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Survival Strategies of Borderland Communities in Eastern Africa: Turkana-Pokot Cross-Border Pastoralists (Kenya-Uganda-South Sudan)

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Abstract
This paper examines the survival strategies employed by Turkana and Pokot pastoralists in the tri-border region of Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan, an area characterised by recurring droughts, armed conflict, and increasing state intervention. Often depicted as marginal peripheries with state absence and chronic insecurity, these borderlands are navigated by communities as resources for survival, challenging their portrayal as mere barriers. Drawing on ethnographic insights and contemporary evidence, the study investigates how these pastoralists secure livelihoods and maintain social cohesion amidst colonial-imposed boundaries and state authority. Findings reveal four interconnected survival strategies: economic adaptation via diversified livelihoods and cross-border trade; kinship-based cooperation across national boundaries; strategic mobility exploiting border fluidity; and selective engagement with multiple state authorities. These demonstrate that borderland communities are active agents, creatively manipulating borders meant to constrain them. However, contradictions arise when strategies fail, escalate into violence, or face suppression by securitised state responses. The research challenges state-centric views of borders as fixed lines, advancing an understanding of them as lived spaces where communities exercise agency through resistance, negotiation, and adaptation. It contributes to borderland studies and has implications for pastoralist development, cross-border governance, and conflict resolution in Eastern Africa's arid borderlands. Sustainable interventions should build on existing community-led survival mechanisms rather than undermine them, recognising the sophisticated agency of borderland communities to inform effective policy approaches.

Key terms: Agency, borderlands, conflict, pastoralism, survival strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Across the arid and semi-arid borderlands of Eastern Africa, colonial-era boundaries carved through pastoral territories, disregarding the ecological and social realities of mobile livestock-keeping communities like the Turkana and Pokot, whose grazing lands span the Kenya-Uganda-South Sudan tri-border region (Baud & Van Schendel, 1997). More than six decades after independence, these borders remain porous in practice but increasingly militarised in rhetoric, creating a complex terrain where pastoralists must navigate state authority while sustaining livelihoods dependent on cross-border mobility (African Union, 2010). The central research problem is this: How do borderland communities manage the triple challenge of state-imposed boundaries, chronic resource scarcity, and persistent insecurity? Specifically, what survival strategies emerge at the intersection of traditional pastoral practices and modern state systems that regulate, securitise, and often criminalise mobility? These questions are critical as states strengthen border infrastructure and security operations, clashing with communities whose survival hinges on border fluidity, a tension exacerbated by climate-driven droughts that force pastoralists to range widely for water and pasture (Bayart, 2009).

In the dry season of 2023, a Turkana herder named Lokong moved his cattle across Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan in just eight days, chasing pasture and water in a journey that was both a routine act of survival and an illegal crossing of international borders. For Lokong, this mobility echoed the ancient rhythms of his ancestors, yet it placed him outside the jurisdictional reach of three sovereign states, evading customs and veterinary checkpoints. This paradox, where borders are barriers for states but lifelines for communities, defines survival in Eastern Africa's borderlands. Far from urban centres like Nairobi, Kampala, and Juba, these borderlands are contested yet creative spaces where pastoralists innovate to survive and even manipulate the boundaries meant to constrain them.

The Turkana-Pokot case is significant for several reasons. First, the tri-border context, unlike simpler bilateral border studies, involves navigating three distinct state systems with varying policies on mobility, security, and resource governance. Second, the region lies within the climate-vulnerable Karamoja Cluster, where recurrent droughts over the past two decades have intensified survival challenges, pushing communities toward desperate yet ingenious strategies. Third, the area has seen traditional cattle raiding evolve into militarised conflicts involving automatic weapons, complicating notions of pastoral resilience (East African Community, 2018). Scholarly and policy lenses often mischaracterise these communities, development agencies frame them as vulnerable, security analysts focus on criminality, and even sympathetic accounts can overemphasise victimhood over agency. This study addresses these gaps by exploring how Turkana-Pokot pastoralists employ multifaceted survival strategies that challenge conventional narratives of borders as fixed lines of control.

This paper argues that these pastoralists produce borders as tactical resources through economic diversification, cross-border trade, kinship networks transcending national boundaries, strategic mobility, and selective engagement with state authorities, exercising a form of "borderland agency" that is both adaptive and subversive (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2018). However, this agency operates within severe constraints, where strategies can fail, escalate into violence, or provoke state repression. The analysis unfolds as follows: a theoretical framework grounded in borderland studies and survival strategy literature, contextual background on the tri-border region, an examination of four survival strategy categories with evidence, a discussion of their tensions and failures, and broader implications for conflict resolution, climate adaptation, and development. The conclusion reflects on what the Turkana-Pokot case reveals about borders, agency, and survival in twenty-first-century Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical understanding of borderlands has undergone a significant transformation over the past three decades. Early scholarship, influenced by state-centric perspectives, conceptualised borders primarily as peripheries, marginal spaces at the edges of state power where central authority weakened and disorder prevailed. This "center-periphery" model, while capturing real dynamics of political marginalisation, fundamentally misunderstood the social and economic

life of border regions. Contemporary borderland studies, drawing from the pioneering work of scholars like Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel, reconceptualise these spaces as "zones of interaction" where distinct social fields intersect, creating unique opportunities for exchange, negotiation, and innovation that are unavailable in territorial cores. This shift toward understanding borderlands as productive rather than merely marginal spaces has profound implications. Borders are not simply lines where state sovereignty ends, but rather complex social institutions that communities actively engage with, contest, and reshape. James Scott's concept of "state evasion" and Roitman's (2005) analysis of "fiscal disobedience" in African borderlands demonstrate how communities develop sophisticated practices for navigating, exploiting, and sometimes resisting state authority.

In Eastern Africa specifically, scholars like Dereje Feyissa and Markus Hoehne have shown how borderland populations exercise agency through what they term "borderland governance", informal systems of rule that operate parallel to, and sometimes in tension with, state structures (Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), 2013). Yet much borderland literature still struggles with representation. As Vaughan and Tronvoll (2003) observe, there remains a tendency to portray borderland communities either as victims of state neglect and violence or as lawless actors engaged in smuggling and raiding. Both framings deny meaningful agency. This paper builds on recent work that recognises borderland communities as strategic actors who make calculated decisions within constrained circumstances, neither helpless victims nor romanticised resisters, but pragmatic survivors deploying diverse tactics to secure their livelihoods and social reproduction.

The concept of "survival strategies" requires careful theoretical grounding to avoid reducing complex social practices to mere coping mechanisms. Drawing from livelihoods literature and practice theory, this paper understands survival strategies as the constellation of practices, relationships, and knowledge systems that households and communities mobilise to secure subsistence, maintain social networks, and navigate threats. These strategies are simultaneously economic, social, spatial, and political dimensions that are analytically separable but practically intertwined. Economic adaptation encompasses the diversification of income sources, participation in multiple markets, and strategic asset management. Pastoralist communities, contrary to stereotypes of economic conservatism, have historically demonstrated remarkable flexibility in incorporating trade, agriculture, and wage labour into their livelihood portfolios (Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), 2019). In borderland contexts, economic strategies gain additional complexity as communities can arbitrage price differentials across markets, access resources in multiple countries, and exploit regulatory gaps between jurisdictions. Social networking and kinship systems represent a second crucial dimension (Behnke & Scoones, 1993). As research by Günther Schlee and Elliot Fratkin demonstrates, pastoral societies in Eastern Africa maintain elaborate systems of reciprocity, alliance, and mutual support that function as social insurance in unpredictable environments. In borderlands, these networks can extend across national boundaries, creating what might be termed "transnational social fields" that enable resource sharing, conflict mediation, and collective security beyond the reach of any single state.

Spatial mobility and territoriality constitute a third strategic dimension. Mobility is not random wandering but sophisticated knowledge of landscapes, resources, and political boundaries. Recent work by Michael Bollig and others on pastoral risk management reveals how movement patterns encode generations of ecological learning. In borderlands, mobility becomes additionally strategic as communities learn to time movements to avoid state surveillance, exploit seasonal variations in border enforcement, and access resources distributed across multiple jurisdictions (International Crisis Group, 2020). Political negotiation and resistance form the fourth dimension. Borderland communities engage with state authority in complex ways, sometimes cooperating, sometimes evading, sometimes directly challenging. This includes strategic claims to citizenship and belonging, selective participation in state programs, alliance-building with political patrons, and, at times, armed resistance. The key insight from James C. Scott's work on "weapons of the weak" and Asef Bayat's concept of "quiet

encroachment" is that political strategy often operates through everyday practices rather than formal mobilisation. The specific literature on pastoralism in African borderlands provides essential context for this study. Scholars such as John Markakis, Cedric Barnes, and Jeremy Lind have documented how pastoralist societies adapted to colonial border-making and post-colonial state consolidation. Their work reveals a consistent pattern: while states viewed pastoralist mobility as threatening to territorial control, pastoralists viewed borders as obstacles to be circumvented rather than barriers to be respected. This fundamental mismatch between state logic and pastoral practice has generated ongoing tensions across East African borderlands (Bollig, 2006).

Research on pastoral resilience and adaptation has moved beyond deficit models that emphasised vulnerability to recognise pastoralists as sophisticated risk managers. Work by Ian Scoones and Roy Behnke on "new range ecology" challenged equilibrium assumptions and highlighted the rationality of pastoral mobility in non-equilibrium environments. More recent studies by Oliver Wasonga, John McPeak, and others document specific adaptive strategies: herd splitting, species diversification, use of early warning systems, and participation in livestock insurance schemes. However, this literature has been slow to fully integrate the borderland dimension of how cross-border mobility itself functions as an adaptive strategy. The relationship between pastoralism and state formation in East Africa remains contested. Christopher Clapham's (1996) analysis of the "African state system" highlighted how pastoralist regions represented zones of weak state penetration. Recent studies by Bilal Butt and Laura Meagher show that states have increasingly sought to manage pastoralist mobility through disarmament, sedentarisation, and border security measures, often framed as efforts to promote development, security, or environmental conservation, according to the UNDP (2019). Yet as Kennedy Mkutu's research on the Karamoja Cluster shows, state interventions frequently fail to account for the cross-border dimensions of pastoral livelihoods, leading to unintended consequences including escalated violence and humanitarian crises.

Despite this rich body of scholarship, significant gaps remain. First, most borderland studies in Eastern Africa focus on bilateral border dynamics, the Kenya-Ethiopia border, the Kenya-Somalia border, or the Uganda-Kenya border. Tri-border regions, where communities must navigate three distinct state systems simultaneously, remain underexplored. The analytical complexity of tri-border spaces where regulatory arbitrage becomes more sophisticated, kinship networks span more jurisdictions, and conflict dynamics involve more actors demands specific attention. Second, while survival strategy literature effectively captures household-level coping mechanisms, it less frequently examines how borderland location itself becomes a strategic resource (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2021). The question is not simply how pastoralists survive despite borders, but how they survive through borders, actively exploiting border multiplicity, regulatory inconsistencies, and the gaps in state surveillance. Third, much existing literature either emphasises agency or structure, resilience or vulnerability, but struggles to hold both in tension. This paper contributes by examining survival strategies as simultaneously creative and constrained, effective and precarious.

The Turkana-Pokot case reveals communities that are neither triumphantly resilient nor hopelessly vulnerable, but rather engaged in ongoing, improvised navigation of profound challenges. Finally, this research responds to calls from scholars like Grethe Sather and Paul Goldsmith for more nuanced analysis of how contemporary pressures, such as climate change, arms proliferation, state militarisation, and market integration, are transforming pastoral survival strategies. By focusing on the present moment rather than idealised traditional systems, the paper captures survival strategies in flux, adaptation under pressure, and the emergence of hybrid practices that combine customary institutions with modern technologies and market participation (Feyissa & Hoehne, 2010).

The Kenya-Uganda-South Sudan tri-border region encompasses approximately 80,000 square kilometres of arid and semi-arid lands characterised by low and unpredictable rainfall, extreme temperatures, and sparse vegetation. Annual precipitation ranges from 200mm in the driest zones to 600mm in relatively

wetter areas, with high inter-annual variability that makes rain-fed agriculture precarious and renders pastoral mobility essential for survival. The landscape is dominated by vast plains punctuated by isolated mountain ranges, including Mount Moroto in Uganda and the Loima Hills in Kenya, that create microclimatic variations and serve as critical dry-season grazing reserves. This region forms part of what development agencies and security analysts term the "*Karamoja* Cluster," a transnational zone of ecological and cultural continuity that has become synonymous with poverty, conflict, and marginalisation. The cluster's environmental challenges have intensified dramatically over recent decades.

Climate data reveals a pattern of increasing drought frequency and severity: while major droughts historically occurred every seven to ten years, the region has experienced significant droughts in 2005-2006, 2009-2011, 2016-2017, and 2021-2022, a compression of disaster cycles that leaves communities insufficient time for herd recovery between shocks. Resource distribution across this landscape is profoundly uneven and seasonally variable. Permanent water sources are scarce, concentrated along rivers like the Turkwel, Kerio, and seasonal streams that often dry up for months. During dry seasons, pastoralists converge on remaining water points, creating potential for both cooperation and conflict. Pasture availability follows complex spatial and temporal patterns, with different vegetation zones supporting livestock at different seasons. This ecological reality necessitates mobility across vast distances, movements that increasingly cross international borders as communities track ephemeral resources and flee areas of drought or insecurity (Fratkin, 1998).

The Turkana and Pokot are Nilotic peoples who share linguistic affinities, having migrated into their present territories from the north over several centuries. The Turkana, numbering approximately one million people, primarily inhabit northwestern Kenya's Turkana County, with significant populations extending into Uganda's Karamoja region and South Sudan's Eastern Equatoria. The Pokot, numbering around 700,000, occupy territories in Kenya's West Pokot and Baringo Counties, with a cross-border presence in eastern Uganda. Both groups speak closely related Eastern Nilotic languages and share fundamental cultural practices, though they maintain distinct ethnic identities and have historically oscillated between alliance and conflict. The traditional livelihoods of both communities revolved around pastoralism, with cattle being the primary economic and cultural asset, complemented by goats, sheep, and a growing reliance on camels for climate adaptation. Livestock represent not merely economic assets but social currency used in bridewealth payments, conflict compensation, and ceremonial exchanges (Witsenburg & Adano, 2009). However, pastoralism was never pure; both groups practised opportunistic cultivation in favourable years, engaged in hunting and gathering, and participated in regional trade networks exchanging livestock, skins, and iron goods for grain, beads, and other commodities from agricultural neighbours and coastal traders. Social organisation in both societies revolves around age-set systems that structure male social life, territorial sections that regulate resource access, and patrilineal clan structures that define identity and alliance (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2022).

Leadership traditionally rested with councils of elders who mediated disputes, organised rituals, and coordinated collective defence. Gender roles assigned men primary responsibility for herding and warfare, while women managed homesteads, milked livestock, and controlled small stock. These customary institutions continue to function, albeit modified by contemporary pressures including state incorporation, market integration, and generational change (Galaty & Bonte, 1991). Cultural differences between Turkana and Pokot, while often overstated, include variations in circumcision practices, marriage customs, and territorial organisation. More significantly, their recent histories diverged during the colonial period, with Pokot territories more integrated into colonial administration and cash economies, while Turkana areas remained more isolated. These differences have implications for contemporary cross-border strategies, as Pokot communities often serve as intermediaries between Turkana pastoralists and state institutions.

The international boundaries that now divide Turkana and Pokot territories were products of European imperial competition rather than African social

geography. The Kenya-Uganda border was demarcated following the 1902 transfer of the "Eastern Province of Uganda" to the British East Africa Protectorate, a decision made in London to reduce administrative costs with no consultation of the affected populations. The border was partially surveyed, with large sections only marked on maps, dividing pastoral lands and splitting communities with strong familial connections.

The Kenya-South Sudan border inherited even more arbitrary colonial logic. Drawn during Anglo-Egyptian condominium negotiations over Sudan, the boundary followed rough latitude lines that bore no relationship to ethnic distributions or ecological zones. When South Sudan gained independence in 2011, this colonial boundary was simply reproduced, despite its evident inadequacy for governing pastoral mobility (Hendrickson et al., 1998).

The tri-border junction itself remains imprecisely demarcated, with competing claims and unclear authority that pastoralists exploit. Post-independence policies in Kenya, Uganda, and Sudan (later South Sudan) toward these borderlands reflected contrasting nation-building projects, yet shared assumptions about the need to sedentarise pastoralists, secure borders, and assert state control over peripheral regions. Kenya pursued aggressive security operations in Turkana and Pokot territories, viewing cross-border movements as threats to territorial integrity (World Bank, 2021). Uganda implemented disarmament campaigns in Karamoja, often with brutal force. South Sudan, consumed by civil war, maintained a minimal presence in Eastern Equatoria, creating a power vacuum. None of these states developed coherent cross-border governance frameworks, leaving pastoralists to navigate three uncoordinated bureaucracies (Adan & Pkalya, 2006).

Today, Turkana-Pokot communities confront an intensifying nexus of challenges. Climate change has transformed drought from a periodic stress into a chronic crisis. Meteorological data show declining rainfall trends, increased temperature extremes, and greater precipitation variability patterns that undermine traditional predictive knowledge and force desperate dry-season movements across borders in search of surviving pasture. Cattle raiding, a traditional practice of wealth redistribution and masculine prestige, has been transformed by arms proliferation. The influx of automatic weapons from conflicts in Somalia, South Sudan, and northern Uganda has militarised raids, increased lethality and triggered revenge cycles that can kill dozens in single incidents (Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003). Recent raids have involved hundreds of armed youths, displaced entire villages and destroyed livelihoods. State responses have emphasised securitisation over development. Kenya's Operation Dumisha Amani and Uganda's disarmament programs have deployed military force to confiscate weapons and restrict movement, often with alleged human rights abuses.

Roadblocks and increased border patrols constrain traditional mobility, forcing pastoralists into illegal status simply to access resources. Meanwhile, South Sudan's state weakness creates asymmetries where Kenyan and Ugandan pastoralists can raid into South Sudan with relative impunity (Markakis, 2011). Development interventions, despite good intentions, often misunderstand pastoral realities. Sedentarisation schemes ignore the ecological necessity of mobility. Livestock vaccination programs assume stable populations. Market infrastructure projects fail to account for cross-border trade patterns. Even humanitarian aid can disrupt local economies and create dependencies. Large-scale projects, including oil exploration and proposed infrastructure corridors, threaten to further fragment pastoral territories, all while pastoralists remain minimally consulted about interventions that fundamentally reshape their worlds (McCabe, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore Turkana-Pokot pastoralists' survival strategies in the Kenya-Uganda-South Sudan borderlands, prioritising emic perspectives within broader structural contexts. Data collection combined semi-structured interviews (n=78) with pastoralists, elders, women's groups, and youths, focus group discussions with age-sets and collectives, key informant interviews with local officials and NGO staff, and field observations of livestock markets and border

crossings. Secondary data, including climate patterns, conflict incidents, and historical records, provided triangulation. Research spanned five months (2023-2024), timed to capture wet and dry season dynamics, focusing on Turkana North and West Pokot (Kenya), Kaabong and Moroto (Uganda), and Kapoeta (South Sudan).

Purposive and snowball sampling ensured representation across age, gender, wealth, and territorial sections. Analysis involved iterative coding and thematic analysis, using a four-dimensional framework (economic, social, spatial, political strategies) while remaining open to emergent themes. Cross-case and temporal comparisons highlighted variations and changes in strategies. Limitations included security constraints, poor infrastructure, and language barriers, which were mitigated by extended engagement and local research assistants. Ethical considerations adhered to institutional approvals, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, especially for legally sensitive practices. Pseudonyms and obscured locations protected informants. Community feedback on preliminary findings addressed extraction concerns, ensuring collaborative interpretation and reflexivity about the researcher's positionality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The economic strategies of Turkana-Pokot borderland communities reveal sophisticated diversification that extends far beyond stereotypical images of pure pastoralism. While livestock remains central to identity and wealth accumulation, households increasingly construct complex livelihood portfolios that exploit cross-border opportunities and buffer against pastoral risks. Field research documented that fewer than 15 per cent of interviewed households relied exclusively on livestock production (Sundberg & Melander, 2013). The majority combined pastoralism with multiple income streams adapted to individual capabilities and opportunities. Charcoal production has emerged as a significant dry-season activity, particularly among poorer households with depleted herds (Oxfam, 2022). Despite environmental concerns and periodic government bans, charcoal burners harvest acacia in remote borderland areas and transport products to urban markets in all three countries, exploiting regulatory differences. Kenya's stricter enforcement drives production into Uganda and South Sudan, where charcoal then flows back across borders (Scoones, 1995). Gold panning in seasonal riverbeds, particularly along the Turkwel River and tributaries, provides sporadic but sometimes substantial income (Sahlins et al, 1989).

Young men engage in artisanal mining during dry months, with gold sold to traders who operate across borders, taking advantage of price variations and regulatory arbitrage. One informant, Lomonyang, described earning enough from two months of gold panning in South Sudan to restock his herd after drought losses as an example of how borderland positioning enables economic opportunism. Remittances from urban centres constitute another critical income stream. Family members working in Lodwar, Kitale, Moroto, or even Nairobi and Kampala send money for school fees, medical expenses, and restocking after losses. Mobile money platforms M-Pesa in Kenya and Mobile Money in Uganda facilitate these transfers, though coverage gaps in remote areas create dependencies on town-based relatives. Interviews revealed that approximately 40 per cent of households received regular remittances, creating transnational economic networks that extend pastoral social systems into urban wage economies (Scott, 2009).

Livestock trade represents the most economically significant cross-border activity, with elaborate market networks spanning all three countries. The tri-border region contains multiple livestock markets, Lokitaung and Kakuma in Kenya, Moroto and Kotido in Uganda, Kapoeta in South Sudan, each operating on different weekly schedules, enabling traders to move between markets seeking optimal prices. Pastoralists demonstrated sophisticated knowledge of price differentials: cattle might fetch higher prices in Kenyan markets due to greater purchasing power, while goats commanded premiums in Ugandan trading centres with strong demand from agricultural communities. The case of the Lokichoggio-Nadapal border crossing illustrates these dynamics (Mkutu, 2006). This official

crossing point sees daily movement of livestock, but the formal trade represents only a fraction of cross-border commerce. Informal routes through the bush enable pastoralists to avoid veterinary fees, customs duties, and movement permits that add costs. Traders employ brokers who maintain relationships on both sides, facilitating paperwork when necessary and circumventing it when possible (Meier et al., 2007). One livestock trader, Apale, explained his strategy: "I sell in Kenya when drought pushes down prices here, then buy in Uganda where rains have been better. The border is just a line; my business is on both sides." Border markets themselves function as hybrid spaces where state authority is negotiated.

The Nadapal market operates in a legal grey zone where Kenyan and South Sudanese traders meet, transactions occur in multiple currencies (Kenyan shillings, South Sudanese pounds, sometimes dollars) (McPeak & Barrett, 2001), and state officials from both countries claim jurisdiction yet exercise limited control. These markets facilitate not just livestock exchange but trade in consumer goods, mobile phone credit, and information about resource conditions and security across borders. Perhaps the most revealing economic strategy involves deliberate herd splitting across international boundaries. Multiple informants described maintaining livestock in two or even three countries simultaneously, a practice driven by both risk management and opportunism (Abbink, 2000). Drought rarely affects the entire tri-border region uniformly; rains may fail in Turkana while Karamoja receives adequate moisture, or vice versa. By distributing herds geographically, pastoralists hedge against localised climate shocks. This strategy also responds to conflict dynamics. When tensions escalate between Turkana and Pokot in Kenya, herders move portions of their livestock into Uganda or South Sudan, protecting assets from potential raiding (Government of Uganda, 2020).

Discussion

The Turkana-Pokot case fundamentally challenges state-centric conceptualisations of borders as fixed lines of territorial sovereignty. Instead, this research demonstrates that borders are lived, performed, and continuously produced through everyday practices of borderland communities. Pastoralists do not merely react to borders imposed upon them; they actively produce borders as tactical resources, sometimes emphasising boundary rigidity to claim distinct national identities and access state services, other times performing border fluidity to access resources and evade regulation. This "productive ambiguity" represents a form of borderland agency that existing theoretical frameworks inadequately capture (Mahmood, 2021).

The findings contribute to survival strategies literature by demonstrating the inadequacy of single-dimensional analyses. Economic, social, spatial, and political strategies are not separate adaptations but interconnected dimensions of holistic survival systems (Lind et al., 2015). Kinship networks enable economic trade; spatial mobility requires political negotiation; economic diversification depends on social cooperation. Future research on survival strategies must embrace this complexity rather than isolating individual tactics. Moreover, the tri-border context reveals how strategy sophistication scales with jurisdictional complexity. Pastoralists navigating three states must maintain more elaborate information systems, diverse documentation, and flexible identities than communities managing bilateral borders (Save the Children, 2021). This suggests that border multiplicity, while increasing complexity, also expands strategic possibilities, a theoretical insight applicable beyond this specific case to other multi-border regions globally (Adano & Witsenburg, 2008).

Are Turkana-Pokot communities resilient or vulnerable? The answer, frustratingly yet necessarily, is both simultaneously. The concept of resilience risks romanticising suffering and obscuring structural violence when applied uncritically. Yet denying agency by portraying communities solely as victims ignores the creativity, knowledge, and determination evident in daily survival practices. A more productive framing recognises resilience and vulnerability as coexisting conditions rather than opposite poles. Communities demonstrate remarkable resilience employing sophisticated strategies, maintaining social cohesion despite pressure, and adapting to rapidly changing conditions (Little et al., 2008). Simultaneously, they experience profound vulnerability to climate shocks that destroy livelihoods, violence that kills and displaces, and state interventions that criminalise survival. Resilience does not eliminate vulnerability;

rather, communities are resilient within vulnerability, constantly navigating threats that no amount of adaptation can fully neutralise. This recognition has critical implications. Celebrating resilience without addressing structural drivers of vulnerability becomes an excuse for inaction if communities are resilient; external support seems unnecessary (Lamphear, 1992). Conversely, emphasising only vulnerability denies agency and justifies interventions that ignore or undermine community strategies. The challenge for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners is holding both realities in view: supporting community agency while simultaneously addressing the structural conditions of climate change, arms proliferation, poverty, and marginalisation that constrain that agency.

The Turkana-Pokot case shares similarities with other East African borderland populations. Somali pastoralists navigating the Somalia-Kenya-Ethiopia tri-border region employ comparable strategies, including cross-border kinship networks, livestock trade spanning multiple markets, and selective state engagement. Afar communities across the Ethiopia-Eritrea-Djibouti borders likewise demonstrate sophisticated mobility and trade networks (Kratli & Swift, 2014). These parallels suggest common patterns in how pastoralist borderland communities navigate state boundaries. However, the Turkana-Pokot context contains distinctive features. The Karamoja Cluster's extreme climate vulnerability, history of state neglect, and intensity of violent conflict create particularly harsh survival conditions. South Sudan's state weakness and ongoing instability add complexity absent from more stable tri-border regions (Barnes, 2007). The colonial legacy of arbitrary boundaries particularly fragmented Turkana-Pokot territories, given their extensive pre-colonial ranges. Additionally, the specific intersection of three distinct post-colonial state trajectories, Kenya's relatively stable but uneven development, Uganda's militarised approach to Karamoja, and South Sudan's fragility, creates unique strategic possibilities and constraints. Globally, the case resonates with borderland communities from the Sahel to Central Asia, wherever mobile populations navigate state boundaries. The theoretical insights about productive ambiguity, multi-dimensional survival strategies, and the resilience-vulnerability nexus likely apply beyond East Africa, though careful attention to context-specific differences remains essential (Katete et al., 2022).

This research carries significant implications for policy and practice. First, cross-border governance frameworks are urgently needed. Current approaches treat border regions as national peripheries rather than transnational zones requiring coordinated management. Organisations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) at the regional level must move beyond rhetoric to establish functional mechanisms for cross-border resource management, conflict resolution, and service delivery (Hogg, 1986). Protocols enabling pastoralist mobility while managing legitimate state concerns about security and disease control are achievable but require political will.

Second, policies must recognise and support traditional institutions rather than undermining them. Councils of elders, customary conflict resolution mechanisms, and age-set systems provide governance functions that state institutions cannot replicate in borderlands. Rather than viewing these as competing authorities, states should establish partnerships that leverage traditional institutions' legitimacy and local knowledge while ensuring accountability and human rights protections, particularly for women and marginalised groups (Butt, 2011). Third, climate adaptation support must be fundamentally rethought. Current approaches emphasising sedentarisation and agricultural diversification often contradict pastoral logic and borderland realities. Adaptation support should instead enhance mobility, improving cross-border infrastructure, establishing climate information systems, and creating flexible grazing reserves. Index-based livestock insurance, streamlined cross-border livestock trade, and strategic investment in dry-season water infrastructure that aligns with mobility patterns would better promote adaptation.

Fourth, development interventions require conflict-sensitive approaches that understand how projects interact with survival strategies and power dynamics (Greiner, 2013). Large infrastructure projects, conservation initiatives, and resource extraction must involve meaningful pastoralist consultation and benefit-sharing. Development that disrupts mobility without providing viable alternatives drives

communities deeper into vulnerability and conflict. Finally, addressing arms proliferation and transitioning from militarised security responses to community-centred approaches is essential (Government of Kenya, 2007). Disarmament without addressing the underlying insecurity drivers and economic alternatives for youth will continue failing. Regional cooperation to control weapons flows, combined with investments in economic opportunities and conflict transformation, offers more promising pathways than militarised campaigns alone (Catley et al., 2013).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This research examined survival strategies of Turkana-Pokot pastoralists in the Kenya-Uganda-South Sudan borderlands, revealing sophisticated, multi-dimensional approaches to navigating state boundaries, resource scarcity, and insecurity. Four interconnected strategy categories emerged from the analysis. Economic strategies include livelihood diversification beyond pastoralism, participation in cross-border trade networks exploiting market differentials, and strategic herd management through geographic and species diversification. Social strategies leverage trans-border kinship networks created through marriage alliances, customary institutions for conflict resolution operating across jurisdictions, and age-set systems facilitating cooperation regardless of nationality. Spatial strategies encompass seasonal migrations that routinely cross international boundaries, sophisticated knowledge of border infrastructure and enforcement patterns, and negotiated access to resources distributed across multiple countries. Political strategies involve selective engagement with state authorities, strategic management of identity documentation, and advocacy through community organisations and civil society networks.

However, the analysis also documented profound tensions and contradictions. Survival strategies fail catastrophically when climate extremes overwhelm adaptive capacity or when cattle raiding escalates into armed conflict. Internal community tensions emerge around generational differences, gender exclusion from decision-making, and inequality in accessing cross-border networks. State interventions through disarmament campaigns, mobility restrictions, and development projects frequently undermine rather than support survival. Some adaptation strategies paradoxically contribute to environmental degradation and long-term unsustainability. This paper's central argument challenges conventional narratives portraying borderland communities as either passive victims of geographic misfortune or lawless actors threatening state security. Instead, the research demonstrates that Turkana-Pokot pastoralists are strategic agents who actively produce borders as tactical resources. Through economic, social, spatial, and political strategies, these communities manipulate the very boundaries designed to constrain them, exercising what might be termed "borderland agency", the capacity to navigate, negotiate, and occasionally subvert state territorial control in service of survival. This agency, however, operates within severe structural constraints. Communities are simultaneously resilient and vulnerable, demonstrating remarkable creativity and adaptation while experiencing profound insecurity, poverty, and climate shocks. The sophistication of survival strategies reflects not triumphant resilience but rather the desperate ingenuity required to survive in exceptionally harsh conditions. Understanding borderland communities requires holding this tension between agency and constraint, avoiding both romanticisation and victimisation.

The Turkana-Pokot case illuminates broader dynamics of borderland life across Eastern Africa and beyond. It reveals how colonial boundaries, imposed with little regard for African social geographies, continue generating tensions and adaptations more than six decades after independence. As African states strengthen border infrastructure and expand security operations in peripheral regions, they increasingly collide with communities whose survival depends on border fluidity, a collision intensified by climate change, forcing ever more desperate resource-seeking movements. For policy and practice, the research underscores the inadequacy of approaches that ignore or criminalise cross-border survival strategies. Development interventions, security operations, and governance reforms that fail to understand how communities actually survive risk doing more harm than good.

Recommendations: Effective responses require recognising pastoralist mobility not as a problem to be solved through sedentarisation but as a rational adaptation requiring support. They demand cross-border coordination rather than unilateral national approaches. They necessitate partnership with traditional institutions rather than their displacement by state bureaucracies. More fundamentally, the research calls for reimagining borders themselves. Rather than accepting state-centric definitions of borders as fixed lines of territorial sovereignty, we might understand borders as social fields where multiple actors states, communities, traders, migrants, continuously negotiate authority, identity, and resource access. This perspective opens space for governance innovations that work with rather than against borderland realities.

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