



Understanding ‘night grazing’: Conservation governance, rural inequalities, and shifting responses ‘from above and below’ throughout the nychthemeron in Laikipia, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Across much of eastern Africa, the land area coverage of private or otherwise non-state conservation areas is rapidly increasing. In Kenya, these trends have sparked renewed contestation and debate concerning the property rights and broader terms of access to non-state conservation spaces. Pursuant to these disputes, emergent conservation territories are increasingly governed through practices of landscape stratification, demarcation, and surveillance, as well as via the formalization of community-based grazing arrangements in hybridized ‘buffer zone’ spaces. Examining the empirical implications of these practices in Kenya’s Laikipia County, we highlight the somewhat counterintuitive ways in which private conservationists increasingly employ grazing arrangements ‘from above’ not only to regulate access to natural resources, but also to influence subject formation processes and to fix or otherwise reshape the spatial contours of pastoralist systems. Emphasizing the limitations of such initiatives, however, we foreground the significance of ongoing patterns of agro-pastoral transformation and their implications for the persistence of night grazing or other illicit nocturnal responses ‘from below’ amongst certain strata of Laikipia’s internally diverse communities. Whilst such forms of nocturnal agency are inherently significant insofar as they frustrate conservationists’ efforts to uniformly enforce resource access restrictions throughout the nychthemeron or complete 24-hour ‘day-night’ cycle, we suggest that these practices also grant important insight into the nature of shifting ‘conservation subjectivities’ in East African drylands.

1. Introduction

In East Africa today, conflicts between rural land users and protected area managers constitute only one facet of a multidimensional ‘land rush’ that also precipitates contradictions between competing non-conservationist land uses (Letai and Lind, 2013; Hall et al., 2015a). Characterized by fluctuating commodity prices, shifting governance structures, and unprecedented influxes of capital into rural areas, this land rush continues to elicit mutually exclusive natural resource claims from a diversity of actors. Consisting of both domestic and transnational networks of investors, landowners, administrators, and other stakeholders, these actors increasingly evince similarly diverse vested interests in – *inter alia* – commercial agriculture, smallholder farming or pastoralism, for-profit conservation or ecotourism ventures, and other development initiatives (Bersaglio and Cleaver, 2018; Butt, 2012; Catley et al., 2013; Pas, 2018).

Seeking to contribute to recent scholarship on both East Africa’s land rush (e.g. Chome et al., 2020; Scoones, 2021) and broader debates concerning diverse “responses from below” to land and resource acquisitions (Hall et al., 2015b), this paper foregrounds how longstanding conflicts between smallholder pastoralists and conservationists increasingly articulate with an additional axis of empirical dynamics. Namely: intra-community and inter-community tensions amongst different socioeconomic strata of rural East African populations, which are now increasingly accentuated by intensifying processes of rural transformation and agro-pastoral change (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013). In Kenya, these issues are particularly salient at present vis-à-vis the precipitous rise of private, community, and other ‘non-state’ conservancies in the country (Bedelian and Ogotu, 2017; Schetter et al., 2022). The Wildlife Conservation and Management Act of 2013, for instance – an important part of broader legal and administrative reforms – now allows for three types of non-state wildlife conservancies to be

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incorporated as legally-recognized entities. In addition to state-owned protected areas, diverse actors can now incorporate ‘private conservancies’ on lands owned by individuals or firms, ‘group conservancies’ on aggregated private lands, and ‘community conservancies’ on collectively-owned or managed landholdings (Cavanagh et al., 2020). As a result, these non-state conservancies enjoy both full legal recognition under present legislation, as well as economic and political support from a growing number of civil society and membership organizations, such as the Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association (KWCA) and the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT). Conversely, however, the proliferation of these non-state conservancies is once again reworking older conflicts between ‘rural smallholders’ and protected area managers or other large-scale landowners, as well as within and amongst rural populations.

In Kenya’s Laikipia County (Fig. 1), these tensions have precipitated incidents variously described in popular media as ‘incursions’ or ‘invasions’ in which pastoralists have entered private ranches or conservancies to graze their livestock without landowner consent. Over the last decade, such conflicts have repeatedly captured the attention of the media – particularly in the leadup to Kenya’s 2017 presidential elections – and are seen by some analysts as likely to re-emerge in frequency or severity in advance of the August 2022 election (Njuguna, 2021). In much of this media coverage, the terms ‘illegal grazers’, ‘bandits’, ‘terrorists’ and other provocative labels have often been utilized to describe pastoralists who encroach upon private lands – typically, at night – to graze their livestock. Since September 2021, a spate of “night attacks” (Macharia, 2021) and other incidents have resulted in the deaths of at least 19 people, the razing of numerous homes, and recurring thefts of

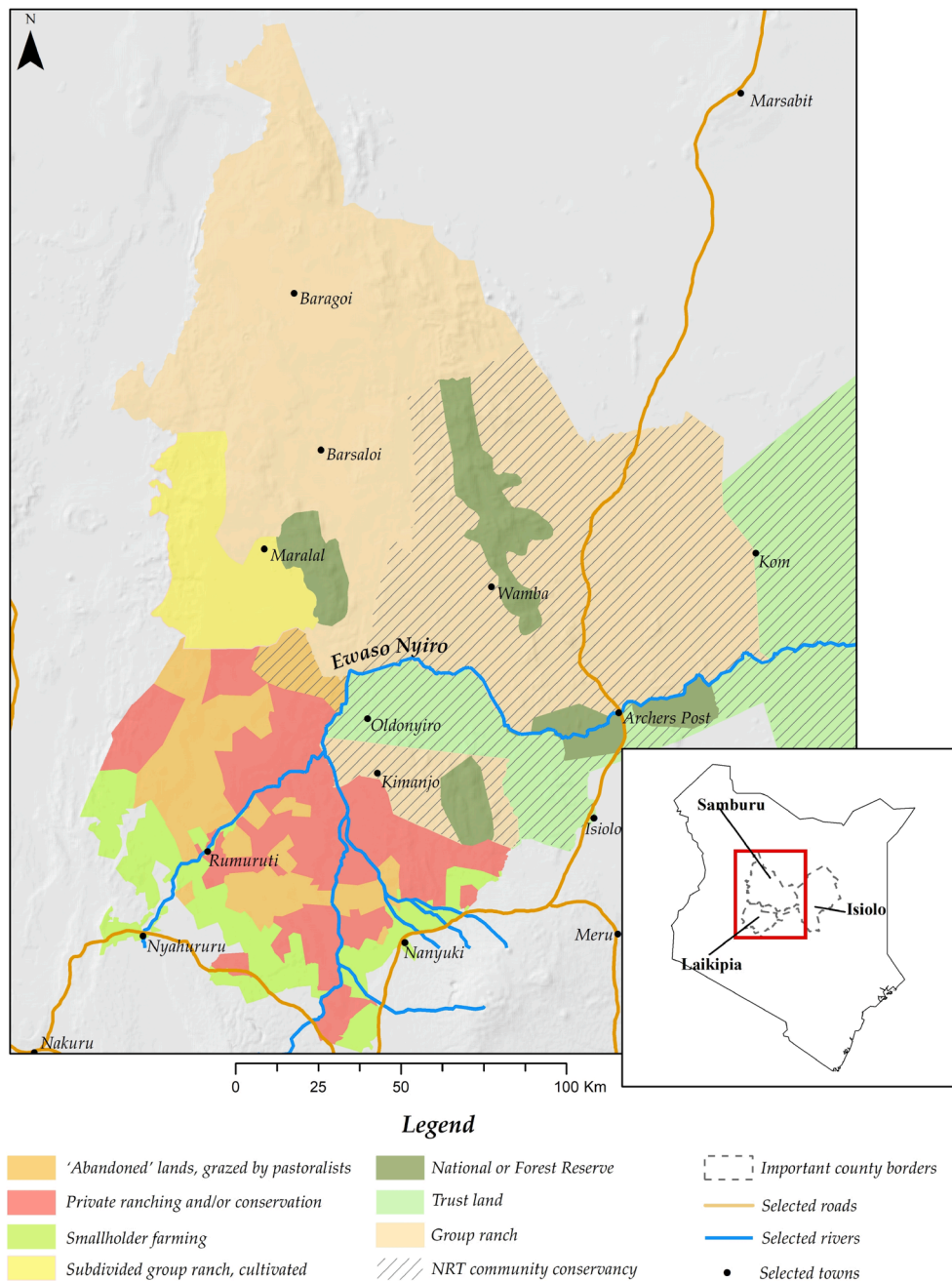


Fig. 1. Map of Laikipia, Samburu and Isiolo counties showing the distribution of private ranches and/or conservancies (red), abandoned land (brown), group ranches (light brown), and smallholder farming, horticulture and other land uses (bright green). (Map prepared in collaboration with William Gibbs, 2018). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

cattle (Waithaka, 2022). Media reports often note that these incursions disrupt the operations of private businesses linked to ecotourism or conservation, threatening the security of residents, conservation professionals, and high-paying conservancy guests alike. For many East Africanist scholars, however, these dynamics also underscore the enduringly controversial position of affluent European landowners and other propertied (non-)African residents or citizens within both Laikipia and Kenya's broader post-colonial body politic (McIntosh, 2017; Fox, 2018a). In turn, the contested political and economic status of Laikipia's large-scale private landholdings is paralleled by the similarly fraught territorial attachments of the region's diverse African communities, which are often still influenced by the lingering spatiality of Kenya's former colonial-era native reserves (Watson, 2010). Once an important northernmost segment of Kenya's "White Highlands" exclusively reserved for European settlement under British rule (Morgan, 1963), many of Laikipia's most prominent estates were created in this period, emerging at the interface of both state-owned protected areas and African native reserves.

Particularly from the mid-twentieth century onward, landowners, nongovernmental organizations, and state agencies in Laikipia have sought to harness a variety of ostensibly 'collaborative' grazing arrangement models to govern smallholder pastoralists' access to these controversial private ranches. Reflecting implicit practices of quasi-experimental 'trial', failure, and subsequent recalibration, successive generations of these arrangements have precipitated a wide range of overlapping land and resource access institutions in the present conjuncture (German et al., 2017; Unks et al., 2019). As a result, these grazing schemes often now entail both formal and informal mechanisms for regulating communal use of privately-owned and otherwise inherently exclusionary properties (Letai and Lind, 2013; Bersaglio and Cleaver, 2018). Further complicating an already complex institutional and land tenure milieu, several of these properties are associated with so-called "old colonials" with family ties in Kenya dating to the early twentieth century (Uusihakala, 1999). Yet others have changed hands numerous times throughout the contested land management reforms that characterized the early period of post-colonial rule, resulting in the contemporary involvement of several landowners that hail from both majoritarian and minoritarian African communities (Fox, 2018b).

In light of these complex legacies of both (settler) colonialism and tumultuous post-colonial governance, we suggest that grazing arrangements are perhaps incompletely understood when conceived only or even primarily as a conventional means of regulating access to natural resources on privately-owned rangelands. Seeking to contribute to a fuller political-ecological understanding of these arrangements in contemporary Laikipia County, we highlight how conservationists increasingly employ such measures not only to regulate access to natural resources, but also to (re)shape 'conservation subjectivities' and to 'fix' or otherwise reconfigure the spatial contours of pastoralist systems (Li, 2014). Analysing empirical findings from a multi-year case study of grazing arrangements in Laikipia County, however, we also note the observable limitations of such conservationist interventions 'from above'. To illuminate these dynamics, we approach Laikipia's grazing arrangements as an empirical entry point into historically evolving processes of protected area (re)territorialisation, shifting 'conservation subjectivities', and spatial control in conservation governance. In doing so, we highlight how conservationist interventions 'from above' frequently entail unequal implications for internally diverse rural communities. As a result, these initiatives may precipitate unanticipated "responses from below" (Hall et al., 2015b), as well as other unforeseen consequences for prevailing dynamics of natural resource management.

In this respect, central to our analysis is the persistence of night grazing and other 'nocturnal' practices amongst various strata of Laikipia's internally diverse communities. Foregrounding the concept of *nocturnal agency*, we suggest that these practices are inherently significant insofar as they frustrate conservationists' efforts to enforce resource access restrictions throughout the complete nycthemeron or 24-hour

'day-night' cycle. Beyond the intuitively practical significance of these illicit practices and their apparent proliferation at night, such dynamics also illuminate metaphorically 'nocturnal' behaviours on the part of various stakeholders in conservation governance. For some, precisely these kinds of divergences highlight mutually-exclusive interests amongst diverse constituencies, rather than ostensibly "win-win" conservation outcomes for all (Mbaria and Ogada, 2016). Indeed, we suggest, careful attention to such nocturnal forms of agency and their implications enriches our understanding of shifting 'conservation subjectivities' alongside the institutional fragmentation of pastoral landscapes in East African drylands.

In support of this argument, the article proceeds as follows. First, we situate our case study of Laikipia County in relation to both seminal and more recent scholarship on agro-pastoral transformation, as well as broader 'responses from below' in conservation governance. Secondly, we outline the methodological approach adopted in this context, highlighting how this was shaped by the historical, geographical, and institutional characteristics of the Laikipia study area. Thirdly, we foreground three primary dimensions of shifting 'conservation subjectivities' that are perceptible through the lens of Laikipia's grazing arrangements: i) landowner attempts at distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' conservation subjects within communities participating in collaborative grazing arrangements; ii) articulations between inter-group and intra-group inequalities within and amongst rural populations; and iii) the influence of the latter inequalities on differentiated practices of night grazing and associated forms of nocturnal agency. We conclude with a discussion of related implications for critical literatures at the intersection of political ecology, agrarian studies, and (East) African studies.

2. Conservation subjectivities, agro-pastoral transformation, and shifting 'responses from above and below' in East African drylands

The spatial ordering of both landscapes and human populations is a recurring theme in critical scholarship on conservation and environmental governance (Neumann, 2001a; Bluwstein and Lund, 2018; Kalvelage et al., 2021). As is well known to political ecologists, environmental historians, and human geographers, ruling over 'nature' in the form of protected areas is in practice often intertwined with the administration of human economic activities, subjectivities, and associated political or administrative territories (Agrawal, 2005; Singh, 2013; Nepomuceno et al., 2019). The techniques of government employed in conservation thus often serve as a means of 'protecting' nonhuman life and landscapes whilst simultaneously controlling, influencing, or regulating contradictory dynamics of social, agricultural, and environmental change (Li, 2014). In the process, both social and geographical forms of difference are often simultaneously produced – in historically-evolving ways – through practices of spatial inclusion and exclusion, taxonomization or categorization, and the assertion of hierarchies for rank-ordering both social identities and socio-environmental relations (Cavanagh, 2017; Lunstrum and Ybarra, 2018; Regassa et al., 2018). As illustrated by an extensive literature in both political ecology and related fields, such mechanisms can be leveraged to inculcate or otherwise influence the formation of specific kinds of 'conservationist' or other 'environmentalist' subjectivities amongst targeted populations: albeit often with uneven degrees of 'success' in practice (for reviews, see Holmes and Cavanagh, 2016; Fletcher, 2017).

In this paper, we seek to contribute to the extant scholarship on these themes by deepening engagement between the above studies of conservation subject formation in political ecology and a related strand of literature in critical agrarian studies. Namely: recent analyses of how land and resource acquisitions – typically conceived as being imposed 'from above' – articulate with diverse local responses 'from below' (Hall et al., 2015b). As Borrás and Franco (2013) note, conventional notions of 'resistance' constitute only one of many possible responses to land and

resource acquisitions for conservation or agricultural development schemes. These initiatives can also precipitate instances of adaptation, incorporation, acquiescence, or negotiation. As Hall et al. (2015b: 468) remind us, large-scale land acquisitions interact with populations that are “differentiated along lines of class, gender, generation, ethnicity and nationality, and that have historically specific expectations, aspirations and traditions of struggle”. In turn, emergent response(s) to resource acquisitions are inevitably shaped by prevailing intra-community and inter-community dynamics, as well as by their articulation with the potentially unequal effects of the intervention in question. In recent years, scholars have thus usefully responded to calls for further examination of the ways in which diverse ‘responses from below’ to conservation governance may or may not differentiate both within and amongst rural communities (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2015; Green and Adams, 2015; Nepomuceno et al., 2019).

Scholarly engagement with such nuances of local agency and associated implications for patterns of identity or subject formation is not ‘new’ *per se*. An initial wave of ‘collaborative’, ‘community-based’, or ‘participatory’ resource management approaches in conservation from the 1980s onward, for example, also prompted an earlier round of critical reflection on similar themes. Memorably, Agrawal and Gibson (1999) caution against eliding multiplicities of vested interest within ostensibly both socially and spatially bounded ‘local communities’. Similarly, Brosius et al. (1998: 165) question representations of community that are perhaps strategically “essentialized, timeless, and homogenous”, and which might therefore overlook inconvenient tensions or conflicts within intra-community social relations. For Li (2002: 265), such “strategic simplifications” may in fact be actively encouraged by certain ‘community-based’ project models in conservation. As a result, these simplifications may constitute a “problematic basis for justice” if they elide complex rights claims that do not conform to narratives of a homogenously collective or otherwise virtuously ‘local’ identity (Li, 2002: 265). Indeed, Ortner (1995) famously describes tendencies to ignore such observable intra-community or inter-community dynamics as a form of “ethnographic refusal” on the part of researchers: one that risks limiting our understanding of how individuals or community strata may (or may not) align their otherwise diverse expressions of agency in the form of a more perceptibly unified ‘response from below’.

In East Africa specifically, recent studies of agro-pastoral transformation have underscored how ongoing processes of socioeconomic, political, and environmental change are once again reworking complex legacies of capitalism, colonial rule, and their recombination in the postcolonial era (e.g. Greiner, 2022; Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013). In a recent intervention, for example, Scoones (2021: 1) notes how “[f]or many years, studies of peasants and pastoralists have run in parallel, creating mutual blind-spots [...] The classic problematics of agrarian studies – around production, accumulation and politics – apply as much to pastoralists as they do to peasants.” Perhaps reflecting the implicit functionalism of much early research in human or cultural ecology, classic studies of pastoralism in East Africa have tended to approach transhumant communities as socio-ecological *systems*, albeit ones inevitably embedded in the disequilibrium ecological dynamics of East African drylands, forests, and other landscapes. Undoubtedly, seminal works in this tradition have considerably advanced scholarly understanding of East African pastoralism under persistently tumultuous socio-ecological conditions (see, for instance, Boone and Lesorogol, 2016). Yet as Scoones (2021) observes, only rarely have scholars engaged parallel debates in peasant studies, critical agrarian studies, and related fields concerning the drivers and implications of rural socioeconomic differentiation. Seeking to contribute to the extant literature in this regard, in what follows we outline the methodological and case study approach that was adopted in Laikipia County. In doing so, we address crucial historical dimensions of Laikipia’s contemporary political-ecological conjuncture, examining how emerging grazing arrangements reflect both dynamic processes of agro-pastoral transformation, as well as shifting forms of conservation subject formation.

3. Methodology and case study overview

Following processes of administrative devolution inaugurated by Kenya’s 2010 constitution, the area now known as Laikipia County is located in central-northern Kenya (Fig. 1). The county is situated between the slopes of Mount Kenya to the east, the highland Aberdares forest to the southwest, Baringo County to the west, and the arid regions of Samburu and Isiolo counties to the north. As such, Laikipia is a natural transition zone between the fertile agricultural highlands and forests to the south and the drylands to the north, with an altitude ranging from 1,500 m to over 2,600 m above sea level. Moreover, whilst the county generally experiences two annual rainy seasons (Yurco, 2017), average annual rainfall varies quite significantly across Laikipia’s various microclimates. On average, the higher-altitude areas of southern and western Laikipia receive between 500 and 700 mm of precipitation, whereas the lower-altitude central and northern regions receive between 300 and 500 mm (County Government of Laikipia, 2018). Accordingly, the highlands tend to yield a higher productivity of vegetation (Kimiti et al., 2017) and have historically been the focus of land acquisitions for both African smallholder agriculture (rather than pastoralism) and European agricultural settlement.

Laikipia’s contemporary institutional landscape mirrors the diversity of its natural environment, resulting in a complex mosaic of land uses, land users, and land tenure systems. Still today, this mosaic reflects the explicitly racialized distribution of private property rights under British rule, as well as the tenurial inheritances or ‘afterlives’ of the former African native reserves in neighbouring areas. Importantly, these native reserves were largely excluded from access to either private or collective land title *as such* throughout the colonial period, with African residents technically retaining the status of “tenants at will of the Crown” on reserve lands formally owned by the state (Okoth-Ogendo, 1991). As a result, prevailing land uses now range from large-scale ranching and private nature conservation on (former) settler properties, to smallholder farming in the sub-humid zones; to ‘abandoned’ private land and group ranches occupied by semi-nomadic pastoralists on the higher-altitude semi-arid zones (Letai and Lind, 2013; Evans and Adams, 2016). Within the seemingly rigid cadastral ‘grid’ of this institutional landscape, however, pastoralists and their livestock regularly cross social and political boundaries to access grazing. This is variously accomplished either through negotiations (Lengoiboni et al., 2011) or other (in)formal means, the often-contested nature of which tends to spark recurring conflicts – and especially so in dry seasons (Galaty, 2016; Pellis et al., 2018).

Our case study of these contemporary dynamics is primarily based on a total of sixteen months of fieldwork conducted by the first author between 2014 and 2017 in Laikipia, Isiolo and Samburu counties. This was supplemented by follow-up interactions with key informants in May 2018, January 2019, and January 2020. Methodologically, a metaphorical ‘follow the cow’ approach was adopted as a means of grounding the broader study design, with the objective of avoiding the constraints of more rigidly deductive theoretical frameworks and associated *a priori* assumptions (see also Boas et al., 2020). Consequently, the case study is rooted in a qualitative ‘grounded theory’ approach, consisting of in-depth key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and an extensive review of relevant documentation governing resource access agreements.

Firstly, a sample of 20 private ranch and/or conservancy landowners and managers was interviewed, covering the growing diversity of ownership and management structures in Laikipia County.¹ Secondly,

¹ The terms ‘landowner’, ‘manager’, and ‘pastoralist’ are linguistic simplifications that we have adopted for the purposes of readability. Multiple, diverse, and complex livelihood portfolios, as well as structures of resource management and ownership, are found across the full suite of ranches, conservancies, and other landholdings in Laikipia County.

resultant findings were triangulated with an additional 25 key informant interviews, as well as two focus group discussions, at two community conservancies that were formed on group ranches owned by self-identifying Laikipia Maasai pastoralists. Finally, a further 25 interviews and two group discussions were conducted at two 'abandoned land' locations utilized by pastoralists from several different communities. These locations experienced large influxes of pastoralists from further afield to access grazing on private ranches. Throughout the course of fieldwork, a purposive sampling technique was applied to select a sufficiently diverse cross-section of respondents from different genders, generations or 'age-grades', ethnic communities, socio-economic statuses, and land use or tenure arrangements (e.g. private ranches or conservancies, community conservancies and related group ranches, as well as 'abandoned lands'). Data were analysed using a manual coding system to first acquire an overview of the various grazing arrangements, to identify the different functions of these arrangements in controlling access to land, and subsequently to assess which grazing arrangements were available to whom and why. The coding process highlighted recurring themes across the interviews, and subsequently enabled triangulation between the perspectives of different actors on these themes. Due to the controversial nature of unresolved land use conflicts in Laikipia, however, individual names, exact interview dates, and local-level identifiers are not included in the below analysis to maintain respondents' anonymity.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Differentiating 'good' and 'bad' conservation subjects: responsabilization, sensitization, and the formation of collaborative grazing arrangements

Whilst there is a long (post-)colonial history of collaborative resource management institutions in Laikipia, many of these schemes were revised and reformulated in important ways from the early 2000s onward. In 2004, for instance, a consortium of government officials, pastoralist community leaders, activists, and landowners congregated via the facilitation of the Laikipia Wildlife Forum (LWF) to establish a renewed set of collaborative grazing arrangements. Even more explicitly than in the past, these arrangements were framed as a means of curbing a perceived increase of incursions into private ranches and conservancies. In essence, the arrangements allowed for organized grazing within private landholdings for pastoralists residing on formally recognized group ranches in Laikipia. Rather than a 'concession', however, many landowners and conservancy managers viewed these initiatives as a subtle means of protecting their private property rights, mitigating against the threat of incursions, and advantageously managing their often-turbulent relations with pastoralists, community leaders, politicians, and government officials. Since 2004, ranchers and conservancy managers have increasingly formalized these grazing arrangements via short written contracts signed by pastoralist community leaders or other representatives. These contracts are generally not standardized, and many landowners have developed their own set of unique rules and conditions. Nonetheless, the adoption of written contracts has created a formal yet adaptable 'template' for governing landowner-community relations, often giving conservancy managers a firmer sense of control, and raising the possibility of redress in instances where prevailing behaviour is perceived to deviate from agreed-upon conditionalities.

An important feature of these grazing arrangements is their focus on the social and ecological 'responsibilisation' of pastoralist communities. Each of the group ranches sampled in this study, for instance, is represented through a single grazing committee, the role of which is to ensure that individual group members adhere to the rules of grazing contracts. These include rules relating to the number of permitted livestock (usually no more than 100 for each grazing committee); the duration of rangeland access permitted; the size of grazing fees payable to landowners; and the exact services or behaviours governed by agreements (e.

g. herding, watering, dipping, vaccinations, and so forth). The grazing committees determine whose cattle is allowed within the quota specified by the manager. Often, this resulted in grievances or conflicts, as only a limited number of cattle from selected individuals would be 'covered' under the grazing arrangement. Furthermore, the grazing arrangements also establish the nature of the sanctions and fines that may be imposed, including in cases of illicit grazing on private land by uncontracted third parties.

More subtly, however, these agreements also implicitly attempt to foster the internalization of specific sets of environmental norms and values favoured by landowners. In this sense, grazing arrangements constitute a mechanism for transforming pastoralists into responsible 'conservation subjects' by stipulating strict rangeland management conditionalities on private landholdings, as well as within neighbouring group ranches. A key mechanism for doing so is the practice of levying grazing access fees: at the time of fieldwork in 2015, for instance, most landowners were charging between 150 KES (ca. 1.50 US dollars) and 500 KES (ca. 5 US dollars) per head of cattle per month of grazing.

Some landowners argued that the grazing fees would enhance compliance to conservancy rules, discourage illegal grazing, and 'sensitize' pastoralists to the value of sustainable grassland management. Over time, however, the uneven results of this approach in practice began to result in landowners' perception of new stratifications within neighbouring communities. Indeed, although some individuals and groups came to be seen as 'responsible', well-sensitized, or reliable collaborators, others came to be viewed as unreliable, disruptive, or even dangerous. As a result, 'responsible' community members were increasingly identified, grouped, and mobilized – with financial and technical support from private landowners, donors, and/or conservation NGOs – into grazing committees to act as pasture gatekeepers. As one respondent described the functions of these committees:

We have quite a good crisis grazing committee from neighbouring community. So we pass [issues] through them and then they try and deal with it. We have given them some of the responsibility as well for looking at fines so it does not come solely from us (Interview, Landowner, April 2015).

In effect, grazing committees were tasked with preventing both cattle and their own community members from accessing private land, except in contractually agreed-upon quantities. Accordingly, landowners provided grazing passes to the members of the grazing committee, which allowed access to a strictly regulated number of cattle. However, grazing committees themselves were responsible for internally allocating this 'cattle quota' amongst their constituents. As such, committee members were increasingly authorized to police cases of apparently 'irresponsible' or 'defiant' behaviour on their own accord, usually in the form of the seizure and slaughter of a goat or bull belonging to an alleged offender. Moreover, both grazing committees and landowners maintained a joint 'compliance record' system documenting grazing fees, trespassing incidents, violations, and offender details, as well as fines or other punishments imposed.

In summary, these arrangements might first appear to be reminiscent of classically Ostromian approaches to community self-regulation via the use of "graduated sanctions" (Ostrom, 1990). More subtly, however, grazing committees also serve as a *de facto* disciplinary mechanism through which landowners seek to mobilize local self-surveillance and shape pastoralist values via the encouragement of environmentally 'responsible' forms of subject formation (see also Neumann, 2001b; Holmes and Cavanagh, 2016). In doing so, landowners attempt to strategically influence pastoralist behaviour, albeit in ways that can be outwardly portrayed as plausibly non-interventionist or non-coercive. In addition, the partial transfer of managerial responsibility to grazing committees denotes that local conflicts are in large part outsourced from private landholdings to neighbouring group ranches, within which social differentiations between 'good' and 'bad' conservation subjects are gradually institutionalized or reinforced via the unequal distribution of

grazing permits. This contemporary form of small-scale ‘indirect rule’ in rangeland governance thus protects landowner interests whilst forging alliances between landowners and community leaders or elites, albeit in ways that also risk inadvertently creating a *de facto* class or group of ostensibly ‘bad’ conservation subjects with correspondingly limited access to pasture. As we explore below, in some cases these strategies may risk inflaming existing inequalities or tensions within communities, as well as precipitating new or exacerbating existing conflicts between rural populations.

4.2. Pastoral inequalities, cattle barons, and the politics of belonging on Laikipia’s ‘abandoned lands’

Though grazing arrangements in Laikipia were initially negotiated between landowners and primarily Maasai pastoralists from nearby group ranches, it has gradually become apparent that available pasture does not satisfy growing ‘local’ demand. As a result, over the last thirty years, many individual pastoralists moved to occupy so-called ‘abandoned lands’ or un(der)utilized pastures in Laikipia County, sometimes whilst continuing to benefit from grazing arrangements on large private ranches and conservancies. Although initially approached with considerable hesitation, a number of private conservancies subsequently also initiated negotiations to establish grazing arrangements with residents of the ‘abandoned lands’. Simultaneously, pastoralists from further afield – such as from Samburu, Baringo, and Isiolo counties – have also sought access to these ‘abandoned lands’. Thus, Laikipia’s longstanding residents increasingly encountered ‘new’ non-local herders from neighbouring counties, who in some cases became ‘permanent’ or settled residents of Laikipia as well. For some landowners, however, such influxes of pastoralists from outside Laikipia have catalysed a reassessment of existing grazing arrangements. From the perspective of certain private landowners, these non-local pastoralists were similarly deemed to be environmentally ‘irresponsible’, yet potentially even more threatening than local Maasai or other longstanding Laikipia-resident communities due to their perceived willingness to engage in unsanctioned incursions. Not unlike initial landowner perspectives on the ‘irresponsible’ behaviour of their group ranch neighbours, then, both landowners and collaborating local representatives similarly came to view these ‘newcomer’ non-local pastoralists as squatters, trespassers, or otherwise as people ‘who do not belong’ in Laikipia.

Central to these variable inter- and intra-community perspectives was a recurring observation that pastoralists from neighbouring counties generally lacked title deeds to either private or group ranches in Laikipia, and were thus not formally a party to prevailing grazing arrangements. Further, certain individuals from both local Maasai and private landowning communities argued that tolerating the presence of non-local pastoralists would legitimize the presence of these ostensibly ‘temporary and threatening’ people. As one landowner put it: “I think it is important to keep Laikipia for Laikipia livestock only” (Interview, Landowner, 2015). In this regard, landowners generally saw utilization of the ‘abandoned lands’ adjacent to their properties as an entry point for non-local pastoralists coming to Laikipia in increasing numbers. As one landowner remarked, pointing to the limitations of simply replicating the conflict resolution model of grazing arrangements negotiated with neighbouring Maasai communities:

These individual ranches are trying to do similar things with the so-called neighbouring communities who are not really, you know, from there, they have invaded there, they don’t belong there, they come from the north but have almost squatted there with their livestock. So actually, we should not deal with them because that means that we are encouraging them to stay. And they actually don’t belong here (Interview, Landowner, 2015).

Landowners often espoused the view that an increasing number of Samburu pastoralists were opportunistically migrating to Laikipia in search of pasture. The underlying reason, in their estimation, was that

Samburu County was heavily overgrazed, overpopulated and overstocked. Others feared that, once in Laikipia County, Samburu pastoralists would not voluntarily leave. As one landowner anxiously put it: “Laikipia will look like a desert too” (Interview, Landowner, 2015). Landowners and conservationists thus tended to frame these dynamics as consisting of multiple layers of ‘invasion’: both in terms of specific pastoralist incursions into private landholdings, as well as broader influxes of pastoralists and livestock into Laikipia County more generally.

Besides rendering pastoralists from further afield as destructive to the environment and in need of heightened regulation, some landowners also argued that Samburu incursions into Laikipia were supported by powerful politicians – known as ‘cattle barons’ – in northern Kenya. These high-profile individuals were said to include members of parliament (MPs) from across otherwise antagonistic partisan divides; senior military, law enforcement, and/or government personnel; and networks of lower-level functionaries embedded both in local governments and communities executing their demands in “cartel-like” fashion (see, for instance, Anonymous, 2017: 16). Cattle barons were thus said to be interested primarily in political or economic gain rather than the livelihood security of local pastoralists, most immediately in the form of an (unsuccessful) attempt to secure the re-election of former Laikipia North Constituency MP Mathew Lempurkel in the 2017 elections. A self-identifying Samburu, Lempurkel was widely perceived as antagonistic to Laikipia’s private landowning interests, and supportive of elite ‘pastoral capital’ in neighbouring counties. Accordingly, some landowners concurred with the substance of an influential, anonymously published 2017 report – entitled *Cattle Barons* – which posited that concerns about historical injustices, environmental change-induced droughts, and related issues of food or livelihood insecurity were largely “populist fictions” (Anonymous, 2017: 4) mobilized by elites to mask efforts to privately accumulate cattle, land, wealth, and – ultimately – political power in Laikipia County and beyond.

Whilst the *Cattle Barons* report was contested amongst various constituencies, it nonetheless highlighted several important dynamics. For example, the issue of hired herders – which corresponds with observations during fieldwork – reflects existing processes of wealth and livelihood differentiation between but also *within* pastoralist communities (see also Scoones, 2021). Inequalities of wealth – which often intersect with educational, generational, and gender inequalities or power asymmetries – are an important underlying driver of conflict and political tension throughout the region. Also important, however, are the inequalities often highlighted by local populations *between* different segments of ostensibly “ethnic” communities. These include perceived inequalities between communities in the Samburu highlands – who are often considered wealthier due to relatively superior access to education and employment, as well as productive agricultural land (Lesorogol, 2008) – and the Samburu lowlands, wherein highlanders often perceive lowlanders as living a relatively impoverished or ‘more traditional’ lifestyle. As one respondent stated: “If you go down there [Samburu lowlands], you can find people with only one cloth” (Interview, Pastoralist, 2015). As a result of these intersecting forms of social differentiation within and between communities, both landowners and their collaborators amongst permanently resident pastoralists in Laikipia tended to view young herders from the Samburu lowlands, in particular, as amongst the most ‘unwelcome’ populations in the region. Not least, this was due to their perceived lack of education, alleged propensity to utilize firearms whilst engaged in trespassing, and susceptibility to recruitment by influential ‘cattle barons’ or well-connected informal ‘employers’ residing outside Laikipia County. In aggregate, these inter-group and intra-group dynamics of social differentiation increasingly shape the diverse responses of local inhabitants both to the collaborative grazing schemes in Laikipia County and to the in-migration of pastoralists from elsewhere.

With respect to grazing arrangements, for instance, landowners have increasingly sought to hold ‘permanently resident’ Maasai and Samburu individuals liable for influxes of pastoralists from neighbouring

counties. Some landowners reformulated existing grazing arrangements, arguing that – since squatters on “abandoned lands” in the county did not possess land titles – they would not be able to reliably exclude pastoralists from neighbouring counties. Instead, grazing committees and individuals were increasingly expected to function as a *de facto* buffer zone for insulating private properties from non-local pastoralist incursions. As one landowner put it: “we rather help the neighbouring communities and sort of form a buffer on these [private] boundaries” (Interview, Landowner, 2015). In exchange for successfully excluding non-local pastoralists from the region, then, neighbouring communities would be granted sustained grazing rights in private ranches. If unsuccessful in this exclusionary boundary-policing role, however, landowners emphasized that they would terminate grazing arrangements, excluding both local and non-local pastoralists from access to their lands. Hence, local ‘co-managers’ on grazing committees were again expected to internalize norms of exclusion and resource access restriction under threat of cancellation or suspension of collaborative agreements. In other words, the grazing arrangements were increasingly deployed to exclude ‘outsiders’ from both private properties and adjacent community lands.

In short, this strategy of oscillating punishment and incentive provision catalysed heightened tensions both within and between pastoralist communities. As one respondent put it: “Those who come here and settle here, they have no room, they come here to quarrel with the people all around. They make us unfriendly with the owners. We used to graze peacefully” (Interview, Pastoralist, 2015). Furthermore, many community members began to accuse one another of hosting ‘those who should not be hosted’ – a practice widely resented, given the associated risk of the community’s exclusion in aggregate from grazing arrangements. Such resentment was especially palpable when the first author attended a meeting to address concerns about alleged Samburu ‘invasions’ in the group ranches. As one participant commented, frequent incursions “brought problems for [Laikipia] residents because the *mzungu* [European] does not make a difference to one [African] individual and others. We are not anymore given that special treatment between the rancher and the residents, all are denied grass” (Interview, Pastoralist, 2015).

Yet attempts to deploy grazing arrangements as a buffer against incursions by non-local pastoralists were not always effective. “The grazing committee is no more functional,” remarked one pastoralist, “due to the fact that the manager asked us to prevent other people from invading the farm, which we are not able to do.” “These people have got problems just like us,” he continued, “so where and how can we send them? Once it rains, they will definitely leave” (Interview, Pastoralist, 2015). Differently put, the premises of landowners’ buffer zone strategy were discordant with values held by some pastoralists regarding the moral obligation of reciprocity and flexibility in response to shifting environmental conditions. For some local pastoralists, enforcing the denial of grazing access was viewed as impractical for both ethical and practical reasons. As an elder described this predicament: “The challenges are that finally your brother is here, the cows are thin, you want to chase him, you don’t want to chase him, but others say no, he must go. So you are left with that stress” (Interview, Pastoralist, 2015). In sum, the shifting nature of landowners’ strategies over time – from using the grazing arrangements as a means of distinguishing between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ local conservation subjects, to creating buffer zones for insulating private landholdings from non-local incursions from beyond Laikipia – often did not produce expected results. In what follows, we explore the implications of these unintended consequences by highlighting the phenomenon of illicit night grazing and related nocturnal practices, which illuminates both similarities and differences in the experiences of different constituencies throughout Laikipia.

4.3. Night grazing, nocturnal agency, and mounting securitisation throughout the nychthemeron

Given the uneven results of the above schemes, both local and non-local pastoralists in Laikipia increasingly engaged in illicit night grazing. This was particularly important for Samburu pastoralists temporarily present in the county. Especially *Imurran* (young unmarried men, often translated into English as ‘bachelor-warriors’) would settle with combined cattle herds in temporary cattle camps at the border of private landholdings. Although Samburu elders frequently condemn the *Imurran* for letting their cattle graze on private ranches, they often tacitly recognized or sympathized with the underlying material constraints faced by young pastoralists from neighbouring counties. As one elder explained, the cyclic calendar of the Samburu community expected their youth to be in a time of recurrent conflict: “now we are in the age-set of the Lkishami [...] and it is a time of Lnyangi and we have been fighting with many communities. [...] we are now expecting a new generation to be circumcised soon in two years’ time and we call it the peaceful time of Siria”.

Local occupants of ‘abandoned lands’ and pastoralists from nearby group ranches also widely participated in the practice of night grazing. In particular, the latter involvement of group ranch residents was resented by non-local Samburu pastoralists, who often referred to local night grazers as “silent invaders” (Interview, Pastoralist, 2015). In such instances, Samburu pastoralists perceived Maasai from the group ranches as being somewhat duplicitous. That is: maintaining positive ‘diplomatic’ relations with landowners during the day, but grazing at night under the cover of both literal, nychthemeral darkness, as well as the metaphorical cover of political rhetoric concerning the ‘invasion’ of Samburu pastoralists from outside Laikipia.

For both constituencies, however, night grazing provided a means of averting or otherwise resisting the fees and fines levied by landowners. As one woman put it:

You pay for your cow in that private farm on a monthly basis. But the people should understand that when you do not have money, you have no option. Because in times like now, it is so dry, even selling your cow or taking it to a market, nobody probably even wants to buy it. So the ranchers should also know that you don’t have money and it is not out of your will that you are not paying it. And then again, they should also look on their farms: there is no grass. So why should you stop people from grazing on the land where there is no grass and there is nothing left? What are they stopping anyway? Why do they want to give fines for no grass? (Interview, Pastoralist, 2015).

Importantly, the woman explained that – whilst night grazing – she also prepared for the possibility of bribing conservancy staff by travelling with sufficient amounts of cash. This practice was reportedly widespread. For this respondent and others, it was far better to attempt bribery than to confront landowners, who were perceived as likely to impose more severe penalties, such as impounding cattle or locking herders in makeshift ‘prisons’ whilst awaiting the arrival of law enforcement personnel.

In particular, these informal arrests and detentions have sparked widespread resistance from community members in Laikipia. Here, one of the most prominent examples is *The Declaration by the Maa Speaking Communities in Laikipia County* (2015), which was written “as a result of the happenings of the last few years in regards to human rights infringement and land conflict”. The document petitions the Government of Kenya to, *inter alia*, curb the “Kangaroo courts where the Maa people are arrested and unlawfully charged inside private ranches on claims of trespassing and illegal grazing”, and to settle “land disputes by paying off absentee landlords and allow the Maa people to continue to live in peace”. Accordingly, it was likewise demanded that “the police must stop excessive use of force among the Maa people and allow them the rights of speech, social gathering and movement”, which are

guaranteed by Kenya's 2010 constitution.

Parallel to these formal responses, many community members simultaneously engaged in several informal or clandestine practices. Chief amongst these is night grazing, which effectively encompasses a suite of informal tactics or “responses from below” that tend to be implemented under the cover of darkness (Hall et al., 2015b). These practices include bribery, fence manipulation, and the fabrication of explanations for the ‘accidental’ incursion of cattle into unmarked private lands. To facilitate this, herders would – for instance – fill cattle bells with grass to avoid sound, and use torches only sparingly to avoid detection. In addition, non-local pastoralists would increasingly seek ‘friendships’ or alliances with both rangers and members of local Maasai communities who were perceived to be sympathetic to their struggles. In practice, such alliances denote that ‘night grazing’ involves the participation not only of herders and their cattle, but also of networks encompassing a diversity of individuals who facilitate these activities. Depending on the specific actors involved or the nature of the clandestine arrangement in place, these individuals were reportedly embedded – variously – in conservancy management, local government, or law enforcement agencies.

Such collaborations are inherently tenuous, however, and subject to rapid change in accordance with the shifting interests of the various parties involved. While night grazing, many respondents thus expressed considerable fear of landowners or law enforcement personnel “who will shoot you” (Interview, Pastoralist, 2015), or who will not hesitate to arrest and initiate the prosecution of trespassers. If the likelihood of paying a bribe is perceived to be unlikely, for instance, herders often prioritize stealth when encountering ranger patrols, allowing their cattle to be captured. Though this necessitates walking home at night amidst dangerous wildlife, and later returning to negotiate the return of impounded cattle, this is often still deemed preferable to arrest whilst ‘in the act’ of night grazing. Alternatively, some *Imurran* turn to force when caught by rangers. As one man put it:

Sometimes we have to use force if they become too much. You cannot be giving out money each day each week. At that pace all the cows will go; you sell one today and another the following day. They have to know you are not keeping cows for them (Interview, Pastoralist, 2015).

Given its potential to escalate tensions and attract police intervention, however, violence was often not a preferred – or at least not a frequent – response. Whenever possible, many ‘night grazers’ instead sought to circumvent ranger patrols altogether, attempting to obtain local ‘intelligence’ about the movements of enforcement personnel in advance as a means of avoiding confrontation.

The persistence of these night grazing practices has prompted a growing number of landowners to cancel or to revise existing grazing arrangements in ways that incorporate stricter conditionalities. Many landowners and conservancy managers expressed dissatisfaction with Kenyan legislation, lamenting that the capacity and/or the political willingness of the government to address the incursions was insufficient. In response, some landowners (successfully) lobbied for an amendment to the 2013 Wildlife Act, which now requires mandatory prison sentences for some conservation-related offences (KWCA, 2019). Simultaneously, non-local pastoralists were increasingly framed as ‘organized criminals’, or members of cartels operating on the basis of instructions from elite ‘cattle barons’. In cooperation with both British and Kenyan security forces, for instance, landowners have increasingly sought to combat ‘criminal’ incursions through the formation and deployment of private conservancy militia forces. These measures are not entirely private, however, as they also entail practices of ‘deputization’ in which public security agencies grant official recognition to private forces of armed conservation rangers. Since 2014, these private forces have conducted night-patrols and associated operations to impound cattle and arrest ‘illegal’ herders with increasing frequency. As part of these operations, strict documentation of trespass records is maintained, and

supplemented with increased surveillance both on the ground and in the air via helicopters and drones. Here, cattle counts – and, increasingly, geo-tagging or GIS monitoring – are being used to assess the number of cattle on private land relative to quotas allowed by grazing arrangements, and to track the movements of both ‘sanctioned’ and ‘unsanctioned’ pastoralists and livestock.

Another measure adopted by some landowners to stop night grazing and pastoralist incursions more generally was increased engagement with the conservancy membership organization known as the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT). In the first instance, the NRT was initiated as a means of facilitating trans-county community grazing arrangements on private land in Laikipia: cattle originating from NRT community conservancies in northern Kenya (including from Samburu County) would be temporarily placed on private ranches and conservancies. Participating landowners argued that bringing cattle from Samburu to Laikipia would reduce the pressure on pastures in the north, and that this would, in turn, reduce influxes of non-local pastoralists migrating to Laikipia. Additionally, facilitating the movement of “community cattle” through the NRT would plausibly give the perception to the outside world that the private ranches and conservancies were operating in the interests of “the community”. Simultaneously, however, the same arrangements would facilitate stronger conservancy border controls, given that community cattle would not need to enter private landholdings on a daily basis. As a result, some landowners accepted both NRT and neighbouring cattle, whilst others declined to host cattle from northern counties through NRT, preferring to restrict grazing access arrangements to their neighbouring communities. Furthermore, while the status of people residing on abandoned lands has always been controversial, one of these locations was re-designated from an ‘abandoned land’ location into a community conservancy supported by the NRT. Here again, the securitization of buffer zone spaces around private landholdings was leveraged as a justification for this approach, albeit this time institutionalized via NRT-supported community conservancies. In turn, many landowners increasingly perceived engagement with the NRT as a systemic solution to both the local (intra-county) and *trans*-local (inter-county) dimensions of Laikipia’s ‘grazing problem’, providing a solid buffer to private landholdings from influxes of pastoralists from further afield.

In tandem with these collaborative grazing arrangements organized through the NRT, the County Government of Laikipia, law enforcement, and local conservation organizations have periodically coordinated to evict Samburu cattle and prosecute ‘illegal’ pastoralists. Commonly filed charges include trespassing, illegal grazing, damage to private property, possession of illegal weapons, and failure to possess formal identification (technically a legal requirement in Kenya, but one often not observed by rural communities). Here, landowners have repeatedly sought the harshest punishments available under (in their view, inadequate) existing legislation, suggesting that heavy penalties would serve as a deterrent that discourages future trespassing. Given the uneven results of grazing arrangements and other collaborative measures, landowners have gradually returned to coercive mechanisms for controlling movements of cattle and pastoralists into and within Laikipia. The neo-colonial symbolism of these practices is sometimes quite overt, as in the decision of some conservancy managers of European descent to host British military personnel for the purposes of conducting training exercises on private landholdings, or in the parallel deployment of British personnel to conduct joint anti-poaching and conservation law enforcement exercises with Kenyan security agencies (e.g. Hughes, 2014). Increasingly, landowners are at pains to tie the defence of their private properties to the urgency of these conservation efforts, anticipating that the considerable armed security necessitated by wildlife conservation and anti-poaching activities will also serve as a deterrent for incursions. As one pastoralist put it, however – inherently demurring with the long-term viability of these strategies – “illegal grazing was there for as long as there are fences”. As long as “there is grass inside the fences,” he concluded, “illegal grazing will be there” (Interview,

Pastoralist, 2015). As we have sought to illuminate in this section, the implicit contradictions between ubiquitous ‘collaborative conservation’ rhetoric and the material pressures faced by numerous segments of both local and non-local communities in Laikipia often come to a head at night, as manifested in the phenomenon of persistent ‘night grazing’, or the nocturnal circumvention of existing conservation arrangements.

5. Conclusion

Through engagement with the empirical case of shifting grazing arrangements in Kenya’s Laikipia County, this paper has sought to contribute to scholarship on recent ‘land rush’ dynamics in East Africa and beyond. Like much of the rural Global South, contemporary Laikipia County is characterized by intensifying processes of rural development and agro-pastoral change (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013; Hall et al., 2015a; Scoones, 2021). Laikipia County increasingly thus finds itself at the centre of multidimensional controversies concerning land ownership, land use change, and broader processes of rural transformation (Letai and Lind, 2013; Chome et al., 2020). In this context, we have sought to elucidate the often-diverse factors shaping varied “responses from below” (Hall et al., 2015b) emerging in the aftermath of land acquisitions for both new – and ‘newly reconfigured’ – forms of conservation governance. Such reconfigurations of conservation governance are particularly topical in Kenya at present, given the rise of private, community, and other ‘non-state’ conservancies in the country over the last decade (Cavanagh et al., 2020). Facilitated by Kenya’s 2010 constitution and associated legislation, the proliferation of these conservancies is once again reshaping longstanding conflicts amongst rural smallholders and large-scale private landowners, many of whom are now engaged in the business of private conservancy management and related ecotourism ventures.

In analysing these empirical phenomena, this paper extends recent scholarship on land rush dynamics by highlighting three key findings. First – engaging literatures on conservation subject formation (e.g. Singh, 2013; Holmes and Cavanagh, 2016) – we have approached the ongoing evolution of local grazing arrangements as an empirical entry point into shifting attempts by landowners and other parties to (re)shape the perceptions, values, and practices of various rural constituencies. Indeed, in this context, grazing arrangements are perhaps incompletely understood when conceived primarily as a conventional means of ‘co-managing’ natural resources. Contributing to a fuller political–ecological understanding of these arrangements, we have shown how – over time – these evolving initiatives have occasionally resulted in the exclusion of some ostensibly ‘threatening’ strata of pastoralist communities, and the prioritization of other constituencies perceived by landowners as comparatively ‘responsible’ conservation subjects. In turn, the latter have at times come to be seen as retaining more authentic or deserving claims to land, territory, and – ultimately – political belonging within Laikipia County’s postcolonial body politic.

Secondly, we have underscored a key mechanism through which practices of conservation subject formation threaten to exacerbate existing tensions and conflicts. Namely: through their interaction with a range of both intra-community and inter-community inequalities. Responding to recent calls in political ecology to elucidate how and why diverse ‘responses from below’ may vary (e.g. Green and Adams, 2015; Nepomuceno et al., 2019), we highlight how processes of socioeconomic differentiation *within* pastoralist communities have become increasingly salient throughout central and northern Kenya over the last several decades (see also Greiner, 2022; Scoones, 2021). Often intersecting with educational, generational, and gender inequalities, these intra-group inequalities are also paralleled by a range of perceived *inter*-group inequalities. As a result, landowners’ perceptions of new stratifications within their neighbouring populations – and the correspondingly uneven livelihood impacts of resulting grazing arrangements – interact with these inequalities in ways that may fragment local responses to conservation governance. In particular, grazing agreements have been

increasingly reworked to exclude non-local or in-migrating pastoralists, who have been repeatedly constructed as ‘outsiders’ in the Laikipia landscape. Nonetheless, we emphasize how the perceived illegitimacy or untenability of these exclusions in Laikipia have influenced differentiated responses to conservation governance in subtle yet important ways. For instance, a significant proportion of local communities found the landowners’ efforts to exclude ‘non-local’ Samburu pastoralists via the formation of buffer zone grazing arrangements to be discordant with pastoralist values regarding pastoral reciprocity and flexibility.

Finally – and perhaps most importantly – the confluence of the above two dynamics illuminates the centrality of the persistent phenomenon of ‘night grazing’ within our analysis. Here, we conceptualize night grazing as encompassing a suite of both literally and figuratively ‘nocturnal’ responses to conservation governance. Undertaken by various strata of the region’s internally diverse stakeholder communities, these practices underscore how local responses to conservation governance may vary throughout the full ‘nycthemeron’ or complete 24-hour ‘day-night’ cycle. On one hand, the concept of the nycthemeron thus highlights the intuitively practical significance of attempts to circumvent conservation measures under the literal cover of darkness, and the necessity of conservationist responses to mitigate such practices. More broadly, however, harnessing the nycthemeron as a conceptual lens also draws our attention to how both practices of conservation governance and associated ‘conservation subjectivities’ remain enduringly fluid rather than fixed. Particularly if these ‘nocturnal’ behaviours and practices contradict official policies, such divergences can reveal slippages between official conservation rhetoric and *de facto* conservation realities, at times highlighting instances of everyday resource governance that deviate from promises of “win-win” outcomes for all concerned.

Differently put, notwithstanding earnest attempts by landowners and other authorities to shape local conservation subjectivities in ways that align with their own interests, these efforts have been repeatedly complicated by the multiplicity of inter-group and intra-group relations within Laikipia’s complex political–ecological *milieu*. Indeed, as our analysis of the persistent phenomenon of night grazing suggests, such conservationist ‘responses from above’ are not always or necessarily ‘successful’. In an effort to suppress influxes of ‘unwelcome’ pastoralists, for instance, both private landowners and public authorities in Laikipia – backed by transnational financiers, nongovernmental organizations, and even military institutions – increasingly apply coercive mechanisms to sustain authoritative control over their properties. Although these mechanisms may precipitate a further “hardening of lines” (Watson, 2010) throughout Laikipia’s cadastral archipelago of private, public, or other exclusionary properties, they also threaten to exacerbate historically evolving forms of marginalization for vulnerable segments of numerous rural populations. As a result, such interventions ‘from above’ may risk catalysing unintended or unanticipated “responses from below” (Hall et al., 2015b), as well as other unforeseen consequences for prevailing dynamics of natural resource management. In doing so, they risk considerably increasing the likelihood that heightened tensions and conflicts will recur – or possibly even escalate further – amidst intensifying processes of environmental, socioeconomic, and agrarian change both in Laikipia and far beyond.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Annemiek Pas: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Connor Joseph Cavanagh:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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