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Sonic selves, ancestral archives: Identity, language and cultural memory in amaXhosa sacred practice

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Among the amaXhosa of South Africa's Eastern Cape, knowledge lives less in texts than in bodies, voices and sacred landscapes. In Hamburg, at the mouth of the Keiskamma River, knowledge of the ocean, river, forest and healing plants is transmitted in isiXhosa through song, carried by elders whose authority rests on accountability to the ancestors rather than institutional credentials. This article examines how amaXhosa sacred spaces function as living archives where language, music and cosmology converge to form identity, sustain memory and enact healing. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Hamburg (2022–2024): (1) semi-structured interviews with 30 community members (25 analysed), (2) participant observation and (3) cultural immersion. Narratives were examined ecomusicologically through narrative analysis and ritual and folklore songs, framed by literature on African Indigenous Knowledge Systems, decolonial methodology, memory studies and sonic epistemologies. Findings show that the river, coast and grove known as Nyulutsi operate as active archives; that identity formation is inseparable from sonic performance, making the politics of language inseparable from the politics of sound; that songs, chants and clan-call protocols form an irreplaceable but generationally strained transmission system; and that healing, memory and resilience are enacted sonically and remain place-bound. The article proposes the Sonic Living Archive as a theoretical contribution, arguing that decolonising knowledge requires recognising sonic and oral forms of knowing as legitimate archives.

Contribution: The article shows how amaXhosa sacred sonic practices offer epistemological and pedagogical frameworks for re-centring African knowledge in research and teaching, contributing to debates on higher education transformation.

Keywords: amaXhosa; sacred spaces; oral archives; identity; cultural memory; ecomusicology; decolonisation; living archives.

Introduction

Language, sound and the politics of knowing

In much of the African scholarly tradition, knowledge does not reside in texts (Mbembe 2002; ed. Odora-Hoppers 2002; Wa Thiong'o 1986). It lives in bodies, in voices, in the rhythmic coordination of song and ritual and in the specific acoustics of sacred landscapes. For the amaXhosa people of the Eastern Cape, South Africa, this is not a metaphor but an ontological premise: (1) language, (2) music and (3) ancestral presence are inseparable instruments through which the self is constituted, the community is reproduced, and the relationship between the living and the dead is maintained. To speak isiXhosa at the riverbank in the right register, with the right ritual intention, is to participate in a form of governance that is simultaneously ecological, spiritual and cultural. This claim is our central argument, developed from fieldwork observations and the testimony of community participants (Cebo Mvubu, Nolusindiso Jakavula, Sambesiwe Mavela, Veronica Betani, MaSango, Ahlume and anonymous respondents).

The politics of language in decolonising knowledge is, at its most basic, a question about what counts as legitimate knowledge and who gets to decide. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) argues that colonialism produced a coloniality of knowledge, a systematic devaluation of African epistemologies in favour of Western scientific paradigms, and that epistemic freedom requires not only the recovery of indigenous knowledge but its recognition as a living, generative system rather than a relic of the past. Within this framework, the isiXhosa oral tradition, its songs, its ritual incantations and its diviner's chants constitute a knowledge politics: An assertion that the

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world can be known, governed and transmitted through performance, not only through inscription.

Research methods and design

This article takes as its primary site of investigation the sacred spaces of Hamburg, a small coastal village at the mouth of the Keiskamma River in the Eastern Cape. Here, fieldwork conducted over several years as part of the Indigenous Marine Innovations for Sustainable Environments and Economies (IMIsEE) project a transdisciplinary collaboration between Rhodes University, the South African Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity (SAIAB), the Keiskamma Trust, and the International Library of African Music (ILAM) revealed how sacred spaces function simultaneously as sites of identity formation, ecological stewardship, healing practice and oral archival transmission. In these spaces, language, music and ancestral cosmology converge. Folklore songs, ritual soundscapes and call-and-response structures encode ecological knowledge, negotiate cultural identity and sustain intergenerational memory. They do so in ways that resist the epistemic erasures of colonial and post-colonial governance (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Smith 2012).

The article draws on interview data from community members (Cebo Mvubu, Nolusindiso Jakavula, Sambesiwe Mavela, Veronica Betani, MaSango, Ahlume and anonymous respondents). A systematic review of studies on indigenous sonic practice and ethnomusicological analysis of selected ritual songs to develop a theorisation of what we call the Sonic Living Archive: The convergence of sound, place and cosmological orientation into a dynamic system through which amaXhosa identity and memory are constituted and renewed.

We proceed through four interlocking arguments. Firstly, that sacred spaces are not merely settings but active archives in which language and cosmology materialise as practice. Secondly, that African identity formation is inseparable from sonic performance, and that the politics of language in the amaXhosa context cannot be separated from the politics of sound. Thirdly, the oral archive of the repertoire of songs, chants, clan-call protocols and ritual soundscapes constitutes a substantive and irreplaceable system of intergenerational knowledge transmission. And fourthly, that healing, memory and resilience in indigenous knowledge practices are fundamentally sonic processes: (1) acoustically enacted, (2) place-bound and (3) dependent on living community performance for their continuation.

The politics of language in decolonising knowledge

The history of colonial governance in the Eastern Cape is, among other things, a history of archival violence. As Mbembe (2002) states, colonial archival regimes did not merely record history; they constituted it, determining which lives, practices and knowledge systems were legible to the state and which were rendered invisible, unofficial or dangerous. The amaXhosa were subjected to a sustained programme of dispossession that included the suppression of the indigenous language in formal education, the criminalisation of certain ritual practices and the systematic exclusion of oral tradition from the category of legitimate knowledge. In Hamburg, the colonial and apartheid history left a community impoverished in material terms but remarkably tenacious in its relationship to sacred practice, language and sonic knowledge.

The decolonial turn in African scholarship has increasingly insisted that language is not a neutral medium but a political one. Writing primarily in isiXhosa, or conducting ritual in isiXhosa, or insisting that ethnographic research be translated collaboratively with isiXhosa-speaking community members, as was the practice in this research, constitutes an act of epistemic assertion. As Odora-Hoppers (ed. 2002) argues, indigenous knowledge systems are not supplementary to scientific knowledge but parallel epistemologies with their own validity criteria, communities of practice and accountability structures. The challenge, she insists, is not to translate indigenous knowledge into Western frameworks but to create what she calls 'a philosophy of articulation', a space in which radically different knowledge systems can encounter one another without one annihilating the other.

In the Hamburg context, this philosophy of articulation takes sonic form. The songs performed at Nyulutsi, a riverbed site of concentrated ancestral presence, medicinal knowledge and ritual practice at the Keiskamma River, and at the ocean's edge, are not simply cultural artefacts; they are epistemological instruments. They encode ecological protocols, ancestral genealogies, healing prescriptions and governance norms in a compressed, performable form that survives not in written records but in the bodies and voices of community members. When MaSango, a traditional healer in Hamburg, describes the moment before ritual singing, 'It is forbidden to sing before you first ask the ancestors'. She is articulating a knowledge politics: A set of rules governing who can know what, when and under what conditions of accountability.

Language as cosmological practice

The amaXhosa understand language not merely as a system of communication but as a relational practice that binds the speaker to an ancestral network. Clan names are among the most politically charged linguistic forms in the amaXhosa tradition. To introduce oneself with one's clan name at a sacred site is to activate a protocol of ancestral recognition: It is a linguistic performance that positions the speaker within a genealogy, asserts their right to be in the space, and opens a channel of communication with the ancestors who inhabit it. As Ahlume, a trainee healer in Hamburg, explains:

> 'The songs they sing depend on the kind of work they will be doing. You have to introduce yourself using your clan names.' (Ahlume, Interviewed, 23 August 2024)

This linguistic-cosmological practice has direct implications for the politics of identity formation. Identity among the amaXhosa is not an individual project but a relational one, constituted through ongoing participation in the networks of obligation that link the living to the ancestors, the community to the land and the present to the past. *Ubuntu*, the philosophical principle of interconnectedness, famously summarised as 'I am because we are', extends in amaXhosa cosmology beyond human relations to encompass ecological and ancestral relationality (Metz 2012; Ramose 2002). To speak one's clan name at the river, to sing the song that belongs to that river, is to enact an identity that is simultaneously individual, communal, ancestral and ecological.

The implication for decolonial knowledge politics is significant. When formal education systems teach isiXhosa as a language subject while systematically excluding the epistemological content encoded in that language, its ritual registers, its ancestral address forms and its ecological terminologies, they participate in a form of linguistic dispossession that is also an epistemological one. Le Grange (2012) argues that truly decolonised environmental education would require not simply the addition of indigenous knowledge content to existing curricula but a fundamental reconstitution of what counts as knowledge about the environment.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (No. 2022-4951-7185).

Results

Identity formation through African cosmologies and cultural heritage

Sacred spaces as sites of identity

The concept of sacred space in the amaXhosa context does not map onto Western theological categories of the holy as set apart from the ordinary. Sacred spaces in Hamburg Nyulutsi, the Keiskamma River, and the Indian Ocean are simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary: They are used for fishing, for collecting grass, for daily washing and for the most intense ritual moments of a community's spiritual life. What makes them sacred is not their separation from everyday practice but the density and quality of the relationships they sustain. As Eliade (1959) observed, the sacred is constituted through encounter; but in the amaXhosa context, that encounter is not a singular hierophany but an ongoing, repeated, sonically activated engagement with ancestral presence.

For community members in Hamburg, sacred spaces are primary sites of identity formation in the fullest sense: they are where individuals learn who they are, where they come from and what they are responsible for. Veronica Betani, a project manager at the Keiskamma Trust, describes her relationship with the ocean in terms that reveal how identity, ancestry and spatial practice are interwoven:

> 'My clan name is *Magaba, Nozibe, Cihoshe. Ndingumuntu womlambo,* I am a person from the river. When we were growing up, the elders used to tell us that the ocean was not a place to play with because there were elders there, our ancestors.' (Veronica Betani, Interviewed, 23 August 2024)

To be 'a person from the river' is not a geographical description but an ontological one: It locates the speaker within an ancestral network that has specific obligations towards a specific landscape.

This ontological grounding of identity in sacred landscape has practical implications for how community members navigate the contemporary world. Sambesiwe Mavela, a Rhodes University master's student from Hamburg, describes visiting the sacred space as a process of identity renewal:

> 'I breathe in the fresh air and feel like I was reborn and that my baggage had been taken away after being taken to my ancestors in the sacred space.' (Sambesiwe Mavela, Interviewed, 28 September 2024)

The language of rebirth and the removal of baggage registers the transformative power of sacred encounter, but it also registers the burden of living in a world that does not recognise the legitimacy of this form of knowledge or this form of selfhood.

Cosmological frameworks and ecological identity

The amaXhosa cosmological framework understands the natural world as animated by ancestral presence. Rivers, forests, mountains and coastal environments are spiritually inhabited landscapes where *izinyanya* [ancestors] are active, responsive and morally demanding. This framework produces what Tucker and Grim (eds. 2001) call religious ecology, a form of environmental practice grounded in spiritual obligation rather than abstract conservation ethics. The ancestors are understood to be custodians of the land; to pollute the river, to clear the forest or to overfish the ocean is not merely an environmental act but a spiritual transgression that disrupts the relationships upon which community wellbeing depends.

This cosmological framework shapes identity in profound ways. To be amaXhosa, within this framework, is to be embedded in a web of obligations that extends across time to the ancestors who have gone before and across species to the animals, plants and waters that share the landscape. Ecological knowledge is thus not a separate domain from cultural identity but constitutive of it. Community members in Hamburg demonstrate this integration consistently: Nolusindiso Jakavula describes sustainable fishing practices as expressions of the same relational ethic that governs ancestral ritual:

> 'We practised sustainable fishing, limiting our harvest to avoid overfishing, and used tools that would not harm baby mussels or fish.' (Nolusindiso Jakavula , Interviewed, 23 August 2024)

The ocean provides, but it must be respected and reciprocated.

Cebo Mvubu's account of the protocols governing the use of Nyulutsi's plant resources is particularly revealing:

> 'Cutting of trees and grass is prohibited in the sacred space. However, some plants are needed, so they must first talk out loud to the ancestors who reside there before they can go ahead and cut.' (Cebo Mvubu, Interviewed, 23 August 2024)

The requirement to speak to the ancestors before harvesting is a linguistic-cosmological act that simultaneously constitutes the speaker as a responsible member of the community, acknowledges the authority of the ancestors over the landscape and enacts an identity grounded in relational obligation rather than individual right. It is, in miniature, an alternative political ontology.

Oral archives, indigenous literatures and intergenerational knowledge transmission

The sonic living archive

The concept of the archive has been extensively theorised in African and post-colonial scholarship. Derrida (1996) established the archive as a political institution, a site of power that determines what is remembered and how. Mbembe (2002) extended this analysis to the colonial archive, arguing that colonial records constituted a form of symbolic violence against African subjectivity. Almeida and Hoyer (2020) and Sabiescu (2020) have proposed the concept of the living archive, a dynamic, participatory, performance-based archival practice in which memory is sustained through embodied, communal action rather than institutional record-keeping.

We extend this concept to propose the Sonic Living Archive: The convergence of sound, sacred space and cosmological practice into a dynamic system of knowledge preservation and transmission. In Hamburg, the sonic living archive operates through folklore songs, ritual soundscapes, call-and-response performance structures and the attentive listening to environmental sounds that community members describe as forms of ancestral communication:

> 'This archive is not housed in a building; it is housed in bodies, in voices, in the acoustic properties of specific landscapes, and in the relational networks that sustain performance practice across generations.' (Cebo Mvubu, Interviewed, 23 August 2024)

The sonic living archive is distinguished from other archival forms by several features. It is performative rather than propositional: Knowledge is not stored as a set of claims to be retrieved but as a set of practices to be enacted. It is relational rather than individual: No single performer holds the archive; it is distributed across the community and activated through collective performance. It is place-bound rather than portable:

> 'The songs of Nyulutsi carry their full meaning only at Nyulutsi, where the acoustic environment, the ancestral presence and the community's shared history converge.' (Cebo Mvubu, Interviewed, 23 August 2024)

And it is adaptive rather than static: As Muller (2004) documents, amaXhosa musical traditions have evolved responsively to ecological change, with songs acquiring new emotional registers as environmental conditions shift.

Songs as ecological texts and identity protocols

Analysis of specific folklore songs performed in Hamburg reveals the sophistication of the sonic living archive as a knowledge system. The song *Ngena Emanzini ngokuzithoba* [Enter the water with humility], performed during river ritual preparations at Nyulutsi, employs a pentatonic descending scale in a slow, weighted pulse. Its call-and-response structure enacts the relational accountability it advocates: no individual acts alone; all action is communally endorsed and witnessed. Its text encodes specific ecological protocols: participants must not urinate near the water, must not harvest plants without ancestral permission and must not make disruptive noise at the site, which constitute an indigenous environmental governance framework transmitted through musical performance.

Mama waManzi [Mother of the Waters] performs a different archival function: It registers ecological grief. Performed during healing ceremonies at the Keiskamma River, it addresses the personified spiritual essence of the river as a maternal figure, expressing sorrow at the degradation of the water and petitioning the ancestral guardian for restoration. Traditional healers in Hamburg report that this song has gained new urgency as water pollution has worsened. The song has become what Feld (1996) might call an acoustemological registration of ecological loss, a sonic transformation of environmental change into communal awareness and moral obligation.

Izintaba Zekhaya [Mountains of Home] functions as a sonic map: A praise song for the Hamburg landscape that, in its performance, reproduces detailed geographical and ecological knowledge about the Keiskamma estuary, the coastal dunes and the inland forests. Community members who can sing this song demonstrate an embodied ecological literacy, knowing not only the names of landscape features, but also their spiritual significance, their seasonal dynamics and their place in the ancestral network that no written document can replicate. The song functions, as Nzewi (2007) argues of African music generally, as a multi-level pedagogical structure: It teaches at once the geography of belonging, the ecology of care and the cosmology of accountability.

Intergenerational transmission and its vulnerabilities

The intergenerational transmission of the sonic living archive is the central preoccupation of elders in Hamburg. Oral literary forms are uniquely efficient vehicles for intergenerational knowledge transfer because their aesthetic and performative properties enhance memory, emotional engagement and embodied retention (Berkes 2018; Finnegan 1970). The rhythmic, melodic and call-and-response structures of amaXhosa ritual song are not ornamental but mnemonic: They make knowledge memorable, repeatable

and transmissible across generations without the mediation of writing.

However, the transmission chain shows signs of significant disruption. In Hamburg, this decline is felt acutely by elders. MaSango expresses a concern shared by many:

> 'I worry about the younger generation because they don't care about traditions.' (MaSango, Interviewed, 23 August 2024)

Sambesiwe Mavela adds a nuance that reveals the complexity of the situation:

> 'Even though these spaces exist, if you are not a spiritual young person, then that space just exists without it being special.' (Sambesiwe Mavela, Interviewed, 23 August 2024)

The disruption of intergenerational transmission is not simply a matter of youth disinterest; it is structurally produced by the colonial and post-colonial educational system, which has systematically excluded indigenous knowledge from formal curricula, and by the economic pressures that drive young people towards forms of employment and social participation that leave little time or space for ritual practice. As Muller (2004) and Erlmann (1996) have documented, the erosion of musical traditions and environmental degradation are bidirectionally related: When rivers are polluted, the songs that address those rivers cannot be performed in their full ritual context; when songs are not performed, the ecological knowledge they encode is not transmitted; when ecological knowledge is not transmitted, the community loses the capacity to recognise and respond to environmental threat.

Healing, memory and resilience in indigenous knowledge practices

The healing archive

Within African cosmological frameworks, healing is not a medical category but a relational one. Illness, physical, psychological or communal, is understood as a disruption of the relationships that constitute wellbeing: Relationships between the living and the ancestors, between the individual and the community, and between the community and the land (Hamilton 2022; Mokgobi 2014). Healing, accordingly, is the restoration of these relationships through ritual, sound and ancestral engagement. Sacred spaces are the primary sites of this relational restoration, and sound is its primary medium.

The concept of the healing archive that we develop from this research builds on Taylor's (2003) distinction between the archive and the repertoire, but insists on their integration in African sacred practice. In the Hamburg context, the repertoire of the living body of ritual songs, soundscape knowledge, healing protocols and ancestral address forms is itself the archive. It does not supplement a written record; it is the record. And it is a record that heals by being activated: The performance of a healing song is not merely a representation of healing knowledge but an enactment of it, a doing that constitutes the therapeutic process it describes.

Nolusindiso Jakavula's account of the practice of isolating individuals with health disturbances in sacred spaces surrounded by the sound of ocean waves, the rustling of wind through trees and the presence of the ancestors is particularly revealing:

> 'After the person has been left in that place for a certain period, they come back better.' (Nolusindiso Jakavula, Interviewed, 23 August 2024)

The healing is accomplished not through pharmacological intervention but through immersive acoustic and relational encounter with the sacred: The waves, the wind, the birdsong and the ancestral presence they index constitute a therapeutic environment that works on the body and the spirit simultaneously.

Soundscape as therapeutic presence

The therapeutic function of environmental soundscapes in amaXhosa practice is one of the most consistent findings of the ethnographic fieldwork. Community members describe the sounds of sacred spaces, waves, wind, river flow and birdsong not as passive background but as active communicative agents. As Respondent 4 explains:

> 'Whenever I go to the ocean to cleanse myself, it is always the sounds of the waves that make me feel like my ancestors have heard me.' (Respondent 4, Interviewed, 16 July 2022)

Respondent 1 adds:

> 'When I am at the sacred space, the wind rustling through trees and the stillness of the pond water is what usually makes me feel welcome and at home.' (Respondent 1, Interviewed, 15 July 2022)

This understanding of environmental sound as ancestral communication aligns with Feld's (1996) concept of acoustemology, acoustic knowing, which holds that sound is not merely a cultural product but a mode of environmental engagement and knowledge production. To listen to the waves at the healing site is, within the amaXhosa framework, to engage with the ancestors who inhabit the water; the quality of the sound, its turbulence or its calm, and its rhythm or its silence carries information about the ancestors' response to the ritual being performed.

As MaSango explains:

> 'When you are done working, you can tell by the waves and animals associated with the ocean that they have accepted you.' (MaSango, Interviewed, 23 August 2024)

The therapeutic dimensions of the sonic living archive are thus inseparable from its archival and identity-forming functions. The same performance that transmits ecological knowledge across generations also activates healing by restoring the relational balance upon which wellbeing depends. The same call-and-response structure that enacts communal governance also produces the emotional and embodied states that Turino (2008) calls participatory music-making that sustain resilience in the face of loss, disruption and threat. Sound is, in this sense, the medium through which the amaXhosa community

constitutes itself as a community: Remembering together, healing together and knowing together.

Resilience and the politics of sonic memory

The concept of resilience in indigenous knowledge studies has been critiqued for its potential to naturalise the conditions of precarity that indigenous communities face (Smith 2012). We use the term advisedly here to designate not the capacity of communities to absorb external shocks without changing a definition that risks celebrating survival under conditions of injustice, but the active, creative and politically conscious work through which communities sustain their knowledge systems, their identities and their healing practices in the face of systemic dispossession.

In Hamburg, this resilience is sonic. The persistence of ritual song at Nyulutsi, at the Keiskamma River, and at the ocean's edge despite the economic precarity of the community, the ecological degradation of the landscape, and the cultural pressures of Westernisation constitutes what Impey (2018) might call a practice of cultural survival through sound. The songs that grieve the polluted river while petitioning the ancestral guardian for restoration are not expressions of passive lamentation but active assertions of a relational right: the right to a clean river, to an ecologically intact sacred space, to a living archive that remains functional as a system of governance, identity and healing.

Zolekile Mavela's account of the songs sung during community ocean rituals, including *Sikhalo somntwana sihoye* [Heed the cries of a child], which he describes and demonstrates the political dimensions of sonic memory:

> 'Our way of crying out for support, whether it is for fishing permits, successful sales or simply sustenance for our families.' (Zolekile Mavela, Interviewed, 23 August 2024)

The song is simultaneously a prayer, a governance claim and a form of collective memory that connects the present community to the ancestral networks through which the ocean has been sustainably managed for generations. To sing this song is to assert a claim to the ocean that is older, deeper and more legitimate within the cosmological framework of the community than any fishing permit or conservation regulation.

Discussion

Implications: Decolonising knowledge through the sonic living archive

The theoretical and practical implications of the Sonic Living Archive concept are far-reaching. In educational terms, the recognition that amaXhosa oral traditions constitute a sophisticated, self-maintaining system of ecological, cultural and healing knowledge demands a fundamental reconstitution of what counts as valid knowledge in formal curricula. Decolonising environmental education requires not merely the addition of indigenous content to existing frameworks but the recognition of performance-based, oral, place-bound knowledge systems as epistemologically co-equal with written, quantitative and decontextualised scientific knowledge (Dei 2000; Le Grange 2012; ed. Odora-Hoppers 2002). In conservation terms, the evidence presented here supports the argument that indigenous sonic practice is not peripheral to environmental stewardship but central to it. Community-led conservation initiatives that fail to engage with the governance functions of ritual song, its capacity to enforce ecological norms, to register environmental change, to mobilise community response and to sustain the relational ethics of ecological care across generations are likely to be less effective and less legitimate than those that do. The Sonic Ecological Stewardship model proposed in related work (Feld 1996; Impey 2018) offers a framework for integrating sonic and ritual ecological knowledge into conservation policy and practice.

In archival terms, the living archive sustained through performance, embodied in community practice, and place-bound in sacred landscapes, challenges dominant archival paradigms that privilege written records, institutional repositories and decontextualised documentation. As Ketelaar (2001) argues, archives are always already tacit narratives: They encode the assumptions of those who create them about what is worth preserving, who has the right to preserve it and what forms of knowledge are legitimate. The Sonic Living Archive foregrounds a radically different archival logic, one in which the community is the archive, performance is the preservation mechanism and the ongoing vitality of the sonic tradition is the measure of archival health.

The generational disruption of this archive, documented in fieldwork and systematic review, constitutes an urgent challenge that requires coordinated responses from academic institutions, community organisations, cultural heritage bodies and environmental governance agencies. The Indigenous Marine Innovations for Sustainable Environments and Economies (IMIsEE) project, in which scientists, ethnomusicologists, community members and heritage practitioners collaborate in a genuinely transdisciplinary framework, offers one productive template. Others might include community-led sonic documentation initiatives, university-community curriculum development partnerships, and the integration of ecologically significant song repertoires into living heritage designation processes.

Conclusion

There is no place without a history; there is no place that has not been imaginatively grasped through song, dance and design, no place where traditional owners cannot see the imprint of sacred creation (Rose 1996:18). The amaXhosa of Hamburg have grasped their landscape through sound: Through the songs that instruct, govern, grieve and celebrate; through the soundscapes that communicate ancestral presence; through the ritual protocols that locate every individual within a web of relational accountability that extends across species and across time.

Their sacred spaces are living archives not because they preserve a static past but because they are continuously

activated by performance into the present, registering ecological change, renewing social bonds, forming identities and enacting healing in the same sonic gesture.

The politics of language in decolonising knowledge are, in the final analysis, the politics of which forms of knowing are recognised, supported and protected as legitimate. The isiXhosa oral tradition, with its clan name protocols, ritual incantations, ecologically instructive folklore songs and acoustemological attunement to the sounds of sacred landscapes, constitutes a profound and irreplaceable epistemological resource. Its erosion is not a natural misfortune but the consequence of specific historical processes, colonial dispossession, epistemic violence and educational marginalisation that decolonial scholarship, policy and practice must directly address.

The imperative for scholarship is clear: to listen, to document, to theorise and to advocate not merely for the preservation of songs as cultural artefacts, but for the living conditions, ecological, social and political, that make their performance possible. In Hamburg, the songs are still being sung. The ancestors are still being called. The waves still bring their message. The question is whether the institutions that claim to serve this community will hear.

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During the preparation of this work, the authors used Grammarly and ChatGPT for preliminary drafting and language refinement. The content was reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for its accuracy.

Competing interests

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CRediT authorship contribution

Vuyelwa O. Moyo: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Boudina McConnachie: Conceptualisation, Funding acquisition, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

All collected data, including interviews, recordings, photographs and traditional cultural expressions, are archived with the consent of the Keiskamma Trust and IMIsEE project (4951), at the International Library of African Music (ILAM). This ensures accessibility for scholars and community members and preserves the connections between ecological knowledge, ritual practice and heritage.

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