

## **Performing Manhood: Masculinity, Authority and Social Expectation in Kuyabila Poetry of the Tonga and Ila People of Zambia**

Samson Kantini<sup>1</sup> and Cheela Chilala<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of Arts, Languages and Literary Studies, The University of Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i03.006 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i03.006>

Received: 11 February 2026 / Accepted: 17 March 2026 / Published: 25 March 2026

### **ABSTRACT**

*Oral poetry plays a significant role in articulating social identities within many African societies, yet its contribution to the cultural construction of masculinity remains underexamined. This study investigates how masculinity is constructed, performed, and negotiated within Kuyabila poetry among the Tonga and Ila communities of Southern Zambia. The central research question asks how poetic performance represents culturally recognised ideals of manhood and how these ideals respond to shifting social expectations. The study employs qualitative textual and thematic analysis of a purposively selected corpus of Kuyabila poems documented through community cultural preservation initiatives. The analysis focuses on symbolic language, genealogical references, and performative strategies used by poets to articulate masculine identity. The findings indicate that masculinity in Kuyabila poetry is constructed through several interconnected cultural registers. Genealogical invocation and ancestral naming establish lineage authority and historical continuity. Metaphors related to cattle ownership, agricultural productivity, and hunting symbolise masculine competence, economic provision, and social responsibility. Public performance and audience participation further validate masculine identity by transforming individual claims into socially recognised status. At the same time, the poems reveal tensions within dominant masculine ideals, particularly where economic hardship, emotional vulnerability, and social criticism disrupt the image of the authoritative male figure. The study demonstrates that Kuyabila poetry functions as a cultural arena in which masculine identity is continually produced, affirmed, and contested. By highlighting the performative and symbolic dimensions of masculinity, the article shows how oral poetry mediates evolving expectations of authority, responsibility, and male selfhood in contemporary Southern Zambia.*

**Keywords:** Masculinity; Kuyabila poetry; Tonga; Ila; oral performance; gender norms; African masculinities.

## **1. Introduction**

Masculinity in many African societies is not simply a biological condition or a private identity; it is a socially produced and publicly evaluated status that emerges through performance, responsibility, and recognition by others. Manhood is therefore less a fixed attribute than a relational achievement negotiated within institutions of kinship, labour, ritual authority, and community expectation (Connell, 1995; Lindsay & Miescher, 2003; Ratele, 2016). Within African oral traditions, poetry, praise performance, and public speech play a crucial role in shaping these negotiations by articulating the moral and social criteria through which men become recognised as legitimate social actors (Finnegan, 2012; Barber, 1991). Oral performance thus functions not merely as aesthetic expression but as a cultural arena in which gender identities are produced, affirmed, and sometimes contested.

This article examines *Kuyabila* poetry among the Tonga and Ila peoples of Southern Zambia as a performative discourse of masculinity. *Kuyabila*, a form of self-praise and genealogical poetry performed during communal gatherings and cultural ceremonies, provides a platform through which men narrate their lineage, achievements, labour, and moral standing before a witnessing community. Through poetic language rich in metaphor and symbolic imagery, performers present themselves as cattle owners, cultivators, hunters, protectors of lineage, and custodians of communal responsibility. Masculinity in this context is therefore not simply described in poetry; it is enacted through the performance itself, where authority emerges through rhetorical skill, genealogical knowledge, and audience recognition.

African praise poetry has long been recognised as a powerful medium of social representation and identity formation. Studies of traditions such as Izibongo among the Zulu and Oríkì among the Yoruba demonstrate how poetic performance functions as a public archive of reputation, authority, and social memory (Finnegan, 1970; Opland, 1998; Barber, 1991). In these traditions, praise poetry not only celebrates individuals but also encodes moral expectations about leadership, courage, labour, and social responsibility. Yet despite the rich scholarship on African praise traditions, *Kuyabila* poetry has received comparatively limited scholarly attention, particularly with regard to its role in constructing and performing masculine identities within Tonga and Ila communities. Existing research on Tonga and Ila cultural life has largely focused on social organisation, cattle economies, or ritual practices (Colson, 1962; Scudder, 1962), leaving the gendered dynamics of oral poetic performance insufficiently explored.

This article addresses that gap by analysing how *Kuyabila* poetry constructs masculinity as a socially negotiated performance grounded in lineage authority, productive labour, communal recognition, ritual symbolism, and moral accountability. It argues that *Kuyabila* functions as a cultural grammar through which men articulate their legitimacy within the social order.

Metaphors of cattle ownership, agricultural productivity, hunting prowess, and ancestral continuity serve as symbolic registers through which masculine authority is narrated and validated. At the same time, these poetic narratives reveal tensions and ambivalences within masculine identity, particularly where economic precarity, emotional vulnerability, or moral failure complicate idealised expectations of male strength and authority.

The study draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives. First, gender performativity theory emphasises that gender identities are constituted through repeated social practices and discursive acts rather than innate characteristics (Butler, 1990). Second, the concept of hegemonic masculinity highlights how particular models of manhood achieve cultural dominance while marginalising alternative masculinities (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Third, African masculinities scholarship stresses that masculinities are plural, historically situated, and shaped by local cultural economies, colonial histories, and contemporary social change (Lindsay & Miescher, 2003; Ratele, 2016). Together, these perspectives allow *Kuyabila* poetry to be understood as a performative site where masculine identities are continuously produced, negotiated, and evaluated.

Methodologically, the article undertakes a close textual and contextual analysis of selected *Kuyabila* poems collected through community-based cultural documentation initiatives in Southern Zambia. Attention is given not only to poetic language and imagery but also to the performance contexts in which the poems are delivered, including the social roles of performers, audience responses, and the ceremonial settings that frame these performances. Such an approach recognises oral poetry as an embodied cultural practice in which meaning emerges through the interaction between performer, audience, and social occasion (Finnegan, 2012).

By foregrounding *Kuyabila* poetry as a site of masculine performance rather than simply a form of cultural expression, this article contributes to three broader scholarly conversations. First, it extends African oral literary studies by bringing attention to a relatively understudied praise tradition in Southern Zambia. Second, it contributes to gender studies by demonstrating how oral performance functions as a medium through which hegemonic and alternative masculinities are articulated. Third, it enriches debates in African cultural studies by illustrating how poetic traditions mediate changing understandings of authority, responsibility, and male identity in contemporary rural communities.

Ultimately, the article argues that *Kuyabila* poetry operates as a cultural arena in which masculinity is continually staged, evaluated, and renegotiated. Through poetic performance, men not only celebrate idealised forms of authority and productivity but also reveal the social pressures and vulnerabilities embedded within expectations of manhood. In doing so, *Kuyabila*

remains a living tradition through which Tonga and Ila communities reflect upon the meanings, responsibilities, and contradictions of masculine identity.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Masculinity as Performative, Relational, and Socially Produced**

Contemporary gender scholarship increasingly emphasises that masculinity is not a natural or biologically determined attribute but a socially produced and historically contingent identity. One of the most influential frameworks for understanding this process is the concept of hegemonic masculinity developed by Raewyn Connell (1995, 2005). Connell argues that societies organise multiple masculinities within hierarchical structures in which certain models of manhood become culturally dominant and legitimate male authority over women and other subordinated masculinities. These dominant forms are reproduced through everyday social practices that valorise attributes such as physical strength, economic provision, leadership, and control.

Later developments in masculinity studies further emphasise the relational nature of male identities. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) stress that hegemonic masculinity is neither static nor universally fixed but continuously negotiated within specific cultural contexts. Masculinity therefore emerges through social recognition, institutional practices, and symbolic representations rather than through inherent biological qualities.

Within African studies, scholars have emphasised the plurality and contextual specificity of masculinities. Ouzgane and Morrell (2005) argue that African masculinities cannot be understood through a single model of male authority but must be analysed in relation to historical transformations such as colonial rule, labour migration, and changing economic structures. Masculinities in African societies therefore appear as multiple and contested forms rather than as a unified cultural ideal.

Similarly, Kopano Ratele (2016) highlights the relational character of African masculinities, emphasising how expectations of male authority are negotiated within complex social realities that include economic insecurity, shifting gender relations, and generational tensions. Masculinity, in this sense, is not only culturally produced but also constantly reinterpreted in response to social change. These theoretical perspectives provide an important conceptual framework for analysing how masculine identities are constructed and performed within oral poetic traditions such as *Kuyabila*.

## **2.2 Oral Performance and the Construction of Masculine Identity**

African oral literary scholarship has long demonstrated that oral poetry is not merely a textual artefact but a performative social practice through which identity and authority are articulated. Ruth Finnegan's foundational work on oral literature emphasises that meaning in oral poetry emerges through performance context, including the relationship between performer, audience, and social occasion (Finnegan, 2012). Oral genres therefore function as dynamic communicative systems that mediate social values and cultural expectations.

Studies of praise poetry across Africa further reveal how poetic performance constructs public identities. Elizabeth Gunner (1984) and Russell Kaschula (2001) show that praise poetry in southern Africa operates as a performative medium through which individuals assert social status, genealogical affiliation, and moral authority. Through stylised language, metaphor, and rhetorical display, performers position themselves within networks of lineage and communal recognition.

Okpewho (1992) similarly argues that praise poetry serves as a form of autobiographical expression in which speakers construct social identities through genealogical invocation and symbolic imagery. Such performances do not simply describe identity but actively produce it by aligning the speaker with recognised cultural values such as bravery, productivity, and communal responsibility.

These insights are particularly relevant for analysing *Kuyabila* poetry. When performers invoke cattle wealth, agricultural labour, hunting prowess, or ancestral lineage, they are not merely embellishing speech but participating in culturally recognised practices of masculine self-representation. The poetic performance thus becomes a site in which masculinity is publicly enacted and socially validated.

## **2.3 Praise Poetry as a Cultural Grammar of Masculinity**

Across many African societies, praise poetry functions as a structured medium for narrating individual and collective identities. Traditions such as Izibongo among the Zulu and Oríkì among the Yoruba demonstrate how poetic language embeds individuals within genealogical histories and moral expectations (Finnegan, 1970; Furniss & Gunner, 1995). Through metaphor, repetition, and historical reference, praise poetry transforms personal achievements into communal narratives of legitimacy and belonging.

Importantly, praise poetry frequently articulates ideals of masculinity. In many traditions, male identity is symbolically associated with courage, leadership, cattle ownership, agricultural productivity, and protection of lineage (Opland, 1998). Such symbolic frameworks function as

cultural grammars through which communities define the moral and social qualities expected of men.

These poetic traditions reveal that masculinity is not merely a social role but a narrative performance grounded in cultural symbolism. By invoking ancestral figures, territorial markers, and economic achievements, performers position themselves within recognised hierarchies of masculine authority. Praise poetry therefore operates simultaneously as a form of artistic expression and as a cultural mechanism for producing and evaluating masculine identities.

*Kuyabila* poetry shares many of these characteristics but remains relatively understudied in relation to gender analysis. Among the Tonga and Ila, poetic references to cattle herds, farming tools, hunting exploits, and lineage continuity serve as symbolic markers of masculine competence and social legitimacy. These symbolic forms provide the cultural vocabulary through which masculinity is narrated and publicly affirmed.

#### **2.4 Social Structures and Masculine Authority in Tonga and Ila Societies**

Anthropological studies of Tonga and Ila societies provide important contextual insights into the cultural foundations of masculine identity. Elizabeth Colson's influential research on the Plateau Tonga highlights the central role of cattle ownership, agricultural productivity, and lineage leadership in defining male status within Tonga social organisation (Colson, 1962). Men derive authority through their capacity to sustain households, manage livestock, and participate in communal decision-making structures.

Similarly, studies of the Gwembe Tonga by Thayer Scudder (1962) emphasise the importance of labour, kinship obligations, and ritual authority in shaping gender roles within Tonga society. Masculine identity is closely linked to productive capacity and social responsibility, particularly in agrarian contexts where cattle and land function as key resources for economic and symbolic status.

Within Ila communities, similar patterns of social organisation exist, with cattle culture, agricultural labour, and lineage affiliation playing crucial roles in defining social identity. These cultural structures provide the broader social framework within which *Kuyabila* poetry articulates ideals of masculinity. References to livestock, land cultivation, hunting, and ancestral continuity in *Kuyabila* performances reflect deeply embedded social values associated with male authority and responsibility.

Understanding these social contexts is therefore essential for interpreting the symbolic language of *Kuyabila* poetry. The poetic representation of masculinity draws directly upon the cultural institutions that structure everyday life in Tonga and Ila communities.

## **2.5 *Kuyabila* Scholarship and the Research Gap**

Although *Kuyabila* poetry holds significant cultural importance within Tonga and Ila societies, scholarly research on the genre remains limited. Early documentation by Chibalo (1983) focused primarily on the descriptive features and performance contexts of *Kuyabila* but offered little analysis of its symbolic or gendered dimensions. Subsequent studies have expanded understanding of the genre while still leaving important analytical gaps.

Michelo (2016) demonstrates the symbolic centrality of cattle imagery in *Kuyabila* poetry and argues that the genre possesses a coherent poetic structure rooted in Tonga cultural philosophy. However, the study treats gender primarily as a background element rather than as a central analytical category.

Chilala and Jimaima (2020) examine the relationship between *Kulibanda* (self-praise) and *Kuyabila*, highlighting the linguistic sophistication and rhetorical strategies involved in poetic performance. Their work provides valuable insights into the stylistic dynamics of the genre but does not explore how these performances articulate masculine identity.

Lubbungu (2020) further expands the discussion by acknowledging the participation of women in related poetic traditions, suggesting that *Kuyabila* and associated genres form part of a broader expressive culture. Nevertheless, the gendered symbolism embedded within naming, praise, and lineage invocation remains underexplored.

Taken together, these studies establish *Kuyabila* as a significant cultural form within Tonga and Ila societies but leave several important questions unanswered. First, the genre is often treated as exclusively Tonga, overlooking its shared cultural relevance among the Ila. Second, existing scholarship tends to describe the aesthetic and cultural functions of *Kuyabila* without theorising its role in constructing masculine identity. Third, the relationship between poetic performance and the social institutions that shape masculine authority has not been systematically analysed.

## **2.6 Positioning the Present Study**

Building on scholarship in masculinity studies, African oral literature, and anthropology, this article approaches *Kuyabila* poetry as a performative arena in which masculine identities are articulated, negotiated, and evaluated. It examines how symbolic language, genealogical invocation, and performance context converge to produce culturally intelligible models of manhood.

By foregrounding masculinity as a central analytical category, the study extends existing research on *Kuyabila* beyond descriptive accounts of its stylistic features. It also contributes to

broader debates in African gender studies by demonstrating how oral poetic traditions function as cultural mechanisms for producing and regulating gender identities.

Furthermore, by analysing *Kuyabila* within both Tonga and Ila cultural contexts, the study highlights the shared symbolic frameworks through which masculinity is articulated in Southern Zambia. In doing so, it positions *Kuyabila* not simply as a form of cultural heritage but as a living social practice through which communities continue to negotiate authority, responsibility, and masculine selfhood.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design and Analytical Orientation**

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design to examine how masculinity is constructed and performed in *Kuyabila* poetry among the Tonga and Ila communities of Southern Zambia. The analysis treats *Kuyabila* not merely as literary text but as a performative cultural practice through which masculine identity, authority, and social responsibility are articulated and publicly validated.

The study is informed by three complementary theoretical perspectives. First, gender performativity theory conceptualises gender identities as produced through repeated social acts rather than fixed biological attributes (Butler, 1990). Second, the framework of hegemonic masculinity highlights how particular models of manhood become culturally dominant and socially authoritative (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Third, African masculinities scholarship emphasises the plurality and contextual nature of masculine identities within African societies (Ratele, 2016). Together, these perspectives guide the interpretation of *Kuyabila* poetry as a discursive space where masculine identities are articulated, affirmed, and negotiated.

#### **3.2 Corpus Construction and Data Sources**

The study draws on a purposively selected corpus of *Kuyabila* poems documented through community-based cultural preservation initiatives in Southern Zambia. The broader archive consists of multiple recorded and transcribed performances from both Tonga and Ila traditions.

From this corpus, twelve poems were selected for detailed analysis. Selection was guided by three criteria: thematic relevance to masculine identity and social authority; representation of different social occasions such as ceremonies, communal gatherings, and ritual contexts; and the presence of distinctive performative elements including self-praise, genealogical invocation, and symbolic imagery related to labour, cattle, and lineage.

The poems are analysed as performed texts situated within specific social and cultural contexts rather than as isolated literary artefacts. Where available, information regarding the performer, audience interaction, and performance occasion is incorporated into the interpretive analysis.

### **3.3 Analytical Procedure**

Analysis was conducted through close textual reading combined with thematic discourse analysis. The analytical process focused on identifying recurring symbolic and rhetorical patterns through which masculinity is represented and enacted in *Kuyabila* poetry.

Four analytical dimensions guided the interpretation. The first concerns ritual self-presentation, examining how performers establish authority through practices of self-praise and naming. The second focuses on material symbolism, particularly references to cattle, agricultural labour, hunting, and land as markers of masculine competence and social legitimacy. The third dimension examines genealogical invocation and lineage affiliation as mechanisms through which masculine identity is embedded in ancestral continuity. The fourth considers performance context, analysing how poetic meaning emerges through interaction between performer, audience, and social occasion.

These dimensions allow the study to trace how poetic language, metaphor, and performance strategies collectively construct culturally recognised models of manhood.

### **3.4 Interpretive Credibility and Contextual Reading**

To enhance interpretive credibility, textual analysis is situated within ethnographic and historical scholarship on Tonga and Ila social organisation and cultural practices. This contextual reading enables the study to relate poetic representations of masculinity to broader social values associated with cattle ownership, agricultural productivity, lineage authority, and communal responsibility.

Rather than treating the poems as transparent reflections of social reality, the analysis approaches them as discursive constructions that both reproduce and interrogate cultural norms. Where relevant, excerpts are presented in the original language alongside English translations to preserve semantic nuance and cultural meaning.

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

The *Kuyabila* poems analysed in this study originate from identifiable performers and circulate within collectively owned oral traditions. Their documentation was undertaken with the knowledge and participation of local cultural custodians as part of broader cultural preservation initiatives.

This article does not claim authorship of the primary texts; its contribution lies in the analytical interpretation of these performances. The study therefore recognises *Kuyabila* both as intangible cultural heritage and as a living literary tradition, and seeks to engage with it in a manner that respects community ownership while contributing to scholarly discussions on African oral literature and gender.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

### **4.1 Genealogy, Ancestral Continuity, and the Cultural Authorisation of Masculinity**

A central finding emerging from the analysis is that *Kuyabila* poetry constructs masculinity through genealogical continuity. Masculine identity is not articulated as an isolated personal attribute but as an extension of ancestral lineage that situates the male subject within a historically continuous chain of belonging. Through this genealogical logic, masculinity becomes both inherited and performed: it derives legitimacy from ancestral affiliation while simultaneously requiring active enactment in the present.

This dynamic is illustrated in the poem *Us Children of Real Men*, where the speaker declares: “Ndime Muzuni ushi taata. (*I am Muzuni, the father to my father*).” The utterance collapses generational boundaries by positioning the speaker simultaneously as descendant and progenitor. Rather than describing biological lineage alone, the speaker symbolically assumes responsibility for sustaining ancestral continuity. Masculinity, in this sense, is constructed not simply as inheritance but as an ongoing cultural project through which the present generation reproduces the authority of the past.

From a theoretical perspective, this genealogical articulation resonates with the understanding of identity as a performative and discursive process. Butler (1990) argues that identities are not pre-existing essences but are constituted through repeated acts that cite and reproduce cultural norms. In the *Kuyabila* context, invoking ancestry becomes one such performative act. By naming himself within a lineage, the speaker reproduces culturally recognised scripts of masculine legitimacy.

Recent African masculinity scholarship similarly emphasises that masculine identities in African societies are historically grounded in kinship, ancestry, and community-based authority structures rather than purely individual attributes (Ratele, 2016; Chitando, Mlambo, Mfecane & Ratele, 2024; Scott, 2024).

This perspective reinforces the argument that masculine identity within *Kuyabila* poetry is embedded within genealogical memory and territorial belonging:

...ndavwa amaanda akwabo Syilika Muzuni, akwabo Mikolo Muzuni.  
(...*the original home of Shilika Muzuni, the original home of Mikolo Muzuni*).

Here, land functions as a repository of masculine legitimacy. The reference to ancestral homesteads does not simply locate the speaker geographically; it situates him within a spatialised memory of lineage and inheritance. Masculinity is thus anchored in a moral geography where land, ancestry, and identity intersect.

This construction aligns with conception of identity as a process of “becoming” by Hall (1990) grounded in historical narratives rather than fixed origins. By invoking ancestral homesteads, the speaker situates himself within a continuing historical trajectory that binds past, present, and future.

At the same time, genealogical masculinity reflects the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity described by Connell (1995). Connell emphasises that masculine authority is sustained through culturally legitimised practices that position certain forms of masculinity as socially dominant. In *Kuyabila* poetry, genealogical invocation functions precisely as such a legitimising practice. By demonstrating continuity with recognised ancestors, the speaker claims a culturally sanctioned form of masculine authority that resonates with communal expectations.

Importantly, genealogy in *Kuyabila* does not simply grant prestige; it also imposes obligation. Invoking ancestors places the speaker under the moral scrutiny of inherited reputation. Masculinity therefore becomes a relational identity measured against the remembered conduct of those who came before.

Through this genealogical grammar, *Kuyabila* poetry constructs masculinity as historically embedded rather than individually possessed. The masculine subject is authorised through lineage, territory, and cultural memory, demonstrating how gender identity is produced within broader structures of history and belonging.

#### **4.2 Communal Recognition and the Social Production of Masculinity**

While genealogy provides historical legitimacy, the poems analysed demonstrate that masculinity must also be socially recognised in order to become meaningful. Masculine identity in *Kuyabila* poetry is therefore not privately asserted but collectively validated through communal interaction.

This relational dimension is evident in the recurring refrain: “Tubana ba balombwana uba Julius. (*Us children of real men with Julius*).” The phrase constructs masculinity as a shared identity

grounded in collective belonging. Rather than presenting masculinity as an individual accomplishment, the poem situates it within a symbolic community of “children of real men.” The inclusion of the name Julius reinforces the relational nature of the statement, positioning the individual within a wider network of kinship and recognition.

The poetic declaration therefore functions as a performative act that invites communal affirmation. Audience responses, whether verbal acknowledgement, rhythmic participation, or attentive listening, serve as forms of social ratification that stabilise the masculine identity articulated by the performer.

Recent scholarship on African masculinities also highlights that male identity in many African societies is relationally constituted through communal recognition and social belonging rather than individual self-definition (Ratele, 2017; West, 2023).

This relational understanding of gender identity resonates with African feminist scholarship emphasising that personhood in many African societies is fundamentally social rather than individualistic. Mama (1997) argues that identities are shaped within collective structures of kinship, community, and social expectation. Within the *Kuyabila* tradition, masculinity emerges precisely through this communal framework. The male subject becomes intelligible not through self-definition alone but through recognition by others.

This relational logic is further reinforced in the statement: “Utanzanda ame nshimuzanda. (*Whoever hates me, I also hate them*).” The utterance reflects an ethic of reciprocal loyalty and emotional firmness that is culturally associated with masculine dignity. Within the moral universe of the poetry, masculinity requires the capacity to defend social reputation and maintain relational boundaries. Emotional restraint and decisiveness become markers of recognised male character.

From a theoretical standpoint, these expressions illustrate concept of gender performativity by Butler (1990). The speaker’s assertion does not simply describe masculine attributes; it enacts them through language. By articulating firmness and reciprocal loyalty, the performer reproduces cultural norms that define legitimate masculine conduct.

At the same time, the communal context of performance highlights the dialogic nature of gender identity. Masculinity is not simply enacted by the speaker but co-produced through audience reception. This interaction reinforces Connell’s (1995) argument that masculinities are socially negotiated within relational structures rather than individually determined.

*Kuyabila* poetry thus reveals masculinity as a socially produced identity sustained through communal recognition, performative articulation, and collective affirmation.

### **4.3 Labour, Provision, and the Moral Economy of Manhood**

Another significant construction of masculinity emerging from the analysis is the association between manhood and productive labour. Agricultural work in particular functions as a central symbolic register through which masculine worth is evaluated. Through this moral economy of labour, *Kuyabila* poetry frames masculinity as an achievement grounded in responsibility and contribution to communal survival.

This logic appears clearly in the poem *Self-Praise*, where the speaker proclaims: “Ndime mwanakaso mulombwana (*I, the disciplined one, the real man*).”

The declaration links masculinity with discipline and moral responsibility rather than physical strength alone. By describing himself as a “disciplined” man, the speaker emphasises ethical conduct as a defining attribute of recognised masculinity.

The poem further elaborates this ethic through agricultural imagery:

Tubalimi beni beni... Twakayaya maila ku Namwala.  
(*We are the real farmers... we produced maize in Namwala*).

Farming here functions as a symbolic marker of masculine responsibility. The ability to cultivate land and produce food represents the capacity to sustain households and communities. Masculinity therefore becomes visible through acts of productive labour that contribute to collective well-being.

This representation reflects broader patterns observed in African gender scholarship, where male identity is frequently associated with economic provision and social responsibility. Recent studies further demonstrate that economic participation, productive labour, and the ability to provide for families remain central markers of socially valued masculinity in many African contexts (Tamale, 2020; Makusha, 2024). The research by Makusha (2024) on young fatherhood in South Africa, for example, illustrates how masculine identity is closely linked to economic responsibility and the ability to fulfil provider roles despite changing social and economic conditions.

These insights reinforce the interpretation of agricultural labour in *Kuyabila* poetry as a culturally recognised performance of responsible masculinity. In this way, *Kuyabila* poetry embeds masculinity within the material realities of agrarian life. Manhood is not abstractly defined but grounded in visible contributions to communal survival. Labour, therefore, becomes a key site through which masculine identity is enacted and evaluated.

#### **4.4 Ritual Symbolism and the Performance of Masculine Authority**

Masculine authority in *Kuyabila* poetry is also articulated through ritual symbolism. Symbolic objects associated with leadership, warfare, and communal ritual frequently appear within the poetic discourse, functioning as cultural markers that evoke strength, protection, and authority.

One such reference occurs in the line:

Uba maala uba lundwe ubaa ngabo keembe o...o.  
(Even those from Ngabo, the axe, oh! Oh!)

The axe operates here as both a practical tool and a symbolic representation of masculine agency. Historically associated with clearing land, marking boundaries, and defending territory, the object carries cultural meanings that link masculinity with authority and control over space.

The poem also invokes ritual sound:

...ingoma                      acha                      amaanda                      keelila.  
(...as the drum was being played).

Within African performance traditions, the drum often functions as a medium of communal mobilisation and ritual expression. Its presence transforms speech into an event that carries social and symbolic significance. In the context of *Kuyabila* performance, the drum amplifies the authority of the poetic voice, situating the performer within a broader ritual framework of leadership and communal identity.

Such symbolism aligns with the argument by Connell (1995) that hegemonic masculinity is reinforced through cultural practices that associate masculinity with authority, protection, and leadership. The invocation of ritual objects therefore operates as a performative strategy that strengthens the cultural legitimacy of the masculine voice.

Through these symbolic references, *Kuyabila* poetry situates masculinity within a ritualised universe where authority is publicly enacted and culturally affirmed.

Contemporary research on African masculinities likewise emphasises that symbolic practices, ritual authority, and cultural performance remain key sites through which masculine identities are constructed and validated within communities (Chitando et al., 2024; Scott, 2024).

These insights highlight the importance of cultural performance traditions such as *Kuyabila* as spaces where masculine authority is symbolically produced and socially negotiated.

#### **4.5 Masculine Vulnerability and the Strain of Social Expectation**

Although *Kuyabila* poetry frequently celebrates masculine authority, the analysis also reveals moments where the discourse exposes the pressures associated with sustaining these ideals. Masculinity is therefore portrayed not as effortless dominance but as a demanding social role requiring continual validation.

This tension is evident in the poem *I Underrate My Manhood*, where the speaker reflects:

Balaamba alimwi nindona ndabutenga bulombwana bwangu mwana  
kaMpoma.

*(They say that when I sleep I belittle my manhood, child of Mapooma).*

The statement reflects anxiety about failing to meet communal expectations of masculine performance. Even ordinary acts such as rest become subject to social interpretation, suggesting that masculinity must be constantly demonstrated to remain credible.

The metaphor that follows intensifies this sense of strain: “Ilabile injini (*The engine was labouring*).”

By comparing masculinity to a struggling engine, the poem evokes the physical and emotional effort required to sustain recognised manhood. Masculinity is portrayed as a mechanism that must continually operate under pressure to maintain social legitimacy.

Such expressions reveal the precarious nature of masculine identity within hegemonic gender systems. Connell (1995) notes that hegemonic masculinity often imposes demanding expectations that many men struggle to fulfil. The *Kuyabila* poem captures this tension by exposing the emotional labour involved in maintaining masculine authority.

From the perspective of the theory of performativity (Butler, 1990), these moments highlight the instability inherent in gender identity. Because masculinity must be repeatedly enacted through socially recognisable acts, it remains vulnerable to disruption whenever those acts fail or appear inadequate.

Rather than undermining masculinity, the acknowledgment of vulnerability adds depth to the poetic discourse. It reveals masculinity as a negotiated and sometimes burdensome social role rather than a static symbol of power.

Recent scholarship increasingly highlights the emotional pressures and contradictions embedded within dominant masculine expectations across African societies (Makusha, 2024; Gukurume & Shoko, 2023).

These studies demonstrate that men often experience tension between cultural ideals of strength and the lived realities of economic insecurity, emotional vulnerability, and shifting gender norms.

Such perspectives reinforce the interpretation that *Kuyabila* poetry not only celebrates masculine authority but also reveals the social strain associated with maintaining it.

#### **4.6 Masculinity as Lineage, Performance, Labour, and Negotiation**

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that masculinity in *Kuyabila* poetry operates through multiple interconnected dimensions. First, masculinity is genealogical, deriving legitimacy from ancestral continuity and territorial belonging. Second, it is communal, requiring recognition and validation within social interaction. Third, masculinity is moralised through productive labour that sustains households and communities. Fourth, it is symbolically reinforced through ritual imagery associated with authority and leadership. Finally, masculinity is revealed to be emotionally demanding, exposing the pressures involved in maintaining socially recognised male identity.

These findings support theoretical perspectives that conceptualise gender as a socially constructed and historically embedded process. Consistent with concept of performativity by Butler (1990), *Kuyabila* poetry demonstrates how masculine identity is repeatedly enacted through language, labour, and ritual practice. Similarly, the framework by Connell (1995) of hegemonic masculinity helps explain how certain forms of male identity, such as genealogical authority, economic provision, and emotional firmness, become culturally privileged.

At the same time, the poems illustrate the understanding of identity by Hall (1990) as a dynamic process shaped by history, memory, and cultural representation. Masculinity in *Kuyabila* emerges not as a fixed cultural essence but as an evolving discourse negotiated through performance and communal recognition.

Through the interplay of genealogy, labour, ritual symbolism, and emotional negotiation, *Kuyabila* poetry constructs a complex vision of masculinity that simultaneously celebrates male authority and reveals its social demands. Masculinity therefore emerges as a dynamic cultural practice continually reproduced, contested, and reinterpreted within the poetic and communal life of Tonga and Ila society.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This study has explored how *Kuyabila* poetry functions as a cultural medium through which masculinity is articulated, enacted, and negotiated within Tonga and Ila communities of Southern Zambia. Rather than simply reflecting existing gender norms, the analysis demonstrates that

poetic performance actively participates in the production of masculine identity. Through genealogical invocation, symbolic imagery, and public performance, *Kuyabila* poetry establishes a discursive space where ideals of manhood are publicly affirmed and socially evaluated.

The findings highlight that masculinity in *Kuyabila* discourse is sustained through interconnected cultural frameworks of lineage, communal recognition, and productive labour. By invoking ancestral genealogies and territorial histories, performers anchor masculine authority within broader structures of memory and belonging. At the same time, the performative context of *Kuyabila* ensures that masculine identity remains relational and socially contingent. Recognition by the audience and the wider community transforms poetic self-representation into socially validated status, demonstrating that masculinity is negotiated through collective cultural practices rather than individual assertion alone.

Equally significant is the way the poetry reveals tensions within dominant masculine ideals. References to economic struggle, emotional strain, and social criticism suggest that masculine authority is not automatically secured but must be continually demonstrated and defended. These moments expose the pressures associated with culturally dominant expectations of male strength, responsibility, and provision. In doing so, *Kuyabila* poetry captures the dynamic and sometimes fragile character of masculine identity within changing social conditions.

Beyond its regional focus, the study contributes to broader debates within African gender scholarship by demonstrating the analytical value of oral literary traditions for understanding gendered identities. *Kuyabila* poetry illustrates how masculinity is not merely a social category but a cultural performance shaped through narrative, metaphor, and communal participation. Oral performance therefore provides a critical lens through which the lived complexities of gender relations can be examined.

The findings also highlight the importance of incorporating indigenous expressive forms into contemporary gender analysis. Oral poetry traditions such as *Kuyabila* function simultaneously as repositories of cultural memory and as arenas for social commentary. As such, they offer insight into how communities interpret continuity and change in gender roles, authority structures, and moral expectations.

Future research could extend this analysis by examining how generational change, migration, and shifting economic conditions influence the themes and performances of *Kuyabila* poetry. Comparative studies across different Zambian or Southern African oral traditions may also reveal how diverse performance genres mediate evolving forms of masculinity. Such approaches would further illuminate the role of oral literature as a dynamic site where gender identities are continually reimagined within African cultural life.

## References

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Chitando, E., Mlambo, O. B., Mfecane, S., & Ratele, K. (2024). *The Palgrave Handbook of African men and masculinities*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Colson, E. (1974). *Tradition and Contract: The Problem of Order*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.  
[https://books.google.ca/books?id=qH6XSh\\_b9x8C&printsec=copyright&source=gbs\\_public\\_info\\_r#v=onepage&q=Tonga&f=false](https://books.google.ca/books?id=qH6XSh_b9x8C&printsec=copyright&source=gbs_public_info_r#v=onepage&q=Tonga&f=false)
- Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities*. Berkely: University of California Press.  
<https://www.scribd.com/document/587351894/R-W-Connell-Masculinities-1995-2>
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829–859.
- Finnegan, R. (2012). *Oral Literature in Africa*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers.  
<https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0025/>
- Gukurume, S., & Shoko, M. (2023). Policing toxic masculinities and dealing with sexual violence on Zimbabwean university campuses. *HTS Theological Studies*, 79(3), a8625. Available at <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/8625/26067>
- Gunner, E. (1984). *Ukubonga Nezibongo: Zulu Praising and Praises*. PhD dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
- Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (pp. 222–237). London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Kaschula, R. (Ed.) (2001). *African Oral Literature: Functions in Contemporary Contexts*. New Africa Books.  
<https://books.google.co.ck/books?id=gvmxk7yMGVwC&printsec=copyright#v=onepage&q&f=false>
- Makusha, T. (2024). Young fatherhood, masculinities, and structural factors in South Africa. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 9, 1410801. Available at <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11306147/>
- Mama, A. (1997). *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity*. London: Routledge.

- Ouzgane, L., & Morrell, R. (Eds.) (2005). *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu Natal Press. <https://archive.org/details/africanmasculini0000unse/page/n7/mode/2up>
- Ratele, K. (2017). African (situated) psychologies of boys, men and masculinities. *Psychology in Society*, 54, 22–41. [https://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1015-60462017000200002](https://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1015-60462017000200002)
- Ratele, K. (2016). *Liberating Masculinities*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Scott, L. (2024). African Masculinities. In: Allen, L., Rasmussen, M.L. (eds) *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Sexuality Education*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-56681-3\\_92](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-56681-3_92)
- Tamale, S. (2011). *African Sexualities: A Reader*. Cape Town: Pambazuka Press.
- Tamale, S. (Ed.). (2020). *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*. Ottawa: Daraja Press.
- West, T., Elliot, J., Clark, E. & Mendez, M. (2023). Masculinities and gender norms in African society. *Journal of African Development*, 4(1), pp. 12 – 16. <https://afea-jad.com/article/masculinities-and-gender-norms-in-african-society-41/#:~:text=Common%20elements%20of%20traditional%20African,household%20heads%20and%20community%20leaders.>