "send back" a curse could brand a healer as impure.

Social media further amplifies *ukuthwala* as a path to wealth. Some followers promote it directly with slogans like "Thatha lento ayinabungozi / Take this thing, it has no danger".[60] Many unemployed youths seek these services, while others flaunt new riches online. Over time, stories have emerged of the devastating consequences, such as loss of homes, contested family dynamics, and compromised mental well-being, driving some back to social media to express regret.

Consumerism is risky business: Public sharing of knowledge

The rise of younger, entrepreneurial *izangoma* has accelerated its commodification. Driven by competitive pressures and the need to attract clients, healers are increasingly employing social media to brand themselves, display rituals, and publicise previously private ceremonies. Herbst[61] illustrates how *Izangoma Zodumo* exemplifies this shift where

56 Mlisa, "Ukuthwasa Initiation Ritual," 160

57 Andreas Wahjuwibowo and Melani Wongkar, "TikTok, Religion, and Misinformation among African Youth," Digital Religion Studies 3, no. 1 (2025): 4

58 Piet Maluleka and Thabiso Nkwe, "Digital Religion and African Youth: Risks of Online Healing Practices," Journal of Religion in Africa 55, no. 1 (2025): 3

59 Mlisa, "Ukuthwasa Initiation Ritual," 93

60 "Thatha lento ayinabungozi/Take this thing, it has no danger," is a song by G Jealous amabhinca. In this song, he is singing about the value that comes with the ukuthwala process, August 15, 2024, https://www.tiktok.com/@ckhinkily/video/7403460416384273669?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc

61 Denika Herbst, "Izangoma Zodumo Cast Member Addresses Backlash after Show Premier," Briefly News, October 11, 2020, https://briefly.co.za/82279-izangoma-zodumo-cast-member-addresses-backlash-show-premier.html (accessed March 2, 2025).

sacred practices are performed within an economy of likes, follows, and client recruitment. The result is a commodified version of *ubungoma* that privileges visibility, spectacle, and profit over ancestral respect and communal healing. What was once regarded as a spiritual calling, accepted with humility and in honour of the ancestors, is increasingly at risk of being reconfigured as a consumerist enterprise. This observation does not dismiss the possibility that many of these *izangoma* possess an authentic ancestral calling but rather suggests that the marketing of their product has taken precedence over the preservation and protection of sacred knowledge.

Social media not only alters the visibility of *ubungoma* but also its ontology from a sacred service rooted in relational accountability to a commodified performance embedded in the logics of competition, branding, and profit. A significant shift becomes apparent when examining the ways in which *ubungoma* is marketed today. This is not to suggest that traditional healers of the past operated in complete purity as they too employed strategies to attract clients and sustain their practice. However, such promotion typically occurred privately among existing clients who would share information based on their personal experience of the healer's work through word-of-mouth. In contrast, social media platforms allow for the rapid and expansive dissemination of information to broad and often anonymous audiences, irrespective of authenticity. Given that the digital environment remains largely unregulated, misleading or exaggerated claims can circulate widely, further blurring the boundaries between legitimate and inauthentic practices and increasing the possibility of harm.[62] This shift reduces the sacred vocation of *izangoma* into consumable fragments for online audiences, eroding its integrity and reinforcing the broader commodification of Indigenous spirituality in the digital age.

Diviners and healers have leveraged this demand, promoting their services, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when many stepped up in their roles in healthcare. This period saw a surge of *izangoma* on social media,[63] to keep alongside the surge in online shopping, which in turn increased competition. As *ubungoma* began to resemble a business, profit often

62 D. R. B. Manisha, A. M. Begam, K. S. Chahal, and M. A. Ashok, "Medicinal Plants and Traditional Uses and Modern Applications," Journal of Neonatal Surgery 14, no. 3 (2025): 162–175.

63 Luís Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Thaddeus Metz, Ubuntu and Covid-19: Ubuntu Philosophy as an African Approach to Dealing with the Pandemic (New York: Routledge, 2021). 9

outweighed care[64] with many opportunists taking advantage of the unregulated space. Munyayadzi supports this argument noting it created competition that led to immoral advertising, false testimonials, and misinformation.[65]

Current legislation in South Africa does not provide a comprehensive legal framework for regulating traditional healers despite the World Health Organization's call for their recognition. Efforts towards regulation have faced resistance from sectors of the medical community, especially as traditional healing is often grounded in spiritual epistemologies. For example, Doctors for Life has expressed concern that healthcare standards may decline if treatments prescribed by "spirits" are formally recognised.[66] Although the Traditional Healers' Organization represents over 69,000 practitioners in Southern Africa, questions remain about its capacity to ensure quality control.[67] Without effective regulation, misleading marketing and exaggerated claims about medicinal plants may surge, increasing the risk of consumer confusion and misuse.[68]

Mkhulu[69] further argues against the way knowledge is shared on social media:

> Have we ever heard KFC publicising their recipe for how they make their chicken? You won't. Have you ever heard any company publicising its marketing strategy? You won't. Why are we doing it, ebungomeni? Are we not understanding that we are in a process of awakening? People are becoming aware of who they are, yet we are feeding them too much information, even information that is not supposed to be shared publicly. Then you might say, "We are

64 Nyundu, "Business of Healing."2

65 Richard Munyayadzi, "Commercialisation of African Traditional Healing: Ethics and Competition," African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems 10, no. 2 (2011): 1–10. 4

66 C. Rautenbach, "Review on a New Legislative Framework for Traditional Healers in South Africa," Obiter 28, no. 3 (2007): 518-536. 11

67 Rautenbach, "Legislative Framework," 7

68 D. R. B. Manisha, A. M. Begam, K. S. Chahal, and M. A. Ashok, "Medicinal Plants and Traditional Uses and Modern Applications," Journal of Neonatal Surgery 14, no. 3 (2025): 162-175. 10

69 Mkhulu Manzolwandle Media, "What Is Killing Ubungoma: Self-Initiates," YouTube, July 17, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vqcf_lmsd5I.

> sharing information", However, there were settings where the sharing of information needed to be done in a way that ensures only trusted individuals, who are indeed abangoma themselves, are present. This awakening is bringing forth teachers who are being very careless with information.

The current discourse on *ukuthwala* illustrates the risks posed when dangerous knowledge is made public. *Ukuthwala* encourages the pursuit of quick riches without labour, often at high personal and financial cost. Baba Dokotela highlights that these rituals are expensive and frequently unsuccessful with many spending their final resources in pursuit of unattainable wealth. Similarly, Gogo Maweni stresses that no *sangoma* in South Africa can perform genuine *ukuthwala*, a claim corroborated by Baba Dokotela who maintains that such practices are primarily offered outside the country. These testimonies suggest that discussions of *ukuthwala* introduce foreign ritual practices that exacerbate South Africa's existing socio-economic challenges.[70]

Practitioners claim that *ukuthwala* also demands strict adherence to rules that many cannot sustain. Moreover, attempts to abandon the practice often result in severe consequences, including death. A young woman's confession, as well as the widely publicised case of Gogo Skhotheni's eventual turn to Christianity, demonstrate how ritual wealth inevitably brings harm to both the individuals and their families. Belief that wealth may be carried by a snake within the household further illustrate the destructive nature of this practice. Upon the death of the practitioner, wealth and possessions typically vanish. Families who attempt to maintain such wealth by transferring it to another member often suffer the same fatal consequences.[71]

Although some *izangoma* publicly claim to perform *ubugqwira/ubuthakathi* (witchcraft), such practices fall outside the scope of genuine *ubungoma*. The role of a *sangoma* is to heal rather than harm. While some justify defensive

70 Baba Dokotela. "Ukuthwala Stories Videos Featuring Babu Dokotela 2024 on National TV." Video, 2024. https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?&q=Ukuthwala+nge+ring%23National+TV_SA%23minzo&&mid

71 Lindo Myeni, "Red Flags of Abantu Abathwele Revealed," video, November 2, 2023, https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo.

practices such as “back to sender” *muthi*, Rato insists that true *izangoma* engage solely in healing. He warns that many figures on social media are false healers, noting that it is increasingly rare to encounter a *sangoma* who heals with integrity and respect. Nonetheless, authentic healers, those who call upon God and ancestors, heal through genuine gifts, and refrain from invoking destructive forces, remain. Crucially, such *izangoma* are seldom found on social media, which, he argues, is dominated by pretenders.[72]

The proliferation of these practices has diminished the status of traditional healers, blurring the line between authentic *izangomas* and *ubugqwira/ubuthathathi*. This recalls missionary claims that *ubungoma* was not genuine but merely witchcraft.[73] In light of this, associations of traditional healers must establish mechanisms to regulate public discourse and safeguard dangerous knowledge from being disseminated irresponsibly. Above all, *ukuthwala* represents a hazardous and temporary path to wealth, one that ultimately results in suffering for both the practitioners and their families.

Rigours of ukuthwasa

Ukuthwasa (initiation) remains a central process in preparing healers to confront the challenges of their vocation. It provides profound experiential knowledge rooted in ancestral calling and is not limited to herbal medicine. Rather, initiation transmits wisdom that enables the healer to convey knowledge responsibly to others. Training also varies among the different categories of healers. For example, *izinyanga* (herbalists), renowned for their expertise in medicinal plants, generally do not undergo initiation. *Inyanga* is understood as a generational gift transmitted through ancestral selection from one individual to the next. The chosen person is believed to receive knowledge, such as the mixing of herbs, through dreams. Often, a child who shows an early interest in traditional healing is identified as the successor and trained under a parent or senior herbalist, eventually inheriting the practice upon the elder’s passing.[74] Consequently, while they possess valuable herbal knowledge, they may inadvertently pass on dangerous information without recognising its potential harm. By contrast,

72 Lerato Matiwane, “Kukhona Izangoma Ezithwele,” TikTok video, accessed June 10, 2026, https://www.tiktok.com/@leratomatiwane
73 Mlisa, “Ukuthwasa Initiation Ritual,” 34
74 Nyoni, “Comparative Study.” 18

within *ubungoma*, such issues are directly addressed through the rigours of initiation.

Drawing on Boujee Gogo's video, she explains that many contemporary *izangoma* grew up without knowledge of *isphandla* and *mpepho*. She critiques Christianised, urbanised, and Westernised Africans for failing to transmit foundational indigenous knowledge and cultural practices to their children. As a result, many initiates enter the initiation process with a significant cultural deficit that, in turn, creates a range of challenges:

> now you are introduced to this new thing where you go and initiate and then you come back and you still have to fumble your way, you still need to fix things that were not done…we are trying to find ways. And it's not easy being *izangoma* of this day. It's not easy.

While acknowledging the necessity of a proper initiation processes, Boujee Gogo explores the unique difficulties facing young *izangoma*. She emphasises that their spiritual legitimacy is located in the same work as their ancestors, albeit with a shift in contemporary accessibility, asserting: "we are no less than our ancestors. We are no less than them. We are just continuing from where they left off". In addition, she mentions that the young *izangoma* are navigating the journey while “trying to find their way back to their roots”.

Beyond the internal challenges, she highlights how modern *izangoma* must also navigate external obstacles in their initiation and healing practices. Environmental degradation poses a particular threat whereby spiritual rivers are polluted with toxins, construction companies destroy natural water bodies, and societal crimes including murder create profound challenges for divining, purifying, and spiritual healing. These contemporary realities prompt her urgent question: "Where are we going to connect with our ancestors, and our people and our higher selves" given the ecological imbalance?

The internet is giving rise to a phenomenon of self-initiation to *ubungoma* using the guidelines provided by online *izangoma*. Conversely, Mkhulu remains adamant that correct initiation rites must be followed. He disapproves of youth who follow content creators and influencers, choosing to self-initiate without proper mentorship and authentic rites of passage. He

argues that self-initiates create a "confused space" or embraces Chidester's "wild religion" that challenges boundaries, as they,

> seem to want to wear, seem to want to use the language and the terminologies of *ubungoma*, seem to want to do and practice rituals practiced by *izangoma* without them saying, I am going to go through the process of initiation…they want everything.

Rather, he suggests that self-initiation become a reference to the herbalists (*inyanga*) who do not require training, rather than in comparison to those who undergo the rigours of *ubungoma*.

Contemporary versus elder *izangoma* practices

Contemporary *izangomas* differ markedly from their predecessors in terms of context, modes of communication, and technologies. While healing practices are increasingly articulated on social media, such exposure requires restraint and discernment regarding what may or may not be disclosed. This is particularly important given social media's accessibility to all audiences, including youth who may lack the maturity to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate content.

Boujee Gogo, a young contemporary *sangoma* with long braids, numerous piercings, and pink nails, wearing an *ibhayi* (fabric worn by *izangoma*) over her shoulder, emphasises that modern *izangoma* cannot be expected to mirror older *izangoma* as they belong to different generations. She contends that contemporary *izangoma* are "fumbling" due to inheriting a "dilapidated" African spirituality damaged by Christian dominance and the resulting break in traditions and knowledge. Describing the process as "trial and error", she urges patients and social media followers not to judge or "belittle" new age *izangoma*. She maintains they are "no less than their ancestors" despite wearing jeans, makeup, and tips (false nails) while existing in a corporate world, owning businesses, and maintaining social media presence.

Maintaining his position, Mkhulu[75] decries youth who learn from social media rather than following the ways of the elders. He observes that distinguishing

75 Mkhulu Manzolwandle Media, "What Is Killing Ubungoma: Self-Initiates," YouTube video, July 17, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vqcf_lmsd5I.

between self-initiates and true *izangoma* has become impossible, as "no one checks who's who anymore":

> …there are those who saying, my ancestors came and said, I must not go to *iphehlo(initiation)* and you realise that it's a lie. These are the people I'm referring to. These are the people who spend their time looking at social media, teachers, doing research in depth, research about and they start knowing the language. They start knowing the rituals. They start knowing exactly how to look like you can have a piece.., but if it was never presented to you, connected to you, it means those things you can wear, they mean nothing, because you did not go through the rite of passage society now doesn't even know how to tell the difference between who is the izangomas, who's a self-initiate…

His angst is arguably aligned with the challenge in conveying the materiality of *ubungoma* practices through digital media, where embodied rituals and sacred objects may be reduced to images or performance.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal how the digital age has profoundly reshaped the practice and perception of *ubungoma*. Once revered as a sacred vocation rooted in ancestral authority and communal wellbeing, *ubungoma* is increasingly commodified on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. The rise of performative healing, ritual exposure, and online competition has blurred the boundaries between authentic spiritual practice and commercialised spectacle. While digital platforms have provided visibility and legitimacy to some healers, they have also amplified misinformation, sensationalism, and exploitative practices that threaten the integrity of Indigenous knowledge systems.

Significantly, the findings demonstrate that female *izangoma* remain central to these digital engagements. Discussions on *ukuthwala* and the sharing of knowledge were largely initiated and driven by women whose online presence shaped contemporary debates on authority, authenticity, secrecy, and power within *ubungoma*. The discourse surrounding *ukuthwala* demonstrates the dangers of making sacred, and often hazardous, knowledge readily available to uninitiated audiences. As shown in podcasts

and digital testimonies, curiosity, desperation, and algorithmic amplification converge to normalise practices that carry profound spiritual and social risks. The commodification of healing rituals undermines their intended purpose, transforming *ubungoma* from a gift of healing into a transactional pursuit of wealth, fame, or influence. Such trends not only destabilise the reputation of *izangoma* but also expose vulnerable youth and seekers to harmful misinformation and exploitation.

At the same time, the study affirms that authentic healers, those who embody ancestral wisdom, uphold ritual integrity, and resist the lure of algorithmic visibility, remain. Their voices, however, are often overshadowed by the noise of digital competition. This emphasises the urgent need for traditional healer associations, cultural custodians, and academic researchers to collaborate in safeguarding the sanctity of Indigenous healing knowledge. Regulatory frameworks, culturally grounded digital ethics, and community-led strategies are essential to curbing the misuse of sacred practices online.

Ultimately, the transformation of *ubungoma* on social media reflects broader tensions between tradition and modernity, spirituality and consumerism, and healing and harm. It is a reminder that while digital platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for cultural expression, they also demand careful negotiation of ethical boundaries. Future research led by Indigenous scholars is crucial to ensure that the study of *ubungoma* in the digital age does not replicate extractive approaches, but instead honours relational accountability, spiritual responsibility, and the resilience of African epistemologies.

.

References

Abidin, Crystal. “Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours.” *Cultural Science Journal* 12, no. 1 (2020): 77-103.

AFP. “How SA Sangomas’ Ancient Healing Work Is Going Digital.” *Inside Politics*. 2021. https://insidepolitic.co.za/how-sa-sangomas-ancient-healing-work-is-going-digital/Nationtv_sa, “Ukuthwala Stories Videos Featuring Babu Dokotela 2024 on National TV,” TikTok, 11 July 2024, 4min., 10 sec., https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?&q=Ukuthwala+nge+ring%23National+TV_SA%23minzo&&mid

Baym, Nancy K. *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015.

Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Bhandari, Ekant, and Bayu Bimo. “The Attention Economy of TikTok: Algorithmic Culture and Digital Labour.” *Social Media + Society* 8, no. 2 (2022): 1-12.

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: SAGE, 2021.

Caliandro, Alessandro. “Digital Methods for Ethnography: Analytical Concepts for Ethnographers Exploring Social Media Environments.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 47, no. 5(2018): 551-578.

Campbell, Heidi A. "Digital Religion as the Networked Spiritual Infrastructure of Our Religious Futures." In *Redefining Spiritual Spaces in the Age of Technology: Innovations and Pitfalls* edited by Stacey K. Guenther, Xiaoan Li and Michelle A. Scheidt, Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025.

Chidester, David. *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018.

Chilisa, Bagele. *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012.

Ckhinkily. TikTok, 15 August 2024, https://www.tiktok.com/@ckhinkily/video/7403460416384273669?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc

Cordeiro-Rodrigues, Luís, and Thaddeus Metz. *Ubuntu and Covid-19: Ubuntu Philosophy as an African Approach to Dealing with the Pandemic*. New York: Routledge, 2021.

Evolvi, Giulia. "Hybrid Muslim Identities in Digital Space: The Italian Blog Yalla." *Social Compass* 64, no. 2 (2017): 220-232.

Fairclough, Norman. *Language and Power*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2015.

Geldenhuys, K. "When Cultural Beliefs Turn into Crime: The Witchcraft Issue." *Servamus Community-Based Safety and Security Magazine* 109, no. 6 (2016): 24-31.

Gerlitz, Carolin, and Anne Helmond. "The Like Economy: Social Buttons and the Data-Intensive Web." *New Media & Society* 15, no. 8 (2013): 1348-1365.

Gillespie, Katrin. "Hashtag Activism in South Africa: Social Media and the Politics of Representation." *African Journalism Studies* 39, no. 2 (2018): 1-19.

Herbst, Denika. "Izangoma Zodumo Cast Member Addresses Backlash after Show Premier." *Briefly News*. October 11, 2020. https://briefly.co.za/82279-izangoma-zodumo-cast-member-addresses-backlash-show-premier.html

Isithombe se Dlozi. "The Spiritual Journey of Spirit Initiates." Facebook. 30 May, 2024. https://www.facebook.com/groups/1094740131181070/posts/1442237589764654/

Lazzarato, Maurizio. “Immaterial Labor.” In *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics,* edited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Maina, Miriam. “Digital Cultures in Kenya: Local Practices, Global Platforms.” *Journal of African Media Studies* 9, no. 2 (2017): 233-249.

Maluleka, Piet, and Thabiso Nkwe. “Digital Religion and African Youth: Risks of Online Healing Practices.” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 55, no. 1 (2025): 1-15.

Manisha, D. R. B., A. M. Begam, K. S. Chahal, and M. A. Ashok. “Medicinal Plants and Traditional Uses and Modern Applications.” *Journal of Neonatal Surgery* 14, no. 3 (2025): 162-175.

Markham, Annette, and Elizabeth Buchanan, with Charles Ess, Laurel S. Townsend, and Claire Wallace. Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0. *Association of Internet Researchers*, 2016. https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf.

Masango, Maake. “Initiation and Healing in African Traditional Religion: Boundaries and Challenges.” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 45, no. 3 (2019): 1-12. Matiwane, Lerato. “Kukhona Izangoma Ezithwele.” TikTok. Accessed June 10, 2026. https://www.tiktok.com/@leratomatiwane

Mjoli, Zingisa Noluvuyo. “The Question of Genre Classification in the Drama Series “Ubizo: The Calling” (2007).” MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 2022.

Mkasi, L. P. “A Threat to Zulu Patriarchy and the Continuation of Community: A Queer Analysis of Same-Sex Relationships amongst Female Traditional Healers at Inanda and KwaNgcolosi, KwaZulu-Natal.” MA thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2013.

Mkhulu Manzolwandle Media. "What is killing Uboungoma: Self-Initiates," YouTube, 17 Jul 2025, 31 min., 46 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vqcf_lmsd5I

Mlisa, Nkosazana. Ukuthwasa Initiation Ritual as a Practice of Incorporation into the Ancestral Healer Profession. PhD diss., University of Fort Hare, 2009.

Munyayadzi, Richard. "Commercialisation of African Traditional Healing: Ethics and Competition." *African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems* 10, no. 2 (2011): 1-10.

Myeni, Lindo. "Red Flags of Abantu Abathwele Revealed." Video, November 2, 2023. https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo

Ndwayana, Feziwe. "There Are Many Reasons for the Increasing Number of Traditional Healers." *Mail & Guardian*. November 1, 2022. https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/opinion/2022-11-01-there-are-many-reasons-for-the-increasing-number-of-traditional-healers/

Nene, J. "Ukuhlonipha and Ukuhloniphana among the Zulu Traditional Healers." *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences* 43, no. 3 (2016): 1629-1637. https://archives.ju.edu.jo/index.php/hum/article/view/7525

Nyoni, Linnet. "A Comparative Study of the Relationship Between the Applications of Erythrina lysistemon (Umsinsi) Within the Traditional African and Homeopathic Medicinal Systems." PhD dissertation, 2021.

Nyundu, Sipho. "Traditional Healers and the Business of Healing: A Study of Ubungoma in Contemporary South Africa." *South African Review of Sociology* 49, no. 4 (2018): 1-12.

Ogugbuaja, Ephraim Makuochukwu, and Idongesit Ededet Akpan. "The Impact of Social Media Algorithms on Religious Belief Formation and Community Engagement." *Journal of Humanities and Social Policy* 12, 1 (2026): 137-147.

Papacharissi, Zizi. *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Phanyeko, Thobeka. "An In-Depth Look at African Spirituality." GQ South Africa. 2021. https://www.gq.co.za/culture/an-in-depth-look-at-african-spirituality-5b366d56-96c8-45bc-a5dd-397bc8df6d89/

Pink, Sarah, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi. *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. London: SAGE, 2016.

Promey, Sally M. *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.

Rautenbach, C. "Review on a New Legislative Framework for Traditional Healers in South Africa." *Obiter* 28, 3 (2007): 518-536.

Robards, Brady, and Siân Lincoln. "Platformed Media Production and Consumption: Practices of Identity on TikTok." *Journal of Youth Studies* 23, no.4 (2020): 1-17.

Salmons, Janet. *Doing Qualitative Research Online*. London: SAGE, 2017.

Scharnick-Udemans, Lee-Shae Salma. "Prospects and Potential for the Study of Religion and Digital Media in (South) Africa." In *What Has Religion Studies in Africa Been Up To?* Edited by Jaco Beyers. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2023.

Siwani, Sethembile. "The Politics of Revealing: Art, Ancestry, and Secrecy." *African Arts* 49, no. 2 (2016): 12-20.

Siwani, Sethembile. "Show and Tell: The Dilemma of Disclosing Sacred Practices in Contemporary South Africa." *Critical Arts* 33, no. 4 (2019): 12-22.

Sloan, Luke, and Anabel Quan-Haase, eds. *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*. London: SAGE, 2017.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 3rd ed. London: Zed Books, 2021.

Terranova, Tiziana. “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy.” Social Text 18, no. 2 (2000): 33-58.van Dijck, José. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Wahjuwibowo, Andreas, and Melani Wongkar. “TikTok, Religion, and Misinformation among African Youth.” *Digital Religion Studies* 3, no.1 (2025): 1-10.

Wasserman, Herman. *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa.* New York: Routledge, 2011.

Wilson, Shawn. *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Black Point, NS: Fernwood, 2008.

Wood, Felicity. "The occult, the erotic and entrepreneurship: An analysis of oral accounts of ukuthwala, wealth-giving magic, sold by the Medicine Man Khotso Sethuntsa." *Alternation* 15, no. 1 (2008): 338-366.

Zulli, Diana J., and Darren Zulli. “Extending the Internet Meme: Conceptualizing ‘Memetic Media’ on TikTok.” *New Media & Society* 24, no. 8 (2022): 1872-1890.

NOTE: ChatGPT.com was used to assist with the correct use of Chicago style referencing for: Bibliography, Footnote notes and Footnote shortnotes as per https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html