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### Navigating the Enigmas of Unregulated Nomadic Pastoralism on Peasant Farmer Communities

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#### Keywords:

*Land Commodification,  
Subsistence Farming,  
Unregulated Pastoralism,  
Environmental Deterioration,  
Communal Land Tenure.*

This study investigated the profound implications of the roaming pastoral practices of the Balaalo on peasant farming communities in Northern Uganda, particularly the disruptions resulting from their free-range nomadic lifestyles. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected through questionnaires and subsequently analysed using MAXQDA's auto-coding, sentiment, and text-based analytical tools. The target population comprised 600 individuals across affected communities, with 400 participants ultimately completing the study. The reduced participation was largely attributed to the contextual challenges of unregulated pastoralism: seasonal cattle movements and recurrent land conflicts caused widespread displacement, insecurity, and mobility, which hindered consistent engagement. Furthermore, subsistence farmers often prioritised urgent survival activities over research commitments, making the final sample both realistic and representative of community realities. Findings reveal that loosely regulated mobile pastoralism exerts a significant strain on agrarian livelihoods. The Balaalo's patterns of land encroachment and the destruction of farmlands have intensified tensions across the Acoli, Lango, and Madi subregions, with a high potential for replication in other parts of Uganda if left unaddressed. The study underscores the structural consequences of nomadic incursions, including disruption of local farming systems, heightened food insecurity, and increasing vulnerability among subsistence households. These dynamics highlight the urgent need for effective policy interventions to balance pastoral mobility with agrarian land rights. The study acknowledges certain limitations. Because the analysis draws on case studies within four districts, the findings cannot fully capture the breadth of livelihood adjustments or the nuanced belief systems of all affected communities. Nonetheless, the research provides valuable insights into ongoing structural transformations in northern Uganda. This work

makes three critical contributions: first, it demonstrates the long-term consequences of unregulated pastoral mobility on smallholder farming systems; second, it highlights the formation of alternative and adaptive livelihood strategies within contested rangelands; and third, it situates these processes within broader debates on poverty reduction and vulnerability mitigation in pastoral–agrarian interfaces. By foregrounding the lived realities of farmers confronting the pressures of roaming pastoralism, the study advances both scholarly and policy dialogues on land use, livelihood security, and sustainable coexistence in Uganda and beyond.

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of environmental determinism and resource management theories has provided critical analyses of the various social influences and how they influence social standards, customs, and beliefs. According to environmental determinism, the environment, specifically its physical qualities, is the major cause of human behaviour, culture, and social organisation (Sargentis et al., 2022; Livingstone, 2011; Gopalakrishnan & Dugal, 1998; Judkins, Smith & Keys, 2008). This, therefore, implies that the natural environment influences how humans live, what resources they consume, and how they interact with one another and their surroundings.

In the Ugandan context, significant shifts in the land commodification of the erstwhile considered empty

areas in northern Uganda have occurred over the past twenty years (Alidri et al., 2024, p. 27). The transfiguration from subsistence to commercial farming, the reintegration of numerous indigenous groups from internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, the natural skyrocketing in population, and the rise of loosely uncontrolled mobile nomadic pastoralism have all contributed to exasperations between indigenous populations and the allowed-to-roam pastoralists (Ajayi et al., 2023; Bhusal & Awasthi, 2024). The worsening altercations between the grazers and peasant farmer communities have necessitated an increased discernment of the implications of mobile pastoralism on the livelihoods and susceptibility of the local subsistence farmer populations in the northern Uganda districts of Adjumani, Amuru,

Nowoya, and Apac (Vundi & Koome, 2023; Ghazali, Zibaei & Azadi, 2023).

In 2012, a group of pastoralists, the Balaalo, traversed into the Buliisa district in western Uganda, where government security officers killed their animals after fights with indigenous cultivators (Bagungu and Banyoro) over pasture resources (Amone, 2025, pp. 12-35). In 2006/2007, Congolese authorities drove approximately 800 Basongora pastoralists from the Virunga Mountain Range on the Uganda-DRC border (Mugaiha, 2007). These examples highlighted the boundaries of East and Central African states as problematic regions that define aspects of social reality, as well as the importance of understanding them through the eyes of individuals who live there (Galaty, 2016; Travis, 2014; Schindel, 2016). In the words of Goodhead (2008, p. 230), if there is “violent contention, boundaries and borders are taken seriously, simultaneously serving as sources of security and clashes, inclusion and exclusion”. Borderlands are not simply isolated peripheries; they are regions where people move, develop networks and political alliances, trade, information, and conflicts. However, each borderland has its own “historic trajectory and specificities” (Goodhead, 2008, p. 230). Pastoralism differs from modern livestock cattle ranching in that animals are moved to pasture and water as opposed to having fodder brought for them, and as a result, pastoral populations are mobile (often following the availability of pastoral resources according to seasons), moving herds and themselves over large areas (Fratkin, 2001; Galaty, 2016).

According to initial investigations, there could be up to fifteen thousand (15000) pastoralists (Balaalo) spread across northern Uganda's West Nile, Lango, and Acoli sub-regions. The Balaalo believe they got the land lawfully using the rightful methods and should not be branded as land grabbers. For example, Geoffrey Mwiine (a Mulaalo) in Lakang sub-county in Amuru district said he owns 318 acres of land and that he has been in Amuru since 2014

and owns 1500 herds of cattle. Indigenous leaders in Acoli have raised alarm about what they term harmful land commodification, environmental deterioration, and the increasing frequency of property disputes caused by the presence of non-local herders. Several leaders have urged immediate reforms to protect communal land tenure and future generations from what they regard as gradual displacement under the pretext of private land ownership.

Nomadic Pastoralism has a negative influence on the peasant farming communities in Uganda's districts of Adjumani, Amuru, Nowoya, and Apac due to the nomads' free-range grazing practices. These sites were chosen specifically because they represent some of the new livelihood mixtures in the region's rangelands occupied by the Balaalo, which are linked to various drivers of change as well as varying demographics of vulnerable and impoverished people. The study's overarching purpose was to investigate the reasons and consequences of the deteriorating interaction between Balaalo nomads and subsistence farmer communities in the Adjumani, Amuru, Nowya, and Apac districts. In Eastern Uganda, this has been evidenced by an upsurge in cattle rustling by Karamojong adolescents, commonly known as “*Karacunas*,” and other militarised criminal gangs, resulting in mortality, people relocation, and famine in Karamoja and parts of Teso, Bugisu, Lango, and Acoli. In Northern Uganda, unrestricted nomadic activities show themselves in land invasion and destruction of farmlands by *Balaalo* nomadic pastoralists, colloquially known as the “*Balaalo*,” which has so far damaged Acoli but has the potential to extend to other places in Northern Uganda and West Nile. Cattle rustling in Karamoja has a long history, and it has recently been aggravated by increased access to guns (Bello & Kazibwe, 2024; Marigat, 2023). Nomadic pastoralism is a relatively new practice in Acoli, emerging following the end of the twenty-five-year northern insurgency in 2006.

While pastoralism continues to be one of the most productive uses of Uganda's rangelands, traditional subsistence agricultural practices have encountered considerable problems as a result of the Balaalo invasion. Several seemingly contradictory characteristics describe the challenge of livelihood security in evolving pastoral and post-pastoral rangelands. We identified four such contradictions. First, while mobile and semi-mobile livestock keeping is the most productive activity in nearly all rangelands, per capita livestock holdings have declined over time and continue to fall across most of Uganda (Mubiru et al., 2018; Lumborg et al., 2021; Aragie & Thurlow, 2022; Deng et al., 2020). A considerable majority of pastoralist populations currently have insufficient livestock holdings per capita to meet their subsistence needs. Second, land commodification and live animal commerce have increased significantly, notably in northern Uganda, yet poverty and vulnerability are rising. The breadth and depth of vulnerability were visible during the 2019 drought crisis, which affected approximately 500,000 people in Acoli, Madi, and Lango, as well as in 2020, when Uganda was hit by the catastrophic consequences of the COVID-19 epidemic. Past and contemporary environmental deterioration have pushed many people into a state of extreme food insecurity, prompting nationwide attempts to devise measures to manage vulnerability and provide assistance to the weakened livelihoods in the now-occupied pastoral communities. Third, while human movement with livestock has substantially dwindled, the resulting sedentarisation has been defined by the dispersion of households, with members migrating to cities, urban centres, and beyond for jobs, social support, and education. Fourth, while perennial uncertainty in both climate and disease necessitates flexibility and adaptability, rangelands are fragmenting as an increasing proportion of land area (particularly key grazing areas) is enclosed for state (conservation) and private (crop production) uses, limiting passage and livestock movements.

Following the notion of environmental determinism and resource management in the preamble, we now structure the rest of the study as follows. The first portion furnished a brief history of the mobile pastoralists, the *Balaalo*. The second section examines the reasons and consequences of the deteriorating interaction between the *Balaalo* nomads and the subsistence farmer communities in Acoli, Lango, and Madi. The third segment argues that the roaming pastoralists and peasant farmers have crossed paths, resulting in mutual blind spots while dealing with uncertainty, mobility variability, an inflexible land tenure system, dynamic social formations, collective social relations for a new economy, and engaging with complex politics for a volatile world. The fourth component provides a critical study of the major methodologies, which include participant observation, interviews (individual and focus group), life histories, oral narratives, and an examination of the Balaalo's social relationships within the subsistence farmer community and with other groups. The final section is the discussion and analysis, which deconstructs the conventional public belief that, while nomadic pastoralists offer a sustainable way to use marginal lands, they also face issues connected to climate change, land degradation, and conflicts with settled people. Finally, the conclusion sums up the key points of the study and examines the significance or implications of the findings for future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Situating the Balaalo within the Environmental Determinism and Resource Management Framework**

It could be asserted that, far from being a distinctive feature of the nomadic people, the problems of conflict and ecological degradation brought about by the implementation of land tenure reforms blind to the ways the land is used in existing production and livelihood systems are a legacy shared along the entire cattle corridor (Wassie, 2020). A legislative framework for land tenure limits the scope of options for land use, which is why top-down

agricultural changes are accompanied by land-tenure system reforms (McAuslan, 2006; De Almeida, 2022). According to one significant research from the 1990s, “the British set a land policy that transformed pastoral rangeland tenure in that it promoted settlement or semi-transhumance instead of the nomadism or transhumance system of production.” According to one significant research from the 1990s, “the British set a land policy that transformed pastoral rangeland tenure in that it promoted settlement or semi-transhumance instead of the nomadism or transhumance system of production.” This eventually pushed those with a background in agriculture to acquire the best grazing area (Ewatu, 2022; Chepkemioi, 2020). For nearly a century, policy interventions and initiatives, particularly resource management policies, have had an impact on Ugandan pastoral systems (Lwiza et al., 2024; Mayanja et al., 2020). It is thus remarkable that the definitions of ‘issues’ in pastoral development discourse, ranging from soil erosion to conflict, appear to ignore this century-long meddling, instead attributing them to some mythical ‘traditional’ pastoralism working in the gloom of an ecological catastrophe.

Over the last four years, there have been several complaints and commentary in the public media about the actions of the Balaalo Pastoralists in northern Uganda (Alidri et al., 2024). These complaints have been fuelled by the pastoralists’ free range cattle grazing style, which threatened food security, the general security in the region and the allegation of land theft or its intention. Because of these adverse reports against the pastoralists, numerous eviction orders were issued against them by both the local and central governments. However, specifically for the Acoli sub-region, these orders fell on deaf ears in most instances. Unlike in the past, the relationship between the two cultural groups and neighbouring communities have been cordial; the present relationship is poor (Omenya, 2024; Rosenoff, 2024).

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the effects of unregulated nomadic pastoralism on subsistence farming communities in northern Uganda. A qualitative approach was most appropriate given the study’s focus on lived experiences, social dynamics, and community-level interpretations, rather than the quantification of variables (Kostere & Kostere, 2021; Butler, 2023). Multiple complementary strategies were applied, including ethnographic methods, in-depth interviews, textual analysis, and systematic review of secondary data. This triangulated approach allowed both community voices and documentary evidence to inform the analysis, thereby strengthening the depth and reliability of the findings.

### Study Population and Sampling

The study population comprised 600 individuals identified as potential participants across four rangeland districts in northern Uganda, most affected by seasonal cattle movements. From this group, a purposive sample of 400 individuals was ultimately included. This number was sufficient to achieve thematic saturation while remaining manageable given the challenges of conducting fieldwork in conflict-prone and highly mobile communities. The reduction in participation was largely due to contextual challenges associated with unregulated pastoralism, including displacement, household mobility, and insecurity, which limited availability.

Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals directly engaged in or affected by pastoralist–farmer interactions. Snowball sampling was then employed to reach participants who were less accessible, such as mobile pastoralists, displaced farmers, and marginalised groups. Snowballing was especially valuable, as random sampling is often ineffective for capturing the perspectives of hard-to-reach populations (Gunnell et al., 2022; Newman &

Gough, 2020). District-level specialists—such as agricultural officers, land administrators, and community leaders—were also included as key informants to provide expert insights.

### Data Collection

Fieldwork took place between June and October 2024 in four purposively selected districts: Adjumani, Amuru, Nwoya, and Apac. These districts represent areas where tensions between Balaalo pastoralists and subsistence farming communities are particularly intense.

Data collection involved 40 semi-structured interviews with community members, subsistence farmers, and pastoralist households. Interview questions addressed:

- Experiences of land use and grazing disputes,
- Perceived impacts of pastoralist mobility on farming livelihoods,
- Coping strategies adopted during conflicts,
- Perceptions of government interventions, and
- Suggestions for improving co-existence and resource management.

Additionally, 10 key informant interviews were conducted with district specialists. These provided broader thematic insights, details on conflict mitigation measures, and access to grey literature not available in databases.

All interviews were conducted by the principal researcher with assistance from two trained research assistants fluent in English and Acoli. This ensured cultural and linguistic accessibility while reducing misinterpretation. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and supplemented with detailed field notes.

### Secondary Data and Literature Review

Alongside fieldwork, a systematic review of existing literature was conducted. Over 400 documents were retrieved through structured

database searches, complemented by manual back-searching and snowballing (Simkus, 2023; Dragan & Isaic-Maniu, 2022). These documents included peer-reviewed articles, NGO reports, policy papers, and archival records. Inclusion criteria required a focus on pastoralism, land use, conflict, or subsistence farming in East Africa, with a preference for Uganda. Materials outside this thematic or geographical scope were excluded.

This dual strategy—combining field interviews and systematic review—enabled the integration of empirical community voices with broader theoretical and policy perspectives.

### Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and field notes were transcribed verbatim and analysed using MAXQDA software. Both inductive and deductive coding strategies were applied: while some initial codes were derived from the research questions (e.g., “land disputes,” “mobility,” “policy gaps”), new codes emerged directly from participants' narratives. Auto-coding was used to identify patterns, followed by manual refinement to preserve contextual accuracy.

Secondary data from the literature review were analysed thematically and compared with the field data, highlighting points of convergence and divergence.

### Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of pastoralist–farmer relations, ethical protocols were carefully observed. Approval was obtained from Kabale University Research Ethics Committee, the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology, District Chief Administrative Officers, and local chairpersons. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained orally or in writing, depending on literacy levels. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality, and all data were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

Special care was taken to avoid retraumatizing participants who had experienced violence or displacement. Interviews could be discontinued if participants showed distress. Feedback sessions were conducted in two districts to share preliminary findings with communities, ensuring reciprocity and accountability.

### **Rationale and Justification of Sample Size**

The final sample size of 400 participants was justified on both methodological and practical grounds. Qualitative research prioritises depth of understanding rather than statistical generalisation; thus, the goal was to reach thematic saturation—the point at which no new themes emerge (Guest et al., 2020). Pilot interviews confirmed that saturation could be achieved within this range. Furthermore, the challenges of displacement, insecurity, and mobility made a larger sample impractical. By combining perspectives from farmers, pastoralists, and key informants, the study ensured a diversity of viewpoints that enhanced its validity.

## **RESULTS**

### **Implications of the Balaalo Free-range Nomadism on Vulnerability and Destitution**

The ongoing structural modifications in northern Uganda's pasture, as well as contradictory dynamics, have harmed the region's population and sub-regional pastoral territories. In this context, vulnerability is not a static idea, but rather a dynamic and ever-changing one related to the various livelihood mixes that are currently present. Large livestock movement, along with demographic expansion, has altered the distribution of poverty, with per capita livestock holdings steadily declining (Mengistu et al., 2021).

The effects of free range nomadism are visible across the district in a downward change in the financial standing of various homes, with an increasing proportion of persons becoming destitute or living in low- or middle-income households, and fewer classified as wealthy (Morando, 2023;

Atuhaire, Adyanga & Ocan, 2025; Ahereza, Ocan & Akena, 2024). Poverty is deepening among residents as animal movement increases. There has also been a shift towards maintaining cattle in smaller herds that may be easily disposed of to meet meat cash demands. Wealth and income disparities are widening between those who are moving up and down and others who are just barely staying within or have left to offer pastoralists land for their livestock. Per capita income is highest for those pastoralists with higher mobility and land access alongside good market development (Byamugisha, 2021). Further, pastoralists who move appear to be significantly better off than dormant pastoralist farmers in the same districts (especially pastoralists near a big water source) (Adamie, 2021).

While many locals are being forced to abandon pastoralism, the opportunities for them to return to productive livestock-keeping are also diminishing. Evidence points to growing poverty and destitution among local farmers (Lubaale, Ocan & Adyanga, 2024). People in this group have the highest levels of impoverishment and the most difficult hurdles in establishing a stable livelihood. They rely on low-return enterprises that are susceptible to unforeseen events, such as weather and the sale of food crops, burning charcoal, or harvesting and selling firewood. For most of those who have exited livestock production, diversification is about surviving, with limited capacity to scale up fuelwood or charcoal production (Antal & Grønli, 2003; Chidumayo & Gumbo, 2013), and only meagre incomes from the range of survival work that people engage in (Kpenhafaar, 2011). Many who have diversified seek to keep a few animals when conditions permit. Having a small herd is disadvantageous, as small herds that are milked intensively experience lower calf growth and survival when pasture is scarce (Kirkbride, 2008). This also makes it difficult for the local farmers to 'build back' herds. In contrast, the pastoralists' households can leave more milk for livestock to consume, resulting in better calf health and more resilient herds (Balehegn et al., 2021). These

dynamics are often echoed in the relatively inferior nutrition status of settled households that do not keep herds or only have a few livestock. Even if households build up a small herd, sustaining a mobile way of life in the pastures of northern Uganda is becoming increasingly difficult as land is communally owned, commodified, and fragmented, as explored in the discussion below. These changes in the pastures are complicating pathways out of poverty, with opportunities diminishing for building herds and finding grazing land for the Balaalo.

While a considerable, and maybe growing, proportion of residents struggle to make a living outside of or near subsistence farming, pastoralist communities and individuals gain greatly from livestock prospects. Wealth is being increasingly concentrated among pastoralists, who are better off and better positioned to advance in cattle trading and commercialisation. A study by Price and Makarewicz (2024, pp. 65-82) found that the wealth generated by livestock selling primarily benefits those at the 'sharp end of the business' (exporters and butcheries) who can get the most out of both domestic livestock markets, and traders who can navigate the risky routes can also generate significant relative wealth. These benefits are not available to those who are hanging in with tiny herds or falling out (the poorest households who need to build up their herds, assuming they still have animals at all), and who are unable to take advantage of high-value marketing opportunities.

The dynamics of increased land commercialisation in the northern region, which coincides with new infrastructure and agricultural investments, are exclusive. Essentially, recent road investments symbolise an encouraging renewed interest by communities in pastoral areas, as well as a possibility to improve the countryside dwellers' accessibility to markets and services. The outcomes of capital forecasting in drylands can be ambiguous for smaller-scale livestock units and the small towns. Kaiser and Barstow (2022, p. 2149) observe that, 'While transport improvements can create new

opportunities for more price-responsive marketing and value-added processing, it is by no means clear that the benefits to the majority of dryland residents will outweigh the costs, if current trends continue.' Recent large-scale investments might lift the livelihoods of dryland populations; equally, they could constitute a new type of stressor in places where investment hastens land and resource grabbing, creating new restrictions on resource access (Porru et al., 2020, pp. 88-97).

Thus, changing livelihoods in pastoral and post-pastoral grazing land result in substantial shifts in poverty and vulnerability patterns. New livelihood mixtures provide pastureland inhabitants with substantially varied alternatives and chances for managing long-standing and new unpredictability, as well as potential for poverty and vulnerability reduction. The consequences are nonlinear and complicated, with new patterns of social differentiation arising, as well as shifts in gender and generational demographics. As the ways of making a living shift in a multitude of directions, and diverse forms of accumulation emerge, gender and age norms are destabilised (Jager et al., 2022). Both opportunities and tensions arise as negotiations ensue around demands for labour as well as control of new wealth. The following section examines five rangeland settings where structural change has generated new differentiation and vulnerability while also challenging long-established ways of managing uncertainty.

## DISCUSSION

### Parameters of Livestock Mobility Across the Four Districts

#### *Adjumani District*

Adjumani district is found in northern Uganda, between latitudes 2°53'N and 3°37'N, and longitudes 31°24'E and 32°04'E. The district is located on the eastern side of the Albert Nile, which forms its common border with Moyo District. It shares borders with the districts of Amuru in the south and east, Arua and Yumbe in the west, and

Moyo in the north. Adjumani is one of the districts in northeast Uganda that shares a border with the Republic of South Sudan. Adjumani consists of the following sub-counties: Adropi and Pachara; Ciforo and Ukusijoni; Pakele; Dzaipi and Arinyapi; Ofua and Itirikwa.

The district has a hot spring near Amuru, in Pakele sub-county. Adjumani is also blessed with extensive lush greenery cover; natural wetlands with a diversity of species, including papyrus, line the banks of the Nile (Albert Nile). Seasonal swamps also occupy a sizeable area of the district. The Arawa highlands and the equatorial forest of Zoka, in Ofua sub-county, dominate the southern part of the district. Although all soils in the district are generally fertile, Ofua sub-county has the richest soils. Currently, Balaalo pastoralists are settled across several districts in the West Nile region, including Adjumani, Moyo, Obongi, Yumbe, parts of Terego, Madi Okollo, Pakwach, and Nebbi. Livelihoods in these districts have shifted from conventional pastoralism (which is characterised by large herds of cattle, mobility, and reliance on communal grazing lands) to mobile types of livestock rearing. Historically, pastoralists move their herds across vast areas, following seasonal grazing patterns. While this mobility is still practised in some regions, it is increasingly influenced by land fragmentation and state interventions.

### ***Balaalo Livestock Mobility in Adjumani District***

Livestock mobility is a phrase that has become more prevalent in a variety of contexts, notably pastoral studies, rangeland ecology, social implications of climate change, and sustainability. Commentators around the world describe livestock migration as rising or decreasing, expanding or shrinking, shifting or persisting, with varying effects on landscapes, humans, and the animals themselves. A Web of Science search on the use of “livestock mobility”, “herd mobility”, “pastoral mobility”, “livestock movement”, or “herd movement” in the title, keywords, or abstracts of peer-reviewed

articles reveals that 35% of all uses occurred from 2016 to 2018, with 75% occurring since 2008. According to Google Scholar, the average annual number of usage of “livestock mobility” over the last five years (2014-2018) is 58% more than the five-year average from 2009 to 2013. Livestock mobility and related themes are gaining popularity not only in the scholarly literature (as provided below) but also in the larger literature on pastoralism and dryland regeneration.

In the same way, livestock mobility can be defined as the total number of livestock migrations across open rangelands over a specific period. Livestock mobility, so defined, can be associated with the mobility of all or just some of the people managing and depending on mobile livestock (Turner & Schlecht, 2019). Those people who depend economically on grazing livestock on common pastures are often called pastoralists. Perceptions of livestock/human mobility as the prominent feature of pastoralists’ livelihoods, culture, and economies have strongly shaped others’ views of them. Just as importantly for this paper is that the views of (agro) pastoralists shape in turn how outsiders have portrayed livestock mobility.

In fact, a brief summary of the long history of the Balaalo pastoralists is that their mobile livelihoods are seen to work against the interests of the state, the indigenous community and the progress of the decentralisation policy, and a sustained environment (Green, 2008). The state’s interest is to control wealth within its borders, while collecting taxes from and providing services to its citizens is, at the very least, complicated by the movements of people and livestock within and beyond the territorial state (Cherry, 2010). In fact, early accounts, despite evidence to the contrary, argued that pastoralism itself has worked historically against hierarchy and state formation (Hodgetts & Lorimer, 2020, pp. 4-26).

Early anthropologists regarded pastoralism and other mobile livelihoods (e.g., hunting/gathering) as primitive livelihoods along cultural evolutionary

pathways that led to crop agriculture, economic surplus, and territorial forms of governance, culminating in capitalism and the contemporary nation state (Ranco, 2006). On a more technical level, animal movement appears to act against the geographical fixity of capital expenditures required for livestock improvement (Udo et al., 2011, pp. 22-29). Finally, and perhaps most crucially, pastoralism as a livelihood and pastoralists as individuals have been shown to have interests (mobility) that conflict with private property structures (Leshan & Standslause, 2013; Dong, 2016). Pastoralists use common or open-access property regimes to move their livestock. Thus, pastoralists and livestock movement are viewed as either artefacts of a prehistoric past that will be supplanted or as the polar opposite of economic development and progress.

Moreover, ubiquitous institutions, which are intrinsically linked to the needs of cattle mobility, are also viewed as contributing to environmental catastrophe owing to a misalignment between individual desires and the greater good. While the concept of the “tragedy of the commons” is not new, it was most likely first introduced into resource economics through a fishing analogy (Sims, 2021). The most well-known representation of the tragedy is around the “Tragedy of the Commons” (Nori & Neely, 2009). This knowledge, together with cattle complex interpretations of pastoral logics (Manzano et al., 2021), resulted in enduring notions among Balaalo pastoralists of an innate inclination to overstock (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2021). This, combined with long-held beliefs that mobile pastoralists lack attachments to place and so do not appropriately manage local resources, fostered the perception that Balaalo pastoralists are prone to misusing the environment (abuse and move on).

Given that *Balaalo* pastoralism has been conceptually linked to livestock migration, these understandings, most of which are true, have triggered unfavourable perceptions of both in Ugandan conservation and development since the

colonial era. President Yoweri Museveni has issued a new eviction order targeting migratory livestock keepers, known as the *Balaalo*, in northern Uganda. The validation procedure begins by evaluating allegations of a valid purchase of land. The auditing squad, working with landowners, will decide who can stay and who must depart. While there have been instances of pastoralists being evicted peacefully (by other previous presidential executive order), more widespread pasture policies might best be defined as malevolent neglect. The government have been known to disregard pastoral tradition leaders and resource claims, resulting in a schism between the *Balaalo* and rural populations, to erode pastoral mobility and the institutions that support it (Oba, 2011; Fernandez-Gimenez & Le Febre, 2006).

Livestock mobility by the *Balaalo* has been exceptionally at risk from perceptions that it is a rudimentary tribal element, as its survival under competing land-use pressures necessitates government action to maintain the public assets of pastures, water sources, and mobility corridors. As situations change, we have seen Balaalo pastoralists choose to modify their livelihoods or limit the migration of the livestock under their care. While it is true that the viability of pastoral livelihoods has declined and livestock mobility systems have eroded (Huysentruyt, Barrett & McPeak, 2009), larger systems for livestock farming have persisted in Amuru, Nowya, and Apac, with minimal development in more modern cattle stocking systems. Such developments have had no positive impact on the economies of peasant farming communities.

### *Amuru District*

#### *Historical Context and Patterns of Unregulated Pastoralism*

Amuru District, located in northern Uganda, is named after its principal town, Amuru, which serves as the administrative centre. The district is bordered by Adjumani District to the north, South Sudan and

Lamwo District to the northeast, Gulu District to the east, Nwoya District to the south, Nebbi District to the southwest, and Arua District to the west. The district headquarters in Amuru town lie approximately 60 km northwest of Gulu, the largest urban centre in the sub-region. According to the 2002 national census, Amuru District had an estimated population of 1.5 million, a figure that has since grown considerably.

Historically, Amuru District has been predominantly inhabited by the Acholi people, whose livelihoods have been closely tied to agriculture and customary land tenure systems. However, the prolonged conflict between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) from the late 1980s to the mid-2000s led to significant displacement and disruption of traditional land use practices. The return of displaced populations and the resettlement process have been marked by disputes over land ownership and usage, further complicated by the influx of pastoralist communities from other regions.

In recent years, unregulated pastoralism has emerged as a significant issue in Amuru District. Pastoralists, particularly from the western and southwestern regions of Uganda, have moved into the district, establishing temporary settlements and grazing their livestock on both private and communal lands. For instance, reports indicate that over 100 pastoralists have occupied approximately 20,502 acres of land in various sub-counties of Amuru District, including Lakang, Opara, Pogo, Pabbo, and Atiak (Uganda Radio Network, 2022). These pastoralists, often referred to as "Balaalo," have set up numerous kraals and graze large herds of cattle, goats, and sheep, sometimes encroaching on land designated for other purposes, such as the Amuru Sugar Works project (Uganda Radio Network, 2022).

The movement of pastoralists into Amuru District has led to several challenges. Unregulated grazing has resulted in the destruction of crops, leading to conflicts between pastoralists and local farmers.

Additionally, the establishment of kraals without proper land tenure agreements has raised concerns about land ownership and usage rights. The lack of regulation and oversight has exacerbated tensions and hindered efforts to achieve sustainable land management and food security in the district.

Efforts to address these challenges have included government interventions, such as directives for pastoralists to vacate certain areas and comply with land use regulations. However, enforcement has been inconsistent, and the underlying issues of land tenure, resource allocation, and community relations remain unresolved.

In conclusion, the historical context of displacement and land disputes in Amuru District, coupled with the patterns of unregulated pastoralism, underscores the need for comprehensive land governance reforms. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach that considers the rights and livelihoods of all stakeholders, promotes sustainable land use practices, and fosters peaceful coexistence between agricultural and pastoral communities.

### ***The Balaalo Issue in Amuru can be Likened to the Settler Colonialism.***

The critical concern over Balaalo's incursion in Amuru District, the West Nile sub-region, and Northern Uganda as a whole ought not to be overlooked. In Amuru, the Balaalo's goal is to acquire and permanently own the Acoli people's land. The Balaalo issue, thus, can be compared to one of the legacies of settler colonialism (Carpio, Barnd & Barraclough, 2022; Taylor & Lublin, 2021). The matter is generating impediments such as land grabbing, economic hegemony, and repression in politics. Settler colonialism materialises when an unfamiliar population of individuals come as settlers in an initially settled area to snatch the natives' land, permanently occupy it, and establish a new immigrant civilisation on it (Reibold, 2023). Such a migration and settlement process involves not only land grabbing but also the

displacement or repression and even elimination of the natives whom the migrants got in their targeted areas and a destruction of the society, culture and language of the native people of the area (Johnson & Francis, 2022; Atuhaire, Adyanga & Ocan, 2025). One key characteristic of settler colonialism is that it is usually organised or supported by State power. This alludes to strategic planning and state resources are directed towards aiding the migrants in the process of dispossessing the indigenous communities from their land; and this may be carried out by a variety of ways, ranging from political, economic, judicial and military means. The police, local and central administrations, and the courts of law will be tilted to aid the migrant community, and in some extreme cases, the support given to the migrant community may include the forceful displacement and removal of the previous inhabitants of the area. Then, finally, as their land is taken, there will be an assimilation of the weakened remnants of the indigenous population into the culture of the new arrivals.

Besides, settler colonialists have clashed with natives in previous colonies, Kenya's Rift Valley areas, and South Africa, as well as further afield in North America and Australia (Enns & Bersaglio, 2024; Butler & Ben, 2021). Non-Europeans, on the other hand, engage in settler colonialism; for example, the Boers or Afrikaners are a Southern African ethnic group that appeared from predominantly European or Dutch settlers who first landed in South Africa and established themselves at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 (Veracini & Verbuyst, 2020). However, they later claimed supremacy and controlled South Africa's political and economic life until 1994, when a Black man, Nelson Mandela, became president of South Africa and overturned the White minority rule.

Furthermore, there were divergent livelihood trajectories in the Amuru district. Many pastoralists in this region have transitioned from customary pastoralism into large-scale livestock-keeping; most recently, they gathered goats and sheep; some

Balaalo have also turned to large-scale farming (Waiswa, Günlü & Mat, 2021; Zane & Pica-Ciamarra, 2021). Like in Adjumani district, the Balaalo's livelihood patterns have changed as a result of larger-scale livestock commercialisation and shipments of cattle and goats to South Sudan (Ealgzoli, 2023). Many rural farmers have been forced to abandon cattle farming in favour of providing casual labour or selling wood, water, and charcoal in and around small townships (Bamwesigye et al., 2020; Okello et al., 2024). Small townships have expanded in the Acoli region in the last three years, with centres presently housing around 16% of the population (UBOS, 2021). Work possibilities, access to public services, particularly education, and improved living conditions are all reasons that attract people to townships. Though cattle rearing is tightly linked to the Balaalo in the region as their livelihood activities and social relations, many continue to identify as 'mobile pastoralists' (Ayele, Dedecha & Duba, 2020). Most Acoli men are getting involved in brokering, trekking and farming and women are in fuel wood collection, local brewery, and work as housemaids. Kiconco (2021) discovered that after adopting a settled lifestyle, low-income Acoli women engaged in milk and vegetable trading, handicrafts, brewing, and waged labour, whereas wealthier Balaalo women relied on revenue from livestock, milk, and ghee sales.

In Amuru, some Balaalo herders have responded to these challenges by fencing community grazing areas (Nkuba et al., 2020). While it was implemented in response to grazing decreases, communal land fencing has triggered pasture degradation. Links can be drawn with other contexts in the region, where sedentarisation and enclosure have emerged from a combination of official action and local initiatives to enclose and commercialise the commons. In Acoli, a land rush continues as those with connections to the regional political administration and metropolitan businesses purchase land to construct ranches and other personal uses (Mubiru et al., 2023). This

exacerbates social separation as individuals with influence and/or capital claim communal land, either in biologically superior areas or near new infrastructure and growing towns in Acoliland (Tumuhirwe, 2020). This suggests that, while nomadic pastoralism provides benefits such as increased food security and sustainable lifestyles, it can also have a detrimental influence on subsistence farming due to resource rivalry, land degradation, and potential violence. Subsistence farming, on the other hand, might present obstacles for migratory pastoralists, such as land fragmentation, limited access to grazing pastures, and increasing rivalry for resources.

### ***Nwoya District***

#### ***Livestock Mobility as a Strategy***

Nwoya district was one of the counties in Amuru district, which was established in 2010. The district has an area of 4,170.6 square kilometres. It is bordered by Omoro and Oyam Districts to the East, Kiryandongo and Bullisa Districts to the South, Pakwach District to the West and Amuru District to the North. The District Headquarters is in Anaka Town Council, which is about 372km away from Kampala by road. It hosts the northern and larger wing of the Murchison Falls National Game Park, the Karuma-Pakwach-Nebbi-Paidha-DRC Road and the Karuma-Pakwach-Nebbi-Arua-DRC Road, which pass through the district, giving access to the Democratic Republic of Congo, thus providing potential for cross-border trade.

Cattle keepers in Nwoya District are concentrated primarily in the agrarian, fertile sub-counties of Purongo, Anaka, and Koch Goma. The presence and activity of Balaalo nomadic cattle keepers have sparked friction and worry with the local people. The Balaalo, who are commonly connected with nomadic cattle herding, have been accused of land grabbing, environmental degradation, and indulging in activities that harm surrounding populations. These difficulties have prompted calls for their removal and the introduction of restrictions

governing their movements and operations. So far, approximately 700 livestock owned by five individuals have been evacuated from Got Apwoyo Ranch, with an additional 1,616 found at Aswa Ranch and other locations. Livestock movement is an important livelihood and coping mechanism for pastoral people in many regions of the world, especially in Africa.

While outsiders may romanticise or condemn nomadic pastoralism based on livestock mobility, pastoralists believe that their bond with livestock rearing is more essential than mobility itself (Jansen & Robertson, 2001). Pastoral identities may be linked to freedom of movement and cattle. However, pastoralists do not romanticise the "mobile herding" lifestyle, which includes hard walking hours, a restricted diet, and social isolation. Animal movements are viewed as required reactions to animal nutritional needs, security hazards, and potential markets (Subharat et al., 2022). In terms of livestock nutrition, the goal is to supply a mixed group of animals with pasture of adequate quality (density and nutrient content) at a correct distance from water to maintain the required watering frequency. A number of studies provide empirical support for grazing management by herders who distribute livestock appropriately in response to available pasture resources (Drewry, Cameron & Buchan, 2008). Arguably, cattle nutrition is the fundamental goal of both grazing and travel movement decisions (Hegarty, 2012). However, in the case of travel movements, choices are further complicated by insufficient knowledge regarding the movement's energy/time demands. Incomplete knowledge is due to shifting conditions that influence whether a location is suitable for grazing. These circumstances are more socio-political than biophysical, because the quantity of herds at an encampment, livestock health risks, the presence/absence of a host, the presence/absence of bandits/government officials, the distribution of cropped fields, and conflicts among herders and farmers can all change faster than water or forage quality does.

In short, for nomadic pastoralists, migrating cattle is a means to an end, with the primary goal of attaining optimal livestock nutrition. It is not an arbitrary lifestyle decision. Shifting livestock from a herding family's native territory, where they have a denser network of social relationships, is always risky, as it exposes the family's wealth (livestock) to loss, theft, government officials, and crop damage payments. Furthermore, a family with inadequate labour, limited resources, or weakened cattle is less inclined to relocate their livestock. Cost-benefit analysis guides livestock movement plans. Shifting is more probable when the benefits of moving livestock (better feed, water, market, or security circumstances) outweigh the additional dangers to herds on the move. Weakened livestock in a herd may stay at their permanent base while the others move. During droughts or at the conclusion of the dry season, when the benefits of moving to better pasture conditions are perceived to be significant, the risks of moving debilitated animals are frequently too large, resulting in reduced mobility. The contention is not new, but it bears reiterating. It is reinforced by research that shows the shifting mobility of pastoralists and agro-pastoralists throughout time (Fernandez-Gimenez & Le Febre, 2006; Oba, 2011; Adriansen, 2008).

The livestock mobility discussion demonstrates the relevance of animal nutrition in herdsmen's actions. Some suggest that as agricultural pressures increase, livestock husbandry will become more passive to reap the benefits of crop-livestock integration and intensification (Kim, Marshall & Dawson, 2022; Peterson, Deiss & Gaudin, 2020). The evidence for such a transition is equivocal. The growth of cultivation influence frequently leads to an increase in cattle mobility and sporadic excursions away from one's home base (Jahel et al, 2019), unless funding for feed supplements is readily available. These insights illustrate the complex considerations made by herd management when confronted with agricultural expansion. The growing presence of cultivation causes local feed scarcity (especially during the rainy season), as well as greater crop

damage and social strife when people move to locations where grazing still exists. The risky decision to relocate is taken in response to the nutritional requirements of cattle.

### *Apac District*

#### *Unregulated Pastoralism in Apac District: Socio-Economic and Environmental Implications*

In the Apac District, northern Uganda, unregulated pastoralism has emerged as a significant socio-economic and environmental challenge, with far-reaching implications for local subsistence farming communities. Observations from Maruzi Ranch illustrate the intensity of this problem: the high concentration of livestock, particularly cattle, has led to widespread encroachment into surrounding agricultural fields. The spatial overcrowding at the ranch compels the animals to wander in search of pasture and water, creating friction between herders and crop farmers. This dynamic is particularly evident in villages such as Abongker, Terogali Parish, Abongokere, Teboke, Rwakisaza, and Onekgwok, where the proximity of livestock to cultivated lands results in frequent trespassing and crop destruction (Uganda Broadcasting Corporation, 2025).

The impacts on the agricultural sector are profound. Local farmers report extensive damage to staple and cash crops, including maize, cassava, beans, soya beans, and sunflower fields, as well as tree plantations. The destruction is not merely an economic inconvenience; it undermines household food security, diminishes farmers' incomes, and exacerbates rural poverty. The resulting tensions often manifest as confrontations, with villagers sometimes resorting to physically assaulting cattle to protect their livelihoods. These conflicts reflect a broader struggle over land and resource control, which is intensified by the absence of clear regulatory frameworks governing pastoralist movements in the district (Uganda Broadcasting Corporation, 2025).

Institutional responses have been intermittent and largely reactive. The district security team, alongside local authorities, frequently intervenes to mediate disputes and assess the extent of damage. However, these measures often fail to provide sustainable solutions due to the structural nature of the problem. Reports suggest that Balaalo herders manage over 100,000 cattle in the district, while corporate entities such as Hillside Agricultural Investment Ltd. have leased significant portions of land, including a ranch covering approximately 54 square miles, which herders currently occupy. The overlapping claims and unclear tenure arrangements exacerbate land-use conflicts, creating a precarious situation for both farmers and pastoralists (Uganda Broadcasting Corporation, 2025).

The situation in Apac reflects broader patterns observed in northern Uganda, where the influx of commercial and semi-nomadic pastoralists into traditional farming zones generates recurrent socio-environmental challenges. Unregulated pastoralism disrupts local agrarian economies, heightens competition over natural resources, and threatens ecological sustainability through overgrazing and land degradation. Moreover, the lack of formalised grazing corridors and institutional oversight perpetuates cycles of tension, as communities struggle to reconcile livestock mobility with sedentary agricultural practices (Uganda Broadcasting Corporation, 2025).

Addressing these issues requires an integrated governance approach that balances pastoralist livelihoods with the protection of agricultural production. Policy interventions could include delineation of designated grazing areas, formal registration of herders, conflict resolution mechanisms, and community-based land management strategies. Such measures would not only mitigate crop destruction but also foster social cohesion and reduce the recurrent violence associated with unregulated pastoralism. In the Apac District, where livestock density continues to increase and land scarcity is becoming more

pronounced, proactive and evidence-based interventions are urgently needed to reconcile competing land uses and promote sustainable rural development (Uganda Broadcasting Corporation, 2025).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Given the preceding examination, the Balaalo invasion of Northern Uganda should be likened to one of the most well-known examples of large-scale migration and colonisation by settlers in other regions of the world. The Balaalo are also helped by state authority, particularly by their influential kin in Uganda's current government, who include MPs, ministers, and army generals. The Balaalo migration to Northern Uganda began earlier, but it has now taken on a new scale and is worsening. President Museveni's directions are intended to assist the Balaalo in settling in Northern Uganda, rather than to force them to leave. Instead of directing the Balaalo to return to their original lands, the order promotes "fencing of land by the Balaalo". As it currently stands, the instruction will help the Balaalo establish themselves permanently in Northern Uganda.

Currently, the Balaalo cattle are destroying gardens, food and cash crops with both arrogance and impunity of the native communities of Northern Uganda. So, to prevent future settler colonialism, the Balaalo and their cattle should not be allowed to coexist with the local communities in Northern Uganda. All other people of Uganda who have come to do business or to live in Northern Uganda should have no worries – they will not be affected; the local people's anxiety is with the Balaalo settler style, with large herds of cows. Therefore, navigating the enigmas of unregulated nomadic pastoralism on the peasant farmers is ubiquitous and occurs at the individual, community, institutional, and national levels. Many conflicts are localised and expressed nonviolently. Conflict can be constructive and in many instances it is fundamental to social change (Kriesberg, 2009; Ramsbotham, Miall & Woodhouse, 2011). However, conflict that is

widespread and expressed destructively or even violently appears to have increased over recent years, impelling the global community to examine the root causes of conflicts and analyse conflict theory and management in greater detail. While times of coexistence do not exclude conflict, they do exclude widespread violence and acts intended to psychologically, socially, economically, or politically destroy the other side(s).

The management of this Balaalo issue requires a collective response from the people at the community level in Northern Uganda and no one should trust the government of Uganda as it is constituted today. We should be able to identify our political leaders and other government officials serving the interests of the Balaalo in Adjumani, Amuru, Nowoya and Apac in Northern Uganda at large. We recommend concerted efforts and a united front to deal with the Balaalo issue in Northern Uganda. At the epicentre, we recommend 'coexistence', which is the awareness that individuals and groups may differ in numerous ways, including class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and political inclination. These group identities may be the causes of conflicts, contribute to the causes of conflicts, or may be solidified as conflicts develop and escalate. A policy of coexistence, however, diminishes the likelihood that identity group differences will escalate into a damaging or intractable conflict.

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### Contributions of the Authors

All authors made substantial contributions to the conception and design, acquisition, and interpretation of data for this research. Johnson Ocan, Ph.D., (PI) of the project, led the writing. Associate Professor Marus Eton, PhD, (Co-PI) designed the questionnaires as well as commented and added to the full draft. Ms. Jacquiline Akello and Julius Alexander Arinaitwe, Ph.D., reviewed and approved the final draft of the article for publication.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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