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Introduction: pastoral prosperities

Samuel F. Derbyshire, Tahira Mohamed
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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

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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.

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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

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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

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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

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(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

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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.

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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,

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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

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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.

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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

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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.

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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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.

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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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