

## Implication of Hall's Concept of High-/Low Context Culture in Making Meaning of Mwazindika Spirit Healing Dance from Dawida Community in Kenya by Westerners

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### Abstract

*Culture is a complex system that influences how individuals perceive and interact with the world. High-context and low-context cultures are terms used to classify different societies on how they communicate. According to Hall (1981), high-context cultures incorporate high-context communication that relies on indirect, nonverbal cues and shared understanding within a group. Low-context cultures encompass low-context communication which uses direct, explicit verbal language to convey most information. Drawing on Hall's cross-cultural contexting theory, the distinction between high-context African traditional dance and low-context Western dance reflects their societies' respective communication styles. African dance relies heavily on unspoken, shared knowledge and cultural cues to convey complex information. It is considered "high context" because their meaning is deeply embedded within a specific cultural and social framework. This study uses Hall's concept of high-context and low-context culture to provide insight into how differences in communication style can militate against shared meanings and understanding of traditional African dances by non-Africans. The researcher—a native with insider perspective—uses Mwazindika spirit healing dance from the Dawida community in Kenya to explore the outworkings of the high-/low context continuum in dance mediated messages to provide indigenous perspectives in the study, understanding, and appreciation of African traditional dance forms.*

**Keywords:** Hall' High-/Low Context Culture, Communication Style, Shared Meanings, Mwazindika Spirit Healing Dance

## Introduction

Culture is a way of life that guides a group's interactions, shapes its identity and can be seen in both tangible things like food and architecture and intangible aspects like language, traditions and social norms (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). Culture shapes meanings through shared beliefs, values, and behaviors that are learned and passed down through generations. It is a complex system that influences how individuals perceive and interact with the world, with both material elements such as art and objects, and non-material elements that include ideas and norms (Naik, Baker & Mohiyeddini, 2023).

High-context and low-context cultures are terms used to classify different societies on how they communicate. According to Hall (1981), high-context cultures incorporate high-context communication that relies on indirect, nonverbal cues and shared understanding within a group. On the other hand, low-context cultures encompass low-context communication which uses direct, explicit verbal language to convey most information. High-context cultures prioritize relationships and trust, and messages are understood through the context, tone, and body language. Examples of these types of societies include many African and Asian nations. Low-context cultures focus on clear, literal messages and prioritize explicit, verbal information over nonverbal cues. The United States and many European nations are low-context cultures. No society is completely high context or low context; all societies contain elements of both. For example, in the low-context United States, communication within family units is often high context (Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, & Heyman, 1996).

In dance, high and low-context communication determine how meaning is conveyed through movement, affecting everything from social cohesion to the transfer of cultural knowledge. African traditional dances are often considered high context being deeply interwoven with culture, spirituality, and community, serving purposes beyond entertainment, while Western dances are often more focused on individual expression and performance, with distinct genres like ballet or hip-hop (Kuwor, 2017). Western dance styles focus on explicit techniques and particular artistic manifestation while African dances are often polyrhythmic, meaning they simultaneously use two or more conflicting rhythms. Dancers express these rhythms through the independent movements of different body parts like the chest, pelvis, arms, and legs, all while moving in unison (Frishkopf, 2021). The Indlamu dance is a South African example that embodies this characteristic, along with other elements like specific footwork and warrior-like movements (Sakhiseni & Vusabantum, 2023).

The folk dances of the West, while deeply embedded in regional cultures, passed down through generations and whose purpose is cultural preservation, storytelling, social bonding (e.g., Irish jigs, German Schuhplattler, Spanish Jota) similar to traditional African dances, are still associated with low-context communication. This is because, while dance is a non-verbal form of communication globally, the cultural environment in which Western folk dances developed is fundamentally low context, where clarity and explicit instructions are highly valued (Comstock, 2025).

Many traditional African dances are deeply rooted in high-context communication and cultural significance. Muraya, Miller, and Mjomba (2011) posit that the primary implication of high- and low-context communication is that it can cause inconsistent, confusing, or misconstrued messages, especially in cross-cultural settings. This study uses Hall's concept of high-context and low-context culture to provide insight into how differences in communication style can militate against shared meanings and understanding of

traditional African dances by Westerners. Mawusi (2024) emphasizes the need for indigenous perspectives in researching, understanding, and appreciating the music and dance traditions of Africa to address misconceptions held by non-African researchers. Taking a lead from Mawusi, the researcher—a native with insider perspective—uses Mwazindika spirit healing dance from the Dawida community in Kenya to explore the outworking of the high-/low context continuum in African traditional dance mediated messages to provide native perspectives in the study, understanding, and appreciation of dance traditions in Africa.

To the best of our knowledge, Hall's (1981) HCC/LCC construct has not been applied to dance mediated communication and no analysis of the outworking of the HCC/LCC continuum has been done on African traditional dance forms such as Mwazindika spirit healing dance. Available research on Mwazindika is in areas of music, entertainment, recreation and theatre performance and hardly any as a tool of communication. This study is significant in that it lays foundation for more research and theorizing in the outworkings of the HCC/LCC continuum in African traditional dance mediated communications. Secondly, it adds knowledge and more understanding in the contrasts in communication styles between high-context and low-context cultures. Finally, it provides native perspectives in the interpretation and understanding of meanings in high-context Mwazindika spirit healing dance communication from the Dawida community in Kenya.

The purpose of the study is to explore the outworking of the high context-/low context continuum in Mwazindika spirit healing dance mediated communication messages from the Dawida community in Kenya. The Dawida community are found on the main massif of Taita Hills in Taita Taveta County, Southeast of Kenya. The other two massifs of Taita Hills are occupied by Saghalala and Kasighau who speak a dialect of Taita different from that of the Dawida. The neighbors of the Taita are the Kamba, the Taveta and the Maasai; all of whom have influenced each other.

Among the Taita, one language is spoken with various dialects. The dialects are mutually intelligible and thus do not prevent communication. The dialects are Kikasighau, Kisaghala and Kidawida spoken in the main massif of Dawida. Despite the language differences, the Saghalala, Kasighau and the Dawida still consider themselves as one people.

Mwazindika is both a dance for treatment and celebration on social and public occasions such as birth, rite of passage, marriage, death, bumper harvest and other events in the Dawida community. This study explores Mwazindika spirit dance only performed during healing processes. The dance is performed in various forms across the three sub-ethnics groups of Taita in Taita Taveta County that consists of Dawida, Saghalala and Kasighau. The study investigates Mwazindika spirit healing dance that is performed among the Dawida community located in Bura location.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Hall's (1981) cross-cultural contexting theory describes how high- and low-context cultures differ in their reliance on explicit versus implicit communication. In his view, all cultures can be situated on a continuum with respect to how much contexting occurs in communication.

According to Hall (1981), high-context communication (HCC) is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or is internalized in the person, whereas very little is in the coded, explicit,

transmitted part of the message. High-context cultures, such as many in Africa and Asia, rely more on indirect, nonverbal cues and shared understanding to convey meaning, making context and relationships central to interpretation (Miller, 2002). In such cultures the verbal code conveys relatively little of the meaning in a typical interaction and may even be somewhat mistrusted. Instead, people place greater trust in non-verbal behavior and situational cues. In a high-context setting, a person might hint at a need for help rather than asking directly. They might talk about being busy or overwhelmed, expecting others to infer the need and offer assistance without being explicitly asked (Gudykunst et al, 1996).

In contrast, in low-context communication (LCC) the mass of information is lodged in

the explicit code (Hall, 1981). Low-context cultures, like those in the U.S. and Europe, depend on direct, verbal communication where meaning is in the words themselves. The members of these cultural groups are used to straight forward and explicit messages both visually and verbally. In these societies people are highly individualistic. Because they maintain relatively little close involvement with others, meaning is carried in the explicit verbal code in

order to make up for what is missing in the context. In LCC cultures someone would directly ask for a favor and clearly state the details (Hall, 1981).

High- and low-context communication in dance refers to how much meaning is derived from unspoken context versus explicit instruction. In a high-context dance communication, meaning is implicit, relying on shared cultural understanding, body language, eye contact, and subtle cues between partners or performers and the audience (Nam, 2015). Traditional African dances, such as Mwazindika spirit healing dance, entail intricate, stylized gestures, makeup, and costumes that carry deep and specific meanings understood by the culturally attuned audience (Majalia, 2024).

In a low-context dance, meaning is conveyed through clear, direct, and often less nuanced movements. The "message" is the movement itself, and the logic is more easily deciphered by an outsider. Some narrative ballets, like *The Nutcracker*, explicitly tell a story through movements that are a more direct representation of the plot, even if emotional subtext is high (Lutts, 2019).

A simple, clear gesture might be used to "tell" someone to "go" or "stop," without needing a shared cultural history to understand it (Nam, 2015).

Although to our knowledge the HCC/LCC construct has not been applied to African traditional dance mediated communication messages, researchers have noted that Hall's (1981) concept of high- and low-context communication provides insight into how differences in expectations regarding communication style can render cross-cultural messages ineffective (Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, & Heyman, 1996; Kim, Pan, & Park, 1998; Richardson & Smith, 2007). To investigate that possibility with respect to having shared meanings and understanding in Mwazindika spirit healing dance we posed the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the outworkings of the HCC/LCC continuum in communication styles that militate against shared meanings and understanding of high-context Mwazindika spirit healing dance by low-context cultures?

RQ2: What are the outworkings of the HCC/LCC continuum in interpretation and understanding of meanings in Mwazindika spirit healing dance mediated communication messages?

## Literature Review

African traditional dance is not a spectator sport but is intricately interwoven into the complex fabric of daily life (Asante, 1996). Unlike many dances of the West, dance in Africa is not detached from the lives of the people but a spontaneous emanation from the people. It decodes everyday life experiences through movement. (Green, 1998). In high-context cultures of Africa, traditional dance is not merely a form of entertainment but a rich system of communication. It transmits history, values, and emotions through unspoken cues, relying on a shared understanding of symbolic movements, rhythms, and attire (Mjomba, 2011). Meanings are embedded in the cultural context, and a performer's every gesture and step is understood through a deep, collective cultural background. Therefore, without knowing the specific context, an individual from a low-context culture viewing a dance performance in rural Africa would most likely miss the profound ritualistic significance (Hawkins, 1988).

African high-context cultures are typically collectivistic, prioritizing the group over the individual. Dance strengthens social bonds, fosters unity, and reinforces a shared identity, bringing people together for a common purpose. Communication is effective because of a shared history and collective experience. For instance, a dance depicting a past event, like war or migration, is understood implicitly by community members who already know the narrative (Shilabukha, 2006).

The rich layers of meaning in African traditional dance give it a profound significance beyond pure aesthetics. It is integral to ceremonies marking significant life transitions, such as birth, funerals, coming-of-age, and marriage. The Maasai *Adumu* jumping dance, for example, is performed by young warriors to demonstrate strength and agility, marking their transition into manhood (Christensen, Westgate, Griffiths, Sironga, Maro, Helge, & Brage, 2023). Some dances, such as *miend juogi* spirit healing dance among the Luo community from western Kenya and Mwazindika spirit healing dance from the Dawida community in Kenya, are used for purification and healing within a community, helping individuals and the group to process difficult emotions and experiences (Majalia, 2024).

## Spirit Healing Dances

Spirit healing dances are designated to appease the spirits and bring about healing through exorcising of evil spirits, which are known as *pepo* among the Dawida community. They involve dancing, singing and drumming which are intended to activate possession externally observed in the shaking of the dancers' bodies. Omibiyi-Obidike (1997), while discussing music and dance healing among the Yoruba noted that music and dance as a charm to ensure health and to cure illness is closely linked with religion and belief systems. This therefore means that the use of music and dance in healing in Yoruba is seen within the framework of the peoples' attitude to their wellbeing and cause of ailments and disease.

Orawo (2012), in his investigation of *miend juogi*, spirit healing dance among the Luo community from western Kenya, posits that the complaints that deal with spirit possessions in the Luo communities are cases of anxiety. The diseases attributed to ancestral spirits result from guilt as a dominant factor. Orawo indicates that during *yiengo juogi* or climax of the performance the dancers dramatize the activities of the healing process. To perform the act of cleansing the possessed, the cleanser moves to the possessed and pours water on the head. During such activities, the dance becomes more provoking and involving. The idea behind pouring water on the heads of the possessed is to assist them get rid of the evil spirits. The significance of



the spirits is medical as it is believed that these spirits cause diseases whose cure lay in dealing with them. It could be said that it was the diseases which were spiritualized, in the same way the illnesses were diagnosed in terms of the anger of the ancestral spirits, or the curse of the living parents. If it was stomachache, headache, miscarriage and other diseases that are spiritualized, the techniques of treatment deal not only with the physical aspects; the patient was given herbs to drink or rub on the affected part, but at the same time receives psychological treatment as well (Orawo, 2012).

Dances like the *miend juogi* and Mwazindika among the Dawida community act as a traditional body regulator against nagging conditions of life that call for courage, hope, aspiration, anxiety, faith, trust and steadfastness (Quarm, 1997). Disease, pain, suffering and death have always been the curse of humanity in society. In order to attempt to overcome and cope with the blight, the Luo and the Dawida like other traditional African communities believe in the existence and powers of spirits, which are believed to take interest in the promotion of the welfare of the lineage. It is important to note that in traditional African societies the specialized skill and knowledge of music and dance therapy, as we shall see in the Dawida community, are transmitted orally from generation to generation by the custodians of culture whose duty is to ensure continuity (Mokwunyei, 1997).

### Mwazindika Spirit Healing Dance from the Dawida Community

Mwazindika is both a dance for treatment and entertainment on social and public occasions performed in various forms by all the Taita people. *Mwazindika ya wurighiti* or Mwazindika for treatment is a spirit dance designated to appease the spirits. Among the Dawida, disease, meaning the lack of *ease* in the body, is attributed to one being possessed by evil spirits commonly known as *pepo*. One is possessed by *pepo* because he/she angered the spirits. Treatment, therefore, involves doing Mwazindika dance to appease the spirits and removal of *pepo* from the victim.

Mwazindika dance performance encompasses dancing, singing and drumming which are intended to relieve one of *pepo*. It begins with a song which is performed by a male soloist and from then on it switches to call and response communication mode. The lead dancer pours waters on one of the dancers to vicariously assist the persons with *pepo* in reenacting its removal. The dancer(s) possessed by *pepo* have *njugha*, which are metallic rattles, tied around their ankles that they shake to accompany the melodies and drum beats. The role of *njugha* is that of rhythm and percussive sound (Chanya, personal communication, March 22, 2025).



Figure 1: Njugha or Leg bells (source: author)

While from a Western perspective the Mwazindika dance moves maybe interpreted only from an aesthetic perspective, the movement of the Mwazindika dancers (often women, while men drum) are highly interpretive, dramatizing the healing process and conveying messages from unseen forces.

During Mwazindika performance, the drummers vary the rhythmic patterns of the drums in accordance with leader's guidance. Such guidance consists of cues or finger signals to direct rhythmic changes. There are also intervals of silence from the master drummer to allow lead drum to perform solo. At climax when the *pepo* is believed to be exorcised, the skill shown by the master drummer player is referred to as *kushewera ngoma*, which is to rub the drum with wet fingers to produce a *zzzeeeeerrrrrrrr* sound. This particular technique of the master drummers (playing *shimba mbaa*) is to communicate different stages of the dance performance and are crucial in building a rapport with the possessed person to activate healing (Kisingo, personal communication, March 22, 2025).

The Mwazindika drum communication style is different from the low-context Western culture in the sense that the non-verbal language is primarily used for spiritual invocation, healing, and strengthening social bonds. It's a complex system that blends rhythmic drumming, singing, and movement to facilitate a connection with the spirit world and community. Mwazindika drums are no ordinary drums but are a hollowed-out trunk of the *Mlungu Msura*, which is a sacred tree reserved for that purpose (Dede, personal communication, March 22, 2025).



Figure 2: Mwazindika Drums (source: author)

Typically, the number of drums in a Mwazindika dance consists of five drums. There are two big drums called *shimba mbaa*, two smaller sized drums called *shimba ndini* and one *kengele*, which is the smallest of them all. Other instruments include *firimbi*, a whistle made from wood and in some cases a mouth organ, which is a foreign instrument that has been incorporated into mwazindika.



Figure 3: *Firimbi* (source : <https://www.dilwana.com/products/tanzanian-whistle-african-handmade-whistle?variant=43154515394815>)

The *firimbi* blown at intervals act as cues signaling change in dance movements and patterns. *Firimbi* provides a persistent rhythm when played by ordinary dancers (Majalia, 2024).

In Mwazindika, the visual spectacle is just as important as the movements themselves. Costumes, body adornments, flywhisk, and *kikuchu* all enhance the vibrancy of the performance and symbolism of the dance, adding layers of meaning and depth to the dance related to healing, community identity, spirituality, and the link to ancestors.



Figure 4: *Kikuchu* (source: author)

*Kikuchu* is the leather bag carried during performance and the flywhisk is used by the lead dancer to motivate the whole dance and drumming ensemble.





Figure 5: Flywhisk (source: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/fly-whisks/ngF7xSGb4waf5A?hl=en>)

The traditional attire for the ladies used to be a skirt made from cow hide but now has been improvised to include cotton dress. The men's attire was made of goat skin but now has been modified to a wrap-round and beads on bare chest as seen in fig 6. below (Dede, personal communication, March 22, 2025).



Figure 6: Men and women Mwazindika dance attire (source: author)

At the high point of Mwazindika, the exorciser pours water on the person possessed who would wail, scream, let off steam and more often than not make demands for things like a new dress or *Khanga*, cooking stove or sheets, lantern lamp and such like. This process is crucial as it marks the point that *pepo* is leaving and the person is getting relief and hence healed. Mwazindika dance takes place at night and goes on for many hours; sometimes it goes on throughout the night. (Wadilo, personal communication, March 22, 2025).

The core function of Mwazindika is for spiritual healing, specifically exorcising evil spirits. The music and dance create an environment intended to lead participants into trance-like states, allowing emotional burdens to be expressed and the spirit to be calmed or removed.

## Research Method

This qualitative research uses proceedings from the workshops organized by UNESCO (2024) aimed at preparing nominations of the Mwazindika spirit dance to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) list, informal discussions with workshop participants and key informant interviews with Mwazindi-Kishawi Mwazindika performance group from Godoma village in Bura location. The author also used his insider position to get a deeper understanding of the Mwazindika spirit dance.

The author is a native and has lived and worked for over 20 years in Taita as a high school teacher training students in Mwazindika dance performance for music and dance competitions at district, provincial and national levels in Kenya. He studied Mwazindika as a tool of communication as part of his dissertation (Mjomba, 2005) in Ohio University and authored a number of peer-reviewed journal articles and a book chapter on the subject (Mjomba, 2011; Muraya, Miller, & Mjomba, 2011; Majalia, 2024). Being an 'insider' means that the author understands the dynamics and social relationships that inform the situation; hence likely to be in a better position to do research among the groups that perform Mwazindika and Dawida community in general (Brayton, 1997; Griffiths, 1998).

The author has taught and performed traditional African dance (Mwazindika) in Ohio University' School of Dance and other fora for six years and has been exposed to both African and Western dance forms. From discussions and intellectual debates with scholars and practitioners of both art forms, this researcher observed how the Western perspective of African dance has historically been marked by misconceptions and the interpretations largely fails to grasp the deep cultural, social, and spiritual significance that dance holds within African communities. He used this insider knowledge in this study to show how the Western interpretation often clashes with the African worldview due to fundamental differences in cultural frameworks.

A purposive sample totally 15 respondents was used in the study. From the UNESCO Workshop, leaders of the various Mwazindika groups in attendance were identified for the study. Mwazindiki-Kishawi performance group was selected for a follow-up field study because most members of the group lived in close range and would be easily available when needed. At the UNESCO workshop, the respondents were leaders of the various groups totaling five. There were three males and two females whose age ranged from 35 to 60. During the fieldwork with Mwazindiki-Kishawi group there were 10 respondents; seven were male and three were female, whose ages ranged from 30 to 65.

Open-ended questions were used to trigger sustained dialogues which were captured by video and thick field notes. Open-ended questions helped gather rich, qualitative data, uncovering unexpected insights by allowing participants to express detailed thoughts, feelings and experiences in their own words, going beyond predefined answers to reveal authentic motivations, nuances, and new perspectives often missed in quantitative surveys. They were crucial in building rapport and promoting deeper exploration thus providing verbatim quotes that added depth and credibility to our findings.

The data was collected in both Kidawida and Kiswahili language. The author transcribed the video data making sure to do a manual review and proofreading against the original recording. The author transcribing is a Dawida native and is familiar with the topic, terminology and specific dialects involved which helped reduce misinterpretations. Analysis of the qualitative data involved organizing, coding, and finding patterns

(themes) in the interviews using thematic analysis to interpret meaning and draw insights through the following steps: First, preparing data, second, coding segments, third, identifying themes, and then finally interpreting findings to answer the research questions.

## Discussion

Mwazindika spirit healing dance is high context with its meanings deeply rooted in cultural rituals, community expression, and storytelling, often involving intricate, polycentric movements across the entire body. It is performed as a form of prayer, invocation and to connect with the divine. The rhythmic movements and trance-like states induced by the dance can be cathartic, allowing individuals to release emotions, heal trauma, and connect with their inner selves (Majalia, 2024).

Mwazindika serves as a form of interpersonal communication between two people, in this case the healer and patient. Interpersonal communication is a dynamic process that involves two or more individuals exchanging messages in order to share meanings, create understanding and develop a relationship between the parties involved as shown below in figure 7 below (Adler, Rosenfeld and Proctor II, 2020).

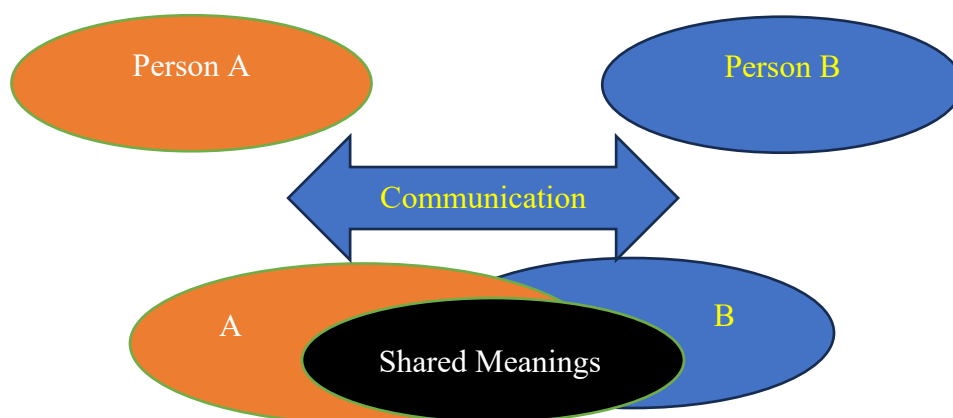


Figure 7: Interpersonal Communication Model (Source: Adler, Rosenfeld and Proctor II, 2020)

The role of Mwazindika spirit healing dance is akin to that of a person. It transmits messages like from person A to person B in figure 7 so that the *sender* and *receiver* understand the *message* in the same way to have shared meanings.

Figure 8 demonstrates the dyadic communication between Mwazindika dance and a person possessed by *pepo*. Dyadic simply means “between two,” so dyadic communication is communication between two people or creatures e.g., romantic partners, two friends, parent-child, or patient-therapist dyads (Adler et al., 2020). Meaning is transmitted through an in-person dyadic communication scenario in a range of ways, such as: verbal exchange, body language and gestures, facial expressions, and psychological attributes such as attitude and tone of voice.

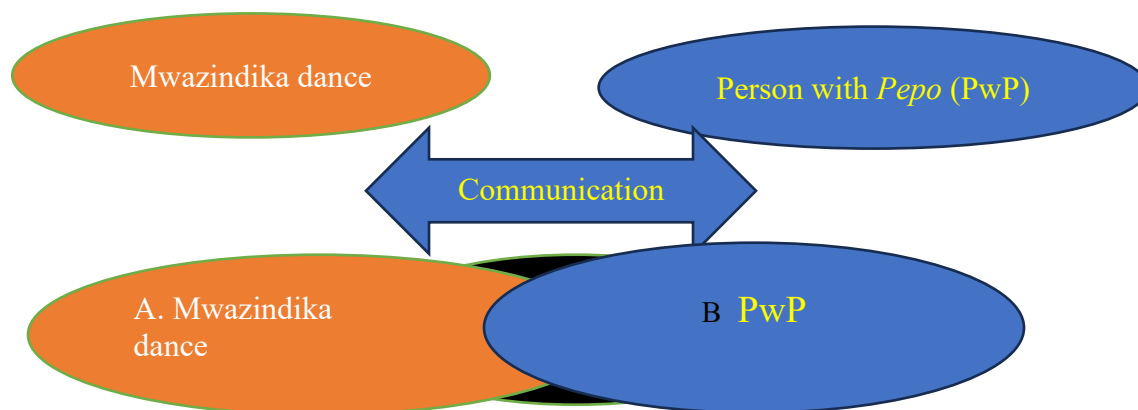


Figure 8 : Mwazindika Dance Interpersonal Communication Model (Source: Author)

Mwazindika is an integral part of the Dawida community daily life that fosters interpersonal and community connection. It serves as a form of "dyadic communication" and also broader community communication, promoting collective well-being and social solidarity. It is used during important community events like harvests, rites of passage, and times of crisis to restore balance. Mwazindika functions as a vital vessel for passing on cultural identity and history through informal transmission

n of knowledge and skills through family and community teaching. In contrast, Western dances are diverse, ranging from classical to modern styles, and have historically been seen as a separate art form, often focused on individual performance or partner work (Lutts, 2019).

Employing Hall's (1981) HCC/LCC continuum, we provide insights on the differences in communication styles that militate against shared meanings and understanding of high-context Mwazindika spirit healing dance by low-context cultures as well as in interpretation and understanding of meanings in Mwazindika mediated communication messages.

### Inseparable Art Form

Western low-context cultures can compartmentalize life and separate art from everyday living; animals from human beings; business from play; work-life from home-life; and skill and intellect from ethics and morality (Mjomba, Majalia, & McDermott, 2025). Many Western dance forms, particularly ballet and contemporary dance, are viewed as a high art form. They are presented on a stage for a paying audience, creating a clear separation between performers and spectators.

This separation is opposed to Dawida collectivistic high-context cultures. Mwazindika spirit healing dance is not a separate form of art but an inseparable part of life. It is tightly interwoven with music, rhythm, chanting, and drama to form a holistic art form. This means that the dance's meaning cannot be understood by observing the movements alone, but by understanding its context within the entire performance. For instance, at the beginning of Mwazindika for healing, the lead dancer is not just pouring water on another dancer but reenacting a very symbolic process that is meant to vicariously assist the persons with *pepo* to get healed through its removal. The dramatization is meant to increase self-efficacy of PwP. Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations, which plays a crucial role in motivating them to overcome challenges and achieve goals (Bandura, 1994).

The aspect of meaning in message being embedded in the context is reflected in everyday communication style of high-context cultures where most of the information is in the physical context whereas very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. High-context cultures rely more on indirect, nonverbal cues and shared understanding to convey meaning, making context and relationships central to interpretation. In low-context, in dance communication and every day communication, the mass of information is lodged in the explicit code and depends on direct, verbal communication where meaning is in the words themselves. These differences in communication styles is one element that militates against interpretation of messages and making meaning of Mwazindika spirit dance by Westerners.

### **Spiritual Connection**

In Dawida community, there is no rigid separation between the living and the dead, particularly ancestors. Ancestors are believed to transition to a higher state of being, but they remain an active, present, and influential part of the community and family. This relationship is not one of mere remembrance but is a central, dynamic, and fundamental aspect of the Dawida worldview.

In this view, people are not truly gone after death but simply move to another realm of existence. The presences of “caves of skulls” in Taita Hills validates this worldview among the Dawida community (Wadilo, personal communication, March 22, 2025).



*Figure 9: : Cave of Skulls in Taita Hills (source: author)*

Mwazindika spirit healing dance involves connecting with ancestors, spirits, or deities. Masks, costumes, and body paint have deep, symbolic meaning and are used to transform the dancer into a spiritual figure. Spiritual connection in Mwazindika is seen as a way to communicate with the spiritual world, honor ancestors and deities, and embody beliefs through movement, music, and rhythm. It is often woven into daily life and rituals like healing practices, acting as a sacred act that can induce trance-like states, allow for communion with the divine, and support community well-being. This connection is not separate from the physical world but is viewed as a holistic embodiment of one's view of the world.



Through rhythmic drumming, singing, and dancing in Mwazindika, PwP enters a trance-like state, which is seen as a sign of spiritual possession or communion with spirits. Trance is an altered state of consciousness, of relaxation, in which one feels as if they are letting go of the wheel of their life and letting something else take over (Pekala, Kumar, Maurer, Elliott-Carter, Moon, Mullen, 2010).

In low-context cultures, while not inherently anti-spiritual, dance in these cultures tends to emphasize personal expression and can include spiritual connection as one of many possible interpretations. The spiritual connection is often a personal journey for the dancer, who may view dance as a form of self-expression or meditation. The goal is not necessarily to evoke a community-wide spiritual experience but rather to foster personal and spiritual growth.

### **Polychronic Versus Monochronic Approach to Time**

Hall's (1981) model of polychronic and monochronic cultures distinguishes between societies that handle multiple tasks and relationships at once (polychronic) versus those that focus on one thing at a time (monochronic). Monochronic cultures focus on one task at a time, value punctuality, and prioritize schedules and deadlines, while polychronic cultures are comfortable with multitasking, are more flexible with time, and prioritize relationships over strict schedules. Monochronic cultures are often task-oriented with explicit communication, whereas polychronic cultures are relationship-oriented with high-context communication (Hall, 1981).

Based on cultural and structural elements, several Western dance forms can be characterized as monochronic. This aspect is reflected in communication styles of low-context cultures which have a monochronic approach to time, common in many Western cultures like the U.S. and Germany, as a linear, tangible resource to be scheduled and managed efficiently. This translates into a focus on precision, a sequential flow of movement, and strict adherence to rhythmic cues (Fisher & Lee, 2004).

Classical ballet is a strong example of a monochronic Western dance form due to its rigid structure and emphasis on precise, sequential movement. Dancers must follow a plan and execute pre-determined steps and formations with impeccable timing (Lutts, 2019). Mwazindika spirit healing dance is polychronic because its rhythmic and movement structures are built on multiple, simultaneous, and overlapping pulses, reflecting a cultural orientation toward interconnected relationships rather than linear time. Dancers move with polycentricity, where different body parts move to different, interlocking rhythms, embodying the dense, multilayered nature of Dawida polyrhythmic music.

Mwazindika dance showcases this polychronic orientation in several ways: first, there is an emphasis on relationships. In Dawida culture, relationships are prioritized over strict schedules. Mwazindika dance for treatment is not scheduled to take place at a certain particular calendar day or time but summoned by village elders for the treatment of those who need to be relieved of *pepo* whenever need arises. Second, Mwazindika encompasses the elements of flexibility and adaptability. Time is fluid and adaptable to situations. Mwazindika takes place at night and goes on for many hours. There is no fixed time period on how long it will last and sometimes goes on throughout the night as it is primarily a collective activity that fosters community bonding and social cohesion. Finally, there is the embodiment of *wumweri* or *Ubuntu*. Dawida worldview of *wumweri* focuses on harmonious relationships and community, which is reflected in the polychronic value placed on social interaction over rigid timelines.

The concept of polychronic time is reflected in the high-context communication style of the Dawida people, and Africans in general. Time is perceived as cyclical, tied to natural and social events like seasons, birth, death, and rituals, unlike the linear, forward-marching concept of Western time. It is created by events that have happened, are happening, or are about to happen. What hasn't happened or cannot be immediately conceptualized is considered "no time". The distant future is considered uncertain and therefore does not exist in the same way as the past or present. Therefore, the concept of being "late" or "early" for a function or in life is not so easy to visualize and comprehend.

### **Collectivistic Versus Individualistic Culture**

Collectivistic cultures like the Dawida emphasizes the group over the individual while individualistic cultures such as the U.S, prioritizes individual achievement and accomplishments.

Mwazindika dance is a community event that is summoned by the elders when they sense there is disharmony or dis-ease among the people and hence demands relieving of *pepo* that is disturbing the peace. Mwazindika spirit healing dance is participatory and communal, while Western dances have a stronger tradition of formal, choreographed performance by trained individuals on a stage.

Mwazindika dance begins with a song which is performed by a male soloist and from then on it switches to call and response communication mode. The participatory call and response communication style blurs the line between performer and audience. Audiences are not passive observers but active participants who interact with the dancers. The participatory nature of Mwazindika reinforces social bonds and communal values, which are key to a high-context cultures. The shared experience strengthens group identity and belonging. Dance is a collective activity that solidifies social bonds and a sense of belonging.

The practice of call and response fostered in Mwazindika is evident in speech-making occasions among the Dawida and African people. It is a vital communication technique that transforms public address from a monologue into an engaging, communal dialogue. The call and response mode ensures that public discourse, whether during civic meetings, rituals, or social events, is a shared community experience rather than a top-down delivery of information. This dynamic, interactive style is a fundamental characteristic of Dawida traditions, serving to connect the speaker and the audience, strengthen social bonds, and collectively reinforce cultural values. Unlike passive listeners in Western oratory, the Dawida audience is an active, critical and commentary-making participant. Listeners are not just present; they are essential collaborators who help shape the performance.

### **Polyrhythm Versus Monorhythm**

In contrast to the layered rhythms often found in Mwazindika dance, Western dance forms are fundamentally based on a monorhythmic structure, or a single dominant beat. This approach is central to most Western musical and dance traditions, including pop, classical, and electronic dance music. A monorhythmic structure is built on one core tempo or pulse that performers and dancers follow together. Most Western dancers place emphasis on the downbeats (the strong, first beat of a measure) to stay aligned with the music. For instance, the classic waltz follows a simple 1-2-3 pattern, with the strong beat on "1" (Riley, 2025).

The polychronic nature of Mwazindika dance is best understood through its foundational concepts of polyrhythm. Its music is built on polyrhythms, where two or more contrasting rhythms are layered simultaneously. For example, in a drumming ensemble, a 3-beat pattern may be played against a 2-beat pattern, creating a complex, textured beat. This layered sound creates a rich tapestry that reflects interconnectedness.

During the climax in Mwazindika for treatment, the dance becomes vibrant and highly participatory; dancers get to high energy levels, the drummers increase the tempo, and the air is filled with liveliness and dancers articulate different parts of their bodies to multiple rhythms simultaneously, demonstrating high physical skill. Mwazindika dancers are known for their use of complex polyrhythms, where they move different body parts to different rhythms simultaneously. This polycentric movement style requires an advanced, internal understanding of rhythm that goes beyond simple, singular coordination.

Polyrhythm, the simultaneous use of two or more contrasting rhythms, is a core aspect of African communication styles. Rhythm is not just a musical technique but a language that conveys specific social and spiritual messages and reinforces communal bonds. In Mwazindika, the pitch and rhythm of drums mimic the intonation patterns of speech, allowing drummers to "talk" and transmit messages, stories, and historical narratives across distances

In summary, using Hall's (1981) cross-cultural contexting theory, the study explored the outworking of the high-/low context continuum in Mwazindika spirit healing dance mediated messages to provide native perspectives on how low-context cultures may have little or no shared meanings and understanding of the dance because it is not an event to be displayed on stage but an integral part of the everyday life of Dawida community.

## Conclusion

This research has pointed out the distinction between high-context Mwazindika spiritual healing dance and low-context Western dance, which is replicated in their societies' respective communication styles. High-context cultures (HCC) rely more on indirect, nonverbal cues and shared understanding to convey meaning, making context and relationships central to interpretation. In contrast, in low-context communication (LCC) they depend on direct, verbal communication where meaning is in the words themselves. The study corroborates previous research (Gudykunst et al, 2007) as it indicated Hall's (1981) concept of high- and low-context communication does provide insight into how differences in expectations regarding communication style can render cross-cultural messages ineffective. The lack of shared meanings and understanding of Mwazindika by low-context culture is most probably because it is an inseparable art form that is interwoven into the social fabric of Dawida life unlike Western dances that are presented on a stage for a paying audience, creating a clear separation between performers and spectators. This means that the dance's meaning cannot be understood by observing the movements alone, but by understanding its context within the entire performance.

This is reflected in everyday communication style of high-context Dawida culture: most of the information is in the physical context and very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message.

Similarly, as seen in Mwazindika where there is no clear separation between the dancer and audience, there is no rigid separation between the living and the dead. Mwazindika spirit healing dance involves connecting with ancestors, spirits, or deities. Spiritual connection in Mwazindika is seen as a way to communicate with the spiritual world, honor ancestors and deities, and embody beliefs through movement, music, and rhythm. This connection is not separate from the physical world but is viewed as a holistic embodiment of one's view of the world. In low-context cultures, while not inherently anti-spiritual, dance in these cultures tends to emphasize personal expression and can include spiritual connection as one of many possible interpretations.

The study has attempted to show monochronic cultures are often task-oriented with explicit communication, whereas polychronic cultures are relationship-oriented with high-context communication. Western dance forms can be characterized as monochronic. This aspect is reflected in communication styles of low-context cultures which have a monochronic approach to time as a linear, tangible resource to be scheduled and managed efficiently. Mwazindika dance showcases polychronic orientation where there is an emphasis on relationships. In Dawida culture, relationships are prioritized over strict schedules. Time is perceived as cyclical, tied to natural and social events like seasons, birth, death, and rituals and thus the concept of "late" or "early" maybe difficult for the Dawida community to grasp.

In a collectivistic society like the Dawida, and many African communities, the practice of call and response fostered in Mwazindika is evident in speech-making occasions. Unlike passive listeners in Western oratory, the Dawida audience is an active, critical and commentary-making participant. Listeners are not just present; they are essential collaborators who help shape the performance. This dynamic, interactive style is a fundamental characteristic of Dawida communication styles, serving to connect the speaker and the audience, strengthens social bonds, and collectively reinforces cultural values.

Polyrhythm, the simultaneous use of two or more contrasting rhythms, is a core aspect of Dawida and African communication styles. Rhythm is not just a musical technique but a language that conveys specific social and spiritual messages and reinforces communal bonds. In Mwazindika, the pitch and rhythm of drums mimic the intonation patterns of speech, allowing drummers to "talk" and transmit messages, stories, and historical narratives across distances.

The study recommends further research on the outworking of the HCC/LCC continuum in other forms of Mwazindika spiritual dances that are not for treatment and performed in Taita sub-ethnic tribes of Saghala and Kasighau. This will help lay foundation for further scholarship in the discipline, hence, not only exposing the barriers that militate against shared meanings and understanding of Mwazindika by Westerners but also providing the requisite knowledge and skills to bridge the gap.

Secondly, there are apparent parallels between Mwazindika dance treatment and hypnotherapy. Pekala et al (2023) indicates that hypnotherapy is one of the mind therapy techniques for clients who are experiencing problems within themselves as a result of mental disorders such as trauma by using the hypnosis method. There is need for research to map out the steps in mwazindika spirit healing dance communication processes that induce trance-like states. Mapping out these processes may help reveal more parallels with hypnotherapy and hence find its place in traditional medicine that can be incorporated into mainstream modes of treatment in mental health.

Finally, Mwazindika, more than a spiritual healing dance, intertwines with the daily life of the Dawida community, marking milestones and providing solace in times of calamity. Mwazindika stands as a cultural treasure, a testament to the resilience of the Dawida community. Beyond its captivating dance, songs, and drumbeats, this ancient ritual offers a profound glimpse into their rich heritage, yet faces an urgent need for safeguarding. There is need for in-depth case studies on Mwazindika dances to delineate the imminent threats posed by rural-urban migration, opposition from religious institutions and other dangers so as to put in place sound mitigation plans.

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