

Article

The Role of African Spirituality in the Provision of Kinship Care in the South African Context

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Abstract: This article focuses on understanding the role played by African spirituality in the provision of kinship care in the South African context. African traditional spirituality was found to be an important factor underpinning kinship care and its provision, especially in rural African communities. The study was conducted using a qualitative research methodology. Twenty-one (21) participants, who were kinship caregivers, were recruited using purposive non-probability sampling methods. The study found that African spirituality helped them to preserve both their cultural and personal identity. Furthermore, through African spirituality, children and youth in kinship care receive psychosocial support and experienced a positive upbringing through their kinship caregivers and tribal community. African kinship caregivers were found to offer kinship care as a spiritual duty to help children and youth who need care and protection in the absence of their birth parents.

Keywords: kinship care; African spirituality; religion; family; children



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1. Introduction

This paper explores the role played by African spirituality in the provision of kinship care in the South African context. Kinship care as an alternative care method, is practiced across the world. There are many definitions of kinship care as an alternative care method. Conventionally, kinship care can be understood as an external form of child support offered by aunts, uncles, siblings, grandparents or even community members deemed suitable to assume the parental role with a child(ren) in need (Mabetha et al. 2021, p. 3; Sahota 2019, p. 64). Several studies have revealed that kinship care can either be formal or informal (Day et al. 2020, p. 6; Koh et al. 2022, p. 1; Hallett et al. 2021, p. 1; Hernandez and Berrick 2019, p. 35; Zuchowski et al. 2019, p. 617; Sharda et al. 2019, p. 74; Abe Abe 2022, p. 3; Rodriguez-JenKins et al. 2021, p. 670; Ratune 2020, p. 11; Birchall and Holt 2022, p. 2).

These studies found that the provision of kinship care is not uniform, but dependent on the cultures, traditions and practices that directly influence this care in respective contexts across the world. Accordingly, in the South African context, kinship care is influenced by African spirituality. In the South African context, kinship care is recognised as a traditional feature that plays an important role in child protection (Nkosi 2020, p. 6). Informal kinship care has a long history in South Africa, where children and youth spend a significant amount of time being raised by relatives (De Wet 2019, p. 80). Kinship care is how African families look after the children of their deceased family members. However, providing kinship care is not limited to children being orphaned. It is also provided to those who suffer ill-treatment or neglect at the hands of their birth parents. The large informality around kinship care in South Africa, however, is a result of this type of care being treated as a cultural normative and not as an official alternative care method.

Kinship care is important as it affords children and youth an opportunity to preserve their spiritual and cultural identity by remaining under the care of family members. Caring for children and youth in kinship care is made seamless through adoption of the *Ubuntu* concept that underpins African spirituality. A study by Simbine and Le Roux (2022, p. 4)

indicated that *Ubuntu* has the necessary wisdom within itself through which African children are raised by their respective families and local communities. According to [Magezi \(2020, p. 4\)](#), *Ubuntu* is defined as “a distinctive African quality that values collective good, humanness and respect for the community and is a foundational ethic of meaningful communal relations in many African communities”. Though *Ubuntu* alone does not define African spirituality, it plays an important role as a guiding principle in the observance of this spirituality within an African worldview.

African spirituality involves “deeper human values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices, based on various African worldviews” ([Marumo and Chakale 2018, p. 11697](#)). In addition, African spirituality helps Africans to attain a connection with one’s higher self in the sense that one achieves a high level of consciousness and awareness about their life and surroundings ([Marumo and Chakale 2018, p. 11697](#)). African spirituality is very important for African families as it guides their way of life. [Bhagwan \(2022, p. 155\)](#) categorically stated that the practices and beliefs underpinning African spirituality informs all aspects of human life. It teaches family members to care for one another and stay united irrespective of the challenges life presents them with. This is seen mostly when there is a death of a family member or relative ([Knoetze 2019, p. 1](#)). Kinship care becomes an option to help in raising of the children of the deceased, keeping in line with the teachings and values of African spirituality. This is because a child belongs to all family members and the extended family and not only to the birth parents.

2. Study Aim

The aim of the study was to explore how African spirituality nurtures kinship care in South Africa and the benefits it has for children and youth in kinship care.

3. Methodology

This study was guided by a qualitative research methodology. [Mohajan \(2018, p. 23\)](#) described this kind of research as that which is “inductive in nature, and the researcher generally explores meanings and insights in a given situation, thus referring to a range of data collection and analysis techniques that use purposive sampling and semi-structured, open-ended interviews”.

3.1. Study Sample

Fifteen (15) African families were included in the study. The researcher interviewed a total of twenty-one (21) participants from these families. These were all kinship caregivers. The sample was recruited using purposive sampling techniques.

3.2. Study Setting

This study was conducted in Robbinsdale, a rural community in the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data” ([Castleberry and Nolen 2018, p. 808](#)). In thematic analysis, themes are seen as latent content. This means that the researcher has to identify, categorise and look at the reality behind data and subsequently interpret the overall meaning of the gathered data ([Vaismoradi and Snelgrove 2019, p. 2](#)).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Theme One: Role of African Spirituality

This theme sought to understand the role played by African spirituality in the provision of kinship care. Four sub-themes emerged under this theme, which are namely (i) cultural context, (ii) personal identity, (iii) healing and (iv) positive upbringing.

4.2. Sub-Theme One: Cultural Context

Participants lauded the role African spirituality plays with regard to exposing children and youth in kinship care to the cultural practices unique to each family. This is reflected within the following excerpts:

“African spirituality plays a crucial role as it allows a child to grow up within a culture in which they belong. If it is a girl child, she grows up in accordance with her community’s cultural standards pertaining to the raising of girls. As the Swati people, our girls participate in reed dance ceremonies through which they are kept in chastity until they become independent adults who can make responsible decisions”.

“I (kinship caregiver) can say that African spirituality is important. The role played by African spirituality, especially since we (Africans) are a cultural people, where children (generally) are brought up in accordance with our traditions of raising respective genders so they can be contributing citizens of society in the near future”.

Cultural practices such as the reed dance promote abstinence from sexual activities among teenage girls until they reach adulthood, where they would be considered ready for marriage. These are important values taught by kinship caregivers. According to [Gwebu \(2019, para. 1–4\)](#), the reed dance is observed by the Zulu and Swati maidens through which they are taught to respect themselves and keep away from sexual activities until they reach womanhood. Apart from saving them for marriage, these young people are able to stay clear of sexually transmittable diseases as well. Such protection from diseases would not be possible for children and youth had they not been in kinship care placements within their cultural community of origin where these practices are observed.

Participants further explained how children are able to preserve their cultural identity through African spirituality. They made the following statements:

“I (kinship caregiver) think that African spirituality plays a vital role. Firstly, it teaches children (in kinship care) about their background, cultures and sacred family rituals”.

“A child in kinship care gets to know their culture and the ways that their family lives by. For instance, if there is a ritual performed in which all family members are required to go through cleansing, appeasing ancestors, the child is well exposed to all that and they learn that this is how their family’s spirituality goes”.

“The role of African spirituality means that they (children in kinship care) have to receive love and be taught about their background and their authentic cultures”.

“I (kinship caregiver) conform to an African traditional culture. This means I should know my clan names and so forth. This is the reason it is important that a child is raised within a culturally appropriate environment, so their spirituality aligns with it”.

It is important that young people are able to grow up within a home where they are exposed to their culture of origin. Kinship care offers this opportunity. Studies by [Beaufils \(2022, p. 2\)](#) and [Pato \(2018, p. 1\)](#) indicated that kinship care is an important component of one’s culture. In the South African context, kinship care is a customary practice ([Hall et al. 2018, p. 7](#)). [Lee et al. \(2021, p. 2\)](#) added that children and youth are able to stay connected with their cultural values through kinship care, as evidenced in the excerpts. Children and youth are more likely to enter kinship care within their same community of origin ([Xu et al. 2020, p. 1](#)). Hence, these young people are able to observe the same cultural values and practices which their birth parents also ascribed to. A study by [Day and Savage \(2023, p. 45\)](#) found that kinship care promotes cultural permanency, which is of utmost importance to people of colour. [Zuchowski et al. \(2019, p. 616\)](#) elaborated that kinship care placements are often utilised to maintain cultural connections among families. Similarly, the [Government of Alberta \(2023, para. 3\)](#) and [Dare et al. \(2020, p. 1\)](#)

asserted that children and youth are enabled to secure culturally appropriate placements through kinship care. Children are able to understand their tribal names and deepen their understanding of African spirituality by being placed in a kinship care placement with similar spiritual worldviews.

According to [Hallett et al. \(2023, p. 633\)](#), children find it easy to adjust to living arrangements that observe the same culture as their natural home. Though children might be too young to notice the benefits of engaging with their cultural activities, growing up in such a context helps them to achieve a sense of belonging with their ethnic community. Children and youth are afforded opportunities to learn about their culture, spiritual beliefs and practices simultaneously. Hence, when kinship caregivers teach children and youth about cultural practices, the history of that tribe's spirituality inevitably becomes part of the conversation as well.

4.3. Sub-Theme Two: Developing a Personal Spiritual Identity

The second sub-theme that emerged from the data focused on developing a personal spiritual identity that children and youth achieve from observing African spirituality. Participants described the ways children and youth achieved this, within a kinship care home. Two participants revealed that the more children and youth learn about their spiritual background, the more likely it is that they are able to realise their identity. The participants made the following statements:

"It is (role) that African spirituality allows children (in kinship care) to grow up cognisant of who they really are".

"I (kinship caregiver) could say this is where (family that observes African spirituality) a child (in kinship care) learns more about their background, which subsequently leads to the realisation of their true self and the ways they are expected to carry themselves amongst other people".

Children and youth are often cognisant of their unique identity and spiritual background. In the context of their spiritual stories, they learn more about those who lived before them (ancestral forebears) and who passed on the sacred rituals of each family. It is through kinship care homes that children are exposed to these rituals that strengthen their psychosocial development. The child in kinship care then gets to understand what it means to be part of their family. [Price Genealogy \(2022, para. 3\)](#) affirmed that children develop a sense of spiritual identity as they learn more about their forefathers. Young people are also able to understand the traits they have inherited from those who lived before them.

Similarly, other participants shared that a child's personal identity developed through belonging to the tribe of origin. The kinship care arrangements evolve where children are exposed to the overall way of life adhered to by a particular tribe. This is evidenced within the following excerpts:

"African spirituality is very important. Through it a child (in kinship care) gets to know their tribe and identify with its standards as well".

"African spirituality practices are done so the child (in kinship care) knows themselves and what they stand for even when they cross paths with different people from different tribes. The child grows to know certain forbidden acts as per their clan rules and refrain from them so they can lead successful lives".

"They (young people in kinship care) are able to know the kind of family they come from and follow its customs. At home we identify with African traditional religion, which is now their identity as well".

"It is important that a child (in kinship care) grows up within a living arrangement that allows them to be brought up in accordance with their traditional ways and then leads them to self-awareness with regard to what they should and should not do or partake in".

Personal identity, particularly in an African context, is acquired by knowing the family one emerges from; this is referred to as one's tribe. This means that one should keep in line with all that is deemed spiritually appropriate in their culture and learn to refrain from what is deemed spiritually inappropriate. There is an African belief that a person should be a representation of those who came and lived before them. Hence, if their ancestral forebears were not allowed to hunt and eat certain animals, then the current generation would not be allowed to do so. However, a child who does not grow within their family of origin would not be aware of such practices. Hence, African spiritual beliefs compel people to nurture and raise their own children in the African way of life.

For instance, there are certain spiritual rituals that a tribe follows. Therefore, there are repercussions for those who do not follow these rituals. According to the participants, developing a personal identity was important as a child would grow up understanding such tribal rituals. Consequently, they would be able to pass these values and practices onto their children and ensure that they identify with them as well. Relatives have often become kinship caregivers due to the fear that the child might lose their identity should they be placed in other alternative care facilities. Family connections do not only allow children to develop well psychologically but also offer a sense of identity that is linked to culture and traditions as well (Epstein et al. 2021, p. 2).

4.4. Sub-Theme Three: Healing

The third sub-theme that emerged focused on healing through observing African spirituality. Participants made the following statements:

"In my (kinship caregiver) own understanding, there is a big role played by African spirituality because . . . there was a time when the child I looked after (in kinship care) had spiritual-related health complications, and it made us (kinship care family) consult one of the birth parents who then helped us to perform the required ritual for the child after which the child got well".

"As much as African spirituality provides healing, it can prove ineffective when performed on a child who does not belong to the clan in question. For a child in kinship care to benefit from the healing rituals, they have to be somehow connected through blood to at least one member from the entire clan performing the ritual".

One kinship caregiver shared that the healing rituals are only effective when performed by adults who are blood relatives of the child. This emphasises the importance of a child who is cared for by relatives from Black African communities. Odozor (2019, p. 4) explained that one of the benefits of African spirituality is that young people are exposed to traditional healing. The healing, in this regard, can be undertaken through divination, the burning or mixing of traditional herbs or through the appeasement of the child's ancestors. According to Bhagwan (2022, p. 115), Africans appease ancestors in times of need based on a belief that ancestors are intermediaries connecting humans to the supreme God.

Participants mentioned that there are some sorts of rituals that must be undertaken in an African family at every stage of a child's development. The rituals enable psychological and physical development in different ways depending on the challenges which the young person is faced with. As some of the rituals are clan-specific, the approach that is needed for the child's situation so that the child can be healed is the exclusive knowledge of the elders of that clan. Participants described this fact as follows:

"The rituals that are observed will stay with them (children in kinship care) for their lifetime".

"African spirituality plays a huge role in childrearing, though it has different segments from the birth of a child to adolescence. After the birth of a child, there are traditional herbs unique to each clan that are mandatory and are burnt near a new-born baby, and they (new-born baby) have to inhale that smoke to gain strength against evil spirits".

“Over the ages, a family was as good as their ability to observe African spirituality. On occasions when a child was reported as sick, the elders of the family would take out traditionally mixed herbs to give to the sick child, and they would recover instantly; there would not be any need to rush to the clinic as is done nowadays”.

“A child in kinship care could easily receive healing through traditional rituals provided that there was a strong connection between their family and African spirituality. This connection would suffice in withstanding any problem life may throw their (child) way”.

The study found that through the practice of African spirituality, healing occurs when children have health-related or emotional distress. Children and youth benefit from the ancient healing practices that are sacred to their clan. For instance, there are rituals cited by participants that are mandatory at childbirth, which either protect the child from evil spirits or heal the child when such spirits attack them. In alternative care placements, such as residential care, this would not be possible since children would be under the care of adults who do not know the family rituals pertaining to certain health complications a child might face. The clan usually has a member(s) who has the designated authority to connect with clan ancestors through various spiritual practices. This connection is vital for putting the physical healing of living descendants into action. A study by [Isabirye \(2020, p. 47\)](#) found that these traditional healing practices invoke the ancestral spirits of that clan, which in turn contribute to the healing of the troubled members of the clan. This is why it is beneficial to children and youth to remain within one’s family or clan of origin, so they may have such practices performed for them should the need arise.

4.5. Sub-Theme Four: Positive Upbringing

The fourth sub-theme that emerged in the data related to the role of African spirituality in enhancing the positive upbringing of children and youth in kinship care. Participants made the following statements:

“They (young people in kinship care) learn about other people’s cultures more, especially when there are traditional ceremonies within the community, which make them behave appropriately”.

“I (kinship caregiver) could say that it is beneficial for my children (in kinship care) to grow up in a community where they are exposed to a range of cultures; this has a positive impact on their upbringing”.

“When children (in kinship care) are growing up, regardless of how naughty they are, the games and traditional ceremonies done around our community really excite them, and taking part in those events channels them towards positive behaviour”.

“Taking part in traditional ceremonies is good for these children (in kinship care) as there is no discrimination as to whether or not the child has birth parents. Instead, this helps them to learn to coexist with other people and to grow up to be contributing members of society. They learn to respect others this way as well”.

Traditional ceremonies and practices undertaken in the community were found to play a crucial role in helping children to emulate a positive way of life. Such ceremonies are often led by adults who act as role models of appropriate cultural lifestyles in the community. Hence, it benefits children to attend and learn from these activities. Additionally, [Padilla \(2023, para. 14\)](#) reported that culture influences positive behaviour through symbolic representations which people of shared values build upon.

As reflected in the excerpts that follow, young people are traditionally raised with respect for gender-specific cultural practices in African communities.

“Traditionally, children (in general) are brought up according to traditional customs that are gender specific. For boys, there are gate-grouping ceremonies

(Lisango) where they are taught important lessons pertaining to transitioning into manhood. For girls, there is yard-grouping [Liguma] where they receive teachings pertaining to their journey to womanhood as well. This is one of the reasons it is mandatory for a child in such a traditional community to have an adult caregiver who is going to be responsible for them throughout these respective journeys”.

“Raising a child (in kinship care) in accordance with our traditional ways plays a crucial role in their lives. I (kinship caregiver) will focus on a girl child. Say she is raised traditionally and is taught that cow dung is widely used as a polish like in the olden days. Even though it might not be a prevalent trend nowadays, the truth is that we do not know how her future will be. Perhaps God has it for her that she will marry into a family that values this kind of living. That way she will excel in whatever duty they expect from her all because she was raised in a manner that had prepared her for a range of home situations”.

Traditional gender-specific cultural practices help young people to acquire teachings and guidance that are relevant to their respective genders. Through these rituals, young people would grow up to raise their families according to traditional African beliefs and become responsible members of society as well. Positive upbringing through gender-specific cultural practices was also reported in a study by Pato (2018, p. 56). He indicated that “cultural boys meet their fathers in *Lisango*—males are given life skills, and girls meet their mothers in *Liguma*—where females are given life skills”.

Participants expressed how the living values embedded in African spirituality help children and youth in kinship care to experience a positive upbringing. One example provided was that growing up in a community where chastity is venerated could help young people to see the need to abstain from sexual activities. This can help them to stay away from exposure to sexually transmitted diseases. These practices then contribute to the development of appropriate behavioural conduct of young people in the community. Such practices are also used to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS, which is rampant in the African context. A participant in a study by Burke et al. (2023, p. 9) indicated that her traditional spiritual rituals have been very helpful for her kinship caregiving role as well as for the young people in her care.

Children and youth are also raised positively by being guided by African spiritual beliefs and values. This is where Africans make use of the renowned proverb that “it takes a village to raise a child”. One participant explained this further by making the following statement:

“A person is a person because there are other people. My fellow people in our community understand this. Hence, they never allow a child [in kinship care] to stray before them; they make means to correct any inappropriate behavioural conduct shown by my child”.

Africans live through *Ubuntu*, which, especially in times of adversity, informs their empathy towards one another. Eze (2017, p. 98) emphasised that *Ubuntu* ethics are predicated on the notion that ‘*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*’ (I am because you are). All members of the community play the roles of caring adults in ways that ensure the total well-being of children and youth. The benefits of this collective childrearing ensure that young people do not engage with criminal behaviours as they are brought up in accordance with values that prioritise accountability and honesty in their lives. The positive upbringing of children in kinship care was also noted by a participant from a study by Diraditsile and Mmeanyana (2019, p. 63) who said that “in a family setting, children can also show improved social skills as they have the opportunity for involvement in community activities and access to different relatives such as uncles, cousins and aunts”.

5. Conclusions

This paper discussed the influence of African spirituality in the provision of kinship care in the South African context. The study showed African spirituality to be instrumental in the provision of kinship care as it ensures the strengthening of families while preserving their cultural identities as well. Kinship care ensures the strengthening of families through the concept of Ubuntu. The concept of Ubuntu, which Africans live by, propels extended family members to care for the children of their relatives whenever the need arises. This concept underpins African spirituality, which is a worldview of African people. The observance of African spirituality is salient as communal living is valued through it. Living in such a way prevents the unnecessary removal of needy children from their families of origin. African spirituality informs the decisions made by remaining family members to assume the kinship caregiving role for young people who have experienced loss or separation from care provided by their birth parents. Having these young people remain within their family constellations prevents disruptions that they might have encountered had they been removed and placed in other alternative care settings, such as residential care. Additionally, these young people are able to maintain bonds with their family members, which are beneficial to their cultural identity as well. Bhagwan (2022, p. 116) asserted that understanding the spiritual beliefs of young people and their families is salient when working with them towards finding solutions to their challenges.

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