

Defending Pastoralism: Livelihood  
Diversification and Competing  
Currencies in Northern Tanzanian  
Maasailand

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*IPE Summer Research Fellowship Report*  
*October 13, 2014*

## **Abstract**

Over the course of recent decades, the Maasai of northern Tanzania have undergone a fundamental economic shift from a system based centrally on the exchange of cattle and livestock to one in which cash now plays a growingly important role. Situated in the mounting challenges to pastoralist livelihoods and an increasingly diverse range of livelihood activities, this paper draws from a multi-sited ethnographic data set from two trips to Tanzania in 2013 and 2014 in order to look specifically at how and where these two currencies intersect in the contemporary rural Maasai economy. The perspectives and experiences of rural-urban migrants and Maasai in several villages in northern Tanzania illuminate the persistent significance of a livelihood and identity based centrally on pastoralism. Though cash has come to hold an important utilitarian exchange value that livestock lack, cattle remain the socially prioritized currency; in other words, the “walking bank” of the Maasai. While this result should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Maasai livelihoods, I argue that in a broader sense it contradicts dominant globalization narratives on monetization and migration. Finally, I suggest that these findings have implications for development practice, as even newer, more progressive frameworks for understanding development seem to come up short when applied to this case.

## Introduction and Reflections

In fall 2013, I spent a semester studying the political ecology of wildlife conservation in northern Tanzania with S.I.T. While there, we traveled and studied in some of the world's most desired territories, known to conservationists and visitors by the names of their game parks, like Serengeti, Tarangire, or Ngorongoro, but to the residents who live there by the names of their homes, like Loliondo, Simanjiro, or Engare Sero. In our four months there, we witnessed the effects of the longstanding tension between Maasai – the primary ethnic group presently residing in northern Tanzania's conservation-desired areas – and conservation interests, which has resulted in forceful eviction, large-scale relocation, and widespread exclusion from vital resource bases (e.g. Brockington 2008; Dowie 2009, Igoe 2004). So when I had an opportunity to pursue my own independent study project at the end of the semester, I chose to focus on one manifestation of these ongoing challenges: livelihood diversification in the form of rural-urban labor migration. For three weeks in the urban center of Arusha, I interviewed and observed the city's Maasai migrant community, learning about the causes of migration, the challenges they face, and the informal structures that exist to address these challenges.

I left Tanzania that first time with more questions than answers, however. While my informants had sketched a fairly detailed drawing of their lives in the city, our conversations often shifted to the lives they had temporarily left behind in the villages from which they migrated. They spoke highly of their lives there and generally waited eagerly to return, but these out-of-context exchanges couldn't answer all my questions about how migration and participation in a cash economy is affecting life in the village. How was money being spent at home? What economic value had the historical currency of cattle retained? Were these new forms of production based on wage labor relations uprooting the livelihood based on

pastoralism and social relations based on age-sets? The extent of my time in rural Maasai communities was limited to a three-night homestay with the S.I.T. program, so I decided to put together the proposal for this project to return to the villages from which these migrants come to answer these questions and many more.

At its core, this project was a study about livelihood. The first study question aimed to determine what social and economic roles cash now plays relative to the historical currency of cattle in rural Maasailand. The second asked how Maasai are understanding and reacting to these changes, again intended to address the context of dual currencies and diversifying livelihoods. Though my first study focused specifically on labor migrants, almost all of whom worked as night watchmen at homes or businesses, I expanded the scope of this study to include all cash jobs, as the livelihood profile of Maasai is indeed ever-diversifying and more rural opportunities for wage labor are becoming available; still, I am the most familiar with the experiences of rural-urban migrants, and thus my data set reflects this. In order to keep the project rooted in themes of *international* political economy, I also paid attention, if somewhat informally, to ways in which forces like international development aid, foreign investment (e.g. in tourism), and of course internationally-backed conservation interests might be influencing these phenomena and vice versa.

The study was ethnographic in methodology, although perhaps not in length. It began in Arusha, the gateway to Tanzania's northern safari circuit, where I connected with my friend, guide, and translator from last year, a Maasai man named Marco who truly ended up shaping the rest of my project. Here we visited the different meeting places in town where migrants typically gather during the day and held individual interviews, group discussions, and informal conversations with many of the same migrants we interviewed last year, as well as many new ones. Even more importantly, I spent countless hours, including much of my free time, with

him and his close friends and family members, all rural-urban migrants themselves. At their homes and all over town I cooked, ran errands, relaxed, and passed the time with the surprisingly open group, some of whom I would see again when I returned to their home for the second half of my study. Through a combination of limited English and KiSwahili, along with Maa translated by Marco, I learned more from this participatory observation than I ever anticipated, and it now comprises a far larger proportion of my data set than I planned.

I also used Arusha as a launch point for several trips to nearby villages. I visited weekly markets held primarily by and for Maasai on four different occasions, which proved to be very insightful in observing the interface of monetary and non-monetary currencies. I took two day trips to the village of Monduli, about 50km outside Arusha, to visit the homes of friends of mine and Marco's. And I accepted the gracious invitation of another friend, a migrant who now studies in Arusha who I met last year, to return to his village of Lengiloriti in the Simanjiro District. There I spent three nights living and talking with his family in a setting that was far more remote and difficult to access than anywhere else I went. In total, these excursions and my time in Arusha totaled just less than four weeks, the majority of the first half of my study.

The most ethnographically involved portion of the study, however, was by far the second half, in which I traveled with Marco back to his home in the village of Engare Sero in Ngorongoro District. The village, located about five hours' bus ride from Arusha, lies 112km from the nearest paved road and sits at the foot of the escarpment of the Great Rift Valley. A back road to Serengeti National Park passes through it, and with wildlife-rich Lake Natron, the popular mountain climb of Ol Doinyo Lengai, and a stunning waterfall in an otherwise arid climate, the community has attracted its fair share of tourists and tour operators. S.I.T. hosts its three-night homestay there biannually, so as much as a researcher, I was able to visit this

community as a friend of Marco's and a former student of S.I.T., allowing me to form comfortable friendships with people there.

I camped in the yard of Marco's brother for the duration of my stay, and spent some days interviewing shop owners, cattle traders, craftmakers, tourism workers, returned migrants, herders, and more. Other times I simply put my days into the hands of my generous hosts and shadowed these same men and women as they went about their daily activities, be it sitting in the shade making jewelry, taking the goats out to graze, or going into the village to buy or sell stock. Again in the spirit of accepting every invitation, I also spent six nights sleeping in "the bush," in a canyon just outside of town, eating meat and drinking medicine in a tradition called *orpul*, meant to be an enjoyable and healthy cleanse. There I learned about a wide range of topics, but managed to interview guests of the *orpul* in exchange for meat and get to know my seven companions at the camp extremely well.

Citing anecdotes and evidence from all of these study sites, this paper will first describe the context in which livelihood diversification and monetization are occurring, and profile the process of rural-urban migration to provide an example of how one particular form of livelihood diversification plays out in peoples' lives. Next, it will focus on the different roles of the two functional currencies of rural Maasailand – cattle and cash – in order to explore the effects of the fundamental political economic shift presently occurring there. Finally, the last section will apply these results to discussions on globalization and development, as that is the direction in which the implications point most directly.

In short, the paper argues that despite increasing livelihood diversification and an undeniably intensifying reliance on cash, Maasai continue to deliberately perpetuate an identity and livelihood based centrally on pastoralism. Though cash has come to hold an important utilitarian exchange value that livestock lack, cattle remain the socially prioritized currency; in

other words, the “walking bank” of the Maasai. Especially in the context of migration and monetization, this result counters the common narrative on globalization, which more often than not envisages homogenization of cultures and livelihoods. Similarly, prevailing notions of development theory and practice often employ universalizing standards that fail to capture the local particularities of this case. While some of these approaches are no doubt better than others, these findings demonstrate a need for a framework that prioritizes the specificities of livelihood preferences.

### **Preliminary Results**

#### *Experiencing a Diversified Livelihood*

In the rural context, division of labor amongst Maasai is, along with most elements of economics and culture, dictated by the demands of livestock. Women take care of children and tend to the home, but also milk cows in the morning and evening. Younger, uncircumcised boys are responsible for herding cattle during the wet season and when the task is not overly demanding, whereas elders generally retain ownership and managerial authority over the herds. The warrior class, consisting of young men into their late twenties, faces the honorable burden of herding the cattle in difficult times – such as when they have to travel long distances to graze and drink – along with protecting the family, land, and livestock (Homewood & Rogers 1991). As Jim Igoe (2006) and others (e.g. Hodgson 2009) have pointed out, the resulting image of indigeneity and “pure pastoralism” is a highly politicized, oversimplified, strategic self-representation, but the principle significance of livestock, and mainly cattle, to Maasai livelihoods still cannot be underemphasized.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, however, Maasai men began travelling to cities to seek wage-labor jobs as night watchmen. Hired presumably for their perceived trustworthiness and courageousness, unofficial estimates put numbers in the thousands by the early 2000s (May and

McCabe 2004, 3). Some Maasai began to get involved in informal gemstone economies as well, primarily acting as middlemen in the Tanzanite trade (Sachedina and Trench's 2009), but low pay wage-labor work, mostly as security, remains the most prominent type of employment. Other forms of livelihood diversification also accompanied rural-urban labor migration. The near ubiquitous presence of cultivation in contemporary Maasai communities, for example, makes for a dramatically different landscape than before the 1970s agricultural surge amongst Maasai (McCabe et al. 2010, 326). And the quintessential image of colorfully-clad Maasai in the eyes of the foreign tourist has created ample opportunities for Maasai engagement in the tourism industry, including both "collective village income" deals with tour companies and household-level engagement in activities such as souvenir sales and cultural tourism programs (Trench et al. 2009).

The motivations for this diversification are naturally many, but most relate to factors that are making sustaining livestock herds more difficult. Because Maasai resource management is based on a bimodal system, or one in which part of the resource – in this case, grasses for grazing and water for drinking – is reserved for the dry season, restriction of rangelands that encompass these dry season reserves compounds vulnerability to drought and compromises long-practiced coping mechanisms (Igoe 2004, 52). It is in this way that the "fortress conservation" model based on violent exclusion of humans from protected areas has proven so devastating not just in a human rights context, but also to the core principles of Maasai livelihood. But as notions of "community-based conservation" have gained momentum as alternatives to this approach, noncommittal efforts have proven equally compromising to pastoralist resource management (e.g. Goldman 2011).

Conservation areas alone are not the sole challenge to East African pastoralism, however. In the past four decades, Tanzania's population has tripled; while population density

remains relatively low, increasing population pressure threatens to compromise access to competitive pasturelands. Moreover, because at least 74 percent of this population occupies rural areas, agricultural encroachment further fragments the rangeland in the more fertile parts of Maasailand (National Bureau of Statistics 2011). Perhaps most existentially threatening to pastoral livelihoods is the increasing frequency and severity of droughts and generally unpredictable weather patterns that disrupt the seasonal rain on which Maasai so heavily rely. And certainly not least significantly, the increasing connectivity of Tanzania's rural stretches to cash economies creates a greater demand for at least some cash in most rural communities.

These challenges collectively begin to suggest that urban migration and livelihood diversification are motivated at least in part by increasing desperation in the rural context; in other words, more push factors inform decisions to migrate than pull factors. This point becomes even clearer when situated in urban migrants' grim conceptualizations of their lives in the city. The typical migrant makes the journey alone, likely arriving in the city for the first time with no guarantee of work and no direct connections. In his search for employment, he depends on his identity as Maasai to build connections. He usually joins one of several small, informal sub-communities of migrants, organized loosely by geographic origin, that becomes his support network and peer group. The members of these groups meet consistently in public spaces – likened by May and McCabe (2004, 6) to the rural meeting places known as *iloipi* in Maa – to rest and socialize, as well as to sell goods like peanuts, individual cigarettes, and snorting tobacco to complement their modest incomes. The *Laigwanani*, or chief, holds a more formal meeting about once a week to discuss plans, share advice, and address any problems a member might have.

These problems stem from the low quality of work that most migrants do end up finding. Sometimes migrants need to treat an illness or injury sustained from harsh working

conditions, such as defending their bosses' property from thieves and intruders, staying up all night in the cold with few days off, and sleeping in public, on the ground, or in tight conditions during the day. Should the problem require any substantial funds, group members will likely contribute to a general pool of money, as the modest salaries – reported to be as little as Tsh40,000 (approximately USD25) per month, and generally between Tsh60,000 and Tsh100,000 per month – do not leave much room for security. Migrants expressed similar frustration over paying for things like water, firewood, and shelter which are found for free in the commons of Maasailand. And while relationships with bosses vary dramatically, I heard of several instances of migrants being sent to jail if the property they were defending was robbed, requiring substantial funds to pay a bail.

Migrants complained of many other annoyances and challenges in Arusha, including undesirable and unhealthy diets, poor behavior and lack of respect for elders, discriminatory treatment from Arusha's Swahili-speaking majority, competitive attitudes, and the stress of navigating crowds and hurriedness in town. To sum up, when asked if they generally like living in the city, the overwhelming response from the migrants I interviewed was a definitive no. The Maasai migrant community in town sees itself as a very distinct, out-of-place, almost self-contained population working in a perilous, unforgiving environment. But in contrast to this negative depiction of the city, the men with whom I spoke in town hold their lives in the village in high regard. "Living in the village, there's so much freedom. Here in town there are so many worries," summarized one. With this understanding of one particular common form of livelihood diversification, I moved to the rural context to address this difference and attempt to understand just why this migration is so important.

*From the City to the Village: Impacts and Perceptions of a Cash Economy*

Given the hardship some Maasai obviously face in the process of livelihood diversification, why do they continue to migrate? Why did I find upon my return to Arusha so many of the same men working the same jobs, speaking of many of the same challenges they did the year before? In other words, what makes the small denominations of money earned worth the difficulties of migration? In the villages I visited, the answers came in two primary parts. First, money has come to hold an important utilitarian exchange value that the historical currency of cattle no longer holds. Second, this value provides an important investment back into livestock, which still holds many cultural, economic, and practical purposes absent in cash currency.

To begin, the challenge of consuming commodities in many parts of Maasailand has been compounded by the diminishing retail value of livestock relative to these increasingly abundant goods, along with the virtual absence of barter. Sometimes, according to elders, the income generated from selling a single cow could keep a family afloat for up to a year in the past. By contrast, several of my informants expressed frustration over how that money disappears in a matter of a few months or weeks today. Sure enough, on display at the markets I visited was a large quantity of livestock juxtaposed with a vast diversity of commodities, many of them imported. For every group of vendors selling rice, fruit, “traditional medicine,” and *shukas'* (robes worn in sets of three as clothing), there would be others selling blue jeans, cell phones, soccer balls, and name-brand coffee. In my conversations with these vendors, I met people who had left their villages on Sunday, for example, to walk to the Tuesday market to cut transportation costs or to bring their stock. For those families with no alternative form of income, selling stock then becomes a nearly perpetual burden that it must face in order to keep

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<sup>1</sup> Generally, translations provided in parentheses are common KiSwahili words. Though these items mostly have different words in Maa, in these cases the KiSwahili words are often used even by Maasai.

up with consumption of non-livestock goods for sale. The financial margins at which pastoralists live are tiny, demonstrating the important space cash has come to occupy even in the rural economy.

Though spending habits obviously vary, informants voiced similar patterns in regards to how they use this money in their villages. A more detailed, quantitative economic analysis of household spending could be used to support these trends, but the preliminary explanations of my informants point to a few basic areas where money is of particular importance. First and foremost come basic needs. Nearly all demographics with whom I spoke were quick to mention food and clothing as primary costs. Crops like maize, cassava, and sometimes fruits like papaya and banana provide certain subsistence nutrition in certain areas. In Lengiloriti, for example, families eat a stiff porridge (*ugali*) made from ground maize from their own farm. In other places, however, like Engare Sero, aridity makes cultivation more difficult. There, remoteness drives up the price of transported food and tourist lodges often buy up supplies quickly, making a trip to the weekly market an important Thursday morning activity. Approximate price sampling demonstrated that one kilogram of rice costs Tsh2000, a bundle of tomatoes might go for around Tsh500, one cloth *shuka* can cost around Tsh10,000, and one kilogram of grilled meat (*nyama choma*) costs Tsh6,000-Tsh8,000<sup>2</sup>. Some of these prices fall far below the average cost of like goods in the United States, but given the modest salaries of Maasai workers they account for a major portion of most incomes.

After basic needs, education is a priority for many residents of the communities I visited. Education is one of several factors that many people seemed to see as contributing positively to the collective good of the community, and many attributed the proliferation of schools and

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<sup>2</sup> One bias worth mentioning here is that prices were often inflated when I inquired as a *mzungu*, or white person. I adjusted for this as best I could by asking multiple vendors for prices, by sending Marco to ask for prices, and by cross-checking my numbers with his knowledge of how much these goods typically cost for Maasai.

enrollment to migration. One migrant from Simanjiro described the process of pursuing education after arriving in Arusha and working as a night watchman. After being sent to jail on account of a theft on his boss' property, he ran away from home in order to continue earning money which he could eventually spend on school fees. Additionally, he had sold a total of three cows to continue his education over the years, and his father was refusing to sell any more. This tremendous individual drive for education was often echoed by parents who expressed similarly strong desires to pay their children's school fees.

Still, a dramatic emphasis on education clashes with the difficulty families still have in sending children to school. Though Tanzania provides seven years of primary education free of charge, fees begin at the level of secondary education. A chief of Engare Sero listed meeting these fees as his community's biggest challenge, one that multiplies given the large size of most families there. In a rare departure from the risk-aversion strategy that characterizes most economic decisions in Tanzania, the sale of livestock especially demonstrates just how much of a priority education has become. From one perspective, the logics are very justifiable: particularly in the context of livelihood diversification, education is often the only pathway to high-paying jobs. Another point of view, however, would point out that the most immediately applicable skill that children learn at school is to speak English, which leads directly to service jobs in tourism; in other words, it reinforces an unequal division of labor at the international level. Either way, many people in the communities I visited spent much of their money in this way.

Business also seemed to be viewed as a mostly beneficial product of a cash economy, primarily for the access it provides to formerly scarce consumer goods. Business was often described as literally being "learned" in the city and brought back to the village. A shopkeeper at a small window store (*duka*), carrying basic food items, school supplies, toiletries, and similar

household items affirmed that “we [in Engare Sero] really know how to use money now.” Its merits, in his view, were that it was not subject to a harsh, unpredictable dry season “like cattle are.” As he makes profits and expands his business, the money he saves will not dry up, like cattle might. Testament to the explanation of one migrant in Arusha, who told me that “in the village they have come to adopt the behavior of the business of town in order to get money,” this shop was new, and for now it was the only one of its sort on its side of the main village.

Housing is a final positive change many people mentioned in discussion of the impacts of money. Perhaps more so than any other material good that money purchases, people in the communities I visited expressed aspirations to one day be able to afford so-called “modern” or “Swahili” housing. As opposed to the circular, thatched-roof structures (*bomas*) in which Maasai have historically lived, these houses are more permanent, partially-concrete, rectangular, often contain multiple rooms, and sometimes have tin roofs. The desire for this type of housing potentially reflects several ideas. First, these structures certainly offer a degree of practicality, as they are often less susceptible to weather, require less maintenance, and are more comfortable and spacious. Second, they seem to constitute a status symbol to a certain degree. And third, they could be read as a symbol of infrastructure in general, for several people drew connections between new types of architecture and the roads, buildings, and public services present in the city and emerging piecemeal in some villages. In any case, housing, like the other uses of money, was talked about both in terms of individual practicality and collective good for the community.

Overshadowing all of these purchasing choices, however, is the second motivation for earning cash – the reinvestment into cattle and livestock herds. While money is a necessity to a certain degree, beyond that necessity the Maasai with whom I spoke said they spend any surplus income on purchasing cows, goats, or sheep, one at a time, whenever possible. In the

words of one informant, “We need money to live sometimes, but we don’t worship money.” Instead, generating cash income provides an alternative to selling cows in the first place. In the same way that a lack of cash income necessitates an almost perpetual sale of livestock in order to meet basic needs, a steady flow of cash from the sale of labor replaces this need. In the face of diminishing herds, cash is therefore sought not only for its utility in the marketplace, but for the role it plays in maintaining livestock numbers.

*Redefining Wealth: The Social and Cultural Value of Cattle*

Commonly referred to as the “walking bank” of Maasai, then, cattle fulfill certain roles in Maasailand that money simply cannot. The ultimate goal underpinning livelihood decisions is a ubiquitous desire to retain cattle ownership and continue a livelihood based on pastoralism. In this regard, seeking cash as a currency of exchange can be seen as a coping mechanism that addresses the difficulties entangled in a pastoralist livelihood in this day and age. Just as McCabe et al. (2010) found Maasai to be “adopting cultivation to remain pastoralists,” in the villages I visited an underlying aim of increasing or at least maintaining herd size preceded any involvement in a cash economy. In the end, cash still lacks the cultural and historical significance of cattle. What money cannot buy, cattle can fill the void.

Importantly, cattle in this circumstance afford their owners – and, by connection, their owners’ families – a certain degree of cultural capital. As a social asset which can affect how members of a community can act and how others will receive them, cattle afford a Maasai family respect, power, and prestige. One respondent likened cattle directly to a Western equivalent: “Without cattle, a Maasai can never succeed. It’s like in Europe you can’t succeed without education.” Just how in Europe (in this case, meaning the “Global North” more generally) education is a central component of climbing the socioeconomic ladder, cattle constitute a fundamental component of Maasai social success. Thus informants across

demographics engaging in a diversity of livelihood activities expressed an explicit desire to own cattle. Even the man at the *duka*, for instance, who expressed his faith in the drought resistibility of cash, told me he invests the profit he makes back in to his herd nonetheless. As another informant put it, “You can have a lot of money, but if you don’t have any cows it doesn’t count.”

Nowhere was the power of cattle expressed as directly as in conversations addressing wealth. Despite the influx of cash into the Maasai economy, and despite the occasional instance of conspicuous consumption, the question of what makes a Maasai rich consistently yielded two specific answers: cows and children. Though different informants explained the benefits of these things in slightly different terms, not a single person deviated from this answer. One man explained how if he had any problems with other members of his community, he could essentially appease them by giving them a cow. Others referenced the abundance of milk and meat that large herds yield. And nearly all alluded to the respect, honor and status that comes with such wealth, not unlike the status wealthy people are assumed to have in Western countries. Accordingly, informants commonly referenced the “richest people” in their communities or areas – some of whom had nearly 1,000 cattle, up to ten wives, and one hundred children. One man told me in awe about a man who has a single school exclusively for his children. As forms of cultural capital and literal wealth, cattle are the means by which Maasai reproduce their identity and find their place within societies. Ultimately, the results of my study suggest that adoption of wage-labor work and a cash economy by no means compromise this.

### *Questions of Globalization, Poverty, and Development*

Admittedly, this unrelenting articulation of a pastoralist identity is the underlying theme in nearly any ethnographic study involving Maasai. As local political economies continue to

change in northern Tanzania, the core principles of Maasai livelihood are indeed challenged. But that the experiences and opinions of Maasai engaging in diversified livelihood activities in the villages I visited reveals that this shift is doing little to uproot the ubiquitous desire to own cattle will surprise no researcher familiar with Maasai. It does, however, stand out more in a broader international picture, as it contradicts commonly held assumptions about how the intersection of “traditional” and “modern” political economic systems will manifest. Furthermore, from this case study emerge important implications for development theory; on a fundamental level, it calls for a rethinking of the way “development” is practiced in this context.

Though it is difficult to generalize about the colossal mass of scholarly literature on globalization, it can be said that the maintenance of historical livelihoods is generally far from a common trope. First, the case presented here represents a drastic departure from the common argument that globalization will lead to cultural and economic homogenization. Instead of conforming to Western standards of wellbeing and wealth, for example, Maasai clearly retain their central focus on livestock-based social status. Rather than abandoning clan-based social relations due to changing modes of production, their age-set system likewise remains the central organizing principal in Maasai communities. Ultimately, this strategic inward-orientation of social relations – in contrast to integration into the capitalistic class relations which the prevailing wisdom on globalization may predict – seems to be going nowhere fast: when one man told me, as many did, that cattle are the “walking bank” of the Maasai, I asked him “even today?” His response: “until tomorrow.”

On a finer level, the Maasai case also contradicts other more empirically nuanced arguments that predict a finer balance of assimilation and cultural preservation. This is not to say that Maasai are completely and arbitrarily rejecting symbols of “modernization;” quite to the contrary, they are strategically adopting elements like architectural techniques that

increase material wellbeing. But the specific themes of migration and urbanization display that Maasai discontent with their diversified livelihoods stands out next to most ethnographic accounts. More specifically, case studies have charted the experiences of migrants who, despite hardship and some disillusionment, are generally allured by consumptive potential in the city, who migrate to escape the confines of rural poverty, and who quickly develop a disinterest in formerly practiced livelihoods (e.g. Wilk 2006). Even the most anomalously successful Maasai migrants, by contrast, expressed a desire to at least own cattle, if not to go back to their lives as herders in the village. From night watchmen to tour operators to gemstone traders, not to mention across age-sets, not a single Maasai person I have met expressed disinterest in owning cattle. Again, this is not incompatible with selective adoption of new forms of employment or new degrees of consumption, but the common thread through each of my conversations is unique in its fundamental dedication to a continued pastoralist life.

Beyond the simple admiration of the cultural survivalist, however, these themes hold relevance to scholars, practitioners, and officials concerned with issues of development. Development narratives dating back to the colonial period have constructed an image of Maasai as deeply impoverished and pastoralism more generally as a flawed, unmanageable livelihood. Hodgson (2000, 55), for example, described how the 1951 “Masai Development Plan,” instituted by British colonists and framed essentially as an infrastructure project, was an endeavor in ethnic assimilation and an attempt to “coerce [Maasai] to adopt modern economic ways.” After independence, similar motives were reproduced by Julius Nyerere’s socialist program, evident in his villagization campaign which attempted to create sedentary ranches where Maasai would herd cattle in a single location (Scott 1998, 246-247). And validated by articles such as Herskovits’ 1926 piece on the East African “Cattle Complex” and Hardin’s (1968) widely accepted “Tragedy of the Commons,” development practitioners have largely

discredited the complex rangeland management systems that Maasai and other pastoralists commonly practice (McCabe 2003, 101). Paired with the obsession on income and financial indicators of development and the preeminence of “traditional” cultural elements like dress and housing, Maasai perfectly fit the bill for an “underdeveloped” people.

Attention to the primacy of cattle in Maasai livelihoods calls these assumptions into question on a fundamental level. That is, if the standards of pastoralism are employed to evaluate the level of development in a given Maasai community, the notion of Maasai as impoverished and destitute necessitates complete reevaluation. For example, in communities where access to pasture remains uncompromised, a water source flows plentifully year-round, and healthy herds provide milk, meat, and, importantly, cultural capital, Maasai are, by their own standards, wealthy. Even when viewed in terms of cash assets, those esteemed Maasai whose herds push 1,000 head hold ownership of many millions of shillings however the financial value of his cattle may be calculated; indeed, elsewhere in Tanzania I rarely saw money in as great of quantities as the wads of cash I saw trade hands in the cattle sections of the markets I visited. If used as indicators of development, then, the quality of the *pastoralist* life paints a very different picture of development as compared to the approaches that have been applied historically, with predictably limited success, in Maasailand.

A survey of ground-up, Maasai-led development initiatives, on the other hand, reveals a much different set of priorities. Small denomination grants made to grassroots organizations by U.S.-based NGO Global Greengrants Fund (GGF), which I worked with in summer 2013, revealed that wherever funds were allocated to Maasai communities they were typically spent on reinforcing existing livelihoods. An organization called Osiligi, for example, used funds to survey and demarcate grazing lands in Ngorongoro District in order to gain government-licensed customary certificates of ownership. The Kikundu Cha Wanawake women’s group in

Simanjiro district similarly put funds toward a cattle-dipping program meant to prevent disease in their herds and mobilized a project to improve their village's water catchment area. And Ujamaa Community Resource Team, one of Tanzania's leading land rights NGOs, used a grant to organize against a land grabbing case in Loliondo which was excluding Maasai from lands they used for grazing and accessing water. While this particular donor organization intends its grants to be as environmentally beneficial as socially beneficial, the consistent decision to focus first on livestock-related projects when Maasai are given the choice stands in stark contrast to the larger development projects which lack the devolutionary element of GGF.

At the same time, the collective benefits afforded by a cash economy were referred to by my translator as essentially "developmental" benefits. Curiously, however, there is no word for "development" in Maa. Instead, my translator used the word to conceptualize the broad array of public benefits – including education, availability of consumer goods, and improved housing – as a single group of desired things that in English are frequently referred to as "development" in Tanzanian mass discourse. Whether it was their own words or expressions of someone else's, however, my informants and translator expressed a degree of faith – or at least an expectation – in financial resources to improve wellbeing. As displayed by the drive for "modern" housing and education, my informants saw these benefits as a "challenge," as standards for which they strived. As essential as cattle remain for "success," my informants still broadly saw money as one avenue toward conquering these challenges; essentially, towards the eventual, even if not immediate improvement of material wellbeing.

This duality begs the question of how to approach development in Maasai communities. Even those measures of development that look beyond income – such as a basic needs approach, a capabilities approach, or a rights-based approach – tend to be universalistic in nature and look to apply general standards of wellbeing across cultures and livelihoods. While these are no

doubt steps in the right direction, this case study reveals that different livelihood profiles create different priorities in different contexts. Accordingly, a new framework for development practice should incorporate relative standards based on place-specific livelihoods. Applying such a framework to Maasai communities would require assessments of a combination of factors, ranging from pasture quality to herd size to other general indicators like nutrition and health and even income. In some cases the result may not differ – certain Maasai communities would still be seen as “underdeveloped,” but in terms of the factors that limit their ability to practice and identify with pastoralism rather than low income or another exclusively universal factor. Crucially, though, the resulting prescriptions would be vastly different.

To the best of my knowledge, the closest theoretical framework to such an idea is the “sustainable livelihoods approach,” described by Scoones (1998, 3) as a process by which “context,” “livelihood resources,” “livelihood strategies,” “institutional processes,” and “outcomes” are collectively evaluated to determine how successfully a livelihood may be continued. In this broad-based approach, many of the above-mentioned variables are synthesized to create a normative assessment about the effectiveness of a certain livelihood strategy. In the Maasai context, McCabe (2003) applies this concept to the adoption of agriculture. Given the same challenges to pastoralism that I discuss in this paper, he argues that “diversification of the livestock-based economy is a move toward sustainability” (2003, 110). Though this process succeeds in addressing variables that most development practices miss, its implications for policy avoids directly confronting the factors that limit the successes of pastoralism. While I do not wish to dismiss the importance of livelihood diversification as a adaptive strategy, a framework that centralizes livelihood preferences would first and foremost aim to increase the feasibility of the *preferred* livelihood, rather than constructing a sustainable diversified livelihood portfolio. This approach would go farther in avoiding unwanted and

unintentionally harmful interventions. In reality, the ultimate policy implication could perhaps be to stop interventions in some cases.

### **Conclusion**

Like pastoralist cultures in many parts of the world, the rural Maasai economy is functionally balancing a historical social and economic prioritization of cattle with the growing prevalence of cash in their communities. While it is difficult to generalize across all of Maasailand, evident in the communities I visited was that despite the individual and collective utility of cash, the perspectives and experiences of my informants suggested a persistent significance of a livelihood and identity based centrally on pastoralism, due in large part to the cultural capital function which cattle fulfill. As a contradiction of different globalization narratives and an example of a situation in which traditional development approaches come up short, this paper also acts as a case study in which international factors – spanning from investment and imports to development interventions and conservation practice – do and also *do not* manifest in local communities.

### **Budget**

Due to some unique circumstances of my travel, the \$4,000 provided for this project was able to cover all my costs quite easily. Before I went to Tanzania, I participated in Rachel DeMotts' "Field School in Conservation and Development" course in Botswana and Namibia. Because funds allotted for that class covered a round-trip ticket to and from Johannesburg, South Africa (the regional hub), I had to buy only a ticket from Johannesburg to Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania and back. Between that ticket and the change fee I had to pay in order to push the date back on the return flight to the U.S., airfare was still my biggest single cost, but it was surely less than it would have been had I had to purchase a round-trip between the U.S. and Tanzania. Beyond that, my actual budget does not reflect my predicted budget very

accurately, as I saved in places I was not expecting (e.g. accommodation by staying at the homes of friends) and incurred other costs that I did not see coming (e.g. purchasing a goat and two sheep to take on *orpu*). Because of the money I saved on transport, though, along with occasional (but not very restricting) frugality and planning, I was able to spend rather freely during my two months. Had I not saved that money on transportation initially, however, I imagine it would have been a workable but very tight budget.

### **Acknowledgements**

For that funding and the privilege of having this opportunity I must thank the International Political Economy department and Brad Dillman. Thanks also to Andrew Gardner for advising this project at every stage. Finally, though many of them will likely never see this report, I am most indebted to all of the people in Tanzania who shared their stories, opinions, and lives with me, especially Marco, Rafael, Teresia, Lazaro, and Thomas.

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