

Land, Labour and Belonging: Indigenous Ecologies in *Kuyabila* Poetry of Southern Zambia

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/gjahss.2013/vol14n22843>

Published March 21, 2026

Citation: Kantini S. (2026) Land, Labour and Belonging: Indigenous Ecologies in *Kuyabila* Poetry of Southern Zambia, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 14(2),28-43

Abstract: *This article examines how Tonga and Ila Kuyabila praise poetry encodes indigenous ecological knowledge and mediates human-environment relations in Southern Zambia. Drawing on ecocriticism, cultural materialism, and indigenous epistemologies, it argues that Kuyabila expresses a complex ecological worldview in which land, labour, cattle, and ancestral memory shape social identity and environmental responsibility. Analysis of field-recorded performances shows that ecological knowledge in Kuyabila appears not as abstract reflection but as embodied practice embedded in farming, pastoral life, seasonal rhythms, and material culture. Through land-rooted metaphors, environmental histories, and moral vocabularies of sustenance and stewardship, the poetry constructs belonging as a relational condition grounded in place. Kuyabila functions as an archive of ecological literacy, preserving climate memory, histories of drought and abundance, and culturally embedded systems of environmental governance. The study contributes to Environmental Humanities and African oral literature by showing how poetic traditions transmit ecological ethics, sustain environmental memory, and support culturally grounded environmental resilience.*

Keywords *Kuyabila* poetry, Indigenous ecological knowledge, Ecocriticism, Tonga, Ila, oral literature, Zambia

INTRODUCTION

Environmental knowledge in many African societies is not transmitted primarily through written texts or formal scientific institutions but through oral traditions that encode ecological observation, ethical norms, and historical memory. Oral literature functions as a medium through which communities interpret their relationship with land, water, animals, and seasonal rhythms. Scholars of African oral traditions have long observed that poetic and narrative forms frequently preserve detailed environmental knowledge, embedding ecological understanding within cultural expression and social practice (Finnegan, 2012; Irele, 2001; Vansina, 1985). These traditions operate not merely as aesthetic performances but as repositories of collective knowledge that shape environmental perception and responsibility.

Among the Tonga and Ila peoples of Southern Zambia, *Kuyabila* constitutes one such expressive form in which human–environment relations are narrated, ritualised, and morally evaluated. Performed in contexts ranging from community gatherings to ceremonial occasions, *Kuyabila* poetry intertwines personal praise, genealogical memory, and environmental imagery. References to cattle, rivers, rainfall, grazing lands, soil fertility, and agricultural labour frequently appear within these performances, situating the individual within a landscape of ecological and social relations. In this sense, *Kuyabila* does not simply describe the environment; it frames the land as a domain of identity, livelihood, and moral accountability.

African praise poetry has received considerable scholarly attention across several regions of the continent. Studies of *izibongo* among the Zulu (Cope, 1968; Opland, 1998) and *oríkì* among the Yoruba (Barber, 1991; Finnegan, 2012) demonstrate how poetic traditions encode historical memory, social hierarchy, and cultural values. However, despite the prominence of oral praise poetry in African literary scholarship, the ecological dimensions of these traditions have only recently begun to receive sustained attention within the interdisciplinary field of ecocriticism and environmental humanities. While African literary scholars have examined environmental themes in written literature (Gikandi, 2011; Huggan & Tiffin, 2015), the ecological insights embedded in oral poetic traditions remain comparatively under-theorised. In particular, *Kuyabila* poetry of Southern Zambia has rarely been examined as a structured repository of indigenous ecological knowledge.

This article addresses that gap by examining *Kuyabila* as a form of indigenous ecological literacy embedded in oral performance. It advances three interrelated arguments. First, it demonstrates that *Kuyabila* poetry constructs the environment as both material reality and cultural memory, where land, cattle, and seasonal cycles form the symbolic grammar through which belonging and livelihood are articulated. Second, it shows that labour practices, particularly agricultural and pastoral activities, function within the poetry as moral acts that mediate the relationship between people and land. Through images of cultivation, cattle herding, and environmental stewardship, *Kuyabila* frames labour not merely as economic activity but as a culturally valued mode of ecological responsibility. Third, the article argues that *Kuyabila* preserves environmental histories and climate memory by recalling past droughts, migration patterns, and changing environmental conditions within poetic narrative.

The analysis is informed by Ecocriticism and Cultural Materialism. Ecocriticism provides a framework for examining how literary and cultural forms represent human relationships with the natural environment (Buell, 2005; Garrard, 2012). Recent work in environmental humanities further emphasises the importance of understanding ecological knowledge as culturally embedded within narrative, art, and lived practice rather than confined to scientific discourse (Heise, 2016; Tsing, 2015). Cultural Materialism, particularly as articulated by Raymond Williams (1977, 1980), emphasises the interconnection between cultural expression and material life, including labour, land use, and social relations. Together, these approaches enable an interpretation of *Kuyabila* not merely as artistic expression but as a cultural practice rooted in the material conditions of agrarian and pastoral livelihoods. This perspective also resonates with broader scholarship on indigenous ecological knowledge, which recognises local knowledge systems as sophisticated frameworks for understanding environmental processes and managing natural resources (Berkes, 2012).

Methodologically, the study draws on textual and contextual analysis of a purposively selected corpus of *Kuyabila* performances documented through field recordings and community-based cultural heritage initiatives in Southern Zambia. Close reading of poetic language, metaphor, and performance context reveals how environmental knowledge is encoded within narrative structure and symbolic imagery. The analysis considers not only the textual content of the poetry but also its performative context, including the social occasions, audience interactions, and cultural meanings that shape its interpretation.

By foregrounding *Kuyabila* as a poetic archive of ecological knowledge, this article contributes to scholarship in African oral literature, environmental humanities, and indigenous knowledge studies. It demonstrates that oral poetic traditions can function as repositories of environmental memory and ethical reflection, offering insights into how communities conceptualise land, labour, and ecological responsibility. In doing so, the article highlights the significance of indigenous expressive forms in sustaining place-based environmental knowledge and challenges dominant Western frameworks that privilege scientific abstraction over culturally embedded ecological understanding.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indigenous Ecological Knowledge in African Oral Traditions

Research across African environmental humanities demonstrates that ecological knowledge is frequently embedded in oral traditions, ritual practices, and everyday cultural expression rather than confined to formal scientific discourse. Indigenous ecological knowledge refers to cumulative bodies of observation, practice, and belief that develop through long-term interactions between communities and their environments (Berkes, 2012). Such knowledge systems often integrate environmental observation with ethical frameworks, spiritual cosmologies, and practical subsistence strategies.

African oral traditions play a central role in the preservation and transmission of this knowledge. Oral poetry, folktales, and praise traditions frequently encode detailed observations about landscapes, climate variability, animal behaviour, and agricultural cycles. Finnegan (2012) emphasises that oral literature in agrarian and pastoral societies often functions as a repository of practical knowledge about land and livelihoods. Similarly, Vansina (1985) demonstrates that oral traditions preserve historical memory, including environmental events such as droughts, migrations, and ecological transformations.

Studies of African oral poetry illustrate how environmental knowledge is embedded within cultural narratives and symbolic language. Okot p'Bitek (1986) argued that African oral forms often articulate cosmologies in which human life is inseparable from land, animals, and ancestral territories. These traditions do not treat the environment as an external object but as a relational domain in which human identity, labour, and spirituality are interconnected. Such perspectives resonate with broader scholarship on indigenous ecological knowledge, which emphasises relational understandings of nature and place-based systems of environmental management (Berkes, 2012).

Within this framework, oral poetry becomes a medium through which ecological literacy is transmitted across generations. Environmental knowledge is embedded not in abstract explanation but in narrative, metaphor, and performance. Analysing *Kuyabila* poetry within this tradition therefore enables a deeper

understanding of how Tonga and Ila communities encode ecological knowledge through expressive cultural forms.

Contemporary scholarship on Indigenous ecological knowledge further emphasises that such systems integrate ethics, governance, and environmental observation within relational worldviews that foreground responsibility toward land and non-human life (Whyte, 2018; McGregor, 2021).

Ecocriticism and African Environmental Humanities

Ecocriticism has emerged as an interdisciplinary field concerned with representations of nature and human–environment relations in cultural texts (Buell, 2005; Garrard, 2012). While early ecocritical scholarship focused primarily on European and North American literary traditions, more recent work has emphasised the importance of incorporating indigenous and postcolonial perspectives. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) argue that environmental questions in postcolonial contexts cannot be separated from histories of colonial exploitation, land dispossession, and resource extraction.

The influential concept of “slow violence” by Rob Nixon (2011) further highlights how environmental degradation often unfolds gradually and disproportionately affects communities in the Global South. Within African contexts, scholars have therefore called for ecocritical approaches that recognise indigenous ecological knowledge and local environmental histories rather than relying solely on Eurocentric environmental frameworks.

African environmental humanities scholarship increasingly foregrounds relational cosmologies and material survival within African ecological thought. Mwangi (2019) observes that African literary and oral traditions frequently depict the environment not as wilderness but as a lived landscape shaped by labour, subsistence practices, and cultural meaning. Similarly, Tiffin (2010) emphasises that indigenous narratives often articulate ethical relationships with land that challenge the nature-culture dichotomy common in Western environmental discourse. Further, Iheka (2018) and Caminero-Santangelo (2014) show that African literary and cultural traditions articulate ecological consciousness grounded in local landscapes and histories.

Despite these developments, ecocritical scholarship has largely focused on written African literature, including novels and poetry. Oral traditions, which remain central to many African cultural contexts, have received comparatively less attention within environmental humanities debates. Analysing *Kuyabila* poetry through an ecocritical lens therefore contributes to expanding African ecocriticism by foregrounding oral forms as important sites of environmental knowledge and ethical reflection.

Cultural Materialism and Labour Ecologies

The relationship between culture and material life has been a central concern within cultural materialist theory. Raymond Williams (1977, 1980) argued that cultural expression cannot be understood independently of the material conditions in which it emerges. Cultural forms reflect and interpret social relations shaped by labour, land use, and economic structures.

In agrarian and pastoral societies, labour is particularly central to the relationship between communities and their environments. Agricultural cultivation, livestock management, and seasonal work rhythms structure everyday life while also generating symbolic meanings within cultural expression. Williams’ concept of the “structure of feeling” highlights how lived experiences of work

and environment are translated into cultural forms such as poetry, storytelling, and ritual (Williams, 1977).

Historical and anthropological studies of Southern Zambia illustrate the deep interconnections between labour systems and ecological landscapes. Moore and Vaughan's (1994) analysis of agricultural change in Zambia demonstrates how colonial interventions transformed labour relations, land use, and subsistence practices. However, despite these transformations, many rural communities maintained cultural frameworks that emphasise reciprocal relationships between labour, land, and social identity.

Within oral poetic traditions, labour frequently appears not only as economic activity but as a moral and symbolic marker of adulthood, responsibility, and belonging. References to farming tools, livestock management, and seasonal work rhythms encode both practical knowledge and ethical values. Cultural materialist approaches therefore provide a useful framework for analysing how *Kuyabila* poetry represents labour as a mediating force between human communities and the ecological landscapes they inhabit.

The Ecology of Cattle in Tonga and Ila Society

Cattle occupy a central position within the social and ecological systems of many Southern African communities. Among the Tonga and Ila peoples of Southern Zambia, cattle function simultaneously as economic resources, social status markers, and symbolic anchors of identity. Anthropological studies have long documented the significance of cattle in shaping social organisation, ritual life, and environmental knowledge in the region.

Elizabeth Colson's extensive ethnographic work among the Gwembe Tonga demonstrates how cattle historically structured patterns of wealth, kinship, and subsistence (Colson, 2006). Livestock provided traction for ploughing, manure for soil fertility, and security during periods of environmental uncertainty. Cattle ownership also played an important role in marriage transactions, ritual ceremonies, and social hierarchy.

Similarly, ethnographic research across Southern Africa has shown that pastoral and agro-pastoral systems generate complex ecological knowledge related to grazing patterns, water availability, disease management, and seasonal mobility. Cattle management therefore requires intimate familiarity with landscapes and environmental conditions.

Within oral poetic traditions, cattle often function as powerful symbolic figures. Praise poetry across several African cultures frequently invokes cattle imagery to signify wealth, strength, lineage, and moral standing. Among the Tonga and Ila, *Kuyabila* performances frequently incorporate cattle metaphors that connect personal identity to pastoral landscapes and agricultural livelihoods. These symbolic references reflect broader socio-ecological systems in which livestock management forms a crucial interface between communities and their environments.

Kuyabila Scholarship and the Research Gap

Although *Kuyabila* occupies an important place within Tonga and Ila expressive culture, scholarly engagement with the tradition remains relatively limited. Early documentation of *Kuyabila* focused primarily on its stylistic features and social contexts rather than on broader theoretical interpretation.

Chibalo (1983), for example, examined aspects of *Kuyabila* performance but questioned the structural coherence of the genre, thereby underestimating its literary complexity.

Subsequent scholarship has begun to challenge this perception. Michelo (2016) demonstrated the symbolic centrality of cattle imagery in *Kuyabila* and argued that the poetic form exhibits clear internal organisation and thematic coherence. Chilala and Jimaima (2020) further analysed the linguistic features of *Kuyabila*, highlighting its relationship with *Kulibanda*, a form of ritual self-praise performed within Tonga communities. Lubbungu (2020) expanded this discussion by exploring gender dynamics within related expressive forms and acknowledging the participation of women in praise traditions.

While these studies establish the cultural importance of *Kuyabila*, several significant gaps remain in the scholarship. First, *Kuyabila* is frequently treated as a primarily Tonga tradition despite its wider circulation within Ila communities of Southern Zambia. Second, existing studies tend to emphasise stylistic features and linguistic characteristics without fully theorising the cultural knowledge encoded within the poetry. Third, the ecological dimensions of *Kuyabila*, including its representations of land, cattle, labour, and environmental change, have received little systematic analysis.

These gaps are particularly notable given the growing interdisciplinary interest in indigenous ecological knowledge and environmental humanities. Examining *Kuyabila* through an ecocritical and cultural materialist framework therefore offers an opportunity to expand existing scholarship by highlighting the ecological knowledge embedded within the tradition.

Positioning the Present Study

Building on African oral literary scholarship, ecocritical theory, and cultural materialist perspectives, this article approaches *Kuyabila* as a poetic archive of indigenous ecological knowledge. It examines how environmental observation, labour practices, cattle symbolism, and historical memory converge within poetic performance to construct a culturally grounded understanding of human–environment relations.

By analysing *Kuyabila* poetry from both Tonga and Ila contexts, the study moves beyond narrowly ethnographic descriptions of the tradition and situates it within broader debates on indigenous knowledge and environmental humanities. The article argues that *Kuyabila* constitutes a form of ecological literacy in which land, labour, cattle, and memory function as interconnected elements of belonging and environmental responsibility.

Through this approach, the study contributes to three areas of scholarship: African oral literature, environmental humanities, and indigenous knowledge studies. It demonstrates that oral poetic traditions can function as repositories of environmental memory and ethical reflection, offering insights into how communities conceptualise ecological relationships through culturally embedded forms of expression.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Analytical Orientation

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design to examine how *Kuyabila* poetry encodes ecological knowledge and articulates relationships between land, labour, cattle, and social belonging among the Tonga and Ila communities of Southern Zambia. The objective is not to produce a comprehensive ethnography of *Kuyabila* performance but to analyse how ecological meanings are constructed through poetic language, performance context, and culturally embedded symbolism. The approach therefore treats *Kuyabila* not merely as aesthetic expression but as a communicative system through which environmental knowledge and ethical relationships with the landscape are articulated. The research design combines four complementary analytical approaches. First, ecocritical textual analysis is used to examine how natural elements, landforms, animals, vegetation, climate patterns, and agricultural processes, are represented in poetic language and metaphor. Ecocriticism provides a framework for analysing the ways cultural texts mediate human–environment relations and how ecological values are embedded within narrative and symbolic forms (Buell, 2005; Garrard, 2012). This perspective enables the study to situate *Kuyabila* within broader debates in environmental humanities concerning the cultural representation of ecological knowledge.

Second, the study incorporates ethnographic fieldwork, recognising that oral poetry derives much of its meaning from the circumstances of its performance. As scholars of oral literature have emphasised, oral genres cannot be adequately understood as disembodied texts; their interpretation requires attention to performance setting, audience interaction, and social occasion (Finnegan, 2012; Barber, 2007). Contemporary scholarship on African oral performance similarly emphasises that meaning emerges through the dynamic interaction of performer, audience, and social context rather than through textual content alone (Okpewho, 2014; Quayson, 2021). Field engagement therefore provides contextual insights into how *Kuyabila* performances relate to everyday environmental practices such as herding, farming, and seasonal labour.

Third, thematic environmental coding is used to identify recurring ecological motifs within the poetic corpus. Rather than treating environmental references as incidental imagery, the coding process enables systematic identification of themes related to land, livestock, rainfall patterns, vegetation, and labour practices. This analytical step facilitates comparison across poems and highlights the environmental dimensions of the tradition.

Finally, the study employs semiotic interpretation of ecological symbols, examining how environmental elements function as culturally meaningful signs within the poetry. Semiotic approaches emphasise that symbols derive their meaning from culturally shared systems of interpretation rather than from literal description alone (Chandler, 2017). In *Kuyabila* poetry, references to cattle, ploughing, rivers, and fertile soil therefore operate not only as environmental descriptions but also as symbolic markers of identity, moral responsibility, and communal belonging.

Together, these methodological orientations allow the analysis to integrate textual interpretation with ethnographic context, thereby illuminating how ecological knowledge is embedded within the performative and symbolic structure of *Kuyabila* poetry.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through a combination of field-based documentation and qualitative interviews conducted in collaboration with cultural custodians in Southern Zambia. The research focused on communities in the Tonga and Ila cultural region where *Kuyabila* remains an active oral tradition performed during communal and ceremonial gatherings.

The primary dataset consists of audio recordings of *Kuyabila* performances obtained during community events and cultural gatherings. These recordings capture poetic performances in their natural contexts, preserving elements such as rhythm, vocal emphasis, and audience responses that are central to the interpretive meaning of oral poetry.

In addition to performance recordings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with community members recognised as knowledgeable custodians of local cultural traditions. Participants included elders, poets, cattle herders, and farmers whose livelihoods are closely connected with the environmental themes represented in the poetry. Interviews focused on participants' interpretations of ecological imagery in *Kuyabila*, as well as broader discussions of land use, cattle culture, seasonal labour cycles, and environmental memory.

The study also incorporated participant observation during selected community activities associated with agricultural and pastoral life. These observations included attendance at ceremonial gatherings where *Kuyabila* performances occurred, as well as engagement with everyday practices such as cattle herding, land preparation, and seasonal agricultural activities. Observational data provided contextual insights into how ecological knowledge represented in the poetry corresponds with lived environmental practices.

Collectively, these data sources enabled the study to situate poetic analysis within the broader socio-ecological context of Tonga and Ila communities.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a multi-stage interpretive process designed to identify ecological patterns within the poetic corpus while incorporating insights from ethnographic engagement. The analytical procedure involved three primary stages.

The first stage involved coding ecological motifs present within the *Kuyabila* performances. Transcribed poems were systematically examined to identify references to environmental features and practices. Coding categories included landforms (such as rivers, plains, and grazing lands), animals (particularly cattle and wildlife), climatic elements (rainfall, drought, seasonal change), vegetation, and labour-related activities such as ploughing, planting, and herding. This process enabled the identification of recurring ecological themes across different performances.

The second stage involved interpretation of ecological metaphors within the poetic language. Environmental imagery in *Kuyabila* often operates metaphorically, linking natural elements with moral or social meanings. For example, references to fertile land may symbolise prosperity or ancestral inheritance, while cattle imagery frequently conveys social status, lineage continuity, or resilience. Semiotic interpretation therefore focused on how ecological references function symbolically within the broader cultural framework of the poetry.

The third stage involved triangulation with indigenous explanations derived from interviews and field observations. Interpretations of ecological imagery were compared with explanations provided by community participants in order to ensure that symbolic readings aligned with locally recognised meanings. This triangulation process strengthened interpretive credibility by situating textual analysis within culturally grounded perspectives on environmental knowledge.

Through this layered analytical approach, the study was able to trace how ecological knowledge, cultural symbolism, and lived environmental practice intersect within *Kuyabila* poetry.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical responsibility formed an integral component of the research process. Participation in interviews and documentation of *Kuyabila* performances was undertaken with the informed consent of all participants. Individuals were informed about the purpose of the research and their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study.

Given that *Kuyabila* constitutes part of the intangible cultural heritage of Tonga and Ila communities, the study also adhered to principles of cultural respect and custodial acknowledgement. Indigenous ecological knowledge shared during interviews and observations was treated with sensitivity, recognising that such knowledge forms part of collectively held cultural traditions.

The research approach therefore sought to balance scholarly analysis with respect for community ownership of cultural knowledge. Interpretations presented in this study aim to contribute to academic understanding of African oral ecological traditions while acknowledging the authority of local custodians over their cultural heritage.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Land as Ancestral Territory and Ecological Identity

The analysis demonstrates that *Kuyabila* poetry conceptualises land not merely as a physical landscape but as an ancestral and ecological foundation of identity. Within the Tonga and Ila cosmological imagination, land embodies historical memory, cultural belonging, and moral responsibility. Rather than appearing as an inert environmental backdrop, the landscape is represented as a living domain through which identity is articulated and social legitimacy affirmed.

Ecocritical scholarship emphasises that literature often constructs environments not simply as settings but as relational spaces that shape cultural consciousness. In *Kuyabila*, the environment emerges as what may be described as an ancestral ecology, where land connects present generations with their predecessors through shared practices of cultivation, grazing, and settlement.

This relational conception of land becomes evident in the poem *Drought (Chiyuma-yuma)* by Ricky Muchaka, where the speaker reflects on the vulnerability of agricultural life during periods of environmental instability:

Atelekelwa mazuba ngutu bona wanga meenzhi kwizeulu
Nukakwata busongo kumuunda
Nukakwata basune bakando mafwumba walima mbuli ooko
Ulima ngu Leza.

*(Days are not the same; God withheld the rains.
No matter how clever you can be at the field,
No matter how many oxen or manure you have,
It is God who makes things grow).*

Here the poet articulates an environmental philosophy grounded in humility before ecological forces. Agricultural success is shown to depend not solely on human labour or technological inputs but on the delicate balance of natural cycles. Such imagery resonates with Indigenous epistemologies that understand the environment as a network of interdependent relationships rather than a passive resource.

The emotional consequences of environmental disruption further reveal the depth of this relationship between land and identity in the poem *Drought*:

Ume ninsyoma kwalo kumuunda
Ndapona achani ubana ba mushala lyapiya ikabe lyangu.
*(Me, who just depends on farming,
How am I going to survive with orphans? My watermelon is scorched).*

In this passage, ecological failure translates immediately into social and moral anxiety. Crop loss threatens the capacity to sustain the household and fulfil kinship responsibilities. The field therefore becomes a moral landscape in which ecological conditions directly shape the well-being of the family and community.

From the perspective of Environmental Humanities, such poetic representations illustrate what scholars describe as place-based ecological consciousness. Land is understood not merely through abstract ecological concepts but through lived experience, labour practices, and ancestral memory. *Kuyabila* thus constructs a cultural geography in which environmental stewardship becomes inseparable from social identity.

Labour as Ecological Practice and Moral Discipline

A second major finding concerns the centrality of labour as both ecological practice and moral discipline. Within *Kuyabila* poetry, agricultural and pastoral labour are not represented merely as economic activities but as ethical obligations through which individuals demonstrate responsibility to land, family, and community.

Cultural materialist approaches suggest that cultural meaning often emerges from everyday material practices such as farming, herding, and resource management. *Kuyabila* provides clear evidence of this dynamic: environmental knowledge is transmitted through labour practices that are simultaneously practical and symbolic.

This moralisation of labour appears clearly in the poem, *Drought*, where the speaker reflects on childhood instruction in agricultural discipline:

...kumuunda mukwilo.
Kalemana taata ndasyiya ibbanga kumuunda.
Kalemana taata ndabubisya bulimo.
(...at the field there was the whip.
Father used to be angry when I did not plough well.
He used to be angry when I failed to do the work properly).

The whip functions symbolically as a tool of instruction through which ecological competence is cultivated. Farming is not simply technical knowledge but a moral discipline that shapes character and social responsibility. Through such practices, environmental knowledge is embedded within everyday life rather than transmitted through formal education.

The poem also addresses younger generations directly, warning them about the consequences of neglecting agricultural labour:

Ulaamba mwana amwanangu kumuunda kwini.
Wakabomba kulabula kulombwa mulilo,
Wabomba kulabula munzhi,
Kumuunda wabomba bana balanjila milyango balomba twakulya.
(Child of my child, at the field:
If you become lazy, there will be no place to ask for fire.
If you become soft, there will be no home.
If you neglect the field, children will go door to door asking for food).

Here labour is framed as the foundation of dignity and social belonging. Agricultural work sustains not only the household economy but also moral standing within the community. Laziness, by contrast, threatens both subsistence and social cohesion.

Such passages demonstrate how *Kuyabila* constructs what may be termed an ecological ethic of labour, where farming and pastoral work become expressions of stewardship. Through this ethic, environmental sustainability and cultural responsibility are inseparably intertwined.

Cattle as Ecological Wealth and Cultural Memory

Another central theme emerging from the poems is the symbolic importance of cattle. In Tonga and Ila pastoral–agrarian culture, cattle represent not only economic wealth but also ecological stability and social prestige.

Cattle imagery in *Kuyabila* frequently reflects environmental conditions such as pasture availability, rainfall patterns, and grazing cycles. In this sense, cattle function as ecological indicators within the poetic imagination.

The poem *Cattle* by Trophy Moonga portrays pastoral life through vivid imagery of woodland clearing and labour:

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Batema mabimba batema masamu abo kalalila mbuka beletema
Keembe kalalya kalabulula...
Keembe bayaya kembe muna Moonga ngu mulimo.
(*They cut the Mabimba logs; the axe makes the only sound as it eats and spits...
The axe, my people, is a sign of work*).

The axe symbolises human engagement with the landscape through pastoral labour. Clearing woodland for grazing or settlement reflects the dynamic relationship between environmental management and cultural survival.

Cattle also function as carriers of genealogical memory, linking present generations with ancestral heritage:

Moomba, moombe sha babaama shabulela Chief Chaande ku Mungaila...
Tata, kuli ine muntu musuma, ng'ombe Shikanze ya bantu bakwete yasiyapo.
(*My father's oxen came running from Chief Chaande in Mungaila...
Father, for me, you great man, the cow named Shikanze from my dear ones left*).

Through this imagery, cattle become mnemonic devices that preserve lineage histories and territorial connections. Herds are thus not merely livestock but living repositories of family memory and cultural identity.

From an ecological perspective, this symbolic role reflects the deep integration of pastoral life with environmental knowledge. Herd management requires understanding seasonal grass cycles, water sources, and climatic fluctuations. *Kuyabila* poetry captures this knowledge through narrative and metaphor, embedding ecological awareness within cultural storytelling.

Environmental Memory and Oral Climate Archives

The poems further reveal that *Kuyabila* functions as a repository of environmental memory. Through narrative recollection, the poetry preserves historical experiences of drought, agricultural failure, and climatic variability.

In poem *Drought* by Ricky Muchaka, the speaker remembers a year of intense labour followed by ecological disappointment:

Welya mwanaka Mpoma ndaka kulimine
Ndaamba takuzhibwa ambweni kumbele ndayana moombe
Atelekelwa mazuba ngutubona wanga meezyi.
(*That year, child of Mpoma, I worked very hard,
Thinking perhaps I would harvest well and buy an ox,
But days are not the same; the rains were withheld*).

This narrative transforms a personal experience into communal memory. By recalling past droughts and agricultural challenges, the poem contributes to what may be described as oral climate archives,

cultural mechanisms through which communities remember environmental events and transmit adaptive knowledge across generations.

Environmental historians increasingly recognise oral traditions as valuable sources for reconstructing local climate histories and understanding how communities interpret environmental change (Chakrabarty, 2021; White, 2017). *Kuyabila* demonstrates how poetic performance can function as a medium for preserving ecological knowledge that might otherwise remain undocumented.

Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Ecological Philosophy

Underlying the themes of land, labour, cattle, and environmental memory is a coherent ecological philosophy emphasising humility, reciprocity, and interdependence between humans and nature.

This philosophy becomes particularly evident in passages that highlight the limits of human control over environmental processes in the poem *Drought*:

Nukakwata fertiliza mung'anda
Nukakwata busongo kumuunda
Ulima ngu Leza.
(*Even if you have fertilisers,
Even if you are clever at farming,
It is God who makes things grow*).

The poem rejects purely technocratic understandings of agriculture, emphasising instead the need for humility before ecological forces. Such perspectives align with Indigenous environmental ethics that prioritise balance, stewardship, and respect for natural systems.

In this sense, *Kuyabila* articulates a relational ontology, where humans, animals, land, and spiritual forces exist within a mutually dependent ecological system. Environmental sustainability emerges not from technological mastery but from responsible participation within this network of relationships. Such relational perspectives resonate with broader Indigenous philosophical traditions that emphasise reciprocal relationships between humans and the natural world (Kimmerer, 2013).

Kuyabila as Indigenous Ecological Archive

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that *Kuyabila* poetry functions as a sophisticated indigenous ecological archive. Through metaphor, narrative, and performance, the tradition preserves generations of environmental knowledge related to agriculture, pastoralism, seasonal cycles, and climatic variability.

Unlike Western scientific frameworks that separate knowledge from cultural practice, *Kuyabila* integrates ecological understanding within everyday life. Environmental knowledge is encoded in stories, proverbs, labour practices, and poetic performance.

Consequently, *Kuyabila* represents not only an artistic tradition but also a form of vernacular environmental philosophy. It articulates a worldview in which land, labour, cattle, and community exist within a shared ecological system governed by reciprocity and moral responsibility. Decolonial environmental scholars similarly argue that Indigenous knowledge systems offer alternative ecological

epistemologies that challenge dominant Western assumptions about nature, development, and environmental governance (Escobar, 2018).

By foregrounding these relational understandings of the environment, *Kuyabila* challenges dominant epistemologies that privilege abstract scientific knowledge over lived ecological experience. The poetry thus contributes important insights to the Environmental Humanities by demonstrating how indigenous oral traditions preserve and transmit ecological knowledge in culturally meaningful forms.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how *Kuyabila* poetry among the Tonga and Ila communities of Southern Zambia encodes indigenous ecological knowledge and mediates human–environment relations. Drawing on Ecocriticism, Cultural Materialism, and Indigenous epistemologies, the analysis demonstrates that *Kuyabila* articulates a relational environmental worldview in which land, labour, cattle, and ancestral memory function as key organising principles of ecological identity. Land emerges not merely as a material resource but as an ancestral landscape through which belonging, responsibility, and moral accountability are articulated. Agricultural labour and pastoral practice appear as ethical disciplines that transmit environmental knowledge across generations, while cattle imagery reflects the ecological realities and values of pastoral–agrarian life.

The study further shows that *Kuyabila* poetry operates as an archive of environmental memory, preserving collective experiences of drought, abundance, and ecological uncertainty. Through narrative, metaphor, and performance, the poetic tradition encodes climate knowledge and reinforces culturally grounded principles of stewardship, reciprocity, and interdependence between humans, animals, and the land. In doing so, *Kuyabila* challenges dominant environmental paradigms that privilege abstract scientific knowledge by foregrounding lived ecological experience embedded in cultural practice.

These findings contribute to scholarship in Environmental Humanities and African oral literature by demonstrating that indigenous poetic forms can function simultaneously as aesthetic expression, ecological pedagogy, and historical archive. Future research may extend this work by undertaking comparative studies of ecological knowledge across African indigenous-poetry traditions, exploring the role of oral literature in contemporary climate adaptation discourses, and integrating ethnographic and linguistic approaches to further illuminate how indigenous expressive forms continue to shape environmental ethics in rapidly changing ecological contexts.

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