Global Prosperity in Thought and Practice

Pastoral Prosperities

Rethinking African drylands

Edited by

Samuel F. Derbyshire,
Tahira Mohamed and
Rahma Hassan



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Pastoral Prosperities

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List of abbreviations

AfDB	African Development Bank
ASAL	Arid and Semi-Arid Lands
BIEA	British Institute in Eastern Africa
CRDD	Centre for Research and Development in Drylands
EMKP	Endangered Material Knowledge Programme
FCDO	Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office
HADMA	Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management Agency
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICPALD	IGAD Centre for Pastoral Areas and Livestock Development
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
ILRI	International Livestock Research Institute
KHH	Karamoja Herders of the Horn
MOWDAFA	Minister of Women Development and Family Affairs
NDMA	National Drought Management Authority
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute, the previous name of the now rebranded ODI Global
PaDD	Pastoralism and Drylands Development seminar series
PDMP	Puntland Disaster Management Policy
RGS	Royal Geographical Society
RVI	Rift Valley Institute
SPARC	Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises
TBI	Turkana Basin Institute
TEK	Traditional Ecological Knowledge
UN	United Nations
UNFCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UPDF	Uganda People's Defence Force
UWA	Uganda Wildlife Authority
WFP	World Food Programme

Foreword: pathways to prosperity in pastoral drylands

Ian Scoones

This important book asks, what are the pathways to different forms of prosperity in pastoral areas? This is a vitally important question, as it opens up debates about different meanings of development and different visions of the future.

The conventional approach to progress and therefore prosperity is one that is based on a linear, predictable path based on singular and narrow understandings of prosperity. Whether growth in marketed outputs, contributions to gross domestic product or infrastructural and technological investments, such framings of prosperity are severely limiting. Yet mainstream development defines progress in these terms, with a host of metrics and evaluation procedures constraining our visions of the future. The result in pastoral areas is projects that promote, for example, settled farming, irrigation schemes, centralised market infrastructure and 'growth corridors' providing trade connections. As this book shows, this is just one vision of progress and prosperity, and not one attuned to the particular conditions of pastoral areas and their peoples.

Much of this book is about how conventional approaches to development actually limit prosperity, making people poorer culturally, socially and materially, so undermining the capacities for pastoral systems and peoples to thrive. This is why a new approach to prosperity is urgently needed – or more accurately prosperities, because there are multiple pathways to reach these diverse goals differentiated by gender, age, wealth and location.

Such pathways emerge in the context of highly variable dryland settings, and often borderlands, where climate variability combines with volatile market conditions, conflict and political instability. These are uncertain worlds, where fixed, stable, managed interventions of the sort promoted by the mainstream vision of prosperity quickly unravel. Embracing uncertainty, managing variability and rejecting controlling visions of progress in favour of a more caring, flexible, adaptive

alternative rooted in local relations and mutual support networks offers a very different vision of how prosperities are generated in dryland areas.

Changing perspectives on pastoralism

A perspective on pastoralism focused on uncertainty, and so rejecting standard ideas of management and control, has been central to the evolution of the field. Around 40 years ago the importance of 'non-equilibrium' ecological thinking became central to rethinking rangeland management approaches, which had been based on stable visions of landscapes and ideas such as carrying capacity and fixed stocking rates emerging from temperate settings. In parallel, discussions about how standard approaches to thinking about 'degradation' and 'desertification' make no sense in highly variable environments emerged. Approaches to environmental care focused instead on responding to highly variable ecological contexts, highlighting the importance of 'key resources' within wider dryland landscapes.

A focus on variability and so uncertainty was in turn extended to thinking about land tenure and governance, marketing, drought management, public administration and more. Indeed, all areas of policy have to be recast if uncertain conditions are to be taken seriously. More broadly, a focus on living with and from uncertainty suggests different approaches to development practice and implementation. Management regimes focused on stability and control have been shown time and again simply not to work, while a more flexible, adaptive, relational approach to building resilience and supporting livelihoods, centred on an ethic of care, becomes more central.

Decades later, however, these ideas remain still on the margins. With each gain made within policymaking circles that take on this new paradigm, there seem to be other moves that take a step backwards. While there is perhaps a greater acceptance of some of these ideas in range management and pastoral development circles, the impulse to predict, manage and control has meant that those working in disaster management, humanitarian assistance and climate change response have frequently failed to embrace these ideas, instead adopting technocratic, top-down approaches.

Of course, such perspectives circulating within academic and policy circles are not new to pastoralists. This is why a shift towards an approach centred on pastoral values and knowledges is essential. This book offers a useful addition to this longer debate by shifting the gaze, redefining

the frame and offering multiple empirical cases that add up to a new perspective on pathways to prosperity, one that is genuinely responsive to the variability and uncertainty of pastoral contexts.

Crisis, commerce and connection

There are three parts to the book. The first questions the idea of 'crisis' as the dominant framing of dryland areas. Crises are seen as particular events – a drought, a conflict, a market shock – that must be responded to in defined ways, often through anticipatory forms of prediction. The aim is to restore stability, to exert control. There is, as several chapters document, a whole paraphernalia of prediction, anticipation and early warning that has been promoted in dryland areas to this end. But do these technologies of prediction, management and control – a particular form of governmentality – actually generate prosperity by improving the situation on the ground? Many argue that they fail. The framing of 'crisis' as a predictable, temporally defined 'event' fails to articulate with the way droughts and other processes are seen locally.

Pastoralists live with, and indeed from, uncertainty and have always done so. Variability is normal and droughts are not unusual, even if they are getting more extreme through climate change. Responses are not just coping but more active, involving diverse and changing strategies to ensure that livestock remain alive, people do not suffer and livelihood systems remain resilient. Many of these strategies involve a reliance on flexible mobility – either of livestock, or of fodder and water. In heterogeneous dryland areas, making use of variable resources is central to generating prosperity. External interventions that restrict mobility – through the expansion of fenced farming areas, urban settlements, growth corridors, irrigation schemes and so on – can therefore undermine prosperity rather than promote it, as is often imagined.

For pastoralists, 'crisis' is the wrong framing. Returning to a stable state through external control after a drought or other shock – via humanitarian assistance or resilience-building development programmes, for example – does not lead to prosperity. The conventional approach of prediction, anticipation and external assistance is often the wrong frame when responding to crises therefore. For pastoralists, there is a different temporality, a different way of 'seeing like a pastoralist', resulting in a very different type of response. As the chapters in this book show, prosperity for pastoralists emerges out of the ability to navigate uncertainty, responding flexibly to inevitably high levels of variability,

and so being able to generate reliability. This requires a very different set of skills emerging from a quite different mindset.

The next section of the book focuses on 'commerce'. Here again, standardised, centralised, technocratic market interventions are found wanting. These again are attempts to manage and control framed by a particular vision of prosperity. Yet such interventions, as we see again and again, may actually undermine sources of prosperity. Instead, the highly effective and massively productive market and trade arrangements in pastoral areas are based on much more agile, networked, decentralised local markets.

These are managed flexibly through relational trust networks between producers, brokers, traders and others.

Across pastoral areas, there are huge flows of livestock products to terminal markets in urban centres or across borders. The result is the generation of substantial income through the trading of meat, milk and other livestock products. These are sources of prosperity for many, generated through a flexible, adaptable form of commerce. Contrary to some of the standard myths, pastoralists are not backward and market resistant, but people who are forward looking, entrepreneurial but able to respond flexibly to dynamic changes in market conditions, generating prosperity in new ways. Recasting market interventions towards a different perspective on prosperity therefore will result in more success than the repeated failed schemes of the past, the book suggests.

Both responses to environmental and other forms of variability and the navigation of market volatility are built through the third theme of the book – 'connection'. How are pastoralists able to navigate such high levels of variability and so uncertainty? How are they able to generate reliability and so prosperity? The answer very often lies in the patterns of social relations and networks that give rise to forms of mutual aid and moral economy and that are built on patterns of social solidarity within pastoral societies.

Again and again in the book, examples of such practices are documented as central to pastoral livelihoods. These are the cultural, social and crucially relational basis for prosperity. Without romanticising pastoralism as an equitable, collaborative and cohesive social system, it is important to note how such forms of social organisation – rooted in cultural norms and deeply embedded social practices – are central to livestock management, market interactions, conflict response and so on.

Such practices are changing of course, and new institutions for sharing and collective response emerge; for example, through the influence of Islam and the role of *zakat* or the incorporation of *harambee*

events as ways of mobilising collective resources. Processes of social differentiation within pastoral communities mean that there are often different strategies for elites and others. And gender dynamics in highly patriarchal settings also mean that women must elaborate their own forms of mutual aid and social solidarity. New technologies, such as mobile phones and internet connections, may also assist in the way such relations are constructed, not only in pastoral localities but through diaspora and other networks.

Rethinking pastoral development

This book offers exciting and refreshing new ways of rethinking pastoral development, and perhaps other forms of development in other settings too. By taking the idea of prosperity and challenging the conventional framing, a new approach is offered that contrasts with standard imaginaries of progress and prosperity as emerging from a singular, linear progress towards a modernist ideal centred on management and control. Instead, the book argues, there are multiple pathways to prosperity. These must emerge through contextualised and diverse knowledges and practices, rooted in the highly variable, uncertain conditions of dryland areas.

Rather than relying on a simplistic technocratic, economistic solutionism, we must turn instead to social 'connections' – and so relations and forms of collective solidarity – that are central to pastoral practices for navigating uncertainty. This in turn means recasting both 'crisis' and 'commerce' in the process. A new perspective on prosperity, as outlined in this book, must thus draw on older, traditional practices but also reinvented new ones as the basis for a reimagined approach to pastoral development in the drylands of Africa and beyond.

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Introduction: pastoral prosperities

Samuel F. Derbyshire, Tahira Mohamed
and Rahma Hassan

Thirteen years ago, in March 2012, Kenya's president announced the discovery of major oil reserves in the Lokichar Basin of southern Turkana, in the country's far north-west. The announcement followed a programme of internationally funded exploratory drilling. It was heralded in the national press as a game changer, both for Turkana, a pastoralist area grappling with multiple livelihood- and climate-related challenges, and for Kenya more broadly. At the same time, a colossal hydroelectric dam was being constructed on Ethiopia's Omo River, with reports circulating of massive impending downstream impacts on Lake Turkana, Kenya's largest lake, which receives roughly 90 per cent of its water from the Omo and is an important resource within broader pastoral economic practices and relationships. During that same year, the legal and institutional groundwork was being laid for the launch of Kenya's newly devolved system of government, preparing for the establishment of 47 county governments, each with an elected governor and local county assembly.

The atmosphere, in Turkana, was suffused with the energy of cataclysmic transformation, a mirror image of the violent geological convulsions that lie frozen across its vast, open exposures. Generations of exclusion and anti-pastoralist development seemed to hang immanently amidst urgent conversations and circulating rumours, culminating in a confused sense of anticipation, promise and distrust. Oil, political devolution, the damming of the Omo – all of these converged into a widely felt sense that the ground itself, as in ages past, was once again shifting. Across Africa, from the Sahel to the Horn, similar convulsions

were underway. A combination of climate change, investments in renewable energy and colossal infrastructural developments was bearing down upon the drylands like a tectonic force, seeming to promise sudden transformation after decades of marginalisation.

Looking back on that time from the other side of 13 years of fraught debate, contestation and change, it is now possible to see the historical moment it comprised with greater clarity. Oil has yet to be extracted in substantial quantities from Turkana; the nascent sector has faced difficulties at multiple levels, leading many investors to withdraw (though recent developments suggest renewed momentum). The Gibe dam, contrary to early fears, did not reduce Lake Turkana's levels, though it has led to catastrophic strife and displacement for pastoralist communities in southern Ethiopia. In Turkana, the lake has in fact risen, in keeping with a hydrological phenomenon impacting all the Rift Valley lakes. Devolution, meanwhile, did not solve the problems accumulated over a century of distant governance and a state-led model of development oriented towards stabilising, controlling and reordering lands and societies envisaged to be empty and wild. Many of the assumptions embedded in this model have merely been brought closer to the front lines of its operation, producing a more proximate, familiar form of marginalisation. The promises with which that moment was pregnant have fragmented or at least transformed into contorted and unsettled versions of themselves. But in the haze of their lingering, one thing is clear: they were all expressions of an idea that continues to shape how pastoralist societies across Africa's drylands are understood – that change, whether good or bad, always comes flowing from the outside.

From the vantage point afforded by our present moment, we are drawn to a difficult yet insistent question: what ideas about prosperity does this particular vision harbour? Or to frame this question slightly differently, are there other kinds of prosperity that are pushed aside by it and left to dwindle in the dust? It is in asking this question, and looking to ongoing research across multiple other contexts in Africa, that we have brought about this book. In seeking answers, our aim is to examine the idea of prosperity itself, and to ask what assumptions, desires and ways of valuing the world it carries with it. The ground of our enquiry is pastoralism, the livelihood system that sustains communities in Turkana as it does in many other dryland and mountainous regions of the world. Unlike oil or hydropower, the forms of flourishing and abundance that pastoralism promises are proximate; they are measured in cupfuls of fresh milk, in freedom of movement across the ranges and the satisfaction that comes with fulfilling debts and obligations to kin through the gift of livestock.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Before turning to pastoralism's distinctive visions of prosperity, it is worth pausing to consider the word itself – what it asks of us intellectually, and what it conceals. If anything, prosperity is a word that requires us to think more carefully about how the future is imagined and thus pursued and made real in the present. This means attending to the specific values, practices and ideas that shape notions of 'the good life' in different places, and how these, in turn, are informed by wider processes and forces. Many influential works have highlighted the complex ways in which hope, desire and aspiration are – while perhaps universal human forces – always situated within cultural logics, social structures and material conditions (e.g. Wiredu 1980, 1996; Strathern 1992; Guyer 2007; Moore 2011; Appadurai 2013). Building on these works, this book takes as its premise that the pursuit of prosperity is not only always a contextually specific act, shaped by the socio-economic and ecological conditions in which people live, but also a culturally and ontologically distinct process that takes shape amidst particular ways of valuing, imagining and relating to the world.

In the context of policy and development, prosperity has, of course, already proven an important and productive vein of thought, discussion and research. In synthesising much of this recent work, Moore et al.'s (2023) *Prosperity in the 21st Century* challenges conventional economic thought and the dominance of narratives that equate prosperity purely with GDP growth and market-driven models. In pressing beyond such universalising mindsets, they advocate new forms of co-production and collaboration, and citizen-led processes of planning and design. Extending this enquiry, we ask what might come from thinking about prosperity not only as something contextually situated but also as something that is contingent on a particular form of livelihood. As scholars of pastoralism in its diverse historical and contemporary forms, we are drawn to the possibility that it might comprise the grounds for an exploration of a distinct universe of ideas about human flourishing. It is in pursuing this possibility that we have brought together case studies and perspectives from across African pastoralist contexts, all united by the contention that the textures of pastoralist life – its knowledges, familiarities, skills and histories – might teach us something new about what it means to live well.

One of the reasons we, and the other contributors to this volume, are interested in this question is that it is self-evident in work spanning a variety of disciplines that pastoralists across diverse economic, political and ecological contexts have important things in common. To some scholars, this cohesion emerges primarily from the misconstrued portrayals of

nomadic life that shape external imaginaries via various tropes and stereotypes (e.g. Davies 2015; Lane 2015; Derbyshire 2020), to others it is part and parcel of the ensuing mix of exclusion and marginalisation that often shapes pastoralist experiences of the state (for examples see Hogg 1987; Bollig et al. 2013). To yet others, it is the livelihood itself, and the practical day-to-day experience of pursuing a mobile, livestock-based form of subsistence amidst high levels of variability – the communal management of resources, high levels of physical and socio-economic mobility and forms of reciprocity and sharing that structure pastoralist economic practices (e.g. Scoones 1996; Krätli 2015).

Recently, significant strides have been made across all these dimensions and others through new research and thinking on the subject of pastoralism's relationship to uncertainty (as recently synthesised in Scoones 2023). Like Moore et al.'s (2023) rethinking of prosperity, this work challenges dominant assumptions about progress, and the narratives that continue to shape these in nuanced ways. The book sets out how development in many African pastoralist contexts continues to prioritise stability, prediction and control at the expense of finding ways to support how pastoralists productively and successfully engage with the uncertainty that shapes their lives. This is an idea that has profound and wide-reaching implications for development in the pastoral drylands, spanning everything from approaches to measuring and addressing chronic vulnerability (e.g. Hassan et al. 2025), to the question of how best to prepare for and manage disasters (Caravani et al. 2022; Derbyshire et al. 2025b; Mohamed 2026).

A bridge between this work and the present volume might be found in Hirokazu Miyazaki's (2004) ethnography of Fijian knowledge practices, in which he describes hope not just as a philosophical concept but as a *method*, allowing people to orient themselves towards the future. This notion of hope as an ongoing, always incomplete project casts it as a way of knowing and engaging with the world that refuses closure by continually reconfiguring itself amidst uncertainty. Miyazaki asserts that his discipline – anthropology – must learn from this disposition and find ways of deploying hope as a mode of enquiry and engagement, rather than the familiar themes of crisis, rupture and loss. To us, pastoralism's now well-documented relationship with uncertainty is a similar source of learning, not only for discovering new ways of doing anthropology but also for thinking about new approaches to research across multiple other disciplines (many of which are represented in the contributions to this volume). 'Pastoral prosperities' is a lens through which to rethink some of the core interests of research in and on the drylands, places

commonly refracted through implacable accounts of crisis, environmental destruction, poverty and vulnerability.

In suggesting this, our argument in this volume is not that critical challenges and negative phenomena do not exist across the drylands; indeed, many of them are explored at length in Part I, 'Crisis'. Instead, we suggest that overly negative portrayals tend to limit understandings of how humans flourish in these unpredictable environments, and how they think about and work towards personal and collective goals. To put this another way, casting the drylands in a singular, negative light closes down the possibility for an appreciation of the plurality of hopes that spring from them, and the diverse ways in which these might be better nurtured, cultivated and supported in the years to come. This is, we would suggest, a particularly pressing danger in the current moment, when multiple intersecting forces are driving seismic environmental and economic change.

One of the more profound among these forces is climate change, a global phenomenon that brings with it a deep sense of urgency and often an obligation to make radical interventions. In Africa's drylands it often intersects with and exacerbates a suite of related disasters, including conflict, disease and market shocks. Within this overarching story of disaster and loss, what is often overlooked is the heterogeneity in this phenomenon's impacts across areas that are broadly ecologically similar, and the equally diverse array of responses mobilised by pastoralists in different dryland contexts. Too often in the world of international development, 'solutions' to the challenge of climate change are designed in relation to this overstory, rather than to the understory – the subplots, practices and layers of meaning through which people grapple with and make sense of change in their day-to-day lives (Derbyshire et al. 2023). This tendency is complicated and troubling in its own right but becomes still more dangerous through its entanglements with wider geo-political phenomena including a recent resurgence of famine on a global scale and a wider, connected trend of degradation in international humanitarian norms (de Waal 2025). We should emphasise that our point here is not about the direct threats posed by entangled negative phenomena themselves – such as hunger, or livelihood loss. Rather, it concerns the ways these crises are mobilised to rationalise policies and practices that go far beyond dealing with immediate problems and attempt to craft new futures from universal metrics and principles, ones that are often strange to the local contexts in which meaning emerges and is pursued (Hassan et al. 2026).

Much recent work has advocated for a more careful appreciation of local knowledge and power relations in climate change adaptation

(including through considerations of cultural diversity, environmental justice and human rights, see Klepp and Chavez-Rodriguez 2018). Others have illuminated pathways that may help aid programming do better at 'taking context seriously', including through more locally relevant indicators and metrics (e.g. Levine 2022; Levine and Pain 2024; Derbyshire et al. 2025a). What is interesting to us is that these forms of advocacy seem to mirror critiques of development that emerged many years ago in the wake of an era of high modernist optimism that took its form in the early stages of independence for many African nations, including the works of Ake (1981), Ferguson (1994), Leys (1996) and Scott (1999), among others. These works, much like the more recent critiques, showed how development depoliticises complex problems, reducing them to technical issues. In reality, such problems are, of course, not only always socio-economically and ecologically complex but also (and perhaps above all else) underlain by *moral* questions and thus not straightforwardly resolvable through new technologies or resolutions of data.

The question of why there remains a need for such critique today, or why old approaches and dynamics endure so doggedly, is a complicated one. Escobar (2011, 2018) would have it that development is, and always has been, a disciplining regime concerned mainly with sustaining a particular world order – a system of knowledge and practice that must be abandoned for alternatives. Whether or not this is the case, to us equally important answers lie in what we might call an imaginative failure: the narrowing of visions about what counts as progress. The only way to overcome this failure is to look to *values* and consider how particular visions of what counts as a 'good' life, a 'good' intervention or a 'good' outcome are consistently privileged, while others are sidelined or silenced (see Robbins et al. 2023). To put this another way, focusing only on how systems of knowledge and power reproduce inequality by depoliticising structural problems and reducing moral questions to technical ones risks overlooking how everyday people continue to aspire, hope and make claims about value (cf. Ortner 2016). Such claims, and their socio-material expressions, may contradict development logics, but they may also align with or subtly reconfigure them.

As we said above, our point here is not that wider structural issues are less important than how local communities navigate them on the ground and endure despite them. Rather, it is that closer attention to how values take shape in specific social contexts might yield meaningful insights and ideas that lead to positive change in wider institutional dynamics and established ways of working. Of course, this is a point



Figure 0.1 Milking camels in Korr, Marsabit, 2021. © Samuel F. Derbyshire.



Figure 0.2 Cattle watering in Dogogicha drought reserve, Merti, Isiolo, 2021. © Tahira Mohamed.



Figure 0.3 Returning goats and sheep to their enclosure, Kinna, Isiolo, 2022. © Tahira Mohamed.

better articulated by Joel Robbins (Lockwood and Robbins 2025: 105), who recently argued that a focus on values 'can be an effective way to counter nihilism and [the] attendant naked transactionalism and self-dealing that are ever more central to politics in many parts of the world'. That pastoralism on the global stage might be a source of new ideas with implications for multiple sectors and domains has already been demonstrated by Ian Scoones (2024) in his recent exploration of what pastoralist approaches to uncertainty say about dominant approaches to risk around the world. Our aim in this volume is thus not to demonstrate that such an undertaking is worthwhile (for clearly it is), but rather to continue the work of drawing pastoralist knowledges, skills, ideas and practices further into public discourse about the future of humanity.

Pastoralist futures

Why is such rethinking of the future necessary? As we outlined above, several converging trends – new uncertainties degrading international norms, the overarching climate crisis and the trundling expansion,

amidst this confusion, of massive infrastructure investments – are propelling a renewed sense of urgency in the world's drylands. This urgency reinforces familiar patterns of decision-making and action, precipitating a future that remains deeply rooted in old imaginaries. Across Africa, a new era of 'mega-projects' has taken shape, characterised by large infrastructure projects heavily funded by external investors and rationalised, for the most part, in relation to potential future contributions to GDP (Carmody 2011; Müller-Mahn et al. 2021). These range from vast irrigation initiatives, such as Kenya's Galana-Kulalu Food Security Project, to colossal hydroelectric projects, such as those constructed along the Omo River in Ethiopia. The idea that the drylands are barren, empty wastelands in need of transformation via outside influence and investment – an idea deeply planted during the colonial conquest of pastoralist homelands in the early years of the twentieth century – is as influential today as it has ever been (Semplici and Campbell 2023). New forms of disorder and confusion on a global scale combine with an overarching narrative of crisis to fuel the resurgence and growth of this old idea, while obfuscating its origins and history.

It is in response, then, to this new future, currently being carved out across the continent behind bulldozers and tractors, that this volume turns back once again to the drylands in an attempt to uncover precisely what is obscured in the settling dust. That is, the other futures being imagined, debated and pursued amidst particular pastoralist cultural milieus and social practices. The path to undertaking this task was largely opened for us through the work of Arjun Appadurai, particularly in his 'ethnography of aspiration', *The Future as Cultural Fact* – an account of, among other things, how the future is a lived terrain of imagination and struggle (Appadurai 2013). Appadurai's call in this work for 'a full scale engagement with the variety of ideas of human welfare and of the good life that surround us today and that survive in our archives of the past' seems even more important now, and certainly from the perspective of the drylands where, more than a decade after its issuance, a politics of probability is increasingly taking root at the expense of a politics of possibility (Appadurai 2013: 8). This is a point we return to further on.

In finding new answers to this call, the cases explored in this volume – spanning geographies from the Greater Horn to the Western Sahara – offer fresh perspectives on how pastoralists cultivate adaptability as a practice of future making. In contexts where, as much recent scholarship reminds us, the future in its broadest sense is inherently unknowable – an indeterminacy that, in Knightian terms, resists the assignment of reliable

probabilities – it is often untenable to think about prosperity as a linear predetermined trajectory. This is a point that surfaces throughout much of Part III of the book – 'Connection' – in which pastoralist negotiations of different architectures of intervention and transformation are explored in northern Uganda and Western Sahara. Matteo Caravani's contribution to this part, which explores how Karamojong pastoralists in northern Uganda pursue their livelihoods amidst the turbulent interplay of claims, interests, practices and institutions surrounding the Kobebe dam, makes this particularly clear. Here, as in other case studies, prosperity seems to us to be less a destination and more an always-ongoing process of becoming, made real in individual lives and moments through a collective insistence on the openness of the future, even against the rigid designs of state authorities and conservation agendas.

In taking stock of such dynamics, the challenge, as Caravani reminds us, is to navigate carefully so as not to invite the familiar critique of neoliberal logics, which shift the burden of survival in times of hardship onto local actors while obscuring the structural conditions that give rise to vulnerability in the first place (cf. Derbyshire 2020). His chapter, and this book more widely, is not a cynical celebration of resilience in the face of hardships produced by marginalisation and political failure. The claim of both is rather that meaningful answers to the question of how wider political and economic systems might more adequately engage with and support pastoralist livelihoods in Africa can only be found by taking those livelihoods seriously as generative grounds for the emergence of the good.

As such, the picture that emerges in this book is not a black-and-white one, in which discrete reservoirs of culturally entrenched knowledge and custom do battle with the dark overarching forces of dominance and homogenisation (we return to this point about knowledge below). It is rather an investigation of the particular kinds of contestation, hope and practical navigation that manifest themselves in contemporary pastoralist societies. This investigation is at times concerned with how the future, as cultural fact, both constrains and creates social possibilities, but it is also at other times concerned with how the past is drawn into this process through its retelling and reconfiguration, and through the defiance of state-sanctioned historical narratives anchored in externalised ideals of progress, which obscure local tales, memories and commemorations. This kind of intellectual and historical reclaiming is perhaps akin to the kind envisaged by Kwasi Wiredu (1980, 1996) in his writings on philosophy, culture and tradition.

Geleta Berisso's retelling of ecological history in southern Ethiopia, for example, situates radical socio-ecological transformation within a local moral universe, reframing processes of environmental degradation by viewing them through environmental ethics – those of Guji and Borana communities – long misconstrued or ignored. What is needed, in this context, is not new projects and interventions aimed at harnessing 'indigenous knowledge', but rather an appreciation of how this world of thought and action has, for generations, been a domain in which future imaginaries have emerged only to be denied and dismissed – and of how, today, the very terrain of imagination bears the scars of this history. Perhaps there is even an argument for developing a new language of loss in and about the drylands, something similar to the active processes of 'ruination' Stoler describes in *Imperial Debris* (2013), or Rose's reframing of wildness in Australian landscapes through Aboriginal testimony and memory (2004). Such a language, if tenable at all, would not be about 'hybridity' or the triumph of one epistemology over another, but about generating new knowledge altogether – new ways of thinking and thus collaboratively creating, made possible through the provocations of epistemological friction.

Matthew Porges explores such a process in the wake of disjuncture in Western Sahara in his contribution to the volume. Here, the cleavages of change have led people to draw upon their pastoralist heritage in a complex variety of ways, as they chase down new dreams, visions and ideas amidst the remnants of war. This process is interpretive and reflexive as much as it is practical, in some instances shaping physical engagements with new contexts and environments, in others shaping political aspirations and hopes. Understanding the future here in Western Sahara is also a process of coming to terms with how the past is retold and repurposed, and how pastoralism itself becomes the imaginative terrain in which this undertaking unfolds.

But the retelling of the past is not only vital in local contexts, through its specificity it can also serve to recast a much broader history of thought about pastoralism on the continent. Roba Jilo frames his essay in these terms, reflecting on the ways in which persistent historical narratives around pastoralism have excluded it from state-sanctioned visions of progress and development, while simultaneously justifying the further undermining of pastoralist systems. To us, his discussion of how a particular vision of prosperity is mutually entangled with a particular understanding of crisis through time is a reminder of a larger mutually constitutive relationship between the past and the future. As Simon and

Tamm (2021: 7) recently argued, while discussing their idea of 'historical futures', 'our concept of the past derives from our ideas about the future; without a concept of the future, history as we know it is not possible – and the same is true of any new forms of history inasmuch as they necessitate the possibility of change over time in the future'. A critical question here is what imaginative work counterfactuals do in pastoralist history making, oral or otherwise.

Thinking and talking only about *what might have been* is perhaps, at least within the professional practice of history, to be treated with scepticism (see Evans 2013). However, in the wider social worlds in which histories are shared, debated, critiqued and digested, it is an important means of narrating injustice, challenging deterministic accounts and perhaps even sustaining hope. Pastoralist prosperities, as we see them, take shape through this insistent work of imagining, often grounded in counterfactual dreams drawn from experiences at the blunt edge of imposed visions of progress. They are, in this regard, horizons that are perpetually under construction – never neatly separable across space or time. Such horizons often emerge from ways of reckoning with tradition and history that, as Kwame Gyekye insisted, work with these realms on the principle that they are dynamic and open-ended (Gyekye 1997). They are part and parcel of an understanding of the past not as a repository of heritage but as something that is living and reconfigurable, grounds, in this sense, for unique forms of moral reasoning, political critique and future reflection.

Returning to the points we made previously about the contemporary moment, we want to emphasise our belief in the importance of not 'going dark'. Our suggestion here for a focus on pastoralism's lost futures is not an articulation of what Sherry Ortner (rightfully, we think) sees as an anthropological tilt towards 'the harsh dimensions of social life (power, domination, inequality and oppression) as well as the subjective experience of these experiences in the form of depression and hopelessness' (Ortner 2016: 47). Nor is it straightforwardly an answer to Robbins's call for more focus on 'the good', though as we said above, the volume as a whole finds resonance with this call. Instead, our point is that pastoralism's lost futures emerge within social spaces where memory, loss, imagination and hope continually intersect and shape one other. The objective of paying attention to them, here in this book as in so many everyday contexts throughout the drylands, is not simply to dwell on loss but to turn it into grounds for imagining otherwise.

A wealth of knowledge

What is the nature of this imagining? Or to put this another way, if the future is a lived terrain of creativity and struggle, what and where is the knowledge that gives it life? Above, we drew on Appadurai's terms to suggest that, in the drylands, a politics of probability is gaining ground against a politics of possibility. Perhaps here we might explain in a little more detail what we mean by this. In their insistent instability and uncertainty – characteristics that rangelands ecologists root in 'disequilibrium' environmental dynamics – the drylands pose a stark challenge to approaches to governance and investment that are predicated on the pursuit of contrary conditions. The prizing of stability and control, and of connected development models oriented towards sedentary, predictable forms of production enter into a fraught tension with a dynamic of life fundamentally oriented otherwise. Scoones (2023: 59) explains this as follows: 'Derived from a very different framework of understanding, usually from temperate climates and settled organisation, the focus of development is to seek control through suppressing variation, creating stability and asserting order.'

As Derbyshire and Hassan explore in their contribution exploring drought-related crises in northern Kenya, this seeking of control emerges from a politics that intuitively engages with the future as something to be managed, contained, perhaps even insured against. That is, as something that is, above all else, knowable, modellable and manageable, not open and brought into being through human creativity. In this orientation, uncertainty is treated as a problem to be minimised, producing a cultural regime of the future that privileges the reduction of loss over the pursuit of what *might yet be*. The crisis of drought is externalised and detached from the social and moral worlds in which it is always entangled; prosperity is imagined in negative terms – as the mere absence of certain problems, rather than as the active fulfilment of hopes and desires that emerge in the crucible of hardship. One of our contentions in this book is that this culture of the future makes it possible to imagine knowledge itself in terms that are strange and unrecognisable to anyone who has spent time among mobile livestock herders.

'Indigenous knowledge' has, since at least the 1990s, been a major policy concern in the world of development, taking root in multiple influential frameworks and approaches. To a large extent, this has happened against a backdrop of broader institutional change in which new forms of data- and technology-oriented centralisation – including, as Derbyshire and Hassan describe, the rise of early warning systems – have provoked a sense of unease about widening disconnects between

communities on the ground and the technical expertise of development practitioners. Against this backdrop, the idea of 'bridging the divide' has drawn indigenous knowledge into mainstream debates, planning processes and methods.

Today integrating indigenous knowledge with formal, scientific approaches is an aspiration routinely invoked across the continent. Well intentioned as this sentiment may be, it rests on a picture of knowledge that is only intelligible within the dominant cultural imagination of the future that we have described, that is, one that does not reflect how knowledge works in day-to-day life. In this imagination, indigenous knowledge is a resource that might be harnessed in relation to an externalised future terrain of risk, but not the grounds through which the future might itself actually be formulated. By envisaging the future only as knowable and controllable, the politics of probability makes room for drylands knowledge, but only by recasting it as a bounded and static resource that is part asset and part constraint and usually categorised as a series of set strategies and mechanisms (things that might straightforwardly be 'integrated'). Such a framing makes it impossible to envisage knowledge as an open, living, generative practice rooted in engagements with uncertainty that are shaped as much by habit, improvisation, intuition and creativity as they are by information passed down.

Such a critique adds little that is novel to long-standing academic debates about the nature of knowledge. Tim Ingold in particular has advanced a distinctive rethinking of knowledge not as a resource to be owned and then transferred to new generations but as an ongoing, always incomplete process fundamentally rooted in practice and dwelling (2000, 2011). His writing on lines and correspondence, in particular, offers a radically different conception to that which inheres in the politics of probability (i.e. the notion that knowledge can be stabilised, codified and integrated as a resource to manage future risk). Through this lens, pastoralist knowledge in the drylands might best be seen as an open correspondence with uncertain conditions; something inseparable from the act of living and thus fundamentally relational, unfixed and generative (Ingold 2015, 2020).

This perspective says two important things about prosperity in the drylands. Firstly, that knowledge, when seen in the expansiveness of its unfolding, is itself a form of prosperity – a living wealth that is not straightforwardly inheritable, but which arises from the continual work of remaking long-standing orientations towards the world amidst particular conditions and across all domains of life. Secondly, that such knowledge does not just sustain life but also bears its own visions of the

good – some expressly spoken, others made real in acts of mutual correspondence with the world and with others.

Furthermore, this framing of knowledge and its misapprehension leads us to an additional justification for this book, that is, for thinking about prosperity not just in culturally distinct terms but in terms of a way of life that crosscuts diverse cultures and contexts. We have already defended our sweeping project by appealing to the shared experiences of marginalisation and misguided policies to which many pastoralists lay claim; we have also invoked the common patterns of practice that arise from pastoralist livelihoods themselves – collective resource management, high levels of mobility and economies shaped by sharing and redistribution. However, another way of thinking about these latter characteristics of pastoralist life is to see them as rooted in the relationships that form between humans and their livestock, and thus as dimensions of a particular way of *valuing*, which gives life out on the ranges its orientation. In other words, pastoralists, in living lives that are so intimately woven around the lives of livestock, harbour knowledge systems that are comparable in fundamental ways.

The value of livestock in pastoralist contexts is, like risk, complicated when it comes to calculation, for animals embody at once the immediate and the transcendent. They sustain human life through milk, meat, blood, hides and other products but also circulate as financial assets. Through gifting practices, they anchor networks of reciprocity and obligation that span vast social and geographical terrains. To hold livestock is not simply to possess a resource but also to inhabit responsibilities, competences, skills and forms of care that weave people into enduring relations with others. Yet livestock are also much more than economic and social instruments. They are also deeply symbolic beings, resonant in song, story and ritual, where they both express and reshape collective values, unendingly. They draw humans into a particular poetics of dwelling – unique ways of moving through and thus perceiving the world that configure landscapes as much as they are configured by them. To speak of their value, then, is to confront the paradox that livestock are at once eminently calculable, as commodities with prices, and wholly beyond calculation, as the grounds for meaning, connection and purpose in pastoral life. They are both the measure of wealth and a horizon of prosperity that exceeds all measurement.

To put all of this into more concrete terms, we might draw on the example of livestock ownership among Rendille communities in the north of Kenya, where it is not uncommon for a man to own over a hundred camels (often it is vastly more than this), and yet for more than

half of such a herd to comprise 'loans in trust', to use Evans-Pritchard's terminology (1940). In such instances, both giver and receiver of the gift understand it as a kind of fictive loan, in which the receiver has usufruct rights – its milk and male offspring are theirs – but ownership of the original animal is forever tied to the one who gave it, and indeed to their descendants who may hark back to the original loan in future appeals for assistance or during negotiations. The camel, in Rendille society, thus mediates and sustains a value regime in which prosperity is not simply about accumulation or calculable wealth but rather about nourishing relations, and thus social cohesion, across space and time.

The camel's value is not limited to its economic functions but lies equally, if not more, in its role in realising a particular vision of the good – a world in which families and generations are tied together in ever-closer bonds of obligation that trace back into the deep past and are continually renewed across time. It is perhaps unsurprising, in this sense, that camels are prized by Rendille herders above all other species of livestock. Indeed, the *sorio* ceremony, which takes place four times a year, compels all herders from the clan to bring their camels back to the main village, sometimes from hundreds of kilometres away, and for small stock to be sacrificed for their protection. In this ceremony of sacrifice, clan symbols are painted in goats' blood on the bodies of the camels, before they are returned to pasture.

Policies that treat livestock as mere assets or commodities, abstracted from the social worlds that sustain and are sustained by them, can only ever cater to one side of the equation. As David Graeber reminded us (2001), value, in its fullest sense, arises in the interplay of human labour, relation and imagination, and what the camel embodies in Rendille society is precisely this synthesis (i.e. a living practice of meaning making). Building on this perspective, Iyer and Longoli's chapter, again in Part III, 'Connection', turns to the question of value and resilience in Karamoja, northern Uganda. Drawing on many years of evidence and insight, they explore a similar way in which livestock move across social contexts, binding people together through networks of obligation and exchange. They paint a picture of 'vernacular resilience', which unsettles many deep-seated assumptions in the field of resilience building in international development.

Focusing on *etamam* – a socially embedded process through which information is shared, decisions are negotiated and pastoralist life is organised – they show how resilience in Karamoja society emerges not solely from investments in assets and infrastructures, as is the assumption in much development discourse, but from investments in

relationships and from a wider knowledge system that is an active site of innovation and creativity. *Etamam*, like the broader world of thought and action of which it is a part, is not a vestige from the past lingering on, it is an approach to life that endlessly finds expression amidst new contexts and dynamics, re-establishing a long-standing vision of prosperity by means of new technologies and realities.

As we said, this is a view that has important implications for how we think about resilience in a much more general sense. As the concept has expanded beyond its origins in ecology, many, including Iyer and Longoli, critique its tendency to reinforce forms of neoliberal governance that place responsibility for coping with shocks on communities rather than broader structures, or governments. In countering such tendencies, and in attending instead to the question of how wider systems might do better at working with locally led resilience, a major risk is construing the knowledge that underlies such local forms of resilience in restrictive terms. Discussions of 'nested' strategies, practices and mechanisms perhaps risk overlooking the more important question of how resilience is forged in new ways, via new approaches and relationships over time, by means of longer-standing orientations. That is, how strategies, practices and mechanisms might themselves change, or come to be reimagined, and how this takes place by means of a habitual manner of engaging with wider landscapes, materials and populations that is itself fundamentally processual, and impossible to capture in a synchronic snapshot.

Sahra Koshin describes a different dimension of the vernacular, which is nevertheless rooted in a similar picture of pastoralist knowledge. Her chapter on 'vernacular humanitarianism' in Puntland, Somalia, in Part I, 'Crisis', portrays a knowledge system surrounding crisis management that is informed by place, and indeed rooted in a history of mobile interaction with a particular landscape alongside livestock, but nevertheless international and transboundary in its contemporary dynamics. In seeking to characterise how this knowledge – and the forms of support it galvanises – works, Koshin suggests that it is based on three distinct kinds of sharing: the sharing of information, responsibility and resources. The networks and relations she describes have perhaps always defied boundaries and categories, and continue to do so in the face of contemporary multidimensional and unpredictable crises, or 'wicked crises' to use Simon Levine et al.'s terminology (2023).

These networks now link people, resources and values across vast distances. A particular way of being in the world – of managing uncertainty through collective practices – thus extends far beyond its local origins, proliferating across borders and subtly reshaping global





Figures 0.4 and 0.5 Camels after *sorio*, painted in symbols for their protection, Korr, 2021. © Samuel F. Derbyshire.

systems by co-opting them towards the moral and practical needs of kin and community. To us, one of the most important implications of this contribution is its challenge to the idea that forms of industrialisation, commoditisation and economic development emanating from the 'world system' come to transform older forms of subsistence on their own



Figure 0.6 Goats returning home to their enclosure at dusk, Morusipo, southern Turkana, 2019. © Samuel F. Derbyshire.

terms, working only to absorb, homogenise or supersede them. Indeed, we would suggest that Koshin's study connects in multiple ways with the works of Jeremy Prestholdt (2008, 2019), which have drawn on diverse contexts and forms of evidence to level a convincing counter-narrative to the idea that social change only ever radiates into the hinterlands from metropolitan centres, either in the past or the present. Koshin's account describes precisely the opposite flow of influence – a socially rooted way of working, based on sharing and mutual responsibility, that grows outward into the world system and in doing so reconfigures it according to its own moral and relational logics.

Of markets and meanings

The contributions to Part II, 'Commerce', are concerned with the same process of agentive social change, negotiated and reconfigured by those at the sharp edge of transition. Indeed, Guyo Roba approaches things from the other side of the spectrum to Koshin – namely, from the vantage point of market participation and the commercial dimensions of livestock exchange. His chapter, like Iyer and Longoli's, challenges the underlying fallacy that pastoralist knowledge is merely instrumental – a

set of techniques for managing livestock as assets rather than a living practice in which livestock themselves realise diverse forms of value. His chapter confronts the enduring narrative that pastoralists are economically irrational, culturally resistant to livestock offtake and unresponsive to markets, which is, he explains, a view rooted in colonial policies that envisaged indigenous herds as non-integrateable into modern economies. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative evidence from southern Marsabit in northern Kenya, Roba demonstrates that livestock markets are in fact dynamic sites of growth and innovation. Far from being reluctant market actors, pastoralists have expanded their participation in these markets over the course of history, often in spite of policies and investments that have failed to recognise or support their market practices.

He shows that this expansion has been enabled through the very relational practices that underpin pastoralist lifeways: bonds of kinship, trust and reciprocity that facilitate transactions locally, and which then, intriguingly, extend outward into increasingly complex, multiethnic trading networks that connect producers to terminal markets across great distances. In outlining these dynamics, Roba invites us to see locally led livestock marketing as a synthesis of different values, in Graeber's sense. The narrative he unfurls is one in which the economic, social and moral dimensions of life are inseparably intertwined. The commercial vitality of his markets depends not on the abstraction of livestock as assets but on their embeddedness within wider systems of relation and obligation through which value itself is continually produced and realised.

What, then, does this tell us about how social and economic change should be understood in pastoralist contexts? So often, the emergence of monetary economies is implicitly envisaged as a representation of broadscale upheaval, or at least as an index of a great and permanent transition away from 'gift economies'. Evidence presented in Part III of this book muddies such a picture and challenges the various dichotomies it implies (i.e. tradition/modernity, pre-capitalist/capitalist, etc.), in doing so it builds on foundational ideas set out in Bloch and Parry's *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (1989), as well as related works that explored the relations between money and non-money economies at a time when, in many places, such transitions were still unfolding (e.g. Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Harris 1989). The emergence and development of markets in pastoralist contexts in Africa has not only entailed radical divergence from past practices but has also been

a process through which long-standing visions and values have found purchase, and indeed by means of which new opportunities have been chased down via long-standing orientations towards the world.

Banerjee et al.'s chapter makes this point by focusing on the market itself as a social institution that is used by pastoralists to negotiate change and indeed dangers such as conflict. Markets, they underline, are not simply places where livestock realise their financial values, they are also places where things essential to a good life on the ranges can be attained, including livestock medicines, animal feed and early warning information. Equally, they are places where diverse people come together, and where crosscutting dialogue naturally ensues. They draw on data accumulated through an innovative citizen science programme established in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia to explore a story of development and change that sheds light on both the past and the future. In colonial times, they note, cash markets emerged across the Greater Horn of Africa as part of an attempt to advance governmental control, and to reconfigure pastoral market systems with a view to making them more legible to the state. And yet, over time, pastoralists have made sense of cash markets, and the wider economic and material connections they have brought, on their own terms, using them to navigate diverse environmental and political challenges.

Complicating simplistic discussions of the impact of conflict on markets, Banerjee et al. point both to new market opportunities and to forms of marketing that emerge in response to conflict, but also to the roles that markets play as places of peacebuilding, through their capacity for drawing diverse actors together. They show how markets in conflict-affected pastoral regions are not simply casualties of instability but are rather part and parcel of how pastoralists live with and through uncertainty. In this sense, they are not best understood, or even supported, within a wider 'return to stability' framing. To put this another way, where Roba highlights the sociality of pastoralist marketing practices and the synthesis of different values this involves, Banerjee et al. extend this point by foregrounding the very spaces of exchange and showing how they are both sustained by and generative of sociality, cooperation and knowledge. In both instances, prosperity emerges not from certainty but from an ability to act meaningfully amidst flux and to participate materially, socially and imaginatively in the ongoing work of making life possible under uncertain conditions.

Both chapters perhaps reflect what John Galaty, drawing on the writings of Marshall Sahlins, would characterise as the 'indigenisation

of modernity' (2013). Pastoralists across Africa, he argues, are never undermined by modernity; they work to co-opt it in diverse ways, bending it to their needs and interests by absorbing and repurposing new institutions, discourses and technologies by means of existing cultural logics and moral worlds. While we do not disagree with this sentiment, it seems to us to imply a pre-modern world that stood far apart from such processes, framing 'modernity' as an epochal shift that is historically unparalleled in terms of the adaptations and innovations it has provoked. Yet the archaeological record attests to pastoralist pasts that are equally replete with adaptation, creativity and socio-economic dynamism (see Davies 2015). The chapters by Banerjee et al. and Roba introduce new evidence of pastoralist engagements with markets that can be situated within a long regional history of socio-economic and environmental change, in which pastoralist peoples have interacted with diverse economies and polities, shaping environments, territories and each other along the way.

Echoes of this long history cascade through the contemporary world in northern Kenya in subtle ways, amidst a socio-material palimpsest comprising shared lexicons of numbering and naming and in the convergences of domestic material culture forms that crosscut linguistic divides. The *akurum* and *apangach* milk souring containers used by Turkana herding families, for example, are mirrored in the similarly shaped *kul* and *bangach* containers made and used by Rendille communities, or the *kurum* used by Daasenach communities up on the Ethiopian border. Such similarities are not signs of a common ancestry but of a common ground of making, making do and making sense – a record of trade, exchange and cross-cultural interaction that is immanent in contemporary thought and practice among northern Kenya's diverse pastoralists. The open-ended, cross-cultural networks described by Roba as critical to livestock marketing are less an expression of novelty than of deeply engrained ways of working. It is a change that reflects a longer-term continuity. Banerjee et al.'s description of the social role of market-places in drawing people together and opening dialogue, even in times of conflict, aligns with this picture of regional trade and exchange as a locally led driver of socio-cultural as well as economic transformation.

These forms of entangled socio-economic adaptation are further explored in Wangari-Muneri and Mohamed's chapter, which presents three new case studies to explore how pastoralist women navigate changing social and ecological landscapes while reworking deep-seated norms surrounding labour, ownership and belonging. Building

on feminist analyses of moral economy and collective solidarity, they emphasise how pastoralist women in northern Kenya are central actors in the work of reconstituting the social and moral worlds through which livelihoods take shape. The women they describe navigate markets not on individualistic terms but via a politics of care in which economic activities are inseparable from social reproduction. Amidst a fast-moving cash economy, the women work collectively to create and maintain common resources and infrastructures, co-opting markets to work on their own terms, enhancing relational well-being over profitability.

Read alongside wider feminist and moral economy literatures (e.g. Zelizer 1989; Guyer 2004), Wangari-Muneri and Mohamed's account of women-led market interactions in northern Kenya complicates the separation of markets from morality, resonating with Berisso's grounding of prosperity, in southern Ethiopia, in moral and ethical questions. The forms of collective, gendered adaptation they describe frame markets as social and ethical terrains where care, obligation and livelihood come together to mutually shape each other. Like many of the other chapters in the volume, the situation they present is one in which several implicitly held binaries are blurred. A picture emerges in which economic practice is no longer conceivable beyond the moral and affective work through which people sustain relations and imagine the future. The driving force at play, beneath market dynamics, wider values and social relations is *desire*, not in the sense of yearning for something that is immediately lacking, per se, but in the sense of working towards futures that are valued (Moore 2011). To put this another way, pastoralist worlds are worlds in which economic transformation is also always moral and imaginative work.

The next chapter, 'Pastoral prosperity in crisis', by Derbyshire and Hassan, commences Part I, 'Crisis', and is followed by three further chapters that draw on case studies from across the Horn of Africa to examine the role of crisis in shaping social action at multiple scales, from government intervention to collaborative locally led social assistance. Following these chapters, Part II, 'Commerce', proceeds through three chapters exploring pastoralist market engagements, to interrogate the nature of ongoing economic transformation in the drylands and the creative, moral and social work through which pastoralists negotiate and remake their place within it. Finally, Part III, 'Connection', draws together three contributions from northern Uganda and Western Sahara to examine pastoralist social reproduction amidst diverse architectures of intervention and transformation.



Figure 0.7 Making Rendille *kul* and *bangach* containers, Korr, 2024. © Samuel F. Derbyshire.



Figure 0.8 Making a Daasanach *kurum* container, Ileret, 2025. © Samuel F. Derbyshire.



Figure 0.9 Turkana household domestic containers in an *asajait* carrier, including *akurum* and *apangach* containers, at the rear. © Samuel F. Derbyshire.

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Part I
Crisis

Africa's drylands have long been characterised as ecologically unstable, 'disequilibrial' environments, marked by highly variable rainfall. Pastoralists live and work within these conditions, strategically exploiting uneven resources and embracing uncertainty through diverse forms of collaboration. Nevertheless, while drought has long been a feature of these ecosystems, in recent decades it has more frequently deepened into crisis. Neglect and disinvestment in pastoralist systems, political and demographic shifts and the broader effects of climate change have all, in diverse ways, shaped long-term transformations in the relations between people, the state and the land. Pastoralism, in its fluid and evolving forms, has been continually reconfigured amidst these shifting dynamics, as knowledges, familiarities and practices have been drawn into new contexts of social and economic life. Yet in many places, as multiyear droughts recur with increasing regularity and external systems of drought management remain weak, these longer processes of change have culminated in heightened vulnerability.

Crisis has long been the dominant idiom through which Africa's drylands are understood. Cast as primordial and passive landscapes, they are imagined to exist in a perpetual state of emergency – always on the verge of collapse and always in need of external assistance. Such narratives rest on the assumption of an inherent vulnerability to climatic shocks rather than on the recognition that much of this vulnerability has been historically and structurally produced. Generations of neglect and misguided development, often favouring irrigation and sedentarisation over the flexible logics of mobility, have undermined the systems that sustain life amidst uncertainty. Pastoralism persists in the face of all of this not by closing itself off to change, but by engaging with it,

through creative, adaptive and imaginative reworkings. The severity of drought and other crises in recent years arises not from outmoded traditions or unsustainable lifeways, but from constraint: the stifling of locally grounded capacities for adaptation and innovation through a long-standing failure to recognise pastoralism as a viable foundation for development.

The drought that gripped the Greater Horn of Africa between 2020 and 2023 brought these longer histories into sharp relief. It led to the loss of vast numbers of livestock, widespread displacement, acute malnutrition and death. Yet, as so often in the drylands, it was not a drought alone. Its effects were compounded by conflict, pest invasion, disease and flooding – disasters whose force was magnified by years of weak governance, poor planning and uneven investment. The chapters in this part of the book follow the drought's imprint across different settings, grounding it in local histories, moral worlds and ways of knowing. They ask how pastoralists make sense of crisis, how they act together in its midst and how, through such acts, they turn devastation into the grounds for imagining otherwise. Together, they show that prosperity cannot be delivered from without; it must be cultivated from within.

1

Pastoral prosperity in crisis

Samuel F. Derbyshire and Rahma Hassan

Introduction: prosperity comes from afar

A central theme in critiques of development discourse and practice has been its depoliticising nature (e.g. Ferguson 1994). Through technocratic and bureaucratic systems, so the well-trod argument goes, moral and political questions are simplified into technical ones and addressed through instrumental fixes that either do not work or actively undermine locally led and locally accountable answers. The drylands of Africa have served as the context of much research, across many disciplines, that has contributed to this argument and pointed to alternative possibilities (e.g. Hogg 1982; Adams 1986; Adams and Anderson 1988; Ellis et al. 1993). The returning crisis of drought has been at the heart of much of this work, and the growth of drought management institutions and early warning systems that are oriented towards proactive management are, in many respects, evidence of conceptual growth and advocacy leading to positive change. Yet, despite the influences they have drawn from work that emphasised the systemic and political nature of drought-related disasters and famine (e.g. de Waal 2005), and despite their early manifestation as localised, engaged and responsive forms of monitoring and early action (e.g. Swift 1985), these systems have recently become grounds for the resurgence of a centralised, depoliticised approach to drought.

Nowadays, early warning systems work to synthesise diverse forms of data, from weather forecasts to food security assessments, thereby facilitating the mechanistic triggering of early action assistance programmes, or as they are often termed, 'anticipatory action protocols'. Drought, from the perspective of these systems, is seen in terms of predictions, probabilities, measurable risks and degrees of vulnerability. Much has

been written about the fundamental misalignments of this approach with pastoralists' own approaches to uncertainty, and the incongruity of seeking to make predictions about or trying to stabilise contexts that are characteristically uncertain and fluid – places navigated, on the ground, through dynamic improvisation (Scoones 2023; Caravani et al. 2022). Our argument in this chapter is that beyond this depoliticisation of drought-related crises, these systems also work to de-socialise them – that is, to detach them from the social and moral worlds with which they are always entangled and frame them as external forces of change that come to wreak havoc on their own terms. We suggest that this view of drought does not only fundamentally misunderstand it but, in doing so, also harbours an inverse image of prosperity that is equally externalised and unhuman.

Recent discussions of prosperity and 'the good' perhaps find common ground in the idea that human flourishing always emerges in culturally specific ways, that is, by means of values, ideas and practices that are specific to place and society. Our starting point in this chapter is that, in the shadow cast by the same light, crisis works equivalently; it does not come from afar but rather takes shape amidst particular historical experiences, ecological engagements and outlooks. The interdependence, solidarity and mutual vulnerability that surface in its grip become grounds for the emergence and re-establishment of the values that determine what a good life is. Prosperity, in this sense, is not an externalised future but one imagined and pursued *now*, or to use Ferguson's terms, 'fought for and made . . . [by] all those with something at stake' (Ferguson 1994: 281).

The technocratisation and technologisation of drought are thus not only a problem for its pragmatic management – they do not only manifest themselves in top-down, rigid, prediction-based interventions that are misaligned with pastoralist drought management strategies (as we have argued elsewhere, Derbyshire et al. 2025). They also culminate in a failure to see the future as anything other than calculable and measurable through statistics, models and actuarial logics. As we noted in our introduction, Arjun Appadurai calls this dominant mode of governance 'a politics of probability' (Appadurai 2013). His call for a counter – a politics of possibility – is what we are concerned with in this chapter; the future as what might be, and as a product of collective, socially constituted imagination and hope. This, we suggest, is a particularly important focus in the contemporary drylands, where the obfuscation of such things through disaster and crisis narratives leads to forms of development that take for granted a need to transform what is there into something else,

and to bring prosperity from outside rather than nurture it from within (Semplici and Campbell 2023).

To pursue our argument, we draw on anthropological fieldwork we have undertaken across a wide variety of contexts in Kenya's northern drylands over the course of the last decade. We move between interviews, observations and vignettes accumulated from Turkana and Marsabit Counties, comparing the practices and ideas of Turkana, Borana and Rendille communities. In doing this, our point is not to portray Kenya's northern pastoralists in monolithic terms (indeed, we hope our engagements with the ethnographic material make this very clear), but rather to explore a diversity of social, economic and spiritual engagements with a distinct ecological context and a returning phenomenon – drought – that is universally familiar.

Re-socialising crisis in the drylands

Turkana, in Kenya's far northwest, has experienced an assortment of substantial ecological transformations over living memory. These changes have, as many scholars are wont to articulate, come to constrict and reshape pastoralist livelihoods in a variety of ways. In the south, the Kerio – a seasonal river, whose banks once flooded on a regular basis – has undergone major hydrological shifts, associated with an invasive species of mesquite called *Prosopis juliflora* and increased irrigation activity further upstream in the Kerio valley. Nowadays, sorghum farming is therefore increasingly less common, with the river remaining dry for progressively longer stretches of time, and riverside plots remaining fallow for years. Further out from the river, on the plains, annual grasses are becoming ever rarer to behold, a consequence of climatic shifts that have softened the seasonal weather contrasts on which they once depended. As a result, cattle, who graze these grasses as their primary source of sustenance, have all but disappeared, leaving in their wake songs and memories recounted over herds of camels, goats and sheep. During weddings, when a bull is needed for the celebration feast, it is brought from far across the Loriu Hills, or from herds kept where the Kerio and Turkwel deltas converge at the shores of Lake Turkana, or perhaps even from the west, near to the Ugandan border, where the environment is more temperate.

But these changes are not just ecological, they are social. A reduction in riverside harvests means changes in the relationships that previously existed between riverside cultivators and mobile herders, who

used to migrate to the river on a seasonal basis, exchanging livestock and livestock products for goatskin bags full of sorghum at the water's edge. Fewer cattle means transformations in diet, reciprocal exchange and in the very texture of daily customs. More widely, these immediate social entanglements might be seen as threads in a tapestry of change that, over time, reveals its picture only by tying ecologies and social relations together into one inseparable narrative. Indeed, speak to elders in market centres along the southern reaches of the Kerio today about hydrological and ecological change and it is likely that they will recount such changes to you within a story of declining health that cuts across the social and the physical.

Declining sorghum production is partly caused by the rapid spread of prosopis, and the gradual strangulation of riverside farms. This shrub, heavily browsed by goats and sheep, causes gastrointestinal and gum problems, leading to poor herd condition and, by extension, poor human health. But the shrub, and the river's changing hydrology, and these forms of physical ill health with which they are associated, have also all been entangled in the growth of market centres at nodal points where riverside exchanges once took place. These markets are places where theft, alcoholism and other kinds of social ill health are on the rise, and where the livestock-centred moral universe long central to pastoralist livelihoods in Turkana – and imagined by many to be ageless – seems to come into uneasy tension with the ambiguities and ambitions of the contemporary moment.

Head west from the river onto the plains and it is likely you will find herding communities grappling with changes in weather patterns that seem to blur the boundary that once existed between the dry season – *akamu* – and the rainy season – *akiporo* – to the extent that it is never quite clear what season one is in or, for that matter, how they should prepare. Ask them how they make sense of this change, and they might tell you a story that is common across many villages and homesteads in the present: as populations have grown in Turkana, so has the number of *ngimurok* (singular: *emuron*) – diviners or seers who have an inherited capacity to commune with God and ask him to bring rain. *Ngimurok* have long been known to contest with each other, and there are stories of battles and curse wars between prominent *ngimurok* going back generations. Nowadays, with so many in existence and in such close proximity to each other, when one sets about bringing rain, it will not be long before another comes to confound his efforts and cause the rain to stop or move elsewhere. In other words, the confusion in weather is at once a social and spiritual confusion, a shift that reflects an increasingly unsettled

and fraught covenant with God. Indeed, for many, this explanation of weather, misfortune and changing spirituality is bound up with the recent spread of Christianity into Turkana's hinterlands.

A comparable story is told 170 kilometres to the south-east in Korr, on the other side of Lake Turkana, among Rendille communities. Here, recent experiences of climate change are often narrated as a social unravelling – a fragmentation in communal bonds and ceremonial life evident, for instance, in reductions in the number of young men who participate in the *khandi* initiation process or the failure of others to return their camels to the main clan village in time for each *sorio* ceremony (which, as we described in the introduction to this volume, takes place four times a year). Such ceremonies mark time across multiple scales, from the seasonal to the historical. A breakdown in weather patterns is thus straightforwardly more than a climatic shift. It manifests itself in changing social and ceremonial experiences in a manner that blurs any preconceived ideas of stark divisions between society and environment, nature and culture, ritual and domestic. Prayers to God gain power from the collective, that is, from unity. His distance – as evident in erratic rainfall patterns and the cascading impacts of this on livestock health – is a culmination of what many from older generations decry as division, factionalism, disarray and disunity amidst a previously close-knit society.

Of course, pointing these things out is far from theoretically novel. The moral and symbolic ordering of the environment is a theme that lies at the heart of Mary Douglas's influential exploration of purity, pollution and taboo in *Purity and Danger* (2002). Similarly, Evans-Pritchard's exploration of causality in his work on Azande witchcraft and magic describes a world in which environmental and social phenomena are inextricably intertwined, and where misfortunes are explainable by means of layers of overlapping causes, from the physical to the moral (1976). In more recent years, and building on these early interventions, the modernist division between nature and culture has come to be increasingly unsettled. The works of Descola (2013), Ingold (2000), Tsing (2015) and Viveiros de Castro (1998) have each, in different ways, presented us with a picture of the sociality of ecology, and vice versa. They have described worlds constituted through relations, where humans and non-humans are mutually entangled in the production of meaning and value. That various processes of ecological change in northern Kenya have unfolded as ethical, spiritual and social processes finds points of comparison across these literatures, each of which insists that transformation in the environment is also transformation in the social and moral order.

And yet, a point of uniqueness when it comes to pastoralist societies in northern Kenya is the ways in which these long-term socio-ecological processes of change also frame an always ongoing oscillation between extreme scarcity – which often culminates in crisis – and abundance. Indeed, northern Kenya, like many other dryland contexts across Africa, has long been prone to extreme ecological variability and recurrent drought episodes. In pragmatic terms, such conditions are what make pastoralism such a uniquely viable livelihood, allowing for the dynamic and strategic exploitation of shifting resources as and when they become available, through mobility, economic flexibility and collective institutions and forms of management. Drought is, at least historically, a time for collecting wild fruits, depending on stored fats, oils and milk, perhaps even grains stored from previous exchanges. The rainy season, on the other hand, is a time of movement, daily milk consumption, weddings and other ceremonies.

The fact that this seasonal temporality has, in recent decades, seemingly come to be confused and disturbed is itself often understood as an index not only of climatic but also moral disorientation. That is to say, it is often understood by means of a longer-term historical temporality that comprises a set of broader socio-ecological transformations with important spiritual implications. As with Evans-Pritchard's Azande interlocutors, the point here is not that natural phenomena are always interpreted purely in terms of divine will but rather that divine, moral and ecological explanations are mutually entangled and without clear boundaries. The blending of social and physical ill health in southern Turkana, the interactions between shifting weather patterns and increasing numbers of diviners out on the plains, the relationship between social and ceremonial fragmentation and new forms of seasonal ambiguity in Rendilleland – all of these are aspects of a broader understanding of contemporary drought-related crises as phenomena amidst which humans are active and effective agents. To put this another way, they frame an understanding of such crises not as external forces that come to wreak havoc on their own terms, but rather as processes that are deeply entangled in and contingent on human relationships to livestock, land, God and others.

A key point, as far as we are concerned in this chapter, is that this understanding is not merely ideological. It reflects a set of pragmatically grounded, perhaps even archetypal truths, about how human societies interact with the world around them and how the relationships that carry them through these interactions continually shape both society and environment. The social ills that have come to percolate

through riverside contexts in southern Turkana are not only figuratively associated with the physical ill health of livestock and people; the two are *literally* entangled in the thorny thickets of prosopis that now dominate the water's edge. Increasing human sedentism (and with it, a decline in milk consumption), the decline in agricultural productivity, the rise in new commercial engagements and market activities and the rise in theft and alcoholism are all bound together in ways that defy any single, linear explanation.

In the same way, further out on the plains, population growth has led to restrictions on forms of longer-distance mobility that were once commonplace, intensifying competition over pasture and water. These pressures have generated new social challenges as people navigate increasingly unpredictable weather patterns while also grappling with the emergence of new ambitions and subjectivities. The recurring motif that growing numbers of *ngimurok* have unsettled the relationship between humans and God (relationships that once brought rain in pronounced, clearly demarcated episodes) merely condenses this wider awareness. That is to say, the story circulates amidst a lived familiarity with how population growth, social change and environmental degradation are all mutually entwined, together refracting how changes in the weather are experienced. In many respects, this is an extension of the argument that people know through inhabiting, not through abstracting themselves from the world they seek to understand. As Ingold put it (and we could not put it better than him),

> Bathed in light, submerged in sound and rapt in feeling, the sentient body, at once both perceiver and producer, traces the paths of the world's becoming in the very course of contributing to its ongoing renewal . . . The path, and not the place, is the primary condition of being, or rather of becoming. (Ingold 2011: 12)

This point about how interpretations of socio-ecological phenomena emerge not through adherence to an ideology or an abstract worldview but through *being in the world* is critical to understanding the kinds of acute crises that often stimulate development and humanitarian responses in the drylands, and as Jilo points out in his contribution to this volume, are often invoked to justify state-led modernising visions of progress and prosperity. Our argument in this chapter is that seeing crises as externalised non-human phenomena – as exogenous 'shocks' to society – means thinking about appropriate responses in similarly instrumental and de-socialised terms. Yet as we set out in our introduction,

crises, when they do come, are never blank forces of nature. They are events that take shape within situated human experiences and explanations, and that unfold as sets of social processes.

The third example we described above – Rendille interpretations of unsettled weather patterns as an outcome of social and ceremonial fragmentation – illustrates this. The idea that increasingly volatile, inconsistent seasonality stems from a breakdown in social unity is bound up with a broader understanding that crisis, turbulence and adversity are all made infinitely worse through social division and discord. Collective institutions, grounded in kin-based networks of reciprocity, obligation and trust, are frequently cited as critical to navigating the intense variability of the drylands, including by many contributors to this volume. Such collectivity, however, is always much more than a practical answer to environmental and economic uncertainty. Through its very sociality, it is also an answer to moral questions, such as, what is a good life? And how do you bring blessings?

Crisis, then, is, or at least should be, an arena for more intensive cooperation, closer social entanglement and for the further proliferation of bonds of interdependence. In this sense, in as much as it is destructive of livelihoods, it is also socially productive – it gives rise to values that endure far beyond its catastrophic immediacy. Again, this is not exactly a novel reflection, nor does it only apply to pastoralist experiences of drought in the drylands. Indeed, many of the key theories used to understand and analyse collective pastoralist practices today emerge from the same recognition. E.P. Thompson's classic work on the moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century (1971), for example, is a description of the organised assertion of a moral order in the face of economic crisis. The use of moral economy to understand and explain how pastoralists manage a variety of economic and ecological transitions today builds upon this same reasoning (see Mohamed 2023; Mohamed and Nori 2024). Familiarity with crisis (its rhythms and its moral and material demands) is generative of social forms that extend beyond it. Just as Thompson's English crowd sought to reassert a moral order amidst economic dislocation, pastoralist moral economies can be seen as products of, and responses to, recurrent adversity. They are ways of living with uncertainty that make crisis itself a ground for enduring social value.

Likewise, works that emphasise the critical importance of solidarity in pastoralist approaches to extreme variability (e.g. Scoones 2023; Watson et al. 2025) build on a long intellectual lineage that recognises how such solidarities are most effectively generated and consolidated amidst crises. Somewhere near the root of this lineage, Richard Titmuss's



Figure 1.1 Prosopis invasion in riverside farmland in southern Turkana, 2014. © Samuel F. Derbyshire.



Figure 1.2 Prosopis invasion on the banks of the Kerio River, southern Turkana, 2014. © Samuel F. Derbyshire.



Figure 1.3 Prosopis invasion in southern Turkana, a cause of ill health in humans and livestock, 2017. © Samuel F. Derbyshire.



Figure 1.4 Market day in Nakurio, southern Turkana, 2014. A trading ground of new ambitions and interests. © Samuel F. Derbyshire.

Problems of Social Policy (1950) comprises a detailed account of the ways in which solidarity underpinned civilian action on the home front in Britain during the Second World War. Exploring the expansion of social services and wider shifts in values around welfare, protection and equality, Titmuss explains that, at home, the war comprised a moral transformation that later culminated in institutional and policy change – Britain's modern welfare state (with the National Health Service coming to be established in 1948).

Recognising this constitutive role of crisis harbours important implications for the drylands, where the social and the ecological are never discrete, detached domains. Here, the fundamental and returning nature of drought-related crises has not only shaped livelihoods in practical terms (i.e. how resources are managed and how labour is organised through the seasons) but also in moral, ontological and existential terms. The cohesion and mutual inter-reliance that must emerge during times of acute scarcity become a structure that determines not only what is immediately necessary but what is good and right. Below we suggest that underneath this structure lies vulnerability itself: a state of inter-dependence and mutual reliance that gives rise to hope in the crucible of hardship.

Vulnerability and possibility

From the perspectives of drylands policymakers and development practitioners, vulnerability is almost always a measurable, quantifiable condition attributable to individuals or households, which is reducible via technical interventions. Vulnerability assessments, which are undertaken in advance of distributing some kind of support, thus aim to target the most vulnerable within a given population, to ensure that (usually very limited) emergency assistance finds its way to where it is most needed. Such people – the most vulnerable according to standardised measurement systems – tend to be those with limited food, water, healthcare or income. Suffice to say, vulnerability is envisaged as a deficit to be reduced, a condition that fundamentally threatens livelihoods.

There has been extensive debate on the theme of vulnerability targeting for humanitarian assistance, with many articulating the limitations of standardised approaches (e.g. Jaspars and Shoham 1999). Indeed, our own work has specifically emphasised the misalignment of such approaches with pastoralist practices of collective care, locally led

social assistance and resource redistribution (Hassan et al. 2025). In the drylands, where crises are managed through intensive cooperation and sharing – the kinds of informal welfare described by Titmuss in his account of the Second World War in Britain – the idea that vulnerability is best conceptualised and addressed at the level of the individual or the household seems particularly inadequate. Vulnerability in the drylands is usually collectively experienced, and emergency resources targeted at individuals deemed by external actors to be the most vulnerable tend to be redistributed immediately among wider communities. This is not because culture undermines individual flourishing, but rather because social capital is a much more important form of capital to most pastoralist individuals than a small amount of money or a parcel of food. But collectivity, among diverse pastoralist societies, is not only a response to economic or political marginalisation and deficiencies in state services (though it is partly this). It arises also from the very qualities of dryland environments, from rainfall that is intensely localised and variable, and from ecological conditions that demand movement, attentiveness and interdependence. In such contexts, relations of care and obligation cannot be understood outside of, or on top of, a pre-existing landscape, they grow through it, as people, herds and weather grow evermore entangled in the same field of life. Collective tenure, and the varied social institutions that sustain it, are not social adaptations to a particular ecological setting, they are features of a world in which, as we suggested above, the social and the ecological are part of one ongoing process.

This was all made clear to us in July 2024, during a period of fieldwork among a community on the outskirts of Korr, in Marsabit County, northern Kenya, who had received sacks of beans from the government as a form of relief for the most vulnerable among them. This food distribution came following a multiyear drought that had led to long-term impacts on herd health and human diet. We found the sacks stacked up in the centre of the village, which was, like most Rendille villages, a circular stockade comprising households along the interior of the main boundary and, on the inside of this perimeter of houses, a sacred enclosure called the *nabo*, where elders meet to pray. Following a meeting we had convened, some men gestured to the sacks of beans and requested that we drive them back to the centre of Korr, where they were due to be sold. Of course, we acceded to their request, but as we loaded the sacks onto the roof of the car, questions began to emerge in our minds about those who might have received them, would they be given the money? 'No', we were told, when we tentatively made our enquiries, 'the money will be used to fix the borehole, it is more important'. 'Who

has use of the borehole?' we asked. Our question was met with looks of incredulity: 'everyone'.

Coming at the beginning of a piece of fieldwork focused on locally led crisis management, and how local practices of care intersect with formal assistance programmes, this incident stirred a string of follow-up questions that came to weave their way through our work, surfacing in many of the interviews and group discussions we undertook. The study unravelled a picture of collective crisis management that cut across all domains of life, and which served to contextualise all forms of external assistance. We learned that, in southern Marsabit, the vulnerability assessments of organisations seeking to intervene were always actively negotiated by recipient communities, who fulfilled the requirements of the distributor before directing the resource towards whatever made most sense to a wider collective of people, and their concerns. Sometimes, as was the case with the sacks of beans we encountered at the beginning of this piece of fieldwork, what made most sense for support was literally a collectively owned and managed resource (i.e. water). In other instances, more subtle forms of redistribution took place, which shifted the dynamics of distribution slightly to prioritise either a single individual or a wider pool of people. When a resource that had been designated for a handful of individuals or households was redirected to one individual, this was usually a reflection of a greater burden of responsibility currently being on that individual (perhaps more school fees to pay or a wedding to host). The rationale for combining all of the assistance in this manner was to ensure that one person could meet their obligations in full, rather than multiple people receiving too little to truly make a difference. This is part and parcel of a relational ethic in which support is often best concentrated rather than fragmented, enabling the fulfilment of social responsibilities that, in turn, sustain wider networks. In other words, such forms of redistribution were less about fairness than about maintaining the flow of mutual obligation (a flow that, after all, ultimately means an individual's vulnerability is less to do with the assets they happen to have than the relationships they have invested in throughout their lives).

Elsewhere, across multiple pastoralist areas in Kenya's northern drylands and over many years, we have encountered similar situations – vulnerability targeting undertaken purely to cater to external organisational requirements, with resources then coming to be enfolded in grounded redistributive practices to cater to collective needs. In Ambalo, in the north of Marsabit, for example, we learned that women from Borana communities have organised themselves into savings and credit

groups based on the long-standing principle of *marro* ('taking turns'), which underpins rotational systems of sequential reciprocity. Women in these groups take turns to support each other in times of need, directing resources towards individuals who have an urgent burden of care or broader responsibilities to family and community. Such reciprocal practices – often referred to in terms of *jifu* ('debt' in the sense of personal indebtedness) – are common across multiple domains of life, many of which women are central to. When an animal is slaughtered, for instance, women facilitate the sharing of certain cuts of meat among neighbours; this is a practice common to numerous pastoralist communities, including those in Turkana, where we have encountered it regularly.

During northern Kenya's most recent catastrophic drought, which took place between 2021 and 2023 (and which impacted populations across the Greater Horn of Africa), it was *jifu*, and the underlying principle of *marro*, that structured community interactions with formal aid amidst the Borana population. Women's groups in Ambalo tapped into cash transfer programmes run by diverse programmes to fund relational practices of mutual care. Funds received individually were pooled into a collective pot, then directed towards the most significant individual needs of community members as and when they arose, based on collective deliberation. Assistance targeted at individuals based on perceived individual vulnerabilities was thus redirected via a collective institution. Again, this was not to efface the individual, but to sustain them through a living meshwork of interdependence, a condition in which dependence is not a mark of weakness, per se, but an acknowledgement that a meaningful life unfolds through relations of care and reciprocity, and through social commitments that reach beyond the self, but in so doing, also work to uphold and nurture it, and to orient it towards what is right – a future of shared possibility where one's own flourishing emerges through the always ongoing, collaborative work of social renewal.

It is important to note here that beyond such savings and credit groups, networks of obligation – and the trust they enshrine – facilitate a diverse array of collaborative actions that are essential to the pragmatic management of complex crises in the drylands. Humphrey et al. (2023) describe many such actions undertaken by pastoralists in South Sudan during the same drought period. Meanwhile, Levine et al. (2023) paint a picture – again, during the same drought period – of socially grounded crisis management in Somalia that defies the kinds of linear, mechanistic forms of assistance that emerge from most early action protocols.

In Korr, where sacks of relief food were being sold to address more urgent collective needs, the wider crisis of drought was being managed

via a complex, intersecting network of informal service providers, who collaboratively facilitated communities' management of a deeply uncertain and dynamically transforming array of challenges. Motorbike riders provided an informal ambulance service, or relayed and translated information between different knowledge bases (that is, between the government, NGOs and communities). They also transported jerrycans of drinking water to herders tending livestock far away, or conveyed young, weak livestock to new pasture in advance of the larger herd to avoid their deaths on an arduous journey. Shopkeepers provided interest-free loans, based on knowledge of seasonality, herd movements and the reputation, competence and responsibility of the borrower and their family. Car drivers translated livestock diseases to agrovets in towns dotted along their transportation routes, then purchased relevant medicines and conveyed them to herders efficiently and without the need for a long, costly journey by foot. In short, indebtedness and obligation made life possible in a context where an individual's wealth, capacity and knowledge are continually exposed to a horizon of risk so diffuse and unpredictable that no one can act strategically against it alone.

The point we wish to make here is that vulnerability, in this world of collaborative action, is ill understood as a deficit to be reduced, or a threat to human livelihoods. In fact, viewing it in these terms at all is only possible from a perspective that takes for granted a view of prosperity – human flourishing – as total individualised self-sufficiency, and the diminishment of dependence on others. Or, to return to Appadurai's framing, a view that envisages the future in probabilistic terms, as something external to human lives, to be prepared for, mitigated against and managed through the reduction of individual precarity. To us, vulnerability is not a condition of precarity, it is a condition of possibility. That is to say, a way of being in the world, and of being in the hands of others, that takes for granted precisely the opposite view of where the future comes from and how existential risks emerge. To express this point more clearly, our argument is not merely to suggest that vulnerability is collectively experienced, due to the pragmatic requirements of living in highly variable contexts (i.e. collective institutions). Our argument here is that vulnerability, like collective intuitions themselves, does not lie on top of landscapes, nor does it return sporadically during moments of acute stress and trouble. Instead, it emerges as a fundamental quality of human relationships *with* landscapes, or as we put it earlier, relationships with livestock, land, God and others, in contexts where the social and the ecological are inseparable. Vulnerability, in this sense, precedes collective institutions, serving as

the very ground on which collective life stands. To be prosperous is not to stand apart from vulnerability but to participate in its circulation and to belong to a moral and ecological field in which care, dependence and exposure are shared conditions of life.

There are connections that can be drawn between this view and the work of Ellen Gordon-Bouvier (2020), whose work focuses on unpaid caregiving and domestic labour to counter perspectives common to institutions and states that, she argues, pathologise vulnerability as a form of weakness and a problem that might be addressed through technical fixes. Gordon-Bouvier reminds us that vulnerability is a common feature of all human lives, shaped by relations, and often devalued or concealed by legal frameworks that rest on implicit ideals of autonomy. There are also connections to be drawn with Hirokazu Miyazaki's characterisation of hope as a method of engaging with uncertainty (2004), which we discussed in our introduction to this volume. If, as Miyazaki claims, hope is an epistemological practice of orientation and engagement (i.e. much more than an emotional or ideological sentiment) in the drylands, vulnerability is the generative condition for the emergence of the very social and moral worlds that animate this hope and give it shape. That is, the condition that makes it possible.

What is being hoped for? In Miyazaki's ethnography, undertaken among land claim activists in Vanua Levu, the answer to this question is particularly clear cut – the return of ancestral lands. In the northern drylands of Kenya, such a singular and material goal cannot, in most cases, be determined. Where Miyazaki's interlocutors sought to restore a fixed loss, northern Kenya's pastoralists' hopes are centred on recurrent cycles of drought and rain. Hoping, in this context, takes on diverse forms, yet for most active pastoralists, it tends to centre on a constellation of interconnected blessings: rain, birthing livestock, milk and the celebrations and ceremonies that percolate amidst these happenings. Unlike in Miyazaki's study, such blessings do not lie at the end of a long-term, linear struggle of endurance and active advocacy, they return cyclically, throwing periods of scarcity, disease, hunger and suffering into relief against the abundance they manifest. Yet it is precisely in this cyclicity – the alternation between scarcity and abundance – that patterns of hope in northern Kenya nonetheless resonate with Miyazaki's characterisation. His point that hope in Fiji is recursively renewed through the recollection of past acts of hope, and that this process sustains movement amidst uncertainty, finds a strong parallel in Turkana communities' approaches to remembering crisis and reconstituting life after it. In Turkana, in the wake of each crisis, what endures, and what facilitates



Figure 1.5 A Rendille Village near to Korr, Marsabit, 2024. © Samuel F. Derbyshire.



Figure 1.6 Taking the camels out to the ranges following the *sorio* ceremony, Korr, Marsabit, 2021. © Samuel F. Derbyshire.

the continual renewal of hope, is not only the memory of loss and tragedy but the recognition of mutual exposure, and of its transcendence through bonds of interdependence that crosscut all domains of life. Below, we unravel this point further, exploring how the recounting of the past shapes imaginations of the future.



Figure 1.7 A Rendille homestead after the *sorio* ceremony, Korr, Marsabit, 2021. © Samuel F. Derbyshire.

Remembering

In Turkana, the past is an active field of moral and social work. Historical memory itself is largely organised through an informal and locally varied system of year naming that distinguishes times of scarcity and disaster from those of abundance. In this system, which repeatedly folds crisis into present practice, the name of a year often directly refers to an experience or condition that defined it. For instance, *Ekaru a Nakot*, 'The Year of Blood', which is widely agreed to have occurred in southern Turkana in the late 1960s, was a time when many herding families consumed blood from their livestock and those of others to survive, following a harsh drought that led milk production to plummet. The period of drought which preceded and culminated in *Ekaru a Nakot* is widely referred to as *Ekaru a Namotor*, 'The Thin Year'. This is a straightforward reference to the collectively experienced hunger of people and their livestock during a time without rain. Before *Ekaru a Namotor* came 'The Year of the Lost Padlock', *Ekaru a Atchaka Ekipul*. *Ekaru a Atchaka Ekipul* was a time when it rained so heavily, and for so long, that it felt as though the heavens had lost their padlock. This year is particularly well remembered among communities of riverside cultivators along the Kerio.

In other instances, the link to climatic conditions is less evident in the name of a year itself, but nevertheless almost always recalled

during discussions and recollections that reference it. For example, during an interview with Lomoru Ima, a well-renowned *emuron* who was descended from a powerful and important line of *ngimurok* who had played a critical role during the Turkana's resistance to colonial subjugation in the early years of the twentieth century, he recounted his experiences of the *asapan* initiation ceremony in the following terms,

> My father lived at that place, when we stayed there it was raining. The area, it was blessed that area, when we were young men growing up. They who did *asapan* here, they named that rainy season The Year of Boundaries. They put boundaries around grazing lands. They put a remote place for that, not on our side, they put it there, that side . . . They divided the place to say where the animals would not graze. (Interview with Lomoru Ima, 25 January 2020)

The year Ima references – *Ekaru a Ngipakae* or 'The Year of Boundaries' – is named after a colonial paddocking scheme, and yet his recollection of it specifically relates to the fact that it took place during a rainy season. We should emphasise here that 'year', in this naming system, rarely relates to a calendrical year, but rather to an unspecified period of time encompassed either by *akiporo* (the rainy season) or *akamu* (the dry season, or drought).

When recounting different years, and relating them to each other, it is not uncommon for a narrator like Ima to draw an undulating line in the sand with their staff, and to point to each of its peaks and troughs to differentiate a temporal order. The past, in this sense, is rendered both cyclical and linear: a movement that turns back on itself even as it advances. As we noted above, this system is not concrete or universal but rather localised and, in this regard, contingent on common experience. Communities in different parts of Turkana (which is almost 70,000 square kilometres in size) refer to different chronologies, each comprising years with a specific grounding in the places with which they are familiar. This emergence from collective experience, familiarity and corroboration is also evident in the process of naming itself, which usually takes place by means of deliberative discussion among elders. Historical memory, here, is a process of social relation sustained through the mutual recognition of those who remember, and renewed each time the past is retold.

Yet through this process of repetition – recurring discussions at water points, homesteads or under the shade of large trees – historical events are also continually reinterpreted and recast in relation to the

demands and questions of the present moment, a process that is, of course, long recognised as intrinsic to oral tradition (e.g. Vansina 1985). Sometimes this fluidity generates new reasons for the very naming of a year. *Ekaru ka Ata Nayanae*, for instance, 'The Year of the Mother of Nayanae', is currently explained in at least two ways. To some, it is a year named after a strange, otherworldly woman who, referring to herself as the mother of Nayanae (Nayanae being a common Turkana name), visited numerous villages on her own before disappearing, never to be seen again. To others, the year refers to the vision of an *emuron*, who dreamed and saw a woman who called herself the mother of Nayanae, and told him she would come to take everyone's livestock. The drought that ensued after this vision, and which claimed many livestock, was thus named after her. In other instances, the wider structure of historical consciousness serves as a kind of fluid imaginative terrain for the discussion of important processes, events or people. That is, it situates these within a recursive moral and temporal framework strong enough to sustain collective continuity, yet fluid enough to accommodate reinterpretation and change.

This was the case during the recent return of the figure Lokorijem, an *emuron* who counselled a war leader called Ebei during the colonial conquest of Turkana in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Between 2019 and 2021, stories began to circulate of a man who claimed to have been possessed by this historical Lokorijem (we have discussed this in more detail elsewhere, see Derbyshire et al. 2021). This man, so the stories went, had unrivalled abilities of foresight and an intimate knowledge people's personal actions and intentions everywhere he went. The descendants of the original Lokorijem had even accepted him as their ancestor returned. At market days and other gatherings, he dispensed advice to herders suffering through a protracted dry period – women should milk their livestock with the *elepit* container, not with plastic jugs, and they should wear goatskin *abwo* aprons when doing so, rather than the other fabrics or clothes that have proliferated through the region in recent years. If they do this, the rains will return.

Whether or not this returned Lokorijem really existed is less important than the broader question of how the story itself, through its retelling at homesteads across southern Turkana and its invocations of past years and collective experiences, wove historical memory into a gradually unfolding and deepening crisis, shaping its moral resonance. The implications of Lokorijem's return in Turkana echoed those we surmised from the lamentations of Rendille elders in Korr, on the other side of Lake Turkana, who, as we explained above, interpreted

uncertainty in weather patterns as a symptom of social and ceremonial fragmentation. In both cases the principle was clear: in the face of turbulence and disorder the answer is unity, and what more potent and unifying figure than the diviner who helped lead the Turkana's resistance to colonial subjugation? A diviner widely regarded as the most powerful in recent history, whose dialogue with God superseded all others: the very epitome of moral and cosmological order restored.

History in Turkana thus does two distinct things in its diverse contemporary enactments. It evokes people's own personal experiences of hardship and crisis, and the relations of reliance and interdependence through which these experiences were endured, while also situating them within a broader collective historical memory that lends them social meaning. In this sense, the narration of history is what socialises ongoing crises, renewing solidarities and obligations and making shared experiences of disaster a fundamental ground of togetherness. In doing this, it also serves as the imaginative realm through which contemporary vulnerability – in the sense of one's fate being in the hands of others – becomes the basis for imagining well-being and prosperity in general terms.

The moral-historical imagination that emerges through crisis in Turkana might be thought of, in Nietzschean terms, as a form of growth that draws its vitality from the depths of suffering. As Zarathustra tells the boy on the mountainside before the tree, 'It is the same with man as with tree. The more he seeketh to rise into the height and light, the more vigorously do his roots struggle earthward, downward into the dark and deep – into the evil' (1917: 41–2). To read Turkana history through this image we must, of course, momentarily disregard Nietzsche's disdain for morality, and his insistence that meaning drawn from adversity pertains only to the existential condition of *individual* becoming. Nevertheless, where Nietzsche located renewal in solitary self-overcoming, in Turkana the regenerative force of crisis is realised through collective moral imagination, that is, through the very socialisation of suffering that Nietzsche resisted and derided.

Either way, our point here is not to romanticise suffering, its transformation in the moral imagination is never inevitable, but rather actively sustained through acts of continual narration and reinterpretation. These acts comprise an orientation, or even a method, that facilitates the continual reconfiguration of livelihoods amidst a changing world, and the re-establishment of long-standing socio-economic relationships, values and institutions amidst new economic, material and political conditions. The point that shared experiences of crises are encoded into

collective memory, and that such memories have social and ecological functions, has been made in other pastoralist contexts in northern Kenya, perhaps most notably by Gufu Oba (e.g. Oba 2014; Tiki and Oba 2018). Our argument here is that along with, or indeed by means of, their social and ecological functions (i.e. the ways they inform adaptation), histories of crisis are also the imaginative basis for envisaging human flourishing.

Conclusion: prosperity rises from this ground

In this chapter, we have painted a picture of pastoralist worlds in which social action is engrained in ecology and forged via relations to ecosystems and weather. We have argued that ecological and environmental processes are thus always moral, constituted through society as much as any other exterior force. We have suggested, therefore, that droughts – and the crises they bring – are never neutral, externalised phenomena, but rather moments that reveal and renew the moral fabric of social life. Here, in these moments of acute struggle and togetherness, the past is transfigured; it comes coursing through unfolding scenes to valorise them. The future, the hope of prosperity, in being forged continually amidst the values that rise from this recursive process, is not a distant ideal, looming like a cliff face. It is a desire, constantly pursued, for the regeneration of relations and for the weaving of individual life and purpose into collective renewal.

In suggesting all of this, our argument is not that the crisis of drought is inevitable or necessary in the drylands, or that the suffering it brings is justifiable. Our argument is rather that viewing crisis as an external, technical problem also obscures the local values through which prosperity itself is imagined. In other words, prosperity comes to be defined in negative terms, as the mere absence, or diminishment of a certain set of conditions, rather than the active realisation of shared hopes and desires. This is not to suggest that pastoralists in general inhabit a single ground of shared ambition, or that their visions of prosperity are somehow universal as a result of shared experiences of crisis. Nor is it to imply that, within any given pastoralist society, hopes for the future are uniform from one person to the next. The reality, as anyone who has spent time in such worlds will recognise, is always so far from this. Our point is rather that prosperity, in all its fraught complexity and contestation, is not a self-evident state that might simply be arrived at. It is a goal transformed through the very act of hoping and working towards it, an image continually brought into the world from within, not

reached from afar. Turning to the crisis of drought, and apprehending its social and moral texture, is not to celebrate it, but to understand how, through it, people reimagine what it means to live well, and what kind of future might yet be made possible.

There are wider implications that follow from this recognition. Titmuss saw in the collective experience of the war in Britian the grounds for a renewed social contract, and a moral reorganisation that led to progress – a more prosperous society. Is it possible to imagine such a process in the drylands, where crisis is equally formative yet rarely translated into structural change? Early warning systems and the wider architectures of support in which they are enmeshed perhaps once promised precisely such transformation, yet have increasingly come to embody a technocratic logic of control and containment that undermines locally grounded positive change. If policy and practice are to gain traction amidst the lived realities of pastoralists (something they are so often accused of failing to do), they must begin by recognising the imaginative labour through which people continually remake the world in the midst of adversity. This is a form of engagement that neither descends from above nor begins with scarcity and deficit but rather meets pastoralists on common ground, in empathy and care, and with concern for the moral vitality with which they sustain the possibility of the future.

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2

Projections of prosperity: crisis, development and the marginalisation of pastoralism in Ethiopia

Roba Jilo

Introduction: projections of prosperity

Scholars of diverse themes and historical periods have highlighted how, since the formation of the modern Ethiopian state, pastoralism has consistently been framed by narratives that undermine its legitimacy as a viable livelihood, marginalise it within national development agendas and discourage investments that support or strengthen it on its own terms (see Hogg 1992; Little et al. 2008; Devereux 2010; Catley et al. 2013). This marginalisation has taken place not only through direct forms of dispossession but also through the less visible and yet equally powerful workings of development discourse and state vision (Alene et al. 2022).

In this chapter – accompanied by a series of photographs – I take a closer look at this long-standing process, exploring how ideas about prosperity have shaped state policy over successive regimes, casting pastoralist livelihoods as outside the bounds of national progress. I do this by tracing the experiences of Karrayyu Oromo communities in the Awash Valley and Borana communities in southern Oromia, two examples among many other pastoralist communities occupying dryland areas across Ethiopia. At the heart of my argument is that a narrow vision of prosperity that is tethered to sedentism (and sedentarisation), commercial agriculture and extractive development has worked to exclude pastoralists from the future envisaged by the state-oriented imaginary. This narrow vision has taken various forms, from

imperial modernisation schemes and state-run agricultural enterprises to contemporary infrastructure corridors and private investment zones.

Equally central to my argument is the point that crisis – both as narrative and as event – has played a constitutive role in this imaginary, and its history. Quite contrary to being natural or inevitable, episodes of displacement, drought-induced hunger and livestock collapse (all of which I explore in more detail below) are all best understood as outcomes of a suite of structural conditions that include land alienation, blocked access to aid, discriminatory market systems and wider forms of exclusion. Despite this, and rather than prompting more support for pastoral systems, such crises have often been used to justify their further constriction, reinforcing the nebulous and long-standing claim that pastoralist livelihoods are unsustainable or unfit for modern Ethiopia (Gebeye 2016).This is, of course, all part and parcel of a much broader attitude towards pastoralism in multiple African policy contexts that has historically taken for granted its fragility, inherent vulnerability and lack of suitability as grounds for sustainable development (see Scoones 2023).

This recursive relationship between prosperity and crisis, in which successive crises both emerge from and are used to help legitimise exclusionary visions of national progress, is best understood across the *longue durée*. As Henrietta Moore recently argued, ongoing forms of crisis in Africa should not simply be imagined as a failure of policy or productivity – the shortfalls of successive interventions and schemes – but rather as 'a failure to envisage what prosperity might mean and entail for Africa on its own terms and through the visions of its citizens' (2018: 1513). It is precisely this failure that underpins the contemporary precarity of pastoralists in Ethiopia. Their situation should not be understood as a deviation from a long-term process of development, but rather as one created by the enduring effects of a developmental paradigm that has consistently marginalised alternative visions of prosperity and progress.

To put this another way, pastoralism in Ethiopia is not disappearing because it is ecologically or economically unviable but because it continues to stand in tension with dominant models of development. In the process, not only are communities like the Karrayyu and Borana being displaced but the deep knowledge systems, social solidarities and adaptive strategies they embody are also under threat. This is not incidental; it reflects a broader political agenda that is, in many cases, unwittingly facilitated by development and humanitarian interventions themselves, whose categories, assumptions and silences often help to validate and normalise state visions.

By tracing these dynamics across both historical and contemporary contexts, this chapter calls for a critical rethinking of the narratives that underpin Ethiopian development, and a reckoning with the costs of projecting prosperity in ways that systematically exclude those who have long sustained life in the drylands. The chapter unravels amidst a series of photographs taken in Ethiopia at different times and places, portraying both daily pastoralist life in the shadow of modernising development, and schemes and interventions that have sought to promote livelihood change and the abandonment of past practices. Taking as its departure point the extensive critical literature on anti-pastoralist policy and practice, the chapter seeks to root these arguments in a set of situated reflections and illustrative cases. Rather than an empirical study, it comprises a reflective, interpretive account shaped by long-term observation and engagement, tracing how this broad universe of ideas and interventions has materialised in everyday pastoralist lives over time.

Development, displacement and the reshaping of Karrayyu pastoralism

Since well beyond living memory, communities of Karrayyu Oromo have pursued mobile pastoralism in the heart of the Awash Valley, within the semi-arid landscapes of Fantalle District in the East Showa Zone of the Oromia Region. In recent generations – particularly since the 1960s – this mode of life has been progressively reshaped by the expanding reach of the Ethiopian state and its development agenda. The appropriation of land and the centralisation of natural resource governance, initiated during the late imperial period (a time marked by territorial consolidation and state-led developmentalism) have had far-reaching consequences. Over time, these processes have systematically undermined the ecological flexibility and adaptive strategies that historically enabled Karrayyu pastoralism to endure and thrive in a context defined by climatic variability (see Mekuyie and Mulu 2021).

This trajectory of exclusion has taken shape through concrete acts of enclosure and dispossession, with the late 1960s marking a decisive inflection point. It was during this period that imperial development ambitions crystallised into the direct seizure of core pastoral resources. In partnership with a Dutch firm, the Ethiopian state established a large-scale sugarcane plantation and processing facility on Karrayyu grazing lands. Soon after, it designated approximately 756 square kilometres of



Figure 2.1 Matahara Sugarcane farm, historically dry-season pastureland. © Roba Jilo.

A sweeping stretch of sugarcane plantations now dominates the Awash Valley delta – a landscape that for centuries had nourished the livelihoods of the Karrayyu pastoralists. Once a vibrant ecosystem where the Karrayyu moved their herds along the river's fertile banks, relying on its waters and lush dry-season pastures, the valley has been steadily transformed over the past six decades. Progressive enclosures and large-scale agricultural schemes have carved up the land, diverting river water and fencing off former grazing grounds, gradually eroding the Karrayyu's ability to sustain their traditional pastoral way of life.

adjacent territory as the Awash National Park. These overlapping initial interventions, justified in the language of national development and environmental conservation, resulted in the permanent alienation of key Karrayyu rangelands, and were enacted without consultation, consent or compensation (Gebre 2004). Through these acts, the government of the time inaugurated an era in which pastoralist livelihoods were to be rendered incompatible with the national vision of economic transformation.

In this sense, the interventions were both emblematic of broader, state-centred visions of prosperity and, at the same time, much more than emblematic. They catalysed a cleaving reorganisation of both space and society that reshaped the terms of pastoral life. Following material dispossession, the mobility of Karrayyu communities was further curtailed through ensuing sedentarisation policies that incentivised permanent settlement and administrative incorporation. Under Emperor Haile Selassie, the community lost an estimated 65 per cent

of the ancestral territory it had retained following its earlier incorporation into the imperial polity. These lands, which were once ecologically strategic and central to the cyclical, seasonal movement that underpinned dryland resilience, were steadily reallocated to large-scale infrastructural and agro-industrial schemes oriented towards external markets. In restricting the mobility on which Karrayyu pastoralism depended, these transformations laid the foundations for a long history of marginalisation, in which successive crises – drought, hunger, displacement and so on – would be reframed not as the consequences of extensive spatial and ecological reordering but as symptoms of pastoralism's supposed failure to modernise.

Where early phases of dispossession unfolded without any overt recognition of Karrayyu communities and their claims, more recent interventions have been wrapped in the language of inclusion and development. As Goshu and Gebre (2023) summarise, 'development [now] is a state instrument, intended to realise national objectives', rather than to serve local needs (cf. Stevenson and Buffavand 2018). Their discussion of the recently established Fentale Irrigation-Based Integrated Development Project (FIBIDP), which redirected the Awash River to irrigate over 18,000 hectares, considers how state planners promised a model of community-centred growth. However, they explain, in practice the scheme worked to fragment communal land further, introducing private tenureships tethered to external capital and turning Karrayyu irrigators into de facto sharecroppers on their own land. Between 2014 and 2018, authorities introduced an irrigation project intended to shift the Karrayyu community from pastoralism to agro-pastoralism. The initiative delivered only fragmented results, neglecting the community's most pressing need, which was access to clean drinking water. A more effective approach might have first secured potable water for all households, then developed a genuinely community-led irrigation scheme that allowed the Karrayyu to voluntarily adopt agro-pastoral practices rather than being subjected to an imposed, top-down model. Either way, rather than engaging with the complex legacies of past dispossession, such interventions, which are framed in relation to drought's impact on pastoralism, inadvertently reproduce exclusion while cloaking it in the language of opportunity. In doing so, they cast prosperity as a technical deliverable rather than an open political question. This is a shift with profound implications for how contemporary challenges are understood, narrated and addressed.

It is as part of this shift that drought, environmental degradation and livelihood insecurity have come to be understood through the



Figure 2.2 A Karrayyu woman herding livestock to water, 2015. © Roba Jilo.

Since the 1960s, when the Matahara Sugar factory took full control of the Awash River, Karrayyu pastoralists have, as in this scene, been forced to trek long distances in search of drinking water for their livestock and themselves.

lens of pastoral vulnerability and notions of *inherent* fragility, rather than as phenomena whose experience is situated within the broader historical and structural conditions that prefigure them. In the case of the Karrayyu, the intersection of prolonged drought linked to climate change and recent unrelated seismic activity has led to widespread displacement and severe livelihood disruption. Since November 2024, the region has experienced a series of gradual yet intensifying earthquakes, with increasing magnitude and frequency. These tremors have significantly disrupted pastoralist lifeways, rendering key stretches of remaining pastureland unusable, uprooting trees, releasing clouds of toxic gas and making boreholes dysfunctional. The overarching point, which has gone largely unrecognised, is that the impacts of such phenomena have emerged in a context already shaped by decades of land loss and restricted mobility, which have constrained adaptive capacity and increased exposure to environmental shocks.

This broad and long-term process of pastoralist mobility constriction has produced cascading effects that continue to undermine drylands pastoralism across the Upper Awash Valley. Indeed, similar patterns of exclusion have affected the Afar, whose grazing routes have also been constricted by state-led development and conservation schemes (Kloos et al. 2010). As rangeland systems contract, so, too, does the ability of Ethiopia's pastoralist communities to maintain viable herds, draw upon

traditional resource management strategies and uphold the economic and ecological stability of their systems.

As many other contributors to this volume explore in other pastoralist contexts, these socio-ecological systems, and the values, knowledges, socio-cultural identities and principles that underpin them, enshrine a sense of prosperity – albeit an acutely imperilled one – that far exceeds the conventional economic metrics used to justify and evaluate many recent and ongoing interventions. This prosperity is grounded in collective well-being, cohesion and mutual obligation, as well as in enduring relationships to land, livestock and lineage in a historical consciousness that links present-day practices to ancestral knowledge. In other words, it is a form of prosperity that is not straightforwardly rooted in accumulation (contrary to deeply rooted and still prevalent assumptions about pastoralism's 'cattle complex'; see Kloos et al. 2010),



Figure 2.3 Agriculture promoted over pastoralism at an Ilala site 9 kilometres before entering Matahara town, the capital of the Fantalle District. © Roba Jilo.

During periods of prolonged drought and environmental stress that limit access to key rangelands, the delivery of humanitarian assistance to affected communities has often been delayed or obstructed by administrative and political challenges. At the same time, government institutions have promoted policies favouring more regulated and commercial forms of agriculture, such as the schemes shown here, which can undermine the viability of pastoralism in some areas. This tension reflects a broader policy orientation that continues to prioritise agricultural intensification over rangeland-based livelihoods, despite the demonstrated ecological adaptability and productivity of pastoral systems in dryland environments. In doing so, it risks deepening vulnerability at times of crisis rather than alleviating it.

but in continuity, care and the capacity to navigate uncertainty – qualities largely illegible to the dominant frameworks through which the state defines development and measures progress.

This disconnect in understandings of what matters not only shapes how the future is envisioned, justified and planned for but is also part and parcel of a representational economy that excludes on-the-ground narratives and experiences of ongoing crises. In their incommensurability with broader developmental, progress-oriented narratives, the messy, lived realities of ongoing crises are often obfuscated. This dynamic is evident in the state's recent portrayals of ongoing developments in Karrayyu areas. Its latest interventions were publicised by the Fentale District Bureau of Communication and Public Affairs, alongside its zonal counterpart in Adama, through official social media channels (which are now a central pillar of government communications). These platforms were saturated with curated images of infrastructure corridors, seasonal irrigation schemes and choreographed peace dialogues. At the same time, they remained conspicuously silent on the unfolding emergencies impacting the region and the large-scale displacement that has ensued (the residents of seven Karrayyu villages have been labelled 'internally displaced persons'). In this representational economy, prosperity is both narrowly defined and carefully staged.

Crisis control and resistance in Borana: the 2020–2023 drought

What does it mean to speak of crisis in Ethiopia's pastoral lowlands today, far to the south of the Karrayyu areas I discussed above? This section turns to the Borana Zone in southern Ethiopia. As with the Karrayyu, my focus here is not only on material losses but on the ways in which crisis is framed, acknowledged or ignored, and how such framings intersect with state narratives of progress and prosperity.

As Amartya Sen (1982) influentially argued, drought-induced hunger is never a straightforward consequence of food shortage; rather, it reflects deeper failures in governance and entitlement systems. In Ethiopia, discourses around drought have often framed it as an exogenous climatic event, abstracted from the political and institutional dynamics that condition its effects, in the same way that portrayals of pastoralism's contemporary challenges are often dislocated from the structural and historical conditions in which they are most accurately situated. Recent experiences from Borana make this particularly clear. Between 2020

and 2023, following three consecutive failed rainy seasons, an estimated 3.8 million livestock perished (Gatew and Guyo 2024; Feyissa et al. 2025). While meteorological data can account for rainfall deficits, an understanding of why such deficits translated into widespread livestock collapse requires attention to decision-making processes and the broader institutional arrangements shaping response and recovery.

Borana, like many other pastoral areas, is designated by the National Disaster and Risk Management Authority as a drought-prone zone; in the past, this has led to the area receiving regular support aimed at enhancing resilience. Over the past six years, however, such support has declined markedly, a shift that coincides with the onset of civil war in northern Ethiopia. With political attention and resources diverted, Borana's recent drought-related crisis received limited prioritisation. This partly reflected constrained institutional capacity, with much of the government's focus absorbed by the conflict and its humanitarian consequences. It also reflected the challenges of maintaining coherent national narratives of prosperity and unity during a period of considerable political and economic strain.

Within this context, acknowledging large-scale displacement and humanitarian need in Borana risked complicating wider public communication efforts that sought to emphasise development progress and national cohesion. The Oromia Region, of which Borana Zone forms part, had been positioned as a cornerstone of these broader prosperity efforts. Consequently, government communication channels tended to foreground imagery of infrastructure and irrigation development, alongside public dialogues and investment showcases. This focus, while reflecting the priorities of national development messaging, inadvertently contributed to the relative invisibility of the crisis as it unfolded.

In this sense, the limited visibility of crisis and suffering in Borana was not simply the result of oversight or the pressures of wartime governance. It also reflected a broader discursive and representational tendency oriented towards sustaining a particular vision of developmental progress in the region. In this framing, prosperity is both an economic goal and a political ideal, expressed through narratives of stability, order and growth. Acknowledging large-scale displacement, livestock loss or humanitarian need, would have complicated this narrative and the coherence of the wider pastoralist policy agenda. In this sense, the silences that surrounded the crisis can be understood as an outcome of the institutional logics through which development is communicated and justified. These are logics that, as Ferguson (1994) observed in his analysis of the 'anti-politics machine', often obscure



Figure 2.4 Emaciated Borana cattle during one of the worst droughts experienced in recent years. © Roba Jilo.

This photograph was taken between 2020 and 2023, when southern Ethiopia's Borana pastoralists faced an unprecedented drought that overwhelmed traditional coping mechanisms. Despite the deployment of indigenous early warning systems and adaptive strategies – such as selling small stock to purchase fodder, transporting cattle to distant markets and sustaining remaining calves with hay – the scale of their livestock losses exceeded historical experience. Borana pastoralism has long relied on the ecological resilience of rangelands and livestock breeds, which allow herd recovery after droughts. The recent crisis, however, decimated entire herds, undermining this regenerative capacity and pushing many households towards livelihood collapse.

structural inequalities while casting governance in technocratic and depoliticised terms.

The limited visibility of crisis in Borana was also shaped by administrative and political processes that constrained the flow of information and delayed external response. Bureaucratic procedures and political sensitivities constrained humanitarian responses that might otherwise have provided support to affected populations. Within a highly centralised governance system, relief efforts were often delayed or sharply limited, hindering timely intervention. The absence of a formal designation of the situation as a 'humanitarian crisis' – a step that would have triggered broader emergency mechanisms – further reduced the scope

for international engagement and diminished the political visibility of the crisis.

In the face of this overarching narrative, affected communities resisted this discursive domination through the strategic use of digital platforms. They exercised agency by taking to social media to disseminate their own videos and testimonies, which challenged portrayals of prosperity and stability and reached wide audiences (particularly diaspora audiences). Such grassroots contestation emphasises the dual role that might be played by digital technologies in contexts marked by historic marginalisation. On the one hand, the state's narrative – established via digital platforms – sought to maintain an image aligned with political legitimacy and economic growth agendas. On the other, increased access to mobile phones and telecommunications infrastructure at the grassroots level provided pastoralist communities with unprecedented tools to expose contradictions in official discourses and assert alternative accounts.

Perhaps most importantly, local efforts to convey the lived realities of drought conditions prompted coordinated responses across multiple scales. Among the most significant were those led by international diaspora networks in Western and Gulf countries, which mobilised resources and provided material support through remittance platforms and social networks – a kind of 'vernacular humanitarianism' that is increasingly common across the drylands of Africa (see Musa and Kleist 2022; Koshin this volume). These acts of care emerged from long-standing forms of mutual, socially embedded responsibility that transcend formal borders. Indeed, it might even be imagined that they reflect an alternative vision of prosperity, rooted not in infrastructural expansion or state-led growth, but in relationships and a moral economy that enshrines social cohesion and reciprocal obligation (e.g. Mohamed 2023; see also Scoones 2023).

Nevertheless, despite the scale of support mobilised through diaspora and local solidarity networks, assistance arrived too late to avert widespread hardship. As drought conditions worsened, many Borana households sought to manage the drastic ecological changes by selling livestock. However, for a large number this strategy was not viable due to a collapse in prices and what many Borana communities saw as predatory trading practices. For multiple households, the decision was made to retain dwindling herds, despite the risks.

Understanding why and how such decisions were made harbours important implications vis-à-vis prevailing narratives (particularly within the domains of early warning, 'anticipatory action' and drought

response) that frame pastoralists' reluctance to 'de-stock' as emerging from cultural attachments or emotional irrationality tied to identity or status (see Livingstone 1977; Roba this volume). Such interpretations tend to overlook the complex and highly constrained decision-making environments in which these choices occur. In the 2020–3 drought in southern Ethiopia, the decision not to sell herd animals often reflected careful economic calculations. Low market demand, depressed livestock prices, high transaction costs and inaccessible markets meant that selling would generate little profit (frequently not enough to sustain a household) and could erode future recovery potential. What is often cast as irrationality is, in this context, better understood as a rational response to unjust and exclusionary political economic structures.

But this analysis only captures part of the picture. As recent work on 'relational resilience' in pastoralist areas has emphasised (Semplici et al. 2024), livestock in pastoralist settings are misunderstood as purely economic assets because they are also deeply embedded within systems of social obligation, collective identity and intergenerational memory. Herd animals are often entangled in kin-based networks and moral economies, shaped by histories of gifting, marriage alliances and reciprocal exchange. These relations underpin systems of mutual aid, especially during periods of crisis. Owning livestock does not only mean possessing wealth, it also means carrying obligations to others: to provide support, to maintain bonds and to participate in shared responsibility. From this perspective, decisions not to sell livestock, particularly when markets are exploitative, arguably reflect not a rejection of rational economics, but a different rationality altogether, which is attentive to the maintenance of social cohesion and the preservation of a relational economy critical to long-term resilience.

This point calls into question dominant framings of prosperity that privilege immediate liquidity or market participation. What is revealed instead is a pastoralist ethic of investment in relationships, which values wealth for how it binds people together. In contrast to state-led visions, which, as I have outlined, are underpinned by an image of prosperity as grounded in visible growth and infrastructural transformation, this form of prosperity is, in a sense, quieter, and more distributed and certainly often invisible to formal metrics and indicators.

In Borana, the 2020–3 drought left many without the means to rebuild. Restocking – a key intervention for recovery – has been largely absent from formal responses. As a result, a growing number of families have become internally displaced, stripped of the resources that once anchored their livelihoods and identities. Displaced from rangelands



Figure 2.5 Yabello Airport. © Roba Jilo.

Infrastructure expansion, including airport and road construction, has had negative impacts on Borana pastoralist livelihoods. Adjacent to the new Yabello Airport, pictured here, plans for feedlots and an abattoir are in place with the aim of channelling value-added livestock products into these emerging infrastructures. Investors, attracted by these developments, have enclosed vast tracts of land along highways and near the airport, accelerating the monetisation of local resources. This shift towards profit-oriented ventures is increasingly transforming communal rangelands while sidelining traditional restocking practices essential for Borana pastoralists' recovery from severe droughts.

and resettled along roadsides, they now rely on food aid for survival, their ecological knowledge and pastoral skills rendered unnecessary. Such losses not only deepen material poverty but also lead to widespread psychological trauma, with many facing a prolonged and uncertain path to recovery. These dynamics, I would argue, lend credence to calls for a more expansive understanding of pastoral resilience (cf. Sisodia and Jobbins 2022), which accounts for the social, cultural and emotional dimensions of recovery and recognises the failure of current policy paradigms to protect and restore the social conditions necessary for life in dryland environments.

Prosperity and loss: Ethiopia's pastoralist futures

In both the Karrayyu and Borana contexts, crisis has always been much more than a humanitarian concern. Its power as a legitimising force for far-reaching intervention has proven remarkably enduring, despite extensive critique from across disciplines. In recent years climate change has intensified these narratives, casting pastoralist regions as zones of

imminent collapse and justifying interventions that are often aimed not at support for existing livelihoods but at transformation into something else deemed more 'sustainable' (Derbyshire et al. 2023). In a context of global urgency, Ethiopia's devastating recent droughts, and the associated losses of life and livestock, have, following this precedent, justified transformative policies and investments that seek to restructure pastoral livelihoods. From large-scale irrigation schemes and hydropower dams to sedentarisation projects and the formalisation of rangeland tenure, these interventions are often portrayed as necessary responses to environmental precarity (see Kloos et al. 2010). This reflects a long-standing tendency to obscure the deeper structural injustices and failures that lead to the crisis of hunger (cf. de Waal 2005).

A crucial point here is that, in the same way that disasters are never just 'natural', this transformative agenda should not be understood as purely economic in nature; it entails deep social and ecological cleavages that matter much more in terms of the agenda's implications vis-à-vis prosperity. The pastoralist systems of Borana and Karrayyu communities, as with many other drylands, are worlds long shaped by mobility, reciprocity and economic flexibility. Borana and Karrayyu livelihoods comprise a particular orientation towards uncertainty, which takes shape in fluid, open-ended ways and is undermined not by change itself but by rigidity and imposed forms of fragile stability – in other words, by a controlling rather than a caring approach (Scoones 2023).

The idea that this kind of undermining also manifests itself in the values assigned to particular forms of cultural heritage and knowledge is not new. Comaroff and Comaroff's (1997) work, which explored experiences of colonisation in southern Africa and the complex ways in which new political and epistemological regimes have come to shape capacities and horizons there, remains a valuable source of interpretive ideas. As does Spivak's (1988) influential work on representation, voice and epistemic violence. In Ethiopia, where the privileging of linear, single-path development based on technocratic solutions to complex political problems has long been critiqued, such works perhaps demand a renewed recognition (particularly in the face of climate change) of the unrelenting hegemonic power of negative narratives around pastoralism – its presumed irrationality, inherent vulnerability and unsustainability (see Nori et al. 2005; Odhiambo 2014). Such narratives work subtly to constrain the parameters of discourse and diminish the value of the knowledges and practices that shape pastoralist life in the drylands, often reducing them to lists of 'coping strategies' or to immutable reservoirs of

culturally inscribed knowledge that might be 'integrated' (as critiqued by Derbyshire et al. 2024).

How, then, might we talk about pastoralist cultural heritage and knowledge in more useful, grounded ways? One option is through the language of resistance, and through better recognition of the ways in which Ethiopia's pastoralists continue – against the odds – to actively negotiate and even subvert dominant systems of order and control through what Scott (1985) termed 'weapons of the weak'. The enduring power of kin-based social support systems, which span vast diaspora networks and work to defy state inaction, might be envisaged as one example of this. However, another option, as the editors of this volume set out in the introductory chapter, might be to develop a new language of loss. By this, I do not mean subscribing to the now well-critiqued (at least in the world of anthropology) notions of indigenous cultural erosion and Western homogenisation, but rather thinking more carefully about a different kind of loss – that of an alternative future, and the prosperity it might have brought about. As the editors suggested, such a language might draw insights from Appadurai's (2013) discussion of how cultural forces and social practices actively shape the future, and the uneven distribution of the capacity to aspire, which results from social inequality. It might also draw from Anderson's (2010) work on future geographies, exploring how anticipatory logics work to restructure power, bypass accountability and stabilise the status quo.

Either way, I would suggest that thinking in these terms might engender discussions of pastoralist knowledge that do better at avoiding the two dominant tropes that continue to ensnare it, reducing pastoralists, on the one hand, to romanticised guardians of timeless, pristine land, and, on the other, to backward, obsolete traditional herders. Indeed, it is by falling back on such overly simplistic representations of pastoralist life and knowledge (on which side of this unnuanced conceptual continuum, it matters not) that international development interventions have often come to reinforce a modernising agenda that has had fraught and often negative outcomes for Ethiopia's pastoralists. In practice, even well-intentioned interventions, such as livestock sector modernisation or market integration, have often worked against pastoral systems. While nominally supporting pastoral livelihoods, they have often imposed conditions that erode the communal norms of reciprocity and of shared access that underpin pastoralist approaches to managing uncertainty. Programmes to improve livestock production, for instance, frequently come bundled with measures to individualise herd ownership,



Figure 2.6 Karrayyu pastoralists herding a camel near a sugarcane farm. © Paola Viesi.

Among the Karrayyu, camels typically traverse vast distances following seasonal cycles and return to the villages during the rainy season. However, even as the upcoming rainy season approaches, their mobility remains constrained because large portions of prime rangelands have been converted into sugarcane plantations and irrigation schemes, limiting access to pasture.

restrict mobility and formalise land tenure (cf. Robinson and Flintan 2022). Such reforms, which see both complexity and uncertainty only as problems to be eradicated, are grounded in logics of control, predictability and productivity. These are values that tend to be at odds with relational ethics and adaptive strategies, leading to a kind of modernisation that is less about strengthening pastoralism and more about making it more legible to and governable by external authorities.

In any case, what this chapter has sought to highlight is that both crisis and prosperity are not neutral descriptors in Ethiopia, but are instead political constructs that are mobilised, often selectively, to justify particular forms of intervention while precluding others. For Ethiopia's pastoralists, the notion of crisis has long been deployed as a means of justifying far-reaching programmes of sedentarisation, commercialisation and territorial reordering in the name of progress. Under this logic, prosperity has come to be equated with stability, formalisation and economic growth; this is a vision that rarely accounts for the plural forms of well-being and belonging that emerge from free movement and

reciprocal relationships based on trust and obligation. In this sense, the real crisis in Ethiopia may not be pastoralism's precarity but rather the persistent difficulty in engaging with it on its own terms. That is, to invest in the capacities, knowledges and networks that allow communities to navigate uncertainty in adaptive, collective ways.

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3

Sharing futures: lessons from pastoralist disaster response in northern Somalia

Sahra Ahmed Koshin

Introduction

In this chapter I unravel local approaches to disaster management among pastoralist communities in Puntland, northern Somalia. Drawing out insights from research undertaken in Qardho in 2020, amidst an assortment of intersecting crises, I aim to identify some of the core dynamics of local knowledge, and the wider socio-economic practices it shapes in response to various forms of turbulence. In doing this, my broader ambition is to contribute to discussions of 'indigenous knowledge' at a particularly critical time, when the world's pastoralist communities are facing climate-related disasters on an increasingly regular basis and, at the same time, international humanitarian norms are shifting radically and aid funding is shrinking.

I argue that in this moment of global transition there is much to learn from how pastoralists organise themselves and respond to complex, worsening crises and that, somewhat paradoxically, a richer understanding of these themes harbours important implications for how we think about a future beyond catastrophic crises altogether. To put this another way, the 'social infrastructure' of crisis management that I outline – the values, institutions and relationships that facilitate collective responses to worsening conditions in Puntland – also comprises a foundation on which to imagine a prosperous future. The culturally embedded 'tacit knowledge' behind this social infrastructure is itself a form of wealth (Polanyi 1966), that is, a circulating, relational good, always in

motion and thus always finding purchase amidst changing conditions. I contend that this tacit knowledge is part of a wider social world whose coherence, particularly when crisis looms, is sustained by three kinds of intuitive sharing: the sharing of resources, the sharing of information and the sharing of responsibility. By foregrounding these dynamics, I aim to recast prosperity as an ongoing cultural practice of sharing, with important implications both for formal disaster management systems and for development.

Much past work has explored the habitual and embodied intersections of ecology, livelihood and subsistence, emphasising the situated, relational nature of knowledge and the fallacy of construing it as a static and passive repository (for example Scott 1998; Ingold 2000). In pastoralist contexts, attention has specifically been placed on the ways in which knowledge systems work to facilitate improvisation and dynamic responses to unpredictable conditions (e.g. Krätli 2015), and Derbyshire et al. (2024) have recently highlighted continuing failures in the ways in which formal early warning systems and wider humanitarian and development programmes construe and engage with this pastoralist dynamism. Nevertheless, there remains little situated research that has focused specifically on the question of how pastoralist knowledge systems facilitate disaster or crisis management (although see Hassan et al. 2025) and how kin- and clan-based networks play a role in this. Importantly, while kinship has long been a critical theme of analysis in explorations of social change in Africa (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1951), and indeed remains so (e.g. Guyer 2016), the particular ways in which it structures social and economic life in the drylands of today – contexts marked not only by communally managed resources and high levels of mobility but also by ecological, economic and political instability and, often, fragmented formal governance – have arguably yet to be fully comprehended in their contemporary significance (although see Ikanda 2018).

By exploring contemporary forms of locally led social assistance in Qardho, I situate clan and kinship networks within a moral universe of obligation, where they are inextricably entwined with long-standing social and religious institutions that inform the management of a fast-changing terrain of challenges. In this context, these networks serve as the institutional and relational substrate through which indigenous knowledge is mobilised and enacted. Importantly, they facilitate forms of support and assistance that are truly international and transboundary in nature. Shortly before the fieldwork behind this chapter was undertaken, the World Bank's (2020: 12) Somali poverty and vulnerability assessment emphasised how global remittances were a critical

source of external development finance, and that, 'during 2015–2017, Somali diaspora sent home about an official $1.3 billion per year, but remittances may be significantly larger when considering unrecorded flows'. As I discuss further on, such remittances were a key element of crisis response in Qardho in 2020. Elsewhere, this phenomenon and its role in facilitating local level crisis management, has been characterised as a kind of 'vernacular humanitarianism' (Musa and Kleist 2022), working through expansive networks to facilitate swift, efficient and effective response.

By studying it from a situated context – Qardho – I trace its entanglements with local or indigenous knowledge, and the wider world of values and practices this knowledge shapes. In doing so, I highlight its place within a system of thought and action that is, unlike much of the aid and development world, fundamentally adaptive and capable of reconfiguring itself to work in new ways, efficiently, often at a moment's notice (for an exploration of the adaptive capacity of pastoralist indigenous knowledge, see Oba 2012). I argue that a key element facilitating this adaptability and fluidity is the horizontal or community-centred accountability that emerges from a fundamental sense of shared responsibility. This contrasts in important ways with the control-oriented risk framing that is so often embedded in mainstream approaches to social assistance, disaster response and humanitarian relief, spheres that tend to be profoundly shaped by bureaucratic and institutional dynamics that rest on upward accountability (see Caravani et al. 2022).

The primary disaster facing those who participated in my research in 2020 was severe flash flooding, which followed heavy rains and resulted in catastrophic loss of life, displacement and infrastructural damage. However, importantly, this flooding also occurred at a time when the local population was already experiencing multiple other forms and scales of crisis, from drought to locust invasions and COVID-19. The complicated, intersecting nature of this kind of crisis has led Levine et al. (2023) to frame it as 'wicked', that is, without a discernible trajectory or end point. Amidst such turbulence, it is never easy to make good predictions or to act in advance of forthcoming risk. This wickedness is not an inevitable consequence of pastoralism itself, but rather the cumulative effect of deeper systemic failures – of governance, conflict and institutional coordination – that continue to shape the region's risk environment (cf. Derbyshire et al. 2025). Against this backdrop, this chapter explores how people navigated and endured a time of great turbulence and instability not with a view to romanticising their work but rather with the aim of illuminating the ethical principles

and values of solidarity that animate collective life in hardship, and in order to consider what these reveal about the possibility of a more just and resilient future in Puntland.

Managing crisis in Qardho: pastoralism and Somalia's disaster ecosystem

Throughout the protracted turbulence of Somalia's recent history – marked by recurrent conflict, fragmented governance and overlapping humanitarian crises – pastoralism has remained a central axis of economic life, continuing to underpin domestic livelihoods and generate significant export revenues. This continuity is visible both in earlier analyses that highlighted the structural importance of pastoral production in Somalia (e.g. Handulle and Gay 1987) and in more recent studies that underscore its enduring role in the national and regional economy (e.g. Banerjee et al. 2021). It is important to emphasise that throughout such long-term turbulence and protracted war, pastoralism in Somalia has shown an enduring capacity for working, and often thriving, amidst profound uncertainty. Indeed, this is a characteristic of pastoral production that is much discussed elsewhere (for example, Krätli 2015), with strategic mobility, economic flexibility and dynamic, responsive resource use all enabling pastoralists to continually recalibrate their livelihoods in relation to shifting ecological, political, conflict and market dynamics. In Somalia, this characteristic orientation towards uncertainty has been central in allowing people to weather extreme and often unpredictable hardship. This is particularly evident when pastoralism is understood not as a monolithic, specialist reliance on domesticated livestock but rather as a universe of social and economic interaction oriented around herd animals yet open to functioning in new ways depending on shifting circumstances.

Broadly speaking, pastoralism's endurance amidst these conditions and indeed its growing economic contributions – its resilience – are testament to its generative openness. It is a livelihood system that exceeds reduction to 'backwardness', at least in Somalia, via a constant reconfiguration of social and economic possibilities. Recent work in other contexts has suggested that this resilience is fundamentally relational in nature (Semplici et al. 2024), working through processes and connections rather than individual or static traits. I build on these ideas with insights from Qardho, showing how pastoralism's 'relational resilience' in Puntland has come to be shaped by processes and connections that have

expanded across international borders, crisscrossing different economies and societies. In other words, I explore how a knowledge system rooted in particular geographical and ecological characteristics – a world of thought and action not only attuned to diverse environmental indicators such as shifts in wind patterns, cloud formations, animal behaviours and soil characteristics but also recursively entangled with oral traditions and collective memories of previous hazards – has increasingly unfolded across scales that extend well beyond any single place, while remaining deeply oriented towards and grounded in the local.

In doing so, I also expand on works that have unravelled the global complexity of Somali aspiration, entrepreneurship and kinship in other urban contexts, such as Neil Carrier's ethnography of Eastleigh, Nairobi (2016), which offers a powerful case study demonstrating how diasporic movements and informal trade structured around Somali moral economy practices have shaped new understandings of and pathways to prosperity and belonging. Where Carrier's work explores the international nature of ambition, and the role of personalised trust in shaping 'low-end globalisation', in this chapter I seek to understand the connections that link international networks with values, customs and knowledges that are rooted in place and history. In doing this, I seek to demonstrate how pastoralist knowledge in Qardho operates at the intersection of local immediacy and global networks of exchange, influence and insight. In drawing out implications from this, my research articulates with Levine's (2022) recent problematisation of the development world's focus on 'communities' (particularly in the context of 'resilience building'), which, he argues, often comes at the expense of an appreciation of the connections between different places, economic activities and social groupings that truly shape livelihoods in the drylands. In Qardho, such connections are forged via kinship ties that mediate the interpretation, experience and management of diverse forms of social, economic and ecological change. This is a situation that articulates closely with the one described by Ikanda (2018), in his exploration of the role of kinship in shaping aspiration among Somali refugee communities in northern Kenya. In both cases, kinship serves as the relational foundation through which local lives and experiences are tied into an expanding universe of possibility.

Nevertheless, my intention is not to romanticise pastoralist knowledge, or its deployment amidst complex crises. There are clearly numerous ways in which climate-related weather shifts across Africa's drylands have served to drastically undermine pastoralist livelihoods (see for example McPeak and Little 2017; Stites 2024). Somalia is no

exception, since the 1990s it has experienced multiple climate-related catastrophic events. Recurrent droughts and floods have impacted both water resources and grazing land, increasing the vulnerability of pastoralist communities. Looking ahead, climate projections suggest that these pressures will only intensify, with profound implications not only for pastoral production systems but also for the broader social, economic and political fabrics of Somali life. In the face of this future, vibrant, dynamic knowledge systems are not enough.

As I noted in the introduction, climate-related disasters (most prominently droughts but also occasionally floods) intersect with a wide range of other negative phenomena, including locust swarms, extended conflict, internal displacement and economic volatility. Layered and compounding risks threaten multiple scales of calamity, across both space and time. The entwined constrictions that ensue are exacerbated by weak formal institutions and a lack of government safety nets. The fact that people turn to various forms of clan- and kin-based social assistance to mitigate this should not straightforwardly be celebrated, nor should the site of both the underlying causes and long-term solutions to livelihood insecurity – governance, and the political domain – be ignored. Rather, we should seek to mine insights from the 'informal' ways in which crises are negotiated now, and the customs and social institutions that make this possible, for improving the more formal systems that might shape government and international responses in the future.

Indeed, since 2011, and in line with the Puntland Disaster Management Policy (PDMP), the Puntland State Government has sought to improve disaster preparedness and management throughout the region, focusing on strengthening institutions, developing laws and improving early warning systems, community awareness and education. Responsibility for disaster management largely falls to the Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management Agency (HADMA), a state level government institution, which works with line ministries and international partners to coordinate relief efforts, early warning dissemination and emergency responses. While these efforts represent an important attempt to institutionalise preparedness (itself a critical step in moving beyond delayed and reactive disaster response, see Derbyshire et al. 2024), they remain heavily donor-dependent and only weakly embedded in the social institutions that pastoralists themselves rely on. Moreover, and perhaps most significantly, there remains much progress to be made in instituting approaches that engage with disasters (and particularly the looming prospect of famine) as a set of processes rather than as discrete events. In emphasising this point, Fortnam and Hailey (2024: 2) have

recently argued that 'there is a need for more efficient and effective interventions that address the drivers and processes that make places vulnerable to famine rather than being reactive to unfolding crises'. In other words, crises need to be understood as complex, non-linear and emergent from multiple different entangled socio-economic and ecological processes. By extension, vulnerability, like resilience, must be envisaged and addressed as a relational phenomenon.

In light of these points, a richer understanding of local practices and knowledge in Puntland, and the ways in which these are shaped both by flexible adaptation and the values of shared responsibility and outward (not upward) accountability, is particularly significant. Recalibrating formal disaster governance to better account for these dynamics would not only enhance the legitimacy of disaster institutions but would also serve to better align governance with the ways in which resilience is actively produced in everyday pastoralist life. This would, in turn, perhaps open possibilities for more iterative, context-sensitive approaches in which policy and practice are responsive to both local knowledge and broader systemic dynamics.

As I set out in the conclusions, these points raise broader questions about how prosperity itself is imagined in Puntland and beyond. Disaster governance is not only about managing hazards but also about shaping the terms of the social contract between citizens and the state. If pastoralist knowledge and practices are taken seriously as adaptive frameworks enshrining accountability, flexibility and collective responsibility, then prosperity cannot simply be framed as a transition away from pastoralism but must be seen as something built with and through it. Important questions emerge as to the visions and assumptions guiding state-led planning and practice, and the possibility for their better facilitation of reciprocal relationships of care at the local level (Scoones 2023). These questions come at a particularly critical time, when digital technologies are opening up new opportunities, facilitating new linkages between local values and knowledge systems and wider political and economic contexts. In the following section, I briefly describe the fieldwork behind this chapter, before exploring key themes and implications of the research I undertook in Qardho.

The fieldwork

This chapter draws on research that was undertaken in Qardho during two discrete phases; an initial four-month-long field season undertaken

in 2020 followed by a month-long follow up field season undertaken in 2024. Both phases comprised research that was broadly ethnographic in nature, involving a mixture of one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions and situated observations. This fieldwork in Qardho was also supplemented and enriched by roughly two months of additional fieldwork with Somali communities in Lusaka, Zambia, which took place in 2023 and was focused on examining how diaspora businesswomen in Lusaka mobilised to raise and then deliver humanitarian assistance to flood affected communities back home in Qardho during the flooding of April 2020. This wider research is not directly discussed in this chapter but is nevertheless an important source of critical reflection and insights which are of direct relevance.

Initial interactions with the community in Qardho commenced in April 2020, during the flash flood disaster I described in the introduction. As the disaster passed, I undertook a sequence of progressive and comprehensive life history interviews focusing specifically on how the community made sense of crisis and how local forms of knowledge shaped disaster preparedness and response in the region. I undertook 34 in-depth life history interviews with a wide range of community members, including men, women and youth, I also undertook seven focus group discussions in mosques and with women's groups. To complement this grounded work, I also undertook eight interviews with key informants from relevant organisations, such as the Local Municipality, HADMA, the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management and the Minister of Women Development and Family Affairs (MOWDAFA) and the members of the 2020 disaster committee. All interviews took place in Somali and were later translated into English.

Of equal importance to these interviews and group discussions were the daily observations that contextualised and shaped my interpretations of them. I recorded these during the interviews themselves, but also at other times, during regular intervals throughout the fieldwork. These fieldnotes comprise detailed descriptions of practices and behaviours, daily routines and informal networks critical to lending, borrowing or sharing resources in crises.

They also comprise descriptions of the visible structures that are critical in Qardho for the work of various groups and social institutions, including village committees, elders' councils, religious leadership groups, women's groups, religious institutions, clan or kinship networks, traders and shopkeepers. Observing and describing how these social and material institutions interacted also meant coming to terms with how both were entangled with much broader international diaspora

networks. In the following section, I explore key insights from the fieldwork to unravel some of the dynamics shaping crisis management in Qardho and the social institutions and values that shape these. I then trace connections between different kinds of knowledge, skill and capability, drawing out implications for understandings of knowledge, the future and prosperity in Somalia.

Locally led crisis management: values, networks and institutions

According to Mohamed (2011: 227) 'traditional Somali society was fiercely republican'. An important feature of this historic republicanism was the way in which leadership was governed and shaped by a public system of rules based not only on kinship but also individual virtue and social contract (cf. Lewis 1961). One of the more critical and indeed widely discussed institutions within this long-standing and still immanent public system of rules is *Xeer*, a customary legal system rooted in oral agreements between clans and maintained through collective enforcement. In Qardho, as in many other contexts, *Xeer* represents a foundational framework of social order in contexts where formalised governance is limited. While it has also been widely critiqued – for instance, for reinforcing patriarchal authority (e.g. Peterson and Zaki 2023) – its continued vitality in crisis management rests on two core characteristics: its flexibility and its orientation towards the collective. It would be inaccurate to envisage these qualities merely as cultural ideals, for they are pragmatic principles that specifically structure justice, redistribution and responsibility in contexts of economic and ecological uncertainty. To put this another way, *Xeer* is representative of how resilience is generated by means of relationships (i.e. shared, publicly negotiated responsibilities and obligations) rather than fixed, static institutions.

In this sense it is perhaps unsurprising to note *Xeer*'s deep entanglements with pastoralism, and its vitality in shaping grazing rights, water access, livestock redistribution and conflict dynamics between clans both in the past and the present. In moments of crisis, the fact that *Xeer* is not codified in a rigid, written form, means it is capable of gaining traction by means of specific *situations*, enshrining a form of decision-making that is deliberative and based on shared responsibility rather than the kinds of imposed, unilateral or 'top-down' interventions that often result from state level or large institutional bureaucracies. As Opitz-Stapleton et al.

(2022) recently highlighted in their analysis of livelihoods and conflict in Somalia (including Puntland), *Xeer*'s importance during crises also stems from the systemic, interrelated nature of the issues at hand and the need for broad-based locally legitimate coordination that can shift in focus and scope depending on the horizon of risk and conflict.

Many research participants in Qardho in 2020 emphasised how *Xeer* serves as a vital mechanism during times of hardship, facilitating the redistribution of various resources (livestock, grain or financial support) to badly affected households. Its role underpinning deliberations that naturally crosscut different knowledge bases, principles, obligations, observations and forms of expertise make it a forum in which collective memory and wisdom (i.e. oral historical knowledge of past disasters) are brought into conversation with knowledge of immediate environmental and atmospheric indicators (i.e. the behaviour of birds and insects, pasture quality and so on) culminating in decisions that are both locally legitimate and often enacted via international clan-based collaborations and forms of resource and expertise mobilisation. While many specific institutions, terms and relationships were outlined as important in crisis management, all were widely understood to be enfolded in the foundation of legal, publicly mediated collective accountability provided by *Xeer*.

Deris wanaag

One example of how these principles become lived and enacted in everyday crisis response is found in the practice of *deris wanaag* (literally, 'good neighbourliness'). During the 2020 flash floods in Qardho, residents repeatedly described *deris wanaag* as a first line of support, activated well before the arrival of formal humanitarian assistance. Neighbours organised human chains to help people cross flooded streets, pooled food and money and established ad hoc communal kitchens. In this sense, *deris wanaag* exemplifies how the values embedded in *Xeer* are extended into the micro-scale of neighbourhood relations, where mutual aid and collective rebuilding are understood not as acts of charity but as moral obligations. What is significant here is not only the speed and efficacy of such responses but also their embeddedness in a wider moral economy of solidarity that ensures information, responsibilities and resources circulate horizontally before they move upward to external actors. Far from being residual or symbolic, such practices remain central to how communities in Qardho navigate overlapping crises, and they illustrate how the foundational logics of pastoralist social organisation are continually reworked in urban contexts.

A prominent example of *deris wanaag* in action was provided by a research participant who described its role in the context of livestock-based subsistence and its emergence from attuned, neighbourly observation:

> We used to see our neighbour's pregnant camel the past months. The other day we observed that she had given birth, but we did not see a baby camel with her. We went to inquire and found out that there were complications, and the baby camel had passed on. This is not good for the mother camel because of the milk. We therefore sent our small camels to our neighbour. So that they suckle the milk. (Interview in Qardho, 11 January 2024)

The kinds of locally led social assistance that emerged specifically in relation to flooding (and indeed were fresh in research participants' minds during my interviews with them) were, despite differing in scope and focus, guided by similar ethical principles and pragmatic considerations; they combined attentiveness to immediate material needs with a broader orientation towards collective well-being. In the example described above, neighbours monitored each other's herds, shared resources and coordinated care in ways that both mitigated risk and reinforced social cohesion. Their actions were relational and adaptive, but also firmly grounded in local knowledge, ethical obligations and lived experience rather than codified rules or formal hierarchies. The key point here is that community-driven responses to crisis operate through the same dynamic networks of observation, responsibility and reciprocity, linking practical problem-solving with the reproduction of social order and resilience.

This point, and the critical role of *deris wanaag* during the flooding disaster of 2020 more broadly, was vividly recalled to me in a deeply reflective interview in 2024, during which a woman who had experienced profound personal loss described her experience,

> I lost all my three children during the 2020 floods. The people around me pooled resources and came to keep me strong. They slept in my house, they cooked for me, they mobilised resources and funds. Some came from the settlement next to us, others from afar. When I needed help, they were there for me. (Interview in Qardho, 15 January 2024)

Her testimony is indicative of the entrenched social and ethical dimensions of crisis response and its transcendence of formally mandated

requirements or technical solutions. Such transcendence of the kinds of immediate foci of both humanitarian and development programmes is not unique to Qardho, indeed in a wide-ranging report that combines evidence from Somalia with evidence from multiple other African contexts, Wiggins et al. (2021) emphasise the similar fundamental yet often overlooked point that people tend to manage and survive conflicts through their own social networks. The practices that carry people through are driven by moral concerns, and this is why they endure indefinitely, finding new purchase and vitality as the landscape of crisis itself transforms.

Clan-based aid networks

The neighbourly practices exemplified by *deris wanaag* highlight some of the foundational ethical and relational principles that guide social assistance at a local scale, including shared responsibility, attentiveness to others' needs and collective mobilisation in the face of uncertainty. Yet these same principles are neither confined to individual settlements nor limited to immediate physical proximity. Rather, they operate within a larger, morally and ethically coherent universe in which obligations and solidarities are articulated across multiple scales, encompassing not only local neighbours but also extended kinship and clan networks that span regional and international contexts. In this sense, the moral order instantiated in small-scale neighbourly acts is continuous with, and constitutive of, wider forms of solidarity and mutual aid.

Indeed, a recurrent theme across participants' accounts of the 2020 floods was the decisive influence of clan and kinship ties in structuring access to assistance. Kinship obligations are understood as enduring and all-encompassing, obliging members to support one another irrespective of physical distance, a duty that becomes especially salient during crises. These structures include clan and sub-clan lineage organisation, *diya*-paying groups, obligations between extended family members, marriage alliances connecting groups and elder authority within lineage systems (*diya* is the Arabic term for a practice known as *mag* in Somali, comprising financial compensation paid to victims or victims' kin in cases of killings, bodily harm or property damage). Indeed, the Somali kinship system is a complex social structure with multiple levels of social groups that emphasise genealogical proximity and obligations between individuals. This is why Somali kinship networks enable the swift exchange of livestock, food, cash and labour in the event of droughts, floods or conflicts. Restocking of livestock, mutual loans among kin members and

remittances through kin networks assist in coping with the impacts of droughts and conflicts. These mechanisms are not humanitarian interventions, but rather social obligations based on clan systems (see Ikanda 2018; F. Abdi 2023).

Farhia Abdi (2023) explores how Somali clan leadership and clan identities shape social and political influence alongside formal government roles, especially as Somali families balance life in new countries and maintain ties to their heritage. She argues that the Somali clan system is a good example of relational leadership, as it focuses on shared decision-making, collective responsibility and social cohesion. Clan leaders are part of an informal system that is 'bottom-up' and focuses on consensus, tradition and mutual responsibility (F. Abdi 2023: 109). Meanwhile, Jamal Abdi (2023) examines how Somali societies, without any leadership or government structures, manage to cooperate on a large scale. He emphasises the concept of 'strong reciprocity', which he frames as an innate human desire to deliver mutual assistance and to reciprocate against those who have done wrong.

Kin-based support manifests in multiple forms, from remittances and informal credit to the exchange of knowledge and practical guidance on adaptive livelihood strategies. A central mechanism for such coordination is *qaraan*, a structured system of mutual aid through which every clan member (whether residing locally or in the diaspora) contributes regularly to a collective pool of resources. While *qaraan* is deeply rooted in specific place-based histories, it has increasingly functioned at an international scale, enabling resources and assistance to flow across borders in response to emerging risks.

Following the flash floods of 2020, these clan-based networks mobilised rapidly, establishing disaster councils, coordinating through mosques and pooling material and financial resources among community members. These grassroots mechanisms often outpaced formal humanitarian channels, delivering aid more swiftly and effectively in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. The efficacy of these networks highlights how solidarity-driven action, embedded within informal governance structures and a moral economy, operates as a dynamic, relational system in which collective responsibility, ethical norms and localised knowledge of risk all converge to produce timely and contextually appropriate responses. As one elder poetically explained, 'kinship is a currency as valuable as any cash transfer'.

The accounts of other research participants underscored how these networks are not simply abstract structures of obligation that are

passively inherited but rather constantly enacted, lived relationships that stubbornly entangle neighbours, kin and diaspora together. During an interview one morning in 2020 with elders under an acacia tree in downtown Qardho, an elder explained this in plain language,

> As neighbours we have to help each other. We are not only *daris* [neighbours] but also *xidid* [kin] so we know what is going on within the sub-clans. We use WhatsApp groups to stay connected and to communicate regardless of our locations. This is how we stay connected to kin who are far away. (Interview in Qardho, 17 January 2020)

Their description makes the interweaving of neighbourliness and kinship explicit, with digital platforms envisaged as extending the reach of long-standing obligations across space. In this sense, what might often appear, from the outside, to be ad hoc or 'informal' assistance is in fact structured by a very deeply rooted and resilient moral economy that binds those close by with those far away, activating support in moments of distress. This sense of resilience was further emphasised in a focus group discussion on 9 January 2020 in Qardho's livestock market, where an elder framed community resilience in terms far broader than material assets or external assistance: 'You have been asking us a lot of questions about peace and prosperity. It is impossible to measure our peace and prosperity in terms of wealth only, but in relationships, obligations and honour.' The moral orientation captured in this reflection – one anchored in *Xeer*, enacted through *deris wanaag* and greatly amplified and enhanced via clan-based mobilisation – is what allowed local responses to operate with speed, legitimacy and reach in ways external actors rarely achieve during the flooding of 2020.

It is worth re-emphasising here that clan affiliation in Somali culture is a moral system as much as it is an organisational structure. It enshrines obligations to assist kin, responsibilities for protection and support, rules on justice and compensation and expectations on solidarity (see F. Abdi 2023; J. Abdi 2023). Members of a *diya*-paying clan, for example, share a responsibility for compensation in cases where they are harmed, or in some cases wealthier clan members have a moral obligation to support poorer clan members. While the sharing of information and knowledge is often emphasised in disaster response literature (and for an in-depth exploration of the potential role of weather and climate information in pastoralist contexts, see Luseno et al. 2003), its framing purely as a technical solution to enable better

preparation in advance of impending shocks often misses important socio-economic dynamics at play. This perhaps serves to unnecessarily restrict thinking and planning around new approaches to investment and support that might be better suited to the pastoral drylands (see Derbyshire et al. 2025). In Qardho, participants' accounts stressed that the value of information sharing lay less in the unidirectional transmission of expert forecasts than in the weaving together of multiple knowledges, perspectives and skills into a common frame of deliberation. I described earlier how *Xeer*, the socio-legal foundation on which information-sharing practices are established, serves as a forum through which different forms of expertise (ecological observation, historical memory, spiritual guidance, practical skills, etc.) are brought together into conversation to inform collective decisions. Within this context, the value of information is not straightforwardly in its reception or immediate utility but also in its social production and negotiation by means of different relationships.

Communication technologies serve to amplify and extend these relational practices of information sharing. Mobile phones (particularly via WhatsApp and basic SMS) were central in Qardho to local coordination during the 2020 floods, enabling rapid circulation of alerts, the organisation of rescue efforts and the targeting of assistance to households most directly affected. Elders, religious leaders and youth volunteers took responsibility for sharing real-time updates on the floods' trajectory, road blockages and safe gathering points. These digital exchanges were complemented by broader networks of support, as social media platforms such as Facebook linked communities in Qardho with their diasporic kin, who were able to channel remittances swiftly through mobile money services. Even the modest but reliable use of solar-powered charging systems was noted as essential, ensuring continuity of communication when conventional infrastructure faltered.

These dynamics perhaps contrast with the observations set out in Jilo's chapter in this volume, in which he discusses how, during the same period in southern Ethiopia, social media became a contested battleground for competing narratives of prosperity and everyday suffering. In Qardho, digital platforms were described less as arenas of contestation than as pragmatic extensions of pre-existing moral obligations and systems of collective accountability. Rather than mediating rival visions, WhatsApp and Facebook functioned as a kind of connective tissue, binding neighbours, kin and diaspora into a communicative web through which both material resources and vital information flowed. Alongside

these technologies, radio continued to play a critical role, again, not simply as a one-way channel of externally derived information but as part of a wider communication ecology that entangled local conversations to broader regional and international currents.

The significance of these dynamics was discussed at length during a focus group discussion, at which an elder drew on a well-known Somali saying:

> There's a Somali saying that says *dhegta ayaa ka da' weyn isha* [the ear is older than the eye]. Through oral tradition people learn about other people and places we'll never see. While in the womb, babies hear the outside world before we ever lay eyes on it. So hearing is older than the eye. We hear things first. In this community sharing of information and passing it on to others orally is a daily happening. This is our local knowledge of prediction.

His reflection, which situated contemporary information-sharing practices within a long-standing cultural emphasis on oral transmission, was echoed by another participant, who recalled his own experience during the floods and emphasised the practical implications of communication technologies:

> Some of us live far away from the flood area. But we were warned by others to vacate the waterways and seek higher ground. These messages reached us via WhatsApp audio notes. So, we heard via our ears before we saw anything with our eyes. Later we followed the impact of the floods via WhatsApp images and videos. But we heard before we saw.

Perhaps the key point here is that the pragmatic utility of mobile phones and digital tools, and the functions these have amidst wider practices of information sharing, cannot straightforwardly be disentangled from pre-existing, and indeed long-standing, knowledge systems rooted in place and livelihood and the wider values shaping these. In other words, novel technological capabilities serve to extend relational practices of information, resource and responsibility sharing, expanding ties of mutual obligation across new scales. In the following section, I develop this point further, exploring some of the ways in which new forms of information sharing and international diaspora 'vernacular

humanitarianism' are part and parcel of what might reasonably be termed local indigenous knowledge.

A wealth of knowledge: prosperity in sharing

Recognising the indeterminate nature of the boundaries between knowledge, skill, values and habitual orientations, and indeed between different scales, temporalities and geographies, means understanding pastoralist indigenous knowledge in terms that contradict many of the assumptions underlying formal disaster response (i.e. that it is a static reservoir of techniques and mechanisms that might be leveraged or integrated). A similar point is made by Iyer and Longoli in their contribution to this volume, which unravels 'vernacular resilience'– a term they use in the context of pastoralism in northern Uganda to characterise the relational orientation to the world that allows Karamojong people to navigate complex, uncertain socio-economic and political transformations and to re-establish long-term continuities in the process. 'Vernacular humanitarianism' might be understood as a similar processual phenomenon, characterisable not in any particular rigid format or set of organisational principles but rather in the ways it emerges from flexible social institutions and relational ethics that tie individuals, families, communities and wider populations together in bonds of obligation (cf. Ingold 2000, 2011).

To put this another way, locally led crisis management in Qardho is not fully discernible as something facilitated by any particular set of knowledge, per se (weather individual or collective) but rather by how knowledge works and by the web of obligation through which it takes shape. As I set out in the introduction, while this 'way of working' is by its nature complex and multifaceted, it is nevertheless broadly centred on three different kinds of sharing – the sharing of information, responsibility and resources. The key point is that these forms of sharing shape the practices, observations and monitoring exercises that drive pastoralism as much as they do those that structure international business and aid networks. Kinship-based relationships enable multiple different kinds of mobility in Puntland, they are also key to herd splitting, household resource redistribution and milk and livestock sharing. Decisions to migrate are often prompted by knowledge shared through telephone calls or WhatsApp messages (reports that it has rained in a distant valley can set whole families in motion). They are also made in relation to

collective and iterative forms of monitoring. One research participant explained this as follows,

> We explain and show how birds tend to stop flying and take refuge in shelters if a storm is coming up. Here in this area, this happens a lot but only an observant person can notice. So, when birds fly low to avoid the discomfort of the falling air pressure or when birds fly inland, we can expect a storm. Also, when cocks roost in the daytime, it can mean it will rain. I share this knowledge and skills with my children and grandchildren at home and with the youth at the mosque. (Interview in Qardho, 22 January 2024)

Such observations are not confined to the household, they are shared in multiple different public contexts, producing what might be understood as a distributed system of collective intelligence, deeply embedded in everyday life. As climate change renders floods more frequent and causes temperatures to rise, these practices remain adaptive, dynamic and open-ended, continually responding to shifting conditions. Digital communication technologies amplify rather than displace them, with WhatsApp, Facebook and mobile money services serving to facilitate the circulation of information and resources across vaster distances than was previously possible. For many, hearing information through an audio note or phone call is the first line of awareness. One participant explained this to me in 2024, when recalling the 2020 floods,

> Some of us live far away from the flood area. But we were warned by others to vacate the waterways and seek higher ground. These messages reached us via WhatsApp audio notes. So, we heard via our ears before we saw anything with our eyes. Later we followed the impact of the floods via WhatsApp images and videos. But we heard before we saw. (Interview in Qardho, 19 January 2024)

In its scope and character, the knowledge system that underlies crisis management in Qardho is thus profoundly fluid. It is both locally led and internationally dispersed, place based and geographically indeterminate, historically rooted and improvisatory. However, it is not so fluid as to defy any kind of characterisation whatsoever. Its establishment on different kinds of sharing enshrined via deep rooted social institutions and kin relationships renders it culturally distinct. Its emergence from a distinctly pastoralist history, and a commensurate set of ecological familiarities (including in terms of mobility, collective resource management

and redistributive practices) renders it comparable to a wider universe of knowledge common to pastoralist peoples.

Conclusions

Looking to the future, this study harbours a number of important implications. To the world of formal disaster management, early warning and anticipatory action, it emphasises the inefficiencies of upward accountability and linear, mechanistic approaches to complex crises (which are described in detail by Ramalingam 2013). The residents of Qardho's response to disaster emerged not through hierarchy or top-down directives, but through a sense of shared responsibility, trust and accountability to one's neighbours and kin. This is precisely why it was efficient and economical. The aid system, in its disembodied rationality, functions in a fundamentally dissimilar way, often becoming locked into predefined structures that preclude improvisation amidst fast-changing scenarios. In the years ahead, nationally and internationally led disaster response must seek to enable rather than override local logics and strategies of coordination. For this to be possible, such responses must be learning-oriented and reflexive, and attuned to the human practices, principles and strategies that shape disaster management on the ground.

As part of this, there is a need for indigenous knowledge to be framed and engaged with in less restrictive ways. Qardho's approach to disaster management emerges less from a distinct pool of knowledge, than from a particular approach to harnessing, sharing and applying knowledge across diverse scales. This in itself perhaps constitutes a form of knowledge, but not one that might be 'integrated' into planning and practice for it is embedded in social relations, practices and values in the same way Nadasdy describes knowledge in Yukon Territory, Canada (Nadasdy 1999). Nadasdy's critique of approaches to the integration of 'traditional ecological knowledge' – the way these approaches tend to translate complex, relational practices into 'data' and strip them of their social and moral dimensions – remains pertinent more than two decades after its emergence. The question of why this is the case is addressed by other contributors to this volume, including Derbyshire and Hassan in their chapter on drought in northern Kenya. In Somalia, the task now is to create disaster management systems that do not simply seek to include or integrate the knowledges of citizens and communities but rather let these knowledges take a leading role.

In this chapter, I have characterised Qardho's disaster management practices as contingent on three interlinked forms of sharing: the sharing of information, of responsibility and of resources. I have also emphasised that the institutions that make this possible are themselves a form of wealth – a moral and social framework that enables people to navigate serious challenges in the absence of sustained state support, much as financial reserves or insurance systems are designed to buffer risk in more formal economies. Yet beyond the immediacy of crisis, this orientation gestures towards the future. It reveals solidarities and a collaborative fellowship that transcend not only particular disasters or places but also wider currents of social, economic and political change. In the same way that the women described in Wangari-Muneri and Mohamed's chapter in this volume re-establish a collective ethic of care amidst shifting economic contexts, Qardho's residents, many of them pastoralists or their descendants, extend a distinctive ethic of prosperity into the world. This is not a rejection of capitalism or enterprise but a reframing of what constitutes value and an insistence that prosperity lies as much in relations of trust, reciprocity and shared obligation as in material accumulation.

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4

Prosperity in decline: moral and political ecologies of pastoral adaptation in Guji and Borana, Ethiopia

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Introduction: challenging crisis narratives

For decades, development discourse painted African pastoralists as agents of environmental crisis: irrational herders whose drive to accumulate livestock supposedly led to overgrazing, desertification and ruin (Jarvis 1991; Locher 2016; Fensholt et al. 2017). In this view, the prosperity of pastoralists, something perhaps most straightforwardly measured with reference to the size of herds, was inherently at odds with ecological health. Such crisis-oriented narratives justified policies of sedentarisation, herd destocking and conversion of rangelands to other uses. It is only in the last 40 years or so that research across the drylands has thoroughly debunked these myths, showing that pastoral systems are highly adaptive and productive when allowed to function under their own logics (Behnke and Scoones 1992). Mobility, flexibility and indigenous management institutions enable pastoralists to make sustainable use of variability in arid ecosystems, rather than destroy them.

Nevertheless, the legacies of old narratives remain active within mainstream development discourses and corresponding policies. Pastoral systems continue to be deeply misunderstood, with misplaced assumptions dominating decision-making contexts (Odhiambo 2014). In other words, the stereotype of the destructive, backward nomad still lingers in many policies and interventions (e.g. World Bank 2003). Engaging these ideas

ethnographically, this chapter examines how they have materialised in the lived realities of pastoralists in Ethiopia's Guji and Borana zones – areas that have experienced substantial environmental degradation over recent history. Drawing on insights from fieldwork in Ethiopia and wider engagements with stakeholders, policymakers and researchers, I unravel a locally rooted historical narrative that frames pastoralists in Guji and Borana not as the culprits of environmental decline but rather as the victims of a very different kind of crisis. The prosperity of these communities, most accurately defined, I argue, not in economic terms alone but also in terms of herd health, social well-being and ecological relations, is undermined by structural forces beyond their control.

The chapter traces how development and environmental change have intersected to reshape pastoral life in southern Ethiopia, with attention to the moral, historical and ecological dimensions through which these transformations are understood locally. It examines how Guji and Borana pastoralists interpret the degradation of their environments not simply as an ecological problem but as a moral and spiritual one linked to the disruption of social balance, customary institutions and relations between people, land and livestock. Through these narratives, the chapter reveals how external forms of infrastructural and economic development have unsettled the moral ecologies that once underpinned pastoral prosperity, and how people now make sense of decline, loss and possibility within this altered landscape.

Throughout my analysis I draw on fieldwork conducted in Oromia's Guji and Borana Zones (Adola Woyu/Negelle and selected *kebeles* – Ethiopia's lowest local administrative unit) between November 2023 and July 2024. The material I explore is derived from six focus-group discussions (elders, women and youth), each convened with between eight and twelve participants, and twenty-four semi-structured interviews with pastoralists, customary leaders and local officials. Conversations were held in Afaan Oromo; consent was verbal per community norms, with anonymity offered. Notes were thematically coded and triangulated with secondary sources (policy documents, climate datasets and prior scholarship). Some access constraints, particularly in periods of insecurity and seasonality of movement, no doubt limit the representativeness of this evidence in the sense that the findings reflect communities accessible during field visits and may under-represent more remote herders during peak mobility. The claims made in this chapter should therefore be read as analytic rather than statistical generalisations.

Socio-environmental change in southern Ethiopia's rangelands

The Guji and Borana Zones lie in Ethiopia's Oromia Region, encompassing semi-arid rangelands long inhabited by Borana and Guji Oromo pastoralists, among others. These rangelands were historically managed through robust indigenous institutions such as the Gadaa age-grade system and councils of elders, with practices that regulated grazing rotation, water use and conflict resolution (see Oba 2013). Seasonal mobility (moving herds to track rainfall and pasture) is central to this system, ensuring that no area is overused and that livestock can survive droughts by accessing distant reserves. In fact, the Borana pastoral system was once lauded as a model of sustainable resource use in East Africa (Cossins and Upton 1987).

Over the past few decades, however, people in Guji and Borana have witnessed dramatic environmental changes. Grass cover has radically reduced in many areas, invasive bush and thorny shrubs have spread, water sources have become less reliable and fertile grazing lands have been diminished (Feyisa et al. 2023). Many contemporary pastoralists describe this as a period of degeneration and loss, which is a stark decline from the landscapes their parents knew. Crucially, this decline has unfolded amidst, and by means of, major political and economic shifts (Feyisa et al. 2023).

Bush encroachment and corollary rangeland degradation have been among the most visible changes to the environment, with the invasion of woody plants into what were once open grasslands bringing a wide range of complex negative outcomes (see, for comparison, Derbyshire et al. 2023). Bush encroachment in the Borana rangelands, often by unpalatable acacia species, has transformed grazing areas into scrub thickets. According to local pastoralists and researchers, a chief cause of this trend was the government's ban on traditional bushland burning (Fenetahun et al. 2021). For centuries, Borana herders periodically set fire to pastures at the end of the dry season to suppress invasive shrubs and rejuvenate grasses. In the late twentieth century, however, authorities outlawed fire as a 'backward' practice (Yassin 2019). The enforcement of a national ban on bush fires resulted in increased bush encroachment and a reduction in the availability of good pasture, with woody species taking over and out-competing grasses. Recurrent droughts and changing climate have only exacerbated this process, as weakened grass cover struggles to recover and woody plants, ironically, prove more drought tolerant.

It is worth noting here that, from the perspective of global climate policy, the spread of woody vegetation in drylands can appear superficially beneficial, since shrubs and trees store above-ground carbon and may therefore contribute to climate-change mitigation (Pellegrini et al. 2016). Yet in regions such as Guji and Borana, pastoralists experience this same process very differently. What matters here is not simply carbon stocks in woody biomass, but the quality and accessibility of herbaceous forage, the maintenance of open grazing routes and water points and the viability of mobility-based livestock production systems. Local herders repeatedly explained during focus group discussions and interviews that dense bush cover 'chokes' the land, narrowing paths, harbouring ticks and predators and replacing nutritious perennial grasses with thorny species that most cattle will not eat. These observations are echoed by studies showing that bush encroachment in the Borana rangelands reduces grass biomass and undermines livestock productivity (Yassin 2019).

On top of this, traditional resource management has been weakened through projects and interventions that undermine indigenous institutions and practices. Borana and Guji pastoralists historically employed a system of rangeland management that included deferred grazing, setting aside reserve pastures for dry seasons, herd diversification and social rules to prevent overuse of key sites. Over time, some of these practices have been curtailed and constrained. To a large extent, this has taken place either through the sidelining of traditional authority structures or through the introduction of rules and arrangements that conflict with those enshrined in customary institutions (flexible and dynamic as these are). Banning fires, for example, as I set out above, removed a key tool of range management. Likewise, the promotion of sedentary farming and the establishment of private enclosures in previously communal land has comprised a substantial challenge to the institutions, norms and practices that shape the communal governance of resources. To a large extent, these processes reflect what Li (2007) describes as a technocratic 'will to improve' – a development ethos that seeks to optimise and standardise social and environmental systems according to externally defined criteria, thereby disregarding local knowledge systems and institutions.

Land use change and a general diminishment and reduction of the commons have caused a profound shift, with farming and settlements expanding into prime rangelands. In parts of Guji Zone, fertile valley bottoms and seasonal wetlands that previously served as vital dry-season grazing reserves have been converted into crop fields or taken up by

private ranches and villages (Boru 2021). Similarly, along new roads and around towns, land that used to be open to herders is now fenced for cultivation or construction. This encroachment on the commons has effectively shrunk the grazing territory available to pastoralists. During my fieldwork, older community members (i.e. those with long-term experience of ecological and economic change) often expressed a view of farms and towns as entities that swallow or engulf critical pasturelands. I hasten to add here that the problem is not farming per se – many pastoral households in the area farm opportunistically. The core challenge is rather the unmitigated, permanent and unilateral appropriation of communal land, often without proper consultation or compensation. Indeed, this is a process that has also culminated in, and perhaps even normalised, other kinds of private enclosure, including the clearing of bush for private dwellings. These changes, which are by no means unique to southern Ethiopia (e.g. Flintan et al. 2021), fracture the landscape into a mosaic of holdings, undermining the open-range system on which mobile pastoralism depends.

Compounding these interconnected processes, the region has seen a significant rise in inter-community conflicts that directly affect land and resource access. During the last 30 years, Ethiopia has reorganised its internal boundaries along ethnic lines, creating new regions and zones. The Borana and Guji, who are both ethnically Oromo, now occupy adjacent administrative zones. Border disputes have arisen over which group 'owns' various areas of pasture or water points. Such disputes are not completely novel but were nevertheless far less acute when customary grazing arrangements prevailed. In fact, McPeak and Little (2018: 119–32) note that 'disputes around administrative borders trump all other determinants of conflict' in the area. I return to this subject in the following section, but it is important to note here how it has led some pastures to become contested or dangerous to use (i.e. if they lie on the wrong side of a given border). For example, if a dry-season grazing area falls just inside the boundary of a neighbouring ethnic region or a different clan's jurisdiction, herders might be blocked or attacked if they attempt to use it. Such conflicts have periodically flared between the Borana and neighbouring groups such as Guji, Gabra and Somali communities, often sparked by competition over grazing or water in boundary zones (IIED 2010). The proliferation of modern firearms since the late 1970s, notably after the Ogaden War, and years of regional insurgencies have made these clashes more lethal (Peluso 1993; IIED 2010; Derbyshire 2020). The net effect is a constriction of mobility, fear of violence or simply the existence of a border can prevent pastoralists

from moving freely along traditional routes. McPeak and Little (2018) point out that the most mobile, livestock-dependent households tend to experience the highest incidence of conflict and the greatest frustration with how disputes are resolved. In other words, those who try to maintain a nomadic lifestyle are the very people most negatively impacted by new borders and conflicts. This accentuates how political geography has curtailed the flexibility that once sustained pastoral prosperity.

During my fieldwork, respondents from both Guji and Borana often described a sense of political marginalisation, a sentiment that is also captured by other research undertaken in the area (e.g. Hagmann and Mulugeta 2008). Indeed, it is well documented that pastoral regions in Ethiopia have historically received less investment in infrastructure, education and services and that government policies have tended to favour commercial agriculture, mining or conservation projects on pastoral land (as explored by Jilo in his contribution to this volume). Even in places where grazing lands endure, this broader context has created a sense of tenure insecurity and anxious anticipation. Guye et al. (2023) link this insecurity with diminished capacity for future planning. In instances where a grazing area might feasibly be enclosed or re-zoned, it is difficult to invest in its long-term care. In other words, the processes of preparing for, shaping and actively bringing a desired future into being through acts of environmental care are undermined by the constant threat of dislocation.

Framing and exacerbating these diverse and entangled forms of strife, the intensification of drought cycles has put further pressure on the environment. The Horn of Africa has always been climatically variable, but many herders I interviewed in southern Ethiopia observed that droughts now come more frequently and endure for longer periods of time than has historically been the case. Such observations align with those of pastoralists across a wide range of contexts in the broader area (for example Watson et al. 2016). The region recently endured an unprecedented sequence of failed rainy seasons (2020–3), which devastated herds and which is discussed by all contributors to this part of the volume from different perspectives and contexts. In Borana Zone alone, several million livestock perished over the course of three drought years (UNFCCC 2023). Droughts of this magnitude trigger cascading crises; pastures wither, watering holes dry up and livestock become emaciated or die, which in turn plunges pastoral households into hunger and debt. People cope by slaughtering or selling whatever animals remain, often at throwaway prices, by cutting trees to make charcoal for income or by migrating to towns in search of relief food. These emergency coping

strategies, while necessary, often accelerate environmental decline. In this sense, climate shocks become intertwined with and exacerbate other drivers. Needless to say, a drought such as the one experienced between 2020 and 2023 is far more devastating when back-up grazing areas have been lost to farms or conflict, when bush encroachment has reduced forage and when political neglect means insufficient preparation or relief.

Taken together, these diverse factors form a web of socio-ecological change that defies simplistic causal explanations. During a focus-group discussion I convened with elders in 2023, one participant framed this complex entanglement of problems in frank and clearsighted terms, explaining to me that, 'Our land is sick, not because we abandoned our way, but because we are prevented from following it.' His point, echoed across multiple other conversations and observations, was that environmental decline, and associated drought-related crises, are much more than the outcome of increased climatic variability. They emerge from a historical interplay of conflict, political restructuring, economic pressures and ecological stressors, which have all recursively driven and exacerbated each other. Landscapes that once sustained viable and prosperous pastoralist livelihoods are constrained or degraded, this is a material change caused not by the immediate decisions and actions of pastoralists but by the social and institutional forces that shape these actions, thereby structuring how people can and cannot engage with these landscapes.

Territorial reordering and the restriction of pastoralist movement

Following the above exploration of environmental decline and resource-based conflict, in this section I examine in more detail how historical territorial reordering and changing administrative boundaries have constrained pastoral mobility and access to critical landscapes. A critical theme within this subject area is the boundary politics that have arisen from the rigidification of borders, including, among others, the international Ethiopia–Kenya border. What I mean by this is that a process of hardening territorial limits has clashed in multiple ways with the fluid spatial strategies of pastoralists. Borana communities historically ranged freely across the Ethiopia–Kenya border, their wet- and dry-season grazing areas occupying either side. The rigidification of the national border has served to disrupt this dynamic of mobility, constraining movements and necessitating new forms of circumvention and evasion.

I noted above how, even within Ethiopia, the carving of new administrative units has led to contested borders between groups that previously shared resources more flexibly. In 2002 the creation of Guji Zone, which was split off from Borana Zone, fuelled serious tensions, causing each subgroup to vie more fiercely for prime grazing areas along the newly demarcated boundary. This example perhaps connects with wider critiques of the ways in which the formalisation of land tenure can negatively reshape contexts where ambiguous, continually negotiated arrangements once prevailed, a theme of profound importance across many drylands contexts where pastoralists are navigating rising threats to land access (Robinson and Flintan 2022).

Beyond strife associated with the rigidification of boundaries, a more general increase in ethnic-based conflict in southern Ethiopia has also constrained movement. Borana communities have historically been entangled in conflicts with Somali clans to their east, over both grazing land and water, and with certain Oromo neighbours. In periods of heightened tension, particularly during times of political turmoil at the national level, these conflicts often worsen, causing pastoral mobility to grind to a halt altogether. Herders avoid border zones or stay close to home areas for fear of raids. In recent years, parts of the Guji and West Guji zones have also experienced violence linked to insurgencies and counter-insurgency operations unrelated to pastoral resource use but affecting general security. Such insecurity makes long-distance migration risky. It also disrupts markets in the sense that if roads are unsafe, selling animals or buying fodder becomes difficult. All these dynamics work to force pastoralists into a more sedentary and concentrated pattern, undermining the flexible movement and rotational grazing that large herds require to thrive across variable and unpredictable landscapes.

Borana and Guji environmental ethics: *safuu*, blessings and prosperity

In exploring and documenting understandings of the interweaving issues that have shaped environmental decline in southern Ethiopia, I often encountered a broader framing in which these processes were situated within local ethical understandings of socio-ecological relations. Amidst both interviews and focus group discussions, it became clear to me that to many pastoralists from both Guji and Borana communities, environmental change and the wider upheavals of recent history are often framed within a moral and spiritual context. I should note here that

both groups share an Oromo cultural heritage and, with it, a tradition of environmental ethics situated within a long-standing cosmology. Central to this tradition is the concept of *safuu*: a moral code that defines proper relations between humans, the natural world and God (Alamayo 2021). *Safuu* and related Oromo institutions form what we might term a moral ecology: a fluid, historically shaped system of norms and practices that governs human–environment relations, rather than a static set of rules. During a focus group with Borana elders in Nagele in November 2023, for instance, participants described *safuu* as 'the line that holds people, cows and the land together', emphasising that to violate this order is to invite misfortune on the entire community. Understanding *safuu* in such terms is key to grasping how local pastoralists perceive prosperity, the failures that have prevented its realisation and the current crisis of decline.

The outline that follows is therefore not only a synthesis of existing scholarship on Oromo moral thought but also an interpretation of how Guji and Borana interlocutors articulated these ideas in the course of six focus-group discussions and twenty-four semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2023 and July 2024. In these conversations, elders, women and younger herders repeatedly framed environmental decline, drought and livelihood disruption through the language of *safuu*, blessing (*eebba*) and the loss of balance between people, land, livestock and *Waaqaa* (God). Such framings resonate with wider Oromo discussions of *safuu* as a moral law that structures relations between humans, non-human beings and the divine (e.g. Sibu Oromo accounts in Fufaa 2018).

While interpretations vary across regions, lineages and historical contexts, a recurring orientation in Oromo thought is towards understanding creation as a relational and interdependent whole, animated by *Waaqaa*, the Creator. *Waaqaa* is conceived not simply as a distant deity but as a sustaining presence whose order – expressed in *seera Waaqaa*, or 'God's law' – shapes ethical, social and ecological life. In this orientation, humans are not separate from nature but enmeshed within it, existing in kinship with animals, plants and the land. Many communities articulate this relationship through metaphors such as 'mother Earth' (with the Creator as father), highlighting reciprocal obligations and care rather than domination. *Safuu* is central to these interactions as an ethical and relational principle that guides conduct, ensuring respect and proper engagement among all beings. As one elder explained during a focus group, *safuu* governs how people live 'in relation to the community, to Waaqaa and to all that is created'. Actions are evaluated according to whether they uphold or disrupt this balance, emphasising a worldview

in which morality, ecology and sociality are inseparable and mutually constitutive in a similar way to forms of socio-ecological and moral entanglement that prevail in northern Kenya, as described by Derbyshire and Hassan in their contribution to this volume.

A key implication of *safuu* is a normative orientation towards environmental care. Because nature is understood as Waaqaa's creation entrusted to humans, harm to the environment is experienced as a moral transgression. This ethic is embedded in everyday practices and customs. In a focus-group discussion with Guji women near Adola Woyu in October 2023, for example, participants explained that 'a tree where people pray cannot be cut; if you cut it, you injure the community'. They described how, when a large tree must be felled for construction, elders still perform a brief ritual asking forgiveness and promising not to 'waste' the wood. Similar taboos surround the pollution of springs and ponds, which are said to 'carry blessing' for both humans and animals. More broadly, practices that support ecological stewardship are woven into daily life. Forests near prayer sites, for example, were historically preserved as homes for spiritual guardians, wildlife was hunted selectively according to cultural norms and pastures were rotated not merely for practical reasons but in accordance with *safuu*. Even today, and as I experienced during my fieldwork, elders recite prayers at the onset of the rains, asking *Waaqaa* to bless the grass and vowing not to 'anger the grass' – a phrase signalling overuse and reflecting an ethic of reciprocity and care that links human action, ecological vitality and spiritual accountability.

Within this moral and ethical framework, it was explained to me that calamities were historically interpreted through the lens of relational responsibility. In a mixed-gender focus-group discussion in Adola Woyu in November 2024, participants insisted that drought 'does not just come from the sky [. . .] [but] follows people when they no longer respect the rules'. Natural misfortunes – droughts, livestock diseases or other disruptions – were, in this sense, not understood as purely random events but as indicators that harmony with *Waaqaa* and the wider community of beings had been disturbed. Responses from this focus group and others combined practical management with ritual and moral reflection. Communities sought to identify transgressions and perform purification rites to restore *nagaa*, a state encompassing alignment with God's favour. Certain serious violations such as murder, incest or flagrant disrespect for elders or the natural world were understood to have repercussions for the entire community's fortune. Rituals played a crucial role in both social and spiritual reconciliation. Among the Borana, the

gumii gaayo ('assembly of the multitudes') functioned not only as a governance forum but also as a space to restore communal harmony with *Waaqaa*. In the Guji context, ceremonies such as *dhibaayyuu*, a form of thanksgiving, involved prayers for rain, fertility, peace and abundance, intertwined with the recognition that ethical human conduct sustained these blessings. In this way, misfortune and ritual were deeply entwined with ongoing social and ecological responsibilities to the extent that morality and environmental stewardship were inseparable.

My aim in describing this system of thought and practice is not to present it as a static repository of beliefs but rather as a historically and socially enacted framework through which people continue to engage, act and negotiate relationships. It is through ongoing interaction with these principles that communities actively recreate them, using them to mediate conversations between generations and to shape historical recollection. In turn, these processes of recollection and practice constitute a lens through which contemporary social meaning is understood and negotiated, linking past and present in ways that are both relational and morally grounded. Rather than lying immanent, this system exists in the dynamic interplay between memory, action and ethical engagement across society and ecology. Indeed, the enduring vitality of these values is evident in a number of ways. For instance, common Oromo greetings ask *Ati nagaa? Maatiin nagaa? Horiin nagaa? Ollaan nagaa?* ('Do you have peace? Does your family have peace? Do the cattle have peace? Does your neighbour have peace?'). The absence of peace – whether expressed through interpersonal conflict, environmental disruption or perceived disfavour from *Waaqaa* – is experienced not merely as hardship, but as a diminution of a form of prosperity that is fundamentally relational. Prosperity, in this sense, is inseparable from the well-being of social, ecological and spiritual relationships; it is constituted through the ongoing maintenance of balance between humans, the land, livestock and the divine. Loss in any of these domains is therefore understood as a loss of blessing, a disruption in the network of care, obligation and ethical reciprocity that sustains collective flourishing.

I hasten to emphasise that, in the context of Guji and Borana pastoralists today, this moral framework manifests in complex, often contested ways. The important point is that it frames interpretations of drastic environmental changes. Many community members, particularly elders, see the degradation of land and the hardships befalling their herds in ethical terms rooted in *safuu*. This interpretation emerged consistently across field sites. In three separate elders' discussions held in Wadara, Adola and Negelle, participants linked the 'weakening' of *safuu* to the spread

of bush, the loss of communal pastures and the growing frequency of droughts, arguing that 'when people no longer care for each other and the land, the blessing leaves'. Younger herders and women often expressed similar concerns, though they more frequently emphasised the role of government policy, land grabbing and armed conflict in 'breaking' the moral order on which prosperity once rested.

The problem is often framed as a question of human behaviour. Questions I often heard during my fieldwork, which were prompted by the discussions and historical recollections I actively sought out, included, what has changed in our society that the grass no longer grows as it used to? Have we as a people strayed from the path of justice (*karaa haqaa*)? Some attributed blame internally, pointing to the erosion of cultural practices or the younger generation's lack of respect for elders and customs, thereby weakening *safuu*. Others pointed to external actors such as the government or foreign companies, highlighting the negative outcomes of land grabbing and top-down rules that worked to violate the moral order. In either case, the critical implication of this framing was that prosperity has a moral dimension. It is not just about the number of cattle one has, contrary to the old caricatures of pastoralists that linger in policy circles; it is about living a good life in the eyes of God and community (Wolf 1966).

Paying attention to this moral framing reshapes our understanding of recent processes of environmental decline. Mainstream development perspectives, shaped by the legacy of negative narratives about pastoralism as destructive, irrational or greed-driven, are countered by an explanation of degradation as the result of disruptions in moral and social relations. In this view, the decline of prosperity is tied to the curtailment of the kind of just and balanced world that healthy social relations would sustain. Many Borana communities responded to the devastating drought of 2020–3 not only by seeking external aid and petitioning the government but also by engaging in traditional prayer ceremonies. In one such public prayer meeting, it was recalled to me how elders implored, '*Waaqaa*, forgive us if we erred; have mercy and bring the rains.' Participants in this ceremony then slaughtered an animal in a ritual meant to cleanse communal sins. Such acts demonstrate the widely held perception that solutions to ecological crisis are as much social and spiritual as they are technical.

This analysis frames contemporary interpretations of environmental decline in terms of competing notions of balance. What I mean by this is that historical views of pastoralism, such as pre-1980s ideas of 'equilibrial' rangelands, portrayed pastoral systems as stable

and livelihoods as unchanging, framing socio-ecological variability as disruption and mismanagement. While such models have been largely overturned by ecological research, elements of the wider constellation of narratives with which they were entangled persist in policy and practice today, shaping interventions and perceptions of pastoral life (Odhiambo 2014). The evidence I have presented from Borana and Guji communities describes a different kind of balance and a different kind of disruption and mismanagement. Interpretations of recent historical change among contemporary communities in southern Ethiopia frame it as a process of socio-ecological fragmentation driven not by overgrazing or unsustainable livelihood practices but by policies, interventions and broader socio-political transformations that have consistently taken for granted a view of ecology and society as discrete, balanced domains rather than as aspects of an integrated relational universe of care. The implication is a sense of epistemic injustice and of a moral universe partially obscured by external imaginaries and technocratic rationalisations. As I have noted throughout, this is not to suggest that Guji and Borana ethical frameworks constitute a fixed or monolithic system. The moral imagination in both communities is unsettled, contested and responsive to broader horizons of change, including the proliferation of both Christianity and Islam. Rather, I would suggest what emerges from this fieldwork is a counter-narrative grounded in historically rooted discussions of a socio-spiritual engagement with place, which carries political and interpretive weight in terms of what it says about what might have been and, indeed, what might yet be.

Conclusion: towards moral ecologies of future making

In this chapter, I have explored a recent history of socio-economic and political change that has proliferated environmental decline in southern Ethiopia. In doing this, I have set out local conceptions of the factors shaping this process of decline, characterising it as an outcome of forms of infrastructural and economic development that have undermined pastoralist livelihood dynamics. In exploring a moral and spiritual framing of this process, determinable in ongoing conversations, discussions and narrations in Guji and Borana communities, I have contrasted the way it is implicitly interpreted via external logics and understandings with how it is seen and experienced from the perspectives of those whose livelihoods have transformed by means of it. In doing so, I have set out a locally grounded counter-narrative that asks new questions about both the past and the future.

A central implication that emerges from this analysis concerns the role of local historical narratives and practices of history-making. Much of what I have described in this chapter – people's accounts of decline, moral transgression and lost balance – points not simply to the documentation of the past but also to a living process through which history is continually reinterpreted and made socially consequential. Future research focused on the contemporary narration and discussion of history in southern Ethiopia, and how it comes to interact with shifting contemporary circumstances and socio-material landscapes, would offer further explanation as to how this takes place and how it has changed. Suffice to say here that the narratives I have set out do not merely recall what has been lost; in contemporary practice, they actively structure how people understand what could, or should, have been. In this sense, the moral imagination at work in Guji and Borana accounts of environmental decline is also an imaginative project of world making.

In their introduction, the editors of this volume note recent anthropological writing that has focused on values and the good (e.g. Robbins et al. 2023). This is work, they emphasise, that reminds us how aspiration and moral striving are always situated within particular historical and cultural worlds. The narratives of decline I have explored in this chapter reveal how aspiration in these communities is inflected through a historical consciousness that dwells on interrupted trajectories – futures that were foreclosed or diverted by political and economic transformation. To narrate decline, in this sense, is also to gesture towards unrealised possibilities and towards a wider horizon of the good that might yet be restored, or perhaps reconfigured. In other words, far from being merely nostalgic, these retellings provide a moral and imaginative vocabulary through which alternative futures can be envisioned. They constitute a space of reflection and critique, or an imaginative realm, for asking what prosperity means and what it ought to mean, in a world where dominant models of progress have failed to deliver it.

A key question remains what all of this says about the moral and ethical grounds through which socio-ecological life is organised. As I have been at pains to emphasise throughout this chapter, to speak of a 'moral ecology' in the context of southern Ethiopia is not to suggest the presence of a static moral order, or a fixed set of rules or prescriptions guiding collective life. Rather, what my engagements with Guji and Borana interlocutors imply is a sense of moral ecology as processual and historically situated, and constituted through the interaction of people, land, livestock and institutions that have evolved to regulate collective resource use and mutual obligation. As in diverse other pastoralist

contexts, these latter institutions have never been rigid or mechanistic (e.g. Wachira et al. 2026), they are rather fluid, adaptive and relational, shaping how pastoralists negotiate livelihood, belonging and responsibility over time.

In his work *Europe and the People without History*, Eric Wolf (1982) sets out a vision in which transformations in modes of production are never merely economic but rather – and particularly through violent disruption, where relations that once mediated power and value are severed – can result in an unravelling of both the ecological and the moral order. I have not dwelt here on the agentive negotiations through which such ruptures are lived, reworked and reimagined in southern Ethiopia, though these are surely present. My concern has been with the vision of the past that animates such negotiations: a moral and historical imaginary that situates the present crisis within a longer story of loss and dislocation, and that gives substance to the imaginative labour of thinking about what might have been. In this respect, the study resonates with Peluso's (1992, 1993) ideas about the reconfiguration of moral boundaries through state intervention and the ways in which struggles over resource control can simultaneously comprise struggles over meaning. In southern Ethiopia, the reconfiguration of pastoralist landscapes through policy and development has likewise redrawn the moral contours of livelihood, reclassifying certain practices as backward or destructive, while elevating others as modern and productive. Yet what is distinctive here is that this reworking of moral ecologies is not only about the contestation of legitimacy in the present but also about the moral imagination of loss and possibility. The moral universe invoked in the contemporary narratives of decline I came to hear is, I would argue, simultaneously a critique of the past and a mode of future making. That is to say, it is a way of reasserting value and meaning amidst uncertainty, and of envisioning alternative horizons of prosperity and care.

In recent years, much important scholarship and advocacy have called for the construction of new narratives about pastoralism, which might counter long-standing portrayals of drylands populations as backward, unproductive or ecologically destructive (portrayals I have referenced throughout this chapter). These efforts have been crucial in reshaping dominant imaginaries, yet in the face of an enduringly modernising development apparatus in southern Ethiopia, one finds oneself asking whether such generalised, globally portable narratives are sufficient on their own. Indeed, there is perhaps a need to attend instead to other forms of narrative, which arise from within particular histories, landscapes and moral worlds, and which turn back to past processes of change to reconfigure

their meaning. These locally grounded stories of loss and possibility do more than contest external misrepresentation, for they provide concrete moral and historical grounds for envisioning and advocating alternative futures. In practical terms, they lend ethical force and legitimacy to calls for context-specific interventions such as securing pastoral land tenure, formalising transboundary grazing corridors or reinstating controlled burning and other indigenous management practices.

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Part II
Commerce

Crises, as the preceding chapters have shown, are never simply external intrusions. They are lived and made sense of by means of particular histories, practices and forms of relationality. In this sense, they do not merely strike at human populations from the outside but become occasions for negotiation, for the renewal of values and for the reworking of life itself. The same is true of wider currents of economic and material change. Like the diffuse and affective forces of climate and ecology, such transformations do not unfold on their own terms. They are interpreted, contested and remade in relation to existing habits, ideals and skills, and to newly emerging ambitions and desires. Change does not simply flow into pastoral economies from elsewhere, it is fashioned and given substance by those who move, trade and work within them.

The drylands are often approached through a linear, control-oriented vision of development that imagines a 'return to normal' in the face of intractable shocks, or a stable end state as the basis of prosperity understood purely in terms of economic growth. This perspective frames markets, technologies and growth as forces that arrive to disrupt or replace what came before. Such interpretations are sustained by a persistent misunderstanding of the historical dynamics of the economic practices that precede recent forces of change and by notions of passivity and unproductiveness that have long been affixed to rural Africa and its past. Looking beyond this unnuanced binary, markets and marketing practices emerge not as ruptures, but as vital sites of social reproduction and negotiation. They are spaces through which continuity is sustained by means of transformation, where people make and remake their worlds in motion.

The chapters in this part draw on evidence from northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia, tracing pastoralist markets and marketing practices across diverse contexts and scales. They show how older economic imaginaries, forged during colonial rule, continue to shape contemporary understandings of prosperity. Colonial governments, blind to the dynamism and complexity of pastoralist economic systems, treated them as 'unintegrateable', orienting wider developing economies toward settler export markets. Post-independence development inherited the legacies of this approach, perpetuating assumptions about what kinds of markets and economic activity count as legitimate. Nevertheless, within this context, pastoralists have continued to engage in creative and agentive economic work, shaping new opportunities, carving out livelihoods, sustaining social networks and pursuing broader forms of social transformation. Across the cases explored, prosperity emerges as something that is continually negotiated and reimagined, with pastoralist women and women's groups playing crucial roles in generating new possibilities and steering economic, social and communal life towards self-determined futures.

5

Negotiating prosperity: pastoralist livestock marketing in northern Kenya

Guyo Roba

The study of pastoral livestock marketing in East Africa has been dominated in recent years by two closely linked themes. The first is the marketing behaviour of pastoralists, and particularly the factors that determine their participation in livestock markets; the second is the persistently low and unresponsive rates of animal sales – or 'offtake' – even in the face of drought shocks and associated herd mortality (for an overview see Barret and Luseno 2004). The persistence of these two themes, and concerns with the interplay between them, has been a defining feature of both scholarly and practical engagement with livestock marketing since the 1990s. Amidst the recent push to create climate-resilient economies in drought-prone regions of Africa, low market participation by pastoralists has been widely perceived as an important challenge (e.g. Yitayew et al. 2023). This perceived challenge connects with the bigger question of whether pastoral systems can sustain or generate forms of prosperity within a largely subsistence economy, especially in the recurrent context of drought. That is to say, without 'profit-oriented commercial business', the viability of pastoral production in the long run is questioned (Yitayew et al. 2023: 1428).

Such concerns, while often oriented towards the immediate crisis of climate change, reflect deeply entrenched ideas that first surfaced many years ago, amidst early research on pastoral livestock keeping practices in Africa (e.g. Herskovits 1926). They articulate a pervasive narrative, with its origins in colonial perceptions of nomadic, livestock-based economies, that pastoralists are not market oriented due to a

'cattle complex', which compels them to hold on to animals for cultural value and to irrationally eschew market-based revenues. Combining with wider negative framings, such as 'the tragedy of the commons' (Hardin 1968), this narrative has had far-reaching harmful consequences over the years, often leading to totalising forms of development oriented towards 'market modernisation', which ignore or override established pastoralist marketing practices.

The point that such narratives have had substantive impacts on both policy and practice has been made from multiple perspectives (for an overview in the context of Kenya see Odhiambo 2014). Much research on drylands pastoralism over the last few decades has been concerned with demonstrating their fallacy and providing evidence-based counter-narratives that might engender better approaches to drylands development. For example, Boles et al. (2019) use historical ecological and archaeological methods to demonstrate the complexity of long-term human–environment interactions in eastern African pastoralist contexts, and the misguidedness of simplistic narratives of 'overgrazing'. Meanwhile, Catley et al. (2013) critically assess the tropes and stereotypes commonly applied to pastoralists in the media, and the ways in which preoccupations with crisis, failure, drought and conflict work to overshadow pastoralist led innovations and successes – the locally grounded aspirations that shape perspectives on and approaches to the future. As the editors note in their introduction, one of the most impactful and far-reaching counter-narratives in recent years has emerged through the framing of pastoralism in relation to uncertainty, and wide-ranging discussions of the ways in which pastoralists work with uncertainty in creative, dynamic ways (e.g. Scoones 2023).

In relation to the specifics of livestock marketing, research has focused on demonstrating how pastoralists are, contrary to enduring ideas, increasingly involved in markets. Research from multiple contexts across the Greater Horn of Africa and West Africa has explored pastoralist involvements in long-distance, regional and globalised trade. This includes the trekking and trucking of animals over long distances (Van Ufford and Zaal 2004), but also the sale of livestock at local markets to 'external traders' who move animals to terminal markets which are hundreds of kilometres away, often in different towns (e.g. Kerven 1992; Barrett et al. 1998; Barrett et al. 2006; McPeak and Little 2006; Mahmoud 2008; Roba et al. 2017). Recent research exploring pastoralist livestock marketing in Sudan (prior to the outbreak of war) describes complex, dynamic marketing chains crisscrossing expansive geographies and culminating in an export trade that, though largely informal, is estimated

to be worth more than US $400 million a year (Humphrey et al. 2021). Bollig et al.'s (2013) edited volume on the past, present and future of pastoralism in Africa makes a detailed and compelling case that such dynamic engagements with markets are not a new phenomenon but rather part and parcel of how pastoralism has functioned over millennia.

Many East African pastoralist regions remain geographically remote from terminal markets and meat consumers. Vast distances and often unstable political dynamics mean that pastoralist trade is sustained through social networks that often take shape through commonly held values, and wider 'moral economies' (see Mohamed and Nori 2024). My previous research in northern Kenya has emphasised the social and economic complexity of livestock marketing practices, tracing the finely branched small ruminants supply chain that proliferates livestock through different primary, secondary, regional and terminal markets (Roba et al. 2017). Understanding, and engaging with, this complexity – the social networks that sustain pastoralist livestock marketing and the complex roles played by different actors across informal supply chains – is crucial for determining policies and investments that work with existing systemic dynamics, rather than against them. Indeed, I would suggest that it is a failure to comprehend this complexity that has shaped many generations of flawed interventions and marketing investments, including infrastructure built in inopportune or inaccessible locations, and approaches to market development that have focused on formalising, and thus rigidifying, dynamic, informal, open-ended practices.

Drawing on existing research and presenting new data from northern Kenya, this chapter takes a broad view of pastoralist engagements in livestock markets over the course of recent years. It explores the growth of rural livestock markets and the flows of livestock sold through selected markets over recent decades to provide a picture of growing pastoralist participation in primary, secondary and terminal markets. This is a growing engagement that correlates with growing demand for meat in urban areas. The sheer volume of annual livestock transactions highlights not only the economic scale of pastoral trade but also its potential contribution to local and national prosperity. Yet this contribution is often under-recognised in official statistics, where livestock's share of national or agricultural GDP is routinely underestimated. Such under-quotation has, in turn, served to justify low public investment in pastoral production and marketing across much of the Horn of Africa.

A key implication of this analysis is that, rather than viewing informal pastoralist marketing systems as obstacles to modernisation,

they can be understood as pathways to prosperity in their own right. These systems are sustained by networks of trust, reciprocity and reputation that ensure both economic exchange and social continuity across vast and uncertain environments. Far from being vestiges of a pre-modern economy, they embody adaptive and resilient forms of economic organisation that warrant investment and support on their own terms. Indeed, pastoralist markets are not merely mechanisms for profit-making but extensions of a moral and social vision in which prosperity is shared, relational and tied to collective well-being rather than purely individual accumulation. Economic growth in pastoral areas, which is already visible in the expansion of regional livestock trade, is thus emerging through practices grounded in obligation, responsibility and care. Recognising this is a challenge to conventional policy framings, which often equate progress with formalisation or market integration.

The chapter begins by looking at the attributes and dynamics of livestock trade in pastoral areas of Kenya, drawing on the existing literature, past interviews and market data on livestock trade in Marsabit and Isiolo Counties (from 2014 and 2019). The next section moves on to consider the role of social networks in sustaining pastoral livestock trade, both in short and long-distance chains, describing how social and ethnic based networks remain vital in the near complete absence of commercial or contract-based purchases and sales. The chapter concludes with a brief reflection on the character of the pastoral livestock market and its response to market dynamics, tapping into social networks in absence of government systems for livestock commercialisation. The chapter challenges the notion that pastoralists engage passively in livestock marketing, showing instead how local traders and their networks have sustained trade through social ties and collective effort, even in the absence of state support or investment.

Pastoralist livestock markets

As I noted above, livestock marketing in eastern Africa has attracted considerable academic attention, particularly from the 1990s onwards (see Kerven 1992; Ensminger 1996; Barrett et al. 1998; Bailey et al. 1999; Barrett et al. 2006; McPeak and Little 2006; Barrett and Reardon 2007; Mahmoud 2008; Rich et al. 2011; Iruata et al. 2015). Much of this work has emphasised market embeddedness in social relations, approaching these institutions much as Banerjee et al. do in their contribution to this volume, as active places shaped by and entangled

with diverse social relations, engagements and norms. Building on this framing, livestock marketing has been shown to be complex and adaptive, rather than disorganised and irrational, and participation has been linked to risk management, reciprocity and social obligation as much as to price incentives. A critical theme in much of this literature has also been the role of distortions in official statistics (i.e. undercounting livestock contributions) in justifying both low investment and approaches to development premised on 'modernisation' and formalisation. This section extends these insights by situating contemporary pastoral marketing practices within their longer historical trajectory. It traces how present-day systems of trust, reciprocity and exchange have evolved amidst, and often in spite of, structural exclusions and regulatory legacies that date back to the colonial era.

The place of livestock at the heart of complex value systems that structure everyday life and aspiration in pastoralist contexts led, from the outset of colonial conquest, to a fundamental clash with the cash-oriented and extractive rationalities of colonial economies. In Kenya, development began as a project structured around cash crops and livestock herds managed as assets rather than as living stores of diverse value, social wealth or moral substance, as they were within pastoralist worlds. By independence, this project was formalised in the now infamous sessional paper no. 10, from 1965, on African socialism and its application to planning in Kenya. This paper, which was a critical linchpin in post-independence development policy, effectively reproduced pre-existing colonial geographies of value, categorising Kenya into 'low potential' and 'high potential' areas. Echoing colonial views that pastoralism was an uneconomic system, that would deliver low returns on investment, this paper set the course for a postcolonial process of anti-pastoralist nation building.

An interesting point here is that Kenyan pastoralist groups produced a great deal of livestock and livestock products even during the early colonial period, despite livestock marketing and production incentives being tailored to the needs of European settlers (Kerven 1992; Waller 2004). In this sense, the colonial neglect of pastoral markets foreshadowed the postcolonial development paradigms embodied in sessional paper no. 10, which similarly misread the economic and social logic of pastoral production. The settler-centred 'white highlands' constituted the political and economic core of the nation. As per the colonial mission of the early twentieth century, the government shaped regulations and governance directives to bar African herds from integrating with the market, instead promoting dairy and beef production for European

settlers. The belief that African livestock production was backward and uneconomic, though widely held, was also always wrapped up in a wider concern among settlers to protect their own commercial interests by securing privileged access to land, veterinary services and market infrastructure. The narrative of pastoral inefficiency, then, was inseparable from a broader political project of control and exclusion, raising important questions about why post-independence development agendas never broke from these inherited logics.

State regulation and incentives were established in the mid-1930s to favour development of a settler-led export market (Anderson 2010). The colonial state brokered with the Liebig company to develop meat processing in Kenya with a sustained campaign to cull African-owned 'scrub stock', while coupling the advancement of settler production. These measures were both premised on, and served to reinforce, the notion of uneconomic indigenous African production, a process that bears a strong resemblance to the more recent mutually reinforcing dynamics between crisis and anti-pastoralist development in southern Ethiopia described by Jilo in this volume. An important outcome, from the perspective of pastoralists, was the state's unwillingness to give Africans a fair price for their stock.

Nevertheless, throughout Kenya's post-independence era, and despite enduring undervaluation, policy neglect and exclusion, livestock production and market participation among pastoralists have expanded dramatically. This growth reflects not only the vitality of pastoralist social networks and cultural institutions that enshrine trust and reciprocity across space and time but also the capacity of pastoralism in general to adapt to and work with the constraints and hardships that stem from ill-suited policies. Indeed, this latter point is emphasised by Dabasso et al. (2018) in their recent review of government policies and programmes on pastoral livestock marketing in Kenya. Data compiled by the IGAD Centre for Pastoral Areas and Livestock Development (ICPALD) from across the Horn of Africa serves to further affirm the scale of pastoralists economic productivity and their centrality to regional livestock supply chains (see Table 5.1). That such productivity has flourished largely in spite of, rather than because of, formal policy support raises important questions about the forms of value and knowledge that development recognises, and about what kinds of economic futures might emerge were these systems engaged on their own terms.

Table 5.1 Livestock population within IGAD countries, mostly reflective of pastoralist holdings. Data compiled from IGAD Member States, 2024.

Country	Camel	Cattle	Sheep	Goats	Total
Djibouti	70,902	300,871	470,014	518,966	1,360,753
Eritrea	400,646	2,140,811	2,462,123	1,897,173	6,900,753
Ethiopia	8,145,790	70,291,767	42,914,865	52,463,535	173,815,957
Kenya	2,971,111	17,467,774	17,127,606	27,740,153	65,306,644
Somalia	7,496,636	4,535,919	10,241,518	11,178,929	33,453,002
South Sudan	-	13,646,686	14,563,459	16,444,483	44,654,628
Sudan	4,960,849	32,318,770	41,332,641	32,598,924	111,211,184
Uganda	12,418	14,477,878	4,363,756	17,358,355	36,212,407
Total	**24,058,352**	**155,180,476**	**133,475,982**	**160,200,518**	**472,915,328**

Insights from Korr, Illaut and Merille: understanding livestock marketing in Marsabit South

This wider regional trend of expanding pastoral market participation across the Horn of Africa has been accompanied by the multiplication of local markets within pastoral areas, a development that provides the broader context for my own research in Marsabit, northern Kenya. To explore some of these wider trends in more contextually specific and granular detail, and paint a picture of some of the ways in which regional economic change has been driven by local innovation, this section draws on evidence collected in three markets in Marsabit South (see Figures 5.1a, 5.1b and 5.1c), a small geographical area largely dominated by Rendille and Samburu herders. This evidence is derived from research undertaken between 2014 and 2016, which comprised a mixed methods programme of market observation, regular quantitative surveys at key markets and wider qualitative data collection, including focus-group discussions, narrative interviews and other in-depth interviews.

Analysis of longitudinal data demonstrates the volume of livestock transacted by pastoralists at these markets. In that period, Merille market, which sits on the north–south highway connecting Marsabit and Isiolo county, transacted 64,014 heads of sheep and goats. Similarly, Korr and Illaut registered steady growth in their monthly and annual sheep and goat sales.

A closer look at monthly sales data for sheep and goats across the selected markets reveals a picture of economic vitality. Merille market alone records an estimated 5,300 animals traded each month, amounting to an annual turnover of roughly US $4 million at current exchange rates. Combined transactions in nearby smaller markets add a further US $1.3 million. Taken together, these figures point to an annual trade value that exceeds US $5 million circulating through just three local markets. The significance of these numbers lies in what they reveal about the dynamism of pastoral economies.

A notable trend, discernible in wider data, is the ways in which pastoralists have adapted and innovated around livestock marketing practices, embracing marketing innovations from other communities and regions by introducing organised livestock sales on either a weekly or fortnightly basis. This introduction of scheduled livestock sales has increased both the market participation of local pastoralists and the volume of livestock processed at the local markets. During a focus-group discussion I convened in May 2019, it was pointed out that predictable schedules allow producers and consumers to coordinate sales and purchases, reducing transaction costs and enabling traders from outside the region to plan their routes and meet procurement targets more efficiently (see Table 5.2 for the schedules of different markets in Marsabit and Isiolo). For pastoralists, scheduled sales provide multiple reliable selling points and greater choice of markets, strengthening their bargaining position. In effect, these localised innovations have helped knit together long- and short-chain markets, enhancing the regularity, connectivity and scale of trade across this dryland region.

An additional trend captured in the research is the emergence of new local actors in pastoral markets. Traditionally, activities at pastoral livestock markets have been sustained by a diverse mix of market actors, including local traders (pastoralists themselves), external traders, brokers, transporters, butchers, meat distributors and diverse labourers. However, it became clear during many interviews and focus-group discussions among market participants that recent years have seen the widespread emergence of new livestock marketing groups, predominantly formed and managed by pastoralist women, though also often including youth and men. This new development is widely understood to have led to an uptick in market participation among pastoralists, particularly in local markets. In Marsabit South alone, there are estimated to be over a hundred distinct livestock marketing groups, with women members dominating most of these.

While the participation of women in markets is remembered far back into the mid- to late 1990s, the emergence of distinct livestock

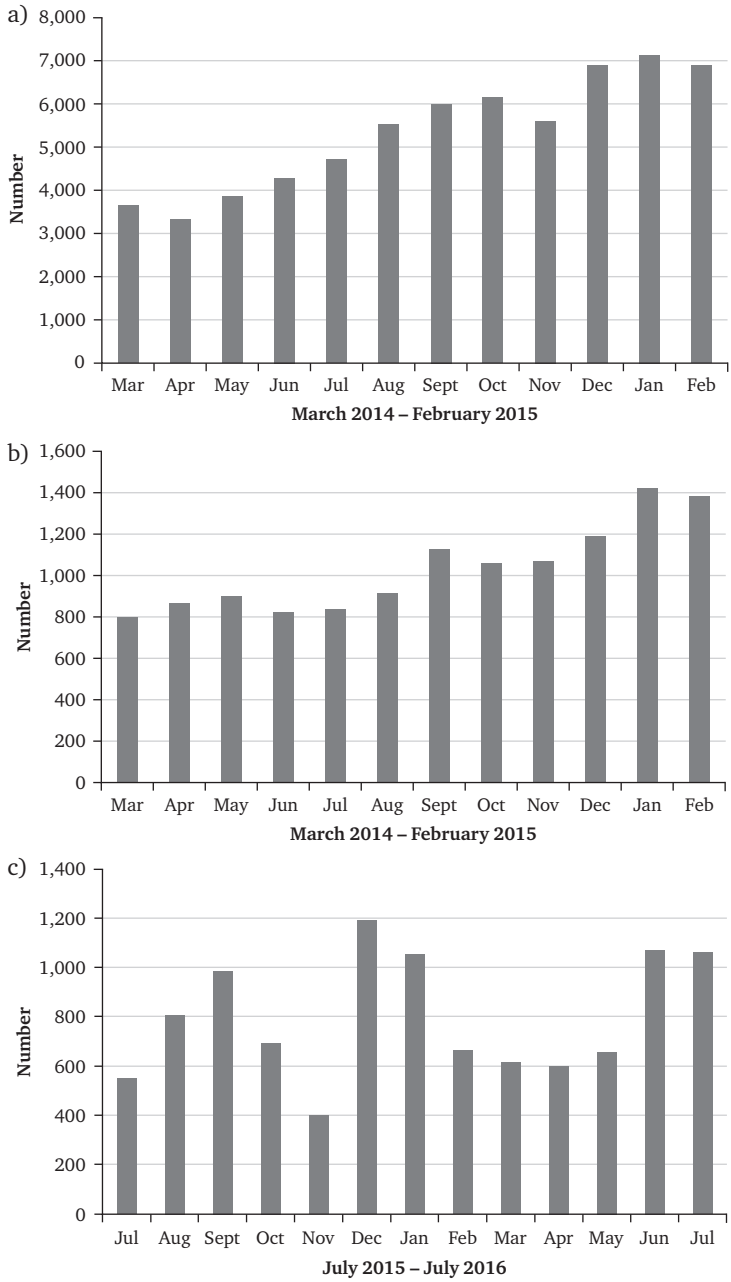


Figure 5.1 Graphs showing sales of sheep and goats at Merille (a), Illaut (b) and Korr (c), compiled by FH Kenya, Marsabit field office.

Table 5.2 Examples of market days for selected Isiolo and Marsabit south markets.

County	Market	Weekly market schedule
Isiolo	Oldonyiro	Tuesday
	Ngarendare Daraja	Wednesday
	Merille	Tuesday
	Kipsing	Friday
	Merti	Tuesday and Saturday
	Duse	Tuesday
	Eskot	Saturday
Marsabit (south)	Merille	Tuesday
	Illaut	Every other Tuesday
	Korr	Saturday

marketing groups in the last two decades has enabled poorer households to organise their sales collectively and thus strengthen their bargaining position with livestock buyers. For these households, such marketing groups provide a convenient group selling arrangement, through which a herder with only a small number of goats to sell is able to achieve a reasonable price. The arrangement also enables the pooling of sheep and goats together from diverse homesteads, and their collective movement to distant markets. Such group coordinated marketing offers better bargaining power and lowers the transaction costs for individual pastoralists, often boosting powers in engaging with markets. I observed it regularly throughout my fieldwork, including among sheep and goat women traders in Merille market (which is predominantly managed by Rendille/Ariaal pastoralists) and women traders in Isiolo central market.

Understanding this growing participation of women in livestock markets requires us to consider a number of different factors. Deliberate support to women by a variety of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) has clearly played an important role, and this was widely reported to be the case during my research, however it was also clear that such support was by no means envisaged to be the only driver of change. Many interviewees emphasised the minimal capital outlay required to enter the sheep and goat trade and the fact that women's groups provided people with a critical means of pooling resources, enabling them to engage in

livestock trading. In other words, the formation of women's livestock marketing groups was often framed as a local innovation that allowed people to seize new opportunities, rather than an initiative introduced from outside. It was also noted that women preferred the convenience of trading closer to their homesteads. Access to markets through group pooling reduces the need for long and laborious travel, which would otherwise keep them away from home for extended periods. Long-distance livestock trading demands prolonged absences and is therefore less accessible to women, who often balance their trading activities with household responsibilities and other daily obligations.

Significantly, many also noted the fact that increases in the number of women traders in sheep and goat markets has led to broader reconfigurations in the dynamics of local marketing. Men, in many contexts, have come to play a larger role in the cattle and camel trade in response to this rise in women's involvement. Multiple interviewees saw this as representing a broadening of participation in livestock markets through a redistribution of marketing roles, reflecting an overall expansion rather than displacement.

More widely, improved connectivity through tarmacked roads and better security was also emphasised as a critical enabling factor enabling locally led livestock marketing. Previous studies have emphasised the roles that poor road conditions and long, arduous journeys across insecure and difficult terrains play in increasing the transport costs, diminishing animal body condition and weight and lowering the market values of livestock. It has also been shown that better road networks reduce per capita trucking costs (for an overview of these points, see Pavanello 2010). Although, again, it is important to see such infrastructural improvements not simply as external drivers of change but rather as opportunities that pastoralists have rapidly and strategically capitalised on to expand and diversify their market engagement.

During a focus-group discussion with pastoralists in March 2019, participants spoke in detail about the benefits of new transportation infrastructure, particularly the south–north highway connecting Kenya and Ethiopia. They explained how improved road quality and transport services had sharply reduced travel times and costs along the Kenya–Ethiopia livestock corridor, making regular trading more viable and profitable. Previously, long travel times not only inflated operating costs but also caused weight loss and reduced sale prices for animals arriving at the market. With better connectivity, pastoralists have gained a new competitive edge within the regional livestock economy, as expanding road networks have attracted buyers from towns such as Meru, Nairobi, Nyeri and Karatina. These infrastructural changes

have thus come to be entangled with a wider reconfiguration of trade relations, through which pastoralists have been able to reach higher-value markets, negotiate better prices and strengthen their role within regional livestock trade systems. A key example is the establishment of the south–north highway in Marsabit, and associated increased mobile phone network investments, which have not only enabled better connectivity between Kenya and Ethiopia but also led to the development of strategic markets like Merille, Sere Olipi and Archers Post. Many respondents I interviewed during my fieldwork described different ways in which they had capitalised on these infrastructural changes.

The fact that these shifts have been co-opted proactively and capitalised on to seize new opportunities is also evidenced by the growth in small businesses and entrepreneurial activity oriented towards the new roads. Interviewees noted how a greatly increased number of trucks ferrying goods to Marsabit and beyond provided additional transportation options both to Nairobi and to other markets. The availability of such trucks has made competition between service providers stiffer and improved transport cost competitiveness for livestock traders. Improved roads have also eliminated frequent incidents of banditry and road insecurity which has boosted livestock trade. Meanwhile, improved market management and stronger governance (particularly through locally formed Livestock Market Associations) and more effective dispute resolution have revitalised several markets in Isiolo, Samburu and Marsabit. By creating a more reliable and transparent trading environment, these measures have attracted external traders and improved livestock prices, which in turn has encouraged greater pastoralist participation and strengthened overall market activity. During my fieldwork, I documented such improvements in market management and strengthening of governance arrangements in many pastoralist-dominated markets, including Illaut, Korr, Merille, Arapal and Jirime.

Another important shift has been the expansion in mobile phone activity, which has been actively woven into the fabric of pastoral marketing systems by herders and traders. A range of interviews with pastoralists and long-distance traders painted a picture of how new capacities for instant connection across vast distances have been incorporated into a long-standing dynamic of adaptation. Mobile phone communication has been used to extend and intensify pre-existing networks, expanding the bounds of information sharing to enable new forms of engagement in different markets. This has reshaped how knowledge about prices, demand and security circulates across the region. Calls between northern

Kenya and Nairobi now link producers, brokers and transporters in real time, allowing for rapid coordination and negotiation (Mahmoud 2008; Roba et al. 2017). Telephone calls also enable the sharing of information between pastoralists and local traders, especially around price comparison for different livestock types offered at different markets and open new possibilities for evaluating demand across diverse clients.

Such calls also help local traders to manage their losses by enabling them to tap into the market intelligence of brokers and assess demand and potential profit margins before purchasing livestock either in local markets or in livestock grazing areas. In remote grazing areas, this connectivity has reduced transaction costs, minimised losses and allowed traders to engage with truck owners and buyers in distant markets without the need for costly travel. Far from eroding traditional systems of oral exchange, mobile communication has become an extension of them, strengthening the relationship between informal knowledge, grounded livelihoods and regional commerce. Indeed, the new trade dynamics that have accompanied enhanced connectivity cannot be understood on their own terms but must be seen as evolving through their entanglement with locally rooted social networks grounded in kinship, reciprocity and emergent relationships of trust that extend across broader geographies. Telecommunications expansion has not brought change from outside; rather, it has been drawn into and reshaped by the moral and social logics that already organised pastoral exchange.

The broader growth in road networks and market infrastructure has complemented this communicative transformation, providing grounds for pastoralists to chase down new opportunities in wider regional and even cross-border trade circuits. Since the mid-2000s, investments by NGOs and donors such as USAID, African Development Bank (AfDB) and the World Bank have produced a new geography of markets, abattoirs and ancillary services across northern Kenya. While not all of these investments have been successful, strategically located markets in places like Isiolo town and Merille have become hubs of vibrant activity, attracting traders from as far as Meru, Nyeri and Nairobi. Improved infrastructure has contributed to increased sales volumes, diversified the range of buyers and enhanced pastoralists' bargaining power through heightened competition. Yet, the uneven success of these physical investments also points to the limits of externally driven development. Many smaller rural markets have faltered due to poor siting, inadequate livestock supply and inconsistent trader attendance. These contrasts underscore the central point that infrastructure alone does not create

markets, rather, it is the work pastoralists do integrating new opportunities into existing social and economic relations that determines their success.

In the following section, I build on this discussion of regional economic transformation through an analysis of the relational, networked nature of trade and the shifting entanglements between locally rooted networks based around clan affiliation and reciprocity rooted in pastoralist livelihoods and wider, cross-cultural networks oriented more towards business collaboration. I then conclude by considering implications in both the world of policy and wider understandings of socio-economic change in pastoralist contexts.

Social networks and change

As many other contributors to this book have outlined, and indeed as scholars of pastoralism have explored in a variety of ways (e.g. Hassan et al. 2026), social networks are the lifeline of pastoralist societies across Africa, constituting a form of social wealth that serves in different ways to shape engagements with diverse processes of change. The editors outlined in their introduction how such networks, grounded in trust, obligation and often shaped by moral economy practices, are established through relationships around livestock, and the example they offer of camel herding among the Rendille is derived from one of the key research sites I have discussed in this chapter – Korr. Koshin's chapter on crisis response in Puntland is an interesting example of how such relationships can grow outward into the world, coming to frame and participate in new contexts for social action, engaging with new resource bases and new value systems. Looking at livestock marketing from northern Kenya, and analysing recent processes of socio-economic transformation, both kinds of dynamic have played a critical role. That is, locally rooted relationships that emerge through trust and kinship, and that sustain everyday exchange, and the outward spill of these relationships and patterns of interaction into wider institutional, economic and social domains where they become entangled in processes of mutual adaptation and change. It is through the interplay of these two forces that pastoralists in Kenya have been able to navigate and actively shape the shifting terrain of regional markets through both short- and long-distance marketing chains.

At the local markets explored in this chapter, livestock trade is primarily organised through kin-based and ethnically homogeneous networks, where transactions rely heavily on trust, obligation and

shared understandings of fairness. Such networks make trade possible in complicated and often turbulent contexts, ensuring reliability (not stability) amidst uncertainty, to use Emery Roe et al.'s terms (1998). For example, it became clear during the course of my fieldwork that the existence of ethnic connections between local Rendille traders and Rendille pastoralists has drastically shaped trade in Laisamis, Marsabit County. Here, I observed pastoralist producers tracking the itinerary of Rendille traders, gaining access to informal credit and gathering market information to negotiate better prices for their sale. Other studies have highlighted similar ways pastoralist traders leverage social relations to cope with diverse trade risks in livestock markets (Mahmoud 2008, 2011). Critically, these ethnic networks extend into a diverse array of services and areas that underpin the livestock trade in different ways. Informal credit, for instance, is often extended based on social capital, reputation and historical ties. Similarly, dispute resolution is often facilitated via informal cultural institutions. These practices and institutions are, in many respects, indistinguishable from the world of locally led services proffered during complex crises in Turkana and Marsabit described in Derbyshire and Hassan's contribution to this volume. Both worlds of practice emerge from sets of locally grounded values that recursively shape and are shaped by pastoralist livelihoods.

Yet as livestock move along the marketing chain towards larger, more urbanised terminal markets such as Nairobi, the role and dynamics of these relations transform. Market relations become increasingly transactional and multiethnic, drawing actors together from a wide range of social and geographic backgrounds. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to envisage this divergence as representative of a straightforward process of commoditisation or capitalist homogenisation. Ensminger's classic work *Making a Market: The Institutional Transformation of an African Society* (1992) is useful in making sense of it. Her fundamental point that markets do not simply emerge on their own terms but are *made*, through social transformation, is critical. Indeed, as with her study among Orma communities, the situation described in this chapter has evolved amidst a process of negotiation, building on a long-term history of similar negotiation, between shifting roles, practices and forms of authority. Within this process, the local context of culturally rooted value systems oriented around livestock (and extending into social relationships and networks) is not a passive inheritance under threat from more powerful, externalised economic forces but rather the primary medium through which market engagement itself is negotiated and redefined. Market change is not merely an economic process but also a moral and political one.

The historical context within which these dynamics have evolved is thus deeply significant. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, colonial and postcolonial narratives of pastoralism as irrational, static or 'unintegrateable' into the modern economy obscured the extent to which pastoralists have long been agents of social and economic innovation. The early colonial history of the regions explored in this study is, therefore, I would argue, a vital line of further enquiry, not merely as background, but as a means of understanding iterative, locally driven processes of adaptation oriented towards a wider horizon of material and economic transformation. Arguably, one of the core reasons why economic change in pastoralist areas is so often imagined as an exogenous or self-propelling force is the absence of such locally grounded narratives of transformation – histories that foreground how pastoralists themselves have continually reconfigured institutions, practices and relationships in negotiation with a changing world (e.g. Derbyshire 2020).

This absence is mirrored in more recent development imaginaries, which continue to construe economic modernity as a totalising project rather than an emergent, situated process. To challenge such visions requires attending to the ways pastoralists rework (not resist) the terms of economic life, transforming market forms and relations through their own logics of value, trust and obligation. As Henrietta Moore (2011) and others have argued, economic change is never simply material but deeply moral and imaginative, shaped by local understandings of what a good life entails. Seen in this light, the historical marginalisation of pastoral economies can be understood not as a failure of integration but as a failure of recognition and a misreading of how economic transformation is made from within.

As livestock move along the marketing chain from the north of Kenya towards larger urban markets such as Nairobi, the kinds of relationships that structure marketing transform to work across new distances. New trading networks have emerged connecting local traders to terminal market brokers, who can navigate the complex social and institutional terrain of the city, linking pastoral producers to abattoirs, retailers and consumers. Within this process of network expansion and adaptation, territorial control and decision-making often shift from the hands of local traders to these urban brokers who possess stronger connections to markets, information and finance.

Importantly, within this evolving system, ethnicity remains both a basis for trust and a marker of inequality. Long-distance traders continue to rely on brokers from their own ethnic or regional background to manage transactions in the risky and opaque environment of the terminal market.

Trust and shared identity remain essential in a trade largely conducted without formal contracts. However, these same dynamics also shape uneven positions within the chain: groups such as the Burji, for example, with kin-based ownership of Nairobi slaughter facilities, command stronger influence and capture greater value, while others remain dependent on intermediaries. One question that emerges from this, and which I explore in more detail in the conclusions, is whether more equitable forms of market participation might be fostered through improving the flow of information and transparency along the marketing chain, perhaps by enabling traders in northern Kenya to access more real-time market information and pricing data. Such efforts might help to reduce informational asymmetries without undermining the social relations that sustain trade.

Either way, what is perhaps most significant is that such 'informal' dynamics are really considered during the formation of development policy, a situation that connects with wider misreadings of statistical trends. As I set out in the preceding sections, data on pastoralist trade in Kenya, as in many other African countries, remains fragmented and poorly managed, and often radically underestimates actual numbers of transactions. All of this leads to a situation in which investment is both limited and often poorly aligned with the realities of those who actively shape the livestock trade and make it possible. As is the case in many contexts where Weather and Climate Information Services (WCIS) are discussed, the problems come to be framed as behavioural in nature – that is, to do with pastoralist cultural practices, and misalignments between different knowledge systems and beliefs (cf. Luseno et al. 2003). This recurring framing can be understood as a novel expression of the old narratives about pastoralist irrationality and livestock complexes I described in the introduction. Framing key challenges as behavioural in nature shifts attention from the institutional failures that are actually to blame.

Yet as was the case in the colonial period, this is not merely a question of epistemic blindness or inherited imaginaries. It also reflects a deeper state agenda, unconscious as it may be, that has long instrumentalised such narratives to legitimise particular visions of progress predicated on formality, stability and the control of the hinterlands. Understanding, therefore, why this narrative endures and continues to shape policy and practice is, I would argue, like the deeper historical processes I mentioned above, worthy of future research. It seems reasonable to argue that this agenda is part of a vision of prosperity that sees pastoralism, and indeed the drylands more broadly, as static, passive and waiting to be transformed (cf. Semplici and Campbell 2023). In failing to apprehend the ways in which markets are made by pastoralists

themselves, through distinct values, networks and familiarities, this vision neglects the plural and situated forms of prosperity that emerge from the desires and aspirations structuring life in mobile societies.

Conclusions

Research across multiple disciplines and contexts has emphasised that information is a critical resource in contexts of fast economic and political change, with access and control over information often becoming a vital means through which people orient themselves, make choices and pursue futures on their own terms (e.g. Papacharissi 2010; Castells 2001). Within pastoralist settings, change is frequently cast as an external, homogenising force, that is, something to which people must adapt, rather than a process they actively negotiate and transform. In the case of pastoralist marketing, this implicit framing continues to constrict possibilities for policies that are focused on supporting existing dynamics, strategies and relationships, and enabling a more equitable access to various forms of relevant information via responsive, locally grounded information systems. In other words, looking to institutions that may do better at providing relevant information on price, climate and market security is a more meaningful and effective starting point than interventions premised on altering pastoralist behaviour or correcting supposed deficits in market knowledge.

As I have noted throughout this chapter, the pastoralist relationships and networks structuring livestock trade are never discrete spheres of activity and interaction; they emerge from moral worlds that shape all domains of life, encompassing a wide array of ceremonies, practices and strategies. By converse implication, investing in more appropriate information systems requires an understanding of the interconnected worlds in which information is used and shared. As the editors noted in their introduction, livestock are valuable in multiple ways, not only as financial assets. The decisions pastoralists make around their sale are always entangled in a complex milieu of wider socio-economic decisions. Improving marketing information is therefore not only about providing more relevant, trustworthy or accessible data but also about opening spaces of exchange and dialogue through which information itself can be co-produced and reshaped in ways that reflect the moral and practical realities of those who will ultimately use it.

Beyond such specific recommendations, what does this case study say about prosperity? In the broadest sense, what comes into view is

a conception of prosperity not as an externally conferred condition, definable and measurable in generic terms but rather as an ongoing negotiation between long-standing moral worlds and the shifting possibilities of economic, political and environmental change. There are affinities between this picture and what various scholars have described as processes of commoning – practices through which pastoralists reassert collective forms of value and belonging amidst expanding frontiers of privatisation and marketisation (see for examples Flintan et al. 2021). Yet what the material in this chapter points to is a process that, I would argue, is a little more open-ended. That is to say that it is not a process of returning to or recreating the commons, but of carrying its logics into new spaces. Much like the forms of vernacular humanitarianism described by Koshin in her chapter on crisis response in Puntland, pastoralist marketing practices in northern Kenya involve going out into the world, forging new connections and engaging across diverse social and institutional contexts. The networks and values that shape trade at its pastoralist origins continue to inflect these wider encounters, even as they take on new forms and meanings. What emerges is neither a story of resistance or assimilation, but of translation, and of continual, dynamic negotiation between different practices, terrains, contexts and values.

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6

Markets, conflict and change: forging prosperity through uncertainty in pastoral Kenya and Ethiopia

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Introduction

Pastoral areas in Africa are still often framed in policy and academic discourse as remote, marginal and volatile. Yet, these drylands are dynamic spaces of socio-economic transaction, shaped by long histories of shifting mobility patterns and equally long, and entangled, histories of market-based trade and exchange (e.g. Catley et al. 2013; Tebboth et al. 2023). Such markets, which nowadays comprise a mixture of livestock, food and other commodities, are central to pastoral ways of life. They function not only as vital infrastructure, facilitating a variety of economic activities, but also as spaces of social interaction and engagement – that is, as social institutions.

The idea that the drylands are marginal, unproductive places traces a long history in policy and practice, and indeed was influential throughout the early colonial era when, in many contexts, cash economies and formalised markets first proliferated. Much has been written about the ways in which a range of negative stereotypes – the notion of the 'cattle complex', overgrazing and the tragedy of the commons – worked to justify and rationalise extractive colonial economic policies, oriented towards the development of settler-led livestock export markets and the

further suppression and subversion of pastoralism (See Anderson 2010; Roba this volume).

Despite this fraught history, expanding markets have, over many generations of socio-economic change, become increasingly central to ongoing processes of dynamic pastoral adaptation, becoming grounds for the active reconfiguration of pastoral livelihoods in relation to a variety of new challenges and possibilities (for example Derbyshire 2020). There has been considerable expansion in market engagement across Africa, with pastoralists now selling more frequently, engaging in the purchase of food more often and with markets regularly becoming hubs for both financial and non-financial services.

Beyond their measurable contributions to the economy, markets thus play increasingly critical roles enabling pastoralists to navigate the endemic uncertainty of the drylands. They are places where veterinary drugs, animal feed and early warning information may be accessed, and where different market actors including traders, brokers, transporters and shopkeepers play a wide range of important roles facilitating various forms of collective, relational crisis management (cf. Roe et al. 1998; Roe 2020).

Failure to apprehend and thus create policy that is oriented towards these important roles is perhaps a further consequence of the long-standing narratives we mentioned above, which frame the drylands as passive places in perpetual crisis and decline. Indeed, the objective of 'stabilising' the drylands, particularly during times of conflict, is often explicitly outlined as a priority in various external interventions. Beyond the immediacy of conflict, and the urgency of response, such approaches arguably stem from a broader and more deeply rooted development paradigm that conceives of uncertainty and variability as conditions to be minimised or controlled rather than as grounds for the emergence of prosperous livelihoods. This is, of course, despite extensive research demonstrating that pastoralist systems work with uncertainty, mobilising flexibility, mobility and social cooperation to make the most of highly variable environments (e.g. Krätli and Schareika 2010; Krätli 2015).

The relationship between markets and conflict in pastoral areas is both complex and dynamic. While it is well documented that conflict frequently disrupts trade flows, displaces populations and undermines physical infrastructure, there is growing recognition that conflict can also generate new patterns of market activity, including market relocation to other areas, the emergence of new market actors, informal exchange mechanisms and cross-border trade networks. Such reconfigurations may create openings for individuals or groups previously excluded from formal market participation, particularly women and youth, but may

also reinforce exclusionary dynamics or generate new forms of localised tension. While women in pastoral societies have historically played substantial roles in food commodity markets and trade of certain types of livestock, usually small ruminants and poultry, their visibility and agency in formal market structures often remain limited, shaped by restrictive gender norms. Conflict can simultaneously expose women to heightened risks while, at the same time, creating opportunities for new forms of economic participation.

Here, we hasten to add that as much as conflict has been shown, in many instances, to have particularly pronounced negative impacts on women, there are many other instances in which women have been shown to play active roles in conflicts, as political actors. In this sense, casting women as 'impacted by' conflict is often too restrictive a framing, and this is particularly the case in pastoralist contexts. For example, in Somali contexts women have been shown to exert significant agency amidst long-standing conflicts, invoking clan honour in public discourse or participating in resource mobilisation. Indeed, Ingiriis and Hoehne (2013) describe some of the ways in which the tragedy of war and conflict have led to considerable empowerment, with women coming to be actively involved in armed conflict as combatants, motivators of men and also as peace makers.

In this chapter, we unravel some of these complex relational dynamics by drawing on evidence from pastoral Kenya and Ethiopia. In doing so, we seek to move beyond a conception of conflict solely as a disruptive shock that impacts economic practices on its own terms towards an understanding of how it might also act as a catalyst for emergent opportunities. We argue that markets, and the kinds of prosperity they promise, are rarely engaged with by pastoralists to return to some sense of pre-crisis stability. They are instead part of dynamic livelihood strategies that serve to creatively reconfigure past practices and relationships on a regular basis. Markets are, in this sense, grounds for new forms of innovation and cooperation, whose entanglements with broader pastoral economies transform in line with a much broader horizon of change. This, we argue, has important implications for policy and programming, inviting a re-examination of how markets are understood and supported within broader agendas for resilience and prosperity in the drylands.

We begin by outlining our methodology, which centres on a community-driven micro-tasking platform called KAZNET, designed for remote pastoral and fragile settings. We then describe the conceptual framework behind our analysis, using markets and conflict as dual

entry points to explore the convergence of economic and peacebuilding dynamics. Finally, we discuss key gaps and contributions that emerge from the study, concluding by setting out some future directions for research.

Methodology

The KAZNET platform

Alongside existing literatures and field observations, our analysis in this chapter draws on data collected via KAZNET, an open-source, community-driven micro-tasking platform specifically developed for remote and fragile pastoral contexts, currently being implemented in Kenya and Ethiopia. KAZNET was designed to address systemic data gaps in fragile drylands where security concerns and logistical costs impede regular surveys. Traditional field surveys, while robust, face significant logistical and cost barriers in pastoral drylands, particularly in conflict-affected or insecure areas where physical access may be constrained (Chelanga et al. 2022; Alulu et al. 2024). KAZNET was developed in response to these challenges and was designed to operate in low-connectivity environments, enabling high-frequency data collection without the need for permanent field teams.

KAZNET operates by engaging a network of locally based contributors equipped with smartphones – individuals with contextual familiarity and trust networks – to collect and submit structured observations via mobile devices. These contributors are not traditional enumerators but members of the pastoral communities themselves, recruited through consultations, for their familiarity with local contexts, markets and social networks. Once trained, contributors can browse, select and complete micro-tasks via a mobile application. The approach reflects a shift towards community-driven and reflexive data collection, where pastoralists and other local actors contribute data based on their lived experiences, observations and mobility patterns. Data is collected on livestock prices, species composition, market attendance and conflict, along with household indicators.

This approach ensures that data collection is grounded in local knowledge and perceptions, enabling a more nuanced understanding of markets and conflict dynamics. A key feature of KAZNET is its adaptive design. Data collection tools, forms and protocols can be rapidly adapted in response to emerging events such as conflict outbreaks, market

closures or shocks like droughts (Chelanga et al. 2022). This adaptability enables the collection of highly relevant data that reflects the rapidly changing conditions of pastoral regions. Beyond individual data collection, KAZNET has been used to support institutional monitoring processes. For instance, in northern Kenya, KAZNET contributors have provided continuous data on livestock prices, volumes and market attendance – information historically absent from official datasets due to the high costs of conventional surveys (Chelanga et al. 2022; Alulu et al. 2024; Lepariyo et al. 2024).

Crowdsourced and citizen-science data can help fill major evidence gaps by generating granular, high-frequency observations from places where conventional surveys are infrequent, costly or difficult to sustain (Chelanga et al. 2022). In Kenya, for example, mobile-phone-based citizen-science work on ticks and tick-borne diseases showed that community communication networks can support information sharing and coordination around complex livestock health challenges, while also strengthening farmer communication and empowerment (Chepkwony et al. 2018). Related work in agroecology in Kenya and Zimbabwe has shown that citizen-science approaches can support collaboration and co-creation of knowledge between farmers, researchers, extension actors and policymakers, bringing farmer knowledge and locally grounded priorities more directly into research design and interpretation (Krell et al. 2022; Alulu et al. 2024). The value of crowdsourced and citizen-science data lies not only in being cheaper or faster but also in expanding the analytical scope for citizen-led research on complex, dynamic and socially embedded processes that conventional, low-frequency datasets often miss (Chepkwony et al. 2018; Chelanga et al. 2022; Alulu et al. 2024). Citizen-science-based research also has the potential to make visible the grounded realities of communities, enabling generation of concrete recommendations which can contribute to policy change (Woodcraft et al. 2024).

At the same time, these approaches have significant limitations. Participation, for instance, is often shaped by who owns a phone, who has connectivity, who is literate or digitally confident, who is mobile enough to report and who remains motivated to contribute over time, raising questions about whose experiences are captured and whose are left out (Brubaker et al. 2021). Evidence from Nigeria shows that sustaining participation in price crowdsourcing is itself a central challenge, and that contribution levels respond to behavioural nudges and incentive design; as a result, changes in the data stream may reflect shifts in platform engagement as much as shifts in market conditions (Solano-Hermosilla

et al. 2022). KAZNET's own early documentation noted accessibility and usability challenges, as well as the importance of tailoring information and delivery channels to users' capacities and contexts (Chelanga et al. 2022). Beyond participation bias, there is also an analytical risk that trends derived from crowdsourced data may be interpreted too linearly if they are not situated within wider socio-behavioural and institutional processes (Munthali et al. 2018). This point is particularly important in pastoral and other agricultural systems, where a particular phenomenon may be experienced very differently across locations, social groups and seasons, and where simplified readings of trends can inadvertently produce a monolithic picture of communities and the challenges they face.

We seek to mitigate these limitations by situating our interpretation of KAZNET-generated data within a much longer trajectory of field-based engagement, drawing on field-based observation and relationships built over many years of living and collaborating with pastoralist communities in northern Kenya. This triangulation enables us to interpret and analyse platform-derived trends in relation to locally grounded knowledge of social differentiation, historical grievance and everyday practice. We recognise that structuring our analysis around KAZNET data necessarily foregrounds a macro-level resolution of complex dynamics, and that such an approach cannot fully capture the heterogeneous and unevenly experienced realities of conflict, or indeed markets. Nevertheless, we would suggest that the longer-term patterns revealed through citizen-generated reporting offer analytically and practically significant insights, particularly for informing policy and supporting locally grounded advocacy. Indeed, one of our aims in this chapter is to demonstrate the value of citizen-science methodologies to contribute meaningfully to development practice in pastoralist regions, even as their limitations are acknowledged.

Pastoralist markets

Livestock markets have evolved into a layered and dynamic system shaped by geography, mobility and local organisation. Observations during our research highlight that at the base are 'bush markets' – informal and infrequent gatherings in remote locations primarily handling small ruminants. These feed into 'primary markets', which are usually held weekly, and where livestock aggregation and initial brokering occur. 'Secondary markets', which are often located at county or regional levels,

draw higher volumes and wider participation, including traders from urban centres. At the apex are 'terminal markets' in major towns, linked to slaughterhouses or export networks.

This system can trace a history that goes back to the early colonial administration of the Horn of Africa, and arguably beyond. Early colonial governments reconfigured pastoral market systems, not because there was an absence of trade but to advance state control, revenue extraction and territorial ordering (Little 2003). Pastoral communities were no strangers to markets and engaged in active livestock trade when terms were fair. Vibrant cross-border livestock trade predated colonial rule, with pastoralists having long driven cattle, camels and goats across the region to barter or sell in regional markets. Even as colonial boundaries split ethnic groups and grazing territories, herders adapted by finding ways around checkpoints and trekking animals along clandestine routes to reach buyers (Little and McPeak 2006; Eid 2014).

Despite this long-standing engagement in lively, cross-border livestock trade, colonial officials framed pastoralists as resistant to markets to justify coercive policies such as forced destocking and fixed-price livestock purchases (Irungu et al. 2019). This mischaracterisation enabled colonial regimes to marginalise local trade practices and introduce formal markets and taxation systems that forced pastoralists into the cash economy. Following initial colonial contact and the imposition of taxation 'in kind', herders were increasingly compelled to sell their animals to meet taxes demanded of them in cash. The intent was not to support market participation, but to instrumentally exploit livestock as a taxable asset and incorporate pastoralists into monetised structures on colonial terms (Little and McPeak 2006). Early markets during the colonial period were referred to as 'holding grounds', that is, places where livestock were bought for sale to pay taxes to the colonial government.

Beyond fiscal extraction, colonial policies were motivated by a desire to control space and reshape land use in ways that made pastoral systems more 'legible' to the state. Authorities imposed restrictive permit regimes, centralised trade in distant market towns and introduced quarantine lines and tribal boundaries that disrupted traditional mobility and trade routes (Pavanello 2010; Eid 2014). Market-based destocking campaigns, beginning in the 1930s, forced herders to sell off livestock to address what officials saw as overstocking and environmental degradation. This policy was rooted in the colonial view that common grazing and traditional practices led to environmental destruction, and that livestock offtake was required for conservation purposes, thus entirely dismissing the customary rangeland management practices.

These colonial market interventions were deeply unpopular and were often met with resistance or circumvention. Herders accustomed to mobility and autonomous herd management resented outside dictates to sell their animals (Irungu et al. 2019). Aklilu et al. (2013) note that pastoralists from north-eastern Kenya and Somalia detested the destocking policies as they viewed them as a deliberate attempt to impoverish their communities. There was a belief among many pastoralist communities that droughts were the natural checks on herd size, thus strongly opposing mandated sales which they believed would weaken their livelihoods and social status. Many pastoralists engaged in trade on their own terms when conditions were favourable, with livestock sales often being voluntary and responsive to herders' needs, unlike the obligatory sales under colonial taxation or quota systems (Tessema et al. 2014). The colonial system thus comprised a deliberate attempt to impose a centralised, regulated vision of commerce and conservation, with lasting consequences for pastoral economies and autonomy (and lasting policy implications).

As Roba outlines in his contribution to this volume, colonial rule in the Horn of Africa cemented a narrative that pastoralists are backward and resistant to formal markets, which tended to ignore their migratory routes, existing networks and systems of trade. This further imposed structural barriers to market participation. Coercive measures such as forced livestock sales, price fixing, movement restrictions and quarantine lines were introduced, all designed to serve the interests of the settler economy (Economist Intelligence Unit and Mercy Corps 2014). Thus, the integration of pastoralists into market systems was not through incentives but through coercion, in the form of taxation, surveillance and centralised market control. There was little to no investment in infrastructure, with decisions about trade and land use made without pastoral input. This legacy of coercion, control and marginalisation not only shaped the early trajectory of livestock markets in the region but continues to have effects in the present day (Pavanello 2010).

After independence, many postcolonial governments inherited both the policy instruments and prejudices of colonial regimes. Pastoral areas remained politically and economically sidelined, with national development plans favouring sedentary agriculture (Little 2003). In Kenya for example, destocking policies between the 1960s and the 1980s continued to perceive herd size as a fundamental problem. State-run marketing boards and export abattoirs maintained control, while regulations like movement permits and veterinary checkpoints persisted. Although veterinary coverage and drought-response programmes

expanded somewhat during this period, pastoralists continued to face high transaction costs, limited bargaining power and minimal recognition as economic actors. Though some of the postcolonial reforms attempted to 'modernise' pastoral markets, top-down approaches continued to be reinforced. Through the 1970s and 1980s, pastoral communities were subjected to centralised planning that hardly reflected their priorities and economic strategies, resulting in tenuous and often exploitative links to formal markets (Little and McPeak 2006; Little et al. 2014).

With economic liberalisation and private trade coming into prominence, especially along cross-border corridors, a shift occurred from the late 1980s. With internal trade control relaxed, and parastatals retreating, pastoral trading networks, particularly among the Somali and Oromo communities reasserted themselves (Eid 2014). Informal livestock trade expanded rapidly, often outpacing official channels, with towns like Moyale emerging as key nodes in regional market flows. Improvements in transport and communication technologies enabled faster, more efficient trade, helping pastoralists access price information and urban demand centres. This period marked a reconfiguration of pastoral markets, which was less state driven, more networked and increasingly shaped by pastoral agency and cross-border entrepreneurship (Little and McPeak 2014).

The role of markets amidst changing pastoral livelihoods

With the increase in market liberalisation through the 1990s and 2000s, market engagements by pastoralists in the Horn of Africa were perceived as strategic and necessary for their livelihoods (Bailey et al. 1999). This was a clear departure from the colonial assumptions that herders were hostile and indifferent to selling animals. Faced with rising cash needs, declining herd-to-human ratios and dietary shifts towards grain consumption, pastoral households began to rely on livestock sales to meet daily needs such as food, school fees and healthcare. Markets thus moved from the periphery to the centre of livelihood strategies, becoming essential for both routine welfare and coping in times of stress (Little 2003).

As pastoral systems are highly adaptive to both climate variability and shifting market demands, the restructuring of herds by Somali and Ethiopian herders in response to the booming demand for camels in the Gulf countries showed their agility and flexibility, while the emergence of cooperatives helped connect producers directly with urban consumers (Eid 2014). At the same time, informal credit arrangements characterised the livestock economy, filling gaps where formal services

were enduringly absent. These informal mechanisms, though sometimes skewed in favour of wealthier traders, kept markets functioning under difficult conditions (Bailey et al. 1999; Little and McPeak 2014).

Markets with time have now become not only outlets for surplus animals but also a means of resilience and recovery. For example, our data emphasise that after a drought or dry spell, markets are often used to purchase fast-reproducing species like goats and sheep (see also Barrett et al. 2004). In non-drought times, herders engage in opportunistic marketing by selling during seasonal price peaks while retaining core breeding stock. This cyclical pattern of engagement illustrates how pastoralists are constantly managing risk, recovering from periods of acute scarcity or preparing for the next one.

Pastoralism itself is changing amidst new market pressures, with increasing sedentarisation near market towns, and more mixed livelihoods (Tessema et al. 2014). Expanding urban demand and export opportunities, particularly to the Middle East, have further integrated pastoral regions into national and global economies, leading pastoralism to take the reins as a key supplier of meat across East Africa. Deeper market integration is serving as grounds for the reconfiguration of livelihoods and social dynamics, with pastoral households increasingly diversifying income through roles in trade, transport or processing along the livestock value chain (Economist Intelligence Unit and Mercy Corps 2014). In Samburu County, for example, our research highlighted that formal markets started emerging in the early 2000s, a process that eventually culminated in organised weekly markets. Initially, these markets had an auctioneer who would stand and conduct livestock sales. As centres and wider populations grew, they became more structured, with specific days that allowed people to trade regularly. Amidst this process of change, the role of a trader began to emerge, that is, someone who earns income by buying and selling livestock. While urbanisation and market growth have opened new opportunities, they have also introduced risks related to price volatility, high transaction costs and limited bargaining power that may constrain earnings (Barret et al. 2004).

Younger generations of pastoralists valuing education and business skills are engaging with markets in new ways, though deep cultural attachments to livestock continue to persist (Little and McPeak 2014). Decisions around selling livestock, while part economic, are also weighed against other considerations such as keeping a minimum herd for various social obligations, or the need to maintain breeds that represent the lineage of the herd, and so on. Markets have evolved as a social arena for pastoralists, and places where norms around wealth,

work and community have come to be redefined and reimagined, with changes usually being negotiated through existing cultural frameworks of kinship and reciprocity (Scoones 2018). Moreover, strategic interventions such as improved infrastructure, mobile-based market information and collective marketing groups are helping enhance market access and equity. Markets now serve as both a lifeline and a platform for transformation, offering pastoralists pathways to resilience, income growth and evolving social interactions grounded both in historical familiarities and newly emerging aspirations and subjectivities (Little et al. 2014; Scoones 2023).

As part of this, they have become drivers of pastoral mobility in the Horn of Africa, influencing not just where herders move but how and when. Across diverse contexts, and in diverse ways, pastoralists increasingly align their movements with market opportunities, including by trekking livestock to towns, border posts or export corridors where prices are better and buyers are more active (Little and McPeak 2014). Weak market conditions owing to low prices, few buyers or long distances weaken coping strategies, reinforcing the critical need for accessible and well-functioning markets. Cross-border trade routes remain essential, with substantial flows of livestock into Kenya from Ethiopia, Somalia and Tanzania, further underscoring how mobility and regional trade are interlinked (Eid 2014).

Moreover, with the rise of digital technology and innovations, and increasing penetration and affordability of mobile phones, there have been significant improvements in pastoralists' access to price information. In many areas this allows for the planning of movements based on real-time demand, as Roba explores in his contribution to this volume. Traders and herders coordinate sales remotely, reducing travel costs and minimising animal stress (Little and McPeak 2014). With the increase in use of WhatsApp and other social media platforms, photos shared often reduce the need for physical inspection, and animals are picked up directly from homesteads or settlements. The use of mobile money is likewise enabling safer cashless transactions, providing new avenues for savings. In this evolving pastoral landscape, mobility, while central to pastoralism, is increasingly intertwined with market behaviour and digital connectivity (Scoones 2018).

Amidst these broader processes of transformation, it is important to recognise that informal markets have deep roots in cross-border clan networks and social trust, enabling herders to move animals through bush markets and border points where formal infrastructure is minimal or absent. In the Horn of Africa alone, livestock trade among pastoralists

is dominated by informal markets, which account for 95 per cent of all transactions. Formal markets on the other hand, which include official municipal markets, quarantine stations and legal export corridors, have limited reach and are often inaccessible to remote pastoral communities (Bailey et al. 1999).

However, both informal and formal markets are closely interlinked. Livestock, moving informally through borders, enter formal systems like export quarantines and slaughterhouses. Traders frequently operate across both spaces, depending on opportunity, regulatory pressure or market access. However, formal systems struggle to compete with the flexibility, trust-based operations and geographic accessibility of informal networks, which continue to serve as the default system for most pastoralists (Little 2003). Informal markets play a critical role in pastoral mobility. Market access shapes movement patterns, with herders trekking animals to locations with active trade, including cross-border hubs. These markets also act as economic support in remote areas, allowing pastoralists to convert livestock into grain or cash. Informal trade routes are highly adaptive, especially during times of conflict or border closures (Little and McPeak 2014), the most recent of these being the one caused by COVID-19. Traders could reroute quickly, unlike in formal systems, which are easily disrupted by restrictive policies or border shutdowns.

Recognising these dynamics and the linkages that informal and formal markets have with each other, there is advocacy for hybrid market models that support pastoral trade without undermining the informal system. This potentially includes improving infrastructure and veterinary services, enhancing market information access and legitimising certain informal practices through light-touch regulation. Recognising informal markets not as a weakness but a strong foundation for pastoral economies and mobility is therefore key (Eid 2014).

Market participation and gender dynamics

Traditionally, in pastoral settings, men and women have had distinct relationships to markets and mobility. While men have been responsible for long-distance herd movements, transporting large stock like cattle and camels to regional or cross-border markets, women have historically overseen domestic responsibilities such as childcare, looking after the elderly, milking, caring for newborn and lactating livestock and producing milk-related products (Tessema et al. 2014). This has resulted in gendered market engagements with women being most active in localised economies and men in larger livestock and trade networks.

Nevertheless, with evolving pastoral dynamics, the role of women is shifting. Indeed, Wangari-Muneri and Mohamed's contribution to this volume serves as an important reminder of the active ways in which women are working to reconfigure existing livelihood dynamics in the pursuit of commonly held values and ambitions. Pastoralist women are increasingly active in local and regional livestock markets, especially in the trade of the small ruminants. In Ethiopia's Somali region, for example, women play a critical role in sustaining small-scale trade, collecting sheep and goats and reselling them weekly with modest profits (Eid 2014). Despite low profit margins, this income is essential for household needs like food and education, enabling women's influence in household decision-making. Where women have been able to gain access to mobile technologies, coupled with supportive networks and localised trading opportunities, they often access price information, coordinate trade and negotiate sales, demonstrating greater decision-making agency (Irungu et al. 2019).

In addition to these evolving economic roles, women are also emerging as key peace actors in market contexts. Embedded in interclan networks through marriage, women are often perceived as being neutral since they do not get involved directly in violence, though they might be the most affected. The perceived neutral status of women has, in many contexts, enabled them to act as informal diplomats, building bridges between groups and facilitating trade in times of tension. Women's roles in supporting and sustaining market linkages in conflict-prone areas thus holds potential for enhancing local economies and also fostering social cohesion (Little and McPeack 2006).

Pastoralist conflicts

As Markakis (2004) notes, pastoralists have long maintained a delicate balance between autonomy and interaction with state structures, a balance repeatedly disrupted by colonial boundaries, conservation policies and resource grabs that have progressively constrained mobility. Conflicts in these regions are diverse in form, ranging from interethnic tensions and cattle raiding to disputes over trade routes and political representation (Bond and Mkutu 2018; Penu and Paalo 2021).

The types of conflict present in pastoral contexts are diverse and multifaceted. Interethnic violence remains prevalent, particularly where ethnic groups compete for access to scarce grazing lands and water resources. For instance, tensions between Borana, Gabra and

Somali communities along the Kenya–Ethiopia border often flare during droughts, when herders converge on limited dry-season grazing reserves (Markakis 2004; Bond and Mkutu 2018). Conflicts also arise around trade routes and marketplaces, where economic interests intersect with ethnic identities. In Marsabit County, in Kenya, for example, control over livestock trade corridors and taxation points has been a significant source of tension, occasionally escalating into violence that disrupts both pastoral mobility and regional commerce.

Conflict in pastoral regions cannot simply be reduced to episodic violence; it is also embedded in everyday social, economic and political life. In many communities, practices such as cattle raiding have historically served not only as a means of wealth redistribution but also as a mechanism to demonstrate bravery, secure marriages or settle intergroup scores. For example, Bond and Mkutu (2018) describe how cattle raiding in northern Kenya, while violent, has long been socially embedded and accompanied by complex rules and rituals that limit escalation. Nevertheless, in recent decades, these practices have become increasingly commercialised and militarised, leading to new, profit-driven enterprises facilitated via the proliferation of small arms.

Drivers of conflict

The drivers of conflict in pastoral areas are layered and interconnected. Environmental variability, particularly recurrent droughts, exacerbates competition over dwindling resources, forcing communities into overlapping migratory patterns and contested territories. Moreover, external interventions such as conservation efforts, land titling projects and infrastructure development have, in many contexts, inadvertently exacerbated tensions by altering pre-existing land use patterns or privileging certain groups over others (Markakis 2004; Schilling et al. 2017). Borders that first emerged during the colonial era reverberate amidst contemporary conflict dynamics, becoming entangled in increasingly complex ethno-territorial contestations centring as much on extractive resources as livestock.

Nevertheless, recent scholarship cautions against viewing conflict in pastoral regions purely as a breakdown of order, emphasising that it often emerges from, and reflects, deeply embedded social and institutional dynamics. As Penu and Paalo (2021) note, institutions in pastoral areas tend to be pluralistic and flexible, coming to be continually reshaped amidst shifting political, economic and ecological circumstances. Conflict, from this perspective, can also reveal the ongoing negotiation

of authority, access and identity within uncertain environments. This is, of course, not to detract from their human and livelihood costs.

Conflict may thus serve as an entry point for exploring how pastoral societies navigate economic opportunities, market engagements and social transformations. Looking beyond its more obvious disruptive characteristics, it becomes possible to also apprehend the ways in which individuals and wider communities work amidst complex dynamics to reshape institutions, including markets, in ways that both challenge and create possibilities for pastoral livelihoods and prosperity.

In making this point, our aim is not to de-emphasise the fact that conflict tends to have substantive repercussions for markets, including both their economic function and their role within broader livelihood systems. We noted in our introduction how, across southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya, livestock and food commodity markets serve not only as places of transaction but also as hubs of social interaction, information exchange and institutional negotiation. Conflict disrupts these vital functions in profound ways.

On an immediate level, conflict can lead to the physical disruption of market activities. Livestock markets frequently bring together buyers and sellers from different groups, making them potential flashpoints for violence, especially in situations of ongoing wider conflict. Markets that once thrived as regional trading hubs often fall silent during periods of heightened insecurity, as traders and pastoralists avoid locations perceived to be unsafe. As a result, the volume of livestock traded in these markets can dwindle considerably.

Insights from KAZNET data reveal such a trend. For instance, in Figures 6.1a and 6.1b, time periods of heightened perceived exposure to conflict in Oldonyiro, Isiolo County, Kenya, coincide with fluctuating number of livestock sold in Oldonyiro livestock market. Although these fluctuations vary with the livestock species, and conflict may not be the sole explanatory factor here, the peaks and troughs in number of livestock between the months of March 2025 and May 2025 could be indicative of an effect of perceived exposure to conflict during this time. Beyond market closures, conflict also disrupts trade routes that link pastoral production zones to regional and national markets. These routes often overlap with pastoral migratory corridors, meaning that violence affects both the movement of people and the flow of commodities. In Marsabit and along the Kenya–Ethiopia border, traders have reported avoiding key roads where ambushes or interethnic attacks are frequent,

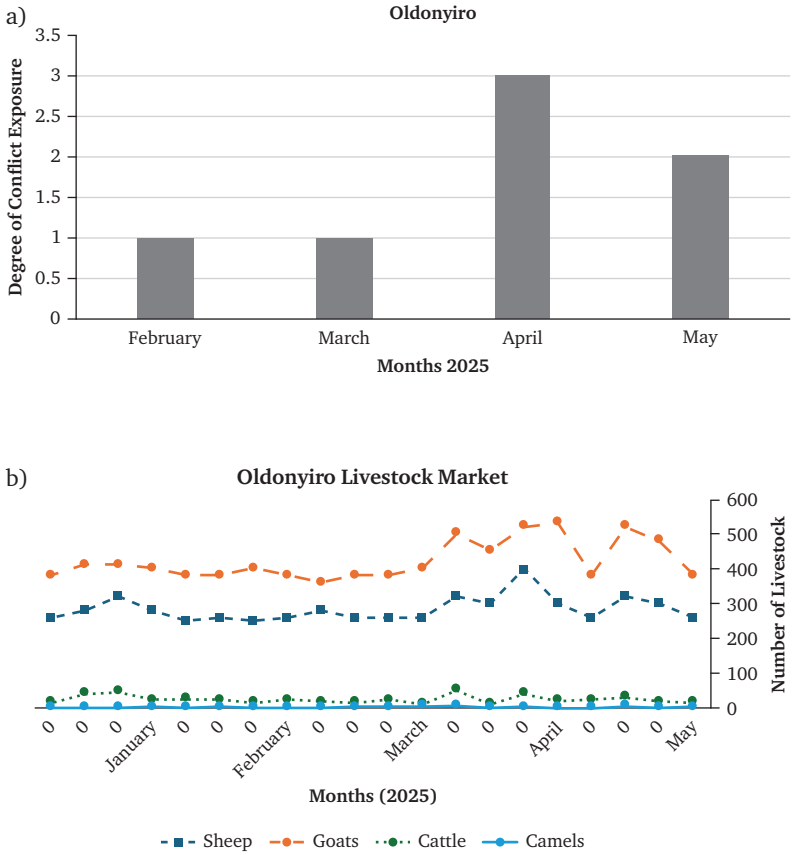


Figure 6.1 (a) Perceived exposure to conflict in Oldonyiro, (b) Number of livestock sold in Oldonyiro, Isiolo County, Kenya.

leading to longer, more circuitous routes that increase transport costs and reduce market competitiveness (Bond and Mkutu 2018). Conflict may redirect economic flows to markets that are considered safer, thus reshaping trade routes and geographies. For instance, we observed in Samburu, Kenya, that conflict has pushed a community to trade livestock in a different market despite the presence of well-developed market infrastructure nearby.

The effects of conflict on markets are not uniform across all actors; rather, they are differentiated by gender, age and economic status. Male traders, particularly those with established networks and access to transport, may be better positioned to reroute their business activities or negotiate safe passage through insecure zones. Women, by contrast,

often face heightened barriers during periods of conflict. Their mobility is constrained not only by physical security risks but also by social norms that can limit their movement in the public sphere, particularly across ethnic or clan boundaries. Our wider research and engagement in the region indicate that women engaged in small-scale trade such as selling milk, grains or small ruminants can be forced out of market participation altogether during violent episodes, with significant consequences for household income and food security. Across the pastoralist contexts in which we have worked over the past decade, we have often observed the gendered nature of mobility, and the ways in which women's movements can become more constrained than men's during periods of insecurity. Of course, such patterns are neither universal nor uniform, and it is important to resist treating pastoralist women as a monolithic category, since such gendered mobilities are always experienced, negotiated and contested in diverse ways by women themselves. The ways in which this takes place comprise a critically important research topic, which we are unable to further address in the chapter due to scope and space limitations.

Despite these diverse negative impacts, conflict also generates a complex variety of opportunities for market innovation and participation, with differential benefits. Our observation shows that, for example, if the number of livestock sold in a market reduces because of conflict, it can in turn increase the price of livestock locally. In this situation, those who can access the market can get better prices. However, conflict can also lead to the emergence of informal bush markets, and this is certainly the case in our study area. These informal markets can often be more accessible to women, who can trade smaller volumes and operate closer to home. This is a dynamic that resonates with insights from Penu and Paalo (2021), who argue that conflict transforms institutions, creating new power dynamics and reconfiguring who gains access to economic spaces.

Youth, too, experience conflict-related disruptions in unique ways. While insecurity limits their ability to participate safely in long-distance trading, it can also draw them into new economic roles, including acting as intermediaries or brokers in informal markets. However, this participation can be precarious. Youth may become entangled in illicit trade networks or face exploitation due to their weaker bargaining power and limited social capital (Bond and Mkutu 2018). From our wider research and engagements, it is clear that livestock theft and associated illicit trade networks in Northen Kenya certainly often come with high youth involvement. At the same time, there are cases where markets

provide crucial employment and social cohesion for young people, potentially serving as spaces for economic opportunity and peacebuilding (Furukawa and Deng 2019).

Overall, the relationship between conflict and market functioning in pastoral areas is never straightforward to determine, and simple characterisations tend to miss important factors. This is because both markets and conflicts are always inextricably entangled within broader socio-economic and political dynamics in ways that defy unilinear explanations or simple causal relationships. While markets often fall victim to violence, they also serve as adaptive spaces where new actors, routes and economic practices emerge in response to shifting risks. Recognising this dual role of markets in conflict-affected areas – their status as both disrupted spaces and potential sites of resilience and transformation – is essential for rethinking how prosperity and peace can be fostered in pastoral drylands.

Markets, conflict and peace

We began this chapter by noting how the pastoral drylands, including those in Kenya and Ethiopia, are often portrayed as sites of volatility and marginality, despite the fact that they are vibrant spaces of socio-economic activity where markets, mobility and conflict intersect in dynamic ways. While conflict is typically seen as a force of disruption, there is growing evidence that it can also act as a catalyst for change, reconfiguring markets, actors and institutional landscapes in unexpected ways. Indeed, markets, as social institutions, are never static but rather come to be redefined and reconfigured continually, often through conflict, to reflect new power relations and emergent social meanings (Penu and Paalo 2021).

In considering this point, it is important to highlight that, by their very nature, markets bring diverse groups together into a shared space, often placing different ethnic communities, traders and herders in close proximity with each other. Such convergences can become flashpoints for violence, as competition over trade routes, control of market fees or perceived inequalities between groups is exacerbated. In Marsabit County, for example, periods of heightened conflict have been tied to contests over the management and control of livestock markets and trade corridors. Yet markets are more than sites of potential conflict; they also hold significant capacity as spaces of mediation and peacebuilding, such as shared market activity mitigating conflict through mutual economic benefits (Aklilu et al. 2013). From diverse contexts in the drylands of the Horn of Africa, there are compelling examples of markets

serving as platforms for dialogue, trust-building and the forging of new social contracts. The Laikipia Peace Caravan, for instance, stands out as an innovative initiative where market actors including traders, elders and women's groups travelled together across conflict-affected areas, holding meetings and trading livestock along the route. This initiative not only facilitated economic exchange but fostered intergroup understanding and cooperation, highlighting how commerce and peace can be mutually reinforcing (Okumu 2013).

Similarly, the Wajir Women for Peace Group in northern Kenya illustrates the transformative role that markets can play in peace processes. In this case, women traders, who frequently interact with diverse ethnic groups in market settings, leveraged their social networks to mediate between warring clans, negotiate ceasefires and maintain communication channels even at times of heightened violence (Bond and Mkutu 2018). Their market-based interactions became entry points for broader peace efforts, underscoring the deep interconnection between economic spaces and social cohesion.

The Amiet 'peace market' in the Abyei region of Sudan is another important example. Here, markets have been deliberately established in contested areas as neutral zones where conflicting communities can trade livestock and goods under agreed security guarantees. Furukawa and Deng (2019) describe how such markets become spaces for forging and strengthening social capital, building trust between groups and creating practical interdependencies that can stabilise fragile peace agreements. For many pastoral areas, markets are thus not merely economic infrastructures but institutions of peace, capable of transforming intergroup relations.

Again, women's roles in these processes are particularly significant. As Bond and Mkutu (2018) and Kong'ani (2024) illustrate, women's involvement in peace initiatives extends beyond the domestic sphere. In West Pokot, women have actively participated in cross-border peace dialogues, using market networks to facilitate communication and build trust across ethnic boundaries. Their economic presence in markets, often as traders of food commodities or small livestock, provides them with a unique vantage point for observing early signs of tension and leveraging economic relationships to de-escalate conflict.

Yet the engagement of women in peace processes is not without its challenges. Schilling et al. (2017), writing on gender and water governance in pastoral communities, argue that interventions must go beyond simply 'including' women to address the deeper gendered power dynamics that shape who participates and who benefits from

peacebuilding. Applied to markets, this perspective suggests the need for a 'gender-relational approach', recognising that true peace requires transforming the institutional structures and norms that perpetuate inequality. Market spaces, if designed or managed without attention to these dynamics, risk reproducing the same exclusions that fuel conflict.

This perspective resonates with the foundational concept of 'positive peace', as articulated by Galtung (1969), which argues for the need to go beyond understandings of peace simply as the absence of violence, and to instead envisage peace as the presence of justice, equity and cooperative relationships. Markets, when functioning inclusively, can embody the principles of positive peace. They can create shared economic interests that bind communities together, reduce incentives for violence and serve as platforms for dialogue and mutual support. Understanding these dynamics is critical for reframing what prosperity might mean in pastoral drylands. Prosperity in these regions cannot be measured solely by market volumes or price indices but must include the social and institutional relationships that enable peaceful co-existence and equitable access to resources.

Discussion

From either perspective – whether focusing on the market itself or on wider conflict patterns – it is clear that prosperity does not, in any straightforward sense, emerge from a simple return to pre-conflict stability or the attainment of fixed development benchmarks, but rather through dynamic, relational processes of adaptation and exchange. In contexts where conflict has reconfigured market access, participation and governance, prosperity cannot be measured solely in terms of livestock holdings or infrastructure development. Instead, emergent forms of market organisation, relocated hubs, informal networks and increased participation of women and youth offer alternative pathways to (and possibly metrics for measuring) resilience and well-being. Mobility, long seen as central to pastoral production, also emerges as a key enabler of market participation and recovery. Crucially, markets that foster trust across ethnic or livelihood groups, and that embed inclusive institutions for dispute resolution and governance, align closely with the principles of positive peace. These features are not merely coping strategies but foundations for justice and resilience, and ultimately for forms of prosperity that reflect the lived realities of pastoral communities. Interventions along the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus

must therefore shift from viewing markets as neutral delivery platforms to recognising their potential as catalysts for prosperity, equity and peace in conflict-affected drylands.

As part of this, it is important that policy and programming move beyond narrow infrastructure-led or productivity-focused approaches. Conflict-induced market reconfigurations such as the relocation of hubs, diversification of actors and emergence of informal exchange networks can create new opportunities for marginalised groups, particularly women and youth. These shifts should not be treated as temporary adjustments but rather as entry points for more inclusive and resilient market systems. Supporting mobile and adaptive services, investing in conflict-sensitive infrastructure and strengthening local institutions that govern access, resolve disputes and help build peace, are central to sustaining market functions. Policies that enable safe and equitable mobility, recognise the legitimacy of informal institutions and integrate gender and youth-responsive design will be essential to unlocking long-term prosperity.

While significant advances have been made in understanding conflict dynamics in pastoral regions, critical gaps remain in both theory and empirical research concerning how markets themselves operate as institutions in times of conflict. Much of the literature has focused on pastoral mobility, which is often viewed through a security lens as a potential driver of instability while treating markets as static infrastructures. Yet our evidence from northern Kenya and the Kenya–Ethiopia border demonstrates that markets are not fixed physical spaces; rather, they, too, are mobile institutions, capable of relocating, reshaping their networks of actors and transforming their social meanings in response to conflict (see also Bond and Mkutu 2018; Penu and Paalo 2021). In this sense, there is a need for new theoretical and empirical work that explicitly interrogates the mobility of markets as institutions. When violence forces markets to shift locations, this is often not merely a logistical adjustment but rather a substantive institutional transformation with implications for access, inclusion and power dynamics.

An equally significant area for future research is the role of markets as infrastructure for peacebuilding. While markets are widely acknowledged as spaces where different ethnic groups converge, and thus as potential flashpoints for violence, there is far less systematic examination of how markets might actively forge alliances and forms of collaboration that contribute to intergroup cooperation and long-term peace. Furukawa and Deng (2019) point to the concept of bridging and

linking social capital in contexts like the Amiet Peace Market in Abyei, Sudan, where market interactions facilitate dialogue and trust-building between divided communities. However, beyond isolated examples, there is little empirical evidence on the precise mechanisms through which markets can generate and sustain such social capital in the Horn of Africa.

Moreover, while there is growing understanding of the institutional environments surrounding pastoral conflict, particularly regarding institutional transformation, plurality and the shifting meanings of governance structures, markets themselves remain under-theorised as institutions. Despite their centrality to pastoral livelihoods, pastoral markets are rarely conceptualised as dynamic systems capable of influencing conflict dynamics, shaping identities and mediating power relations. Questions remain about how markets operate under conditions of institutional pluralism, how customary authorities and formal state actors negotiate market governance in conflict zones and how these negotiations impact different groups.

Finally, we would suggest that explorations of pastoral markets in conflict settings have yet to fully account for the gender-relational dynamics through which economic and social life are constituted, and indeed change is enacted. There is a need for research that goes beyond documenting women's participation to examine how market institutions themselves can be sites of either reinforcement or transformation of gendered power relations. Such work could offer critical insights into how markets might become spaces of positive peace, fostering not only economic recovery but also social justice and equity.

Conclusions

While there is much work left to do in each of these areas, our argument in this chapter has sought to offer a broader reframing that might inform and orient future research and practice. Seeing markets as mobile, adaptive institutions whose trajectories under conflict can either entrench inequalities or open pathways to transformative change can lead to new approaches to peace and inclusion and new ways of comprehending and measuring prosperity in the years to come. Many recent works have emphasised the limitations of approaching prosperity purely in terms of measurable outputs and contributions to GDP (e.g. Cassiers 2015; Moore et al. 2023). This chapter builds on these works to emphasise the value of focusing instead on the capacity of institutions – in

our case markets – to sustain and progress community-led processes of adaptation.

It would perhaps, at least on one level, seem oxymoronic to speak of prosperity in the same breath as conflict. And yet we argue that a reconfiguration of fundamental conceptions of how conflict interacts with pastoral markets opens up new conceptual and practical possibilities. In this chapter we have argued that conflict never simplistically stands outside of economic life, coming to disrupt and destroy on its own terms. It is rather best understood as a moment that exposes and sometimes facilitates the reshaping of the moral and institutional architectures on which pastoral livelihoods depend. We would argue that this is a perspective that demands a shift in development practice, away from efforts to stabilise and restore 'normal' market functioning towards approaches that learn from and support the generative potential of adaptive, plural and locally grounded economies. Prosperity in the drylands is not merely productivity or economic growth; it is an emergent property of relational systems. These systems are increasingly oriented towards markets, the crucibles where they are continually remade, through times of peace and conflict alike.

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7

Pastoralist women's pathways to prosperity: collective solidarity, commoning and moral economy practices in Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands

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Introduction

Studies of African pastoralism have long sidelined women's experiences, practices and socio-economic contributions to everyday life (Onyima 2021). This is a situation that can trace its heritage back to early ethnographies undertaken in pastoralist contexts, which, while often making significant theoretical contributions to the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, often did so through an overt emphasis on men's herding or political activities, thereby implying a certain idleness and passivity among pastoralist women (Hodgson 1995, 1999; Spencer 1998; Flintan 2008). In more recent years, research across varied disciplines has increasingly focused on women, but the picture that has emerged is, on the whole, a binary one, with women tending to come across either as victims of broader social structures and processes or as fully empowered agents.

Apusigah and Bamora (2021) have recently emphasised the dissatisfactory nature of this unnuanced picture. While victim narratives ignore women's strategies and forms of active resistance to various challenges, an over-emphasis on 'empowerment' dichotomises and romanticises

women's struggles, resulting in incomplete and partial accounts (Cornwall 2003). Neither framing adequately captures the diversity of pastoralist women's lived realities, which vary by age, marital status, wealth, religion and political context. Treating women's experiences as universally representative risks flattening these differences and reproducing a monolithic image that obscures internal hierarchies and unequal access to power.

In this chapter, we seek to find a middle ground by examining the everyday spaces of negotiation through which pastoralist women navigate constraint, exert influence and define their own terms of participation amidst shifting dynamics of power, labour and care. We do so by investigating the work and collaborations of pastoralist women in three Kenyan contexts (Isiolo, Marsabit and Narok), exploring how they navigate economic life, contributing to the prosperity of their households and communities while defying their marginalisation and exclusion from formal governance bodies.

Drawing on the concepts of moral economy (Scott 1976; Mohamed 2022), commoning (Linebaugh 2008; Federici 2012; Fraser 2016) and on analytical insights from approaches to social networks (e.g. Bakker 2007), we examine how interactions between gendered labour, informal networks and infrastructures of care, sustain and give meaning to economic life. Our core argument is that women's economic activities, in our case study, are more than responses to structural inequalities; they constitute differentiated active sites of contestation and negotiation, through which women reshape prevailing gender orders and articulate their own visions of prosperity and the good life.

In centring women's economic agency and informal solidarities, this chapter's argument unfolds across three dimensions. First, we build on existing understandings of moral economies as living, adaptive systems of value that underpin pastoralist livelihoods, drawing attention to how they evolve in response to shifting economic and social realities, which are experienced unevenly across social and political positions. Second, we show how practices of commoning and reproductive labour express economic values rooted in care and interdependence, which persist from pastoralist moral worlds even as they are rearticulated within market contexts. Third, we highlight how informal women's economies can scale both horizontally and vertically, with implications for how we understand formality, development and political transformation. Broadly, we aim to contribute to conversations across feminist political economy, African economic anthropology and development studies, offering a grounded, non-totalising analysis of how varied forms of women's work sustain not

only households but the moral and economic systems through which wider communities define their own pathways to prosperity.

In the following section, we review key literature relevant to our study before outlining the research contexts and methods used for data collection. We then present a series of three discrete case studies, from three areas: Marsabit, Isiolo and Narok, comparing perspectives and experiences across these sites to examine the collective practices of care, exchange and solidarity through which women sustain and reshape pastoralist livelihoods. We conclude by reflecting on the study's implications for feminist political economy and for policies concerned with pastoralist livelihoods and drylands development.

Background

Prosperity

The notion of prosperity has, in recent years, become the focus of significant critical reconsideration across diverse disciplinary fields, as scholars move beyond economistic framings to articulate more multidimensional and contextually grounded accounts of human flourishing (Cassiers 2015; Moore et al. 2023). In the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) of Kenya, where pastoralism is both a livelihood and a cultural identity, prosperity cannot, despite dominant approaches in the world of development, be reduced to herd size or income. It is best understood in dynamic, relational and political terms, as something that pertains not only to the economy but also to ecology, social cohesion, cultural vitality and the pursuit of dignity and mutual care across genders. In other words, prosperity is not a fixed condition but an immanent process, woven through the multiple domains of everyday life and continually reshaped as people navigate diverse and often radical processes of change.

Much recent literature on pastoralism has emphasised the limitations of thinking about value purely in terms of material accumulation, and more specifically, the need to understand forms of relational wealth. Semplici et al. (2024), for example, have characterised pastoralist wealth as something embedded in and contingent on social ties, status and a dynamic world of reciprocal obligation. In this context, livestock are ill understood merely as assets; they are avenues to alliances, the fulfilment of obligations and the attainment of prestige. Prosperity thus emerges not from the accumulation of fixed assets, but

through freedom, the capacity to mobilise and the maintenance of social networks rooted in place and livelihood (Jameel Observatory 2024). Amidst all of this, mobility sustained through flexible collective tenure systems forms the lifeblood of pastoral life, through which social ties, livelihoods and landscapes are continually renewed (see Maru 2025).

Nevertheless, women and men often define and experience prosperity differently in pastoralist contexts, with many studies pointing to a tendency for men to emphasise herd size and for women to think and talk more in terms of food security, access to water, healthcare and children's education (Flintan 2008; Kristjanson et al. 2010; Wangari-Muneri 2024). Such differences highlight the highly gendered nature of labour in pastoralist societies, and the ways this shapes imaginations of the future. Alongside gender, a broad array of other factors is important to consider, including age, marital status and perhaps ethnicity (Wangari-Muneri 2024).

Thus, as we think more carefully about pastoral prosperities, and about what they reveal of both past trajectories and future possibilities, it is important to recognise that these are never singular and rarely harmonious. Rather, prosperity always constitutes a contested and plural terrain, fragmented across diverse experiences, familiarities and knowledges even within relatively small groups. To frame it otherwise risks mirroring the totalising visions of progress that have long shaped development planning and practice, or at least envisaging the future in similarly restrictive terms (e.g. Escobar 2011). Calls from feminist scholars for a holistic approach are particularly important here, as a means of understanding and incorporating women's practices and relations not as peripheral but as integral to the production of value, care and continuity within pastoral worlds (Federici 2012).

Moral economy

Increasingly, the idea of moral economy has become key to understandings of how pastoralist societies in East Africa navigate uncertainty and risk, including both market volatility and social transformation. Rooted in foundational works by E.P. Thompson (1971) and James Scott (1976), moral economy refers to culturally and socially embedded practices of redistribution and mutual support that mediate livelihoods under pressure. Johnson et al. (2023) recently defined moral economy as the set of social conventions and cultural norms that govern exchange, redistributing risk through reciprocal obligations, forced generosity and kin-based support. Far from 'precapitalist' remnants, the moral economy practices we explore in this chapter remain active and generative amidst

contemporary pastoral systems, intersecting with, contesting and reshaping market logics.

More widely, moral economies have been examined by means of their expressions in the circulation of livestock and mutual aid during droughts and reciprocal obligations tied to age, kinship and clan membership (e.g. McPeak et al. 2012). In a general sense, such practices challenge orientations towards and metrics that are predicated on individualism, emphasising the collectivity of pastoralist livelihoods in times of crisis and abundance (Catley et al. 2013). Mohamed (2020) has explored moral economy practices in pastoral northern Kenya, focusing on the ethos of solidarity that prevails there, noting how during crises the deep-rooted idea that 'I exist because you exist' comes to be reinforced through the sharing of livestock and other resources.

Scoones et al. (2023) further emphasise that these redistributive systems are governed by logics of mutuality, care and solidarity, often anchored in horizontal social accountabilities and trust networks that contrast with the dynamics of the development sector. Such practices are not monolithic but are shaped by intersecting social hierarchies, including gender, class, ethnicity and age. Indeed, Mohamed and Nori (2025) highlight how moral economies operate through gendered and generational channels, such as the male-dominated transfer of livestock or the women-led *marro* (rotational savings and sharing schemes) discussed by Derbyshire and Hassan in their contribution to this volume, underscoring how trust and reciprocity are mobilised to buffer against price shocks and production decline. Here, as elsewhere, moral economy is a set of not only cultural practices but also political ones, mobilising norms, technologies, trust, care and institutions to assert agency in the face of exploitative market structures.

Building on this literature, this study conceives of moral economy as a dynamic, evolving collection of solidarities and redistributive practices. It offers new evidence to explore the gendered dynamics of socio-economic change across pastoralist contexts in Kenya, unravelling the morality of trade and its implication in an already ongoing and deeply rooted process of adaptation long shaped by pastoralist values and experiences.

Commoning

In unravelling this picture, an equally important concept is 'commoning', which broadly comprises the collective practices, relationships and social norms through which communities manage shared resources. Moving beyond the material resource of 'the commons', commoning highlights

the dynamic, socially embedded processes through which access and use of resources are negotiated (see for example Linebaugh 2008; Bollier and Helfrich 2012) and new relations emerge (Nightingale 2019). In Kenya's drylands as in contexts elsewhere, commoning has historically underpinned the kinds of flexible and adaptive systems that sustain mobile livelihoods amidst variability.

It must be remembered that extensive grazing systems tend to rely on collective access not only to rangelands but also water points and other resources (Fratkin 1997; Homewood et al. 2009; Catley et al. 2013). Nevertheless, the institutions and arrangements that facilitate this are continually being reconfigured in response to ecological pressures, demographic shifts, land privatisation and changing governance regimes, reflecting the broader point that pastoralism itself is always in transition (Cullis and Watson 2005; Flintan 2012). In many contexts, the fragmentation of communal lands through individual titling, conservation efforts or environmental shocks and stressors has led to new, innovative approaches to commoning, through complex, messy and often hybrid arrangements (e.g. Robinson and Flintan 2022).

Scholars focusing on its gendered nature have documented some of the ways in which women engage in acts of everyday commoning, resisting various forms of marginalisation or negotiating shared access through informal networks, thereby reshaping the meaning and practices of commons (Archambault 2016; Flintan et al. 2019). Indeed, Archambault (2016) observed that Maasai families under privatisation pressures attempt to recreate the commons by relying on social networks for free access to resources. Women's social ties via kin, friends and religious associations and community-based strategies are important in this process and effectively restore grazing access. Thus, well-intentioned interventions that ignore women's informal systems of resource sharing and care may undermine the very networks that sustain their livelihoods (Cleaver 2000). Consequently, understanding the everyday practices and politics of commoning, especially from a gendered perspective, is crucial for comprehending how pastoralist women navigate change and rework the social and economic relationships that underpin their livelihoods.

Drawing on this body of scholarship, in this chapter we foreground social reproduction, exploring how forms of reproductive labour such as childcare gain traction and come to be re-established amidst capitalistic economies (cf. Fraser 2016; Bhattacharya 2017). Of course, feminist analyses see social reproduction not as peripheral to development but as central to understanding how economies function and how gendered power operates within them. As Federici (2012) notes, reproductive

commons arise when women refuse to individualise survival and instead produce collective infrastructures of care and subsistence. Women's commercial activities are thus not fully discernible through economic metrics alone, as they are generative grounds for transformation, where new gender contracts are being negotiated and enacted on a continual basis.

In Kenya, women's groups and *chamas* (informal savings and investment collectives) have emerged as critical forms of commoning that enable women to navigate gendered vulnerabilities and forms of structural marginalisation. These groups operate as localised, self-organised systems of mutual aid and resource pooling, offering a practical response to the exclusion of women from formal financial institutions and decision-making spaces (Kinyanjui 2012). Rooted in local knowledge and communal values, *chamas* serve not only as economic support networks but also as social platforms for empowerment and collective action (Wangui 2014). Through these associations, women create solidarities that challenge neoliberal and patriarchal frameworks, cultivating spaces of care, trust and resilience (Federici 2012; Mohamed 2023). Scholars have emphasised that such informal institutions are not merely coping mechanisms but constitute active resistance to gendered socio-economic exclusion, producing alternative economies and forms of governance that are often overlooked in mainstream development discourse (Cornwall 2003; Koster and Ballamingie 2020; Wangari-Muneri 2024). As a form of commoning, *chamas* exemplify how marginalised groups mobilise shared practices and resources to address everyday insecurities and assert greater autonomy in both public and private spheres.

Informal networks and gendered solidarity

Such practices and processes of navigating change are made possible through informal networks and gendered solidarities, which are based on kinship, neighbourhood ties, religious affiliations and friendship. As others have done, we envisage these networks as infrastructures of support, care and reciprocity, especially where formal institutions are weak or exclusionary (see Gómez Becerra and Wangari-Muneri 2021).

Such networks, however, do more than fill institutional gaps. More widely, scholars have highlighted their political dimensions, and their embeddedness in histories of marginalisation. Gómez Becerra and Wangari-Muneri (2021), for example, have demonstrated how various forms of care practices during the COVID-19 pandemic operated through informal solidarities among Maasai communities. Perhaps the most

important point is that, here and elsewhere, critical networks hinge on gendered labour and various emotional investments that tend to be invisible in policy discourse.

In other contexts, women's informal networks centred on institutions such as rotating savings and credit associations, burial societies, mutual aid groups and neighbourhood care coalitions have been shown to offer vital forms of economic security and emotional support. Examples include the abovementioned *marro* in pastoral Kenya (Khalif and Oba 2018; Mohamed and Nori 2025) and *stokvels* in Southern Africa (Verhoef 2001), both of which institutions not only facilitate access to capital but also serve as sites of identity, solidarity and resistance to exclusion from formal financial systems.

In exploring such institutions, and the wider networks that take shape around and by means of them, many have challenged predilections for focusing on 'the formal', highlighting the critical importance of informal, everyday solidarities in social protection (Roy 2009; Federici 2012). We follow this line of enquiry, exploring evidence from our research sites in Kenya to examine how informal networks and gendered solidarities are critical to the navigation of contemporary markets and shifting economic landscapes. In doing so, we reflect on wider implications vis-à-vis prosperity, exploring the possibility for more nuanced, relational understandings of support and well-being.

The study areas

Our study took place in two broad areas: Marsabit and Isiolo in northern Kenya and Narok County in southern Kenya, with data collected among Borana and Maasai communities, respectively. Both areas comprise broadly pastoral economies, which are nevertheless heterogeneous, with livestock production being supplemented by a range of other economic activities, including small-scale trade, farming and employment in small centres. Within Marsabit and Isiolo Counties, the specific sites in which data were collected were Kinna, a small semi-urban pastoral town located between Meru and Maua municipalities, and Bori, a rural village in Moyale Sub-County, south of Marsabit County. Meanwhile, in Narok, the main research site was in Talek.

Across these two general areas, our research was conducted across three contrasting pastoralist settings: Kinna (Isiolo County), Bori (Marsabit County) and Talek (Narok County). Kinna, situated near Isiolo town, benefits from relatively good infrastructure, access to electricity and mobile networks, along with vibrant women-led milk cooperatives that connect pastoral producers to urban markets. Bori, by contrast, lies

in a more remote and arid part of northern Kenya, where limited infrastructure, recurrent droughts and environmental pressures constrain livelihoods, though proximity to the Ethiopian border provides important cross-border market linkages.

Meanwhile, Talek, which lies within the Maasai Mara ecosystem, faces distinct pressures associated with conservation and climate variability and change (Naess et al. 2025). Land leasing for conservation has led to grazing restrictions and curtailed mobility, prompting extensive gendered livelihood diversification. Women are increasingly engaged in non-land-based activities as they were systematically dispossessed in the process of leasing land for conservation process (Wangari-Muneri 2024). Beyond gender differences, other axes of differentiation are equally consequential. Age, wealth and marital status have been identified as crucial social markers shaping women's access to land, livestock, credit, social networks and decision-making power (Wangari-Muneri 2024). Economically poorer women often navigate far more constrained options than wealthier married women, underscoring how social networks are unevenly distributed rather than uniformly shared among 'Maasai women'.

Together, these sites capture the diversity of pastoralist experience in contemporary Kenya, shaped by uneven access to infrastructure, markets and resources, as well as by differing ecological and political constraints.

Methods

This study draws on long-term mixed methods qualitative research and has also been informed by a scoping study on understanding resilience, which was undertaken by one of the authors in 2023 and a 'photo-voice' project with camel-milk producers in northern Kenya (See Jameel Observatory 2024). However, the study is also situated within wider ethnographic, historical and political ecology research undertaken by both authors across the respective sites, all of which provides important grounds for analysis and interpretation (e.g. Mohamed 2022; Wangari-Muneri 2024).

Study participants included men, women and young people across all sites. The data were collected through a combination of focus group discussions, semi-structured and key informant interviews, life history narratives, participant observation and historical event mapping (see Table 7.1). Alongside these methods, we also used photo-voice and network-mapping exercises to gain a richer understanding of embodied experience and the social relations through which women navigate uncertainty and

livelihood change. In the following section, we draw together some of the different experiences of women that were explored during this research, presenting three examples of some of the different ways women navigate markets amidst shifting conditions.

Women's agency, collective solidarity and care

Halima

Halima is a young Borana woman living in Kinna, who has been involved in milk vending for the past 10 years. We interviewed her there in February 2020. She explained that she began this work by getting milk from Rage, a Somali herd owner, and a trader living in Kinna. Rage collects milk from producers and supplies it to the women in town, including, at first, Halima, thus brokering between Halima and milk producers. He charges roughly 300 Kenyan shillings (just over US $2) for every 5 litres of milk, and Halima sells a cup for roughly 20 shillings (a litre is approximately 4 cups). Unhappy with the small profit margins that come from depending on brokers like Rage, Halima recently decided to join with other women, and hired the services of a motorcycle rider called Boru to transport milk directly to her, paying 100 shillings for every 10 litres of milk. When he comes, Boru also brings a list of food rations, medicines and other needs from the milk producers. In return,

Table 7.1 Breakdown of methods used in the research.

Methods	Number	Place
Focus-group discussion	11	Kinna, Bori and Mara
Key informant interviews	27	Kinna, Bori, Isiolo, Marsabit, Moyale, Nairobi, Mara and Narok
Stakeholder interviews	34	Nairobi, Marsabit, Isiolo and Narok
In-depth interviews	37	Kinna, Bori, Talek and Narok
Life-history narratives	4	Narok
Photo-voice	3	Isiolo
Event mapping	14	Isiolo and Marsabit
Network mapping	6	Kinna and Bori

Halima and her group use the money they make from selling milk to purchase many of the items requested by the producers. One outstanding practice that emerged from this relationship is that Halima and her group pay the milk producers at the end of every month and not immediately. Therefore, they get ample time to trade and utilise the immediate milk money for other urgent needs.

Halima also trades with Ibrahim Hajii, who provides cow milk from his herd in Kinna. In every good season, Ibrahim supplies milk to Halima and her wider group members. However, Halima recalled how during a recent dry spell – when Ibrahim's herd was producing very limited milk – she and her colleagues sourced milk from a supplier in a dairy farm in Meru (roughly 80 kilometres away). Motorcycle transporters connected Halima and her six other group members to a female supplier operating in Meru and Maua towns (the latter being slightly closer). The transport cost 80 shillings for every 5-litre jerrycan of milk, while the milk itself in such a jerrycan cost 380 shillings, bringing the total for every 5 litres to 460 shillings. Realising the high cost, Halima and the team decided to hire the services of a car driver, who provides transport to people along the route three times a week. The driver, Roba, charges 25 shillings per 5 litres of milk, thus bringing the group's total cost down to 405 shillings.

Halima uses proceeds from her trade for a variety of daily needs, including the payment of loans, school fees and medicines or veterinary services for her goats. She has also enrolled in her group's saving club, the members of which each contribute 500 shillings every 2 weeks, especially during good seasons when the milk supply is sufficient. Her trade allows for careful financial planning – she sells milk both to daily customers and through monthly subscriptions. Importantly, when she is unwell, or occupied with other responsibilities, her fellow group members collect and sell milk on her behalf. Their collective presence also attracts periodic visits from public health officers, who provide advice on milk safety and hygiene practices. A web of relationships, which is expanded and strengthened via the presence of a nuclear closeknit group, allows Halima to manage a market that has highly variable dynamics, while also providing her with greater flexibility in planning and decision-making than would otherwise be possible.

Taditi

Taditi is a 58-year-old female herder who lives on the outskirts of Bori village, in Moyale, in the southern part of Marsabit County, where we interviewed her in February 2023. She is a mother of six and is married to Qampicha, who manages herds of cattle and goats. When Taditi got

married, she received two cows from her brother and two from her father. She helped manage the calves from these and other animals, milking them and teaching her children aspects of herd management. She lost all her livestock during a series of bad droughts, but recovered others through redistribution from family, in-laws and friends. Many years ago, Taditi joined an informal women's group, which consisted of women from her wider area. This group, of which she is still a member, provides a platform for sharing herding labour, milk marketing and caring for calves and has been in operation since 1998. It works on a quota basis, consisting of five bundled groups along adjacent houses within the same cluster of homesteads.

The sale of milk has become a critical source of income for the women in Taditi's group, who come from five neighbouring houses. For many years they engaged in this business in a collaborative manner, originally collecting three litres of milk from each household, making a total of fifteen litres, to bring to market. Group members would take this milk to the Moyale market on a rotational basis, allowing other members to rest for four days. During the rainy season, when milk production would peak, the rotation would reduce to two days, with two group members taking milk to the market on each rotation. This is a journey of about eighty kilometres, along the Bori-Somare escarpment, and would take roughly four hours. Pregnant group members would typically be exempted from making these journeys from around seven months of pregnancy until their child was three months old, allowing time for childbirth, recovery and early childcare.

In the market, the group sell milk by the cup, at 35 shillings per cup. Once all the milk is sold on any given day, group members save a percentage of their income at a shop in Moyale town run by a trusted friend, using the remaining profits to purchase essential goods such as books, flour, sugar, medicines and tobacco. During a group discussion, one of the group members noted that 'we saved the money with Halakhe [the shop keeper] because, if we come home with it, we may end up misusing it, instead we save for our children's school, paying the herders and other needs'. Taditi and her colleagues noted that they tend to save between 200 and 500 shillings on each day of trade, with their capacity to save increasing markedly during the rainy season.

In the market, the group's milk is received by intermediary traders, called *Nagade*, who are based at the Moyale terminal market. Taditi's intermediary trader is called Asha, and she helps to facilitate the regular deposit of some of Taditi's profits with the shopkeeper Halakhe; this is a personal arrangement, based on trust, that has been in place for 18 years.

Asha also often purchases food items for Taditi using profits from the sale of her milk, based on lists given to her along with the milk at the beginning of the day.

The logistics of this arrangement have changed substantially in recent years, in line with increasing access to motorcycle and vehicle transport and mobile money transfers. Indeed, nowadays there are at least two cars in Bori, which travel to Moyale town in shifts. Capitalising on the efficiency of this transport link, Taditi and her group members have begun sending their milk to market in cars, paying 20 shillings for every 3 litres of milk. In the rainy season, when milk production is at its peak, each member will send about 15 litres of milk to market, paying 100 shillings for the transport. On each these car trips, one member of the group accompanies all the milk to Moyale, hands it over to the respective *Nagade*, and brings back all the essential goods required by the group. During our interview, Taditi noted that with the ease of transport systems, membership of her group has increased to 10 members, with each member now contributing 30 shillings on market days to pay for the bus fare and lunch of the person accompanying the milk.

Taditi and her fellow group members have also recently joined a formal group called 'Abrasa', which was first initiated by an NGO project. The members of this larger group contribute 100 shillings a month to a rotational savings programme. The Abrasa group comprises over 70 members and the money it raises is partly used to fund social events, including *waqlal* (a name-giving ceremony) and weddings, but is also drawn on by members to cover some of the costs of secondary education fees for their children. In our interview, Taditi reflected on shifting household dynamics, noting that the responsibility for daily sustenance increasingly falls on women. She observed that many men, faced with shrinking herds and few alternative income opportunities, have become less involved in meeting household needs, while women rely on expanding networks of exchange and support to sustain their families. Nevertheless, a recent increase in the regularity and severity of droughts has negatively impacted milk supply, leaving many households with little or no income.

Naisura, Soila and Sein

Among many Maasai communities, formal education is increasingly viewed as a strategy to diversify livelihoods, especially in the face of environmental change and land use shifts towards conservation. Many have explored this trend, arguing that education has, in many instances, served to expand opportunities amidst increasingly heterogeneous pastoral

economies, often complementing pastoralism in new ways, or serving as a means for reinvesting in it (e.g. Archambault 2017, 2024; Omolo and Mafongoya, 2019; Walker et al. 2022). During fieldwork in the Mara, this was a narrative that was shared widely by research participants across different social class, gender and age groups. However, it quickly became clear that women across social differences were particularly active agents in promoting education. Indeed, headteachers often noted that women are more likely to attend school meetings, pay school fees, advocate for girls' enrolment and retention after pregnancy and take on additional domestic labour to support their children's schooling. Some, it was explained, even relocate closer to schools to reduce commuting time, despite the added burden to their daily responsibilities.

Naisura (45), Soila (42) and Sein (39) are three Maasai women who today operate the largest private primary school in their region; we interviewed them in November 2019 and January 2020. The women first met in a women's group, a space of solidarity and resource pooling where members practise 'table banking', a localised informal credit system through which participants contribute and borrow funds on a rotational basis. In 2015, the trio, all tertiary level educated, were young mothers juggling waged labour and childcare: Naisura worked as a secretary at a nearby resort, Soila as a tailor and Sein had just been employed as an early childhood teacher. Like many working mothers in the country, they had hired nannies to help with childcare, but the reality of this arrangement was often precarious. Nannies would leave abruptly, children would fall ill, and there were moments of clear neglect. The tension between the demands of waged labour and the expectations of caregiving was palpable.

When school holidays came in April 2005, Sein volunteered to watch over all seven of their toddlers at her home, temporarily relieving Naisura and Soila, who continued with their jobs. The arrangement was informal but deeply significant. As the holidays ended, the old question returned: who would care for their children once Sein returned to work? The women decided on a simple yet profound solution: Sein would remain at home to care for their children, and in exchange, each woman would pay 3,000 shillings on a monthly basis (an equivalent amount to what they had previously paid nannies). This moment marked the informal birth of a child daycare business, which would form the foundation of what would eventually evolve into a full-fledged school.

Before long, other women in the area began bringing their children as well, drawn by the flexibility and trust embedded in the arrangement. Some paid daily rates, others monthly, and many

contributed in-kind by helping to care for the children on some days when cash was short. As the number of children grew, the three women rented an extra space away from Sein's home, in the local shopping centre, eventually hiring two caregivers to help Sein. What had begun as a stop-gap solution to a shared problem was now becoming a more structured enterprise.

By 2010, with the children reaching school-going age, the women expanded the initiative by opening a private primary school. For Sein, this was a welcome return to formal teaching. They secured initial capital through individual loans from their women's group and built their first class on rented land. They began modestly, with ten pupils and one teacher, and added a new class each year by reinvesting annual income. At the time of the fieldwork behind this chapter, the school had grown to house 450 pupils and employed 24 teachers and 7 support staff. Naisura and Soila transitioned from formal employment to serve as the operations and finance managers, while Sein remained the head of teaching. Their partnership is marked not only by a clear division of labour but also by enduring trust, shaped through years of shared caregiving, mutual financial risk and a shared vision.

The road to legitimacy and acceptance, however, was not without friction. While their daycare was largely welcomed, the opening of the primary school, and more so, the purchase of the land on which it stood in 2012, provoked scepticism and, in some cases, resistance. Some members of the community viewed their ambition with suspicion, feeling that they were pushing beyond what was expected or acceptable of women in the Maasai community. Their expansion into land ownership and formal education provision marked a shift in the local gendered economy of authority.

With loans from a local bank, the women not only purchased the land but also constructed dormitories, particularly for girls in upper primary classes. These boarding facilities have become safe, enabling spaces where girls can study without the distraction of household chores and the risk of early withdrawal from school due to social pressures. The school's impressive performance has since earned the trust of the wider community, and enrolment has steadily increased. The women's ability to access loans, secure relevant information and structure these enterprises in more formal ways can be attributed to their educational background and social class.

Although the women have not yet ventured into establishing a secondary school, they continue to support the educational trajectory of their students by sourcing scholarships for top-performing children from

low-income families. Indeed, during our fieldwork, they were focused on renovating older classroom structures, an effort that reflects both their growth and their commitment to sustaining quality education.

What is particularly striking about their enterprise is how it remains entangled with the networks and logics from which it emerged. The school sources food, milk, water and cleaning supplies from other members of the women's group, maintaining flexible, term-aligned payment schedules that respond to the cyclical nature of school fee collection. They also continue to lease event equipment from the group during school functions, ensuring that capital continues circulating within the community and reinforcing the collective ownership of the women's group's benefits.

Beyond the school, the women run a bookshop and a school uniform shop, supplying both their students and others in the region. By sourcing directly from Nairobi-based distributors, they cut out intermediaries, reduce costs for families and generate stable income. These auxiliary businesses also reduce parents' need to travel to larger towns like Narok, reinforcing the school as a hub not only of learning but of community life.

Discussion

All the cases outlined above are examples of how women in pastoralist societies in Kenya are actively reshaping the contours of economic life through collective labour, informal financial systems and care-based entrepreneurship. At the same time, these examples should not be read as a monolithic portrait of 'the pastoralist woman'. As we have emphasised throughout this chapter, women's experiences differ across social and economic realities that cause differentiated capacities for manoeuvre. The cases, nevertheless, broadly demonstrate the vitality and importance of diverse webs of relationships, grounded in trust, that facilitate access to markets, resources and livelihood options. Such relationships crosscut different experience bases and locations, but in their entanglement around nuclear collectives of women, they become grounds through which everyday practices of care, trust and solidarity come to critically shape development and resilience. In facilitating this entanglement, and capitalising on it to navigate a complex terrain of challenges and possibilities, these women not only sustain households and communities back home but also challenge normative gendered constraints, carving out

spaces of autonomy and influence within a rapidly transforming socio-economic landscape. In this section, we explore some of the key implications from the cases, considering how they might inform understandings of economic change, prosperity and the future.

Moral economy and reciprocal exchange

Across all three study contexts, it is clear that economic activity is structured not merely by market imperatives but also by shared ethical norms, trust and relational obligations (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976; Mohamed and Nori 2025). Whether it is milk sales or childcare provision, women draw on reciprocity, trust and care as key organising principles for their economic activities. In this regard, their arrangements, in a straightforward sense, resist narrow economistic logics of prosperity, foregrounding instead the social and moral dimensions of economic life that feminist scholars have long argued are obscured by market centred frameworks. As with the livestock marketers in Roba's chapter, processes of socio-economic change in our study areas have been actively negotiated and co-opted, not experienced passively. In contexts that are perhaps often imagined to be governed primarily by individual accumulation (markets), these women have re-established collective systems of reciprocity, mutual support and shared risk, sustaining social value through relational rather than purely competitive practices. To put this another way, all three cases emphasise what Tronto (2018) and Federici (2012) term a politics of care: an ethic of interdependence wherein economic activities are inseparable from social reproduction.

Beyond this broad framing, the examples reflect several different forms and scales of moral economy. The Isiolo case, for example, features a moral economy mediated by brokerage and intercommunal trade networks. Halima's work hinges on her relationship with Rage, whose role as a broker reflects interdependencies between producers and sellers across spatial divides. The system of deferred payments and trust-based obligations is a mixture of informal finance and caregiving logic, embedded in cross-household and cross-community solidarity. The Marsabit case, on the other hand, reveals a more kinship-rooted moral economy. Taditi reconstituted her herd through family redistribution, exemplifying how pastoralist wealth in the form of livestock circulates through kin networks after ecological shocks. Labour-sharing and income-pooling within her women's group further illustrate intra-community cooperation. In working to support individuals during important life-course events, such as birth and child rearing, the system of

which Taditi is a part works as a medium through which economic roles, and economic transformation more broadly, is continuously negotiated within gendered temporalities.

The women from Narok, on the other hand, work amidst a moral economy grounded in urban and peri-urban informal caregiving networks. Here, Sein's daycare operates not through kin or market ties but through neighbourhood-level relational labour. The innovation lies in the non-commodified nature of early childcare, where in-kind contributions and flexible terms reflect the precarious realities of women's informal labour. Unlike Isiolo and Marsabit, where milk and livestock are central currencies, Narok centres time, care and social access as alternative currencies.

A key implication that arises from these combined cases is that they all, in different ways, complicate the binaries that often structure understandings of economic change in rural Africa (i.e. formal/informal, economic/social). The cases show that moral economies cannot be fully apprehended in black and white terms; they find expression across diverse contexts and processes of ongoing change, serving both as grounds for the re-establishment of pre-existing practices and approaches and for the realisation of completely new ambitions. To put this more simply, they are both engines of change and anchors of continuity in an ever-evolving moral and material landscape (see Mohamed 2022). We return to these points in our conclusion.

Infrastructures of commoning and reproductive labour

Many of the socio-economic practices we have explored in these cases can be understood as dynamic processes of commoning. These practices, much like feminist critiques of economic life that challenge the individualising logics of capitalism, subvert dominant narratives of entrepreneurship, ownership and value. Across all sites, commoning extends beyond the management of physical resources such as milk or buildings to encompass the collective organisation of time, labour, responsibility and social risk, a logic that privileges equity and relational well-being over immediate profitability.

In all three cases, women do not engage in economic activity as isolated actors but as participants in communal infrastructures built through shared risk. Halima and her group in Isiolo collaboratively hire transport, coordinate milk supply chains and assume one another's roles in times of illness. In Marsabit, the Abrasa women's milk pooling and joint logistics reflect a similar ethic, further institutionalised as the group

formalises without sacrificing its relational core. In Narok, what begins as informal childcare among working mothers evolves into a formal school, characterised by cooperative governance and local resource sourcing that preserves the moral and material foundations of commoning.

What binds these forms of commoning is their foundation in social reproduction, the ongoing, often invisible work of sustaining life, households and communities (Federici 2012). Women's groups in these cases not only enable market participation but also ensure continuity of care and well-being within their communities. When Halima is ill or when a group member gives birth, others step in, reconfiguring labour through empathetic obligation rather than contractual enforcement. The Narok daycare turned school emerged as a collective response to the everyday reproductive work crisis. The flexible payment modalities in all the cases highlight the non-monetary dimensions of social reproduction (Katz 2001; Bakker 2007; Gómez Becerra and Wangari-Muneri, 2021). Collectively, these cases speak to broader debates in social reproduction theory, which situate reproductive labour – care work, child rearing and the everyday sustenance of households and communities – as foundational to the continuity of both economic systems and social relations (see Fraser 2016; Bhattacharya 2017).

Significantly, by formalising care work into a paid service in Narok, the women not only created income-generating opportunities for themselves and others but also redistributed reproductive labour in a way that enabled broader female participation in the informal and formal economies. The school's operational model, which embeds it in a broader network, continues to reflect principles of commoning. The strategic intervention of offering boarding to girls reflects a broader gendered politics of care, where women not only respond to their own needs but actively reshape the social structures around them (Tronto 2018; Federici 2012). It also illuminates a deeper understanding of how the burdens of home life (i.e. cooking, fetching water, caregiving) disproportionately affect female students and limit their educational attainment in pastoralist and agrarian contexts (Kabeer 2017).

Weaving informal networks and gendered solidarity as feminist economic praxis

Across the three cases, informal networks operate as critical infrastructures that sustain livelihoods, facilitate social reproduction and build resilience in the face of market and environmental uncertainty. In Isiolo, Halima's integration into a diverse network of milk suppliers,

transporters and health officials illustrates how women establish cross-sectoral ties to maintain a consistent income despite seasonal and climatic volatility. This mirrors Marsabit's relational economy, where Taditi's long-term partnership with intermediaries, such as Asha, reflects the durability of trust-based exchange in the absence of formal contracts or institutional protections.

These everyday economic arrangements reflect what Hart (1973) first termed the informal economy, albeit through a gendered lens that foregrounds care, collaboration and social obligation. They challenge assumptions that informal economies are unstructured or survivalist. Instead, they embody what Meagher (2010: 59) calls 'networks of accumulation', where resource flows, skills and values circulate through personalised, but robust, systems of reciprocity and redistribution.

In all three sites, rotating savings groups (e.g. Isiolo's table banking, Marsabit's group contributions and Narok's pooled funds) play a central role not only in enabling economic participation but in reinforcing social cohesion and accountability. These financial forms are simultaneously material and symbolic, creating spaces where gendered solidarity is performed, negotiated and reproduced (Cornwall 2007; Kabeer 2017). In Isiolo and Marsabit, informal networks remain embedded in day-to-day routines, with economic activity centring on milk trade and care-based labour exchanges. Both cases illustrate highly relational and labour-intensive economies, where the flow of goods is tightly coupled with the circulation of trust, moral obligation and embodied care work. The use of motorised transport (e.g. the shift to Probox vans) and informal savings mechanisms (such as depositing income with trusted shopkeepers) reflects a process of technological and infrastructural adaptation, where material and social systems co-evolve.

Narok, by contrast, presents a scaling up of informal solidarities into formalised institutions. What begins as ad hoc childcare among working women evolves into a registered school, one that maintains its informal ethos of redistribution and community ownership even as it engages with state regulations and formal education systems. This transition illustrates how informal networks can generate institutional permanence and public goods, without abandoning their feminist foundations. The Narok school is both an infrastructure of care and a political intervention in the Maasai gender order, as it disrupts norms around property, education and women's visibility in public life. Unlike the other two cases, Narok illustrates how gendered informal networks can scale not only horizontally (through mutual aid) but vertically (towards political transformation).

Conclusions

This chapter has explored some of the ways in which pastoralist women across Kenya pursue prosperity in ways that are deeply embedded in moral economies, commoning practices and collective solidarities. These women's economic and social lives encapsulate alternative, often overlooked pathways to prosperity that are grounded not purely in individual accumulation or formal employment but in shared labour, trust-based exchanges and, above all, gendered practices of care and reciprocity.

Studying their livelihood strategies, it is clear that organised women's groups, and the wider networks these groups galvanise and sustain, are not only the bedrock of household resilience but are also powerful vehicles used to navigate and reshape local economies, bending them towards the collective desires of women. Connectedly, we would suggest that the entrepreneurial efforts we have explored in this chapter invite a broader understanding of agency among women in pastoralist groups. They add further evidence to a growing critique of implicit characterisations of rural African women, and particularly pastoralist women, as economically passive, highlighting some of the active ways in which structural constraints around gender, land and capital are being challenged (cf. Pollard et al. 2015).

The chapter charts a middle path between the two essentialised portrayals of pastoralist women that tend to emerge (i.e. those critiqued by Apusigah and Bamora 2021). It illustrates how women actively participate in and shape economic transformation, while simultaneously confronting, contesting and attempting to counter structural inequalities. They emerge neither as passive victims nor as perfectly empowered victors.

As we look beyond universalising metrics towards understandings of pastoral prosperity rooted in local values and aspirations, these insights warn against monolithic characterisations. Pastoral prosperity is, we would suggest, always contested ground, where divergent, competing visions are pursued in parallel, even as they share social and moral worlds. Women in pastoralist contexts across northern Kenya work at the frontlines of change, carving out new futures for themselves and their communities. They do so by drawing on pre-existing practices and values, thereby bending markets to their needs. However, they also often do so with a view to navigating entrenched inequality from within their own societies, collaborating in an ethics of care to pursue futures within futures.

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Part III
Connection

Understanding some of the ways in which pastoralists have negotiated economic transformation over recent years in the drylands means seeing such transformation itself as a terrain for reconfiguring the past, present and future of pastoralism – that is, as grounds for physical and intellectual engagement where new connections are drawn between places, times, methods and possibilities. But connections made in marketplaces are only ever part of a broader universe of epistemological and ontological connections that are actively made by pastoralist peoples amidst diverse architectures of intervention and transformation.

Thinking about all of this – the creative work of meaning-making and history-making amidst change, and the socio-material patterns that ensue – unsettles the categories often used to organise and interpret life in the drylands. Pastoralists routinely defy both physical and conceptual borders, forging and reforging their livelihoods in the face of systems of thought, practice and governance that seek to render them legible. Livelihoods, customary institutions, communities, practices, histories, identities, skills and knowledges all resist the limits imposed by policy and practice, spilling beyond the frames drawn around them.

The chapters in this part present evidence from northern Uganda and Western Sahara to explore how pastoralist peoples make their worlds anew in the midst of transition. They examine how pastoralist pasts are brought to bear on the unfolding challenges of the present and how futures are conceived, contested and pursued in the process. They paint a picture of pastoralism as a practice of continual becoming, sometimes reworking itself to endure amidst systemic constraints and

injustices, sometimes reconstituting itself entirely, beyond the bounds of disjuncture and loss. In the worlds the chapters visit, prosperity does not come spilling outward from the past, nor does it approach fully formed from an externalised future; it is fought for, crafted and sustained in the rhythms of daily striving.

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Social capital and everyday practices of resilience building among pastoralists in Karamoja

Padmini Iyer and Simon Peter Longoli

Introduction

The vast and varied literature on the role of social networks before, during and after disasters is a critical line of research within enquiries on social capital (Meyer 2018). Researchers across disciplines have documented the positive consequences that emerge from involvement and participation in social networks, structures and groups (Aldrich and Meyer 2015; Portes 2024). Such networks, whether acquired through kinship relations or other strategies, play an outsized role in disaster situations, where they are often the first line of help, and provide access to aid, financial resources, information and other social support. In contexts of prevalent uncertainty and cyclical disasters, particularly where formal governance is weak, social networks, shared norms and informal institutions are, perhaps, even more critical. Such is the case for pastoralist areas of East Africa.

For the past decade, substantial investments by donors and governments in 'resilience' programming have been accompanied by equivalent interest in its foundational paradigms, applicability and, importantly, critique (Bahadur et al. 2010; Béné et al. 2012; Patel et al. 2017; Reyers et al. 2022). In pastoralist contexts, criticism levelled against resilience thinking and implementation has primarily focused on the continued under-appreciation of pastoralists' specialised responses to and strategies for managing variability, and the widening gap between the conceptualisations of development practitioners and local knowledge

systems (Catley et al. 2013; FAO 2021; Semplici and Campbell 2023). Despite attempts to bridge the theory and practice gap in drylands development and claims of being 'bottom up', resilience programming in pastoralist areas continues to be ahistorical and uninformed by cultural practice, falling easily into a variety of 'disciplinary trap doors' (Krätli et al. 2015; Wandji et al. 2021).

This chapter highlights two informal institutions among pastoralists in Karamoja, Uganda, in an attempt to recalibrate resilience thinking and recentre the role of social capital. We take as our point of departure the concept of 'vernacular resilience', or the 'resilience of communities as constructed across the overlap between: 1) the historicity of adverse environmental, economic and socio-political conditions; 2) the cultural repertoires and social practices passed down from generation to generation; and 3) the variety of contextual responses to multiple crises' (Wandji et al. 2021). Vernacular resilience centres the everyday practices of communities and their agency in building their own resilience. In so doing, vernacular resilience or 'resilient resistance' (Ryan 2015) challenges existing frameworks of resilience thinking through its emphasis on those historical and socio-cultural aspects that are often entirely ignored in normative frameworks, which tend to take a depoliticised and ahistorical lens.

Through the examples of livestock-sharing relationships/friendships and the negotiation practice of *etamam* ('sending the message'), this chapter explores how Karamoja's communities creatively navigate change and reframe resilience on their own terms. It is our contention, in support of other evidence, that, while resilience is a valuable concept, it must be grounded in the lived experiences, knowledge and practices of communities. Key to this is pastoralists' relations to one another and what these relational processes mean for pastoralist resilience and prosperity (Krätli et al. 2015; Semplici et al. 2024). We show how Karamoja's pastoralists innovatively reconfigure relations, not only to navigate change but also as grounds for the expression of long-standing practices, relationships and values, which endure precisely through their creative reformulation.

Data for this chapter come from our long-term engagement with the region through ethnographic, project-based and advocacy-related research.[1] We have collaborated since 2012 on various research endeavours, including research on pastoralist livelihoods, mechanisms of social cohesion, pastoralist governance, the impact of climate change on pastoral mobility and extractive industries and land use changes in Karamoja. Primary data sources for this chapter include multi-sited data

from Iyer's doctoral dissertation among Matheniko section of Karimojong and Tepeth agro-pastoralists, long-term research by Karamoja Herders of the Horn (research and advocacy NGO) on pastoralism and governance and insights from the two authors' collaboration over the years.[2]

A brief note on resilience practice in Karamoja

The Karamoja region in northeastern Uganda is home to several communities, often collectively referred to as 'Karamojong', who are transhumant pastoralists.[3] Between the 1980s and 2011, Karamoja became infamous for armed intergroup livestock raiding and the Ugandan government's forced disarmament campaign that followed, which was accompanied by violence, human rights abuses and a substantive shock to the livestock base in the region. These events had an indelible effect on pastoralist livelihoods. A relatively peaceful period followed, which opened the region up to some positive impacts, such as the bouncing back of pastoral livelihoods (Stites et al. 2016) but also to extensive extraction and continued marginalisation (Human Rights Watch 2014; Iyer et al. 2019).

Despite prevalent narratives on Karamoja's dwindling livestock numbers, a recent estimate (2019) of total 'direct use value' of livestock in Karamoja shows a total imputed monetary value of US $323 million (1.1 trillion Uganda shillings) from livestock products and ploughing services (Behnke and Arasio 2019). The study reported the outsized contribution of cattle at 89 per cent of the total gross value of regional livestock's physical output. In other words, pastoralist production remains the mainstay of Karamoja's economy. Despite the existence of dynamic livestock markets in Karamoja, evidence shows that the combined effect of decades of conflict followed by the Ugandan government's disarmament programme and anti-pastoralist policies by the government and aid agencies has resulted in the concentration of livestock ownership among fewer herders and the 'moving out' of poorer herders into non-livestock livelihoods (Bushby and Stites 2016; Iyer and Mosebo 2017).

Like other pastoralist areas of East Africa, Karamoja has seen its share of resilience programming aimed at strengthening the livelihood base, natural resource management, addressing food and water insecurity, ending drought emergencies and building peace.[4] Often, these interventions draw from a neoliberal logic and conceptualisations that see 'resilience' as an attempt to support 'vulnerable' communities to

minimise, adapt to and bounce back from shocks, rather than address the larger historical, social and political conditions within which many of these shocks emerge (Amo-Agyemang 2021). What results from this logic, then, are projects characterised by short-termism, a focus on livelihoods outside of pastoralism, and resilience as a personal or household responsibility. These projects are complemented by various capacity and system strengthening initiatives at the local government level, particularly on anticipating and addressing climate risks.

Whereas the critique of humanitarian and development – and resilience – programming in East Africa's arid and semi-arid areas is long and beyond the scope of this chapter (see Mohamed et al. 2025), what is evident to us as researchers are the shortcomings of these projects to achieve transformative change despite years of sustained investment. A critical reason for this is the persistent failure to meaningfully build on indigenous knowledge systems (in addition to the politics of aid in marginalised contexts [Caravani 2024] and other issues outlined above).[5] Many interventions rely heavily on external, technocratic models rooted in Western scientific approaches (and, broadly, prevailing assumptions within aid culture) and homogenised approaches to development, which often ignore pastoralist epistemologies (Bassi 2017; Behnke and Arasio 2019). This disconnect results in interventions that are perceived sometimes by communities as irrelevant or impractical, thereby limiting community engagement and long-term sustainability. Programmes that do not reflect local priorities or epistemologies frequently fail to secure legitimacy within communities, leading to low participation and weak uptake of introduced innovations (Levine 2010; Aldrich and Meyer 2015).

At the centre of this is the tendency of aid agencies to misrepresent the problems of dryland areas and dilute complex contexts into simplistic problems to be solved via the generic application of resilience interventions (Levine 2022). That there exists a vast gulf between how communities in Karamoja understand their realities and how aid agencies and other stakeholders construe them can hardly be overstated. During the course of our long-term engagement and ethnographic work in the region, this disconnect between what NGOs think and what communities pursue has been amply clear. Despite the evidence that centring indigenous knowledge not only improves the contextual fit of interventions but also fosters community ownership, dignity and empowerment, actors working on resilience interventions pay lip service to indigenous knowledge, reaching instead for abstractions or 'resilience

speak' and applying standard models that ignore context analyses (Levine 2022; Levine and Pain 2024).

Reconceptualising resilience through the lens of the 'vernacular' opens the door for subjectivity in resilience thinking. It not only removes any preconceived restrictions on what resilience means but also demands fluidity and flexibility when engaging with it (Wandji et al. 2021). Importantly, vernacular resilience also shines a particular light on how indigenous knowledge itself is without time and place bound restrictions and significantly more dynamic than its static representation.

Livestock sharing, risk mitigation and networks of social support

> When we were growing up, we would find that our mother or father . . . would have many people around them. We would ask: who were these people? They were our parents' friends. What can these friends do?, we would ask. Father replied, 'These are friends who can become your clan members, friends who can help during time of need, help you, protect you, when you have hunger you can go to these people and get food. These are people we can always beg for cows, so that we can get life. When we have no sorghum, these are the people we run to.' We now understood that you cannot handle the matters of your family or your kraal on your own.[6]

Pastoralism is a specialised production system that works *with* variability – a defining feature of the drylands – through such strategies as mobility, flexible land tenure, negotiating and securing rights, increasing herds to anticipate future losses and creating alliances (Galaty and Johnson 1990; FAO 2021). As has been shown convincingly, pastoralists work with, accept and even take risks, which may pose as problems or as opportunities depending on the context (Bollig 2006; Krätli 2016). Livestock exchange relationships are one example of pastoralist risk management where risk is pooled among various parties with an understanding that in hardship, one person's losses can be absorbed by others (Wiessner 1977; Bollig and Gobel 1997). Livestock exchange as a risk pooling strategy for pastoralists occurs within various socio-cultural institutions including age-sets, descent groups, marriage and bridewealth institutions and stock friendships (Gulliver 1970; Bollig 2006). For Karamoja's pastoralists, stock friendships (or 'friendships' in short) take many forms and

involve a continuously negotiated process of relationship building with kin and non-kin, through generations and across dispersed geographies.[7]

In common parlance, 'friend' may include brothers, cousins, relatives, affinal relations or those with whom no kinship is shared. The degree of closeness and the intensity of friendship carries with it various prerogatives as well as responsibilities. Close friends not related by blood can be considered 'brothers' and 'sub-clan members' who benefit from, among other things, bridewealth distribution while understanding their obligation to contribute to bridewealth payment for their friend. Besides these strong friendships, always involving some form of livestock exchange,[8] other friendships without an explicit livestock component include those referred to as 'chat mate' (*akiruoret*), 'walk mate' (*erukitoth*) and those with whom people have 'neighborhoodships' (Foster 1961), or bonds of mutual interest borne out of sharing the same geographical area.[9]

The exchange or sharing (*ameanakin*) of animals among stock friends, whether as gifts or during need, is a significant aspect of friendship among Karimojong herders.[10] Most transfers from one friend to another fall under the category of *nguna/ngulu ke ekone* – or 'as a friend'.[11] These can be classified as gifts that an individual gives to a friend without an explicit need on the receiver's end.[12] 'Friendship' animals that are gifted or requested become the property of the receiver and the giver is said to lose all rights over them. The receiver may choose to do whatever he pleases with them. He may sell the animal to buy food, slaughter it to feed the family, milk it or even relinquish it to someone else who needs it in the future. Were the gifted female animal to reproduce, the resulting calves or kids will belong to the receiver.

Besides this most common reason for livestock transfer, there exist several other categories of transfers that carry with them different rules of ownership and rights over the original animal and its offspring.[13] A few of these transfers can also occur among individuals who are not (stock) friends, but requests of such animals are usually fulfilled by friends before one must approach an acquaintance. Perhaps the most critical transfers are those that occur in the context of marriage – for bridewealth and at childbirth (*ekicul*). Not only does marriage, and hence the act of founding a family, elevate a man's status in the community, it also allows him to forge new relationships through his wife's family and thus establish new links in his forever-expanding social network (Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson 1962). The affinal kin (kin by marriage) of a man play a major role in his life by relation as well as by becoming his stock friends, providing him material, moral and physical

support. The process of marriage, however, requires the exchange of animals from the groom's family to the bride's and enveloped within this process are multiple support sources on both the bride's and the groom's side. Conventionally, before the actual marriage ceremony, the groom has to consider the bridewealth that will be paid to the bride's family. These animals come from his father's herd, herds given to the father's wives, the groom's independent herd and those of his brothers, half-brothers, friends and other relatives. An informal discussion with the bride's father is first held to ascertain the number of relatives who will be given animals. Thereafter, even if he has a bountiful herd, the groom must discuss the demanded bridewealth with his own father as a matter of respect and the father may involve the son's mother, other wives and the rest of the family in the discussion.

Animals from the groom's nearest kin – his father and brothers – are almost never sufficient for the demands of the bride's family. This is particularly the case for Matheniko Karimojong who tend to have high bridewealth. Following negotiations with the family, the groom begins the long process of accumulating bridewealth from friends and other relatives. Among Matheniko, although an approximate number of cattle and small stock (and sometimes money) is decided at informal meetings, this does not correspond to the actual number of animals eventually given on the day of the marriage (*akidet a ngaatuk* – ceremony for 'counting cattle'). The full or majority payment of bridewealth from the groom to the bride's family means that any children born of the union will belong to the clan of the groom because, by paying for the mother, he has successfully integrated his bride into his paternal clan. If the bride becomes pregnant before the groom is able to gather the bridewealth, he is still required to pay animals in order for the resulting offspring to join his clan. This 'payment in instalment' of bridewealth known as *ekicul*, or half-marriage, also requires payment of animals, although in smaller numbers than bridewealth and is accumulated with the help of stock friends and relatives.

Friends of the groom have conventionally played a critical role in the accumulation of bridewealth and *ekicul*. Indeed, research participants talked about bridewealth payment as paying for 'their' wife, instead of one man's wife, signifying that it was a matter of collective interest. Friends either give their own animals towards the payment or implore various and sundry male relatives and friends (who are not necessarily in the groom's own network of support) to support their friend in successfully conducting his marriage ceremony. It goes without saying that the giver of the animal loses all rights as the animal is to be transferred

directly to the bride's family on behalf of the groom. However, in so doing, givers are assured of the promise of help from the groom in the future (albeit dependent on the state of his current asset holdings) either during their own marriage or in another circumstance.

Likewise, bridewealth received by the bride's family is distributed among near and far kin members, as well as stock friends who, on account of their friendship to either the father or another family member of the bride, are entitled to their share of the received bridewealth as a gesture of friendship and in recognition of their help in the past. Amassing and hoarding received bridewealth is not acceptable behaviour;[14] in fact, the redistribution of animals within the recipient's social network reinforces kinship and friendship ties and only further benefits the distributor.

A second important category of transfers is one that has direct relevance for pastoralist production – animals for fertilisation (*eketepan*) and for milking (*nakidala*). In order to increase herds and in the absence of enough male animals, herders ask their friends for animals, primarily bulls, for fertilisation. In these exchanges, the giver continues to retain property rights over the animal given for fertilisation, although he may choose to forgo this right. A second condition in this transfer is when the receiver approaches the giver for another fertilising bull, having already taken such an animal earlier. In this instance, the receiver gives the original giver a female cow in exchange for the bull. The cow, however, remains in the receiver's herd and does not join the giver's herd. The receiver continues to care for the cow, and his family consumes its milk. If the giver needs an animal, whether for milk or to support his friend/brother in bridewealth accumulation, he can take one of the calves of the cow that was exchanged for the fertilising bull. He cannot, however, take all the animals that 'belong' to him, that is, the cow and all its calves. This is considered impolite. Instead, the original receiver becomes the decider, while the giver must 'request' for animals, even though the cow and its calves belong to him.

The fertilising bull may never return to the giver's herd as it ages in the process of mating. Likewise, the female cow that was exchanged for the fertilising bull may never leave the herd of the receiver. Some of the calves may be left with the mother in the receiver's herd. In this way, the lineage of the cow lives on in its 'original' herd, and the exchange relationship never ends. Finally, the exchanged cow and its calves that remain in the receiver's herd follow the rules of entrustment (*akijokor*), which we describe below.

In either the absence or shortage of milking animals to feed the family, a man may request a cow for milking from a friend. The friend

gives a cow that has recently calved and is accompanied by its own calf when it is transferred to the friend's herd. Both animals enter the herd at once. If the milking cow dies of natural causes while in the care of the receiver, it is not considered a debt because of the bond of friendship between the two parties. The calf remains in the receiver's herd and produces its own calves. All offspring are the responsibility of the friend who was entrusted with the original cow, and he has the authority to decide what to do with the animals. Were the custodian to give one of the offspring for a ritual sacrifice, the responsibility of following up on the debt will be his and not the owner's.

The owner of the animal can visit the custodian's herd to monitor the progress of these animals and can even request one. As with the fertilising bull exchange, despite technically having ownership rights, the giver becomes a 'beggar' of his own animals and the decision to give out animals rests entirely with the friend in whose herd the cow and its offspring are. The giver cannot, however, take all the animals that came from the original milking cow, and must leave some in his friend's herd. Similar to the rules of the fertilising bull and the entrusted animal, the lineage (*alyasit*) of the original milking cow remains in his herd and symbolises the enduring bond of friendship.

A critical category of livestock transfers, and one that closely aligns to the concept of 'risk dispersion', is the entrusted animal (*akijokor*). To safeguard animals from the risk of raid and disease, herders tend to keep some of their animals in other people's herds, often at a distance from their own. These are animals that they 'entrust' to other herders who may be relatives and/or friends. The herder continues to have all rights over the animal, and all offspring of this animal belong to the owner and not the custodian. The custodian herds, treats and waters the animals, and alerts the owner of any developments to his animals such as their sickness or death. Similar to the rules of the fertilising bull, the owner of the animals loses decision rights over them. During a time of need, the owner becomes the 'beggar' of his own property, and the custodian can decide whether to give the owner an animal. The custodian cannot give out the owner's animals for such purposes as supporting a friend in bridewealth accumulation. To appreciate the efforts of the custodian, the owner may decide to gift him an animal from his herd. The custodian, in turn, can continue requesting other animals from the owner, such as for 'friendship' or bridewealth payment, as he may not use the animals entrusted to him without the explicit permission of the owner. The owner, however, may never take all his animals away from the custodian's herd. As with the rules of the fertilising animal, the lineage of the owner's

animals continues in the custodian's herd in a material representation of the enduring exchange relationship between the two individuals.

Animal exchanges can also carry ritual significance, such as the *ngarobai* animal – a prized, typically castrated male animal that wears a band made from animal skin strips. A *ngarobai* animal is a gift from a friend, even though it can be explicitly requested by the receiver. It is said that friends typically never decline the request of a *ngarobai* animal. In fact, the gifting of *ngarobai* animals carries great weight and emotional significance and both parties can expect help from each other in the future. A *ngarobai* animal's colour, size or skin pattern usually conforms to the receiver's preference. The giver loses all rights over a *ngarobai* animal. There is no limit on the number of *ngarobai* animals that may be requested by friends. Moreover, *ngarobai* animals, especially those of an individual's preference, may also be requested from friends or brothers of a friend. This also opens up pathways for the receiver to forge friendships within his growing network. Ceremonial or social occasions that involve animal transfers in the context of traditional religion include animals (known as *ajulot*) sacrificed to ward off a curse or disease and the ox for men's initiation (*asapan*). The collection of ceremonies that young men undertake to initiate/officially enter an age-set, known as *asapan*, begins with the spearing of an ox by the initiand (Dyson-Hudson 1963). The *asapan* ox always comes from someone else's herd, and is a loan that is repaid with a heifer. On the other hand, the sacrificial animal (*ajulot*), almost always a sheep or goat, is detailed in the dreams of the diviner (*emuron*) who advises on colour, size, age and sex of this animal. Always requested and never emerging from one's own herd, an *ajulot* animal may be a debt, but according to our informants, can also be frequently cancelled because of an ongoing relationship. An *ajulot* animal can also be prescribed for a sacrifice for the well-being of an entire community (e.g. to ward off something that may affect a place rather than a household or person). In this case, the animal is chosen by the *emuron* from the collective herds of the whole community and no individual is responsible.

This brief description of livestock transfers and their underlying norms has implications for how wealth, relationships and everyday resilience building are understood. Livestock exchange relationships are characterised by indebtedness where stock friends continue to be in debt to each other as 'one expression of their social ties' (Bollig 1998). Reciprocal obligation binds people together across generations and geographies and although there are norms and precedents to how livestock relationships are conducted, they are continually open to renegotiation and reimagination. Although strict account keeping reciprocity

was not observed due to the short timeline of the research and due to the long-term exchanges in such relationships, it can be said that these relationships follow norms of dyadic exchange under reciprocal obligations where the giver and taker alternate roles. Reciprocity in these relationships is, thus, best viewed as nestled in the sense of mutual obligation. Friends may gift each other animals without a specific request, but the relationship is activated during a time of need when, based on their friendship and mutual obligation, friends have the right to approach each other for help.

Further, as shown above and in research in other pastoralist areas, livestock exchange has critical implications for property rights in animals and the transfer of an animal may involve the transfer of its ownership, retention of its ownership or usufruct rights, depending on cultural norms and contextual demands (Moritz 2012; Khazanov and Schlee 2022). This mosaic of rights in animals not only ensures that multiple people benefit from the same animal materially but that the animal also becomes the 'vehicle' through which social relationships are carried (Ingold 1986).

Livestock transfer relationships are indicative of the flexibility inherent in pastoralist social institutions as networks continually reconfigure through the movement of animals from one herding unit, family or household to another. Echoing a foundational tenet of pastoralism, mobility of animals across the landscape and across herding units, is, thus, fundamental to resilience in Karamoja (FAO 2021). While the former type of mobility finds greater recognition among resilience practitioners and researchers, we argue that a different form of livestock mobility, facilitated by socio-cultural norms, embedded in informal institutions and in realisation of different social, cultural and economic pursuits, is equally essential to understanding and supporting pastoralist vernacular resilience. In moving animals between herds across space and time, Karamoja's pastoralists not only manage risk in their environments but, crucially, create and strengthen mutually reinforcing bonds. In this way, herders become a key resource within the pastoralist production system, much like pasture and water, through 'institutionalized forms of social interaction' (Krätli et al. 2015).

Communication, cooperation and networks for negotiation: the case of *etamam*

Communication is the bedrock of resilience and enables the flow of information and resources that are integral to ensuring community

resilience during shocks. Scholars have emphasised the role of communication as a dynamic social process that transmits information, facilitates coordination, builds trust and supports adaptive decision-making in response to risk (Norris et al. 2008; Hyvärinen and Vos 2015) The Community Resilience Framework developed by Norris et al. (2008), for example, positions information and communication as one of four key adaptive capacities that underpin community resilience, alongside economic development, social capital and community competence. Other research shows that communication networks are essential for mobilising resources and activating protective social ties during crises (Murphy 2007; Varda et al. 2009). Likewise, the informal institution of *etamam* – a messaging and mobilisation practice of great importance in Karamoja – offers a valuable lens through which to explore how pastoralist communities use communication networks to build resilience from the ground up. We examine *etamam* as an active mechanism through which Karimojong communities manage uncertainty, reinforce cooperation, negotiate access to resources and foster cohesion. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research, we show how *etamam* continues to operate as a critical mechanism for decision-making, conflict resolution and relationship building.

Etamam – literally translated as 'sending the message' – is a foundational practice of informal communication that enables action, coordination and cohesion across dispersed pastoralist communities in Karamoja. Rooted in oral tradition, *etamam* is a socially embedded process through which messages are transmitted, critical decisions are negotiated, relationships are affirmed and pastoralist life is organised. Traditionally, *etamam* is initiated by elders or respected figures within the community who wish to convene others for collective decisions – especially seasonal migration, response to conflict or disaster or ceremonial obligations. The message, once crafted, is sent through trusted messengers – typically younger men or known intermediaries – who travel between kraals, households or territorial sections, delivering the communication. Messengers are expected to report truthfully, and receivers are obliged to listen respectfully and to deliberate collectively on the message. The content of the message may concern the need to move herds to safer grazing areas, the availability or lack of water, the threat of raids or a need to resolve interpersonal disputes.

As part of our long-term research in Karamoja, we have documented various *etamam*-related practices that illuminate how pastoralists are using this mechanism.[15] A key example of this process is the negotiated use of dry season water catchments and wells. Water catchments (*echor*)

are owned and managed by a clan through the clan head who is responsible for the management, use and access of the catchment. Wells (*akare*) within this catchment area or riverbed are 'owned', managed and negotiated by kraal or family heads. During the dry season, the clan head coordinates access to the catchment area for different clans, including 'outsiders', in consultation with kraal heads. As livestock arrive from different kraals to the wells, outsiders need to request and receive permission from a kraal head to be allowed to use the water source for a period. Outsiders, or migrating pastoralists from other clans, will be assigned either direct access – where they take temporary ownership of and manage access and use of a well – or indirect access – where they are subordinate to the original owners, and the latter determine access and usage rights. This process of negotiation, which starts long before the onset of the dry season and before the herds arrive, is one example of *etamam*.[16]

Although a practice with deep historical roots, *etamam* has also experienced changes as the pastoralist socio-economic, political, climatic and technological environments change. For one, rather than an emissary sent on foot with the message, mobile phones are now commonly used to initiate negotiations, schedule meetings and follow up on negotiations. Furthermore, this once purely oral messaging system is being reconfigured to reflect new political realities, where messengers now sometimes carry written letters, which is a modification borne out of the growing hybridity of customary systems and formal administrative structures. As explained to us by a kraal leader, the contemporary practice of *etamam* includes a written report by the elders who transmit this to the local council and sub-county chairpersons for endorsement. This endorsed report is then sent to the district leadership who transmit it to kraal leaders. Dialogues on negotiations are organised between those pastoralists in search of resources and the potential host district with the participation of the district, sub-county leadership and development partners. Once access is granted, the visiting group will plan to move their herds after a bull is ceremonially slaughtered for the host community as a sign of appreciation and peace.

In our study on climate-related migration on the Karamoja–Turkana borderlands, we documented how *etamam* is used by cross-border communities to negotiate access to pasture and water (Longoli and Iyer 2022). The decision to allow other pastoralist groups to access resources in an area is based on an evaluation of such factors as availability, security considerations and rule abidance. Explaining the decision to allow Turkana herders to move into an area, a group of herders in Northern Karamoja recounted:

> What we consider first is the availability of the land for them to settle on . . . so that we know that that camp is for the Turkana, that is for the Jie . . . so that when government comes and wants to meet the Turkana we will already know where to find them. There are things that we consider when we want to allow those people into our land, we will see that there is too much insecurity . . . Another thing that we consider before uniting the Turkana and Dodoth or other tribes [*sic*] when they come to this river, is to check whether they come with guns . . . this might (prove disturbing) to other people who do not have guns since we know that Dodoth have no guns while Turkana have guns. Then we say something like that one should be removed. We look if they have thieves among them because thieves are spoilers of peaceful stays.

According to several herders with whom we spoke, the bureaucratisation or formalisation of the request process to access grazing and watering areas for animals is a significant break from the past where elders of communities bore sole responsibility for such decisions. However, for these informants, this was a desirable change. Due to the imbalance of power between the communities in Karamoja (largely disarmed) and Turkana (many armed), the government's role in mediating the relationship between the various communities and its awareness of the presence of Turkana herders in its area was critical to ensuring security. Today, if animals migrate, a movement report is presented so that there is a record of mobility and the animals are not mistaken for stolen animals that are being driven away. Awareness of movement at the upper administrative levels is necessary and authorised by a movement letter, which can be shown as a movement permit when questioned by security providers (such as the army).

This shift in *etamam* and migratory practices demonstrates a critical interface between indigenous practices and state bureaucratic processes. Although advantageous in terms of tracking livestock theft and facilitating peaceful negotiations, the confluence of a time-tested practice with government procedures is not without its inherent tension. On the one hand, the formalisation of *etamam* – through letter-writing or district-level endorsement – can enhance the legitimacy of traditional actors in the eyes of the state, helping to secure recognition and support for local capacities for resilience and mechanisms for peace. On the other, it risks co-opting or diluting community-based cooperation that gives *etamam* its social mandate and acceptability. Moreover, the modified process has led to inevitable delays, frequently associated with bureaucracies, in the

transmission of *etamam* and the subsequent negotiations. In one instance reported to us, these delays have led to shepherds moving with the animals to access pasture as kraal leaders stay behind to follow procedural requirements; in some cases, this movement without following the conventional process has led to conflict. These tensions reflect broader dilemmas around hybrid governance in pastoralist regions, where state and customary authority often co-exist in ambiguous arrangements that may be ultimately disadvantageous to herders.

While traditionally dominated by male elders and kraal leaders, women have increasingly taken on roles in initiating or transmitting *etamam*. Traditionally, women did not participate in the process because decisions concerning livestock are overwhelmingly the domain of men. In large part, the work of women within the *etamam* process begins when the migration starts and as related to the movement of herds and people. However, interviews conducted by us on this issue reveal that 'educated' women who have 'leadership capacity' may participate in the negotiation meetings. In this way, *etamam* has shown itself to be a fluid and evolving social institution, keeping pace with the changing realities and changing gender dynamics of Karamoja.

Although not the primary senders of messages, women have also acted as crucial initiators, interpreters and conveners within the *etamam* system. In one instance, women mobilised to stop a retaliatory raid, invoking *etamam* norms to send a peace message to a neighbouring community. This aligns with wider observations in the literature, which increasingly recognises that women play strategic roles within pastoral systems (Catley et al. 2023; Iyer 2021). In some communities, younger women have begun to use mobile phones and informal women's savings groups to initiate their own forms of messaging – warning of livestock theft, alerting others to food insecurity or coordinating communal labour. These practices are not always labelled *etamam*, but they draw on its logic: relational accountability, trust and mutual obligation.

The exploration of *etamam* across conventional, adapted and gendered dimensions offers insights into how resilience is conceptualised and practiced. The practice of *etamam*, which is among the cultural cornerstones of pastoralism in Karamoja, urges a move from dominant narratives that often equate resilience with infrastructure, productivity or livelihoods to relationality, reciprocity and informal governance. At its core, *etamam* exemplifies resilience as an ongoing social process that continuously generates and reaffirms trust, cooperation and responsibility across networks of kin and community in service of important migration decisions and to maintain peaceful relationships – both of

which have direct and indirect impacts on pastoralist production. It enables flexible and timely decision-making in environments characterised by uncertainty and volatility.

Mobile pastoralism is thus also a diplomatic act and is based on a framework for negotiated access. Through *etamam*, pastoralists (sometimes across borders) engage in an act of 'resource diplomacy', where they anticipate, negotiate and manage relationships to ensure the successful migration and, thus, health of their herds. The practice of *etamam* is institutionalised as part of the pastoralist calendar in Karamoja, preceding other practices such as *akiudakin* or the ceremonies to start the migration season. This act of negotiation does not seek to determine whether access to resources will be granted from one group of herders to another; rather, it is a cooperative brokering to determine under what conditions this access will be granted. *Etamam* is, accordingly, about the transmission of information and request, and, critically, embedded in a moral economy of trust and reciprocity that shapes how the message is received, validated and acted upon.[17] Its power lies equally in its continuous negotiation by those who depend on this institution.

The practice of *etamam* also complicates linear notions of progress that underpin many development interventions. Rather than seeing informal mechanisms like *etamam* as residual or outdated, our long-term research on negotiated access shows that these mechanisms are active sites of innovation. The incorporation of written communication, interactions with government authorities and increasing involvement of women all point to *etamam*'s capacity for flexibility, adaptability and hybridisation, where tradition and transformation co-exist. Thus, *etamam* once again demonstrates the fluidity inherent in pastoralist institutions and indigenous knowledge, which are remade, find expression and gain traction in new socio-economic, political and cultural realities. This, therefore, illustrates resilience as a process of continuity-in-change.

Moreover, *etamam* foregrounds the political and epistemic dimensions of resilience. It reveals who has the authority to define risk, to mobilise others and to frame appropriate responses. *Etamam* exemplifies what we refer to in this chapter as *vernacular resilience* – that is, resilience rooted in local epistemologies, social structures and historical repertoires of adaptation. A dynamic practice through which pastoralist communities anticipate, interpret and respond to environmental disruptions, *etamam* facilitates collective decision-making and coordination. In so doing, it highlights a distinctly pastoralist logic to resilience, one that privileges relationality and negotiated authority. To

that end, *etamam* challenges prevailing notions within aid culture that view pastoralists as recipients of resilience capacities and traditional knowledge as fixed; rather, it spotlights how resilience is actively produced and new knowledge created in a specific socio-cultural milieu.

Informal institutions, Karimojong pastoralists' vernacular resilience and prosperity

The importance of social capital – or the norms and networks that enable collective action – as a source of resilience, and the critical role of strong and weak ties of individuals and households in managing risk and recovering from shocks is well known from studies in rural communities (Woolcock and Narayan 2000; Rockenbauch and Sakdapolrak 2017). Social capital is one of many factors that shape resilience, while interacting with ecological, socio-cultural and economic factors (among others) at multiple scales (Carmen et al. 2022). In East Africa's pastoralist areas, these social networks and the norms underlying them are continuously shaped and guided by historical memory, traditional relevance, ecological imperatives, individual choice and collective needs. Social capital and economic capital converge within informal institutions and risk management mechanisms in time-tested ways: spreading animals in other herding units, enduring livestock exchange practices and ensuring the adaptation of mechanisms such as *etamam*. Stated differently, social and economic capital in Karamoja are closely entwined and, in some ways, are nearly indistinguishable from each other.

This chapter has presented ethnographic data on two forms of social capital characterised by bonding, bridging and linking ties.[18] Strong bonding ties such as friendship and kinship relations within closely knit territorial sections and geographic areas of Karamoja entail strong obligations and maintenance of bond through various flows of support or mutual insurance. Friendships can also be 'weak ties', which do not carry the same obligations as strong ties, but can act as a bridge through which individuals can access networks other than their own (Iyer 2016, 2021). The psychosocial mechanisms underlying friendship networks are highly congruous with kinship and these relationships, rather than simply being one of risk management, are imbued with trust, reciprocal obligation and emotion. This trust and obligation is nurtured through regular gift giving – material and immaterial – that guarantees the continuation of the relationship, which is significant not only for herd reconstitution or food security but also for the social fabric of pastoralist life.

The role of bonding, bridging and linking social capital in resource management and governance, *ex ante* risk management and post disaster recovery is well explored (Pretty 2003; McPeak 2006; Islam and Walkerden 2014; Aldrich and Meyer 2015; Endris et al. 2017; Cronk et al. 2019). Bonding ties – such as livestock exchange relationships – may not, however, be sufficient to buffer risk and adapt to changes occurring in the socio-economic and ecological environment. Bridging ties to other actors may play an equally important role by allowing different groups to share and exchange information. As Galvin (2008) contends, while pastoral social capital has conventionally been based on bonding ties, the changes occurring to pastoralism, especially land fragmentation, require both bonding and bridging ties to work together. To that end, we view the negotiating mechanism of *etamam* as bridging capital. In bridging groups of herders (who may have their own personal, community and other relationships) through a cooperative framework of negotiated resource access, *etamam* ensures sharing and exchange of information, continuation of collective decision-making and consensus building across diverse (yet related) interest groups for the flexible access to key ecological resources.

Using the examples of livestock exchange relationships and the negotiation mechanism of *etamam*, this chapter shows the everyday practices of resilience building in Karamoja through pastoralist 'investment' in different forms of 'horizontal' social relationships, closely entwined with ecological dynamics (Folke 2006). At the individual level, a pastoralist creates his personal network comprising kin and non-kin and relationships with varying degrees of obligation and trust throughout his life and through ritualised ways. Friends and relatives who have claim on an individual's herd are regarded with greater importance than those individuals with whom livestock are not shared. Livestock transfers between stock friends are, thus, a fundamental aspect of these 'bonding' relationships. Livestock exchange norms show how reciprocity, debt and mutual help are encoded in these relationships in the continued retention of an animal in the debtor's herd, the passing on of 'debts' from one generation to the next, and the myriad ways in which networks expand across households, families and geographies.

Understanding and appreciating this vernacular resilience of Karamoja's pastoralists is fundamental to viewing pastoral prosperity as a collective rather than individualistic effort. Our research in Karamoja highlights, yet again, the tensions inherent in resilience programming and efforts to alleviate poverty in places like Karamoja, where the unilateral focus on assets and wealth, often at the level of the household,

continually misses social aspects of prosperity. This assertion does not contend with decades of research showing economic stratification, wealth differentials and class formation among pastoralists (Dyson-Hudson 1980; Borgerhoff Mulder et al. 2010; Scoones 2021). Our examples of livestock exchange and *etamam* negotiation practice show the interlinked prosperities of individual herders and that pastoralist prosperity can only be understood relationally. Resilience is fundamentally a collective social pursuit and occurs in the context of relationships, trust, obligation and reciprocity, mediated in large part via livestock. In direct contrast to a predefined 'resilient state' or predetermined indicators, true resilience is itself 'mobile' and its definition is constantly reshaped by external factors and pastoralist ingenuity.

This chapter also re-emphasises the necessity of centring traditional or indigenous knowledge in a context regularly labelled a crisis setting. Although it can be argued that aid praxis in Karamoja and its bordering areas has taken a turn towards 'resilience humanitarianism', which foregrounds local response capacities (Hilhorst 2018), it has only superficially engaged with indigenous knowledge. Moreover, traditional and indigenous knowledge, in the aid sector vernacular, supposes long-standing and unchanged information. Our examples show how indigenous knowledge in Karamoja, far from being firmly rooted in the past, is actually grounds for contemporary thought, action and innovation. It provides the architecture for conceiving and pursuing the future through motion, mobility and fluidity. Resilience programming and practice in Karamoja would do vastly better in accounting for these knowledge innovations and relational approaches, and consciously examining, appreciating and centring the resilience that is deeply embedded in pastoralists' relationships to each other and their environment. Only by moving away from a narrow view of resilience focused on livelihoods and income generation towards the social and relational infrastructures that underpin pastoralist well-being can such programming and policy truly claim integration of indigenous knowledge (see also Iyer 2021).

Notes

1 Simon Longoli is a pastoralist researcher from Karamoja and was previously the executive director of the NGO Karamoja Herders of the Horn.

2 We also collected some rapid information for this chapter through embedded researchers from Karamoja Herders of the Horn in the Kobebe Dam area of Karamoja in 2025.

3 The word Karimojong in the vernacular signifies the region of Karamoja. The following communities call the land area of Karamoja their home: Matheniko, Bokora, Pian, Jie, Dodoth, Tepeth, Labwor, Nyangea, Ik and Pokot. Even though we use the umbrella term Karamojong in the report, we recognise the distinction of the constituent communities and identify them separately where appropriate.
4 On the misguided approach to resilience programming and the staggering number of projects in the Horn of Africa, see Mohamed and Scoones (2023).
5 We use the terms 'local' and 'indigenous' interchangeably, while fully recognising the problems with the generic use of these terms. For further discussion on the use of 'indigenous' in the context of nomadic peoples and pastoralists, see Bassi (2017); Gilbert (2007).
6 Key informant quotation from Iyer's dissertation work.
7 We are conscious of generalisations and that these observations are based on information given to us by around 100 or so people. We acknowledge that friendships are almost definitely conducted in myriad other ways than described briefly here.
8 Although various immaterial and intangible resources are also highly rated.
9 'Neighborhoodships' are also called 'proximal' ties.
10 For this chapter we focus largely on pastoralist men and livestock sharing. For a discussion on women's friendship networks see Iyer (2021: 24).
11 Depends on the sex of the animal: *nguna* for female, *ngulu* for male.
12 Although both male and female animals are gifted in this way, one participant stressed that among Matheniko Karimojong, most voluntary gifts are male animals and female animals, whether cows or small stock, are most often requested by the receiver.
13 The ethnographic data described here are not institutionalised and livestock exchange norms have enough elasticity for the givers and receivers to continuously negotiate repayment or property rights. They are, therefore, only a representation of livestock exchange from a particular community during a specific time in which these data were collected. The data presented here do not include all possible categories of livestock transfer and we focus only on some representative transfer categories.
14 As also documented among Pokot pastoralists – see Bollig (2006).
15 Data collected by members of the Karamoja Herders of the Horn (formerly Karamoja Development Forum).
16 Section in book on *etamam* based on data collected and written by Karamoja Herders of the Horn.
17 Information generated through interviews with pastoralists in Karamoja.
18 Here, we take *bonding* ties to mean those characterised by strong trust and *bridging* ties as those that provide access to resources and opportunities outside a particular network. We do not assume group homogeneity as a condition for bonding capital (Galvin 2008).

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9

Nomadic skillsets beyond the desert: Western Sahara's post-pastoralist generation

Matthew Porges

Introduction

Shadi – early twenties, handsome, cocky, aggressive – was trying to explain to me where we were. We sat in the back of a dusty Land Rover on an endless, dusty expanse, and he pointed a dust-coated arm at a mountain in the distance that probably would have, if we had been able to inspect it closely, turned out to be made of dust. Dust carried on the breeze, accumulated in little dunelets, constituted the desert, penetrated our clothing. The desert coated us.

Of the distant mountain, Shadi said 'See that? We are in Western Sahara.'

The driver of the Land Rover, an older man, wiry and toothless, anonymous behind layers of dustproof scarves, shook his head. 'No. This is Mauritania.' He pointed to the same mountain as evidence. A third man in the Land Rover, also older, shrugged. There was no way of knowing, he said; we were on one side or the other of the border, and eventually we would cross back. That part of the border between Western Sahara's 'Liberated Territories' and Mauritania's Tiris Zemmour province – we were somewhere between the villages of Bir Lehlou, in Western Sahara, and Bir Moghrein, in Mauritania – is largely unmarked and impossible to control. It seemed to me that the question of which side we were on was largely unimportant; but Shadi, the youngest and most energetic of us, was adamant.

All three men in the Land Rover with me were Sahrawis, ethnic Western Saharans, and all three resided ordinarily in the Tindouf refugee camps in southwestern Algeria. But the two older men shared a key distinction that Shadi did not: they had been born in the old colony of Spanish Sahara, grew up in nomadic families, and lived through the traumatic, disorienting 1975–91 war between Morocco and the Polisario Front, Western Sahara's Sahrawi independence movement. Shadi, too young to have seen the war, had been born a refugee in Tindouf. He had seen his notional homeland only intermittently, on journeys like this one, through the quarter or so of the original territory of Spanish Sahara that Polisario now controls and administers as the 'Liberated Territories'. Though he was familiar with the basics of nomadic pastoralism – livestock husbandry, desert safety and survival, vehicle maintenance – his experience of it was less direct. He had grown up in a refugee camp, attended a stationary school, learned English, French and Spanish, and spent summers boarding with a family in Spain. He was both more cosmopolitan and less grounded than the older men; and he was deeply insecure about it.

Shadi and I had naturally gravitated towards each other early in the drive. We were both younger than most of the Sahrawis on this trip, and, early in my fieldwork, my training in Modern Standard Arabic had proven less useful with Hassaniyya-speaking Sahrawis than I had hoped, so Shadi's relative fluency in English was very welcome. Yet over the hours of bumpy, monotonous driving, I began to grow exasperated with him. He was constantly pointing out characteristics of the desert about which he clearly knew very little. He was endlessly attempting one-upmanship, showing off for a young European woman from a pro-Polisario activist group who occupied one of the seats of our Land Rover. Where the older Sahrawis were generally phlegmatic about the Moroccan occupation, and the presence of unmarked landmines in the Liberated Territories – not from a lack of passion, but from long experience of conflict – Shadi was eager to demonstrate his toughness, his willingness to return to war if necessary. When we stopped for tea in the shade of some acacias, I found a cluster of spent bullet casings from the war with Morocco, probably from a Soviet DShK machine gun, and the driver of our Land Rover encouraged me to take one home as a souvenir. Shadi, though, fixed me with a hard stare. 'Who did it kill?' he asked. I put the casing back down.

The Western Sahara conflict is something of a relic, a process of Cold War-era decolonisation arrested and subverted. Formerly a Spanish

colony, initially constituted in 1883, Western Sahara was subjected to competing claims as Morocco and Mauritania, both of which border the territory, gained their own independence in 1956 and 1960 respectively. By 1975, as Spain withdrew from the territory, Polisario – formally the *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro* – had widespread support from the indigenous Sahrawi population. A UN fact-finding mission to the territory recommended an independence referendum and rejected Morocco's irredentist claim; it also deemed Polisario, which declared independence as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976, to be the 'legitimate representative' of the Sahrawi people. Simultaneous invasions by Morocco and Mauritania led to a protracted guerilla war of varying intensity. By 1979, following a series of military setbacks, Mauritania withdrew from the war and dropped its territorial claims. In 1991, faced with a stalemate, Morocco and Polisario agreed to a UN-brokered ceasefire on the condition of an eventual referendum on independence. Disputes over voter eligibility, and repeated diplomatic intransigence from the Moroccan side, have more or less taken that promised referendum off the table. Today, the Sahrawi population is divided into three segments: a Moroccan-controlled area, comprising about three-quarters of the original territory of Spanish Sahara, which includes the coastline and major cities, and governed as Morocco's 'Southern Provinces'; a Polisario-controlled area referred to as the 'Liberated Territories', comprising the remaining quarter; and a series of five refugee camps, administered by Polisario and hosting most SADR institutions, in southwestern Algeria. The resumption of low-level conflict in 2020, mainly exchanges of artillery and occasional drone strikes, has failed to substantively change the facts on the ground.

Sahrawis (or Saharawis, Sahraouis, etc., depending on the system of transliteration being used) are the indigenous people of Western Sahara – and, potentially, its immediate environs in northern Mauritania and southern Morocco – but the constitution of Sahrawi identity is complex. For Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy (2010: 92),

> The term Sahrawi . . . is often used to mean 'indigenous Western Saharan', although this equivalent is not accurate. Indeed, it is sufficient on most accounts that an 'ethnic' Sahrawi only has to claim descent from one of the recognized major or minor social groupings – 'tribes' or 'confederations' – in or overlapping the former Spanish Sahara . . . The most pragmatic definition of Sahrawis is that they are the Hassaniyyah-speaking peoples who



Figure 9.1 Revolutionary symbolism in the Tindouf refugee camps, Western Sahara. © Matthew Porges

> claim membership among at least one of the social groupings found in and around the area now known as Western Sahara.

Other authors (e.g. Mitatre 2011; Isidoros 2018) have proposed variations on this definition, particularly in its relation to Western Saharan nationalism and Polisario's ideological aspirations. Yet Sahrawi identity is cultural as much as it is geographic, a postcolonial coalescence grounded in a relationship, both economic and ideological, to the desert, to nomadic pastoralism and to mobility and multilocality. In this chapter, I will explore how a generational split in the formative political experiences of Sahrawis, cohering roughly around three polarities – pre-/post-war; born in Western Sahara or in exile; economically or culturally nomadic – manifests in political, economic and ideological decision-making and identity-formation. Drawing on fieldwork conducted throughout the region since 2014, this chapter will argue that younger Sahrawis, like Shadi, are repurposing their 'nomadic heritage' along multiple axes in an increasingly globalised Sahara. Contributing to anthropological literature on skill and enskilment, I will show how skills acquired in one context, and relating to one set of values, come to be translated into entirely distinct lifeworlds and modes of relating to land and practice; and how those skills themselves contribute to the imagination and instantiation of political futures.

The past and future of Western Saharan nomadism

Salim – early thirties, thickly-built and balding, funny and outgoing – walked with me along the southern edge of the Smara refugee camp in Tindouf, where the tenuous urban life of the camp etiolated into the *hamada*, the flat gravel expanse surrounding the Polisario-run settlements. Here, most of the buildings were livestock pens, built of wire and scrap-wood, held together improvisationally by whatever construction materials could be found in the camp. 'Urban' and 'rural', 'mobile' and 'sedentary', were never clear divides in Sahrawi life, and nowhere was that more evident than here, where the camp did not end abruptly but rather faded and spread out before the apparently endless grey sea of rock and sand visible in all directions.

Salim was unusual for a Sahrawi man of his generation. Although he was university-educated and had lived in the camps all his life, his ambitions lay in the desert. He lacked the capital required to start his own camel herd – a camel can cost between £300 and £1,000 (GBP), and several camels are required to maintain a profitable herd – but he nevertheless was trying to find ways to live within the pastoralist lifeworlds of his parents. For Salim, this manifested as an attempt to start up a business caring for livestock – mainly goats – left in the camps by herders, or the mobile members of mainly-sedentary families. Though he could not manage, economically, to live a 'nomadic' life, he could, and did, approximate it, and in doing so, he explicitly drew upon his heritage, the skillsets contained within that heritage, and what he considered to be the entrepreneurial spirit and flexibility required for any kind of pastoralist life.

Ever since Ingold's classic essays on 'livelihood, dwelling, and skill' (2000), a body of literature, both within and more recently beyond anthropology, has approached the question of 'belonging' to a particular 'environment' processually, via the medium of acquired embodied expertise. The relationship between individual and place is rehearsed and reiterated through continuous practice. The case of Western Sahara, in which the 'place' is notional and, for many, inaccessible, challenges us to think of processual enskilment not just as a means of establishing a practical relationship to a particular environment but also an imaginative relationship to a partially imagined place.

During the 1975–91 Western Sahara War, traditional Sahrawi nomadism became significantly more difficult. The Moroccan army slaughtered large numbers of livestock, planted landmines in pastures and poisoned natural wells. In response, Sahrawi herders often moved

their herds to Mauritania or Mali or sold them off. In the immediate aftermath of the war, Polisario moved to reconstitute the nomadic economy in the territories it retained, particularly by providing distributed, nomadically accessible services, schools, water points, demining and security in the Liberated Territories. This effort was, in part, about rebuilding a local economy that could be used to generate value for Sahrawi society. It was also about re-establishing a relation between the Sahrawi people and their land, via the cultural expedient of nomadic practice. Yet although this effort met with considerable success in the medium term, the nomadism that emerged post-war was different in significant ways from traditional Sahrawi herding. Most importantly, the establishment of ties to the Tindouf refugee camps – schools, stationary businesses, the provision of food and other types of humanitarian aid – fragmented the social unit involved in herding. Whereas an entire family might previously have moved along with the herds, now herding was a specialised practice, often involving just a couple of members of the family which 'owned' the herds, augmented by hired itinerant shepherds from Mauritania or Mali. The implementation of universal education in the Tindouf camps meant that children no longer spent extended time in the desert, and accordingly no longer developed the skillsets required for independent herding. Explosive remnants of war, often in the most fertile parts of the desert, raised the risk of herding for both people and livestock. At the same time, the contracting of Polisario-controlled space and the generalised drought meant that the price of individual livestock was driven up significantly. The lack of wealth generated in the Tindouf camps meant that very few individuals could afford to start their own, independent herds. Herds could still be inherited or grown over time; but a Sahrawi man leaving school in his late teens was now less likely to possess either the skills or the capital required to become a full-time herder.

These practical barriers coincided with emerging cultural barriers. The skillset required to be a herder is vast, including detailed knowledge and technical ability in numerous areas. It cannot be inculcated except over a period of years, and it requires long periods of time spent in the desert. The generational disruption of the war had attenuated the general prevalence of that knowledge among Sahrawis born after about 1970. In place of nomadic skillsets, young Sahrawis were learning other skills, other vocabularies. The regular programme of sending Sahrawi youth to spend time with host families in Spain exposed many to non-pastoralist aspirations. Where they had previously dreamed of being herders, traders or desert navigators, young Sahrawis now dreamed of

business, travel and football. Although most of my younger interlocutors still described herding as valorised or admirable in various ways, they were less likely to see it as a tangible or plausible aspiration. While there was widespread pride in desert heritage, and at least many young men paid lip service to the idea of longing for the desert, most were training for careers that had little to do with herding. Salim, whose interest in the desert was significant, nevertheless had gone to university abroad and saw his path more as developing innovations around processing meat in the camps, rather than producing it nomadically in the Liberated Territories. And Shadi, proud and defensive about his heritage, keen to portray himself as tough, authentic and comfortable in the wilderness, was nevertheless training as a translator and pursuing business opportunities in Spain.

Scheele (2025) has called the current conditions of drought in the Sahara a kind of permanent crisis for nomadic pastoralists. Where past droughts, such as those of the 1950s and 1970s, dramatically but temporarily altered Sahrawi life, forcing coalescence around cities and rendering dispersed populations more vulnerable to colonial penetration, the protracted disturbances associated with global anthropogenic climate change make such periods of pastoral scarcity the new normal. In this context, the reliability of the desert – and the ultimate viability of pastoral livelihoods, now and into the future – is called into question. This is compounded by the hardening of national borders, and in particular by the outbreak of a reignited Morocco–Polisario conflict in October 2020. Unable to plan for a future that definitively involved pastoralism as a viable economic pathway, younger Sahrawis, particularly in the Tindouf refugee camps, had to seek new ways to apply the skillsets and mindsets they had absorbed from an older, more pastorally grounded generation.

Conflict and movement

Conditions for violence in Western Sahara seem close to perfect. In the Moroccan-occupied zone, repression waxes and wanes with, among other things, the fortunes of the tourism industry, but in all cases, the occupying police, military and *Gendarmerie* of Morocco probably at least equal, and may outnumber, the local Sahrawi population. Persistent underemployment, educational and economic discrimination against Sahrawi youth, suffocating surveillance of pro-independence gatherings and a persistent media and diplomatic campaign against Sahrawi

identity, have resulted predictably in significant local animosity within the divided community.

And yet, with few exceptions – such as the Gdiem Izik protest camp in 2010 – very few of the pro-independence gatherings which take place with regularity throughout the occupied zone have featured any violence from the Sahrawi side. Why might this be the case? Western Sahara appears to be an ideal place for an insurgency. Its low population density, difficult-to-access desert hinterland, widespread discontent with Moroccan occupation and living memory of war would all seem to suggest that some degree of violent resistance might be inevitable. Elsewhere, I have theorised that one of the main drivers of sustained discipline in peaceful resistance is social cohesion that itself derives from small-group pastoralist movement (Porges and Leuprecht 2016). Another way of reading this finding might be that as the general gap between pre- and post-war Sahrawis widens, so, too, will the strategy of nonviolence begin to fray.

Khadija, late twenties, patient and warm but evidently on a schedule, met me for an interview in one of the schools in Smara. She was a digital activist and online strategist, tasked with bringing Polisario's national narrative to the internet. She had travelled widely in a diplomatic capacity and spoke English and Spanish fluently. Khadija was an ardent advocate of Sahrawi feminism – she believed that women in the Tindouf camps were treated as liberally as anywhere in Africa – and was adept at sharing life in the camps in ways that both normalised the Sahrawi experience and lent urgency to her advocacy for independence.

In a sense, Khadija was walking a very narrow line, requiring in its way as much flexibility and agility as life in the deep desert, or in the independent Western Sahara of which she constantly dreamed. She believed that the untapped resource in the independence movement was Moroccan civil society. As such, a great deal of her digital outreach was aimed at Moroccan channels and Moroccan social media, which required her to approach Moroccans with a good deal more forbearance than Shadi, or indeed most young Sahrawi men.

Shadi's and Khadija's passionate longing for Western Saharan independence, and for the future they associated with it, did not preclude, and in fact often dovetailed with, scepticism of Polisario. Although the idea of Western Saharan independence enjoyed universal popularity in the Tindouf camps, this was decreasingly synonymous with support for Polisario's vision of how that independence might happen, and what it might look like. Part of this had to do with the undeniable failure of 30 or more years of Polisario diplomacy to produce a referendum on

independence, or any tangible concessions whatsoever from Morocco. Part of it had to do with inevitable generational shifts. Polisario's senior leadership was overwhelmingly made up of older men who had fought in the war or had living memories of Spanish Sahara. Part of this was a change in how that independence was imagined. Salim pictured a return to the desert – an independent Western Sahara, in his telling, was one in which everyone would be free to return to a nomadic life. Shadi probably had no illusions about whether a 'true' return to the past was possible, but his nationalism, at least, was deeply entrenched in the desert, and was fundamentally about belonging, coded as toughness, ability and comfort. Khadija, on the other hand, was tough and adaptive in a different way. It was hard to imagine her personally wanting to live in the desert, even if she, in principle, wanted such a life to be possible for others. But her vision of a Sahrawi state transcended a pastoralist relationship to desert space.

The decline of pastoralism was inseparable from the growing sense that the diplomatic path had failed. The generational split represented by the ceasefire tracked neatly with the collapse and partial reconstitution of the Sahrawi nomadic economy (Volpato and Howard 2014). Even if individual young Sahrawis, like Salim, were preserving some specific pastoralist skills, and even if others, like Shadi and Khadija, were drawing on those skillsets in new ways, the fact of a general social context in which pastoralist skills were widely understood and drawn upon – that, it seemed, was less sustainable, and the implications went beyond cultural or ideological change. As many scholars have observed in other contexts (e.g. Van Anda et al. 2021) the proliferation of (economic, social, political) choice among younger herders (or descendants of herders) often corresponds to morphological changes in the *form of pastoralism* being imagined or hoped for. The very emphasis on diversifying risk, keeping options open and managing alternatives, which is so central to pastoralism itself, provides a mechanism by which options *other than pastoralism* gain traction among youth (Bruyere et al. 2018).

Later in my fieldwork, Shadi grew more hostile. At first this manifested mainly as teasing. Observing me propped against a wall, trying unsuccessfully to connect my phone to a feeble Wi-Fi network in the protocol office of the Smara refugee camp, he said, 'You're a great anthropologist. You're exporting internet addiction to a new culture that didn't have it before.' Generally, we both laughed and moved on. But occasionally his teasing was sharper, quite unlike that of the older Sahrawis, who were more likely to regard me as helpless and harmless in the deep desert. Occasionally he seemed to be trying to dissuade

me from doing any fieldwork at all. When I asked around among my Sahrawi friends about the safety of visiting a particular border village, the response was generally positive and encouraging, but Shadi, who had never been there, told me that it would be 'suicide' to go.

One day, after this teasing dynamic had been established, Shadi and I got to talking about his military training, and his possible reaction if the armed struggle against Morocco resumed. Shadi was of the opinion that a return to violence was inevitable – this was some time prior to the resumption of hostilities in 2020, and Shadi predicted that the flashpoint was coming soon. His arguments were familiar – the youth would not stand for Polisario's inaction, the status quo could not be tolerated, some sort of flare-up would be unavoidable over a long enough timescale. But where I sensed that Salim feared a war that would further damage his treasured pastoralist lifestyle, and Khadija understood that such a war would be unwinnable, Shadi, instead, spoke about it with a sort of longing. For him, Polisario's surprising success in the original Western Sahara War was a direct consequence of the nomadic skillsets of its fighters – a view echoed, in fact, by many military historians (see for example Hodges 1983). But in the 2020s, fielding a generation of soldiers whose relationship to the desert was more tenuous, against Moroccan military technology that shrank distances, saw around corners and fired from beyond visual range, it seemed to me that Shadi was proposing something very, very risky. Military combat, too, was a matter of skillsets, and Shadi, though he had some military training through Polisario, seemed even more alienated from the lifeworld of an army at war than he did from the pastoralism of his parents and grandparents. Indeed, the relationship between pastoralism and combat had changed; fewer skillsets now existed that fit comfortably into both worlds.

Conclusion

Shadi, Khadija and Salim were all born in the Tindouf refugee camps and grew up in the aftermath of a war they did not fight but which had shaped their lives. The remnants of that war were all around them, physically and ideologically, and the odd dissonance of a Cold War decolonial movement, exiled from its homeland, in some sense stranded in time, provided the library of symbols, aspirations and narratives with which they made sense of the world. The same was true of the desert, and of the lifeworlds associated with the desert. Although the low, rocky



Figure 9.2 Urban and rural livelihoods blending in Smara, Western Sahara. © Matthew Porges

hamada around Tindouf was in many respects different from – and less fertile than – the *Tiris* plains or *Zemmour* outcroppings of the Liberated Territories, it functioned as the same sort of imprecise mirror. Although livestock were still to be found in the camps and the surrounding *hamada*, and the trappings of pastoralism were all ubiquitous, the possibilities

of nomadic life, like the war, had become incipient, imagined. It was possible to imagine oneself into a nomadic future or situate oneself in the context of a nomadic past; but the present was immobile.

It is in this context that Sahrawi youth come of age, and articulate pathways for their lives. This chapter has argued that nomadic pastoralism as practised in Western Sahara is not simply an economic activity, not simply a mode of life, but a web of ideological and ideational nodes which persist even into settled life. It has further argued that, despite a gradual and seemingly permanent decline in the percentage of Sahrawis engaged in 'full-time' nomadism – and fundamental changes to the lifeways associated with the nomadism that does still exist – the cultural and political traces of pastoralism are carried forward by Sahrawi youth and deployed in various ways. While it is probably not true that pastoralism is *endlessly* flexible, mobility certainly is. Shadi's flexibility in moving back and forth between Spain and Tindouf, his comfort with constant long-distance desert travel as a trucker and his reification of toughness, resilience and adaptability all speak to the narratives and ideological contexts with which he grew up. Salim's veterinary and husbandry skills, deployed stationarily in the refugee camps, nevertheless drew upon a long history of Sahrawi traditional ecological knowledge, and a comfort with and deep familiarity with livestock. Khadija's vision for a future Sahrawi homeland certainly incorporated an understanding of Sahrawi belonging, entanglement with the deep desert and freedom to move; but it also incorporated liberal-feminist, cosmopolitan and institutional internationalist perspectives, combining the traditional with the modern. Though none of these young Sahrawis were really aspiring to, or practising, 'traditional' pastoralism, all drew upon it in constructing ways of making meaning out of a post-pastoralist Sahrawi society, and a vision of its possible future pathways that did not depend wholly on a return to the nomadic past. The skills they rehearsed allowed them to imagine distinct futures which had different continuities with the past. If any sort of vocational training is inherently future-oriented, then the temporalities captured in Shadi, Salim and Khadija's relationships to pastoralism were multiple, facing both forward and backward, embodying a political project as flexible in its way as the pastoralism which had preceded it.

The last time I heard from Shadi, he was in Madrid. He had been in a serious car accident and was crowdfunding for medical bills and a flight home. As it happened, I was on my way to Tindouf, and each day I walked from the house where I was staying, on Smara's eastern edge, to the protocol office where Shadi had once teased me for using the internet. On one of these walks, a pickup truck pulled over next to me. In the back

were four or five young Sahrawi men, probably still in their teens. One called out to me, 'Hey! What do you think of Smara?'

'It's nice,' I said. 'It's very interesting.' Although the camp was dusty, austere and isolated, I meant this truthfully.

'Really?' one of the young men shouted, incredulous. 'It's horrible!'

They laughed and drove away. I thought that Shadi would probably have shared their view; that was why he was in Spain. But Shadi, I was sure, held this in tension with another feeling: that it *could* be more, that it *would* be more; that the present was not straightforwardly representative of the future. Shadi, Khadija and Salim were all building towards something more complex than simple disillusionment. It was, after all, still their desert.

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10

Navigating uncertainty through institutional adaptability in northern Uganda

Matteo Caravani

Introduction

Frequent institutional shifts, evolving international priorities and the changing discourse of development have significantly shaped the lived realities of populations across the Global South. In many cases, new development paradigms – often articulated through fleeting buzzwords, abrupt interruptions of funding and externally framed visions of prosperity – have led to fragmented and unreliable interventions, particularly in pastoral regions of Africa's drylands. In Uganda's Karamoja region, these dynamics are visible in externally driven prosperity agendas that pursue 'peace' through coercive disarmament and promote development via the construction of water reservoirs and irrigation infrastructure. These interventions advance a biopolitical project that seeks to reconfigure mobile pastoralist livelihoods around settled farming (Caravani 2019, 2024). As elaborated by Roba Jilo in his contribution to this volume, they likewise surface in top-down conservation strategies that declare protected areas without substantive local engagement (Rugadya et al. 2013). Such interventions are emblematic of a broader modernisation paradigm (Scoones 2026) and reflect the continuity of past colonial policies with present national development plans targeting rural areas (Nori 2022), particularly mobile pastoral communities living at the frontier (Tsing 2003).

While these external interventions are ostensibly designed to enhance pastoralists' resilience to drought and to conserve wildlife for

biodiversity under an 'eco-civilisation' mission, their actual outcomes often diverge from planned intentions, and they may be against the interest of the public good and instead serve other interests (Death 2014; Blanc 2022). Governmental critique identifies these interventions ranging from land and green grabs to large-scale infrastructure projects and state-led disarmament exercises as processes of territorialisation and securitisation (Buur et al. 2007; Korf et al. 2015). Territorialisation reworks land (frequently imagined as 'wilderness') into fixed, surveyed and mapped territory, thereby allowing state sovereignty to be exercised via bureaucratic apparatuses designed to render people and space legible (Scott 1998). In this governmental process, fixed water points are the statecraft *medium/means* to achieve this end, and pretext for extending state power to the pastoral peripheries. Conversely, securitisation is introduced through a narrative based on crisis, whereby governments declare a state of emergency that bypasses democratic decision-making and marginal areas are permanently militarised (Branch 2013). Both processes cause profound uncertainties for many pastoralists and certainties for a few institutions/actors (see Roba's contribution to this volume) (Caravani 2026). This poses significant challenges to the former and their traditional ways of life and for the latter opportunities for governance and capital accumulation (Scoones 1995; Tsering 2023; Caravani 2026). Beyond these important reflections, this chapter investigates how pastoralists in Karamoja navigate a coercive and uncertain institutional ecosystem.

This chapter focuses on the Kobebe area, a natural reserve area and a site of one of the most important water sources for livestock in Karamoja and for the nearby region of Turkana in Kenya. This area is located within a natural reserve area in Moroto District, Lositan Sub-County. During periods of water scarcity, cross-border transhumant pastoralists from northwest Kenya (Turkana) also rely on it, leveraging the amicable relationships they have established with the Matheniko – a Karamojong group mainly inhabiting the central belt between Kenya and Uganda. In this area, pastoralists from different countries, park rangers and army personnel co-exist in a complex, multi-layered and often unstable/uncertain relationship.

Karamoja is a semi-arid region predominantly inhabited by transhumant agro-pastoralists and shaped by a long history of colonial and postcolonial state marginalisation. Since 2010, expanded road and electrification networks have linked the region more closely to Uganda's political economy, reconfiguring its socio-political incorporation and modes of governance. In these relations between the state and Karamoja,

the historical dispossession of traditional dry-season grazing land by the state, aimed at establishing conservation areas and national parks, is a well-documented phenomenon (Fratkin 2001; Rugadya et al. 2013; Caravani 2019). In Karamoja, as in other dryland regions, fertile grazing areas have been appropriated to create protected areas, leading to significant disruptions in pastoral livelihoods (Mamdani, 1982; Rugadya et al. 2013). Similar processes occurred across East Africa in the 1970s, when pastoral societies faced communal rangeland losses due to the expansion of parks and game reserves (McCabe et al. 2010; Galaty 2013). In Karamoja, this shift resulted in the enclosure of fertile communal land, locally referred to as black soil, which was placed under the control of the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) (Rugadya et al. 2013). As a result, and similarly to other drylands areas, pastoral institutions managing access to common water and pasture resources co-exist with exclusive (and more formal) claims for conservation, thus leading to instability, confrontations and at times conflict (Kronenburg García et al. 2023).

Executive orders issued by the Ugandan president often introduce abrupt and additional layers of coercion and uncertainty for pastoral communities. A notable example occurred in 2006, when President Museveni ordered a massive disarmament exercise, following which human rights were violated and properties were looted. Since this exercise, the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) have maintained a presence in the region (HRW 2007). A more recent example is when, in 2023, the president ordered the closure of the border with Kenya, prohibiting Turkana pastoralists from grazing their livestock in Karamoja following the killing of three Ugandan geologists and two soldiers in the region.[1]

Against this backdrop, this chapter examines how pastoralists navigate and contend with structural constraints, sudden policy shifts and the imposition of particular ideas of prosperity, focusing specifically on the case of the Kobebe area. The Kobebe case illuminates competing visions of prosperity whose tensions generate instability, contradiction and turbulence – namely, conservationist priorities (biodiversity and ecological equilibrium), state-led agendas (modernising and securitising, 'stable' settled farming) (Caravani 2024) and pastoralist orientations (mobility, flexibility and open-endedness). The chapter shows how local practices of navigation and negotiation are not discernible as 'coping mechanisms', they are active grounds for potentially imagining and informing more supportive and just institutional arrangements.

The research draws on an extended case study conducted in two kraals in Kobebe, where four embedded community researchers (CRs)

followed two herds over a period of 12 months.[2] This study, which began in June 2024 and concluded in May 2025, aimed to uncover the strategies pastoralists use to navigate the (*un*)certainties introduced by both state and international policies and programmes in the area.

Kobebe dam

Constructed in 2010 by Uganda's Ministry of Environment and Water, the Kobebe dam is located approximately 50 kilometres from Moroto town. The project, which cost 6.7 billion Ugandan shillings (approximately US $4 million), was designed to provide a reliable dry-season water supply for over 3,000 livestock.[3] Presently, Kobebe dam stands as one of the most critical pieces of water infrastructure in Karamoja. Functioning as a key reservoir during prolonged dry periods – typically between January and June – it is among the few dams in the area that often maintains water year-round. According to a CR, 'By December 2024 all kraals came to Kobebe. Business people have already come and established permanent settlements. They stay throughout the dry season.'

The dam serves multiple pastoralist groups, including the Matheniko and Tepeth from Moroto, the Jie from Kotido and Turkana herders from neighbouring Kenya, who rely on it during periods of acute water scarcity. Its role in cross-border pastoral mobility highlights its strategic design not only for livestock survival but also as a mechanism for mitigating resource-based conflicts. In recent years, however, mounting demographic pressure, sustained peace and heightened demand for water due to environmental variability have strained the dam's capacity, increasingly giving rise to disputes over access and use (Nicol 2022).

The Kobebe dam constitutes a vital water source for livestock, which remains the cornerstone of livelihoods in the Karamoja region. Despite its importance, the dam's management has proven increasingly complex and problematic. Key challenges include overgrazing, rangeland degradation and fragmented governance arrangements, all of which have contributed to declining sustainability. Competition over access has intensified during periods of drought, most notably in 2014 when the dam dried up completely, leading to violent clashes between rival pastoralist groups. This crisis prompted a bilateral peace agreement between Uganda and Kenya to address tensions arising from cross-border pastoral movements and shared resource use.

According to Mugerwa et al. (2014), the concurrent use of the Kobebe dam by multiple pastoralist groups has exerted considerable

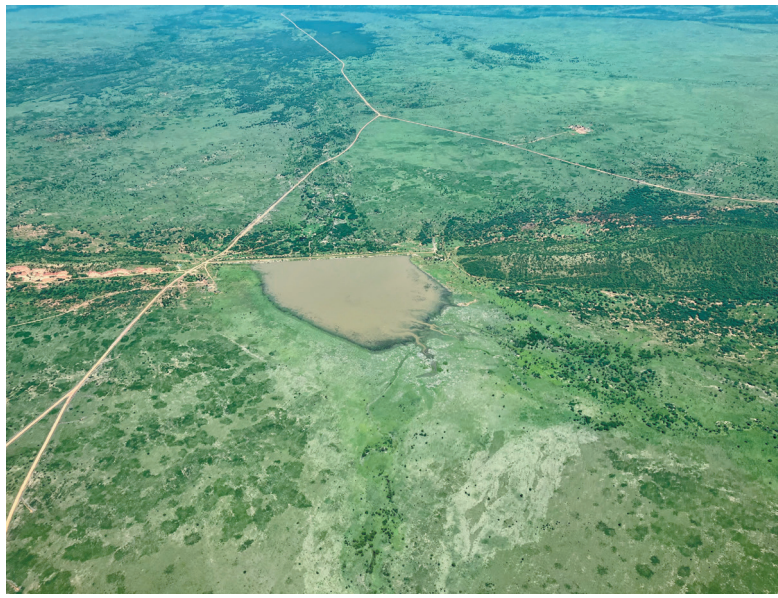


Figure 10.1 Kobebe dam during the rainy season. © Matteo Caravani

pressure on the surrounding rangelands, accelerating processes of ecological degradation. Direct watering of livestock at the dam has contributed to severe erosion, increased siltation and a noticeable decline in water quality – challenges further intensified by sustained high grazing intensity. The dam's management continues to confront a host of structural and institutional constraints, including inadequate infrastructure maintenance, incidents of vandalism and limited local governance capacity. Despite these persistent issues, Kobebe remains one of the most reliable water sources in the region, alongside Nakicumet dam in Napak District (Nicol 2022). This paradox raises a critical question: how does Kobebe continue to function as a vital resource hub amidst such evident management and ecological stress?

Beyond the mixed outcomes of this state-led project, hundreds of herders now reside in the vicinity of the dam year-round. According to Egeru et al. (2023), Kobebe was traditionally used as a wet-season grazing area and formed part of the customary territory of the Matheniko. This interpretation is contested by Iyer (2021), who argues that, prior to the dam's construction, the area near the Apule and Nangolapolon rivers served as a dry-season grazing reserve for the Matheniko and neighbouring communities. This ongoing debate illustrates the fluid and contested nature of land use classifications in pastoral territories and the complex,

changing nature of grazing-water systems in a highly variable rainfall environment.

Regardless of whether Kobebe was historically a dry- or wet-season rangeland (or both according to year), the growing concentration of kraals around the dam raises important questions concerning local governance, ecological sustainability and pastoralists' welfare. Notably, young herders have advocated for the creation of permanent settlements and agricultural plots in the area – an initiative that has garnered support from elders and kraal leaders such as Mukon, who view it as a potential catalyst for peacebuilding and intercommunal cooperation.

In practice Kobebe thus occupies a dual role: it is both a site of resource-based conflict and a locus of emergent collaboration and negotiation. While it remains an arena of contestation, it also offers possibilities for fostering cross-border social cohesion and shared resource management. Yet, the increasing number of herds and kraals relying on the dam – especially during the peak dry season – raises sustainability concerns and disease concerns, given livestock concentrations. These challenges are compounded by delays in government response to infrastructure breakdowns, such as the damaged water pipe at the dam in late 2023, which underscored critical gaps in institutional support. Although the idea of permanent settlement has gained traction among both younger and older pastoralists, any formalised plans remain contingent upon the approval of the UWA, which claims jurisdiction over the Kobebe area as part of a broader conservation mandate. Reconciling the need of pastoral mobility to 'manage variability' (cf. Krätli 2015) with aspirations for more settled livelihoods in a space designated for conservation presents a complex and often contradictory challenge for communities relying on the Kobebe dam.

During the dry season, the area effectively transforms into a seasonal marketplace: traders converge to sell sorghum, maize, beans, salt, cooking oil and locally brewed alcohol, taking advantage of the influx of herders and the scarcity of alternative trading hubs. In January 2025, for example, the same businessmen from Kotido who had occupied specific plots the previous year returned and erected semi-permanent structures in precisely the same locations – plots that local residents tacitly recognise as belonging to particular individuals.

Pastoralists follow a parallel logic. Each group migrates towards the dam in the dry months but reoccupies the *awuongorot* (literally 'the kraal you left') they used in the preceding season, thereby reproducing territorial claims through cyclical movement rather than permanent settlement. By contrast, economic activity sharply differentiates in

the wet season: trade volumes decline, livestock transactions become sporadic and many traders disperse.

Institutional uncertainties further discourage permanence. The UWA maintains that the area constitutes a wildlife corridor, yet its regulatory presence is intermittent and, according to local accounts, occasionally limited to the informal extraction of fees from vendors. This ambiguity deters traders from investing in more durable infrastructure and heightens concerns about security. As Echor, a kraal leader, observed, Kobebe has the potential to develop into a permanent trading centre, although such a transformation is unlikely in the immediate future. Seasonal return during the dry period generates renewed commercial activity, but insecurity remains a significant constraint, as those who appear to be traders may also engage in theft.

In sum, Kobebe illustrates how pastoral mobility, seasonal market dynamics and uncertain governance regimes intersect to shape both economic opportunity and vulnerability in Uganda's drylands, and how the siting of such a large structure without an appropriate development context is fraught with problems.

Mobility as a mode of resilience and a site of contestation

In the pastoralist rangelands of Karamoja, mobility is not merely a reaction to scarcity but a deeply embedded, strategic and adaptive practice. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Kobebe area, where the convergence of institutional and environmental uncertainty, sedentary state bias and overlapping governance systems has shaped a distinctive regime of movement. Rather than a linear migration from one point to another, mobility in Kobebe constitutes a complex choreography of human and non-human actors, responding to seasonal rhythms, climatic shifts, disease dynamics and evolving institutional and economic structures.

Mobility patterns in Kobebe are fundamentally seasonal, structured around the alternating cycles of rainfall and drought. During the wet season, herders tend to remain closer to their kraals, utilising temporary water sources such as ponds and streams. Grazing is strategically planned to avoid overuse of prime pastures near the dam, which are often reserved for the more challenging dry season. In these wetter months, animals are moved to elevated, *neni mukur* (rocky areas) to escape diseases associated with damp terrain and biting insects. Conversely, the dry season heralds

a more intensive movement towards key water points, with Kobebe dam becoming the focal node in a dispersed network of pastoralist mobility. Movements of up to 24 kilometres are common as kraals shift towards corridors along perennial rivers and lesser-known dams to ease pressure on the Kobebe core grazing zone. Herders distinguish carefully among pasture types, evaluating phenological stage and medicinal attributes to enhance livestock nutrition and health. Contrary to a simplistic image of opportunistic grazing, decisions about movement are governed by an intricate and complex knowledge of landscape, livestock health and forage quality. The objective is not merely survival but the maintenance of productive and healthy rangelands – especially critical in an economy where herds' welfare and associated by-product (meat and milk) quality are tightly linked to pasture diversity.

Health-related concerns further shape mobility decisions. Outbreaks of livestock diseases such as *euko* (lung infections) or *ekicodon* (hoof disease) often precipitate sudden shifts, as herders seek to quarantine infected animals and access safer grazing zones. Tick infestations, which intensify with the onset of rains, are addressed through preventive strategies such as controlled burning. The threat of tsetse fly infestation around the dam due to the wildlife also necessitates periodic withdrawal to avoid morbidity among animals.

Mobility is also intimately tied to security. The Kobebe area is both a refuge and a flashpoint. While the presence of the UPDF provides relative protection from livestock theft, herders remain vigilant, often dispersing portions of their herds or collaborating with allied kraals to mitigate raiding risks. Political and economic events – such as the seasonal resurgence of the Kobebe *abatua* (marketplace) – likewise influence movement patterns. During harvest, for instance, adult herders often return to their villages, delegating animal care to younger members of the family.

Mobility in Kobebe is underpinned by a repertoire of well-established strategies. Rotational grazing prevents pasture degradation and curbs disease transmission. Herd splitting allows for differentiated care: lactating cows and weaker animals may remain near the village, while stronger groups are moved further afield. Entire kraals may relocate in stages, often preceded by scouting parties tasked with identifying viable pasture and water sources, and in some cases, network coverage for mobile communication. This also underscores the importance of mobility across heterogeneous landscapes. Moving animals sequentially across different environments enables pastoralists to sustain larger herds than would be possible if they were confined to a single zone. This is partly because plant

species vary in nutritional value, which shifts across species and across different stages of the plant life cycle (Maru 2022).

Leadership and governance remain vital to this process. Decisions about relocation are typically made by elder kraal leaders with long-standing ecological knowledge and inter-community ties. While younger herders enjoy a degree of operational autonomy, particularly for short-range shifts, they remain connected to familial and institutional networks through regular communication. Negotiation and conflict resolution are embedded in everyday life. Meetings between kraal leaders, local councillors and NGO representatives facilitate shared understandings around grazing rights and water access. Informal diplomacy – sealed with the exchange of gifts such as livestock, alcohol or bulls – often cements these inter-group agreements/ties.

At the same time, mobility is increasingly mediated by external actors. The UPDF regulates access to the dam, manages watering times and occasionally expects informal appreciation payments in the form of cash or livestock. The UWA, asserting the area's protected status, places constraints on tree cutting and land use, further complicating pastoral access. NGOs and district governments play a limited and unreliable supporting role, often facilitating veterinary outreach, infrastructure maintenance or documentation required for livestock trade.

The impact of this mobility system is multifaceted. On the one hand, it enables herders to maximise health (and therefore value) of herds by navigating extreme climatic variability and ecological stress, ensuring a modicum of food security and herd viability. On the other hand, seasonal congregation – particularly during the dry season – leads to intense pressure on water points and pastures, fuelling both environmental degradation, potential inter-group tensions and livestock diseases. Yet Kobebe is not only a site of competition but also a laboratory for new social relations. The shared dependence on the dam has catalysed cooperation, from peace dialogues to joint market ventures, in a way that is perhaps comparable to the markets described by Banerjee et al. in their contribution to this volume.

Crucially, mobility in Kobebe should not be romanticised as an effortless tradition. It is an increasingly politicised and negotiated practice, shaped by a dense web of traditional authority, external governance, infrastructural fragility and emerging market dynamics. It also reveals the limits of state-led development interventions that seek to sedentarise populations or impose fixed spatial orders. As this case illustrates, pastoralists are not passive recipients of environmental or development policies but adaptive and resistant groups engaged in a continuous recalibration of movement, governance and survival.

Conservation, mobility and the institutional contradictions of state interventions

The Kobebe area constitutes a dynamic intersection of conservation policy, pastoral mobility and overlapping institutional authority, and, critically, a social field in which customary institutions and forms of authority play a central role in mediating access, adjudicating claims and shaping everyday governance. Formally designated as a wildlife reserve under the jurisdiction of the UWA, Kobebe is emblematic of the tensions inherent in managing protected areas within socio-ecologically complex pastoral systems. As a conservation space, Kobebe is portrayed by UWA as belonging primarily to wildlife (most prominently elephants) thereby subordinating human activity to environmental protection objectives. Yet on the ground, this designation remains contested, negotiated and reconfigured through everyday encounters between pastoralists, state agencies and military actors in a cyclical dynamic of appropriation and re-appropriation (Blanc 2022).

The territorialisation of conservation is rooted in a longer historical process of spatial control. As early as 1963, shortly after independence, the Ugandan government – building on colonial legacies – established multiple controlled hunting areas and game reserves across Karamoja, including Matheniko, Bokora Corridor and Pian-Upe (Rugadya et al. 2013). At the time, Karamoja was treated as an internal resource frontier. As Tsing (2003: 5100) put it: 'the military had a central role in creating the "wildness" of the frontier'. A notable illustration of this exclusionary logic was the establishment of a customs post at the Teso–Karamoja border, specifically at Olilim prior to entering Alekilek, where individuals were required to obtain permits to access the region (Caravani 2017). Cisternino (1979: 67) noted that even after independence, a sign at Iriiri declared, 'You are now entering Karamoja closed district. No visitor may enter without an outlying district's permit'. He famously likened the region to a 'human zoo', reflecting the exoticised and securitised treatment of Karamoja as a space apart.

The apparent contradiction of placing a major pastoral water infrastructure project – Kobebe dam – within or adjacent to a wildlife reserve exemplifies the enduring institutional incoherence that characterises dryland governance. According to Egeru et al. (2023), following the construction of the Kobebe dam in 2010, the area was officially gazetted as a wildlife reserve, triggering a reconfiguration in land use and access. What was previously a wet-season grazing area for the Matheniko was transformed into a dry-season refuge for both livestock and wildlife.

Ownership and governance shifted from traditional authorities to a composite structure involving UWA, UPDF and district officials. Access negotiation mechanisms were similarly transformed, moving away from solely customary deliberation (*etamam*) to a more formalised and multi-layered governance system.

Yet this shift has produced overlapping and conflicting claims. As I set out in my introduction, herders find themselves operating within a space governed by contradictory visions of prosperity – state biodiversity conservation on the one hand and pastoralists livestock productivity on the other. In addition, overlapping user rights, imposed through top-down state planning, have generated institutional turbulence and productive confusions. As Rugadya et al. (2013: 7) report from interviews with Jie communities in Kotido, many residents were unaware of the boundaries and legal status of the Matheniko corridor until 2009, even though this area had long been used as communal grazing land: 'When we left, UWA came and fenced our land and that is the current Matheniko corridor you hear about.'

At the core of UWA's conservation regime lies the assertion of exclusive territorial claims on behalf of non-human actors. Officials emphasise the economic value of wildlife and assert that the area west of the Kobebe dam – locally known as *Akaromwai ngina a lotoo amaata* – functions as an 'elephant base'. UWA enforces regulatory practices that prohibit tree cutting, hunting and bush burning, with surveillance operations designed to detect and punish suspected poachers. Herders are warned against grazing livestock in designated wildlife zones, and children herding in these areas must be accompanied by adults.

Water access is a central axis of tension. During the dry season, UWA – often in coordination with the UPDF – regulates access to the dam, allowing livestock to water only once per day. Bathing in troughs is prohibited, and the military is tasked with enforcing these rules. In this context, water becomes not only a vital ecological resource but also a securitised and contested commodity.

The situation reached a critical point in August 2024. On 11 August, pastoralists observed a group of elephants at the dam and raised concerns about water depletion, as well as the potential spread of livestock disease through flies. Elephants were also reported to have destroyed nearby gardens. On 12 August, UWA officials arrived and prohibited the herders from chasing the animals away, reiterating the area's reserve status. These orders were met with resistance. Many herders were unaware of the official boundaries and disputed the legal designation of the land. The presence of the elephants continued to disrupt grazing routines, and

by 14 August, herders expressed strong dissatisfaction with what they saw as UWA's failure to protect their access to critical water and land resources. Although efforts were made to relocate the elephants, they remained at the dam, fuelling a broader sense of neglect and institutional abandonment.

The governance landscape in Kobebe is thus marked by hybridity and institutional overlap. UWA, UPDF, local police and local council (LC) authorities all play roles in managing conservation, security and pastoral access. Kraal leaders like Lochubakale, who also serve as elected local officials, act as intermediaries between these institutions and the herding communities. Regular joint meetings involving wildlife officers, military personnel, local councils and kraal leaders aim to manage cohabitation and defuse tensions, especially during the dry season when pastoralist convergence intensifies.

Nevertheless, the legitimacy of UWA's claims remains widely disputed. For many pastoralists, the presence of elephants is not a conservation benefit but a threat to survival. The elephants' consumption of scarce water resources and destruction of gardens during the dry season are perceived as direct affronts to their livelihoods. The expansion of the Kobebe trading centre and the emergence of semi-permanent kraals also reflect a significant shift in the landscape – from seasonal use to semi-permanent settlement. Younger herders, supported by elders, have proposed establishing crop cultivation and permanent housing, directly contesting UWA's conservationist mandate.

In sum, Kobebe illustrates the frictional encounter between conservation as state policy and mobility as a pastoralists' livelihood strategy. Protected status does not eliminate human presence; rather, it reorganises it through new power hierarchies of access and exclusion. Governance is not a monolithic imposition but a shifting assemblage of negotiation, resistance and accommodation. The tensions between wildlife protection and pastoral mobility – manifested in elephant–human conflict, overlapping land claims and institutional mess – underscore the broader contradictions of competing visions of prosperity in dryland areas.

As Scoones (2024) argues, state and international development interventions in dryland areas are often attempts to control variability, yet in doing so they generate new forms of turbulence. The Kobebe case exemplifies how pastoralists respond with strategic adaptations – not merely in mobility patterns, but in institutional navigation, collective action and the assertion of historical rights. Sustainable co-existence in such contexts will require not only ecological community management

but also infrastructural investment, political recognition and a rethinking of conservation that acknowledges pastoralists not as threats to biodiversity but as stewards of shared and contested landscapes.

Pastoralists' view

Adjacent to the Kobebe dam is a detachment of the UPDF, which maintains a regular presence in the area since the disarmament operation in 2006. Pastoralists engage in routine interactions with stationed soldiers, often delivering milk as part of everyday exchanges. These transactions are frequently reciprocal, with herders receiving maize flour and other food commodities in return. However, beyond their material utility, such exchanges function symbolically to foster and sustain amicable relationships between pastoralists and military personnel.

Evidence from the research indicates that the establishment of the Kobebe dam has significantly altered local settlement patterns. Pastoralist kraals – historically defined by high mobility – are increasingly transitioning into permanent or semi-permanent encampments. This shift signals broader transformations in pastoral livelihoods and rangeland governance, catalysed by the presence of permanent water infrastructure and evolving institutional arrangements. Although seasonal mobility was anticipated during the research period, observations revealed limited movement around the dam, highlighting an ongoing process of sedentarisation extending beyond village boundaries (Caravani 2019). This transformation carries substantial implications for pastoral production systems, livelihood strategies and the restructuring of social institutions. In effect, Kobebe is evolving into a de facto permanent settlement, necessitating the delivery of essential services such as healthcare and education.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the construction of the dam can be understood as part of the state's broader biopolitical project of promoting, and ultimately imposing, settled farming. However, this aim appears fundamentally at odds with the conservationist logic underpinning the area's designation as a wildlife reserve. As Tsing (2003: 5102) argues, the salvage frontier is a space in which the making, saving and destruction of resources are deeply entangled. In such contexts, conservation, production and resource sacrifice overlap almost entirely, while conventional temporal distinctions between the study, use and preservation of nature become reversed, conflated and confused. Amidst this institutional contradiction, herders have exhibited remarkable resilience

and ability by navigating and reappropriating the fragmented governance landscape to serve their interests – a phenomenon I conceptualise here as *institutional adaptability*.

The relationship between pastoralists and the UPDF represents a key element in this adaptive governance landscape. For kraal leaders in Kobebe, cultivating strong ties with the military is seen as strategically advantageous. These relationships enhance kraal security, particularly against livestock raids, and bolster the social and political standing of kraal leaders within their communities. Moreover, the UPDF exercises control over access to the dam's water infrastructure. Water troughs are only opened at specific times of the year; during the research period, for instance, the UPDF closed access in mid-April 2024 and reopened it in November 2024.

Access to the Kobebe dam is tightly regulated by the UPDF. Historically, herders were required to obtain formal permission from the military detachment commander, and there have been occasions when access was entirely restricted. Informal arrangements also play a role, with herders at times facilitating access through appreciation payments, including monetary contributions (e.g. 200,000 Ugandan shillings/US $57.97) or livestock offerings such as he-goats. To prevent water depletion, the UPDF implements a rotational watering schedule, dividing herds into morning and afternoon groups, with each herd allowed to water once daily. The military also manages the dam's water infrastructure manually following previous instances of tampering with automatic systems. Furthermore, the UPDF enforces hygiene protocols by prohibiting the use of troughs for bathing.

Pastoralists broker relationships with the UPDF through a variety of means, including the provision of essential goods such as milk, ghee, meat or other favours. These reciprocal arrangements secure not only access to water and protection but also elevate the influence of kraal leaders (there are significant connections to be drawn between these arrangements and the business activities described by Wangari-Muneri and Mohamed in their contribution to this volume). One illustrative case involves a kraal leader who cultivated strong ties with both UPDF personnel and UWA rangers. As a result, he gained substantial authority within the community, becoming a focal point for dispute resolution and inter-kraal coordination.

The influence of military alliances is also evident in more personal disputes. For example, a kraal leader whose camel was injured by a young girl in her maize garden leveraged his relationship with the military by enlisting four UPDF soldiers to accompany him in seeking compensation.

Their presence ensured compliance from the girl's family, who acquiesced to a demand of four cows despite initial objections, recognising the power imbalance created by the leader's military backing.

These examples underscore the complex dynamics and power structures shaping pastoral communities around the Kobebe dam. Strategic alliances with military actors are not merely responses to insecurity or evidence of dynamics of local corruption; they are also arrangements through which local leaders consolidate authority and negotiate governance. In doing so, pastoralists show the ability to transform institutional constraints into opportunities for a few, adapting to and reshaping an evolving governance terrain marked by overlapping jurisdictions, competing mandates and enduring structural uncertainty.

Conclusion

This chapter highlights the fluid and often fragmented nature of governance in dryland areas, reflecting the contested and unpredictable institutional terrain that characterises these contexts. The Kobebe area exemplifies such complexity: its dam operates as both a lifeline for pastoralists and a mechanism for sedentarisation – thereby rendering these communities simultaneously more vulnerable to environmental variability and more legible to state structures (Scott 1998). In response, herders have retained elements of mobility in and out of Kobebe to fuel wider networks of relations that provide labour, resources and information and to harness the variability embedded in the grazing land. By doing this, they mitigate the risks associated with turbulent institutional patterns in an increasingly volatile and uncertain ecological environment.

The emergence of a local market economy has begun to fill the gaps left by inadequate public services, supporting livelihoods without fully anchoring communities to permanent settlement. However, the presence of a conservation area adds yet another layer of institutional uncertainty. While based on a vision of prosperity to save the environment, pastoralists' access to grazing land has become increasingly constrained, and the land use regulations imposed by conservation authorities restrict the flexibility needed for effective and healthy rangeland management.

In this context, hybrid forms of rangeland governance have emerged. These arrangements are neither purely private, nor communal, nor entirely open access. Rather, they are shaped through continuous negotiation among diverse actors, including herd owners, kraal leaders,

UWA rangers and UPDF personnel whereby the lines between public and private, legal and illegal become blurred (Tsing 2003). This aligns with a growing body of scholarship demonstrating that pastoralists are capable of producing reliability in the face of growing turbulence (Scoones 2023). The concept of *institutional adaptability* offers a useful analytical lens through which to understand the collective capacity and responsibility of herders to navigate and manage uncertain institutional arrangements, sudden policy shifts and unreliable external interventions in dryland settings.

In Kobebe, pastoralists confront multiple, intersecting uncertainties – ranging from seasonal resource pressures and disease outbreaks to social frictions – by drawing on indigenous knowledge, cooperative practices and context-specific innovations. Their capacity to explore adaptive strategies – whether through temporary migrations, entrepreneurial ventures or proposals for more permanent forms of settlement – demonstrates a remarkable degree of 'collective resilience' (cf. Semplici et al. 2024). Nonetheless, sustaining such collective efforts requires enhanced external support, particularly in the domains of infrastructure development, veterinary care service and conflict resolution.

Over time, pastoralists in the region have cultivated hybrid knowledge systems that integrate scientific expertise (provided by both state and international actors) with indigenous/traditional ecological knowledge. These evolving epistemic networks have supported adaptive responses involving a range of intermediaries and stakeholders. However, adaptability is not a neutral or uniformly positive concept. On the one hand, as I have shown in this chapter, pastoralists have shown exceptional capacity to adjust to abrupt institutional shifts. On the other, as Harvey (2005) argues, such institutional adaptability can be instrumentalised within neoliberal governance frameworks, where the burden of survival is increasingly placed on local actors, while state responsibility is washed away.

Recognising and supporting local adaptive capacities and investments is a first step towards more socially just arrangements. Yet it is equally important to interrogate the broader interests that such adaptations or resilience may inadvertently serve (Duffield 2013). In the context of escalating climate risks and enduring structural marginalisation, it should be the responsibility of the state – rather than solely that of the community – to safeguard populations and ensure the conditions for their sustained well-being and prosperity. Durable material prosperity is most likely to be achieved by first understanding the practices and institutions through which pastoral communities secure survival and

continuously adapt to uncertain and variable environments, and secondly by aligning public support with these endogenous arrangements rather than undermining or co-opting them or establishing unsustainable parallel systems (Stites et al. 2024). In the end, prosperity should be a collective responsibility that requires coordinated and national joint visions among communities and state actors, eventually supported by international donors and organisations.

Notes

1 http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/museveni-demands-kenya-extradites-herders-for-murder-trial-4245408.
2 This is part of a larger three-year study funded by USAID that was abruptly terminated in February 2025.
3 http://www.independent.co.ug/karamojong-turkana-pastoralists-demand-access-to-kobebe-dam/.

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Afterword: the drylands of tomorrow

Gufu Oba

The study of pastoralism has been evolving since Evans-Pritchard's (1940) classic ethnography of the Nuer in South Sudan (then Anglo-Egyptian Sudan), where he used social organisation as an anthropological tool to understand adaptations to a highly variable ecological context. Although theory has undoubtedly advanced since this pioneering ethnographic work and many of its initial assumptions have been challenged, Evans-Pritchard's critical response to the notions of chaos and backwardness, which were then widely applied to pastoralism across the British Empire, opened a path of enquiry that would influence decades of scholarship, including this volume. The fact that, as various contributions to this volume describe, the legacies of these once explicit ideas of pastoralism's disorder and irrationality persist into the present day – shaping development policy and practice in complex ways – offers both reason to reflect on their remarkable durability and insight into the intellectual inheritances underpinning post-independence development in what are now often called 'the drylands'.

It is notable that the term 'drylands' first gained prominence in research and policy contexts that viewed African pastoralism negatively and pessimistically. Only through sustained effort by scholars across disciplines has the term been reclaimed, now serving as shorthand for the environment in which research is undertaken that considers pastoralism seriously as a basis for resilience and sustainability. This volume makes a valuable addition to that body of work. Its exploration of 'prosperity' addresses why pastoralism is often framed in overly simplistic or reductive terms. Prosperity has traditionally been seen as a stage following pastoralism – an ideal future that promises greater stability, order and governability than traditional pastoral life. By challenging

this view, the volume is likely to stimulate important debate and further inquiry. Moreover, it has direct implications for drylands policy and practice, especially at a time when, as the editors highlight in their introduction, much is at stake.

To understand what some of these implications might be, it is first necessary to briefly reflect on the intellectual and practical genealogies through which pastoralism has been approached, managed and debated over time. This history emerges throughout the book, at times as the central focus of discussion and at other times as a means of framing new empirical material. Here, I do not dwell on it in detail but rather sketch some of its key contours to help situate this book's contributions and the possibilities they point to.

Many of the contributions to the volume (Roba; Banerjee et al.) reflect on colonial-era assumptions about pastoralist marketing practices and the emergence of markets and economic practices that undermined and sidelined pastoral economies. More widely, the colonial era across Africa's pastoralist regions comprised a formative moment in which many of the ideas that would later structure development thinking in the drylands first surfaced. It was during this time that concerns with overgrazing and degradation, narratives of scarcity and crisis and notions of pastoral 'irrationality' and 'the tragedy of the commons' were consolidated. What is interesting is that all of these ideas rest on a similar assumption – one that underlay even Evans-Pritchard's pioneering work on the Nuer, and which the editors identify at the outset of their introduction. It is the assumption of stability and passivity, of an equilibrium in socio-ecological relations that is fragile and at risk of tipping off kilter. Change, as the editors state, is always assumed to come flowing from the outside.

Taking this view of pastoral passivity for granted, Africa's post-independence period saw rapid, large-scale development aimed at modernising and transforming pastoralism. However, by the 1970s, following the failure of many large-scale development efforts, new questions arose about the direction pastoralism should take under increasingly difficult conditions. Academics and development agencies alike, faced with the Sahelian drought crisis of the 1970s and equipped with understandings of pastoralism essentially unchanged since the first decades of the twentieth century, questioned whether it still had a future, and what this future could look like. It was at this time that seeds were sown that, over the following decades, would take root and grow into a dense forest of scholarship, reshaping how pastoralism and its challenges were understood. What emerged from these seeds at first was a new

understanding of rangeland ecology as dynamic and 'non-equilibrial', overturning entrenched assumptions about balance, degradation and pastoralist culpability that had long guided policy and intervention (e.g. Ellis and Swift 1988; Scoones 1996).

Building on this paradigm shift, further research and advocacy reframed some of the core challenges facing pastoralists, emphasising that these are often structural in nature, resulting from forms of development, investment and intervention that misunderstand the dynamics of pastoral livelihoods (past and present), either neglecting or actively undermining existing locally led approaches (see Krätli 2015; Scoones 2023). Drawing insights from the disequilibrium paradigm into socio-economic and political analysis has been a further critical achievement of scholarship since the 1980s, including work exploring the entanglements between pastoralists and the state (Little 1992). Such contributions extended the implications of rangeland ecology's paradigm shift, showing that pastoralists are neither passive environmental stewards bound within fixed ecological relations nor victims of forces beyond their control, but rather active political actors.

A critical contribution that emerged from these wider changes was Anderson and Broch-Due's (1999) influential volume, *The Poor Are Not Us: Poverty and pastoralism in Eastern Africa*, which rethought the relationships between poverty, wealth and pastoralism. Looking beyond simplistic, monolithic accounts, this volume paved the way for new, more complex and attentive investigations of value, poverty, wealth and redistribution in pastoralist societies. The present volume represents a natural development of this intellectual trajectory, extending its concerns into the contemporary moment by placing the focus on the reverse image of poverty – prosperity, and asking how it is being imagined amidst far-reaching social, economic and ecological transformations.

Indeed, the editors and contributors to the present volume deserve praise for presenting new perspectives on what prosperity, rather than the now well-trod themes of crisis and poverty, signifies in the study of pastoralism. In foregrounding this affirmative framing, they do not overlook or diminish the complex problems, injustices or enduring forms of exclusion that continue to shape pastoralist lives. Instead, they pose the broader, more generative question of what alternative possibilities are being imagined and enacted, and how individuals and communities are already engaged in actively remaking their worlds in the face of change. Their engagement with diverse literatures and with new empirical material sheds light on the diversity of human–environment relationships currently at play in the drylands, the complexity of pastoralist knowledge

systems and the imaginative and practical dynamism of the strategies pastoralists employ to shape the future.

A critical implication of this volume for research lies in its implicit insistence on the enduring need for genuinely interdisciplinary approaches to the study of pastoralism and development in Africa. The challenges that define the drylands are at once moral and practical, social and ecological. Understanding how they might be addressed and how pastoralist futures might be more effectively supported and invested in requires open, sustained dialogue across disciplines and forms of expertise. This has long been recognised, and many earlier works have brought together diverse perspectives to explore pastoralism in its complete, multi-millennial depth (Bollig et al. 2013). However, this volume gestures towards a different kind of interdisciplinarity; one that treats pastoralism not merely as an object of study requiring multiple lenses, but as a ground for rethinking parts of the disciplines themselves, and perhaps reimagining the relationships between knowledge, practice and change.

Returning to the question I raised earlier, it seems particularly important to ask why, despite this history of work I have briefly described, policymakers and development planners continue to view pastoralism through such limited and restrictive lenses. Perhaps it is not a question with a singular answer, just as there is no singular solution or technical fix capable of enhancing pastoralist resilience across the board. However, it also reflects the difficulty of translating more nuanced, contextually grounded scholarship into the frameworks and languages that drive development policy and governance. This brings me to a further implication of the volume: its emphasis on the need for development practice to better understand and engage with specific contexts. The chapters demonstrate, in diverse ways, how universal metrics, indicators and approaches to development in the drylands will always struggle to capture or measure forms of success that hold meaning for local people. It does this mainly by approaching pastoralism not as a singular or uniform system, but as a diverse set of practices and histories that take shape differently across regions and even within different societies.

The challenge, then, lies in developing an understanding that is both broad and comparative (i.e. recognising that pastoralists share fundamental livelihood dynamics and face many similar challenges) while remaining attentive to the specificities of place, history and context. One productive way to address this tension might be to identify common orientations or frameworks for thinking and action, rather than prescribing uniform solutions. The book highlights several themes

that could inform such coordinated yet locally grounded approaches. Among these is the need to take seriously the social relationships and informal networks that underpin pastoral life in times of both scarcity and abundance. Too often, interventions and investments designed externally to, and misaligned with, these dynamics fail to yield meaningful outcomes, unless and until they are co-opted, adapted and reworked by pastoralist communities themselves.

Another clear area for coordinated change lies in how pastoralist knowledge is understood and engaged with. Across a range of contexts, appeals to indigenous knowledge are frequently used to argue for better alignment between development interventions and community strategies. However, as many scholars have noted, the term itself is fraught with ambiguities and tensions. This volume highlights that pastoralist knowledge systems are never straightforwardly 'integrate-able' into external frameworks or programmes, precisely because they are not fixed, linear or mechanistic. Instead, they are grounded in flexible, continually negotiated institutions and in ever-evolving relationships with ecologies, landscapes and political–economic systems. Shifting attention to these knowledge systems is not simply a means of improving the effectiveness of existing approaches; it offers a way to rethink development itself and identify new ideas and orientations that might shape policy and practice in the years to come.

Key to this ambition and others is the task of engaging more with pastoralist histories and bringing them into conversation with how the future is imagined, planned and projected in the public and private sectors. In many respects, the histories of pastoralist societies, with their distinct narratives of crisis, resilience and collective adaptation, and their distinct messages for the future, stand in stark contrast to the external frameworks and enduring misconceptions through which pastoralism has been understood. The editors note in their introduction that the present moment is one of seismic and unprecedented change across Africa's drylands, in which it is critical to think more carefully about the future. In doing this, it is equally critical to pay attention to the past – how it is imagined, used, included or excluded. Countering the enduring tendency to view change (whether for better or worse) as something that only comes from the outside, rather than as something that also wells up from within, is only possible through a careful appreciation of local histories. Situating contemporary understandings of crisis, poverty and prosperity within their historical and temporal contexts is essential to imagining the drylands of tomorrow. This volume makes an important contribution to that ongoing task, even as much work remains to be done.

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Pastoral Prosperities brings together contributions from diverse disciplinary perspectives to explore the future of mobile pastoralism in Africa's drylands. Offering new empirical material from across the continent, it builds on pioneering works that have challenged fundamental assumptions about development, questioning approaches that overlook well-being, purpose, quality of life and environmental health as central bearings of human flourishing. The book asks how the future is imagined and fought for in the drylands, and how understandings of this might broaden analytical frames that otherwise privilege narrow economic indicators.

Taking stock of the enduring power of negative narratives about pastoralism, the volume considers counter-narratives from multiple corners, tracing their alternative visions of both the past and the future. It explores everyday aspirations and practices to make sense of sweeping socio-economic, political and environmental change. In doing so, *Pastoral Prosperities* gestures towards new cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral conversations that might inform more grounded approaches to investment, governance and support in the years ahead.

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