



Beyond Metaphor: Decolonial Praxis in the Lyrical Poetry of Waway Saway

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Abstract

Indigenous lyrical poetry functions not only as cultural expression but also as a repository of ecological knowledge, cultural memory, and resistance. This study analyzes three lyrical poems by Talaandig artist and cultural bearer Rodelio Linsahay Saway: Iítsa Tamóka Yatáki Tombî, Song for the Queen, and Kulaman, through the decolonial framework presented in Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang. The study situates the poems within Indigenous epistemologies and examines how lyrical poetry operates as a form of decolonial praxis that asserts Indigenous sovereignty, ecological stewardship, and cultural continuity. The research focuses on how the poems articulate Indigenous relationships to land and resistance against colonial structures. The findings reveal that the poems construct land as a sacred and living entity deeply embedded in cultural identity and ancestral memory. Furthermore, the lyrical expressions challenge colonial conceptions of land ownership and affirm Indigenous ecological knowledge systems rooted in reciprocity and communal responsibility. The study demonstrates that Talaandig lyrical poetry functions as a form of cultural resistance and contributes to wider discussions on decolonization, environmental justice, and Indigenous knowledge production.

1. Introduction

Indigenous songs and lyrical poetry serve as important repositories of ecological knowledge, cultural memory, and political resistance. For many Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICCs), artistic expression is inseparable from spirituality, environmental stewardship, and communal identity. Indigenous songs do not merely function as aesthetic forms. They preserve histories, transmit cultural values, and sustain knowledge systems across generations (Berkes, 2012).

Among many Indigenous communities, songs and oral traditions preserve ecological knowledge and encode cultural values connected to land and survival. Feld (2012), in his study of the Kaluli people, demonstrated how Indigenous songs narrate environmental relationships and social structures. Roseman (1998) likewise observed that the songs of the Temiar people communicate ecological and spiritual understandings of the rainforest. These studies show that Indigenous lyrical forms are not simply artistic performances but also systems of environmental education, cultural preservation, and resistance.

Within many Indigenous worldviews, land is understood not simply as territory or economic resource but as a sacred and living presence tied to ancestry, spirituality, and collective survival. Bernbaum (1990) explains that for many Indigenous communities, mountains, forests, and rivers function as living archives of cultural memory and spirituality. This understanding differs significantly from colonial frameworks that reduce land into property, commodity, or capital (Smith, 2012). As a result, colonial systems that dispossess Indigenous peoples from their ancestral domains threaten not only territorial sovereignty but also Indigenous lifeways, cultural continuity, and systems of knowledge.

The recognition of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) further strengthened the understanding that Indigenous knowledge systems are essential in environmental stewardship and sustainability. Posey (1999) and Gadgil et al. (1993) emphasized that Indigenous ecological practices contribute significantly to biodiversity conservation and sustainable environmental management. Berkes (2012) also argued that Indigenous ecological knowledge reflects a holistic worldview where spirituality, culture, and ecology are deeply interconnected.

In the Philippine context, Indigenous communities continue to experience displacement and environmental exploitation despite legal protections such as the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997 and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Studies reveal that conflicts over ancestral domains, mining, militarization, and resource extraction continue to threaten Indigenous communities across the country (Santisteban, 2017; Tauli-Corpus, 2018; Mawis, 2020). These realities reinforce the argument of Tuck and Yang (2012) that decolonization cannot remain metaphorical because colonialism continues to operate materially through land dispossession, environmental destruction, and the weakening of Indigenous sovereignty.

For Tuck and Yang (2012), decolonization is not a metaphor for inclusion, representation, or symbolic recognition. Rather, it requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life. Their argument challenges the tendency to romanticize Indigenous culture while leaving colonial structures untouched. Simpson (2011) and Coulthard (2014) similarly emphasized that Indigenous resurgence requires material reclamation of land, governance, and cultural autonomy rather than symbolic reconciliation within colonial systems.

Among the Indigenous communities affected by these realities are the Talaandig people of Bukidnon, whose ancestral lands remain central to their cultural, spiritual, and ecological practices. The Talaandig preserve their culture through songs, epics, chants, and oral traditions that embody their local knowledge systems (Province of Bukidnon, 2012). Saway (2004) explained that Talaandig knowledge is embedded in nature and transmitted orally through rituals, songs, and storytelling traditions. Their lyrical poetry therefore becomes an important site for preserving Indigenous epistemologies and asserting cultural continuity.

The works of Talaandig cultural bearer Rodelio Linsahay Saway reflect these continuing struggles and forms of resistance. His lyrical compositions draw from ancestral narratives, environmental imagery, and Indigenous spirituality to articulate the inseparable relationship between land, identity, and cultural survival. Through poetry and song, Saway preserves Indigenous knowledge while also resisting colonial narratives that frame land as exploitable space.

Grounded in the framework of Tuck and Yang (2012), this study argues that the selected lyrical poems do not merely symbolize decolonization through themes of identity and environmental awareness. Rather, the poems articulate concrete Indigenous struggles over land, sovereignty, ecological protection, and collective survival. The poems therefore demonstrate that decolonization is not simply metaphorical, but materially tied to ancestral land, Indigenous governance, and resistance against colonial structures.

This study therefore analyzes three selected lyrical poems by Rodelio Linsahay Saway: *Iítsa Tamóka Yatáki Tombî*, *Song for the Queen*, and *Kulaman*. Through these texts, the research explores how Talaandig lyrical poetry enacts decolonial praxis by foregrounding Indigenous ecological knowledge, cultural memory, collective struggle, and resistance to colonial structures.

2. Literature Review

Scholars across different disciplines have emphasized the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems in understanding ecological sustainability, cultural identity, and resistance to colonial structures.

One foundational work in Indigenous environmental studies is Fikret Berkes' *Sacred Ecology*. Berkes (2012) explains that Indigenous ecological knowledge reflects a holistic worldview in which humans, land, and spirituality are interconnected. Such knowledge systems challenge Western scientific traditions that separate nature from culture and instead emphasize reciprocity, balance, and relationality with the environment.

The concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) emerged as scholars began to recognize the limitations of purely Western scientific approaches in understanding environmental systems. Johannes (1989) argued that researchers could learn more from Indigenous communities who possess long-standing relationships with the land. Nakashima and Roué (2002) further observed that Indigenous ecological knowledge systems were historically marginalized during colonial rule because they were regarded as unscientific.

Despite this marginalization, TEK gradually gained international recognition due to its contributions to biodiversity conservation and sustainability. Posey (1999) and Gadgil et al. (1993) emphasized the importance of Indigenous ecological practices in environmental conservation. This recognition became more institutionalized through international initiatives such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007).

Scholars also demonstrated how TEK intersects with several academic disciplines. Toledo (2001) explained that ethnoecology examines how cultural practices shape ecological systems, while Balick and Cox (1997) highlighted ethnobotany as the study of Indigenous plant knowledge and medicinal practices. Kimmerer (2013) further argued that Indigenous ecological wisdom contributes significantly to scientific understandings of sustainability, reciprocity, and environmental ethics.

Sacred Ecology also emerged as a significant framework in Indigenous environmental studies. Berkes (2012) emphasized that Indigenous environmental knowledge cannot be separated from spiritual beliefs and cultural values. This perspective aligns with Smith's (2012) critique of colonial knowledge production and her call for the validation of Indigenous epistemologies.

Scholars such as Ostrom (1990) and Geertz (1973) further contributed to the development of Sacred Ecology by examining localized governance systems and symbolic relationships between humans and the environment. Recent studies continue to emphasize the integration of Indigenous ecological knowledge into climate adaptation and environmental governance strategies (Contributions of Indigenous Knowledge to Ecological and Evolutionary Understanding, 2021).

Political Ecology likewise became an important framework for examining the relationship between environmental issues and systems of power. Wolf (1982) explained that colonialism and global capitalism disrupted Indigenous ecological relationships by integrating local communities into exploitative economic systems. Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) further argued that environmental degradation is often driven by political and economic structures rather than merely local practices.

Contemporary political ecology studies emphasize that environmental issues are inseparable from colonialism, capitalism, and social inequality (Robbins, 2019). Nixon (2011) described this as "environmentalism of the poor," where marginalized communities disproportionately experience environmental violence and ecological destruction.

Within Indigenous literary studies, folklore and lyrical traditions are recognized as important sites of cultural continuity. Feld (2012) observed that Indigenous songs preserve environmental narratives and communal memory, while McLean (2006) explained that Māori songs communicate principles of environmental stewardship and cultural identity. Similarly, Roseman (1998) argued that Indigenous songs encode ecological relationships and spiritual understandings of the natural world.

In the Philippine context, Talaandig oral traditions continue to preserve Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural identity. According to the Province of Bukidnon (2012), the Talaandig preserve their culture through songs, epics, chants, and oral narratives. Saway (2004) further explained that Talaandig local knowledge, known as "Agpangan," is embedded in nature and orally transmitted through rituals, songs, and storytelling traditions.

Studies on Talaandig struggles also reveal the continuing impact of colonial and capitalist structures on ancestral lands. de Vera (2007) documented how economic hardship and mining operations displaced Talaandig communities in Bukidnon. Similarly, Ravanera et al. (2020) discussed the efforts of the Talaandig people to reclaim ancestral lands through Indigenous governance and sustainable environmental initiatives.

One notable study related to Talaandig lyrical poetry is the work of Beverly Galorport Pebria-Taga (2022), who examined ecological themes in selected Talaandig lyric poems using an ecocritical framework. Pebria-Taga's analysis demonstrates that Talaandig songs reflect a deep environmental consciousness rooted in Indigenous cosmology. Natural elements such as rivers,

forests, and mountains function not merely as physical landscapes but also as spiritual and cultural markers of identity.

Pebria-Taga further argues that Talaandig lyrical poetry communicates Traditional Ecological Knowledge that emphasizes environmental stewardship, reciprocity, and respect for nature. These poetic expressions function as cultural mechanisms for transmitting ecological values and reinforcing communal responsibility toward the environment.

While ecocritical approaches effectively highlight the environmental dimensions of Indigenous poetry, they often do not fully engage with the political realities of land dispossession and colonial violence. To address this gap, the present study extends Pebria-Taga's ecological analysis by applying the decolonial paradigm proposed by Tuck and Yang (2012).

Through this perspective, Talaandig lyrical poetry is examined not only as an expression of ecological consciousness but also as a form of cultural resistance that asserts Indigenous sovereignty, challenges colonial narratives of land ownership, and foregrounds Indigenous struggles for land and self-determination.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded primarily in the decolonial framework articulated by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang in *Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor*.

Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that decolonization must be understood as a material process that involves the repatriation of Indigenous land and life. They critique the tendency to use the term "decolonization" metaphorically in academic and social justice discourse, emphasizing that genuine decolonization requires dismantling colonial structures that continue to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their ancestral territories. Applied to literary analysis, this framework allows Indigenous texts to be interpreted as forms of resistance that articulate Indigenous sovereignty, cultural survival, and political reclamation. Indigenous literary expressions become spaces where colonial narratives are challenged and Indigenous relationships to land are reaffirmed.

The arguments of Tuck and Yang are situated within a broader body of Indigenous scholarship that foregrounds land as central to Indigenous identity, governance, and resistance. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011) emphasizes Indigenous resurgence through relationality, land-based knowledge, and cultural continuity. Similarly, Glen Coulthard (2014) argues that state recognition without land restitution merely reproduces settler colonialism in more acceptable forms. These perspectives reject reconciliation that remains confined within colonial structures. Instead, they call for material redistribution, Indigenous resurgence, and the rebuilding of Indigenous life outside settler frameworks. Tuck and Yang's framework aligns with this broader intellectual and political movement by insisting that metaphorical uses of decolonization risk erasing the material realities of Indigenous dispossession.

Using this framework, the present study examines how the selected lyrical poems of Rodelio Linsahay Saway articulate Indigenous relationships to land, reinforce kinship and collective responsibility, and assert sovereignty against colonial systems.

4. Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employs qualitative literary analysis to interpret the selected poems through a decolonial lens. The research adopts an interpretive approach that examines themes, imagery, and symbolic representations of land and identity.

Data Sources

The primary data consist of three lyrical poems composed by Rodelio Linsahay Saway:

Iítsa Tamóka Yatáki Tombî

Song for the Queen

Kulaman

These poems were selected because they contain significant references to land, ecological relationships, and Indigenous cultural values.

The analysis follows thematic interpretation guided by decolonial theory, Sacred Ecology, and Political Ecology. The poems were examined to identify recurring themes related to Indigenous identity, environmental stewardship, and resistance to colonial narratives.

5. Results and Discussion

Tuck and Yang (2012) argued that for true decolonization to take place, it means reclaiming and returning of Indigenous lands. In the succeeding sections, the discussion will focus on how decolonization was argued as an assertion for land and rights, reinforcing kinship, and enacting sovereignty as expressed and observed in the lyrical poetry of Waway Saway.

Decolonization as Reclaiming Land and Space

The succeeding discussion examines how decolonization is expressed in the lyrical poetry of Waway Saway through reclaiming land and space, reinforcing kinship, and enacting sovereignty. The findings also reflect broader Indigenous ecological and cultural frameworks discussed by Berkes (2012), Smith (2012), and Wolf (1982), particularly in relation to land-based knowledge systems, environmental stewardship, and resistance to colonial structures.

Iítsa Tamóka Yatáki Tombî (Throw away, trample down)

Iítsa Tamóka Yatáki Tombî (Throw away, trample down)

Iítsa Tamóka Yatáki Tombî (Throw away, trample down)

Panalipdan ta ang bukid (Let's protect the mountains)

Batuk sa mga barbero sa lasang (Against illegal loggers and miners)

Ang pag galang sa kinaiyahan (*Respecting nature should be*)

Kailangang maisatuparan (*done and realized*)

(*Lines 5–11*)

The emphasis on protecting mountains and forests also aligns with Political Ecology frameworks. Wolf (1982) argued that colonial and capitalist systems disrupt Indigenous ecological relationships by transforming land into exploitable capital. Similarly, Robbins (2019) emphasized that environmental destruction is inseparable from unequal power structures. In the poem, environmental violence through logging and mining becomes directly connected to colonial exploitation.

Furthermore, the lyrical poem foregrounds Traditional Ecological Knowledge through its emphasis on respect for nature. Posey (1999) and Gadgil et al. (1993) emphasized that Indigenous ecological knowledge systems contribute significantly to sustainability and biodiversity conservation. The poem therefore reflects Indigenous ecological ethics rooted in stewardship and reciprocity.

Lines 23–27 further assert Indigenous authority and collective responsibility:

Sandigan sa pagbarog (*A strong foundation to stand firm*)

Naga saysay sa katungod (*Attest our rights*)

Ipa abot sa kadaghanan (*and let everyone know*)

Manalipod (*We protect together*)

Makig bisog (*We struggle together*)

(*Lines 23–27*)

The communal voice reinforces kinship and collective action against colonial structures. Enos and Tamanaha (2022) explained that Indigenous kinship extends beyond blood relations and includes responsibility toward land, ancestors, and future generations. This collective orientation directly opposes the individualistic values embedded within settler colonial systems.

The themes in the lyrical poem also reflect what Tuck and Yang (2012) described as reclaiming relational space rather than merely symbolic inclusion. By centering Indigenous relationships with nature and collective struggle, the poem enacts decolonization through cultural and political assertion.

Meanwhile, the lyrical poem *Song for the Queen* opens with reverence for the “beauty of this kingdom,” acknowledging both the physical and spiritual richness of the Hawaiian nation. Yet it immediately turns to the question: “Ba hindu alawa / Sa mga dana hu mga ginlaasan / Su mga lalanguya daw tebengan hu ikaw ha kaliwatan” (Where will we find / The footsteps of our

ancestors?) This is not just poetic longing—it is an assertion of loss through colonial occupation.

The disappearance of ancestral markers reflects the violence of settler colonialism and territorial dispossession. Smith (2012) emphasized that colonialism threatens not only land ownership but also cultural memory and Indigenous identity. The lyrical poem therefore becomes an act of remembering and reclaiming ancestral presence.

Reinforcing Kinship

Reinforcing kinship is a crucial concept in Tuck and Yang’s framework of decolonization because it restores Indigenous relationships among people, land, and community. This aspect is evident in several lyrical poems of Waway Saway.

In *Iítsa Tamóka Yatáki Tombî*, the poem repeatedly calls the community toward collective struggle and environmental protection. The lines “We protect together” and “We struggle together” foreground communal responsibility rather than individual survival.

<i>Sandigan sa pagbarog</i>	<i>(A strong foundation to stand firm)</i>
<i>Naga saysay sa katungod</i>	<i>(Attest our rights)</i>
<i>Ipa abot sa kadaghanan</i>	<i>(and let everyone know)</i>
<i>Manalipod</i>	<i>(We protect together)</i>
<i>Makig bisog</i>	<i>(We struggle together)</i>
<i>(Lines 23–27)</i>	

This reflects Berkes’ (2012) argument that Indigenous ecological systems are based on reciprocity and interconnectedness. Similarly, Wilson (2008) explained that Indigenous knowledge systems are fundamentally relational, emphasizing responsibilities among humans, land, and spiritual life.

Kinship in the poem therefore functions not only as familial connection but also as cultural and ecological responsibility. Bauman (1975) emphasized that oral performances reinforce collective identity and social cohesion. Through communal voice and repetition, the lyrical poem strengthens Indigenous solidarity against colonial and environmental violence.

The communal orientation of the poem also aligns with Carruthers’ (1996) discussion on Indigenous sustainability practices, where Indigenous communities model reciprocal relationships with nature and collective governance. Through lyrical expression, the poem preserves kinship networks that colonial systems historically attempted to fragment.

Enacting Sovereignty

Enacting sovereignty is another key element in the framework of decolonization proposed by Tuck and Yang (2012). Sovereignty involves exercising Indigenous authority over land, governance, and lifeways not only symbolically but materially and politically.

The lyrical poem *Kulaman* evokes decolonization as theorized by Tuck and Yang (2012). Specifically, it highlights Enacting Sovereignty by Naming Injustice. The lines below constitute a direct political critique regarding environmental injustice that directly affects ICCs and their lands. They showcase false promises of “progress” commonly presented by settlers toward Indigenous peoples.

Agka amin un sa wahig ta kalasan (The waters at the forest are almost consumed)

Tapara ko naan hu kalambu-an (They said it is for development)

Alan kuy baga-id mahandugan (Can we all have our share?)

Palimanan taw batang (Or will we wait and just listen for it?)

(Lines 6–8)

These lines expose the unequal impacts of development projects on Indigenous communities. Nixon (2011) referred to this as “slow violence,” where marginalized communities experience environmental destruction gradually through extraction, displacement, and ecological degradation.

The poem critiques development narratives that justify exploitation of ancestral domains. This reflects the findings of Sharma (2017), who explained that environmental changes disproportionately affect marginalized communities because of unequal political and economic structures. The lyrical poem therefore rejects colonial narratives of progress that prioritize capitalist expansion over Indigenous well-being.

The struggle over land and resources in the poem also reflects actual experiences of Talaandig communities in Bukidnon. de Vera (2007) documented how mining operations and economic hardship displaced Talaandig communities from ancestral lands. Ravanera et al. (2020) further discussed how Talaandig groups resisted land dispossession by asserting Indigenous governance and sustainable environmental practices.

The poem therefore aligns closely with Tuck and Yang’s (2012) assertion that decolonization cannot remain metaphorical. The demand for access to water, environmental justice, and land autonomy reflects material struggles tied directly to Indigenous sovereignty.

Finally, *Song for the Queen* further enacts sovereignty through political remembrance and reclamation. By invoking Queen Lili‘uokalani, the lyrical poem recalls a government overthrown through settler colonial intervention. The poem resists historical erasure by asserting that Indigenous sovereignty persists despite colonial occupation.

Ba hindu alawa

(But where will we find)

Sa mga dana hu mga ginlaasan (The footsteps of our ancestors)

Su mga lalanguya daw tegbengan (The baths and wells of your lineage?)

hu ikaw ha kaliwatan

(Lines 7–10)

Simpson (2011) and Coulthard (2014) argued that recognition without land restitution merely reproduces settler colonial structures in more acceptable forms. In this context, the lyrical poem becomes an act of political resistance that refuses symbolic reconciliation detached from land and sovereignty. Furthermore, Queen Lili‘uokalani herself symbolizes a government overthrown by U.S. settlers, and invoking her name is a radical act. The lyrical poem reminds listeners that Hawaiian sovereignty was never ceded, and the call for her kingdom is also a call for restitution and resistance. Rather than using decolonization as a vague metaphor for healing or multiculturalism, the lyrical poem anchors it in land, lineage, and political reclamation—aligning exactly with Tuck and Yang’s assertion that “decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

These selected lyrical poems reveal that decolonization in Talaandig poetry is grounded in land, kinship, ecological stewardship, and political reclamation. The poems function not only as artistic expressions but also as assertions of Indigenous sovereignty and resistance against colonial systems.

6. Conclusion

The study reveals that the lyrical poetry of Rodelio Linsahay Saway functions as a form of decolonial praxis rooted in Indigenous realities. Through the selected poems, land is portrayed not as metaphor or commodity but as a sacred and living space tied to identity, survival, memory, and sovereignty.

The findings show that the poems articulate concrete Indigenous struggles against land dispossession, environmental destruction, and colonial exploitation. Calls to protect forests, defend ancestral spaces, and resist extractive development demonstrate that decolonization is materially grounded in the reclamation of Indigenous land and life.

Lastly, the study affirms Tuck and Yang’s (2012) assertion that decolonization is not a metaphor because the poems themselves foreground Indigenous sovereignty, ecological protection, collective resistance, and cultural continuity as lived and ongoing realities.

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