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Power dynamics in African spirituality and disability: The South African context

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Background: This article explores the interplay between disability, spirituality and belonging within African spirituality in South Africa. It examines how power dynamics shape the experiences of people with disabilities, focusing on how spiritual beliefs and practices can both empower and marginalise individuals.

Objectives: The study investigates the dual role of spirituality in the lives of people with disabilities, exploring how it can be a source of strength and a mechanism of exclusion. It aims to highlight the complexities of spiritual practices and their impact on belonging and identity among people with disabilities.

Method: This study employed a qualitative approach where data were collected and analysed through a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the topic. Relevant scholarly sources were identified, evaluated and synthesised to extract insights and key themes. The findings were then interpreted to understand how spirituality intersects with disability and power.

Results: The analysis reveals that spirituality can both empower and marginalise people with disabilities. Some people find strength and support in their spiritual beliefs, while others experience exclusion and marginalisation because of certain spiritual practices and power structures within their communities.

Conclusion: The study aims to deepen the understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of disability in South Africa by unpacking the entanglement of power, spirituality and disability. It advocates for more inclusive and equitable spiritual practices that address the diverse needs of people with disabilities.

Contribution: This article contributes to the discourse on disability and spirituality, emphasising the need for inclusive practices that promote equity and belonging for all individuals.

Keywords: African spirituality; inclusion; exclusion; power dynamics; spiritual beliefs; spiritual practices; empowerment; disability.

Introduction

African spirituality, which has its origins in the history and cultures of many African nations, encompasses a broad range of practices and beliefs that affect all aspects of the lives of South Africans with disabilities (African Minds Matter 2025). It is deeply rooted in connections to the community, the natural world and ancestral heritage, and plays a vital role in shaping identities, values and social norms (Mensah 2024). Individuals seek guidance, healing and a sense of belonging within this spiritual framework, making spirituality a significant source of strength and resilience (Dwadwa-Henda 2023). While this study is theoretically grounded in Foucault's power and knowledge framework, it also acknowledges the contextual relevance of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) in shaping spiritual understandings. African Indigenous Knowledge Systems, rooted in oral traditions and communal epistemologies, provides cultural insight into how spiritual beliefs are lived and interpreted in South African communities, particularly in relation to disability (Ndlovu 2023). Spirituality, broadly defined, refers to a sense of connection to something greater than oneself, often involving a search for meaning, purpose and transcendence (Borawski, Lipska & Wajs 2025). Similarly, African spirituality is deeply embedded in traditional African worldviews, where the sacred is interwoven with everyday experiences (Mokoena 2025). It is relational, communal and ecological, emphasising harmony

with ancestors, nature and the community (Maluleka & Mathebula 2022; Walker-Montgomery 2025).

African spirituality reflects a holistic worldview that integrates the sacred into everyday life, emphasising interconnectedness with nature, community and the spiritual realm. It is deeply rooted in ancestral reverence, ritual practices and healing traditions that support psychological and communal well-being (Ayinde, Abiodun & Makanjuola 2023). Scholars such as Singh and Bhagwan (2020); Bisset (2021): Ibanga (2022); History Rise (2025); Mokoena (2025) and Mike et al. (2025) highlight its relevance in modern contexts, noting how African spirituality adapts to contemporary challenges, including technology and social transformation. Additionally, traditional beliefs continue to shape mental health perceptions and healing practices, often blending spiritual and communal approaches to care (African Minds Matter 2025). The relationship between disability and African spirituality is complex and evolving, demanding a thoughtful exploration of how spiritual beliefs and practices can serve as sources of both empowerment and exclusion for individuals with disabilities. By exploring these complexities, this article aims to deepen the understanding of the social and cultural aspects of disability in South Africa and promote inclusive and equitable practices.

The intersection of African spirituality and disability presents a multifaceted and often challenging dynamic. People with disabilities may experience both empowerment and marginalisation within spiritual contexts (Hinton 2025). On the one hand, rituals, prayers and the assistance of traditional healers are common ways through which spiritual beliefs and practices can provide a feeling of purpose, support from the community and personal empowerment (Mkhize 2021). On the other hand, certain interpretations of spirituality may perpetuate stigma, exclusion and discrimination against individuals with disabilities, viewing disability through a lens of spiritual deficiency, ancestral displeasure or misfortune (Mugeere & Swartz 2020).

This complex reality is further complicated by the attitudes of society and cultural narratives that influence how people with disabilities are perceived and treated within spiritual communities. These attitudes and narratives are often deeply rooted in historical and cultural contexts, where disability has been interpreted in various ways, from being seen as a divine sign to being viewed as a curse or punishment (Etieyibo 2022). In African cosmology, ancestors are revered as spiritual guardians whose influence extends into the physical realm (Ifayemi 2023). Consequently, disability may be interpreted as a spiritual calling, a sign of ancestral imbalance or a manifestation of unresolved communal tensions. These interpretations shape how individuals with disabilities are perceived and treated within spiritual communities (Etieyibo 2022; Mugeere & Swartz 2020).

Within African spirituality, the role and influence of traditional healers and spiritual leaders is crucial in shaping people's perceptions of disability (Berhe, Gesesew & Ward 2024). Rooted in indigenous cosmologies, traditional healers are often regarded as custodians of cultural and spiritual knowledge (Bourke 2023). Their practices, including rituals, prayers and divination, are not merely symbolic but serve as vital mechanisms for restoring balance and harmony within individuals and communities (Quantum Healing Pathways 2023). These practices often involve ceremonial acts such as cleansing, offerings and invocations; in addition, they include prayers to ancestors and deities, seeking guidance, protection or healing. Furthermore, music, dance and drumming are commonly used, as they are believed to induce altered states of consciousness and facilitate spiritual connection (Adu-Gyamfi & Anderson 2019). In this context, traditional healers play a dual role: they can be sources of support and empowerment, offering healing practices that affirm the dignity and worth of individuals with disabilities (Bauer, Mbonani & Charles 2019). However, they can also reinforce negative stereotypes and practices that marginalise and exclude people with disabilities, by interpreting disabilities as signs of spiritual deficiency or ancestral displeasure, leading to stigma and discrimination (MIND 2023). Galvin, Chiwaye, and Moolla (2023) posit that by excluding people with disabilities from rituals, believing their presence brings bad luck and use harmful practices to 'cure' disabilities, traditional healers may cause physical, emotional and psychological harm.

According to Hinton (2025), understanding the power dynamics within African spirituality is crucial for addressing the social and cultural barriers that people with disabilities face. Nanthambwe and Magezi (2025) further suggest that power dynamics within spiritual communities can either facilitate or hinder the inclusion of people with disabilities. For instance, the hierarchical nature of some spiritual practices may place individuals with disabilities in subordinate and inferior positions, thereby limiting their participation in family, school and communal activities (Nyangweso 2021). Conversely, inclusive spiritual practices that recognise and value the contributions of individuals with disabilities can promote their empowerment and social integration (Rahman et al. 2021).

African spirituality offers a culturally grounded lens through which to understand disability beyond biomedical or Western psychological frameworks (Ohajunwa, Mji & Chimbala-Kalenga 2021). Its emphasis on relationality, ritual and ancestral connection provides unique insights into how inclusion, healing and marginalisation are negotiated in everyday life (Singh & Bhagwan 2020). This study aims to explore the intricate power dynamics between spirituality and disability in South Africa. It seeks to respond to the research question: '*How do power dynamics within African spiritual communities influence the inclusion and exclusion of individuals with disabilities in South Africa?*' The research objective is to highlight the dual role of spirituality as both a source of empowerment and a mechanism of exclusion and to advocate for more inclusive and equitable spiritual

practices. By unpacking the entanglement of power, spirituality and disability, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of disability in South Africa, ultimately promoting a more inclusive society.

Historical and cultural context

In South Africa, the historical and cultural context of disability and spirituality is deeply rooted in traditional African beliefs and practices. Historically, disability has often been viewed through a lens of superstition and stigma, with individuals with disabilities sometimes seen as bearers of misfortune or as being punished by ancestral spirits (Singh & Bhagwan 2020). However, this view is not universally held across African cultures. For instance, Sefotho (2021), in his exploration of the Basotho ontology of disability, presents a contrasting perspective rooted in Ubuntu and Afrocentric philosophy. Sefotho (2021) highlights that among the Basotho, disability is not necessarily seen as a curse or punishment, but rather as part of the human condition that is embraced within the community. The proverb '*Sehole ho 'Ma-sona ha se lahloe*' [A child with a disability is never abandoned by the mother] exemplifies a worldview that values inclusion, care and dignity, challenging dominant narratives of exclusion and misfortune.

In Kenya, traditional beliefs about disability vary across ethnic groups, but many communities have historically associated disability with curses, witchcraft or ancestral punishment (KIPPRA 2020). These interpretations often result in stigma and exclusion from social and spiritual activities. However, among the Luo and Kikuyu, there are also beliefs that recognise individuals with disabilities as spiritually significant or chosen for unique roles (Kidha 2023). Increasingly, disability rights movements and inclusive religious initiatives are challenging these narratives and promoting dignity and participation (Inclusive Futures 2024).

In Ghana, disability has historically been viewed through a spiritual framework, often linked to supernatural causes such as curses or divine punishment (Boateng-Agyenim 2024). This scholar further maintains that this has led to exclusion from social and religious activities, especially in communities where traditional beliefs dominate. Contrary, the concept of 'biological destiny' in some Akan traditions suggests that disability is part of one's life journey, not necessarily a punishment (Appiah-Sekyere 2023). Faith-based and cultural organisations are increasingly promoting inclusive narratives that align with both spiritual and human rights perspectives (AcrossFaiths Foundation 2024).

In Egypt, disability has historically been interpreted through both Islamic and traditional spiritual frameworks, with some beliefs linking it to divine will or spiritual imbalance (Singh & Singh 2024). These interpretations can lead to exclusion, especially in rural areas where traditional healers and religious leaders hold significant influence (Morris & Vogel 2025). However, Islamic teachings also emphasise compassion and inclusion, and some Sufi traditions view suffering, including disability, as a path to spiritual insight (Pervez 2025). Furthermore, according to Dimensions UK (2025), recent disability advocacy efforts are working to reconcile cultural beliefs with inclusive practices rooted in dignity and human rights.

The perceptions that individuals with disabilities are bearers of misfortune or are being punished by ancestral spirits have led to both marginalisation and exclusion within communities. However, African spirituality also offers avenues for empowerment, where spiritual practices and community support can provide a sense of belonging and resilience (Musoni 2021). Reflecting on the discussions across various African contexts, it becomes clear that disability discourse is gradually shifting, balancing deep-rooted spiritual beliefs with modern advocacy focused on human rights and inclusive dignity.

South African context

In South Africa, spirituality significantly shapes how disability is understood and experienced, often reflecting a complex interplay between indigenous beliefs, Christian traditions and contemporary rights-based frameworks. Ned, Kpobi and Ohajunwa (2021) note that African indigenous worldviews may interpret disability as a result of ancestral displeasure or spiritual imbalance, particularly in rural communities, which can lead to exclusion or reliance on traditional healing practices.

However, faith communities, especially Christian churches, have increasingly become spaces of advocacy and support. Nanthambwe and Magezi (2025) argue that religious institutions can play a transformative role in disability-inclusive development, aligning with global human rights agendas and the Sustainable Development Goals.

A key indigenous philosophy shaping inclusive discourse is Ubuntu, a Southern African worldview rooted in the belief that one's humanity is affirmed through relationships with others, often expressed as 'I am because we are' (Lorenzo & Sefotho 2025; Motimele 2024; Mutanga 2023). In the context of disability, Ubuntu emphasises dignity, mutual care and social responsibility. Mamukeyani (2023) highlights how Ubuntu can be harnessed to reduce stigma and promote inclusive community-based disability programmes, particularly in rural areas where social workers are often the first point of intervention. Bannink Mbazzi et al. (2022) further argue that Ubuntu-inspired inclusive education offers a culturally grounded alternative to Western disability discourses. Bannink Mbazzi et al. (2022)'s review emphasises the importance of community involvement, shared responsibility and hospitality in fostering belonging and inclusion for disabled individuals in African contexts. Similarly, Lorenzo and Sefotho (2025) show that Ubuntu-based approaches empower women with disabilities in informal settlements by fostering collective action and spiritual resilience.

Mpya (2025) adds that South African indigenous religions (SAIRs) can both perpetuate stigma and offer ethical teachings that support inclusive education and social justice. Her analysis reveals that while some traditional interpretations associate disability with spiritual impurity or ancestral displeasure, there is also a growing movement within SAIRs to reinterpret these beliefs in ways that affirm the humanity and dignity of persons with disabilities. Mpya (2025) emphasises that this shift is particularly evident in community-led initiatives that blend indigenous ethics with inclusive pedagogies, creating culturally resonant frameworks for disability inclusion.

These perspectives illustrate a dynamic and evolving discourse in South Africa, where spirituality, once a source of exclusion for persons with disabilities, is increasingly being reinterpreted through inclusive frameworks. The integration of indigenous philosophies like Ubuntu, alongside progressive faith-based advocacy, reflects a growing recognition that dignity, belonging and human rights must be central to how disability is understood and addressed. This shift signals a meaningful transformation in both policy and practice, where cultural and spiritual traditions are being harnessed to promote inclusion rather than marginalisation (eds. Daehnhardt et al. 2024; eds. Ohajunwa, Dube & Chitando 2025).

Colonial legacies

The impact of colonial histories on contemporary power dynamics and spiritual practices in South Africa is profound. Colonialism introduced Western Christian ideologies that often clashed with indigenous spiritual practices (Seroto 2018). Missionaries played a dual role, sometimes providing education and healthcare, but also undermining traditional beliefs and practices. This legacy has left a lasting impact on the spiritual landscape, where Western and African spiritual practices coexist, often in tension (Seroto 2018). The same could be said about the Catholic Church missionaries who also played the dual-purpose role and had the lasting impact on the spiritual landscape in Africa (Sourou 2014). The colonial period also entrenched power dynamics that continue to influence how disability and spirituality are perceived and practised today (Oliver & Oliver 2017). The imposition of Western norms and the marginalisation of indigenous practices have contributed to ongoing struggles for recognition and inclusion within spiritual communities. In this context, 'spiritual communities' refer primarily to indigenous African spiritual systems, including ancestral veneration practices, traditional healers (such as *sangomas* and *inyangas*) and community-based rituals that are deeply embedded in African cosmologies. These communities often hold holistic views of personhood and healing, which contrast with Western biomedical and religious paradigms that have historically marginalised such practices.

My position aligns with an inclusive and decolonial approach to spirituality, one that acknowledges the validity and richness of indigenous African spiritualities while critically engaging with Western frameworks. I advocate for a pluralistic understanding that respects the epistemologies of African communities, especially in how they interpret and respond to disability. This perspective informs the paper's broader argument for culturally grounded and spiritually inclusive models of care and recognition.

A critical conceptual lens guiding this study is the notion of power dynamics within African spirituality, particularly as they relate to the agency, representation and inclusion of people with disabilities. In many African spiritual traditions, disability is often interpreted through frameworks of ancestral disapproval, misfortune or spiritual impurity (Claassens, Shaikh & Swartz 2018; Nyangweso 2021; Ojok & Musenze 2019). These interpretations not only stigmatise individuals but also contribute to their exclusion from spiritual decision-making and healing processes (Makamure 2023; Rimmerman 2024; Shafik 2025). People with disabilities are frequently denied active roles in rituals or spiritual leadership, and their voices are often absent in shaping communal spiritual narratives (Carter & Boehm 2019). This lack of participation in societal activities reinforces dependency among people with disabilities and deepens marginalisation as they are positioned as passive subjects of spiritual judgement rather than active participants in spiritual life (eds. Daehnhardt et al. 2024; Manikam & Mbali 2023; Tarusarira & Tarusarira 2023). The study expands its discussion beyond stigma to critically examine how spiritual power structures, such as hierarchical roles, gatekeeping by spiritual authorities and culturally embedded beliefs, systematically exclude people with disabilities. By unpacking these dynamics, the study highlights how spirituality can simultaneously serve as a source of empowerment and a mechanism of exclusion. It advocates for inclusive spiritual practices that affirm the dignity, agency and belonging of people with disabilities within African spiritual contexts.

Research methods and design

This study adopts a qualitative, literature-based approach to explore the intersection of African spirituality and disability. A thematic literature review was conducted, involving the identification, selection and synthesis of peer-reviewed scholarly sources relevant to the topic. The analysis focused on extracting key themes related to empowerment, exclusion and power dynamics within spiritual communities. This method enabled a contextual and interpretive understanding of how spiritual beliefs and practices shape the lived experiences of people with disabilities in South Africa.

Research approach

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on a comprehensive literature review to explore the intersection of disability, spirituality and power dynamics within the context of African spirituality in South Africa. The methodology is structured around the following key components:

Data analysis

The data analysis for this study is grounded in three theoretical frameworks: Foucault's power and knowledge theory, intersectionality as well as inclusion and exclusion theory. These frameworks provide a comprehensive lens through which to examine the power dynamics within African spiritual communities and their impact on the inclusion and exclusion of individuals with disabilities in South Africa.

This study employed a qualitative, literature-based approach, using thematic analysis to interpret and synthesise existing scholarly work. The literature search was conducted using academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus and EBSCOhost, focusing on peer-reviewed articles, book chapters and policy documents relevant to African spirituality, disability studies and social inclusion. Keywords used in the search included combinations of terms such as 'African spirituality', 'disability in South Africa', 'power dynamics', 'spiritual exclusion' and 'inclusive practices'.

To ensure relevance and depth, the search was categorised according to:

- thematic relevance (e.g. empowerment, exclusion, belonging)
- geographic focus (South Africa and broader African contexts)
- theoretical alignment (sources engaging with power, intersectionality or inclusion and exclusion frameworks).

Sources were then reviewed and coded based on recurring themes and discourses, such as spirituality and disability, empowerment through spirituality, community integration and support, and exclusion and marginalisation. These themes were interpreted through the selected theoretical frameworks to uncover deeper insights into the lived experiences of people with disabilities in spiritual contexts.

Foucault's power and knowledge theory was applied to examine how spiritual authority and communal beliefs shape perceptions of disability. This helped reveal how spiritual practices can reinforce hierarchical power structures, sometimes leading to marginalisation.

Intersectionality was used to explore how overlapping identities, such as gender, class and cultural background, influence the experiences of individuals with disabilities. As an example, the study by Lorenzo and Sefotho (2025), which draws on participatory action research conducted over several years, highlights how Ubuntu can both empower and transform social identities and development opportunities for women with disabilities. Intersectionality highlighted how multiple layers of discrimination intersect within spiritual communities.

Inclusion and exclusion theory provided a lens to analyse the mechanisms through which individuals are either integrated or excluded from spiritual and social participation. This included examining cultural beliefs, rituals and policy frameworks that either support or hinder inclusion.

The integration of these theoretical frameworks into the thematic literature analysis enables a detailed and critical exploration of the intricate relationship between spirituality, power and disability in the South African context. This approach ensures that the analysis is both systematic and interpretive, enhancing the coherence and depth of the findings. It also emphasises the importance of balancing cultural respect with the pursuit of inclusive and socially just practices.

Ethical considerations

Intellectual property and copyright

All sources used were properly cited to respect and acknowledge the intellectual property rights of the original authors.

Bias and representation

A diverse range of perspectives was used to avoid selective bias in choosing literature. This helped to present a balanced view and ensured the fairness and comprehensiveness of the research.

Accuracy and integrity

Honesty and integrity were upheld in reporting findings by representing the data accurately and not manipulating the information to fit preconceived ideas.

Transparency

Methods to select literature:

- **Relevance:** The literature that was selected was directly relevant to the research topic and research question.
- **Date range:** The focus was on reviewing literature that was not older than 10 years to ensure the inclusion of recent developments.
- **Search strategy:** The databases and search engines used to find the literature were Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO and SCOPUS.

Methods for analysis:

- **Thematic analysis:** Used to identify themes.
- **Comparative analysis:** Findings from different studies were compared to identify similarities and differences and these were discussed.
- **Critical evaluation:** The quality and rigour of the studies that were reviewed were evaluated through comparisons that were made.
- **Synthesis of findings:** The findings from multiple sources were integrated to create a coherent narrative by highlighting important insights.
- **Framework application:** Three theoretical frameworks were used to guide the data analysis.

Results

This section explores emerging patterns identified in the reviewed literature on disability and African spirituality. The results section is organised around interlinked areas of focus that reveal both empowering and exclusionary dimensions, including spirituality and disability, empowerment through spirituality, community integration and support, exclusion and marginalisation, broader African cultural contexts, current practices and policies in South Africa, and Synthesis of findings.

Spirituality and disability

In many African communities, disabilities are often viewed through the indigenous spiritual lens, attributed to ancestral displeasure or spiritual deficiencies (Ned et al. 2021). In South Africa, this perception remains prevalent in many communities (Ndlovu & Nyoni 2021; Nseibo et al. 2022), often leading to stigma and exclusion. However, recent scholarship offers a more complex view. Ohajunwa and Mji (2018) argue that African indigenous spirituality, rooted in relational and collective identity, can also serve as a source of resilience and well-being. Similarly, Ned et al. (2019) and Ned (2021) highlight that indigenous communities often interpret disability through frameworks of spiritual imbalance and communal disharmony, which can lead to healing practices aimed at restoring spiritual and social equilibrium.

Traditional healers and spiritual leaders, therefore, hold significant authority in shaping community perceptions of disability (Berhe et al. 2024). Their influence can either reinforce stigma or promote acceptance, depending on the interpretive frameworks they employ. Integrating traditional healing with modern healthcare practices offers a pathway towards holistic and culturally sensitive care (Shange & Ross 2022). By acknowledging both the risks and the potential of indigenous spiritual beliefs, it becomes possible to foster inclusive environments where individuals with disabilities are supported not only medically but also spiritually and socially (Menze et al. 2018; Mugeere et al. 2020).

Empowerment through spirituality

Spiritual beliefs and practices play a significant role in providing a sense of belonging and empowerment for individuals with disabilities in various African communities. For instance, in Swaziland, indigenous beliefs often depict people with disabilities as full human beings with the same rights and responsibilities as others, promoting their social inclusion and well-being (Ndlovu 2016). Rituals and community support, such as those found in African traditional religions, can foster a sense of belonging by integrating individuals with disabilities into communal activities and ceremonies (Etieyibo 2022). Additionally, studies have shown that spirituality helps individuals with disabilities cope with their conditions, offering solace and a platform for reflection (Hodge 2019; Taher et al. 2025). This spiritual framework not only enhances their self-perception but also influences how others view and treat them, thereby empowering them within their communities. The integration of individuals with disabilities into spiritual practices can affirm their dignity and worth, providing them with a supportive network that recognises their contributions and strengths.

This empowerment through spirituality can lead to greater self-confidence and resilience, enabling individuals to navigate the challenges they face with a sense of purpose and belonging.

Community integration and support

The role of spirituality in community integration and support for people with disabilities cannot be overemphasised. Spiritual communities often provide a sense of belonging and identity, which is crucial for the well-being of individuals with disabilities (Venkatesan 2025). In many African cultures, communal activities and rituals, such as initiation rites, ancestral ceremonies and seasonal festivals, are central to social life. The inclusion of individuals with disabilities in these practices can significantly enhance their social integration (Shodipo 2019). For example, in some traditional communities, individuals with disabilities are invited to participate in drumming, storytelling or spiritual healing roles, which affirm their value and spiritual significance. Similarly, faith-based organisations have developed disability ministries that offer spiritual mentorship, communal prayer and leadership opportunities, thereby reinforcing a sense of identity and belonging.

Such inclusion not only benefits the individuals but also educates the community about the value and capabilities of people with disabilities. By participating in spiritual and communal activities, people with disabilities can build meaningful relationships and gain social recognition, which can counteract the stigma and isolation they might otherwise experience (Scoles 2021). Furthermore, spiritual leaders and community members can advocate for the rights and inclusion of individuals with disabilities, fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment. This advocacy can lead to changes in attitudes and practices, promoting a culture of acceptance and respect for diversity within the community.

Exclusion and marginalisation

Recent studies have highlighted the complex relationship between spirituality and disability, particularly within the South African context. Mashau and Mangoedi (2015) explored how faith communities in Tshwane (South Africa) often inadvertently perpetuate social exclusion among people with disabilities, despite their potential role as agents of transformation.

The research conducted by Mashau and Mangoedi (2015) revealed that individuals with disabilities frequently experience marginalisation within religious settings, which can exacerbate feelings of isolation and neglect. Similarly,

Amukelani (2023) discussed the challenges faced by people with disabilities in rural areas, emphasising the role of traditional beliefs and the lack of adequate support systems.

The necessity of organised disability programmes that use Ubuntu methodology to promote empowerment and inclusion was highlighted by studies that were conducted by Mutanga (2023), Motimele (2024) and Lorenzo and Sefotho (2025). Additionally, studies on the migration of mothers from Zimbabwe to South Africa with children with impairments have shown how traditional and religious beliefs can have a positive or bad impact on how people with disabilities are treated (Tarusarira & Tarusarira 2023).

Broader African cultural contexts

Across various African countries, traditional beliefs often frame disability through spiritual or supernatural lenses, contributing to both stigma and resilience. In Nigeria, disabilities are sometimes seen as spiritually caused, yet inclusive rituals and advocacy efforts foster empowerment (Shodipo 2019). In Zimbabwe, cultural views of disability as curses persist, but community-based rehabilitation and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) interventions are promoting inclusion (UNESCO Office in Harare & United Nations Partnership to Promote the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2020). Similarly, in Kenya, beliefs linking disability to witchcraft are being challenged by education and advocacy campaigns (Bauer et al. 2019; Mugo & Kamau 2023). In Ethiopia, spiritual interpretations of disability coexist with inclusive practices supported by organisations like Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development (ECDD) (UNHRC 2022). In Egypt, historical acceptance contrasts with modern stigma, although legal reforms and NGO efforts aim to improve inclusion (Ead 2023).

These examples illustrate how cultural beliefs across Africa can both marginalise and empower individuals with disabilities, offering a broader context for understanding the South African experience.

Current practices and policies in South Africa

A comprehensive understanding of current practices and policies in South Africa necessitates a careful examination of both spiritual traditions and legislative frameworks, especially in relation to the experiences of individuals with disabilities (Claassens et al. 2018). On one hand, African spiritual communities offer complex and often contrasting experiences, serving as spaces of inclusion and empowerment while also perpetuating exclusion through entrenched traditional beliefs (Knoetze 2019). On the other hand, the policy landscape in South Africa provides a robust framework aimed at dismantling these barriers, promoting inclusive spiritual participation and affirming the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities (Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities 2020). Together, these subheadings, 'Spiritual communities' and 'Policy landscape', highlight the dynamic interplay between cultural practices and institutional efforts, revealing both the challenges and opportunities in fostering spiritually inclusive environments across the region (Thomas & Veerabathiran 2025).

Spiritual communities: Within African spiritual communities, current practices impacting individuals with disabilities are multifaceted. On one hand, these communities often serve as vital support networks, offering a sense of belonging and resilience through communal worship and spiritual guidance (Mugeere et al. 2020; Sele & Wanjiku 2024). As an example, in South Africa, some indigenous spiritual communities rooted in Ubuntu philosophy actively promote inclusion by recognising people with disabilities as full members of the spiritual collective (Mpya 2025).

On the other hand, traditional beliefs can also perpetuate stigma and exclusion. In certain rural South African contexts, disabilities are interpreted as ancestral imbalances or spiritual afflictions, leading to exclusion from rituals such as initiation ceremonies or healing gatherings (Dwadwa-Henda, Mji & Ohajunwa 2025). Similarly, in Nigeria, some Pentecostal and traditional religious groups associate disability with spiritual punishment, which can result in social isolation (Etieyibo & Omiegbe 2023).

Despite these challenges, inclusive practices are emerging. In Ethiopia, community-based spiritual healing rituals have been adapted to include people with disabilities, with traditional healers working alongside disability advocates to ensure participation (Baheretibeb, Wondimagegn & Law 2024). In Ghana, healing ceremonies involving drumming, dance and ancestral invocation are increasingly being modified to accommodate physical impairments, allowing broader participation in communal spiritual life (Boateng-Agyenim 2024).

These examples illustrate the dual role of African spirituality: while it can empower individuals through communal support and spiritual affirmation, it can also marginalise them when exclusionary beliefs and practices prevail. Addressing these tensions is essential for fostering inclusive spiritual spaces that affirm the dignity and belonging of all individuals.

Policy landscape: In South Africa, a range of policies and initiatives aim to promote inclusion and equity for persons with disabilities. Central among these is the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Department of Social Development 2015), which provides a comprehensive framework for ensuring the rights and inclusion of individuals with disabilities across all sectors, including spiritual and religious communities. It explicitly calls for the removal of barriers to access and participation, the protection of rights and the promotion of empowerment (Rainford, Naidoo & Sibanda 2023).

Although often interpreted through a socio-economic lens, these policies also carry significant implications for spiritual

empowerment. As noted by the National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD 2023), the White Paper mandates inclusive practices in both public and private institutions – including places of worship and traditional healing spaces – thereby enabling persons with disabilities to reclaim spiritual belonging and participate fully in rituals, ceremonies and leadership roles that were previously inaccessible (eds. Daehnhardt et al. 2024). In this way, policy becomes a mechanism of empowerment, actively challenging exclusionary spiritual norms and promoting inclusive theology and practice (Nanthambwe & Magezi 2025).

Complementing this framework is the *Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act* (2000), which seeks to eliminate discrimination and promote equality. This legislation explicitly addresses the needs of persons with disabilities, ensuring protection from unfair treatment and affirming their right to equal participation in all aspects of life, including spiritual domains (Kok 2017). In contexts where disability continues to be interpreted through stigmatising spiritual beliefs, this Act serves as a legal safeguard against marginalisation, reinforcing the right to spiritual dignity and inclusion (Kok 2017).

The South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa 1996) further underpins these protections. Section 9 guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on various grounds, including disability. This constitutional provision is foundational in shaping inclusive policies and practices and offers a legal basis for challenging spiritual exclusion rooted in cultural or religious beliefs (South African Human Rights Commission 2023).

Beyond formal legislation, NGOs and advocacy groups play a critical role in translating policy into practice. These entities raise awareness and provide resources to support inclusive spiritual practices. For example, Mpya (2025) highlights how NGOs engage with traditional and religious communities to foster inclusive spiritual spaces. Organisations such as Disabled People South Africa (DPSA) and the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) are instrumental in advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities and ensuring their voices are heard in spiritual and cultural contexts. These organisations often work directly with religious leaders and traditional healers to promote inclusive theology and ritual practice (Mnukwa 2023).

By addressing these challenges and fostering a deeper understanding of disability issues, South Africa can continue to make strides towards a more inclusive and equitable society, one in which individuals with disabilities are spiritually empowered and fully integrated into all aspects of life, including religious and traditional communities (Imafidon & Baker 2020). The policy landscape thus serves not only as a legal framework but also as a transformative tool for reshaping spiritual spaces and dismantling marginalising power structures.

Comparative findings

The literature reveals a complex and multifaceted relationship between African spirituality and disability, marked by both empowering and exclusionary dynamics. This complexity highlights the importance of a thoughtful and context-sensitive approach to understanding how spiritual beliefs and practices influence the everyday realities of people with disabilities in South Africa.

Spirituality often serves as a source of strength, resilience and belonging for individuals with disabilities (Hodge & Reynolds 2019; Stewart-Brown 2018). African indigenous spirituality, rooted in relational and collective identity, fosters a sense of belonging and purpose (Van Breda 2019). Similarly, Ubuntu, as a guiding philosophy, promotes interconnectedness and mutual care, which can enhance inclusion and dignity for people with disabilities (Lorenzo & Sefotho 2025). Faith communities frequently provide emotional support, advocacy and social networks that help individuals navigate the challenges of disability (Dlamini, Poliah & Govender 2025). In addition, spiritual practices such as prayer, ritual and meditation offer psychological comfort and reinforce self-worth (Chen 2024).

Moreover, African-centred social work frameworks emphasise the importance of spirituality in healing and empowerment, advocating for culturally grounded interventions (Bent-Goodley, Fairfax & Carlton-LaNey 2017; Chioneso et al. 2020). The indigenous understanding of spirituality positions the self within a relational–collective framework, which can be particularly affirming for people with disabilities (Singh & Bhagwan 2020; Udah et al. 2025). These frameworks challenge Western individualistic paradigms and offer alternative models of inclusion rooted in community and shared humanity (Van Breda 2019).

However, exclusionary dynamics are equally prevalent. Certain spiritual and religious beliefs perpetuate stigma, associating disability with sin, divine punishment or spiritual impurity (Faris & Wane 2019 Murove 2024;). These narratives can lead to ostracism and discrimination, severely impacting mental health and reinforcing feelings of shame and social isolation (Chen 2024; Letsoalo & Tsabedze 2024). The symbolic language and rituals of African spirituality, while rich in meaning, can also reinforce exclusion when disability is framed as a deviation from communal norms (Obodoegbulam 2025).

Social exclusion is not only psychological but also structural. Many places of worship lack accessibility, and religious leaders may be unaware of disability issues, resulting in unintentional marginalisation (Lorenzo & Sefotho 2025). The lack of inclusive infrastructure and awareness within spiritual communities highlights the need for disability-sensitive education and advocacy (Vergunst & McKenzie 2022).

Comparative insights across African contexts reveal that while Ubuntu and indigenous spirituality can be inclusive,

their application is not uniform. In some communities, Ubuntu is interpreted in ways that exclude women and people with disabilities from full personhood (Van Breda 2019). This highlights the tension between idealised communal values and lived realities. While Western religious frameworks often emphasise individual salvation, African spirituality tends to prioritise communal harmony. This difference can either support or hinder inclusion, depending on how disability is perceived within the collective (Faris & Wane 2019).

In conclusion, the dual role of spirituality, as both a source of empowerment and exclusion, demands a critical re-evaluation of spiritual practices and beliefs. Promoting inclusive spirituality requires challenging discriminatory narratives, enhancing accessibility and fostering deeper awareness of disability within spiritual communities (Carter 2021). By embracing the transformative potential of Ubuntu and indigenous knowledge systems, African societies can move towards more equitable and empowering spiritual landscapes.

Discussion

This discussion interprets the findings of the study in relation to existing literature and theoretical perspectives, highlighting their implications for understanding Power Dynamics in African Spirituality and Disability: The South African Context.

Theoretical framework

This article is grounded in three theories, and those are Foucault's power and knowledge theory, intersectionality as well as inclusion and exclusion theory.

Foucault's power and knowledge theory: Foucault's power and knowledge theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex interplay between spirituality, disability and power dynamics in South Africa. According to Foucault, power and knowledge are inextricably linked, with power shaping what is accepted as knowledge and knowledge reinforcing power structures (Pitsoe & Vladutescu 2024). In the context of African spirituality, this theory can be used to analyse how spiritual beliefs and practices both empower and marginalise individuals with disabilities.

Within African spiritual communities, traditional healers and spiritual leaders often hold significant authority, shaping the community's understanding of disability (Mokgobi 2014). Their interpretations of spiritual knowledge can either empower individuals with disabilities by providing them with a sense of purpose, community support and personal empowerment through rituals and prayers, or marginalise them by perpetuating stigma and exclusion. For example, in rural Eastern Cape, individuals with disabilities are often excluded from traditional initiation ceremonies such as ulwaluko, based on beliefs that their impairments reflect ancestral displeasure or spiritual impurity (Sipungu 2025).

This exclusion not only denies them access to key cultural rites of passage but also reinforces their marginalised status within the community, as participation in such rituals is closely tied to social recognition and adulthood.

Similarly, traditional healers in Soweto interpret mental illness through spiritual frameworks, attributing it to ancestral or social imbalance and treating it through rituals such as bone throwing, steaming and herbal remedies (Shange & Ross 2022). Shange and Ross (2022) further posit that these practices reflect a collectivist worldview where the healer's interpretation of 'why things happen' becomes the dominant narrative, shaping communal responses to disability and reinforcing the healer's spiritual authority. Thus, spiritual knowledge in these contexts is not neutral, it is deeply embedded in power relations that can either empower individuals with disabilities through inclusion in healing and ritual practices or marginalise them through exclusion and stigma.

In rural KwaZulu-Natal, traditional health practitioners (THPs), including *izangoma* [diviners], *inyangas* [herbalists] and *abathandazi* [faith healers], hold significant spiritual authority and are deeply embedded in community life. Their interpretations of illness and disability are shaped by ancestral calling and indigenous knowledge systems, which often define what is considered spiritually legitimate or deviant (Ngubane & De Gama 2024). For instance, individuals with psychosocial disabilities may be interpreted as spiritually 'called' or 'imbalanced', depending on the healer's worldview. This framing can lead to either empowerment, through inclusion in healing rituals and spiritual roles, or marginalisation, when disability is viewed as a sign of ancestral displeasure or spiritual impurity. The power of THPs to define and treat disability within spiritual frameworks reinforces their role as gatekeepers of communal knowledge, shaping access to healing and inclusion. As such, their authority exemplifies Foucault's notion of power and knowledge, where spiritual interpretations of disability are not neutral but serve to regulate inclusion and exclusion within the community.

Foucault's concept of biopower is relevant in understanding how spiritual authority in rural KwaZulu-Natal governs individual bodies and community norms (Lemke 2020). Traditional health practitioners, such as izangoma, inyangas and abathandazi, often interpret disability through spiritual frameworks, such as ancestral calling, witchcraft or spiritual imbalance. These interpretations can lead to ritual interventions that either reintegrate individuals into the community or mark them as spiritually deviant. For example, individuals perceived as having failed to heed an ancestral calling may be excluded from communal activities until they undergo *ukuthwasa* [initiation] (Makhathini et al. 2024). Conversely, those who successfully complete spiritual rites may gain elevated status as healers. Personal narratives reveal that while spirituality can offer healing and identity, it can also impose normative expectations that marginalise

those whose disabilities are not spiritually legitimised (Oxhandler et al. 2021). Thus, African spirituality operates as a form of biopower, both empowering and regulating bodies through culturally embedded practices.

In the end, this study's application of Foucault's power and knowledge theory emphasises the necessity of more inclusive and equitable spiritual practices. By challenging and reconfiguring the power relations that marginalise individuals with disabilities, the study advocates for a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of disability in South Africa, promoting a more inclusive society.

Intersectionality theory: Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory offers a framework for comprehending how different social identities such as race, gender, disability and spirituality intersect to produce distinct experiences of privilege and oppression (Collins & Bilge 2020). In the context of African spirituality and disability in South Africa, intersectionality theory can be used to analyse how multiple axes of identity and power dynamics interact to shape the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities.

People with disabilities in South Africa often navigate complex layers of identity, including spiritual beliefs, cultural background, ethnicity, gender and social status (Garry 2021). These intersecting identities can result in compounded forms of marginalisation or empowerment. For instance, in rural KwaZulu-Natal, individuals with disabilities who belong to minority ethnic groups, such as amaHlubi or amaBhele, may encounter exclusion within dominant Christian spiritual communities that prioritise Zulu-centric norms and practices (Hamilton & Wright 2017). These barriers can manifest in limited access to leadership roles, exclusion from healing rituals or being deemed spiritually 'unfit' because of cultural differences. Conversely, traditional healing systems led by izangoma or abathandazi often provide more inclusive spaces where spiritual identity and disability are interpreted through ancestral calling, offering individuals both recognition and community support (Nicolson & Allan 2019). To some individuals with disabilities, their initiation as izangoma not only affirms their spiritual identity but also elevates their status within their community, countering previous experiences of marginalisation (Ngubane & De Gama 2024).

This study aimed to determine how the interplay of several identities affects the power dynamics within African spirituality by utilising intersectionality theory. It draws attention to the necessity of considering the complexity of people's experiences as well as the ways that many types of privilege and oppression interact to influence their lives.

The social inclusion and exclusion theory: The 'Social Inclusion and Exclusion' theory is highly relevant to this study as it provides a framework for understanding how spiritual beliefs and practices within African communities can either facilitate or hinder the inclusion of individuals with disabilities (Saloojee & Saloojee 2021).

By examining the factors that contribute to social inclusion or exclusion, this theory helped to identify the mechanisms through which spiritual practices empower or marginalise people with disabilities in South Africa. It highlighted the role of community norms, cultural beliefs and power dynamics in shaping the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities. Applying this theory allowed the study to critically analyse how inclusive or exclusionary practices are constructed and maintained, and to advocate for more equitable and inclusive spiritual practices that promote the well-being and social integration of people with disabilities.

Interconnectedness of theories: Foucault's power and knowledge theory, intersectionality theory and the social inclusion and exclusion theory are interconnected in their examination of power dynamics, although they approach the topic from different angles. Foucault's theory focuses on how power shapes knowledge and vice versa, emphasising the role of authoritative discourses in constructing social realities (Bowman 2023). Intersectionality theory, on the other hand, emphasises the interconnectedness of various social identities and how they collectively influence experiences of power and oppression (eds. Hankivsky & Jordan-Zachery 2019). The social inclusion and exclusion theory examines the factors that contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of individuals within social systems, highlighting the role of community norms and cultural beliefs (Mhlanga & Ndhlovu 2023).

In the context of this study, these theories collectively provided a comprehensive understanding of the power dynamics at play. Foucault's theory helped to analyse how spiritual knowledge and practices are constructed and maintained by those in positions of authority, whereas intersectionality theory revealed how these practices impact individuals differently based on their intersecting identities, such as race, gender, disability and spirituality. The social inclusion and exclusion theory, on the other hand, further elucidates how these power dynamics and intersecting identities contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of individuals with disabilities within African spiritual communities. Together, these theories offer a nuanced perspective on the ways in which power operates within African spirituality, shaping the experiences of people with disabilities and highlighting the need for more inclusive and equitable practices.

Comparative analysis

Different studies on the interplay between disability, spirituality and power dynamics in African spirituality reveal both alignments and divergences. For instance, Dwadwa-Henda (2023) emphasises the role of Xhosa rituals in shaping perceptions of disability, highlighting both empowering and marginalising effects. In contrast, the Motitswe (2025) special collection focuses on the broader African context, examining how various spiritual practices

influence the sense of belonging for individuals with disabilities. Methodologically, Dwadwa-Henda employs qualitative analysis of personal narratives, while the special collection includes a mix of qualitative and quantitative studies. Theoretical approaches also vary, with some studies using Foucault's concept of power and knowledge, while others apply intersectionality theory. These differences reveal inconsistencies in how spiritual practices are perceived and their impact on disability, highlighting the need for more comprehensive, context-specific research to address these gaps.

Critical evaluation

Existing studies on the interplay between disability, spirituality and power dynamics in African spirituality reveal both strengths and weaknesses. Methodologically, the diversity of approaches, including qualitative analyses of personal narratives (Dwadwa-Henda 2023) and mixed-method studies (Motitswe 2025), enriches the understanding of these dynamics. Theoretical foundations, such as Foucault's concept of power and knowledge, and intersectionality theory, provide robust analytical lenses. However, many studies have limited scopes, focusing on specific communities or practices, and often employ small sample sizes, limiting generalisability. For example, Lorenzo and Sefotho (2025) focus on women with disabilities in informal settlements in Cape Town, Munjanja and Hendricks (2025) examine institutional support at two Eastern Cape universities with only 15 participants, and a SpringerLink study (Niemiec & Tomasulo 2023) explores spirituality among 12 adults with disabilities, all within narrowly defined contexts.

Findings synthesis

The existing literature on disability, spirituality and power dynamics within African spirituality reveals a complex and often contradictory interplay between empowerment and marginalisation. For instance, Singh and Bhagwan (2020) highlight the therapeutic potential of African spirituality, including Zulu rituals, in social work and community health. Practices such as ancestral prayer and sacrificial rituals are shown to foster a sense of empowerment and spiritual connection for individuals with disabilities.

Similarly, Ngubane-Mokiwa (2021) critically engages with Ubuntu, highlighting its significance as a foundational concept in Zulu culture. While Ubuntu promotes collective care and community support, potentially creating inclusive spaces for people with disabilities, it can also perpetuate exclusion when disabilities are interpreted as spiritual afflictions or ancestral displeasure. This duality reveals a persistent conflict between cultural interpretations of disability and inclusive approaches.

Further, Dwadwa-Henda (2023) and contributions from the *African Journal of Disability* (2025) reinforce this dual role of spirituality, showing that while spiritual frameworks can offer emotional and communal support, they may also reinforce stigma and exclusion through entrenched cultural narratives. These studies, although varied in scope and methodology, consistently point to the need for critical engagement with spiritual practices that both uplift and marginalise.

This article contributes to the existing body of work by offering a comprehensive and integrative analysis of power dynamics within African spiritual communities, specifically focusing on the lived experiences of people with disabilities in South Africa. Unlike previous studies that often concentrate on specific communities or practices, this study examines a broader spectrum of spiritual traditions and incorporates larger and more diverse samples drawn from a wide range of literature.

Moreover, the study distinguishes itself by applying three intersecting theoretical frameworks, Foucault's power and knowledge theory, intersectionality as well as inclusion and exclusion theory, to guide the thematic analysis. This multi-theoretical approach enables a deeper understanding of how power operates within spiritual contexts and how it influences inclusion and exclusion (Omodan 2024). By synthesising findings across diverse sources and perspectives, the article advocates for more inclusive and equitable spiritual practices that honour cultural traditions while challenging discriminatory beliefs.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that African spirituality simultaneously embodies empowering and exclusionary dimensions for persons with disabilities. While practices rooted in Ubuntu and indigenous cosmologies can enhance belonging and resilience, hierarchical power relations and traditional interpretations often perpetuate stigma and exclusion. The findings highlight the importance of fostering inclusive spiritual practices that affirm dignity, accessibility, and participation. Future research should expand empirical inquiry into diverse African contexts, and policy frameworks must integrate spiritual inclusion as a key component of disability rights. In doing so, both research and policy can advance a more equitable and decolonial understanding of spirituality and disability in South Africa.

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Data availability

The author declares that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

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