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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'Shield of Cattle': elite politics, corruption and violence in post-devolution northern Kenya

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Abstract

This article explores the strategies of politicians from the pastoralist Samburu of northern Kenya since the country's 2013 devolution – a reform ostensibly designed to remedy Kenya's corrosive and often violent elite politics. Drawing on ethnographic data gathered between 2021 and 2025, I argue that devolution has rendered the political arena in north-central Kenya more diffuse, convoluted and contested. Ahead of elections, shifting coalitions of actors – cutting across the political structures and scales created by devolution – deploy the material rewards of government to intervene in Samburu beliefs around cattle prestige, gerontocratic norms and spiritual life. They do so to assert political influence, mobilise violence against rival groups, and win local elections. Rather than resolving Kenya's elite problems, devolution has thus refracted them through new structures, producing distinctive patterns of power and violence across the northern pastoralist landscape.

Keywords: Devolution; decentralisation; Kenya; pastoralists; corruption; political violence; elites

Introduction

In early 2017, six months before a general election in Kenya, more than a hundred Samburu pastoralist herders sat encircling an urbane-looking man dressed in beige chinos and a blue collared shirt, over which he had draped the distinctive red and blue check *shuka* or blanket worn by Samburu. Matthew Lempurkel was running for re-election as the member of parliament (MP) for Laikipia North constituency and had travelled from Nairobi to hold a 'peace meeting' with the herders, close to the border between Laikipia and Samburu counties, an area which had been plagued by violence for months. I attended the meeting, and afterwards, Lempurkel privately admitted to me that some 'powerful people' had been arming the herders, while many other local people

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as well as media reports alleged that Lempurkel himself was among those who had been arming and inciting them (Fox 2018b). His campaign T-shirts, distributed to herders, read 'Shield of Cattle' in the Samburu language, *Maa*.

The Samburu are one of the largest the pastoralist groups which occupy the semi-arid landscape of Kenya's upper half, practising semi-nomadic livestock production – mostly cattle, but also some camels, sheep and goats. The Samburu are not homogeneous – scholars have differentiated between the 'highland' and 'lowland' Samburu's patterns of settlement and livestock-keeping (Lesorogol 2008). Nonetheless, the contemporary Samburu identify as both an official 'tribe' and a political constituency, spanning the eponymous and largely mono-ethnic Samburu County, as well as parts of neighbouring Turkana, Marsabit, Isiolo and Laikipia counties, where they are minorities. The Samburu are thus politically well represented in north-central Kenya, but not at the national level, making them 'partial winners' of devolution (D'Arcy & Cornell 2016: 257). The Samburu live alongside other pastoralist groups, including Pokot, Turkana, Somalis and Laikipiak Maasai, and agrarian Kikuyu, with 'oscillations between peaceful coexistence and warfare [being] characteristic of relations between the Samburu and virtually all of their neighbours' (Holtzman 2016: 17).

In this article, I analyse the contemporary political strategies deployed by Samburu politicians and their allies in order to establish political influence among their constituencies and sometimes to mobilise violence. I use Kenya's devolution – which was introduced through a revised constitution in 2010 and implemented in 2013 – as a baseline for this research. Following the example of numerous African countries which have opted to decentralise their government as a response to conflict, Kenya implemented devolution ostensibly as the remedy for the 'rent seeking by politicians and ethnic patronage politics' among the national government's elite, seen as giving rise to pervasive political violence and 'ethnic conflict', including explosive post-election violence in 2007/8 which killed more than 1000 people (D'Arcy & Cornell 2016: 249). Under Kenya's new devolved system, 47 new counties were created, and key service delivery tasks and fiscal resources were reassigned to the county governments to de-concentrate wealth, power and zero-sum politics from Nairobi (D'Arcy & Cornell 2016). Newly elected positions were created to represent each county – a governor and deputy governor, senators and a county assembly, operating in parallel to the existing national government structures – and devolution proved lucrative for actors in these new positions, affording them high salaries, large allowances and opportunities for rent-seeking (D'Arcy & Cornell 2016). Unsurprisingly then, across Kenya, 'county governments have become a field for vigorous contests over these benefits' (Cheeseman *et al.* 2016: 29).

Different types of violence have been escalating in a variegated manner across northern Kenya since 2010, when the constitution was revised (Lind 2018). Lind and Greiner surmised that pastoralist politics has entered a 'new chapter' across northern Kenya (Greiner 2013; Lind 2018). Among the Samburu specifically, Okumu *et al.* have argued that a 'new power elite, created through the devolved governance system in 2013, uses violence as a means of gaining and preserving power' (Okumu *et al.* 2017: 409). Scholars of devolution politics in Kenya and ethnographers of northern pastoralist groups alike agree that there remains a

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need for deeper investigation and differentiation of the actors whose positions were introduced into this political arena by devolution (Cornell & D'Arcy 2014; Cheeseman *et al.* 2016) and the impacts this has had on social dynamics, politics and violence in this setting (Greiner 2013; Okumu *et al.* 2017).

I build on this line of argument. I analyse ethnographic data, including more than eighty interviews gathered in north-central Kenya between 2021 and 2025, and recognising that rumours about politicians are rife in this landscape, making it difficult to concretely establish specific 'facts' (Holtzman 2016), I also draw on existing scholarship and media coverage to build up a relatively robust picture. I apply a 'negotiating statehood' lens (Hagmann & Péclard 2010) to identify fluid constellations of actors engaged in the contemporary political arena, the new resources they have access to and the material and symbolic ways that they use these to pursue power and mobilise violence. While there are certainly continuities in the dynamics from the pre-devolution era – and in counties across Kenya – I argue that by introducing new actors and resources, devolution has rendered the political arena in north-central Kenya more diffuse, convoluted and contested. At strategic times – especially ahead of elections –, constellations of actors – which defy the structures, scales and political bounds created by devolution. They collaborate to deploy political strategies largely distinctive to the northern pastoralist setting, intervening in Samburu beliefs around the prestige of cattle, gerontocratic norms and spiritual beliefs. Notably, this research partly coincided with the drought which afflicted northern Kenya from 2021 to 2023 (ICG 2023), and my analysis suggests some ways in which drought-related pressures interweave with political interests in this landscape.

This article is structured as follows: the next section outlines the 'negotiating statehood' framework which will be applied to this case and then summarises what the existing scholarship tells us about contemporary Samburu 'elites' and violence. After describing the research methods used, I then highlight the various government positions and patronage resources available to Samburu actors since 2013. I then explore how these constellations of actors have used these resources to acquire vast herds of cattle which serve political functions, to remotely choreograph mass movements of herders and (armed) violence, and to purchase the services of prominent spiritual actors – all in the pursuit of securing power in post-devolution Kenya.

Negotiating statehood in northern Kenya

This article applies a 'negotiating statehood' lens, a 'partly analytical, partly methodological' framework introduced by Hagmann and Peclard, through which to grasp the 'complex and dynamic aspects of statehood' in contemporary Africa and beyond (Hagmann & Péclard 2010: 546). Through this framework, our attention is drawn to several key aspects of negotiation: the *actors* involved and the *constellations* they form, straddling both state and non-state domains; the material *resources* that they have at their disposal, including but not limited to state resources; and the symbolic *repertoires* that they harness 'to further their

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interests, to mobilise popular support, and to give meaning to their actions' (Hagmann & Péclard 2010: 547). In turn, the authors propose the concept of *negotiation arenas* to 'convey the sense of locations of negotiations [of statehood]; this transcends classical political scales and units of analysis such as the state–society dichotomy or the local-national–international levels' (Hagmann & Péclard 2010: 550). Jeremy Lind similarly drew on the negotiating statehood lens in his own analysis of devolution's impact on patterns of escalating conflict in northern Kenya, arguing that an 'emphasis on understanding the chain of violence operating through assemblages of actors nested and connecting across different geographic scales provides a complementary perspective of the potential impacts and influences of devolution' (Lind 2018: 136).

Samburu politics, 'elites' and violence

Within a wider classic anthropological legacy of portraying eastern Africa's pastoralist societies as rigidly egalitarian and acephalous, pastoralist 'elites' long fell through the cracks in scholarship: Pendle points out that the classic anthropological lens commonly treated pastoralists as being peripheral 'outsiders', largely removed from the state (Pendle 2023), whereas Czuba argues that the opposite has been true for political science, being largely preoccupied with those societies and actors at the 'centre' of the (typically agrarian) state (Czuba 2019). Certainly, more than a century of state neglect in this semi-arid 'frontier' left northern Kenya both geographically and politically 'peripheral', distant from Kenya's 'centre' in every way, and its predominantly pastoralist communities viewed as largely disconnected from the politics of Nairobi (Carrier & Kochore 2014; Lind 2018). Indeed, Paul Spencer's colonial-era ethnography of the Samburu (Spencer 1965) was among the key pieces of scholarship which cemented the enduring image of pastoralist egalitarianism in the region. Spencer painted the Samburu as a strict gerontocracy, governed collectively by older men and structured according to two main axes: the clan, of which there were nine, and (male) age-sets, of which there were six. Spencer's account focused especially on the age set of male cattle herding youth who had been circumcised but were unmarried, roughly aged between 15 and 30 and known as *moran*, and their relation to the age sets of elders. The elders – particularly the 'firestick' elders, two age sets above the *moran* – were assumed to govern the *moran,* including deciding where livestock should be herded for grazing and when *moran* should raid other groups (Spencer 1965).

From the 1990s to early 2000s, coinciding with the reintroduction of multiparty politics in Kenya, several scholars challenged Spencer's enduring image of gerontocracy, examining the roles of political, military and commercial 'elites' among the Samburu and their neighbours, amid an uptick in conflict in the north. Galaty, Holtzman, Okumu *et al.* and Wachira *et al.* have each explored the roles of a variety of different 'elites' and 'big people' – under which bracket they variously include 'high level politicians', police and security officers, local administrators, chiefs, cattle traders and other commercial actors – some Samburu and some from other groups (Galaty 2005; Holtzman 2016; Okumu *et al.*

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2017; Wachira *et al.* 2023). These scholars emphasised how these 'elites' collaborated to encourage cattle raiding and conflict between the Samburu and neighbouring pastoralist groups, ultimately for the purpose of private financial gain. Galaty, Holtzman and Okumu *et al*. show how, by funnelling weapons and providing military-style training to the *moran,* these actors encouraged the growth of commercially oriented cattle raiding (Galaty 2005; Holtzman 2016; Okumu *et al.* 2017). Meanwhile, Wachira *et al.* chart the 'emergence of influential pastoralists with ambitions to control and gain economically from pastoral rangelands and which exclude resource-weak pastoralists', including by fomenting land conflicts (Wachira *et al.* 2023: 548).

The engagement between 'elites', *morans* and elders has been touched upon too. In the intervening decades since Spencer's research, especially since the 1990s, a range of developments destabilised the Samburu's gerontocratic mode of authority and encouraged an apparent 'indiscipline' among *moran* (Marmone 2017). Various 'elites' including politicians from the Samburu – mirroring behaviours of those from the pastoralist Pokot and Garre – have increasingly undermined or co-opted elders in their communities to pursue commercially oriented raiding, land grabs and other private interests (Carrier & Kochore 2014; Greiner 2017; Okumu *et al.* 2017; Wachira *et al.* 2023). Okumu *et al.* also reference the political motivations for Samburu elites to sponsor raiding by *moran*, namely, to 'eliminate and disenfranchise their opponents' (Okumu *et al*. 2017: 504).

However, the existing literature on Samburu 'elites' – and those from other pastoralist groups – still leaves us with a range of questions regarding precisely which actors, by what means, and to what end these patterns of politics and violence have emerged in post-devolution northern Kenya. Intersecting layers of conflict, contestation and transition are unfolding across this arid region, making it difficult to isolate which of these dynamics are associated with devolution versus other developments (Lind 2018). In order to bring devolution politics into sharper focus, I primarily analyse Samburu actors vying for (re-) election in both national and county government positions, who identify as representing the Samburu community, even if they do not appear to practice the typical pastoralist lifestyle. At the same time, following Hagmann & Peclard's (2010) example, I also incorporate wider constellations of local allies and intermediaries, mostly non-elected and lower-ranking government actors and state security officers, with whom the politicians collaborate.

In this article, I rely on certain terms for Samburu actors and social institutions while recognising that each of these terms is laden with historicity, varying applications and even spellings. For instance, Samburu 'gerontocratic authority' and the nature of 'moranhood' have changed and diversified immensely since Spencer brought these terms into the anthropological lexicon (Wasamba 2009; Marmone 2017). Regarding *moran*, I apply the term *moran* in the same way that my Samburu interlocutors used it in conversation, to refer specifically to young men who are tasked primarily with herding livestock, albeit following heterogeneous arrangements and practices. The terms for Samburu spiritual actors such as *laibon* are similarly loaded. While I apply some

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of the terms used by ethnographers in the 20th century, in my analysis, I seek to convey that these actors and institutions are neither static nor essentialised.

Methods

After my initial encounters with Samburu politicians in 2017, the bulk of field research for this article was gathered between 2021 and 2024, with some follow-up interviews in early 2025, across southern Samburu, northern Laikipia and western Isiolo counties. Conflict and insecurity fluctuate in this landscape and must be continuously and carefully navigated. The specific ethical considerations of this research environment and my own positionality rendered a 'limited immersion' approach appropriate (Krause 2021). Between 2021 and 2024 I lived in northern Kenya, roughly a one-to-five hour drive from my various field sites and would drive myself to visit locations and hold meetings for sometimes just a few hours but usually a few days or a week at a time, intermittently and flexibly. The resulting data includes unstructured interviews, both individual and group discussions, with more than eighty people, including elders, *moran*, spiritual actors, local authorities and 'ordinary' people from the Samburu, identified using snowball sampling and opportunistic encounters, as well as participant observation. Interviews were conducted in *Maa* or *Kiswahili* with the help of a local translator, or in English by me where possible. Due to the sensitivity of the subject, all interviewees and specific locations have been anonymised and were not audio-recorded, but extensive written field notes were taken.

Crucially, it must be stated that the political environment in (northern) Kenya makes it very difficult to interpret or concretely determine specific 'facts' and details when discussing the actions of politicians and questions of elections, violence and corruption. Holtzman's ethnography of violence between the Samburu and their neighbours describes perfectly the conundrum for researchers here, where 'rumours' and 'stories' about politics abound: 'While at times these "Big People" are a vague, nefarious category, at other times they are specific individuals who could be named but may be considered too powerful to do so freely . . . The forces are sufficiently powerful and sufficiently hidden that we have no way to assess them' (Holtzman 2016: 189).

Regarding corruption allegations, in many cases media coverage of court proceedings was available to triangulate my findings. Meanwhile, regarding the 'land invasions' and reports of violence by Samburu pastoralists in Laikipia in 2016–2017 and 2021–2022, discussions on this subject became highly politicised – and to some extent racially charged – in online, media and public discussions: on the one hand, rhetoric about colonial-era injustices associated with today's white and foreign landowners circulated, often promoted by certain politicians; on the other hand, some of those influential landowners made allegations about those politicians' instigation of the 'illegal' invasions by *moran* to the media (Fox 2018b). In my analysis of these events, I attempt to sidestep this highly politicised rhetoric by relying primarily on the perspectives provided by Samburu people who were present in the affected

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areas when these events unfolded and on my own direct observations of the 'invasions' during my fieldwork. Taken together, the primary data, existing scholarship and media reporting paint a relatively robust picture of the patterns described, which is consonant with existing contemporary scholarship on the Samburu and their neighbours.

New actors and resources since devolution

As a starting point, we must examine who the (new) actors are in the Samburu political arena and what resources they have at their disposal since devolution. Within Samburu County, all of the key elected positions in both the national and county government structures have been occupied by actors who identify as ethnically Samburu since 2013, from national MPs in the county's three constituencies to the county governor, senator and MCAs. Meanwhile, in neighbouring counties such as Isiolo, Laikipia and Marsabit, Samburu actors hold some elected positions at the ward and constituency levels, but the Samburu are not considered to 'own' these other counties.

On the ground, the distinction between national and county government politics is considerably blurred by the fact that many of the 'new' county government elected positions have been held by actors who formerly held positions in the national government or who have switched back and forth – a pattern seen in counties across Kenya (Cheeseman *et al.* 2016). For example, the governor of Samburu since 2022, Lati Lelelit, was the MP for the Samburu West constituency from 2013 to 2017, while the subsequent MP for Samburu West since 2017 was a county senator from 2013 to 2017. In Isiolo County, the MCA for Ol Donyiro Ward for the three terms since 2013 was a district councillor under the national government before 2013. Similarly, political party lines are also mutable on the ground in Samburu. Though collectively, the Samburu have had a reputation for supporting long-time presidential opposition candidate Raila Odinga, in fact, political aspirants and incumbents have switched parties repeatedly during their campaigns, and there is mixed party membership between President William Ruto's UDA party and a range of other opposition alliances since 2013.

Devolution has altered the state resources available to politicians in this arena. The reforms entailed the reallocation a minimum of 15% of the national budget to the county governments, (D'Arcy & Cornell 2016), depleting the coffers of many national government actors in this area. As one retired, Samburu chief interviewed in this study proclaimed:

> Before devolution, when the national government was ruling, the provincial administration had more powers before the governors and MCAs came in, but now they are castrated; they have nothing to squander. They used to control everything in the district. They have nothing to eat now; devolution has finished them. They can take care of security but nothing else.[1]

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However, one set of national positions whose power and resources have been largely ringfenced from these reallocations is MPs. Infamously, Kenya's MPs have long been among the highest-paid MPs in the world, and in 2013, as devolution was being implemented, their salaries and allowances became a highly contested issue. Nonetheless, their salaries and allowances have steadily climbed in recent years. As of 2024, a Kenyan MP's basic salary was 725,502 KES per month (around $5600 as of August 2025), but with additional allowances factored in, an MP can take home 2.5 million to 3 million KES per month (roughly between $20,000 and 23,000 as of August 2025), according to an analysis in The Star newspaper (The Star 2024). Certainly, among interviewees in this research, Samburu MPs were widely perceived as being enormously wealthy, in absolute terms and in relation to the general Samburu population.

At the same time, MPs retained control of the constituency development funds (CDFs) which were created in 2003. Ostensibly envisaged as a means to support constituency-level, grassroots development projects, CDFs became widely seen as a key patronage source for MPs (D'Arcy & Cornell 2016). Recognising this, the national CDF Act of 2015 sought to reform the system by limiting the role of MPs to an oversight capacity, while a CDF committee was given responsibility for security and education projects (The Republic of Kenya 2015). However, resembling patterns of tendering malpractice seen in other Kenyan counties since devolution (Lind 2018), interviewees in this research claimed that several Samburu MPs had been able to influence the tendering process for CDF projects, hand-selecting the contractors and then receiving personal kickbacks. For instance, interviewees in this study alleged the former MP for Laikipia North from 2013 to 2017 – the 'Shield of Cattle' MP – had selected his own CDF committee in order to influence the specific villages which received funding to win community support (Fox 2018a), and in his home area. He was further alleged in this research to have influenced which contracting firm won the CDF bid, in exchange for a large kickback.

Meanwhile, for county government elected officials, considerable financial resources have been made available. Governors are paid more than MPs, with a basic salary of 990,000 KES (around $7660 as of July 2025) per month as of 2024, plus significant allowances (Mutai & Cheruiyot 2024). Governors hold executive powers in county governments, playing a decisive role in how county resources are disbursed. Other north-Kenyan counties have seen considerable patronage and corrupt practices by governors since devolution (Czuba 2024), and in Samburu, it appears that governors have similar opportunities to influence tendering processes and pocket county funds as do MPs. In a 2024 landmark case, Samburu County's former governor between 2013 and 2022, Moses Lenolkulal, was convicted of corruptly receiving 84 million KES (almost $650,000 as of August 2025) during his tenure by hiring his own petroleum company to supply fuel to the county government during his term in office, using a local businessman as his proxy. More recently, the Kenyan press reported that incumbent Samburu County governor Lati Lelelit was accused by Kenya's auditor General of irregular recruitment and payment practices, operating outside of county employment laws for 2022–2024 (Mumbi & Kinyanjui 2025).

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The involvement of constellations of actors in such practices became evident through the corruption case against former governor Lenolkulal, as a number of lower-ranking and non-elected actors were also implicated – in particular, the county secretary, who sits within the governor's office and has oversight over tendering and other activities in the county government, as well as other county government officers, were also convicted (Munguti 2024).

Meanwhile for MCAs, in 2024 their salaries were set nationally at 164,588 KES (around $1270 as of July 2025) per month, not including considerable allowances (Mutai & Cheruiyot 2024). Samburu interviewees viewed these individuals as relatively wealthy compared to ordinary Samburu. Designed to mirror the CDF in many ways, MCAs were allocated Ward Development Funds (WDFs) for their wards, which quickly proved controversial in several counties, with accusations of interference by governors, MCAs themselves and other illegalities. Interviewees alleged that kickbacks from the project tendering process for WDF spending were a key avenue through which MCAs in Samburu County had appropriated county funds, as well as by pocketing WDF money allocated for school bursaries.

Overall, echoing what Cornell and D'Arcy argued for other (non-pastoralist) counties in Kenya, the ongoing cross-pollination between the 'old' elite structures of the national government and the 'new' devolved county structures in Samburu County has resulted in contemporary politicians and lower-ranking officers, as well as friends and businesspeople outside of government, to a large extent 'eating' government resources in many of the ways that the 'old' elites did before devolution (Cornell & D'Arcy 2014). Nonetheless, the post-devolution era has evidently seen a significant multiplication in the number of positions and the resulting material resources in this arena.

'Cattle Barons' and politics

'Wealth' among the wider Samburu has shifted over the decades. A range of socio-economic factors have produced a broad trend of increasing inequality in livestock ownership among the Samburu: that is, 'ordinary pastoralists' own considerably fewer livestock, while a smaller number of individuals own disproportionately larger herds (Lesorogol 2008). It was widely rumoured that politicians own most of the largest herds among the wide Samburu today, though this was almost impossible to prove.

It is well established that for Samburu and other pastoralists, livestock ownership serves a range of interwoven social and economic functions (Khazanov & Schlee 2012). Regarding Samburu politicians and other powerful elites specifically, the contemporary literature has mostly emphasised their interests in raiding for the sake of augmenting their livestock herds and selling cattle for private economic gain (Okumu *et al.* 2017; Wachira *et al.* 2023). It is beyond the scope of this study to analyse the full ramifications of these patterns of politician or 'elite' owned herds on the wider Samburu livestock economy. This study instead focuses on the *political* functions of livestock and specifically

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advances two related claims: first, that many Samburu politicians probably do indeed own disproportionately vast herds of cattle, and second, that these actors invest in cattle precisely because they can serve a range of political functions – as well as economic and social interests. Cattle, in this sense, serve as both a political resource and a 'repertoire' for these actors.

The existing literature on northern Kenya has not delved into this practice deeply, but some insights from neighbouring South Sudan are instructive. Naomi Pendle has described changing livestock ownership practices among a 'new aristocracy' of political and military elites in South Sudan, mostly belonging to the pastoralist Dinka and Nuer and flush with new oil wealth, who have acquired vast herds of cattle: 'these large, individually owned herds sat alongside and challenged previous norms of cattle ownership in which herds were owned by the family and across the generations . . . these camps were guarded by individually selected *titweng* (armed cattle guards) . . . They were paid for their service and were armed by their employer (Pendle 2023: 129). Pendle explored the political functions of livestock wealth for these 'politico-military elites' whose monetary wealth '. . . was invisible to most South Sudanese who never travelled to Juba. Instead, the western Dinka most clearly saw the elite's oil wealth through their acquisition of thousands of cattle in their own grazing lands' (Pendle 2018: 111). In this remote, rural setting, 'cattle ownership was a way to convert their economic power into local, political power' (Pendle 2023: 129).

In northern Kenya, politicians from the Samburu and other pastoralist groups have been nicknamed 'Cattle Barons' among local people and some media reports (Gouby *et al.* 2017). 'Cattle Barons' from the Samburu have included, from the national government, MPs – including the 'Shield of Cattle' MP from Laikipia North – as well as officers from the police and military. From the county governments, they have included county governors, MCAs and lower-ranking county officials such as county secretaries. These individuals were described by Samburu interviewees as owning herds numbering in the hundreds or even thousands of cattle. Governors and MPs were singled out, especially for their vast herds. As one Samburu interviewee concluded: 'Politicians always have herds of cattle. Cash wealth is not as meaningful as cattle wealth.'[2]

However, the practice of politicians accumulating very large herds of livestock is, I argue, highly ambiguous *by design* and almost impossible to 'prove'. Even under the 'traditional' livestock production and accumulation system, ascertaining which individual or family 'owns' cattle in Samburu society is highly intricate (Khazanov & Schlee 2012). In the contemporary context, the investment of money (whether gained through legitimate or illegitimate means) into large livestock herds is almost impossible for a non-Samburu or outsider to trace to a particular individual. Samburu cattle are typically neither branded nor given ear tags to identify their ownership. An owner of a large herd would likely split his cattle into smaller herds and send them to be herded diffusely across a vast landscape, while the owners themselves maintain a largely urban and affluent lifestyle at a distance in Maralal, Nanyuki, Isiolo or Nairobi. The cattle are typically herded by *moran,*

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usually belonging to the same clan as the owner, though sometimes an owner will send some cattle to be cared for by *moran* of a different clan, belonging to their in-laws, for example. Traditionally, *morans* were not paid in cash by the owners but were allowed to drink the cows' milk. According to interviewees for this study, while many *Moran* still largely subsist off the milk, the practice of hiring herders as waged labourers had become increasingly common, which further obfuscated familial ties between livestock owners, their herders and herds. These arrangements between livestock owners and *moran* are highly informal, and likewise, whether the cattle have been acquired through raiding, breeding or purchase, there is rarely, if ever, a paper trail to prove this, making cattle herds an ideal place to 'hide' wealth.

For other Samburu and local people living in the same landscape in which these large herds graze, however, there are a number of signifiers which help them to identify when a large herd belongs to a politician or a prominent police or military officer. The nine Samburu clans each have different ways of marking the ears of their cattle, using a particular number of splits, in a practice known in *Maa* as *lpotono*. The clan to which a Samburu politician or prominent individual belongs is invariably well known, and therefore this can provide an initial indication of ownership to a Samburu who sees one of these herds. Then, other signifiers of these powerful actors' herd ownership will also be factored in: most obviously, there have been sightings of particular politicians and security officers, or the cars that belong to them, visiting certain herds to check on the cattle and providing supplies to the *moran*, ranging from food and veterinary medicines to weapons and bullets. Other such signifiers of ownership include if a herd is seen with a higher than normal number of *moran*; if some of the herders are also Kenya Police Reservists (KPRs); if the *moran* are carrying larger weapons such as M16 assault rifles; or if trucks are seen transporting cattle – all expensive undertakings. Conversations with the *moran* herding the cattle can also be revealing. Samburu interviewees explained the etiquette required:

> You cannot just go straight to ask someone about the herd owner, but if you strike up a conversation with the herders, being friendly, then usually you can ask which family they come from and then you can dig in. When Samburu meet on the road, they talk a lot. The greetings take a long time; you talk about water, grass, diseases, and then eventually you talk about security and these other issues [like who owns the herds].'[3]

This information then trickles through to the government, police, media and other communities via local chiefs, friends on the ground and other local intermediaries.

In general, being seen to own a very large herd of livestock denotes status and cachet for the politicians. As one Samburu interviewee surmised: 'They keep stock for prestige and political strategies.'[4] Kenya's general elections are held every five years, and the pre-election periods see cattle take on increased political significance among the Samburu. Most straightforwardly, because of

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the prestige attached to cattle, the vying politicians who own especially large herds are assumed by Samburu interviewees to attract more votes from their constituencies: 'In the Samburu society, before you get power you must have cows. To be elected, the community has to consider such resources.'[5]

Cattle can also be used by politicians to garner favour from their communities in other ways. Pendle's research in South Sudan emphasises bridewealth payments by Nuer and Dinka elites as a commonplace practice to command loyalty from their armed forces and communities (Pendle 2023). In the Samburu setting, some interviewees reported that politicians had contributed towards the bridewealth payment for their *moran* in their extended family or clan, or for other people among whom they want to curry favour. Similarly, in a practice known in *Maa* as *paran,* in the aftermath of drought, a relatively poor Samburu herder or livestock owner would approach an owner of a larger herd, asking them to donate a small number of cows or goats. Interviewees claimed that during the drought in 2022, several politicians had offered *paran* in public ways to attract political support from the community.

The livestock herds owned by vying politicians and their allies have been implicated directly in violence too. In 2016–2017 and 2021–2022, hundreds of thousands of Samburu livestock herds and herders moved from Samburu County – and even Marsabit to the far north – moved en masse into parts of Laikipia and Isiolo counties. The two phases of mass movement incidentally coincided with both the run-up to Kenya's last two general elections (August 2017 and August 2022) and with two periods of significant drought (ICG 2023). These mass herd movements comprised a mixture of both politician-owned herds and other – likely smaller – herds owned by other individuals and ordinary pastoralists.

Regarding the former, this study would suggest that constellations of actors, including Samburu politicians – including MPs and MCAs from Samburu and neighbouring counties – as well as prominent security officers and a range of local intermediaries, had collaborated to funnel weapons and other material supplies to *moran* herding their cattle. One Samburu interviewee alleged that 'the police have a civilian broker who will tiptoe to the police and give them a lot of money to buy rounds. One bullet for an AK-47 is 120 KES . . . at the police stations or posts, they do this.'[6] There were also rumours that police officers were paid off by politicians or their intermediaries to allow cattle herds to encroach on private, community-owned and state-owned land or to cross county borders. Kenyan police stationed in these counties might come from anywhere in Kenya but were Samburu. As one interviewee claimed: 'The police officers who happen to be local to the Samburu area are particularly involved in these practices. You serve as a mediator to earn from the Samburu and earn from the police. When you are a police officer from that community it is easier for you to penetrate and earn from that corruption.'[7] The interviewee named several of these senior police officers based in the county capital, Maralal suggesting that 'the Samburu now have a very straight route to gain those bullets.'[8]

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These constellations of actors then allegedly encouraged the *Moran* to forcibly move the herds into targeted areas of land or communities in Laikipia and Isiolo – namely, group ranches owned by Laikipiak Maasai communities, state-owned trust land, small farms owned mostly by Kikuyu and Turkana, and private ranches and conservancies, many owned by influential white Kenyans, foreigners and non-Samburu government elites. The cattle depleted the land of grass and other crops or vegetation and displaced the communities in these areas, often then clashing with the military and police units deployed there, and these mass movements have been referred to by other scholars and in the media as 'land invasions' (Fox 2018a, b; Njuguna 2021; ICG 2023). It has been argued elsewhere that these 'invasions' were instigated by Samburu politicians to displace communities expected to vote for political rivals from targeted wards and constituencies in those counties, ahead of the elections in both August 2017 and August 2022 (McCrone 2023).

Politicians, moran and mobile phones

To choreograph these 'invasions' and other activities, including livestock raids and banditry, vying politicians and their intermediaries in the security agencies and other government offices have intervened in the decisions typically made between elders and *moran*. As noted, the near-absolute authority which Samburu elders may have once held over *moran* has been destabilised over the past three decades (Wasamba 2009; Marmone 2017), however, a research gap remains in understanding around *how* the elites intervene in this mode of authority in order to interact with and mobilise *moran*/herders in raids and other activities in northern Kenya (Greiner 2013; Okumu *et al.* 2017).

In 2020–2024, the current Samburu age set of *moran* was called the *Lkisieku*. This cohort of young men were circumcised, officially entering their moranhood, between 2020 and 2021. The *Lkisieku* age set was therefore relatively new and young at that time, which, according to some Samburu elders interviewed, made the *moran* particularly difficult for them to control. Interviewees also partly blamed the *morans'* indiscipline among the *Lkisieku* on the timing of drought from 2021 to 2023 and its impact on the availability of grazing: 'The circumcision of new *moran* coincided with the onset of drought . . . They went off to find grass straightaway. There was no time to teach them and tell them about the rules.'[9] According to these interviewees, the *moran* therefore disobeyed the elders when they went to forcibly 'invade' certain areas of land to raid livestock or commit robberies and banditry. Several interviewees cited an incident in an area on the boundary between Laikipia and Samburu counties in early 2021, during a period of acute drought, when *moran* had violently invaded an area of private conservancy land. In response, a peace meeting was called with the *moran* and their elders; the *moran* started shooting towards the elders. On the other hand, some interviewees disputed this perspective, arguing that many Samburu elders still retained control of the *moran*, even if they claimed otherwise, and were encouraging the 'invasions' and raiding. As one local government officer complained: 'When elders say the

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moran are disobeying them, we know they're lying. Elders control and provide everything for the *moran*.'[10]

Amid this increasingly blurred arrangement between elders and *moran*, numerous Samburu politicians and their intermediaries have intervened in decisions around *morans'* grazing movements, raiding and conflict. These interactions are fluid and heterogeneous, presumably dictated by individual interests and shifting relationships; as Greiner also observed among Pokot herders, each actor or set of actors will have their own agendas for participating – or not – which could include a combination of 'poverty, revenge, and the desire for prestige or quick money' (Greiner 2013: 235). The 'traditional' intergenerational dynamic between the *moran* and 'firestick' elders appears less relevant here, as the politicians mentioned by interviewees as controlling the *moran* – including MPs and MCAs – were mostly the age set of 'junior' elders, not necessarily the 'firestick' age set which traditionally governed the *moran.* At the same time, the Samburu politicians and their allies are not necessarily always in competition with the other elders; some community members argued that some elders collaborate with the politicians to direct the *moran*. Meanwhile, other elders do not cooperate with the politicians and their allies. Overall, the pressure to find grazing during the 2021–2023 drought appears to have been a major factor for elders and *moran* here in shaping their decisions about how to respond to the demands of the politicians and their allies.

The main entry point through which politicians can insert themselves in these dynamics is mobile phones – through calls and messages to individual *morans*, through large WhatsApp groups with tens or hundreds of *moran*, and via Kenya's mobile money transfer system, M-Pesa. Almost all Samburu now have access to a mobile phone, even if they do not own one personally (Boas 2022). Research from elsewhere in Africa has found that mobile technologies have become 'embedded, rationalized and re-purposed' in the context of pastoralist practices of mobility and livestock herding (Nilsson & Salazar 2017: 14). In Samburu, Boas documented how individuals who have moved to urban centres use their phones to communicate with *moran* who they have tasked with herding their cattle, labelling this practice 'virtual herding' (Boas 2022). Interviewees for this study explained that the *moran* in remote areas 'access social media through their phones and they charge their phones from solar chargers which they take with them. And they also have power banks.'[11] A group of *moran* explained in interviews how phones allow them to communicate with clansmen from across the wider Samburu territory: 'Mobile phones are affecting things here. *Moran* communicates with colleagues from other areas or clans. And they travel together in large numbers for protection.'[12] In another discussion, the same practice was described:

> Even those who are illiterate have smartphones and can see things from outside. They're not literate, but they can name some contacts and they can see videos . . . There are pictures of grass and water from far and wide, so people come from afar. Also, they organise raids through the phones, and then they go on the motorbikes.[13]

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A group of Samburu elders and *moran* in Isiolo explained the way that phones allow the *moran* to circumnavigate the authority of the elders:

> We have [a local politics] forum on Facebook – youths post on this . . . Now they have their own private line of communication through their phones which does not involve the elders. They even have their own WhatsApp groups . . . They take photos of the grass and share through these forums. Before the rain came here, the *Morans* will go into Baringo and share photos of it with others, for example, and this can lead to conflict because of the huge influxes of people that it generates.[14]

Through these avenues, Samburu politicians – including MPs and MCAs – and their allies or intermediaries – lower-ranking government officers, police or elders, for instance – were described as directly communicating with the *moran*. They reportedly also sent cash payments to the *moran* through M-Pesa, either as a way to incentivise them to move into a certain area or for the *moran* to buy goods such as food and even bullets. Phones have thus facilitated an incipient mode of remote-control engagement, in which politicians and their intermediaries can choreograph mass movements of herds and herders, violence and conflict from their homes and offices in distant cities.

Paying for predictions

Lastly, another repertoire through which Samburu politicians harnessed political support – and sometimes mobilised violence – among their communities was by purchasing the services of a number of prominent actors associated with 'divine' or spiritual powers among the Samburu, known as *laibon*, *laisi* and the *Lalekir*.

Laibon are individuals who communicate with the Samburu conception of god, *Nkai*, and who sell their services of divination and medicines (Fratkin 2015). Fratkin described *laibon* as only playing a marginal and apolitical role within Samburu society, though he also noted that 'warriors often consult a *laibon* before undertaking a raid or moving to a dangerous area', and therefore, according to Fratkin, *laibon* and elders occasionally 'compete for the loyalty and obedience of the warriors . . . ' (Fratkin 2015: 46, 48). Nonetheless, some interaction between such individuals and the state is not new – a famous *laibon,* Leaduma, was accused of resisting the colonial government in the 1930s (Fratkin 2015). A handful of living *laibon* were described by interviewees. Alcohol abuse became prevalent among Samburu chiefs during and since the colonial period (Holtzman 2016); the same appears to be true among many *laibon*, who had spent the money which people paid to them on alcohol, squandering their inherited powers and losing respect among members of their community, especially from the younger generations. Nonetheless, some *laibon* still played a significant role when *moran* took the cattle herds to distant or risky areas to graze. According to some Samburu elders, 'We still have strong spiritual beliefs here. When our people are moving far away, they are being guided by a *laibon*.'[15] In another group discussion, this role was further

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explained: 'When a *laibon* says "there is grass, there is life in Maralal", then the community will go there. The *moran* don't listen to the *laibon* so much though. But the age set above the *moran* do listen to the *wazee [elders]* and the *laibon*.'[16]

In 2023, I interviewed a man described by numerous interviewees as one of the most powerful living *laibon* among the Samburu. This *laibon* requested that in order to secure our meeting, I should provide him with two cans of beer, one kilogram of sugar, one kilogram of *miraa* (khat), some snuff, some tea leaves and KSh6000 (around $45 at the time) in cash. We met him in a very basic *boma* which we could only reach on foot. He spoke only in *Maa,* which was translated for me. He talked about his role in relation to grazing and raiding and reported that *Nkai* tells him to warn people when drought or conflict are coming. Regarding the *laibon's* engagement with vying politicians, he relayed the following:

> Politicians come and ask me if they will win. I will tell them if they will win or lose and whether to bother running. The politicians come from far away. When they get my predictions, they have to go home and tell everyone what I said. If I say that they will lose, they just go home [and say nothing]. [I do not] fear telling people if they will win or lose, because it comes from *Nkai*.[17]

This *laibon's* services were particularly sought out in advance of elections, including by an aspiring MCA who sent his people to see him in the run-up to Kenya's 2022 elections, and from several aspiring candidates for the Samburu County governorship:

> I can influence the wider community over voting. If I predict a winner, other people will vote for that guy. [An aspiring governor in 2022] sent some people to come and meet me and ask if he would win in the election. I predicted he would win, and he did, so the people thought that I had predicted correctly. [Another aspiring candidate's] wife came to see me, and I said that he would lose and so not to bother running.[18]

When asked if he felt that the politicians had ever tried to influence his decision-making, he replied:

> People have tried to influence me by buying gifts more than the requested amount, including money, camels and cows. They do this as a thank you for my predictions if they are happy with what I have foretold. I have cows, camels, motorbikes, clothes and houses that I have built from all this money.[19]

This last statement was striking given the very humble homestead that we had met him in. He clarified that he keeps his wealth away from his home village, in the nearby town – seemingly adopting the approach used by politicians of hiding their cash wealth, keeping only their livestock in public view.

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Laisi, meanwhile, are individuals belonging to just a few families within the nine Samburu clans, known to have a 'powerful gift for blessing and cursing' (Straight 2007: 19). *Laisi*, similar to *laibon*, were described by Bilinda Straight as holding an ambiguous position in Samburu society, being 'at times despised as well as respected', while also being 'highly sought when particular blessings are needed' (Straight 2007: 19). During movements of livestock and *moran, Laisi* can bless the herds. Numerous interviewees argued that in the run-up to recent rounds of elections, aspiring and incumbent politicians had approached various *laisi*, to ask for their blessing for their candidacy, in exchange for cash. During a conversation about *laisi*, Samburu interviewees concluded: 'The majority of aspirants go to those figures, even if they don't really believe in it . . . [The aspirants] derive their power from different sources.'[20] Another interviewee, himself a former aspirant for an MCA position, told me: '*laisi* use saliva and make libations. They often get involved in politics. They take cash and alcohol and exchange.'[21] A Samburu elder explained that this involvement of politics and cash had damaged the community's respect for some *laisi*:

> [*Laisi*] are not considered so powerful around here because they are polluted . . . The work of a *laisi* is to protect the people. But now money has come and diluted everything, and people pay them to do things. Before, they didn't use money . . . now most are just doing it as a business, but not all are doing it as a business. If I go to a *laisi* now, I have to give them money because they are greedy.[22]

Lastly, a key individual described by several interviewees and who has featured in some other publications (Mann 2002) but who has not been closely examined in the ethnographic scholarship is the *Lalekir*. The *Lalekir* position is inherited through patrilineal descent in the prominent Lesepen lineage of the Samburu and should live in Mount Nyiro, in the northern Samburu territory. The *Lalekir* reads the stars in order to foresee the future, and, more so than other Samburu spiritual actors, his predictions are still relatively serious across the Samburu community. A group of young Samburu men explained that *Lalekir* has played a role in decisions about where grazing should take place and even where *moran* should go to conduct raids.

Recent *Lalekir* have also become embroiled in politics by making predictions about election outcomes. One interviewee, who had worked in the campaign team of an aspiring county governor in 2022, told me how a delegation from the campaign team had gone to visit the then-*Lalekir*, only to be told that another aspirant had visited him several months prior. The *Lalekir* decreed that his first visitor would win the election and gave his anointed favourite a walking stick to carry with him during his campaigning, which was imbued with special powers. The *Lalekir's* preferred candidate did indeed win the 2022 election for county governor.

Some interviewees described another occasion in 2022, in which the then-*Lalekir* was transported from his home in northern Samburu to Isiolo County. An MCA in the area allegedly paid for this trip. According to a group of elders,

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the *Lalekir* had previously predicted that one person would win the local MCA seat in the upcoming election. However, the *Lalekir* then changed his prediction, foreseeing instead that the MCA who had paid for his trip south would win. The elders in this group all believed that the MCA had paid him off to change his prediction. Of course, it is impossible to assess how determinative these predictions and commands by contemporary spiritual actors really are, though notably, once again, this MCA did win the seat again in the August 2022 elections.

Conclusion

Devolution has seen many of Kenya's old elite problems refracted through new structures, producing distinctive patterns of (state) power and violence across the pastoralist landscape of northern Kenya. Since 2013, the introduction of new government positions and resources has rendered the political arena in this part of Kenya more diffuse, convoluted and contested.

This post-devolution 'Samburu' political arena does not fit neatly within the geographic bounds or political scales of the county. Vying politicians shift back and forth between the national and county structures, between parties, and between remote grazing territories, various county capitals, and Nairobi. At strategic times – especially ahead of elections – these actors come together in diffuse and fluid constellations, which also draw in non-elected and lower-ranking allies in the county and national structures as their allies and intermediaries, and a range of so-called 'non-state actors' as intermediaries.

These constellations pursue power and other interests by drawing on the long-standing symbolic domains and repertoires of the pastoralist Samburu: they use the financial and material rewards associated with being in the national and county governments to harness or intervene in Samburu beliefs around the prestige of cattle, gerontocratic norms and spiritual belief systems. They do so to curry political favour, to mobilise violence against rival groups and to secure election victories at the ward, constituency and county levels.

Further research is warranted to examine why *Moran* and other ordinary pastoralists cooperate with, or resist, these elite-orchestrated activities – though certainly, the stress created by drought and the depletion of grazing in 2021–2023 goes some way to explaining their widespread participation. In this arena, successful politicians are those most adept at straddling all of these apparent structural lines and distinctions while exploiting the stressors – such as drought – interests and beliefs of their constituents.

If devolution was in part designed to reconfigure Kenya's elite politics and to mitigate conflict (Cheeseman *et al.* 2016), then the Samburu case presented here would suggest a different reality. Especially concerning is that these forms of corruption and political violence are more easily obfuscated and neglected when scattered across this remote and seemingly 'peripheral' landscape.

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Notes

1 Interview with elder from Samburu, remote, May 2025.
2 Interview with a young man, Samburu County, May 2023.
3 Interview with young man from Samburu, remote, May 2025.
4 Interview with elder from Samburu, remote, May 2025.
5 Interview with young man from Samburu, remote, May 2025.
6 Interview with elder from Samburu, remote, May 2025.
7 Interview with elder from Samburu, remote, May 2025.
8 Interview with elder from Samburu, remote, May 2025.
9 Interview with community leader, Samburu County, May 2023.
10 Interview with community leader, Isiolo County, July 2022.
11 Group interview with three elders, three community leaders and two young men, Isiolo County, May 2023.
12 Group interview with five men of mixed ages, Samburu County, February 2022.
13 Group interview with two elders and one woman, Samburu County, May 2022
14 Group interview with three elders, three community leaders and two young men, Isiolo County, May 2023.
15 Group interview with two elders and one woman, 2nd May 2022.
16 Interview with elder, Isiolo county, January 2022.
17 Interview with spiritual actor, Samburu County, May 2023.
18 Interview with spiritual actor, Samburu County, May 2023.
19 Interview with spiritual actor, Samburu County, May 2023.
20 Interview with young man, Samburu County, May 2023.
21 Interview with young man, Samburu County, May 2023.
22 Group interview with three elders, three community leaders and two young men, Isiolo County, May 2023.

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