

When The Spirits Dance, Identity Lives: An Inquiry on the Functional Role of Mwazindika Spirit Healing Dance in the Preservation of the Dawida Community in Kenya

Mjomba Majalia^{1*} & Cecilia Kimwama²

¹Taita Taveta University, Kenya (mwalimuwako@gmail.com)

²University Of Nairobi, Kenya (ckimwama@gmail.com)

*Corresponding author: mwalimuwako@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.62049/jkncu.v5i1.440>

Abstract

The Mwazindika spirit healing dance is more than a ritual; it's a living expression of collective identity, spiritual and physical healing, cultural continuity, social cohesion and unity among the Dawida community. This study breaks away from rigid, linear, and non-participatory research models and places cultural values, local voices and lived experiences at the heart of the research process. It recognizes that communities like the Dawida understand and shape their world through deeply rooted traditions. By centering the voices of the Dawida community, the study explores the profound significance of the Mwazindika dance as a vital, meaningful practice that plays a crucial functional role in preserving the Dawida community's identity. The dance is a core component of the Dawida healing processes, an instrument for communicating with the spirit world, and a means to celebrate milestones and reinforce communal bonds. The purpose of the paper is to show the need to safeguard and revitalise this tradition. Safeguarding Mwazindika is not just about preserving a cultural practice, it's about nurturing the spiritual and cultural heartbeat of a people, ensuring their stories and heritage continue to thrive for future generations.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Mwazindika Spirit Dance, Dawida Community, Intangible Cultural Heritage

Introduction

Across the African continent, music and dance extend far beyond leisure or amusement, occupying a central place in everyday life. They are embedded within the core structures that shape communal values, social relations and cultural identity. In this sense, music and dance function as lived practices through which communities understand themselves and articulate shared meanings. As Okewola (2021) explains, music creates bonds among people who possess shared histories and values while also enabling the communication of profound emotional and transformative experiences. Through spiritual dance practices in particular, performers and participants express a broad spectrum of emotions, including amazement, fear, courage, sorrow, joy, love and even hostility, thereby translating complex inner states into collective cultural expression.

Nevertheless, African traditional dances are not confined to emotional expression alone. Instead, they permeate nearly all dimensions of social life. Across diverse societies, dances reflect beliefs about birth, death, and the broader cycle of life, as well as activities such as hunting, warfare, initiation rites, and agricultural practices, including planting and harvesting. Similarly, many dances are associated with spiritual cleansing, thanksgiving, marriage, courtship and the invocation of natural forces such as the sun and rain. For example, Asante (1998) documents the New Yam Festival among the *Idoma* of Nigeria and the *Ebi-Woro* purification festival of the *Ijebu* Yoruba. These ritual performances demonstrate the enduring relevance of African dance as both a spiritual practice and a communal act that reinforces shared identity and social cohesion.

Given this centrality, safeguarding traditional dances as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) becomes imperative. Indeed, the protection of such practices cannot be overstated. Asare et al. (2020) argue that African traditions, irrespective of their specific form, should not be marginalised because they offer deep spiritual and emotional fulfilment that risks erosion under the pressures of globalisation. In a similar vein, Nyamnjoh (2017) observes that African dance is deeply interconnected with community values, ritual life and religious belief systems. These dances are therefore not merely expressive forms but are closely aligned with both physical and spiritual dimensions of communal existence. Consequently, they connect individuals not only to one another but also to their ancestors and the divine, functioning simultaneously as ritual remedy and cultural affirmation.

At the same time, the forces of globalisation have prompted critical reflections on how African art forms are studied and represented. Wanyama (2012) stresses the need to revise research methodologies and ethical frameworks to produce meaningful scholarship on African music and dance. Such revisions are necessary because globalisation has significantly altered the context, structure and modes of performance of many traditional practices. Correspondingly, Kilonzo (2016) notes that the safeguarding of traditional dances in Kenya has become increasingly complex due to rapid modernisation and global cultural influences. Against this backdrop, scholarly efforts that document and analyse practices such as the *Mwazindika* spirit healing dance contribute to broader awareness of their value as living heritage within the *Dawida* community.

The sacred character of African spiritual dances is particularly evident among the Dawida people, for whom the Mwazindika dance constitutes a vital source of spiritual healing and communal wellbeing. The Dawida inhabit the central massif of Kenya's *Taita* Hills and live alongside the *Saghalla* and *Kasighau* communities, who occupy neighbouring massifs. Although these groups speak different but mutually

intelligible Taita dialects, namely *Kidawida*, *Kisaghalla* and *Kikasighau*, they share a common cultural identity. Despite historical interactions with neighbouring *Kamba*, *Taveta* and *Maasai* communities, linguistic variation has not undermined communication or unity among the three sub-groups.

In this context, Mjomba (2024) underscores the significance of the Mwazindika dance as a medium of communication both within the Dawida community and between humans and spiritual forces. More specifically, Wray and Wray (2019) describe how the dance facilitates ancestral communication during initiation and transitional rites, spiritual healing ceremonies and rainmaking rituals. These functions position Mwazindika as a living conduit through which spiritual safeguarding and cultural continuity are actively maintained. As such, the dance embodies a dynamic relationship between tradition and lived experience rather than a static cultural remnant.

Furthermore, Kisilu (2020) offers a contextual analysis of music and dance practices in the Taita-Taveta region and emphasises that, despite limited documentation, Mwazindika possesses deeply rooted spiritual traditions transmitted across generations through oral instruction and embodied performance. To prevent cultural redundancy or loss, Kisilu (2020) argues that such practices must be carefully studied, documented and archived. In this regard, the present research plays a critical role by investigating and chronicling the Mwazindika dance through written description and visual documentation, thereby contributing to its long-term preservation.

Notably, the authors of this study participated in workshops organised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2024, which aimed to prepare nominations for Mwazindika to be inscribed on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Despite the urgent need for safeguarding, these workshops revealed a notable scarcity of scholarly literature on the dance. Consequently, the current study seeks to address this gap by engaging a range of stakeholders, including local and national governments, Mwazindika practitioners, performers, and scholars, to stimulate further empirical research and academic discourse.

Against this background, the primary purpose of the study is to offer an in-depth exploration of the complex interactions between the Mwazindika dance and the everyday lives of the Dawida people. Although variations exist in how the dance is performed and interpreted across the community, the study deliberately focuses on Mwazindika practices among the Dawida of *Bura* location in Taita Taveta County. By doing so, it provides a grounded and context-specific analysis. Ultimately, in seeking to clarify the dance's significance, the study examines its functional roles in preserving cultural identity and continuity, mitigating disasters, promoting health and wellbeing, fostering communal harmony and supporting youth socialisation, thereby framing the research questions that guide the inquiry.

- Research Question 1: What is the functional role of the Mwazindika spirit healing dance among the Dawida community?
- Research Question 2: How crucial is the role of the Mwazindika spirit healing dance in the preservation and continuity of identity of the Dawida community?

Literature Review

According to Asare et al. (2020), artistic expressions in Africa, regardless of their specific form, function as sources of emotional, spiritual and aesthetic fulfilment for African societies. When situated within religious and spiritual contexts, the arts extend beyond visible performance to engage unseen dimensions of existence. These dimensions include non-physical forces, ancestral presences and spiritual entities believed to animate and sustain the physical world. Consequently, artistic practices become mediatory spaces where humans interact with metaphysical realities, enabling communities to negotiate meaning, healing and balance within both material and spiritual domains of life.

In a related argument, Mokwunyei (1997) emphasises that the intergenerational transmission of music and dance as healing practices is predominantly oral and custodial. Such transmission relies on culturally embedded specialists whose responsibility is to safeguard continuity through memory, performance and instruction. These custodians preserve highly specialised knowledge and skills that are inseparable from indigenous belief systems. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of healing dances demands familiarity with the cosmologies that inform them. Without this contextual grounding, the therapeutic significance of music and dance risks being misunderstood or reduced to mere performance.

Similarly, Omibiyi-Obidike (1998) explains that the therapeutic application of music and dance within African societies is intricately connected to indigenous religious worldviews. Among the Yoruba, for instance, healing through music and dance is shaped by culturally specific interpretations of illness and misfortune. Illness may be attributed to immoral conduct, disrupted social relations, physical causes, spiritual forces or biological conditions. As a result, music and dance therapies are designed to address these varied explanations. Healing practices, therefore, function as culturally responsive systems that integrate spiritual understanding with communal wellbeing.

Comparable traditions are evident in Kenya, particularly among the Luo of Western Kenya, where spirituality and health are closely intertwined within traditional belief systems. Orawo (2012) documents how spiritual healing dances among the Luo are based on the belief that distinct spirits are associated with specific illnesses. Each spirit requires unique rituals, songs and offerings either to appease or expel it. These spirits, known as *juogi*, may be linked to conditions such as barrenness, miscarriages, mental illness or bodily pain. Possession is interpreted as a spiritual issue requiring spiritual intervention rather than ordinary suffering.

Furthermore, Orawo (2012) describes the careful, methodical process by which spirits are appeased or exorcised. Traditional healers, regarded as mediums who can communicate with spirits, play a central role in this process. Victims are guided to the medium's homestead by relatives or by the spirit itself. The medium allows full possession to occur, enabling the spirit to be correctly identified. Friendly spirits may be permitted to remain, while hostile ones are expelled or destroyed through ritual intervention guided by spiritual diagnosis.

Moreover, Orawo (2012) explains that music and dance become essential during confrontations with hostile spirits. The *miend juogi* ritual employs drums, rattles and sacred songs to engage the spirit. As music intensifies, participants clap, sing and dance while the healer challenges the spirit to reveal itself. The patient's collapse signals full possession, prompting silence and interrogation. Friendly spirits accept

offerings and depart peacefully. Hostile spirits are symbolically captured, buried and ritually destroyed, restoring spiritual equilibrium within the community.

Mwazindika Spirit Dance

The Mwazindika dance occupies a pivotal position within Dawida's traditional belief systems and is firmly rooted in their indigenous religion, *Dini ya Kutasa*. This concept, which translates as casting out anger or expelling malevolent spirits, underscores the dance's primary spiritual orientation (Orawo, 2012). Beyond its religious grounding, the functional significance of Mwazindika extends into nearly every sphere of Dawida's social life. It plays a vital role in initiation ceremonies that mark the transition from childhood into adulthood and is equally central during agricultural cycles and periods of communal crisis.

Moreover, Mwazindika has profoundly shaped Dawida culture by being integrated into numerous rites and social practices. These include *kualwa kwa mwana* signifying childbirth, *mwari* denoting puberty rites, *kushamishwa* referring to circumcision and *ngua* representing communal labour. Additional contexts include *kuwa* for sowing, *kuwanga mvua* for rain making, *kukwasha posho* associated with bumper harvests, *kudiwa* meaning hunting, *kusima wuda* linked to victory in warfare, *kinga ya mzi* concerning disaster mitigation and *kufwa kwa mdamu* marking death (Mjomba, 2011). Across these occasions, the Dawida consistently employ shared ethnomusicological patterns that are foundational to the Mwazindika dance. Consequently, this continuity reinforces cultural coherence while adapting performance to context. The following section examines.

Mwazindika Drums

Personal communications with key informants revealed several details about the instrumentation surrounding the Mwazindika dance. For example, "The number of drums within any given Mwazindika group varies. Ordinarily, the dance uses five different sets of drums. The two biggest of these are known as *shimba mbaa*, then two smaller ones, known as *shimba ndini*, and the lead drum, also the smallest, known as *kengele* (Mwanyiro, personal communication, March 22, 2025).



Figure 1: Mwazindika drums (Source: Author, 2025)

Figure 2 below shows the drummers' seating arrangement during Mwazindika dance performances. The *shimba mbaa* are positioned at the extreme outer ends, the *shimba ndini* right next to these, on either end, with the *Kengele* at the centre of it all.



Figure 2: Mwazindika drum ensemble (Source: Author, 2025)

Mwafighi (Taita Traditional Seat)

According to Mwanyiro, “During Mwazindika dance performances, the performers sit on a tool known in the local dialect as the *mwafighi*. This stool, made of light wood, would usually be strung around the performer's neck, making it easy to ferry around (Mwanyiro, personal communication, March 22, 2025).



Figure 3: Taita traditional seat (Source: Author, 2025)

Njugha (Leg Bells)

The following item is the *njugha* or leg bells. “The *njugha* are the metallic rattles, worn around the ankles, that induce the Mwazindika dance rhythm and produce a percussive sound. During healing, they play an essential role in bringing the dance to a climax (Wandoe, personal communication, March 22, 2025).



Figure 4a: Njugha for females (Source: Author, 2025)



Figure 4b: Njugha for males (Source: Author, 2025)

Firimbi (Whistle)

Fourth is the role of the tiny *firimbi* or whistle. “This is blown at intervals, and it acts as a cue that signals changes in dance patterns and movements and provides a rhythm that is persistent when played during the dance.” (Mwanyiro, personal communication, March 22, 2025)



Figure 5: Firimbi (Source : <https://www.dilwana.com/products/tanzanian-whistle-african-handmade-whistle?variant=43154515394815>, 2025)

Other aspects of the dance are also important, such as the instrumentation involved. These include the dressing code, the flywhisk, the *kikuchu* (or leather bag), and the dance movements and patterns. These visual symbols enhance the dance's symbolism and the vibrancy of the performances. The overall goal is to add depth and meaning to the dance relative to its core function of providing community identity, spirituality, healing, and a link to ancestral forces.

Marwai (Costumes)



Figure 6a: Male Costume (Source: Author, 2025)



Figure 6b: Female Costume (Source: Author, 2025)

The *marwai*, or costumes worn during Mwazindika, included body adornments, such as necklaces and earrings. “Before the advent of modern clothing, the performers of the Mwazindika dance would wear costumes made from traditional materials. Females would have skirts made of cowhide, while males would have wrap-around/loincloths made of the same” (Mwanyiro, personal communication, March 22, 2025).

Flywhisk



Figure 7: Flywhisk (source: <https://ndambo2010over-blog.com/2015/07/healing-gee-the-spiritual-powers-of-the-taita-traditional-mwazindika-drums.html>, 2025)

The flywhisk, pictured in Figure 7, is usually carried by the lead dancer, whether male or female. However, this whisk is typically taken by the female, who usually is the lead dancer who also leads the call and response parts of the dance song. The purpose of this tool is to enhance the dance's vibrancy, particularly as it approaches its pitch. (Wandoe, personal communication, March 22, 2025).

Kikuchu (Leather Bag)



Figure 8: Kikuchu (Source: Author, 2025)

The *kikuchu* or leather bag (Figure 8) is carried solely by the male dancer. In the Dawida culture, every male in the community is supposed to own a *kikuchu*. This is important during hunting or during a routine animal slaughter. In either case, this leather bag is used to carry meat harvested during such occasions. The *kikuchu* features prominently in the Mwazindika dance as it is an integral part of the Dawida community. (Dede, personal communication, March 22, 2025).

Kuvina (Dance Movements)

When dancing, the dancer's body is bent slightly, with an approximate 90-degree angle between hand and arm. Meanwhile, they vigorously shake their shoulders to the rhythm of the Mwazindika drums. At any point in time, one foot is raised slightly and sequentially thumped to the ground to make the leg bells (*njugha*) release their percussive sound.



Figure 9a: Body posture in Mwazindika (Source: Author, 2025)



Figure 9b: Foot slightly raised and thumped (Source: Author, 2025)

Dance Pattern



Figure 10: The dancers go round in circles in the Mwazindika dance (Source: Author, 2025)

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to enable a nuanced exploration of meanings, beliefs and values that shape the Dawida worldview surrounding the Mwazindika dance. To address the research questions, the study relied exclusively on open-ended questions. Such questions were appropriate because they facilitated the collection of rich, qualitative data that could capture lived experience.

In addition, open-ended questioning empowers participants by granting them agency over their narratives and allowing unanticipated insights to emerge. As Braun and Clarke (2013) contend, this approach enables responses embedded with personal context, emotion and reasoning, thereby clarifying why individuals think, feel or act in particular ways. When investigating cultural practices and systems of meaning, a qualitative approach is essential to deepen analysis.

The respondents were selected from two primary sources. First, participants were drawn from a UNESCO workshop held in 2024 that focused on preparing nominations for the Mwazindika dance for the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Second, respondents included members of the Mwazindika-affiliated *Mwazindiki-Kishawi* performance group based in *Godoma* village within *Bura* location. Furthermore, the lead author, a native member of the Dawida community, contributed insider knowledge that supported interpretation.

The study employed purposive sampling, a method through which researchers intentionally identify individuals and groups with relevant knowledge and experience (Christensen et al., 2021). Accordingly, leaders of Mwazindika groups present at the UNESCO workshop were selected as key informants. The *Mwazindiki-Kishawi* group was also purposively chosen due to its accessibility.

In total, the sample comprised twenty respondents. Six participants were drawn from the workshop group, including four men and two women aged between thirty-five and sixty years. The *Mwazindiki-Kishawi* group contributed fourteen respondents, ten men and four women, within the same age range.

Data were collected using mobile phone applications with audio and video recording capabilities. Interviews were conducted in Kiswahili and Kidawida, then transcribed and reviewed through manual proofreading to ensure accuracy. The lead researcher's linguistic competence strengthened reliability. Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying and interpreting recurring patterns within qualitative materials such as interview transcripts and field notes (Pajo, 2022).

Discussion

The findings are derived from the proceedings of the UNESCO workshop, key informant interviews with Mwazindika workshop participants, and members of the Mwazindi-Kishawi group who were visited at Godoma village for the Mwazindika dance demonstrations. The discussions revealed that the Mwazindika dance is to a considerable extent, still an integral component of the web of life of the Dawida community. In line with this, the first research question asked: What is the functional role of the Mwazindika dance among the Dawida community?

The Mwazindika dance plays a multiplicity of interconnected roles. These functions work at spiritual, social, psychological, cultural, and therapeutic levels. Rather than just being merely a dance performance, it is a holistic indigenous system embedded in the Dawida traditional worldview and daily life. This worldview revolves around the relationship between spirits, ancestors, nature, humans, illness, and healing. These are explained in the discussion below.

Firstly, the Mwazindika's core function is *wurighi*, or healing and therapeutic work, at both the individual and community levels. This particular function of the dance involves specifically the exorcism of evil spirits, also known as *pepo* in the local dialect, which are believed to possess individuals, especially women. In this form, the dance functions as a structured healing practice that employs spiritual connection, rhythm and movement to restore individuals' psychosocial and spiritual balance.

Various respondents made observations that backed up this claim. For example, Ngwatu observed that "The Mwazindika dance is a communal occurrence initiated by village elders for the healing of individuals possessed by *pepo*. Initially, the lead dancer will dramatise the exorcism ritual." (Ngwatu, personal communication, March 22, 2025)

Furthermore, "During the dance, the exorcist, who is one of the dancers, pours water on the head of the possessed dancer. This symbolises purification and is meant to drive out the *pepo*. As these ritual progresses, the drumming, dancing, and singing become more emotionally charged and intense. At the climax of the dance, the possessed dancer may move into a trancelike state and collapse. (Mwanyiro, personal communication, March 22, 2025).

"At this climax, the singing stops and only the drummers perform an intense routine known as *Kushewera* or *kuzira ngoma*. Here, the drums produce a rolling sound occasioned by expert drumming, signalled by the *shimba mbaa* drummer. The possessed dancer wails or screams, demanding items in the name of the *pepo*. This entire aspect of the dance is important as it marks when the *pepo* is being handled, and healing commences. (Mwanyiro, personal communication, March 22, 2025)

The second crucial functional role of the Mwazindika dance is to mitigate the impact of crises, such as natural disasters. An example is the *Wandu wa Mdede*, a family believed to have an ancient tradition of mitigating the potential harm caused by lightning strikes. According to Shako, “In the face of recurrent natural disasters, the *Wandu wa Mdede* are charged with performing a cultural ritual to protect the community from lightning. While practising abstinence for seven days, a designated elder ritually captures lightning using a sacred gourd. This symbolises collective protection from the potential danger of natural calamities and reinforces trust in such inherited ancestral knowledge.” (Shako, personal communication, November 22, 2023). This aligns with the cultural logic of the Mwazindika dance, in which human mediums act as ritual mediators between the physical and spiritual worlds.

“Moreover, beyond the symbolic function of lightning control, this family is symbolically charged to control other elements of nature, such as rain. Here, the objective is to prevent floods and landslides. Each designated elder fulfils their respective communal obligations, fostering societal harmony and environmental balance. These rituals symbolise practical protection, healing and preservation. After performing their tasks, these elders are honoured through communal celebrations. These involve Mwazindika drumming, dancing, feasting and drinking honey beer that lasts all night” (Mwasi, personal communication, November 22, 2023). Thus, the celebratory Mwazindika performances act as performative extensions of the shared guardianship of communal wellbeing.

The third functional role of the Mwazindika dance was *Wutasi* or spiritual invocation. According to Wandoe, “The Wadawida practised animism, which included traditional healing and rituals accompanied by the Mwazindika dance. Trees, such as the Baobab (*Mlamba*), were culturally designed spaces for worship.” (Wandoe, personal communication, March 22, 2025). *Wutasi* is therefore the spiritual heart of the Mwazindika dance, which provides a culturally sanctioned medium of communication between the spirit world and the human world when seeking healing.

Additionally, the central massif of the Taita Hills, inhabited by the community, is believed to have been the primary site of religious activity. Specifically, in this area, there were designated sacred caves (*Mbanga*) and large rocks (*Maghamba*), which were used as shrines and a refuge for the dead (Dede, personal communication, March 22, 2025). They also served as quarantine zones for persons infected with dreaded diseases, who would be reintegrated into society upon recovery (Mwaighonyi, personal communication, March 22, 2025).

“The dead were honoured through placing their skulls in these shrines (also known as *Mwanja*), which were held sacred long before the introduction of Christianity and Islam. (Mwanyiro, personal communication, March 22, 2025). In this context, the Mwazindika dance served to validate ancestral connections. Against this backdrop, the Mwazindika dance strengthened ancestral bonds, guided collective grief and commemoration, and ceremonially reinforced inherited collective identity during periods of social transformation.

Furthermore, as Kisingo explains, “Since some forests were designated as critical sacred spaces, people were not allowed to interfere with them: This, in turn, greatly aided in conservation efforts. These sacred forests, known as *Figghi*, are the equivalent of the *Kaya* forests of the Mijikenda. (Kisingo, personal communication, March 22, 2025). According to the Dawida belief systems, these forests are culturally sanctioned ancestral spaces that link life, death, and the ecology. The function of the Mwazindika dance

was to harmonise these three, thereby aligning sacred remembrance, environmental responsibility, and social cohesion over successive generations.

In summary, the Mwazindika dance in this context acts as a deep spiritual conjuration and as a tool for addressing societal and individual wellness. This is referred to as *morio* or *sere* in the local Kidawida dialect. The unique combination of traditional attire, dance movements, ululations, call and response mode, chants and specific drum patterns is a high-level form of communication. These express emotions, beliefs, and a connection with the spirit world, effectively epitomising the Dawida cosmology.

The fourth functional role of the Mwanzidika dance was during initiation rites and key life stages celebrations. The goal here was to serve as a way to connect the community through ancestral wisdom (*wusuku ghwa waghosi*) and to create individual and community well-being (*sere kwa wose*). Here, the dance is performed during significant Dawida community events such as childbirth, circumcision and wedding ceremonies.

According to Mwanyiro, “The Mwazindika dance helped mark key life stages from birth (*kwalwa kwa mwana*) to death (*kufwa kwa mdamu*). At birth, the dance was performed to seek ancestral blessings (*marasimio*) for the child to grow and become a wise leader (*kilongozi*). (Mwanyiro, personal communication, March 22, 2025). Additionally, the dance was an essential component in circumcision ceremonies that marked the transition from childhood to adulthood.

In this regard, Mwanyiro indicates that, “To usher a girl from adolescence to adulthood, an initiation ceremony known as *mwari* was performed. Each initiate had an instructor called *mwichi*, who had already been initiated into adulthood. The *mwichi*’s role was to mentor the initiate on matters of womanhood and adulthood. These included, but were not limited to, sex, reproductive health, marriage and family life. During this mentorship period, Mwanzidika dance celebrations were held, involving feasting, drinking, and dancing.” (Mwanyiro, personal communication, March 22, 2025). According to Orawo (2012) in the Mwazindika groups, *mwari* is still a part of their musical repertoire, and the Dawida still perform *ngoma mwari* with the same drums used for the Mwazindika dance.

“The initiates though, stayed in seclusion with their mentors in special grass thatched huts. Here, both genders received their last instructions together. At the end of the celebrations, each mentor (*mwichi*) made a presentation that marked the end of the initiation rites. After this, graduation into adulthood meant that the boys became young men (*wadawana*), and the girls, young women (*wai*). They were now eligible to marry within the traditional marriage process (Mwanyiro, personal communication, March 22, 2025). Mwazindika-inspired dance and songs, such as the *kushamishwa* or circumcision dance forms accompanied such rites of passage.

The fifth and final core function of the Mwazindika dance was to forge community cohesion and identity. In this regard, the Mwazindika dance is a foundational element of Dawida social life, serving as a cultural conduit that drives and affirms collective identity and enables the transmission of knowledge across generations. As a community tradition, the dance requires collective and collaborative participation from the community at large. As will be seen, this enhances social cohesion and communal unity and consolidates shared identity.

Mwaegha reveals that, “The Mwazindika dance facilitates solidarity and self-definition through providing a platform for intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, shared rituals, healing, and communication. (Mwaegha, personal communication, March 22, 2025). Also, Manga observes that, “The performance of the dance during significant community events created cohesion through mutual participation, deepening social ties, reasserting shared goals.” (Manga, personal communication, March 22, 2025).

This was further evident in the way the community assembled to organise the dance festivals. As Mwanyiro explains, “This involved various community members such as the community elders (*waghosi wa isanga*), drummers (*wakaba ngoma*), dancers (*wavini*), food preparers (*wadeki*), and brewers (*waruwa chofi*), who had specific roles to play. This collective obligation for maintaining the tradition called for communal teamwork, enhancing collective solidarity and mutual commitment. (Mwanyiro, personal communication, March 22, 2025)

Furthermore, the actual performance of the Mwazindika dance by itself engendered communal cohesion and identity. This is illustrated by Mwanyiro, who observes that, “The dance includes many shared components such as *kushewera ngoma* (rhythmic drumming), singing (call and response), talk-singing, *sarakasi* (dramatisation), and *kuvina* (dance movements). This well-organised collective action cultivates strong relational ties, facilitating symbolic interactions crucial for conflict mediation and shared understanding. (Mwanyiro, personal communication, March 22, 2025)

Cohesion also reflects itself in the community’s agricultural activities. For instance, Wandoe observes that, “Relatives from the clan reserved a day when they would come together to work at one of the clan members’ farms, a day was known as *Ngua*. This bonded the clan/community around achieving a common good, such as when a given farm demonstrated the promise of a bumper harvest that would require extra labour for harvesting. In such cases, Mwazindika dancing would accompany the harvesting activities and clan members would also share the bumper harvest. (Wandoe, personal communication, March 22, 2025).

Next, the study sought to answer the second research question: How crucial was the role of the Mwazindika dance in preserving and sustaining the identity of the Dawida community? From this perspective, the Mwazindika dance plays a central role in maintaining and sustaining identity. This is because it serves as an ancestral conduit linking the past, present and future, enabling the intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledge and cultural continuity. This reinforces communal attachment and solidarity within the Dawida community. In this cultural framework, Dede observes that, “The dance is the main avenue through which traditions (*mila*), *chumbo* (songs, rhythms, chants etcetera), and cultural knowledge (*mizango*) are transmitted from elders (*wagosi*) to younger generations (*wanake*).” (Dede, personal communication, March 22, 2025).

This tradition serves as a primary medium for the transfer of ancestral wisdom, collective memories and values across generations through experiential learning, guidance, and routine performances. It is an essential part of the Dawida collective identity, embodying their collective past and worldview.

In sum, the cultural practices and techniques embodied in the Mwazindika dance are passed down informally through experiential learning, lived practice, and mentorship across generations. This approach guarantees that the youth embody and internalise their cultural identity. This in turn promotes deep feelings of cultural pride and a sense of belonging to who they are as members of the Dawida community.

Additionally, the Mwazindika dance has intrinsic elements that ensure the preservation and continuity of the Dawida community's identity. According to Chao, “The dance techniques are based on cultural knowledge and heritage attributes that can be passed on to the younger generation. These attributes embedded in its dramatisation and performance are transmitted through an entertainment-education framework. This reduces the risk of cultural loss owing to modern influences.” (Chao, personal communication, March 22, 2025).

Fundamentally therefore, the Mwazindika dance acts as a ritual conduit that bridges generations. This way, it links the present community (*wandu wa itanaha*) to its ancestors (*waghosi wa kala*) and to their shared history (*historia imweri*). This linkage ensures the continuity of Dawida traditions despite contemporary sociocultural disruptions.

Through the Mwazindika dance techniques and instrumentation, cultural identity is continually in flux. The dance itself is not merely a form of entertainment but a living conversation, in which the dancers dialogue with the audience. Every dance performance aims to create, shape, and update the communal cultural identity of the Dawida people. Rather than simply copying old traditions, the dancers adjust meanings, movements, and rhythms to address the challenges of daily life such as health, family life, work, or communal responsibilities.

Therefore, in this sense, the dance becomes a tool for change, not just a mirror of traditional culture. The dance purposefully shapes the community's worldview and lifestyle. The dancers' expressions, movements, and rhythms are meant to communicate directly with the audience, fostering a shared understanding. The interactive nature of the dance, which converts daily emotions, struggles, and values into powerful movements, stirs strong feelings. These in turn, reinforce social values, remind individuals of shared beliefs and keep the cultural identity of the Dawida alive across generations.

Moreover, the dance, music and associated rituals are packed with symbolism that may help preserve and sustain the identity of the Dawida community. For example, specific rituals, such as the use of traditional brews (*chofi*) for libation and drums made from sacred trees (*mlungu msura*), symbolise connections with the environment, the divine and the ancestors. These rituals encompass Dawida traditions, conveying symbolism that narrates the relationships between the spirit world, traditional world views, and communal beliefs and value systems.

Conclusion

This section synthesises the study's principal findings in relation to the two research questions that guided the inquiry. To reiterate, the first research question was: What is the functional role of the Mwazindika spirit-healing dance among the Dawida community? The findings demonstrate that Mwazindika operates as a holistic indigenous system whose significance lies in its integrated cultural, ecological, social and therapeutic functions. Rather than existing as a single purpose performance, the dance embodies a multidimensional framework through which the Dawida interpret and respond to everyday life.

Notably, the findings show that Mwazindika cannot be reduced to entertainment. Instead, it is a lived cultural mechanism through which the Dawida address matters of health, crisis, environmental uncertainty and social transition. These processes unfold within a worldview that recognises the interconnectedness of human life, ancestral presence, spiritual forces and the natural environment. First, the dance's core function,

known as wurighi, positions it primarily as a healing medium. Through ritual enactment and dramatisation, Mwazindika restores spiritual and psychological balance at both individual and collective levels. Second, dance serves as a mechanism for crisis mitigation, offering symbolic protection against disasters such as floods, landslides and lightning. In these contexts, human mediums function as ritual intermediaries between the material and spiritual realms.

The third functional role identified is *wutasi*, or spiritual invocation. Through this function, ritual spaces, ancestral shrines and sacred landscapes are affirmed as sites of moral authority, cultural memory and intergenerational continuity. Fourth, Mwazindika anchors rites of passage spanning the entire life cycle, from birth to death. This role ensures the orderly transmission of social identities, values and responsibilities across generations. Finally, the dance promotes communal cohesion through collaboration, role specialisation and shared systems of expression. In doing so, it reinforces reciprocity, affirms collective belonging and provides a key means through which the Dawida articulates who they are as a community.

Overall, the findings suggest that Mwazindika is both preservative and generative. It does not merely conserve inherited traditions but continually reconstitutes them to align with changing social and environmental conditions. Safeguarding the dance, therefore, represents not only cultural conservation but also the protection of the Dawida worldview itself. This process strengthens cultural resilience and ensures the continuity of living, adaptive heritage.

The second research question asked: How crucial is the role of the Mwazindika spirit healing dance in the preservation and continuity of Dawida identity? The findings indicate that dance is fundamental to sustaining Dawida's identity. It functions as a primary cultural channel through which values, worldviews and collective memory are transmitted, revitalised and maintained across generations. The discussion further reveals that Mwazindika operates as a temporal bridge linking past, present and future. Through embodied practice, cultural knowledge is actively experienced, deeply internalised and perpetuated via mentorship and collective participation.

Within this framework, elders are recognized as custodians of cultural knowledge while youth serve as active learners and participants. This structure creates a legitimate social space for experiential learning, fostering belonging, self-recognition and cultural pride. Crucially, the findings emphasize that Mwazindika is not a static remnant of the past. Instead, it remains dynamic and responsive, continually adapting its movements, rhythms and meanings to address emerging health and social challenges while remaining grounded in traditional authority. In this way, the dance safeguards tradition while enabling adaptive change without cultural rupture.

Furthermore, symbolic practices such as libation reinforce a worldview that links spiritual forces, ancestral realms, nature and community. Because Mwazindika is performed collectively, its participatory nature strengthens communal bonds by transforming shared struggles, aspirations and emotions into collective expression. Ultimately, the findings confirm that Mwazindika is a foundational pillar for remembering, negotiating and sustaining Dawida identity, ensuring its relevance as a dynamic cultural force.

References

- Asante, K. W. (1998). *African dance: An artistic, historical and philosophical inquiry*. Africa World Press.
- Asare, S., Kquofi, S., & Osei, M. (2020). The good, beautiful and sensuous in the arts: The aesthetics of Asante arts in perspective. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 25(10), 53–60. <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-2510105360>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. SAGE Publications.
- Christensen, L. B., Johnson, R. B., & Turner, L. A. (2021). *Research methods, design, and analysis* (13th ed.). Pearson.
- Kilonzo, S. M. (2016). Preserving Kenya's intangible cultural heritage: A case study of traditional dances. *African Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25(1), 45–58.
- Kisilu, J. K. (2020). Ethnomusicology and spirituality: Traditional music and dance in the Taita-Taveta region. *Journal of African Music*, 14(2), 121–136.
- Mjomba, L. M. (2011). Ngoma dialogue circles (Ngoma-DiCe): Combating HIV/AIDS using local cultural performance in Kenya. In G. Barz & J. M. Cohen (Eds.), *The culture of AIDS in Africa: Hope and healing through music and the arts*. Oxford University Press.
- Mjomba, L. M. (2024). Exploring the communicative power of Mwazindika spirit healing dance from the Dawida community in Kenya. *Journal of the Kenya National Commission for UNESCO*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.62049/jkncu.v5i1.238>
- Mokwunyei, J. N. (1997, September 3–5). *A comparative profile of music and healing in two African locations: Nigeria and Ghana* [Paper presentation]. International Conference on Music Healing in Africa and the Diaspora, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana.
- Nyamnjoh, A. (2017). The phenomenology of Rhodes Must Fall: Student activism and the experience of alienation at the University of Cape Town. *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 39(1), 256–277. <https://doi.org/10.35293/srsa.v39i1.330>
- Okewola, M. M. (2021). The role of dance in African culture. *Global Sisters Report*. https://praxispace.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-role-of-dance-in-African-culture--_Global-Sisters-Report.pdf
- Omibiyi-Obidike, M. A. (1998). Music and healing among the Yoruba. *African Notes*, 22(1–2), 1–53.
- Orawo, C. N. (2012). Healing dances: A case study of the Luo Juogi and the Dawida Mwazindika dances. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 3(2), 143–162. <https://ir-library.ku.ac.ke/server/api/core/bitstreams/31251595-0792-4eab-b4e4-e08574b43c65/content>
- Pajo, B. (2022). *Introduction to research methods: A hands-on approach*. SAGE Publications.

Wanyama, M. N. (2012). Researching on Kenyan traditional music and dance today: Methodology and ethical issues revisited. *Muziki*, 9(2), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18125980.2012.742231>

Wray, E., & Wray, S. (2019). Rituals and traditional practices in the Taita Hills. *African Studies Review*, 62(3), 312–329.

Acknowledgement

This work would not have been possible without the help of Mwazindi Kishawi Mwazindika performing group from Godoma village in Bura location, whose members are as follows:

1. Cristina Wandoe—chairlady
2. Elizabeth Chao—Secretary
3. Mariam Kisingo—Treasurer
4. Pamela Chao
5. Caroline Chari
6. Monica Chanya
7. Caroline Chanya
8. Shuma Dede
9. Daudi Mwanyiro
10. Phidelis Cholol
11. Mwamburi Ngwatu
12. Mwallingo Kisingo
13. Jackson Kashere
14. Maghanga Mwaighonyi
15. Saimon Koramodo
16. Pius Mwaegha
17. Agens Tatu
18. Agnes Kilongp
19. Donata Chari
20. Gibran Mwadime
21. Edward Shena
22. Marstela Manga
23. Bryson Kinambu
24. Mwanganyi

Thank you very much and looking forward to working on the next project.

