

The Symbolic Concepts of Transhumance [Kuwila] in The Kafue Flats Among the Tonga People of Mwanachingwala, Hamusonde and Mungaila in Southern Province, Zambia

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the symbolic concepts of transhumance (kuwila) among the Tonga people residing in the Kafue Flats, specifically within the chiefdoms of Mwanachingwala, Hamusonde, and Mungaila in Southern Province, Zambia. Transhumance, traditionally seen as the seasonal movement of cattle, is reinterpreted in this study as a deeply symbolic practice, intricately connected to the social, cultural, and spiritual fabric of the Tonga community. Through a multidisciplinary lens, the study examines how kuwila serves as a rite of passage for young herdsmen, facilitating their journey of self-discovery and social rehabilitation. This practice is also explored as a means of reinforcing communal bonds and transmitting cultural values, particularly through the invocation of ancestral spirits and the use of ritualistic numbers, such as the number seven, which symbolizes completeness in both Tonga and biblical traditions. The research further analyses the role of cattle ownership as a pedagogical tool, essential for teaching responsibility and leadership to the younger generation. The herdsmen's deep attachment to their cattle is framed as a reflection of their spiritual and familial connections, with cattle often being named after ancestors to ensure protection and continuity. In addition to its cultural significance, kuwila is highlighted as a crucial practice for resource management and environmental sustainability in the Kafue Flats. The paper underscores the importance of integrating traditional knowledge with modern governance strategies, advocating for a holistic approach to managing the region's natural resources. By bridging the gap between cultural practices and ecological management, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how indigenous knowledge systems can inform contemporary governance and sustainability efforts in Southern Zambia.*

Keywords: symbolic concepts, transhumance [Kuwila], Kafue, Tonga people, Mwanachingwala, Hamusonde, Mungaila, Southern Province, Zambia

Operational terms: *Kuwila*-refers to transference of cattle from highland to lower land (transhumance). *Kulibanda*- refers to self-praise. *Kuyabila* - oral social construct that expresses

human emotions, truth and beauty, fantasy, and imagination through singing, expressed in metrical form and elevated thought of feeling. *Kukwezya* (popularly known as Bally dance among the youth in Zambia) - an illustrative dance involving movements to and from while hands change positions to symbolise the horns of cattle. *Muzimo* – refers to spirit of a deceased person

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the Tonga people of Southern Province, Zambia, who practice transhumance (kuwila) in the Kafue Flats. The Tonga primarily resides in the southern region, particularly along the Kafue and Zambezi Rivers and on the plateau. Their main language, Chitonga, is part of the Bantu language family (Nkolola, 2013; Guthrie, 1948; Doke, 1943). Other linguistic groups associated with the Tonga include the Ila, Lundwe, Toka Leya, Soli, and Lenje. Among these, the Ila people of Namwala district (under Chiefs Mukobela, Mungaila, and Nalubamba), the Lundwe people of Bweengwa (under Chiefs Hamusonde and Choongo), and the Tonga of Mazabuka district (under Chief Mwanachingwala) are particularly noted for their devotion to transhumance (kuwila). Kandyata (1991: 16) highlights that the wealthiest cattle owners are concentrated in these chiefdoms. Consequently, this paper focuses on these groups due to their significant engagement in transhumance.

The term transhumance (kuwila) refers to the seasonal movement of livestock between grazing grounds—typically to lowlands in winter and highlands in summer (Oxford Dictionary, 2010: 1588). Since this study specifically examines transhumance in the Kafue Flats, an analysis of its unique characteristics is essential.

Anatomy of the Kafue Flats

The Kafue Flats is a vast floodplain of the Kafue River located in Southern Zambia, covering an area of approximately 6,500 square kilometres (www.gwp.org/en/learn). The floodplain stretches from the Itezhi-tezhi Dam to the Kafue Gorge and spans parts of Mumbwa district in Central Province as well as Monze, Namwala, and Mazabuka districts in Southern Province. At its widest point, the Kafue Flats extend 50 kilometres from the main river channel (Chabwela, 1990). The average elevation is about 1,000 meters, resulting in a gentle gradient where the river drops only 10 meters over a distance of approximately 450 kilometres. This minimal gradient causes seasonal flooding of the Kafue Flats, particularly from April to June. During the dry season, the water recedes, leaving behind fertile green vegetation. The water level in the Kafue River typically reaches its annual low between November and December.

The Kafue Flats hold significant socio-economic importance. Major activities include hydroelectric power generation, sugarcane farming, wildlife conservation, cattle grazing, and fishing. The Mazabuka sugarcane farms, located on the southeastern side of the Kafue River, produce a substantial portion of Zambia's sugar for both domestic use and export. The Kafue

Gorge Hydroelectric Power Plant, located on the eastern end of the river, and the Itezhi-tezhi Dam on the western side, are key sources of electricity. The northwestern part of Monze district is home to Lochinvar National Park. These activities underscore the vital role of the Kafue River as a lifeline for the region, with water serving as the central element supporting these various industries.

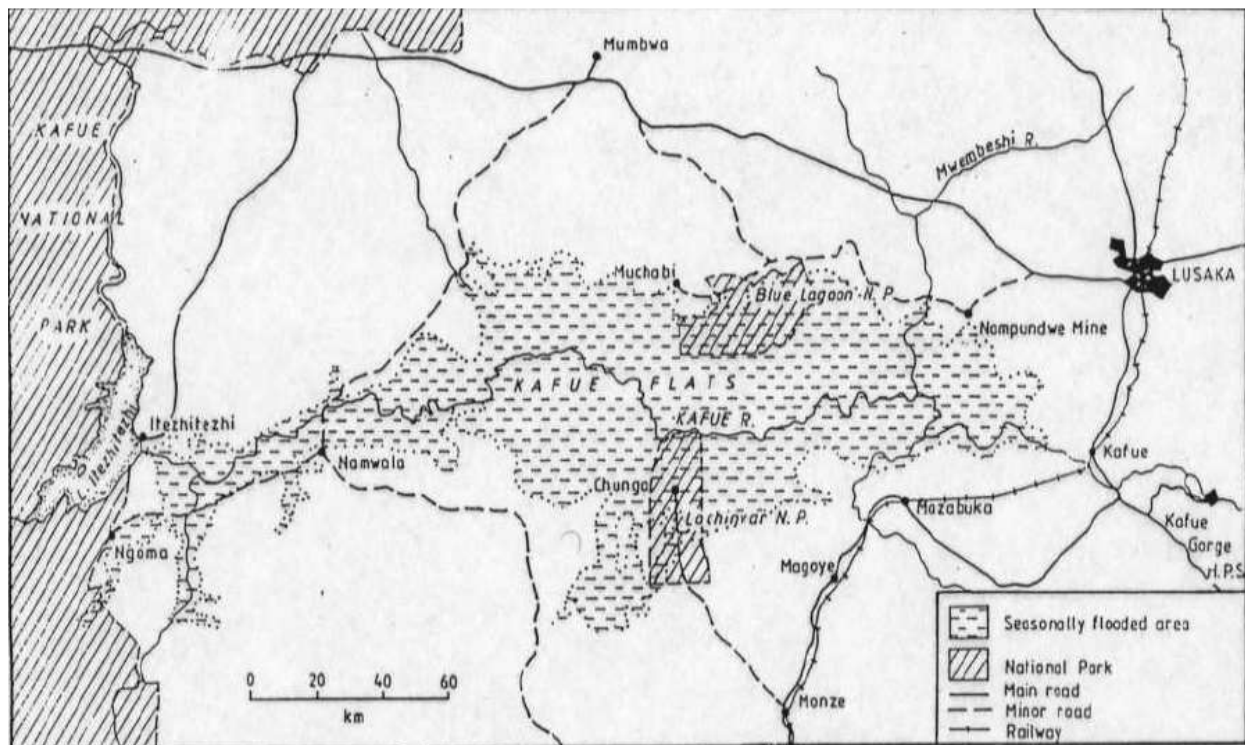


Figure 1.1 The Map of Kafue Flats and its location.

Geo-Physical Features and Pastures of the Kafue Flats

The Kafue Flats are characterized by a combination of geo-physical features, including swamps, marshes, extensive floodplain grasslands, oxbow lakes, and abandoned river channels (Handlos, 1978; Chabwela and Siwela, 1986). The vegetation of the Kafue Flats has been well documented by several studies (UNFAO, 1968; Handlos, 1998; Chabwela and Siwela, 1986; Ellenbroek, 1987; Chabwela and Ellenbroek, 1990) as consisting primarily of Termitaria grasslands and woodlands. These features attract a diverse range of wildlife, with Sheppe and Osborne (1971) and Ansell (1978) identifying 127 species of mammals in the region. Among the most notable wildlife is the Kafue Lechwe, which Whigham (1990) describes as the most significant large herbivore.

The presence of the Lechwe confirms the suitability of the Kafue Flats for cattle grazing, which in turn sustains the practice of transhumance among the local communities from the six chiefdoms discussed in this paper. This view is supported by Tuden (1968), Lehmann (1977), and Haller

(2007), who identify the three community groups as Ila, Tonga, Balundwe, and Twa. These groups have maintained the practice of transhumance in the Kafue Flats, driven by the availability of nutritious pastures. According to UNFAO (1968), Ellenbroek (1987), and Rees (1978), these pastures are characterized by palatable and nutritious plant species, accessible for grazing over an extended period, especially during the dry season, and high in biomass.

Studies by Chabwela (2010), Rees (1978), and Ellenbroek (1987) indicate high productivity and biomass levels in the floodplain. Ellenbroek (1987: 23) reports that the standing crop biomass of grasses in the Kafue Flats can reach 1,747.6 g/m², with peak biomass occurring in April. Biomass production may continue year-round, depending on moisture availability. Plant species such as *Setaria* sp., *Brachiaria* sp., and *Hyperrhenia* sp. are available for grazing at the onset of the rainy season. The quality of fodder varies with the season (Ellenbroek, 1987), with common grass species including *Vossia cuspidata*, *Echinochloa stagnina*, *Echinochloa pyramidalis*, *Acroceras macrum*, and *Setaria sphalelata*. Other species, such as *Paspalum* sp., *Digitaria* sp., and *Cynodon dactylon*, are also important for grazing.

The excellent pastures described by Ellenbroek suggest that the surrounding Tonga communities, particularly the three groups under discussion, are largely transhumant. This means they move their cattle according to flood levels, seeking out areas with good grazing land or returning home. While these communities maintain permanent settlements, the seasonal movement of cattle is deeply embedded in their culture. The value of these pastures to the three groups is closely tied to climatic conditions. With the mean annual rainfall in Southern Zambia, Haller (2007) describes the Kafue Flats as an "oasis" during the dry season and in drought years. In alignment with Haller's description, this paper regards the Kafue Flats as a "sacred shrine" for pastoralists, symbolizing the cultural heritage and livelihood of the Tonga people, particularly in relation to cattle rearing.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts a multi-theoretical approach to understanding the symbolic concept of transhumance (*kuwila*) among the Tonga people, employing social constructionism, functionalism, and formalism. These frameworks offer insights into the cultural, social, and symbolic dimensions of transhumance as practiced in the Kafue Flats.

Functionalism, as articulated by Bronislaw Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, posits that cultural activities must serve practical and utilitarian purposes for the communities that practice them (Miruka, 1994, p. 136). Applying this to *kuwila*, this paper argues that transhumance among the Tonga people is not just a practice of moving livestock; it is an embodiment of their beliefs, customs, rituals, and social structures. These elements contribute to the stability and continuity of their society. The role of cattle in this context is critical, as it provides both economic stability and social cohesion. The Tonga people's agricultural practices primarily maize cultivation and cattle rearing are deeply interwoven with their cultural identity and are seen as essential to maintaining social order and stability (Colson & Chona, 1965; Cliggett, 2003; Lungu, 2003; Michelo, 2016).

Social Constructionism, as proposed by Kenneth Gergen, asserts that social phenomena exist because they are collectively agreed upon within a society (Gergen, 1985). This perspective is used to explore how transhumance (kuwila) is a socially constructed practice that is deeply valued within the Tonga community. Despite its significance, not all ethnic groups in Zambia share this appreciation, underscoring the idea that social realities are subjective and context-dependent (Lock, 2010). For the Tonga people, the practice of kuwila is a powerful symbol of cultural identity, reflecting their deep connection to cattle and the land.

Formalist Approach is employed to analyse the symbolic elements of kuwila. Symbols, as noted by Perrine (1998), are images that carry expanded meanings beyond their literal interpretation. In this study, cattle and the practice of transhumance are seen as symbols of wealth, stability, and cultural heritage. The imagery associated with kuwila is analysed to reveal deeper cultural meanings, much like how the earth is symbolically referred to as a ‘mother figure’ due to its nurturing role in human life. This analysis helps to uncover the symbolic dimensions of kuwila, demonstrating how it represents the values, ideas, and way of life of the Tonga people (Roberts & Jacobs, 2007).

The Symbolic Nature and Process of Transhumance (Kuwila)

Transhumance (kuwila) among the Tonga people involves the seasonal movement of cattle from the homeland to the fertile pastures of the Kafue Flats. This practice is not merely a logistical operation; it is steeped in cultural rituals and beliefs. The herdsmen construct temporary shelters, known as kumatanga, in the highlands of the Flats, where they stay for several months. The term kumatanga reflects the deep cultural significance of these temporary homes, being derived from the Tonga words for “where” (ku) and “herds of cattle” (matanga).

The process of kuwila is marked by a mixture of joyful and challenging moments. Before moving the cattle, pastoralists often engage in traditional rituals, such as marking territory with protective charms, believed to safeguard both the cattle and the herdsmen from harm. These rituals highlight the spiritual dimension of kuwila, aligning with Frantz’s (1976) observation that pastoralism in sub-Saharan Africa is characterized by distinctive rituals, laws, and a deep ideological commitment to cattle. Similarly, Mbiti (1991) emphasizes that African traditional life is rooted in beliefs, ceremonies, and values, further validating the significance of these rituals.

One of the most striking aspects of kuwila is the herdsmen’s ability to navigate the Kafue River, which is infested with crocodiles, without suffering fatalities. This feat is often attributed to the efficacy of the protective rituals, reinforcing the belief in their power. The imagery of herdsmen leading their cattle across the river, unharmed, symbolizes the resilience and resourcefulness of the Tonga people, as well as the deep spiritual connection they maintain with their environment.



Figure 1.4 The Cattle are crossing Kafue River during the transference period

In light of the preceding arguments, it is evident that the transference of cattle to and from the Kafue Flats is a culturally significant event, rich in symbolic meaning. This event is characterized by self-praise, or the revelation of identity through various names (*kulibanda*), an illustrative dance involving movements to and from (*kukwezuya*), and the performance of metrical singing (*kuyabila*). Additionally, the event features the use of taboos, subtly expressed through permissible yet provocative utterances, such as "*wabakunda banyoko*," which translates to "you have sex with your mother." These expressions, while crude, are deeply embedded in the cultural practices surrounding transhumance.

An integral aspect of this tradition is the veneration of ancestral spirits. Seven days prior to the commencement of cattle transference, a farmer sounds a high-pitched drum in the kraal each morning and evening. This ritualistic drumming, performed consistently over seven days, symbolizes the completion of preparations for the transhumance journey. The number seven holds profound symbolic significance, rooted in both cultural and spiritual contexts. As noted by Guerin et al. (2005, 187), "seven is the most potent of all symbolic numbers signifying the union of three and four, the completion of a cycle, in perfect order." This understanding resonates with biblical symbolism, where the number seven denotes completeness (Genesis 2:2-4; 41:1-7; Exodus 23:10-13). Such symbolism may influence cattle farmers to observe traditional rituals over a seven-day period, marking their readiness for transhumance.

During this seven-day period, certain households engage in the brewing of beer as an offering to their ancestral spirits. This practice underscores the belief that the spirits of the forefathers play a crucial role in the prosperity of cattle herds among the Tonga people of Southern Province. The attachment to cattle is often reflected in the names assigned to each cow's lineage, which bear significant cultural meaning. As Nkolola (Cligget and Bond 2013, 84) observes, "cattle among the Tonga people are not simply viewed as a collective possession; each animal is given a distinct and specific identity by its owner, often reflected in its name." These names, frequently derived from deceased family members, are referred to as muzimo among the Tonga.

The concept of 'muzimo' which translates to the "spirit of a deceased person" (Sumaili 1994:V), embodies the belief that a person's spirit persists after death through its name. The Tonga believes that while the physical body may perish, the spirit, or muzimo, continues to exist. This spirit is thought to hover around the living, offering protection over homes, villages, and properties, including cattle. Sumaili (1994:6) suggests that this belief parallels the notion of personal gods, such as "chi" in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958:35), which are believed to protect individuals and their possessions.

Similarly, the Tonga people, much like those depicted in Achebe's narrative, place great importance on the celebration of muzimo, viewing it as central to their lives and possessions. A notable example of this is the veneration of Shimunenga, a revered figure among the Ila subgroup of the Tonga people, who is regarded as a demigod and protector of both people and cattle. This reverence is reflected in the community's prosperity, where individuals can sell over a thousand steers and heifers annually to fulfil their needs. Central to this wealth creation is the belief in muzimo, which is thought to symbolically protect and guide both their cattle and family members in times of uncertainty.

In this context, prior to and during the process of cattle transference, the cattle owner engages in praise rituals, invoking the names of ancestors in the presence of the herd. These invocations are believed to protect the cattle and avert potential dangers. Figure 1.5 depicts a farmer invoking the spirits of his forefathers through a named ox, ensuring the safety of the herd during their journey across the Kafue Flats.



Figure 1.5: The farmer praises his cattle during transhumance.

Figure 1.6: A named ox leads the way, being the first to enter and cross the Kafue River, with the rest of the herd following at a distance.



Figure 1.6: An ox named after the farmer's forefather leads the herd across the Kafue River. In a sense, the images above illustrate the symbolic act of praying to one's forefathers, which reflects the harmonious relationship between the farmer and the ancestral spirits governing cattle ownership.

This ritual symbolizes the farmer's spiritual bond with his cattle, with his intentions becoming the foundation of his authority over the herd. The strength of this bond is evident in the selected cattle that embody the farmer's will. Figure 1.7 depicts a remarkable scene in which four oxen rest their heads on each other's backs, while a trusted ox leads the way in a striking display of coordination.



Figure 1.7 Presents the Herd of cattle lead by four Oxen in a spectacular manner

Kuwila: A Symbol of the Journey into a Sacred World of Self-Discovery

The concept of transhumance, or *kuwila* among the Tonga people of Southern Province, is a pivotal cultural practice, especially for young men. The movement of cattle to and from the Kafue Flats marks the beginning of a significant journey a metaphor for the transition from youth to adulthood and responsibility. This journey, much like the self-discovery quests found in literary works such as Bessie Head's *Maru* (1971), George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (1984), and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) serves as a period of seclusion and introspection, free from societal norms and expectations. The Tonga people, like many other cultures, value these journeys as rites of passage that lead to personal growth and self-awareness. Through the use of the local language throughout the journey, headers tend to experience multiliteracy development, cultural preservation and learners' identity affirmation (Nyimbili, 2021) which they pass to the next generation of young headers. It should be understood that every ritual is hidden into a language which should be shared to the people if it should continue existing which the Tonga headers practice annually.

During transhumance, young, unmarried herdsmen, aged between 10 and 25, undergo a period of self-reflection and learning. This period of seclusion can last from six months to several years, depending on the circumstances. For some herdsmen, this time away is a means to cope with the absence of parents, especially in the case of orphans, or to escape slander and personal hardships. For others, it is a continuation of familial tradition or an employment necessity. Regardless of the reason, the journey into the flats allows these young men to form a unique bond with the cattle, finding solace and security in their daily interactions. This bond often leads to a preference for the company of cattle over human relationships, as the herdsmen develop a deep sense of faith and attachment to their animals.

This profound connection between herdsmen and their cattle often marks the completion of their journey into the sacred world of self-discovery. The transformative experiences during transhumance manifest in various aspects of their lives after they return, shaping their identities and futures.

Cattle Ownership as a Tool for Training and Teaching the Young

Cattle ownership among the Tonga people is not merely an economic activity; it is a crucial element of cultural education and socialization. Children learn the responsibilities of cattle management from an early age, observing and imitating their parents' daily routines. For instance, a father's morning and evening interactions with his cattle checking their well-being, observing their behaviour serve as practical lessons for his children. This daily ritual, which prioritizes the care of cattle even before meals, symbolizes the deep respect and commitment to livestock that is central to Tonga culture.

The behaviours of cattle after grazing convey important messages to the owner. Satisfied cattle display playful behaviours, while those still hungry may resist entering the kraal, signalling the need for further grazing. These observations are not only critical for effective cattle management but also serve as a form of informal education for young boys, who learn to understand and interpret these signs alongside their elders. This method of training aligns with the biblical principle found in Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it." In this way, cattle ownership becomes a foundational tool in moulding a child's character and ensuring the continuity of cultural practices.

Kuwila as a Symbol of Social Rehabilitation and Training

Transhumance also functions as a form of social rehabilitation and training for herdsmen. The isolation and responsibilities of managing cattle in the Kafue Flats impart valuable life skills such as responsibility, self-reliance, and leadership. The experience fosters self-discipline and moral development, steering young men away from undesirable behaviours and towards becoming successful ranchers and community leaders.

Young people with both positive and negative traits are often encouraged to spend time in the flats, where the solitude and demands of cattle management serve as a natural rehabilitative process. This approach is somewhat analogous to the "integrated model" suggested by Brown and Hughson (1993) which advocates for a holistic approach to rehabilitation that addresses all aspects of an individual's life. For the Tonga people, the transhumance experience provides a structured environment where young men can reflect, grow, and develop the skills necessary for adulthood.

Kuwila as a Symbol of Increasing One's Herd

The primary objective of transhumance is to ensure that cattle have access to abundant green pastures, which is essential for their health and fertility. Well-nourished cows are more likely to come into heat, increasing the chances of successful mating and, consequently, herd growth. This practice is similar to how well-cared-for women are often seen as more attractive and fertile, drawing parallels between human and animal behaviour in the context of reproduction.

In Southern Province, the Kafue Flats and other fertile areas provide the ideal conditions for cattle to thrive. Cattle owners often travel long distances and camp in these areas for extended periods, ensuring that their herds receive the best possible care. The result is healthier cattle and an increase in herd size, driven by the higher fertility rates associated with good nutrition and frequent mating.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the multifaceted symbolic significance of transhumance (kuwila) among the Tonga people of Southern Province. The study concluded that the process of kuwila is marked by a mixture of joyful and challenging moments. Before moving the cattle, pastoralists often engage in traditional rituals, such as marking territory with protective charms, believed to safeguard both the cattle and the herdsman from harm. The imagery of herdsman leading their cattle across the river, unharmed, symbolizes the resilience and resourcefulness of the Tonga people, as well as the deep spiritual connection they maintain with their environment. Prior to and during the process of cattle transference, the cattle owner engages in praise rituals, invoking the names of ancestors in the presence of the herd. It can also be concluded that the movement of cattle to and from the Kafue Flats marks the beginning of a significant journey a metaphor for the transition from youth to adulthood and responsibility. During transhumance, young, unmarried herdsman, aged between 10 and 25, undergo a period of self-reflection and learning. This period of seclusion can last from six months to several years, depending on the circumstances. For some herdsman, this time away is a means to cope with the adulthood, learn the responsibilities of cattle management from an early age, observing and imitating their parents' daily routines. Kuwila can be linked to the growth path of a boy into manhood which every society preserves for the brave as the boys face real life dangers which they overcome to show their coming responsibilities as they grow. In the Zambian context, the symbolism of Kuwila is present among most Zambian ethnic grouping which unfold in different ways like 'mukanda' for the north westerners and 'dambwe' among the Chewa. It can be stated here that kuwila is not limited to the cattle headers but manifest

in the Zambian communities in different names hence should be preserved with its practices for the future generation.

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