

Supervision and the more-than-human: the role of spirituality in women's doctoral education

Studies in
Graduate and
Postdoctoral
Education

Halima Namakula^{ORCID}, Jiao Tuxworth, Catherine Manathunga^{ORCID},
Maria M. Raciti^{ORCID}, Wacango Muguro Kimani^{ORCID}, Jing Qi,
Beatrice Akala, Hinekura Smith, Gina Wisker^{ORCID} and Shireen Motala
(Author affiliations can be found at the end of the article)

Received 9 December 2025
Revised 11 June 2026
Accepted 12 August 2026

Abstract

Purpose – There is a wealth of literature about factors that support the success of doctoral candidates, yet the support that doctoral candidates receive from more-than-human, spiritual elements is rarely addressed. Emerging evidence suggests that spiritual, ancestral and religious practices and beliefs can provide support to doctoral candidates. Research is now shedding light upon the role of spirituality in doctoral education, particularly its supportive influence for women candidates. This paper aims to investigate the complex role spirituality played in the doctoral education journeys of women candidates.

Design/methodology/approach – Using feminist and postcolonial/decolonial theories, this multi-sited case study interviewed 47 South African, Kenyan and Australian women of colour doctoral candidates to explore the entangled experiences of gender, race and class in doctoral education.

Findings – This study traces the complex ways in which spirituality was experienced by these women of colour during their doctoral education journey. While some participants drew strength from their spiritual practices, others foregrounded the demands of religious and cultural rituals and their movement from organised religion towards a form of feminist spirituality.

Research limitations/implications – This research has significant implications for doctoral education, particularly by demonstrating that spirituality operates not as a private belief but as a collective and epistemic practice that underpins resilience, identity formation and ethical research engagement in doctoral journeys.

Originality/value – This study offers a tri-country, nuanced and multidimensional analysis of how more-than-human elements shape doctoral education. Focusing on spirituality, this study challenges doctoral education approaches that are only framed by secular rationality and calls for greater recognition of spiritual dimensions as sources of support.

Keywords Doctoral education, Spirituality, Women of colour, More-than-human

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Globally, doctoral education pedagogies and policies have predominantly been shaped by secular frameworks that marginalise spirituality, ancestral traditions and religious beliefs and practices (Montelongo and Lenzy, 2023). Such secular rationality is rooted in Western philosophies, which emphasise the Cartesian division between mind and body and uphold a



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Studies in Graduate and
Postdoctoral Education
Emerald Publishing Limited
2398-4686
DOI 10.1108/SGPE-12-2025-0204

strong commitment to secularism (Gózdź, 2022). Within this modernist Western and Northern paradigm, the primary aim of doctoral education is to cultivate a disembodied intellect that privileges reason, rationality, individualism and autonomy (Johnson *et al.*, 2000). Johnson *et al.* (2000) highlighted that Enlightenment conceptions of the autonomous, masculine doctoral scholar rejected emotions, embodiment and human dependency, attributes historically associated with femininity.

Recently, feminist and poststructuralist critiques of the exclusion of the body have challenged the enduring influence of European Enlightenment legacies in doctoral education (Cover, 2023). Scholars increasingly emphasise the significance of emotion and irrationality within doctoral education (Waters *et al.*, 2020). For instance, Herman (2010) used her own doctoral experience to advocate for greater acknowledgment of emotions in research and to contest the artificial separation between cognition and emotion in doctoral studies. Aitchison and Mowbray (2013) examined the emotional labour experienced by women doctoral candidates, particularly in academic writing and managing family relationships. Burford (2017, p. 24) conceptualised doctoral education as an “affective-political practice”, examining the influence of affect and irrationality and using queer theory to explore “affective agency” and the embodied experience of thinking-feeling.

In this paper, we investigate the role of more-than-human elements, with a particular emphasis on spirituality, in doctoral education. We review key arguments in the literature concerning spirituality in doctoral education. The analysis then extends existing understandings by illustrating how spiritual rituals and beliefs influence the doctoral experiences of women of colour in South Africa, Kenya and Australia. It is important to point out that this study is part of a larger research project exploring the intersectional experiences of black, First Nations and transcultural women in these countries. The focus on women reflects the composition of the research team, which included black, First Nations, transcultural and white women who have either experienced or observed the distinct and intersecting challenges faced by women doctoral students in balancing family, work and academic responsibilities, challenges less commonly encountered by men (Mirick and Wladkowski, 2020). Future research will address the experiences of men of colour. Using an intersectional theoretical framework and an interview-based qualitative methodology, the study finds that more-than-human spirituality provides strength and resilience for women candidates and graduates as they navigate the epistemological and ontological demands of doctoral work alongside multiple roles as mothers, partners and workers (Richards, 2019). The paper proceeds through a literature review, methodology, five thematic findings, discussion and conclusions.

Background

More-than-human spirituality in doctoral education

The term “more-than-human” denotes presences, forces and relationships that extend beyond human-to-human interactions. David Abram (1996) introduced this concept to articulate the interconnectedness of human existence with a broader world of beings, energies and relations. Education scholars, including Rosiek *et al.* (2024) and Dowling *et al.* (2017), have expanded this framework to challenge anthropocentric assumptions prevalent in knowledge production and learning. Within the context of this study, the more-than-human encompasses ancestors, faith, prayer, land and community memory embodied by doctoral candidates throughout their academic journey. This perspective aligns with the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which maintains that individual existence and experiences are shaped by the spiritual world and the wisdom of ancestors (Mugumbate and Naami, 2024; Ikpeh and Federico Awi, 2025). Thus, the concept of “more-than-human spirituality” in doctoral

education aims to acknowledge these presences, which are often overlooked by conventional supervision models.

An expanding body of research on spirituality in doctoral education is beginning to recognise these invisible presences (Nattress, 2015). This shift reflects a broader understanding that candidates' meaning-making, well-being and scholarly identity are often rooted in more-than-human relationality (Hanley and Sant, 2025). Spirituality is conceptualised as a complex construct involving the soul, transcendence and relational consciousness, characterised by a meaningful connection with significant others and the wider universe (Pandya, 2021). For many doctoral candidates, this more-than-human consciousness encompasses ancestral presences and other non-human kin, providing grounding and continuity during periods of displacement and disorientation (Pater, 2024).

Pandya's (2021) research, for example, demonstrates that spiritual rituals and creative practices operate as stabilising mechanisms that help migrants sustain coherence and belonging. Such rituals function not merely as personal coping but as a relational scaffold for doctoral candidates' engagement with their research.

Spirituality, identity and ancestral relationality in doctoral education

Several doctoral theses have documented the supportive role of spirituality for women candidates, identifying it as a stabilising source of strength, identity, community and belonging (Richards, 2019; Bell, 2025). This role is particularly emphasised in research with women of colour, who draw on spiritual practices to sustain motivation and resist isolation (Parker et al., 2024). In these contexts, spirituality operates not as a peripheral influence but as a relational and epistemic resource supporting the doctoral journey (Bufford et al., 2018). Additional research, such as that by Sun and Trent (2020), maps the intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual dimensions of the doctoral journey and demonstrates how candidates reconstruct their scholarly identities in interactive ways. Studies conducted in Türkiye similarly illustrate the intertwined economic and spiritual support provided by family networks as candidates navigate the demands of doctoral study (Gunbey and Karakütük, 2024).

Doctoral education often under-recognises the significance of ancestors, spirituality and more-than-human relationality in shaping postgraduate researchers' experiences (Wiradyuri et al., 2024). Manathunga (2023) documented numerous accounts of Indigenous (First Nations) and transcultural doctoral scholars who access ancestral knowledge through rituals, dreams and spiritual practices. These practices guide both their research and their broader sense of purpose. Manathunga (2023) urged doctoral education leaders and policymakers to recognise candidates' spiritual support needs and to provide access to elders, traditional knowledge holders, chaplains, religious leaders, counsellors or spiritual community groups.

Other research indicates that Māori doctoral candidates in Aotearoa New Zealand describe how their *tūpuna* (ancestors) support the integration of ancestral knowledge within their research (Grant and McKinley, 2011). Devos and Somerville (2012) recounted the experience of a Cambodian doctoral scholar in Australia who relied on memory to transcribe and translate her grandmother's memoir, documenting her experiences as a member of the Cambodian Royal Family killed during the Pol Pot regime. These accounts demonstrate that ancestral presence is not merely metaphorical but constitutes a lived epistemological relationship that many candidates draw upon during periods of uncertainty, transition and scholarly development (Wehrheim, 2023).

Research gap and question

The literature is increasingly recognising the emotional and social dimensions of doctoral life (Cotterall, 2013). However, far less attention has been given to more-than-human spiritual dimensions that shape doctoral journeys (Morton, 2020). Existing work on women's doctoral experiences offers important insights (Richards, 2019; Bell, 2025; Grimes *et al.*, 2023), but it is drawn mainly from contexts such as Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Türkiye and the USA, with notably limited engagement with African doctoral experiences. Many research gaps remain, including how doctoral candidates draw on ancestors, spiritual practices and more-than-human relationality to sustain coherence, agency and meaning across demanding doctoral journeys. This study, therefore, asks:

Q1. How does more-than-human spirituality shape the doctoral experiences and meaning-making of black, First Nations and transcultural women?

Methodology*Methodological positioning*

This study is grounded in feminist and postcolonial methodologies that address the layered complexity of participants' doctoral trajectories. A feminist methodological stance affirms participants' narratives, lived experiences and positionality as legitimate forms of knowledge, challenging androcentric conventions that continue to structure doctoral research (Spitzer and Haley, 2023). A postcolonial orientation facilitates a critical examination of how Eurocentric knowledge regimes and ongoing neo-colonial pressures influence doctoral education (Mbembe, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). In addition, Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional lens is used to analyse how participants' experiences arise from the interplay of race, gender, culture and geopolitical location, rather than from any single axis of identity. This methodological framing enables an analysis attentive to both the structural conditions that constrain women's doctoral journeys and the forms of agency enacted within and against these conditions.

Research design

The research project used a multi-sited case study approach (Audet and d'Amboise, 2001) to leverage rich, narrative-driven methodologies to record and analyse the lived experiences of black, First Nations and transcultural women in three. Jenkins *et al.* (2018) explained that multisite qualitative case studies enhance the transferability and credibility of findings by allowing for cross-site comparisons while preserving the unique contextual insights of each site. This approach enabled the research to foreground both the commonalities and divergences in participants' experiences across varied socio-political and institutional landscapes (Jenkins *et al.*, 2018).

The research design is underpinned by the recognition that doctoral experiences are shaped not only by academic and institutional practices but also by gendered, racialised and cultural positionings. Central to the design is a vision for doctoral supervision and support that encompasses both visible and hidden curricula (Elliot *et al.*, 2020). The study foregrounds the significance of transcultural epistemologies, Indigenous knowledge systems rooted in spirituality and more-than-human relations (Manathunga, 2023; Santos, 2014, 2018; Nakata, 2010).

Data collection, participants and analysis

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with women currently enrolled in, or recently graduated (within five years) from, doctoral studies. These interviews were designed to elicit detailed life stories, challenges and support systems encountered throughout the doctoral journey. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who identified as black, First Nation or transcultural women and who were currently enrolled in or had recently completed their doctoral studies.

The exclusive focus on women was guided by a commitment to foregrounding the experiences of those most historically marginalised within doctoral education (Spitzer and Haley, 2023). Gender influences not only how doctoral candidates experience spirituality but also the specific forms of burden, expectation and epistemic exclusion encountered within academic institutions. Forty-seven participants were interviewed across three countries: South Africa (19 black doctoral candidates and graduates, including African, Coloured and Indian); Kenya (12 women from diverse ethnic backgrounds); and Australia (4 First Nations women and 12 transcultural women). Participants were recruited from a range of institutional types, including research-intensive and comprehensive universities in South Africa and Australia (Keane *et al.*, 2023). Initial participants were identified through professional networks and institutional contacts in each country, with subsequent participants recruited via snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013). In Australia, two First Nations research team members identified and contacted relevant potential participants (Smith *et al.*, 2023).

The study adhered to ethical guidelines in all three countries, including respect for Indigenous knowledge protocols, informed consent, confidentiality and cultural sensitivity (Keane *et al.*, 2023). Pseudonyms are used in this paper to protect participants' identities. Given the potentially emotional nature of the data, support options were offered to participants. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Transcript coding was conducted collaboratively by the research team. Initial codes were generated from the data, then shared and discussed among team members. Cross-national joint coding sessions facilitated the development, refinement and consolidation of themes. This iterative, team-based coding process enhanced the analytical rigour of the study and enabled within-study comparison (Forbay and Mnguni, 2024). The findings presented in this paper emerged from this collective analytical process.

Limitations

We acknowledge the complexities inherent in conducting transnational research across diverse contexts. Throughout the study, we engaged in continuous reflexivity, critically examining how our positionalities influenced both the research process and its interpretation. Particular attention was devoted to power dynamics present in cross-cultural interviews and the representation of knowledge. Regular team debriefings facilitated critical reflection on how our nationality, race and academic positions shaped each stage of the study (Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021). To address these dynamics, we implemented a semi-structured, dialogic interview approach, enabling participants to direct the conversation towards issues they deemed significant (Kvale, 2007). We maintained transparency regarding our research objectives and procedures (Jacobs *et al.*, 2019). In reporting our findings, we prioritised participants' own words and metaphors to authentically represent their lived experiences (Smith, 2021). Decolonial principles informed our research design and analysis at multiple levels (Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021). For instance, interview questions were crafted to affirm participants' spiritual and cultural knowledge systems, rather than to interrogate them (Smith, 2021). We acknowledge, however, that this study was not conceived as an Indigenist research project (Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021;

Washington, 2023) and that participants were not included as co-authors or co-analysts. We identify Indigenist co-designed research as a critical direction for future inquiry in this field (Campbell-Chudoba, 2024).

Findings

This section presents findings on how black, First Nations and transcultural women in South Africa, Kenya and Australia experienced spirituality during their doctoral studies. Spirituality emerged as a complex theme across all three national contexts, serving many students as a critical motivation and survival strategy. These students described prayer, faith, spiritual congregations and support of spiritual communities not merely as individual beliefs, but as vital sources of knowledge, care and support. Australian Indigenous students also emphasised how connection to Country and to Indigenous communities also served as important spiritual sources of strength. It is noted, however, for one transcultural woman, performing religious and cultural rituals in the first year after her marriage, delayed her further studies. In other cases, some participants moved beyond organised religion to wider practices of feminist epistemic orientations and ethical grounding.

Theme #1: Prayer and faith as embodied coping strategies. In each of the three settings, participants spoke about prayer and faith as fundamental avenues of emotional and spiritual support amidst academic precarity and personal dislocation. For many participants, prayer was not separate from their doctoral studies but intertwined with it as an everyday survival and motivational practice.

Kali and Nancy from Kenya illustrated how prayer helped them manage stress during their PhD journey. Their narratives indicated that prayer was framed as a practice that helped them deal with their emotional states, transforming anxiety into a sense of divine assurance. Kali reflected:

A PhD is not an easy thing [...] I committed to prayer, especially on the days when I was presenting, because you don't know which way it may go. I just trusted and believed in God [...] He would take me through this journey.

Her comment highlights how prayer was not passive but an active strategy for managing uncertainty, particularly during academic moments like presentations. Kali further explained how spirituality helped her balance multiple responsibilities:

Even with all these challenges, my son has special needs, being away from home, and a lot of workload. But prayer calms you. It just makes you not worry [...] it makes you feel happy – knowing that God is in control.

Nancy expanded on this by describing prayer as an intervention in her academic work: “Sometimes I pray about a challenge in my academic work [...] It's hard to explain, but it works [...] It's a very real and important part of our journeys”. Nancy's comment suggests that for some participants, spirituality operated beyond the boundaries of conventional academic support systems, providing solutions that were perceived as divinely orchestrated.

In South Africa, Teresia, Fortunate and Winnet also highlighted the role of prayer in supporting them during challenging moments. Teresia noted, “I always prayed to God to give me the strength [...] sometimes I cried to Him because I felt alone, but I knew I had to keep going”. Fortunate added, “You are going into a boxing match – That's how I'm trying to look at the PhD [...] But it's just your faith that tells you, just go to make it”. Winnet also indicated:

The whole PhD as a process is so stressful [...] without anything to hope in, the whole thing would crumble [...] I think much of it goes back to my belief in God.

Their words emphasise that spirituality functioned as a psychological anchor, providing motivation and resilience during periods of intense academic pressure.

Meanwhile, two transcultural participants in Australia highlighted how prayer helped them navigate difficult periods as international students. Both accounts illustrate how spirituality and prayer functioned as essential sources of emotional resilience, providing participants with a sense of peace and strength. Elina recalled, “In terms of my study, my religion gives me peace [...] I’m a Christian and I worship, it really gives me peace and helped me to get through my difficult times”.

Elina also explained how her religious belief serves as a mechanism for resistance during her PhD journey:

As Christians we believe that we are precious because we’re son or daughter of God – That made me really relieved. I use that energy, trying to have that positive solitude and spend a lot of time with myself and doing things, prioritise my wellbeing and my study.

Her reflection illustrates how faith functioned as a protective force, enabling her to resist external pressures and maintain focus on her scholarly and personal priorities.

Priscilla reflected on a particular challenging period during her doctoral journey:

After a few months (of my PhD), my dad passed away - I couldn’t emotionally accept it [...] I remember that was a very difficult period of time. This led my family to the religion. [It helps] we become stronger emotionally. I feel like that’s how I get through all of this.

Narratives from seven participants across three countries demonstrate how prayer and faith served as both emotional regulators and enabling factors in their doctoral studies. Further evidence indicates that participants saw prayer and faith not only as religious practices but also as embodied practices and emotional strategies for managing academic stress and uncertainty.

Theme #2: Spiritual congregations beyond organised religion. Many participants drew upon spiritual resources that transcended formal religious doctrines, particularly through culturally hybrid practices that wove together personal devotion, cultural and communal rituals and connection to Country. These syncretic spiritualities often offered more nuanced support than institutional religions could.

In Kenya, Rose acknowledged “There’s something I think they don’t acknowledge in Christian beliefs [...] spirituality, things that people do”. She suggests a lived spirituality exceeding doctrinal boundaries, where everyday rituals sustain academic resilience. Vanessa from South Africa highlighted the integration of gender and spirituality in navigating her doctoral journey: “I also saw myself as a female [...] being emotional and all of that also had that strength to carry on”. Her spiritual identity became a resource for navigating both academic challenges and gendered expectations. Prama, a transcultural participant in Australia with a Nepalese background, described how participating in religious and cultural festivals reinforced both spiritual and social connections:

I wouldn’t say I am religious to that extent. I do believe in celebrating our greatest religious festivals [...] Back home I had to do it because I was born there, and the culture and the religion are an important aspect of our social lives. When I was back home for my data collection [...] I went to temples and did every cultural rituals – it’s the social connection that uplifts me.

Her narrative illustrates how cultural and religious festivals can serve as both spiritual grounding and social support, even for those who do not consistently identify with formal religious practice. This aligns with broader trends in Australia, where the proportion of people identifying outside traditional religious institutions is increasing, particularly among

younger cohorts, with many instead describing themselves as holding spiritual beliefs without adhering to an organised religion ([Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022](#)).

For Indigenous Australian participant, Alice, cultural-spiritual practices were deeply embedded in identity and connection to Country. Alice highlighted that spending time on Country played a significant and embodied role during her PhD journey, serving as a source of spiritual coping and strength: “Going and spending time on Country – feeling strong in culture is the most probably grounding thing that’s probably going to get me through”. She also described the importance of collective cultural-spiritual practices: “We light a big fire and have a corroboree [1]. We all sit around and we [...] also just go for walks – we go walking on Country together”.

Her reflection illustrates how faith in cultural identity and connection to Country functioned as a profound source of resilience, providing grounding and spiritual support in navigating challenges. This also aligns with the previous research showing that other more-than-human guides from Country, including trees, wind, animals and other natural entities, often hold greater significance than human guidance ([McKnight, 2016](#)).

Theme #3: Spiritual communities as forms of informal supervision networks and relational networks. The isolation of doctoral study was frequently mitigated through spiritual communities that provided both emotional sustenance and assistance, often filling gaps left by formal academic structures. These networks became lifelines, offering support that extended beyond conventional academic advising or institutional resources.

Two participants from Kenya highlighted the positive roles of religious communities and familial spiritual bonds in encouraging them during their PhD journeys. Rose explained, “My church community was very supportive – [that’s] what has kept me determined”. Awinja suggested, “Sometimes we feel like giving up – [that’s when] you may need to go to your pastor”.

At the same time, South African narratives revealed intensive forms of communal care. For example, Ntombi recounted how her church members intervened during a COVID-19 infection: “Three colleagues from church [...] when I fell sick in 2020 it was really bad because it was when COVID was at its peak. They helped me quarantine for safety”.

Ntombi’s account demonstrates how spiritual communities actively safeguarded both health and academic progress, creating a support system that simultaneously addressed bodily and intellectual needs. In addition, Gugu highlighted another dimension of this support through her pastor’s role: “My pastor was very supportive. He believed in this journey more than anyone else, even more than my husband”. Here, the pastor as a spiritual authority figure provided validation that sometimes surpassed familial encouragement.

Carolina’s experience added a cross-cultural dimension: “I found a group of Nigerian sisters who surrounded me in prayers [...] the prayers of those ladies that surrounded me and God really just [...] saw me through”. For international students such as Carolina, spiritually grounded communities functioned as culturally familiar anchors in foreign academic environments, easing the dislocation of studying abroad. She further reflected:

Because I struggled so much [...] the byproduct of that struggle was it deepened my faith because I could see there were things out of my control, and I needed God to intervene. So, I found a group of Nigerian sisters who surrounded me in prayers – it worked. At the end of the day, I was able to finish.

Vatiswa described how her church community provided connections and role models:

At my church, there were some people that were lecturers – they [studied] their PhD. So that kind of made you [...] they sometimes they have like that academic evening, and everyone wears their coats and you just like – you see them and you’re like, wow.

This spiritual connection provided Vatiswa with a form of academic scaffolding, blending emotional reassurance with practical preparation.

Similarly, the Indigenous Australian participants in this study highlighted the spiritual significance of community, describing it as a source of inspiration and a sacred responsibility that supported and motivated them as they navigated their doctoral journeys. Caitlyn reflected: “It’s just I feel so inspired by my community [...] That’s how it’s shaped where I’m at so far”.

For Caitlyn, this inspiration became a form of spiritual responsibility, shaping her research and reaffirming her role as a conduit for community knowledge and care. Cherie also articulates this connection:

I felt like I was spirit led – I was always involved in community engagement and cultural practices because I loved that - there was a group, a movement of women that united communities to discuss bigger things, and [...] they’re united through cultural practice.

For many Indigenous and transcultural participants in this study, spirituality was not separate from academic life but integral to it, embodied in community gatherings, women’s movements and cultural practices. Alice noted: “Rebuilding and reconnecting with my Ngarabal mob has probably been [...] something inside me that is really helping me feel strong in myself, so I would say culture and community”.

Echoing Vatiwa from Kenya, three Indigenous participants emphasised the spiritual dimension of role models within their communities. They not only drew inspiration from existing Elders and leaders but also felt called to serve as role models for the next generation. Caitlyn shared:

A lot of the Indigenous women that I’ve come to know, they’re older and I feel supported by them and they’re nurturing and they have the maternal qualities that have inspired me sort of and made me want to be that for other people.

Alice added, “it’s because of the Elder Scholar and how we have Uncle [X] and this culture really is grounded in the Institute, so I feel really safe and supported”. She concluded her interview by reflecting:

I’m just thinking about the future generations – I’m thinking about my experience and I’m like – where is it that other [...] Indigenous scholars coming through, could use that support to get them to this point.

Irene also emphasised the power of role models as part of a spiritual legacy that she hopes to extend: “I’ve had a few strong women around me who have been very supportive – a lot of the Elders are very helpful”.

Rebecca, a transcultural participant, further stressed the importance of representation in her community:

Having other women around you and being able to see is the first thing that is really important. If you do see other people who share your life experience, then that is going to drive you further. It’s going to be more inspiring, it’s going to encourage you to push harder.

For Prama, another transcultural participant in Australia, spirituality facilitated both emotional and practical support, creating a safe space for her. She explained:

For our spiritual and mental health, I think we have made that connection and we do help each other at times financially or even in the writing process. Those who have done their PhD or those who are continuing their studies, we do appreciate everyone.

These narratives illustrate what [Manathunga \(2023\)](#) theorises as “supervisory constellations”, reframed here through a spiritual lens. These networks offered a sense of

belonging and validation that many participants lacked in their supervisory relationships, emphasising the need to reimagine supervision as distributed, relational and spiritually attuned. Furthermore, participants' accounts suggest a broader ecology of supervision, where spiritual and communal relationships function alongside or in place of formal institutional structures, reflecting what [Manathunga \(2023\)](#) describes as "spiritual ecologies" of supervision.

Theme #4: Spirituality as a feminist epistemic orientation and ethical grounding. For many participants, doctoral research was not simply an academic pursuit but also a spiritual epistemic calling. Their spiritual, cultural and gender identities shaped their research questions and the feminist ethical commitments that guided them. Spirituality served as both an epistemic and moral compass, providing participants with the courage to pursue work they found meaningful.

Anita and Ruby, both transcultural participants in Australia, illustrated how religious belief and curiosity shaped their epistemic orientations. Anita drew on Buddhist philosophy as a subtle yet meaningful lens through which to approach her research: "I'm a Buddhist – I would use some of the philosophical perspective and viewpoint to understand some of my research topic emphasis". Ruby explained how her doctoral inquiry was motivated by a desire to challenge stereotypes and deepen cultural and religious understanding: "My curiosity drove me to investigate religion – It sort of really helped me understand and have a better appreciation for the reasons behind certain cultural beliefs and religious beliefs".

Other transcultural participants in Australia explained how their cultural values and community beliefs shaped the fields of study they chose to pursue. Rebecca reflected: "I know that one of the reasons that I got involved in education in the first place was for young migrant girls. To show them that this is possible". Anu emphasised: "Education is really very important in my culture – We value knowledge and learning".

For the Indigenous Australian participants in this study, spirituality was deeply entangled with cultural identity and belief and for most, it was central to their motivation to pursue research. Caitlyn expressed how her identity as a Nyoongar woman guided every aspect of her academic life:

Being a Nyoongar woman. I want to bring that connection into everything I do [...] I feel like as someone that takes on a nurturing role as a woman, as an Indigenous woman, it's important for me to be able to bring that into my research.

Alice emphasised how affirming her identity as an Aboriginal Ngarabal woman reshaped her doctoral journey:

Believe in that I am an Aboriginal Ngarabal woman [...] when I started telling myself that and believing it and starting to really understand what that meant, then that has shaped the entire doctoral journey.

Irene underscored her responsibility: "Indigeneity and gender is a huge thing [...]. I want the next generation to feel comfortable in their own skin, to feel that their culture is important and it's respected". Cherie added that belief and cultural advocacy were inseparable from academic orientation: "It comes down to that avocation and also that belief, and then you can progress".

In addition, spirituality also shaped participants' personal ethics and values. Cherie highlighted the ethical responsibilities that accompany her identity and role as an Indigenous woman, guiding her conduct within academic contexts:

There's actually an ethical responsibility – that ethics is drummed into us from the minute that we're born. As First Nation writers, that's probably the biggest thing to begin, is how I am

representing my kin and my family - I'm the Aboriginal girl. I'm going to conduct myself in a matter that will still advocate for our families and our communities.

These reflections affirm spirituality as an epistemic framework that is not private or individual but rather deeply embodied and collectively situated. The reflection supports Santos's (2014) concept of epistemologies of the South and the assertion that doctoral knowledge is often forged through spiritual, moral and relational labour.

Theme #5: Religious and cultural rituals delaying further study. There was, however, one counterpoint instance in these data that is important to acknowledge briefly. This instance occurred when religious and cultural rituals delayed the further study of a Nepalese student. Prama talked about the various "other responsibilities, other rituals and rites that I need to do within a year of my marriage". She married after completing her undergraduate study and was focused on "being at home and tending to the household chores [...] There was a whole other level of relationships and engagement after my marriage that I needed to take care of". Having completed these cultural rituals, Prama and her husband then began planning to study in Australia.

Discussion

The findings indicate that, for the women of colour in this study, spirituality constituted an essential component of their doctoral journey, functioning as a critical and more-than-human form of support that shaped their experiences. This perspective challenges the dominant secular-rational model of doctoral education, which is grounded in the Cartesian mind-body dualism and the Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous "Man of Reason" (Hopwood and Paulson, 2011; Johnson *et al.*, 2000). The participants' narratives align with feminist, postcolonial and transpersonal perspectives, which conceptualise doctoral education as an embodied, affective and deeply relational process (Burford, 2017; Hartelius *et al.*, 2007).

The use of prayer and faith (Theme #1), as described by participants such as Kali, Teresia and Elina, illustrates that spirituality functioned as an embodied coping strategy rather than a separate belief system. Prayer was integrated into their daily routines, enabling them to demonstrate agency in managing "emotional overload and emotional dissonance" (Aitchison and Mowbray, 2013, p. 868). This spiritual practice aligns with Hussain *et al.*'s (2025, p. 212) identification of spirituality as "an organic aspect of the scholarly journey", representing a form of resilience that supports candidates throughout the challenges of doctoral study. These findings support Herman's (2010) argument for recognising the role of emotions in research and their impact on student progress. For participants such as Kali and Elina, prayer served as an active method of emotional regulation, transforming anxiety into "divine assurance" and fostering a "sense of peace". This process exemplifies what Ahmed (2012) describes as affective survival, or the capacity to persist within structures not designed for their inclusion. As Hussain *et al.* (2025) noted, such spiritual resilience demonstrates the agency these women exercised in navigating their doctoral journeys (Pedwell, 2012).

Another significant finding concerns the role of spiritual communities, including churches, cultural groups and networks of "sisterhood," which operated as informal supervisory constellations (Manathunga, 2023; Richards, 2019) and as "nested communities of support" extending beyond the formal academic environment (Berry, 2017; Themes #2 and 3). These networks provided forms of support that the formal supervisor-student relationship sometimes could not offer (Snyder, 2014). This observation is consistent with Hussain *et al.*'s (2025) assertion that "reliance on spiritual resilience is an organic aspect of the scholarly journey" (p. 212), a process clearly embodied by the participants in this study. For instance, Ntombi received support from her church members during quarantine, Carolina

benefited from her “sisters” who prayed for her during her PhD and Gugu found validation from her pastor, all exemplifying the function of these support networks (Burford, 2017). Similarly, Grimes *et al.* (2023) found that such communities enabled “the powerful art of truth-telling that we show up in this work as our full selves” (p. 145) among black women scholars. These findings challenge the neoliberal, individualist logic of the academy (Burford, 2017) by fostering spaces of collective care and relationality (Themes #2 and 3). For Australian participants such as Alice and Caitlyn, this relationality extended to “Country” and community as sacred sources of strength, reflecting McKnight’s (2016) concept of “embodied knowledge”, where the land itself serves as a teacher (Theme #2). It is also important to recognise that Christianity a faith some participants draw upon has historically been associated with the suppression of Indigenous spiritual practices that some participants now reclaim (Kwok, 2005; Gebara, 1999), illustrating what postcolonial feminist theologians describe as the negotiated, creative reworking of inherited religious traditions by colonised peoples. This tension enriches, rather than diminishes, the analysis.

Furthermore, spirituality functioned as both an epistemic orientation and a moral compass, directly influencing research purpose and practice (Keane *et al.*, 2023) (Theme #4). Although cultural and religious rituals may sometimes delay academic progress (Theme #5), participants’ reflections reveal that their spiritual and cultural identities were integral to their doctoral journeys, shaping their research processes. For example, Anita’s research was unconsciously framed by Buddhist philosophy, while Ruby’s inquiry was motivated by religious curiosity. For Caitlyn and Cherie, their identities as Aboriginal women served as the primary impetus for their doctoral work. This finding aligns with Santos’s (2014) concept of “epistemologies of the South,” which affirms knowledge systems outside the Western canon. As articulated by Cherie, this orientation entails a profound ethical responsibility to community and kin, challenging the Western notion that researchers can act without accountability. In this context, spirituality emerges as a site of resistance to what Niu *et al.* (2022) described as “epistemic erasure”, or the systematic exclusion of spiritual ways of knowing. (Keane *et al.*, 2023).

These findings highlight the necessity of reconceptualising doctoral education as a “spiritual ecology” (Manathunga, 2023). This framework, informed by postcolonial, decolonial and intersectionality theories, recognises that knowledge production is deeply intertwined with gender, race, culture and the more-than-human. (Atehortúa, 2020). It challenges the “lingering Enlightenment legacy” (Johnson *et al.*, 2000) and supports Gravett’s (2023) call for more relational and caring pedagogies. It is important to emphasise that the secularism shaping dominant doctoral education frameworks is neither universal nor neutral but rather rooted in Global North higher education systems and shaped by specific Western philosophical and political histories (Gózdź, 2022; Hashemi, 2010). This multi-sited study, drawing on data from South Africa, Kenya and Australia, reveals aspects of doctoral experience that secular norms often obscure. For many doctoral students across the Global South and within Indigenous and transcultural communities, spirituality constitutes an epistemological foundation for knowledge production, evaluation and lived experience, rather than a private or supplementary belief (Keane *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, this paper does not merely incorporate spirituality into existing models of doctoral education; it fundamentally challenges the assumption that secular rationality is a neutral or universal default.

Implications and conclusion

This study demonstrates that spirituality, whether expressed through prayer, cultural rituals, ancestral connections or feminist spirituality, plays a crucial role in supporting women of

colour throughout the complex emotional, intellectual and psychological journey of doctoral study. Spirituality functions not merely as a private belief but as a collective and epistemic practice that underpins resilience, identity formation and ethical research engagement (Johnston, 2016). By foregrounding spirituality as a more-than-human dimension of doctoral education, this research advocates for a reimagining of doctoral pedagogies that move beyond secular rationalism and individualism (Sidebottom and Mycroft, 2024).

This approach recognises the diverse ways in which doctoral candidates engage with knowledge, community and the broader world. Consequently, doctoral supervision and institutional policy should be re-envisioned to incorporate spiritual and cultural forms of support as legitimate and valuable contributors to student success (Pham *et al.*, 2024). Institutions should also consider organising courses, workshops or mentorship programmes to assist doctoral candidates and their supervisors in recognising the role of spirituality in the research process, thereby enhancing intrinsic motivation and fostering a deeper sense of meaning (Bufford *et al.*, 2018).

We are not suggesting that doctoral supervisors endorse specific spiritual frameworks or that institutions implement generic “spirituality sessions”. Instead, we are asking that supervisors and institutional leaders develop the capacity to recognise spirituality as a meaningful aspect of many candidates’ experiences. It is essential to ensure that the culture of doctoral education does not actively undermine or render these dimensions invisible (Menon *et al.*, 2022). While the three-country scope offers important comparative insights, it also indicates that further research is needed. Future studies could extend these findings by examining how similar dynamics operate across additional geopolitical contexts and by exploring how spiritual, ancestral and more-than-human relationalities unfold across different doctoral pathways.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all the participants who generously gave their time to take part in this study. The authors also acknowledge the universities that granted permission for the research to be conducted and supported access to the study sites.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

AI use declaration

AI-assisted editing tools, including Grammarly, Paperpal and EditGPT, were used during the manuscript preparation process to support language editing, improve sentence structure and enhance grammatical accuracy. These tools were not used for data analysis, interpretation of findings, or the generation of substantive intellectual content. All analytical decisions, interpretations and conclusions remain the responsibility of the authors.

Note

- [1.] A traditional Aboriginal Australian ceremonial.

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Further reading

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Author affiliations

Halima Namakula, SARChI Teaching and Learning, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Jiao Tuxworth, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Catherine Manathunga and Maria M. Raciti, Indigenous and Transcultural Research Centre, University of the Sunshine Coast, Sunshine Coast, Australia

Wacango Muguro Kimani, SARChI Teaching and Learning, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Jing Qi, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

Beatrice Akala, Curriculum and Social Studies Division, Wits School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Hinekura Smith, ARC Indigenous Futures Centre, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Gina Wisker, International Centre for Higher Education Management, School of Management, University of Bath, Bath, UK, and

Shireen Motala, SARChI Teaching and Learning, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Corresponding author

Halima Namakula can be contacted at: hnamakula@uj.ac.za