

# **IMPILO: ROOTED IN THE LANDSCAPES OF EKHAYENI-EMBODIED LIVES OF RURAL-URBAN MIGRANTS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article builds on my master's study, which examined the attachments of Xhosa-speaking migrants to their rural home, ekhayeni. While the master's study focused on place attachment and belonging, this paper shifts the lens to explore how ekhayeni shapes migrants' *impilo* – their holistic well-being – by examining how the rural home and its surrounding landscapes anchor embodied experiences of *impilo/ukuphila*, which are central to living well and meaningfully. Based on interviews and participant observation with 36 migrants originating from Centane and residing in Cape Town's informal settlements for work, the study shows that *ukuphila* is understood not only in terms of material gain and consumption but as a holistic state of being – one in which individuals feel a sense of belonging, connectedness to self, community, nature, and ancestors. This perspective challenges capitalist notions of well-being that equate life satisfaction only with economic success. It foregrounds the reproduction of more meaningful ways of living – ones that emphasise the immaterial forms of value, such as social ties, collective care, and spiritual and ecological connections. Although they cannot be quantified in economic terms, these forms of value remain central to sustaining the time, space, and conditions necessary for social reproduction and for fuller expressions of human life.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The premise of this paper is to critique contemporary capitalism and neoliberal economics, which have systematically undermined *Impilo*<sup>1</sup> – a holistic conception of well-being that encompasses relational, spiritual, ecological, and ancestral dimensions of life. Rather than serving human needs, capitalism's relentless pursuit of unlimited accumulation and profit has depleted and squandered human vitality, alienating individuals from themselves and from one another, and eroding the relational and affective capacities that are central to being human (Navarro, 1978; Lockhart, 2011; Fraser, 2016; Øversveen, 2022). This alienation extends to the natural world, separating people from ecological systems and ancestral landscapes that once grounded their identities, sustained their livelihoods, and nurtured their spiritual practices – elements that have long been integral to holistic well-being (Claassens, 1980; Stites, 1999; Andrews, 2018; Aayushma, Abbasi-Shavazi, Eigelaar-Meets, Lijadi, Reiter, Striessnig and Lutzet, 2025).

The cumulative effect of capitalism has been the intensification of what scholars now describe as a global polycrisis – marked by ecological destruction, deepening inequality, and widespread social fragmentation—underscoring the urgency of

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<sup>1</sup> Related to a state of physical, mental, spiritual and social wellbeing (Doke and Vilajazi, 1972). The word is also related to terms such as *ukuphilisa* (to heal) or *philile* (whole), *phila* (be of sound mind and good health, but also to have humility), *Impilo* (essence of life/health), *ukuphilisana* (to live in harmony with each other), the word *Impilo* and related embraces both the physical, relational and spiritual aspects of humanity (Edwards, 2010; Edwards 2011).

restoring cosmologies and practices that foreground sustainable co-existence with the natural world (Lawrence, Homer-Dixon, Janzwood, Rockstöm, Renn, Donges, 2024; Janzwood and Homer-Dixon, 2022; Shiva, 2024). In this context, the paper uses African spiritual cosmological thought to foreground *Impilo* not merely as a counterpoint to capitalist notions of productivity and consumption, but as a framework through which to reimagine life, collective care, and ecological harmony in the face of ongoing crises (Asante, 1998; Mzama 2002; Lockhart, 2011; Ohajunwa, Mji and Chimbala-Kalenga, 2021).

Drawing on the experiences of Xhosa-speaking migrants from Centani (in the Eastern Cape) who reside in Cape Town for work, I explore evolving ideas of *Impilo*, particularly those that emphasise relationships with nature and reclaim a connection to each other and to the interwoven physical, emotional, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of life.

### **FROM ALIENATION TO CONNECTION: A BRIEF HISTORY**

This study is situated within the broader historical context of the apartheid racial-capitalist state. Through an extensive legal and administrative engineering, the apartheid system disposed of the black majority much of their land and entrenched a migrant labour system designed to secure a steady supply of cheap Black labour for the mining and commercial agricultural sectors (Wolpe, 1972; Posel and Casele, 2006; Lephakga, 2015; Van Staden, 2024).

These historical processes fundamentally disconnected and alienated people from the landscapes of home (Pheko 1986; Biko 2004; Delport and Lephakga, 2016). In the post-apartheid era, this alienation persists, evident not only in the material deprivation in black communities but also in the social fabric. This resulted in a profound disconnection from others, the environment, and spiritual and cultural landscapes<sup>2</sup> (Stites, 1999; Delport and Lephakga, 2016; Lephakga, 2012).

Claassens' (1980) work on rural land rights and customary tenure demonstrates how forced removals under apartheid disrupted not only people's sense of dignity but also their spiritual attachment to the sacred centres of home, an attachment integral to identity and overall well-being. As she notes, the dispossession of land and prolonged separation from ancestral territories produced a deep and enduring sense of alienation among black South Africans (Stites, 1999). This alienation extended beyond attachments to the home place and to the natural environment itself, as apartheid's racially discriminatory laws systematically severed black people's relationships with nature (Donaldson, 1996). For example, the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953 denied access to beaches and parks (Donaldson, 1996), while the Group Areas Act of 1950 entrenched spatial inequality by forcibly relocating Black communities to ecologically degraded urban peripheries, reserving nature-rich and aesthetically desirable landscapes for white populations (Lockhart, 2011). Although post-apartheid reforms have legally opened access to nature reserves and coastal spaces, the continued commodification of these environments reproduces inequality. Many low-income households remain excluded, not only economically but also in their capacity

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of cultural landscape relates to the multifaceted links between people, place and identity (Cocks, Vetter and Wiersum, 2018). It refers to the landscapes associated with the provision of culturally specific sense of identity and belonging and recognise the inextricable relationship between nature and culture (Coehoorn, 2009; Cocks et al., 2018).

to reclaim and reanimate the spiritual meanings historically embedded in these natural landscapes.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This paper employs the concept of African spirituality as a decolonial ontological approach to the Anthropocene views of the world that dominate Western modern science and economics (Karmakar, 2025). Drawing on the concept of African spirituality, I aim to challenge Western perspectives that dictate what constitutes a well- and meaningfully lived life. Instead, I draw on a decolonial praxis to imagine ways of being - *ukuphila*, grounded in the interconnectedness of all aspects of existence. In this view, human beings, ancestors, nature and the cosmos are inseparable, and the well-being of each dimension directly shapes the others (Mebratu, 1998; Lockhart, 2011; Ohajunwa et al., 2021).

By decolonial, I refer to a move away from colonial, Eurocentric, and capitalist notions that frame economic growth and the expansion of capitalism as the natural path to development and human prosperity (Estrada-Villalta and Adams, 2018; Lies, 2025). As this worldview has destabilised processes of social reproduction and undermined ecological sustainability, thereby eroding the social fabric, accelerating environmental degradation, and generating profound forms of disconnection from others, from the cosmos, from the environment, and from oneself (Lephakga, 2012; Delpont and Lephakga, 2016; Fraser, 2023). Fraser (2023) describes it as “cannibal capitalism”, illustrating how capitalism consumes not only natural resources and labour but also the social, cultural, and political foundations that sustain human life and meaning (Fraser, 2023; Tornel, 2022).

This critique is further supported by research into determinants of well-being and societal flourishing<sup>3</sup> across 22 culturally diverse countries on six continents (VanderWee, Johnson, Bialowolski, Bonhag et al., 2025). The findings reveal that the unending pursuit of wealth accumulation, which is frequently reported in developed countries as an indicator of living well, does not necessarily correlate with flourishing in other aspects of life; as in many cases, participants reported low life meaning and poor-quality relationships despite considerable wealth (VanderWee et al., 2025).

In contrast, African spiritual conceptions of life (*Impilo*) recognise all beings—humans, animals, plants, and the spiritual realm—as interconnected through a shared cosmic energy, reflecting a unified ontology in which life is an integrated whole rather than a hierarchy with humans dominant over nature (Mazama, 2002; Lockhart 2011; Mebratu, 1998). This principle, central to many African traditions, asserts that the spiritual, material, and natural worlds are inseparable (Ashwell, 2010). Therefore, in African cosmology, life is infinite and knows no end, and thus death is simply another form of existence, a rite of passage that allows one to gain another existential status, that of an ancestor (Mzama, 2002). As Credo Mutwa famously observed, the African is taught not to say that a tree is a tree, but it is “I” (Van Lippe-Biesterfeld, 2005), highlighting the deep identification with and reverence for natural elements.

This worldview is not merely symbolic but enacted in practice; for example, in African communities’ rituals often precede the felling of trees, which are regarded as sacred

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<sup>3</sup> The relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good, including the contexts in which that person lives (VanderWee et al., 2025).

conduits for communication with the divine (Mazama, 2002). Building on this cosmological grounding, the Ubuntu philosophy offers a poignant expression of African spirituality, emphasising that human welfare is inextricably linked to relational, ecological, and environmental balance (Soko-de Jong and Maseko, 2022).

The concept of place attachment and belonging is also deeply intertwined with African spiritual cosmologies, reflecting a holistic understanding of well-being in which the wellness of African people is inseparable from their rootedness in the landscapes of their ancestral homelands (Molcar, 2006; Cross, 2015; Ohajunwa et al., 2021; Njwambe et al., 2019). This is because deep-rooted connections to places—imbued with notions of belonging, familiarity, identity, spirituality, and restorative landscapes—enable people to experience *ukuphila*. This experience is continually reaffirmed through meaningful relationships, cultural expression, and ecological ties (Mtuzze, 1999; Masango, 2006; Verhoef and Rathbone, 2015; Aayushma et al., 2025).

As such, African spiritual views are critical in shaping both the conceptualization and practices of holistic wellbeing, as they emphasize harmony, connection, and collective care (Ohajunwa et al., 2021). Among the AmaBomvana people in the former Transkei region, this is reflected in the principle of *ukulungisa*—particularly when one is in the rural home—which denotes a person’s state of balance and harmony grounded in the three-dimensional relationship among humanity, the divine, and nature (Ohajunwa et al., 2021). In this context, the inseparability of the spiritual and material realms is evident with profound spiritual significance, an ‘enchanted’ universe where ancestors, spirits, and the living coexist in ongoing relational reality (Viriri and Mungwini 2009; Attoe, 2019). Land and its surrounding landscapes are thus inseparable from both individual and collective existence, shaping social relationships, livelihoods, health, and wellbeing (Mtuzze, 1999; Masango, 2006; Aayushma et al., 2025).

### **BEYOND WESTERN CONCEPTIONS OF WELLBEING TOWARDS *IMPILO***

Most definitions of wellbeing across philosophy, psychology, health sciences, and economics converge on themes of happiness, life satisfaction, flourishing, and the fulfilment of human capabilities. These aspects are often measured through indicators such as health, income, education, and subjective evaluations of one’s life (Buckingham, 2021; Blas and Kurup, 2010; Han and Chen, 2024). Whether framed as Aristotle’s pursuit of “the good life”, (Karuzis, 2017) the WHO’s holistic definition of health (WHO, 1948), Maslow’s (1999) integration of self-actualization (Steele, 2020), or Nussbaum’s “capabilities approach” (Nussbaum, 2011), these perspectives largely centre on the individual’s state of being and conditions that enable personal growth and satisfaction. Even expanded frameworks, such as the UNDP’s Human Development Index (HDI) (Comim, 2016) or South Africa’s “Everyday Quality of Life” measures (Higgs, 2007), remain grounded in socio-economic, psychological, and health-related dimensions. What is common across them is their focus on the individual as the locus of wellbeing, with material, emotional, and social factors shaping quality of life.

Whereas, in African spirituality, wellbeing (*ukuphila/impilo*) is conceived as a holistic and relational state that extends far beyond individual fulfilment or capitalist measures of wealth attainment (Muxe Nkondo, 2007; Attoe, 2019; Metz, 2023). To live well and meaningfully is to exist in harmony with community, ancestors, land, ecology, and the divine, reflecting an understanding of reality as an indivisible whole in which material

and spiritual dimensions are complementary (Asouzu, 2004; Ijiomah, 2014; Metz, 2023). Central to this worldview is the notion of *vital force* (*a soul*) - a spiritual energy that animates all beings and elements, flowing from the divine and regulating the quality of life (Tempels, Rubbens and King, 1959; Nalwamba and Buitendag, 2017; Attoe, 2019; Agboada, 2024). Wellbeing, therefore, entails practices that nurture and strengthen this life force through rituals, ancestral connection, in community and in alignment with the rhythms of nature (Attoe, 2019).

A person's *Impilo* (life/ wellness) is therefore not defined in isolation but through communal belonging and responsibility, as expressed in Ubuntu and Mbiti's dictum, "*I am because we are*," where individual flourishing is inseparable from the wellbeing of the collective (Mbiti, 1990; Metz, 2023; Muxe Nkondo, 2007). Moreover, the sacredness attributed to all life-forms- humans, animals, plants, and landscapes—underscores an ecological ethic in which meaning derives from maintaining balance, reverence, and continuity across spiritual and material realms (Cumes, 2013; Mandillah and Ekosse, 2018; Attoe, 2019). In this way, African spiritual conceptions of wellbeing challenge individualist and capitalist notions by locating the essence of a good life in collective care, spiritual-ecological harmony, and the continual strengthening of the relationship between matter and spirit.

## **STUDY CONTEXT**

The ethnographic evidence presented in this paper is drawn from a multi-sited study conducted in 2014, which followed circular migrants from Centane to Cape Town and back to Centane during their return home for the Christmas holidays. The research was conducted over an eight-month period, from April to December 2014. A total of 36 migrants—12 women and 24 men, aged 17 to 67—were interviewed.

Centane is located along the coastal region of the Eastern Cape, near Mazeppa Bay, in the southeastern part of the former Transkei homeland (Njwambe et al., 2019; Mquma Municipality IDP, 2025–2026). Administratively, it falls under the Mquma Local Municipality within the Amathole District (Statistics South Africa, 2007). The area has a relatively high rural population density, estimated at 100-300 persons per square kilometre (Mquma Municipality IDP, 2025–2026). Mquma is among the most socioeconomically disadvantaged municipalities in the Eastern Cape, characterised by persistently high levels of poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment (Mquma Municipality IDP, 2025–2026). As of 2023, the unemployment rate in Mquma was 47.23%, considerably higher than the national average of 32.64% (Mquma Municipality IDP, 2025–2026). My research was mainly carried out in the remote villages (*ilali*) of Centane, namely, Nobuswana, officially known as KwaKabakazi, Gqunqe and Gcina see (Figure 1).

Employment opportunities in the region are severely limited, resulting in a heavy reliance on government welfare and indigent support, with social grants serving as the primary source of income for many households (Mquma Municipality IDP, 2025–2026). The area is further characterised by inadequate infrastructure, poor road networks, and limited access to public services and basic resources (Mquma Municipality IDP, 2025–2026). Consequently, migration to urban centres such as Cape Town has long been a critical livelihood strategy for securing cash income. In the post-apartheid era, this trend has been marked by a notable increase in female migration,

reflecting broader shifts in gendered migration patterns (Posel, 2010; Collinson, Tollman and Kahn, 2007).

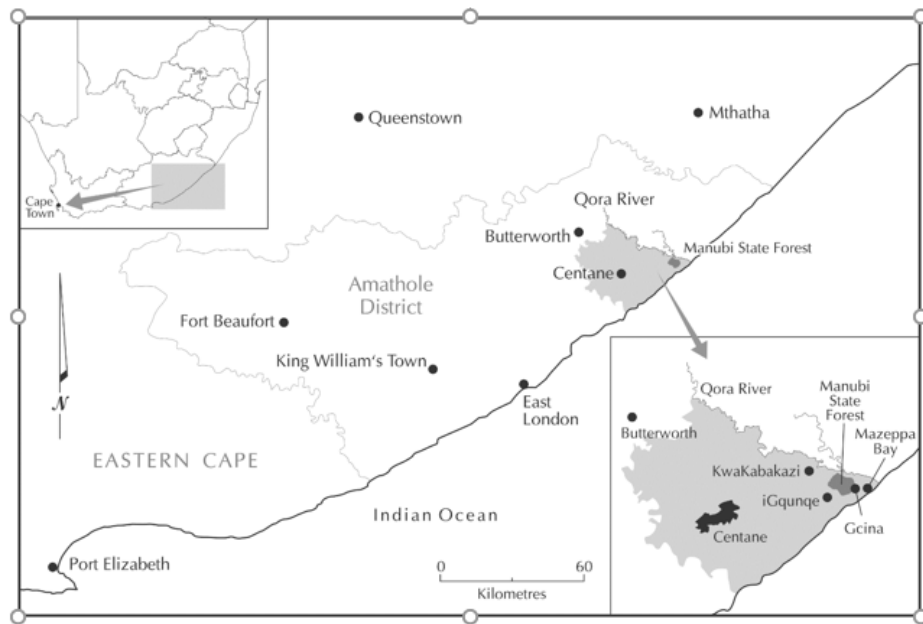


Figure 1: Location of Centane

Fieldwork in Cape Town was conducted among migrants from Centane, primarily residing in Khayelitsha (mainly Site C, as shown in Image 1) and Philippi, with a smaller number located in Delft, Emfuleni, Gugulethu, and Langa. Khayelitsha, meaning “New Home,” is situated on the outskirts of the city, approximately 35 kilometres southeast of central Cape Town, between the northern shoreline of False Bay and the N2 highway (Nleya and Thompson, 2009). Established to accommodate Black migrant workers who moved to the city in search of employment amid rural insecurities (Anderson, Azari and Van Wyk, 2009), Khayelitsha is subdivided into several sections, including Site B, Site C, Green Point, Litha Park, Mandela Park, Makaza, and Harare (Ndingaye, 2005). Apart from more affluent areas such as Litha Park, most sections remain underdeveloped, marked by informal settlements, RDP housing, and overcrowding (Mokoena, 2022).



Image 1: Site C in Khayelitsha

Philippi (see image 2) is in the sandy Cape Flats region and bounded by Lansdowne Road, Duinefontein Road, Vanguard Drive, and the R300 (Adlard, 2009). Rapid population growth in Philippi has contributed to deteriorating living conditions, including the proliferation of informal settlements and heightened overcrowding (Anderson et al., 2009). Across the township areas where this research was conducted, residents were predominantly working class and lived in conditions characterised by shack housing, inadequate water supply, poor sanitation, weak solid waste management, and high levels of crime (Ndingaye, 2005; Marks and Bezzoli, 2001; Harrison, 2018).



Image 2: Phillippi

## **METHODOLOGY**

Data was collected through four site visits. The research began with an initial visit to Centane to obtain contact details of migrants from the area working in Cape Town. This was followed by two field visits to Cape Town and concluded with a return visit to Centane during the December festive season.

Thirty-six (36) migrants—12 women and 24 men, ranging in age from 17 to 67 years were identified using snowball sampling, beginning with contact information obtained during the initial visit to Centane. A research assistant from Centane, along with a contact list of migrants provided by local families, played a key role in locating participants. This approach was crucial for accessing migrants residing in Cape Town's informal settlements, as it would have been difficult to reach them without this initial contact information from 'home'. As a result, the sample primarily reflects a working-class population of rural migrants who maintained strong familial and social ties to their rural homes. Their poor urban living conditions, insecure tenure and low-income forms of work have contributed to a sense of detachment from the city and have discouraged long-term investment in urban areas.

Data was gathered through in-depth interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation across both sites. Participant observation involved participation in everyday activities, such as gathering wood and foraging for medicinal plants in the forest, as well as engaging in cultural and recreational practices, including attending ukwaluko (traditional initiation ceremonies) and visiting natural spaces like forests, rivers, and Mazzape Bay's ocean.

All interviews were conducted in isiXhosa, the first language shared by both the participants and me, and were subsequently translated into English. I analysed the data by coding emerging themes from my fieldwork notes and transcripts, reviewing them in detail to identify recurring patterns across the 36 interviews, and selecting the most prominent and consistent themes for the thesis. These themes were then interpreted using grounded theory, contextualised through literature on place attachment and the South African migration system.

### **Ethical considerations**

Participants shared deep personal and private information, often in one-on-one settings. For instance, they recounted experiences in the forest or by the river, many of which had previously been disclosed only to close friends and relatives. Some participants requested that I switch off my recorder or refrain from taking notes. To maintain trust and uphold the integrity of the research, certain information was not documented or included in the analysis. Confidentiality was further protected using pseudonyms, ensuring that participants could not be identified or implicated.

### **Limitations**

My identity as a young, Black, Xhosa-speaking woman and a labour migrant shaped the fieldwork process, facilitating trust and intimacy with many participants and enabling rich reflections on home, belonging, and cultural practices. However, this positionality also posed limitations: in particular, interactions with older male participants were influenced by cultural norms around gendered communication, which affected the depth and direction of our engagement.

## **FINDINGS**

### ***Asiphilanga Ekapa: We don't feel well in Cape Town***

The legacy of apartheid's spatial planning continues to shape the health and well-being of low-income black communities through the township system, which remains marked by inadequate infrastructure, overcrowding, high crime, and limited access to services, perpetuating social and spatial marginalisation and poor health outcomes (Moghayedi, Mehmood, Michell and Ekpo, 2023). Migrants from Centane in Cape Town reflect these inequalities: with limited formal education, most are confined to precarious, low-paying work in the informal sector. Housing in affluent areas is largely unaffordable, forcing migrants into peripheral townships and informal settlements, where rent is lower, enabling them to send remittances back home. However, this frequently leads to them settling in overcrowded, unsafe, and environmentally hazardous living conditions (Turok, Visagie and Schebaet, 2023).

These material hardships are compounded by psychosocial stressors, including social isolation, emotional strain, and a persistent sense of estrangement from the city. The decline in migrants' health was evident in repeated expressions of persistent fatigue, low motivation, and difficulty engaging in daily activities, symptoms indicative of

underlying depression and psychological distress linked to both physical and emotional strains of urban life. I argue that the homesickness, frequently expressed during interviews, reflected a deeper disconnection from nature, place, and belonging – and a profound “loss of soul,” as described by McCallum (2005).

The psychological toll of living in overcrowded and densely built environments was clearly articulated by Gcobani, a 44-year-old man living with his family of four in a backyard shack in Khayelitsha Site C, who described how the spatial confinement of township life evoked feelings of being trapped, anxiety, and longing for the openness and freedom of rural landscapes:

*The overpopulated and dense housing in Site C made me feel confined. The congested township structures often made me feel enclosed and alone. I dreaded being in the narrow spaces I lived in, and I would often yearn for the open spaces I had access to in the rural areas. Cape Town is like a prison cell, I cannot see beyond the shack next to me, whereas at my rural home there is more green and open spaces. When I am seated on the veranda at home, I can see homesteads at a distance and other villages over the valley.*

Beyond material deprivation, migrants experience profound spiritual and ecological disconnection. Urban environments often limit access to natural spaces, while conservation and commodification practices restrict traditional engagement with the land, thereby undermining cultural and spiritual relationships with nature (Cocks, Dold, and Vetter, 2012). Reflections from migrants, including traditional healers, emphasise how rural landscapes – forests, rivers, and open spaces - supported their spiritual well-being, identity, and a sense of place. The contrast between rural and urban life highlights how Cape Town’s dense, restrictive environment disrupts ecological, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of holistic well-being, illustrating the inseparability of social, environmental, and spiritual factors in shaping life quality.

These dynamics were powerfully captured in the reflections of Simphiwe, a 43-year-old traditional healer who's been staying in Site C, Khayelitsha, for over 20 years. His account reinforces the ways in which urban life in Cape Town reinforces both the commodification of nature and the spiritual disconnect experienced by many migrants:

*I miss a lot about home. When I'm in the Eastern Cape, I don't have to buy anything - as the land provides., I can visit the forest freely - to pick medicinal plants without fear of being arrested by guards—But here in Cape Town, you pay for everything, even with the little money you don't have. Living in a place like this - crowded, with no trees or nature - I really miss the natural landscape of home - the Manubi forest. Back home, when my heart feels heavy, I take walk in the forest or go to the ocean to ease my spirit. Here, you must pay to feel connected to nature.*

These personal accounts align with findings from a research project that analysed data from 2008 to 2017 from the South African National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS), which assessed the mental and physical health effects of rural-urban migration (Capazario and Kollamparambil, 2022). The NIDS study identified social isolation and adverse living conditions as key factors contributing to the deterioration of physical

and mental health among rural–urban migrants, findings that were similarly observed among Centane migrants (Capazario and Kollamparambil, 2022).

Furthermore, consistent with findings among Centane migrants, other existing studies demonstrated a strong link between rural–urban migration and heightened risk of depression, underscoring the psychological costs of adapting to urban life (Chen, 2011; Lu, 2010; Mulcahy and Kollamparambil, 2016; Zhang, Liu, and Wu, 2015).

***Ekhayeni, ukuphila ngokupheleleyo: To live fully and well***

The experiences of urban life, structured by entrenched capitalist logics of alienation and marked by disconnection from nature and social relations, left many internal migrants from Centane feeling physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually unwell. These experiences of disconnection and alienation heightened their attachment to *ekhayeni*—the rural home—which was understood not merely as a geographic location, but as a symbolic and affective space embodying familiarity, comfort, spiritual rootedness, and cultural identity (Njwambe et al., 2019). This is because for many Xhosa speaking rural-urban migrants, referred to their rural home as their *umnombo* (literally, the wick of a paraffin lamp, referring to the way one’s rural home ‘fuels’ a person’s ‘flame’) (Kepe et al., 2008; Njwambe et al., 2019) Since the *inkaba* (umbilical cord) is buried in the rural home, home is also considered a site of physical and emotional rootedness (Kepe et al., 2008), it is also a place where ancestors reside and where the surrounding landscape—encompassing forests, rivers, and the sea—is said to hold restorative and healing properties, thereby being intimately tied to their well-being (Njwambe et al., 2019; Ohajunwa et al., 2021).

Therefore, the rural home, anchored through kinship ties and cultural practices, was described by migrants as a vital component of their well-being. It served as a space where their sense of identity, continuity, and spiritual connectedness was reaffirmed through meaningful relationships and cultural expression.

Asenathi (43-year-old woman) reflected that being at home and in the place of her birth and in the presence of family members transcended into an inner strength:

*Sometimes just being at home where my umbilical cord is buried and where my family is without even doing anything to appease my ancestors, I get a feeling that things will be better, I gain impilo (wellbeing). Encouraging words from elders gives me good luck. People even say if things are not going well for you in the city, it may be because you have not gone home in a while.*

For Busiswa (48-year-old woman), returning home to brew *umqombothi* (traditional African beer) in the presence of family and the warmth of people gathered in the homestead during ceremonial rituals also offered her a profound sense of healing (*ukuphila*), both spiritually and materially (ancestors clearing paths for economic prosperity).

Furthermore, a recurring theme across interviews was the idea of the forest as a place of healing - an association that consistently emerged when participants were asked about what they valued most in the rural landscape. This supported the numerous studies that have shown that contact with nature is associated with a range of mental

and physical benefits (Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown and St Leger, 2006; Townsend and Weerasuriya, 2010, Cocks, Alexander, Mogano and Vetter, 2016).

This sentiment was strongly expressed by Sanelisiwe:

*I feel refreshed and well when I am home, breathing air scented by plants and trees, surrounded by the natural environment (indalo). This allows me to wake up easily at 5 a.m., with my body feeling energised and revitalised by nature.*

Many migrants also reflected the African cosmological belief in interconnectedness, emphasising that humans are part of a greater whole and must maintain reciprocal relationships with nature rather than dominate it. Sizwe, a herbalist, illustrated this ethic by performing rituals of gratitude - such as *leaving coins or white beads - when harvesting medicinal plants*, honouring the spiritual guardians of the forest. Similar practices are documented in Zukulu, Dold, and Raimondo's (2012) study of medicinal plant use in Pondoland. These practices embody a deeply held ecological ethic of care, humility, and respect, reinforcing the sacredness of human-nature relationships and resisting extractive or exploitative approaches to nature.

## CONCLUSION

The rich personal narratives of internal migrants from Centane illustrate how African spiritual conceptions of *Impilo*—which understand human wellbeing as deeply entangled with ancestral, ecological, communal, and spiritual connectedness. These perspectives challenge modern capitalist notions of well-being that prioritise economic success and individual remedies for health. For many rural-to-urban migrants, *Impilo* represents a holistic state of being rooted in their ancestral lands of *ekhayeni*, which, when they are there, enables them to foster collective healing, restoration, care, and cultural affirmation.

In this sense, *ekhayeni* serves not only as a site of belonging but also as a form of resistance to the dehumanising and fragmenting effects of modern-day capitalism, offering a space where individuals are not reduced to units of labour but are recognised as whole, soulful beings capable of feeling, intuition, spiritual and cultural expression, and deep connection with nature and community.

Conceptions of *Impilo* thus prompt a re-evaluation of wellbeing and the criteria for assessing a quality life, which go beyond capitalist metrics and the overemphasis on work and individual material wealth accumulation. Instead, we need to foreground the importance of practices that sustain and reproduce life, such as nurturing social relationships and communal ties, resting, carving out time for reproductive care, maintaining emotional and spiritual well-being through healing practices and ancestral connection, and protecting ecological systems through sustainable resource use and alignment with the natural cycle. This allows us to attune to the rhythms of all life forms, fostering a sense of flow and interconnectedness rather than striving for control.

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