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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

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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,

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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

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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

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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.

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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

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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,

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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

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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.

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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.

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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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