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Truth and reconciliation: Indigenous storytelling reflection on *Inxeba Elingaphakathi*[1]

ABSTRACT

This article revisits the South African project of truth and reconciliation through the lens of inxeba elingaphakathi*, the inner wound, and reflects on it through indigenous storytelling pastoral theology. This invisible wound is carried by individuals and communities in the aftermath of historical violence and systemic injustice caused by apartheid. Drawing on African indigenous perspectives, the article explores truth and reconciliation beyond institutional processes, framing them as spiritual, ethical, and communal acts. It interrogates the limitations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in addressing the depth of grief and trauma from this era and reflects on how indigenous storytelling pastoral theology may offer healing, restore dignity, and nurture relational wholeness. Ultimately, it argues for an indigenous storytelling approach to healing – one that focuses on embodied care, collective memory, and the ongoing recognition of wounds shaping South Africa's moral and spiritual landscape.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This article revisits the South African project of truth and reconciliation, not merely as a political or institutional process, but as a deeply spiritual, cultural, and communal journey of healing *inxeba elingaphakathi*, the wound within. While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) offered a platform for national dialogue and restoration, its

1 Invisible wound.

approach often overlooked the slow, embodied, and collective nature of healing in many African communities. Drawing on indigenous storytelling methodology, this article explores how truth and reconciliation can be reimagined as more than mechanisms of the state – as ethical and relational acts rooted in community care, ancestral wisdom, and spiritual acknowledgment of pain.

Through *inxeba elingaphakathi*, this article poses critical questions: What happens when truth-telling fails to cleanse the wound, and instead, covers it with a plaster? What happens when reconciliation is forced before people are even able to articulate their pain? How and what are we reconciling if people did not take responsibility for any wrongdoing?

To address these questions, the article interrogates the meaning of truth and reconciliation through both theological and cultural perspectives. It then engages the frameworks of social community caregiving and indigenous storytelling as a route beyond policy toward a more restorative, relational, and responsive process of healing. The article concludes by offering key findings and reflections rooted in these alternative ways of knowing and being.

2. TELLING OUR OWN STORIES: INDIGENOUS STORYTELLING AS LENS AND METHOD

This article draws on indigenous storytelling as a way not only of narrating experience, but also of knowing, remembering, and healing. Indigenous storytelling in this text is deeply relational – it holds memory, emotion, and wisdom in ways that written records often cannot. It allows us to speak of *inxeba elingaphakathi* – the wound that is unseen yet deeply felt – in a manner that honours its complexity and depth. As a lens, indigenous storytelling challenges the linear, detached approaches often used in recounting history, inviting instead a circular and collective remembering. As a method, it returns the telling of the TRC's legacy to those whose truths were lived, not only recorded.

It is from this purview that indigenous storytelling is both the lens and method. The relevance of this method is that, in indigenous storytelling methodology, these stories are told through *iingoma* (songs), *umxhentso* (traditional dances), metaphors, proverbs, and in silence (Penxa-Matholeni 2022). Within the TRC context, such silences are not accidental; they reflect the deeper *inxeba elingaphakathi* (the wound within) that has not been given space to breathe. The wounds of Black South Africans, inflicted and deepened by apartheid, have neither been totally cleaned nor allowed to heal; instead, they have often been hastily covered, as one might put a plaster over an untreated wound.

The relevance of indigenous storytelling lies in its capacity to open spaces where these inner wounds can be named, carried, and witnessed. This storytelling holds memory in forms that Western archival practices cannot do, enabling the resurfacing of truths that the TRC's formal hearings could not always capture.

3. RECONCILIATION IN CONTEXT: BUILDING A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Reconciliation is a multifaceted process that encompasses acknowledgment, healing, and the restoration of relationships. In the South African context, reconciliation is not merely about forgiveness, but also about addressing the deep-seated wounds of apartheid. According to the TRC, reconciliation involves the acknowledgment of past atrocities, the restoration of human dignity, and the building of a unified nation (South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998-2003). This process requires confronting painful truths, offering reparations, and fostering a culture of mutual respect and understanding (Marais 2024).

Before reconciliation can be genuine, Scripture call us to confront what must come first, namely matters of truth and justice.

> I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already burning! But I have a baptism of suffering ahead of me, and I am under a terrible pressure until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on, a family of five will be divided – three against two, and two against three (Lk. 12:49-52).

This is not an easy passage to engage with; its tone and imagery challenge the common association of Jesus solely with peace. I approach it not as a New Testament scholar, but as a pastoral indigenous scholar, and my interpretation reflects that lens. In this article, I read this text in conversation with the concept of reconciliation, exploring how it disrupts simplified notions of harmony and points instead to the difficult work that must precede genuine restoration.

What strikes me is that, instead of speaking of peace as we might expect from Jesus' ministry, he speaks of fire and division. What does this mean for the definition of reconciliation and forgiveness in the context of South Africa's TRC? Clearly, this is not the reconciliation the TRC sought to achieve.

The "fire" Jesus refers to is not destructive; it is a purifying fire that reveals, refines, and restores. Symbolically, it burns away lies when the truth is brought into the open. This Jesus does not preserve the status quo, but he ignites holy

disruption – a necessary precursor to reconciliation. Truth must fully expose pain and confront false peace, before genuine healing and unity can be built. The good reconciliation (Vorster 2018) that depicts the renewal of all creation, in Christ, failed Black South Africans. This same Bible was used to oppress and marginalise the so-called "non-Whites" (Vosloo 2015; Plaatjies-Van Huffel & Vosloo 2013).

According to Penxa-Matholeni (2024), South Africa's democratic foundation remains distorted and bleeding, a reflection of how Black South Africans continue to experience the lingering effects of apartheid.

> In the context of indigenous storytelling, reconciliation is deeply embedded in communal practices and storytelling. It involves rituals, dialogues, and communal gatherings that aim to restore harmony within the community. These practices emphasize collective healing and the restoration of relationships, aligning with the controversial passage of scripture above (Penxa-Matholeni 2022:1).

4. WITNESSING THROUGH THE CLIP: INDIGENOUS STORYTELLING IN ACTION

The following clip provides a vivid instance of lived experience that cannot be fully captured through written records or formal TRC documentation alone. In keeping with the indigenous storytelling methodology, this clip becomes a site of witnessing, a moment where *inxeba elingaphakathi*, the unseen wounds of apartheid, can surface and be acknowledged. The voices, gestures, and silences within the clip reveal the complexities of trauma, memory, and resilience, demonstrating both the gaps in formal reconciliation processes and the enduring spirit of those who still carry these wounds. Analysed through the lens of indigenous storytelling, the clip allows us to interpret not only the words spoken, but also the silences, the rhythms, and the emotional expressions that communicate what is otherwise hidden. In contrast to Wielenga (2013), this article contends that healing and reconciliation cannot be mentioned in the same breath. The wound must first be named, acknowledged, and attended to before healing can begin. The South African story of apartheid and oppression is the story of every Black South African – it is our story.

In April 2015, marking the 19th anniversary of the TRC, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) News aired a report from Constitutional Hill. The segment, presented by SABC News reporter Chriselda Lewis, struck me like a blow between the eyes. In her report, she stated: "The TRC was meant to bring reconciliation and forgiveness between perpetrators and victims."

I could not help but wonder. Was this reconciliation and forgiveness expected to happen right there and then? Perhaps we were too ambitious as South Africans, or perhaps we rushed too quickly to unite before the work of truth-telling had even begun. We hurried towards healing and forgiveness without first recognising, naming, tending to the deep pain, and listening to the anger (Wepener & Pieterse 2018; Marumo 2019).

I kept thinking about the victims who were bold enough to heed the call. Were they truly ready? By that I mean, we had voted for the very first time for a government chosen by the people. And almost immediately, we were being asked to reconcile. But reconcile what, exactly? We were still bleeding, and many of us did not even know where the blood was coming from. Our bodies were still warm from the sting of tear gas, from the force of bullets and hand grenades, literally and figuratively that had struck us. The adrenaline still coursed through our veins because, for Black South Africans, staying alert had been a way of life: running from the police, being stopped and questioned if you were Black and driving a nice car, as though you had surely stolen it. We were still in the shock of transition. Psychologically, we lived in a state of disbelief. Was this really happening? And if it was, what were the steps that would take us to the promised land? Then suddenly came reconciliation and forgiveness.

I liken this moment to someone who was hit by a car. In that instant, the body is numb, the shock is high, and bleeding may be happening without the victim even knowing it. Some who are hit or shot are not even aware that they are injured until much later. This is where we were as Black South Africans when the TRC began: still in shock, our bodies hot from the violence and humiliation we had endured, unable to articulate the depth of our pain. From 1994, the dust began to settle; we realised we had been hit. When the time finally came – not only to feel the pain but also to name it – we had already been declared "people of the rainbow", we are reconciled and have forgiven the perpetrators. We were expected to forgive, not only to forgive people who did not even ask for forgiveness, but to forgive when the wounds we had not been able to articulate, let alone heal. The others received automatic forgiveness when they had not even asked for forgiveness. This is where the bleeding foundation of the democratic South Africa came from (Penxa-Matholeni 2024). The wounds inflicted by apartheid were not visible. They lived deep inside – *inxeba elingaphakathi* (Penxa-Matholeni 2025). This is why South Africa remains a wounded country, because those wounds were never truly tended to or healed. In the paraphrased words of Jesus, the holy disruption and the holy fire that needed to happen before rebuilding – the shaking, the burning away of lies – never took place.

4.1 The weight of what remains unsaid

As mentioned earlier, on 15 April 2015, SABC News aired a special report marking the 19th anniversary of the TRC. The broadcast sought to revisit the stories of apartheid's victims, nearly two decades after they had engaged in the TRC process – a process meant to offer healing, closure, and answers.

One of the stories featured was that of the Mogudu family, in Mamelodi township, Tshwane. Their son, Moses, known as (Moss) Mogudu, forcibly disappeared under apartheid. By 2015, he would have been 50 years old. Yet the family had still not been able to bury him, nor receive definitive answers about his fate. As I watched the clip – hearing the anguished voices and cries and witnessing the lingering silence of their pain and lament (Tolbert 1990) – I was struck not only by the spoken words, but also by what remained unsaid. Nineteen years on, the ache of unanswered questions and the burden of unacknowledged grief remain palpable.

4.2 The cry: Public grief and the search for closure

The TRC created a space where victims of apartheid were invited to tell their stories, often for the first time, in a public and officially sanctioned setting. Mogudu's family cry, and that of many others, as captured in the 1996 footage, represents more than personal pain. It becomes the emblem of the emotional and spiritual rupture carried by many families.

Their voices broke into a space designed for healing, yet their cry was also a theological cry, a lament, seeking meaning, justice, and acknowledgement. In this moment, the act of "crying out" functioned both as testimony and indictment. We are still here. We are still grieving. We are still waiting. Were their cries truly heard, or were they simply documented?

4.3 Comforted? The role of the TRC and its limits

The visible act of comforting Mrs Mogudu – whether by TRC officials, clergy, or community members – marked an attempt to respond to trauma with presence. Yet this comfort, while perhaps well-meaning, appears more symbolic than transformative. The TRC was not designed to deliver justice in the form of concrete answers, the return of remains, or full restitution. Instead, it offered something far more fragile: the promise of recognition, and the hope that healing might follow.

But if the TRC was never going to deliver justice or restitution, one must ask: Was it necessary in the form it took? Would victims such as the Mogudu family have come forward so vulnerably, had they known this process would amount to little more than a preview, a staging of healing without its substance?

I argue that to open the wound so publicly, and then fail to properly attend to it, is not a step toward healing but a deepening of the wound itself.

The process asked victims to speak, to revisit the trauma, and to expose their grief. Yet, in many instances, it left them unanswered and unhealed, while perpetrators were granted amnesty. Forgiveness was extended even in the absence of full truth. I return to the question: What kind of comfort was given? What kind of comfort was needed? The gap between the two may help explain the silence, disillusionment, and unresolved grief we witness 19 years later.

4.4 Nineteen years later: The silence of the unhealed

In the April 2015 SABC revisit, the silence of Mrs Mogudu in her Mamelodi home is haunting. It is not the silence of peace, but the silence of exhaustion – perhaps even betrayal. Where her cry once called out to a nation, her silence now stands as a stark testimony to what was never resolved. There is no body to bury; Moss' remains were never reunited with his umbilical cord. There are no answers. The perpetrators have been forgiven, yet the truth remains obscured. The wound stays open: some who received amnesty claim that his body was abducted and tortured, while other accounts suggest that it was blown up. What mother can ever find peace under such circumstances? This silence is not forgetting. It is what endures when language fails. Theologically, it may also be read as resistance: A refusal to perform pain once more for a system that has not delivered justice. It compels us to ask: Has the healing promised by the TRC materialised, or has it been deferred indefinitely?

4.5 The daughter speaks: Inheriting the question

Yvonne Mogudu, Moss' sister, enters the narrative not only as a witness to her mother's pain, but also as the bearer of unresolved trauma herself. Her voice carries the weight of a story passed down not only through memory, but also through silence, survival, and the lingering absence of justice. Her words are more composed, perhaps more reflective, yet they are no less heavy. She belongs to a generation that did not choose the trauma; she must live with its consequences. She speaks where her mother can no longer. These are the words of Yvonne Mogudu:

> The democracy we're enjoying today is through his blood. Sometimes it gives us comfort, sometimes it gives us sadness. It was not easy for us at all.

My reading of her words is twofold. First, there is a sense of comfort in knowing that Moss died for a democracy they now inhabit – however imperfect it may be. As Yvonne says, it brings both comfort and sadness. For me, these are survival words. There is no closure. But they had to find a way to move forward.

In the echo of an unanswered cry, they sought consolation, because life demanded continuation. They had to live on within and through a democracy that Moss himself never got to experience.

Her words alone also carry a profound sorrow. Not only did Moss never see the fruits of the struggle he gave his life for, but more painfully, his body was never recovered. No one truly knows what happened to him. That absence, that unresolved disappearance, is *inxeba elingaphakathi* – a wound on the inside, invisible yet unhealed.

Yvonne's testimony is crucial to understanding intergenerational trauma, the persistence of memory, and the unspoken toll of unresolved grief. Her voice is not simply a recollection of the past; it is a reminder that the story did not end with the TRC. It continues in the bodies, minds, and testimonies of the children who inherited both the freedom and the pain.

Together, the cry, the comfort, the silence, and Yvonne Mogudu's voice form a layered narrative of grief and resistance. They challenge any simplistic reading of "reconciliation" and force us to confront the limits of transitional justice mechanisms when they cannot deliver closure. Perhaps the question is not whether they were healed, but whether we ever truly listened.

5. THE WOUND WITHIN: NAMING THE UNSEEN PAIN

The pain expressed in this clip is not only visible but deeply embedded in the psyche. It is what we call in isiXhosa *inxeba elingaphakathi*, the invisible wound that reflects both personal and collective trauma, lingering long after visible scars have faded.

Inxeba elingaphakathi (Penxa-Matholeni 2024) is not one that bleeds in public or demands immediate medical attention. It festers silently, hidden beneath the surface, shaping lives in quiet but profound ways. For families such as the Mogudus, this wound is more than personal loss; it speaks of absence, erasure, and the impossibility of closure. Moss' body was never returned, his final moments never fully accounted for. These unresolved truths echo through generations, becoming part of the family's psychic landscape.

This invisible wound speaks to a trauma that is carried rather than spoken, lived rather than healed. It lives in the silence of Mrs Mogudu, in the survival speech of Yvonne, in the haunted memory of a nation still struggling to reckon with its past. While the TRC provided a framework for forgiveness, it did not – and perhaps could not – offer healing for every wound. When people such as Schreus (2001) ask this question, must radical openness and the confession

of truth by the perpetrators be an absolute prerequisite for reconciliation? The answer is a resounding "Yes".

South Africa remains an epicentre of gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF), with much of that pain rooted in *inxeba elingaphakathi*. This unseen trauma breeds anger and frustration. Without excusing xenophobia, it is important to acknowledge that many Black South Africans are grappling with unspoken internal rage – anger turned inward, then projected outward, often toward those who look like them.

Collective healing never truly happened. The pain was never named, never fully acknowledged. Yet the perpetrators were forgiven – often without remorse, without naming the pain they caused.

6. FROM WOUNDING TO HOLDING – THE ROLE OF SOCIAL COMMUNITY CAREGIVING

Where formal mechanisms failed to offer true restoration, communities themselves began to carry what the nation could not. In the absence of meaningful acknowledgment and in the silence that followed state-sanctioned forgiveness, many turned inward, to one another, for comfort, continuity, and care. The weight of *inxeba elingaphakathi* – that deeply embedded, intergenerational wound – demanded something more than policy or performance. It demanded presence. It called for a different kind of healing space, one not bound by legal frameworks or political timelines, but one shaped by shared humanity.

In this instance, social community caregiving emerges not as a grand solution, but as a humble, powerful response (Penxa-Matholeni 2023; 2024). A response born in kitchens, church halls, counselling circles, protest marches, and in the quiet resilience of those who have long practised care as a form of resistance. This caregiving – intimate, communal, and rooted in lived experience – begins to hold the pain the TRC could not touch.

Inxeba elingaphakathi – that silent, festering wound of unresolved trauma – is not only the residue of personal grief, but also the imprint of systemic violence and racism that has scarred generations. These wounds, often inherited rather than acquired, live in the silences of Black families, in the displaced anger of communities, and in the invisible burden of dignity denied. Apartheid and its aftermath did not simply harm individual lives; it fractured the social fabric, leaving behind collective trauma with no clear place to heal.

What, then, can hold such pain? What space exists for mourning that was never public, and for justice that never came?

Penxa-Matholeni (2023) offers a profound response, namely social community caregiving, a deeply relational practice that arises not from institutions, but from the people themselves. Drawing on the metaphor of *endleleni* (on the road), she frames caregiving as a shared journey, where healing is not delivered from above but cultivated among us. In this way, caregiving becomes the vehicle through which *inxeba elingaphakathi* can be acknowledged, witnessed, and slowly tended to. It is a practice of presence, of listening, and of restoring humanity where racism, violence, and neglect have long distorted it.

Through community caregiving, we begin to name what was once unnamed: the grief of never knowing, the rage of being unseen, the exhaustion of surviving without support. In collective practices of care, the possibility of healing becomes real – not as a destination, but as a road we walk together.

Therefore, true reconciliation cannot precede the cleansing of the wound. By cleaning the wound, we mean truth, pure truth telling, the kind of truth that when it enters the room, lies are burnt. To reconcile without first naming, acknowledging, asking forgiveness, and tending to *inxeba elingaphakathi* is to bury the wound beneath silence, a silence that festers into resentment, mistrust, and, ultimately, cycles of violence. In South Africa, we rushed to reconciliation not for the sake of the wounded, but to soothe the consciences of the perpetrators. We hastened the process so that they could sleep more easily, not so the wounded could breathe again. Penxa-Matholeni (2023) reminds us that healing is a journey, *endleleni*, not a shortcut. When reconciliation is pursued before justice, it becomes a performance rather than a transformation. This is why racism still persists: the root cause was never dealt with. The wound was never cleaned.

7. CONCLUSION

This article revisited the South African project of truth and reconciliation through the lens of *inxeba elingaphakathi*, the wound within, to examine the continuing pain that the TRC could not heal. It set out to address how the legacies of apartheid remain embedded in the collective psyche, exposing the limits of institutional reconciliation in restoring dignity and wholeness.

Through indigenous storytelling pastoral theology and the SABC clip as a site of witnessing, the article demonstrated how healing unfolds through lived stories, gestures, and silences that reveal what official processes often conceal. The findings show that reconciliation cannot precede healing; the wound must first be named, acknowledged, and held.

Drawing on social community caregiving as both a framework and a restorative practice, this article highlighted how communities have held what the nation could not. The way forward calls for a return to communal, ethical, and spiritual caregiving – spaces where truth-telling, memory, and healing meet – so that South Africa may continue its journey from wounding toward wholeness.

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Collective trauma	Kollektiewe trauma
Indigenous storytelling	Inheemse storie vertel
Inxeba elingaphakathi	Inxeba elingaphakathi