

# Pastoral Production Systems, Institutions, and Community Networks in the Changing Border Dynamics

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## Abstract

The cross-border pastoralists at the Uganda-DRC border have, over time, developed a “border cultural context”. This spatially produced cultural context is constructed on societal institutions, practices, networks, and livestock. This border cultural context operates through alliances at the clan, family, and other social networks as the Batuku pastoralists access pastoral resources such as pasture, water, livestock medicine, and other necessities within Uganda and across the DRC. This paper describes the ways in which institutions and practices facilitate the grazing of livestock along and astride the border, as well as how livestock, especially cattle, function as a thread that ties together the operations of these institutions and practices of the Batuku pastoralists. This paper is drawn from an ethnography conducted at the Uganda-DRC border for a period of seven months from January 2024 - August 2024. The paper reveals that the Batuku pastoralists operate a networked system of institutions and practices in their efforts to produce their livelihood necessities. These institutions and practices have been a source of unity, social well-being, and social capital. These institutions and practices serve both the impecunious and the rich. Therefore, with drastic changes taking place in this border region—which have changed the character of the border from a porous border to almost a hard border—the pastoral production systems, institutions, and communal networks can no longer remain intact, and their usefulness and efficiency drastically change.

## Keywords

Pastoralism, Community Networks, Institutional Production Systems, Border Dynamics

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## 1. Introduction

This paper analyzes the systems, practices, and institutions that facilitate and maintain cross-border pastoralism in the region. These include the systematic institutions that tie the practice of pastoralism together at the border and give the cross-border pastoralists a context that not only facilitates the practices but also ties together the individuals, families, and the community at large in the process of pursuing their livelihood. In this paper, I describe the ways in which these institutions facilitate the grazing of livestock within and outside Batukuland as well as how they operate as a thread that ties together all the beads of the practice of pastoralism. The way these institutions and practices facilitate movements within Uganda and DRC; the ways in which they are used to outwit the state institutions; and how these practices connect the Batuku pastoralists with other groups and create alliances that help them to access land and other resources essential for the well-being of their livestock constitute what I have called elsewhere the Batuku “border context” (Nuwamanya, 2023). Drawing on my ethnography at the Uganda-DRC border from January 2024 to August 2024, I argue that it is these institutions and practices that typically constitute the Batuku’s border context that goes beyond their citizenship. Borders are contested spaces that shape aspects of social reality (Paasi, 2020), surmising that the Batuku cross-border pastoralists have constructed an identity that is embedded in and informed by their spatial context. Batuku pastoralists have constructed a “borders cultural context” by maintaining ties with their kin groups across the border, creating routes that are not known to border officials, and developing networks and institutions based on cattle exchanges to facilitate their movements and access to resources and services as they secure their livelihood. It is this “border cultural context” that is a source of their resilience to the spatial conditions of drought and other ecological uncertainties and vulnerabilities (Nuwamanya, 2023: p. 10). This spatially produced cultural context is apparently being challenged by the capitalistic struggles and militia activities at the Uganda-DRC border region (Nuwamanya, 2023). These struggles have come in the form of state activities against pastoralism and enforcement of the border rules, the militias’ activities and their violent abductions of pastoralists, and the raiding of their livestock whenever they move to DRC in the drought seasons. These struggles have not only weakened the efficient operations of the institutions and practices as sources of resilience; they have also turned communally owned land into a privately competed commodity and made the ever-porous border a hard one. These have exposed the Batuku’s life and existence on the border to so much risk that the Batuku pastoralists are now tending to become destitute as they lose their livelihood.

The Batuku pastoralists operate a networked system of institutions and practices in their processes of producing their livelihood necessities. These institutions and practices have been a source of oneness, social well-being, and social capital. These institutions and practices serve both the impecunious and the rich. They tie people

together both in good and bad times. They are described as a source of people's existence and livelihood. These institutions and practices relate to the livestock and their products as important aspects of their lives and culture; their work, relationships, systems and structural organisation, clan, marriage, reciprocity, and mutual assistance interactions are hinged, for instance, on the cow and the milk. Therefore, with drastic changes taking place at this border region, which have changed the character of the border from a porous border to almost a hard border, it is imperative to note that the capitalistic struggles have turned Batuku common pool resources into private ownership and made pastoralists start to compete for the resources, including land, water sources, cattle, and money. These new trends in the dynamics of this border region have pushed the Batuku pastoralists to destitution in the form of landlessness and loss of cattle, and some are migrating to city centres and towns to look for simple manual labour jobs as a last resort.

## 2. Area of Study and Methodology

This ethnography was carried out in Rwebisengo sub-county, which is one of the seven sub-counties that form Ntoroko district in the western part of Uganda. This district came into existence in 2010. But Rwebisengo sub-county has existed as an administrative unit (sub-county) even since colonial times. Rwebisengo sub-county is inhabited by people who are predominantly pastoralists and practice transhumance to DRC and back depending on the season. The area is flat and dry for most months of the year (normally from July to March). This area exhibits uniqueness in terms of its morphology, settlement patterns, and people's relationships. The unique morphology is seen in the flatness, since it stands at 50 ft above sea level and, due to this flatness, the area experiences occasional flooding in the rainy seasons. This can be seen in how one of my participants described the land thus: "Butukuland is a unique land from other lands in the Rwenzori region and Uganda generally. Butukuland is like an 'island in its own ocean'." According to my participant, this area also lies in the rain shadow. The winds of rain are shadowed by the Rwenzori mountains. This shadowing of rain at times brings floods to the Rwebisengo area even when the area has not received any rain. When it rains in the Rwenzori mountainous areas, water collects itself in the Semliki River and valley, leading to the flooding of the whole area without it experiencing any rain.

In the study, I used both participant observation and ethnographic interviews as methods of data collection. In this fieldwork, I employed an open-ended critical inquiry into the conditions and potentials of Batuku pastoralists' life. I joined with people as they grazed their cattle, as they watered them at River Semliki, treated and sprayed them on different days of the week. I participated in milking, in lifting cows that could not stand on their own due to drought, and I observed people in cattle markets as they sold and bought cows, foods, especially maize mill, and other necessities. I also observed the Batuku pastoralists on several occasions

crossing River Semliki to take cattle to Burasa livestock market across the border in DRC as they swam in the river with their oxen. This act was illegal and risky, but the security personnel could not do anything to them. I attended village meetings, immigration department sensitisation sessions as well as sub-county administrative meetings. I went to churches and observed how possession of cattle influences people's relationships at various levels. I observed pastoralists in bars as they drank alcohol after a long day in the market, and I examined their exchanges in these drinking places and how they positioned themselves according to the number of cattle they owned. This immersion gave me a profound grounding and understanding of what life is like in Rwebisengo sub-county and at the Uganda-DRC border particularly. To keep with [Ingold \(2013: p. 4\)](#), "participant observation is not only a technique of data collection, it is also enshrined in an ontological commitment that renders the very idea of data collection unthinkable." The entire process of participating and observing people as they earn a living at this border could only be comprehended in the context of that ontological commitment.

### **3. The Clan System and Its Enforcement of Pastoral Activity**

There has been a way of thinking that most African societies lacked the social institutions—bureaucratic governments, money-based economies, formal laws, etc.—that most society observers were accustomed to ([Kenny & Kirsten, 2015](#)). It came to be perceived that where such institutions are lacking, kinship serves as an integrating force, an all-purpose social glue. "Blood kinship" provides the basis for the formation of cohesive groups, marriage establishes cross-generational connections between them, and bonds of affection and complex economic relationships hold it all together. Family determines the social structure, inheritance, and group formation in society. Inheritance is a central factor among Batuku pastoral society. What happens when a family is in danger of dying out or the property is in danger of being lost to outsiders because there is no legitimate heir is an inherent concern for most pastoralist societies. The genealogical connections serve to validate claims to land, power, status, or anything else of social value.

Ties of kinship and marriage serve to form and bind together politically significant groups. Kinship, economies, and politics are entangled with one another, which makes it possible to think about these relationships in functional terms. Ties of kinship are also related to moral and economic obligations. There are many formal and informal ways of establishing such bonds, such as adoption, surrogacy, common-law relationships, and marriage. Marriage is a classic rite of passage, often involving complex ceremonies and intricate economic transactions ([Kenny & Kirsten, 2015](#)). Among the Batuku, marriage remains a profound social act—an affair between groups, families, and clans, not individuals. The ties established between groups by marriage are both political and economic and can span generations. Gift-giving is a common feature of these ties. They give bride

wealth (omukaaga). Totemic clans, going under names relating to ecology, wild animals, and cows, determine how people get categorized, including the slot they are placed in; to use Kenny and Kirsten's words in the context of the Batuku, I bring my conversation with the Elder of Makondo village in Rwebisengo sub-county.

The elder of Makondo village in Rwebisengo sub-county, with whom I conversed on five different days, sometimes could not speak because the old man was not feeling well. I traveled to Makondo nine times, and out of those visits, I spoke to the old man only five times. The elder is 82 years old (it is hard for him to remember when he was born); his daughter is the one who estimates his age. He still moves around his homestead and has a strong memory. When I saw him for the first time, he had just returned from the hospital and was still very weak. I wondered whether he could still remember anything that happened a long time ago, let alone understand what is happening now. He lost his wife in 2015, and now his daughter takes care of him in conjunction with his other sons. Some of his children live away from home. He started by saying that he never went to a formal school in his life, but all that he knows was and is acquired from cattle grazing fields. These days, he said that when people go through school, they never return to help Butuku or continue the work of rearing cattle with the knowledge they acquire from school. This is a very pertinent observation that relates formal education acquisition to urban migration. When people acquire formal education, especially at higher levels, they tend to reside in urban centres and cities. This deprives the sector of pastoralism of skills and advanced knowledge. The situation also weakens the pastoral production system and institutions as threads on which the beads of pastoral practice are tied and effected.

Elder was born in the DRC in the chiefdom of Mitego, and his father was a member of the ruling lineage of the chiefdom. For him, it is not just a chiefdom but a kingdom because it had a leader who could be considered a king. He is of the Babiito clan, which is the clan that still leads the Mitego chiefdom. His mother was from the Baihangu clan. He has many relatives who permanently live in the DRC, and they cross to check on him occasionally. He is still connected with the current leadership of the Mitego chiefdom since the current head of the chiefdom, Kituku, is his grandson. He left his birthplace in the DRC in 1963 during the Mulere rebellion and, moving with livestock, crossed the river Semliki and entered Uganda, where he has lived till today. He crossed to Uganda because the rebellion in the DRC then was threatening their lives and livelihoods. He crossed with his family and their livestock and lived with his two uncles and his brothers. The land he settled on in Uganda was already under the custody of his clan, and his uncles and other clan relatives were living on it, though today people have divided the land, and even some have sold to people of other clans. This narrative reveals the conditions within which the Batuku pastoralists have lived and pursued a livelihood through a systematic connection of institutions and practices that revolve around livestock exchange and knowledge, which is apparently facing

much pressure from the Uganda-DRC border regional dynamics. His ability to memorise and list all the clans and their totems found in the Semliki valley in Uganda and in the DRC reveals the importance that Batuku pastoralists still attach to their clans. The Batuku are organised in a very systematic clan structure. This system is composed of clans that have different totems; they are patrilineal, exogamous, and have patrilocal residence patterns and heads and different origins. The morals and beliefs of practising pastoralism in the Semliki valley revolve around the clans and their ability to organise their membership through inheritance of property and status, access to land and grazing grounds, marriage, and blood brotherhood.

According to my Elder, the system of managing resources in Batukuland, whether on the Ugandan side of the border or in DRC, was then based on the clan system. Clan membership guaranteed access to pastoral resources. People could cross and find their clan members and get where to graze their livestock depending on their ability to identify themselves by citing their clan ancestors. When one member of the clan lost all his herd at once, either to disease or any other kind of disaster, it was the responsibility of the clan members to contribute cows to him to start with, called *okusumbusa* in the Rutuku dialect. It was and is considered an ominous practice for one's clan member to sleep hungry when the clan members are happy. "omuntu tarara njala abaako n'enganjane beine eby'okurya." This is literally translated as a person cannot sleep on an empty stomach when his/her in-laws and relatives have plenty of food. There were clan leaders and heads of lineages who used to enforce clan and lineage connections and assistance. Enforcement could be effected through denial of where to marry or to get married (*okwaaka*). If a clan member was fond of not being helpful to other clan members in need, he could be denied a place to marry or get a wife for his son(s), or his daughter(s) would not be married. It is, therefore, the clan leaders who make sure that the needy clan members are helped by their respective clan members.

Clans among the Batuku pastoralists also organize blood brotherhood rituals and ensure that the *dos* and *don'ts* that concern it are enforced and perfectly observed to the letter. Blood brotherhood is a practice where two people from different families, lineages, and clans are turned into brothers by symbolically "sharing" each other's blood. In this practice, people who want to be blood brothers are cut on their navels, and the blood that flows from the cuttings is put on coffee beads and the two persons swallow each other's blood-stained bead. This ritual symbolizes a blood connection that exceeds friendship and binds to consanguinity. Individuals, families, and clans involved in this connection are supposed to observe the conditions of the practice very effectively or else they "kill" it. When it is "killed", one of the blood brothers or their relatives must die. To avoid such eventualities, the Batuku pastoralists observe all the conditions more seriously than other connections. This is symbolically important in the field of pastoralism because it facilitates grazing and access to pastoral resources.

People who are blood brothers in the context of this ritual are supposed to help each other, their families, and their clan members. It holds people together in addition to family, marriage, clan, and other social bonds of the Batuku society.

He lives with his daughter in the same house and one son who has his own house, wife, and children. This is a very common family setting among the Batuku pastoral community, where elders who can no longer live on their own labor are taken care of by their children and live with them in the same homestead. This kind of situation also reveals the importance of the institution of family as a source of social assurance and support to their members. Among the Batuku pastoralists, as is indeed the case in some other African societies, children are a source of insurance in the old age of parents. This is well captured in the Batuku saying that “Engiri ezaire teribwa ngo”. This is literally translated as “a Warthog that has grown up progenies can never be eaten by a Leopard”. This brings out the importance people attach to childbearing in relation to the vulnerability that comes with old age. Childbearing in this community is based on an anticipation of future eventualities.

#### **4. The Cow as an Institution of Power, Wealth, and Social Relations**

“*Ekyitaita mutuku tikimumaraho nteze*” is a saying among Batuku pastoralists which literally translates as... what does not kill the mutuku (singular Person) pastoralist is that which does not deplete (finish off) his cattle. Drawing from this saying, it is possible to understand these communities in the context of Evans-Pritchard’s words that “pastoralists not only depend on cattle for many of their life’s necessities but also, they also have a herdsman’s outlook on the world... the only labour in which they delight is care of cattle” (Evans-Prichard, 2008). Their life revolves around the cow and as long as their cows survive, they survive as well. Therefore, there is no life for them without their cows. In the same vein, David Anderson in his ethnographies among the Maasai of eastern Africa reminds us of the importance of cattle in the re-telling of the cultural and symbolic significance attributed to livestock in relation to political authority. “Cow power”—the cow power theme remains an important element in the construction of history in east-central Africa, for which there remains significant historical and especially archaeological evidence. “History has made Maasai identity; but their identity has also made and remade history, as Maasai constantly redefine their understanding of the past in order to find a more appropriate or acceptable explanation for the present” (Anderson, 1993).

Talking to Elder revealed that when drought comes in their area, they always move to wherever they can find water, pasture, and the general well-being of their cattle. This involves crossing the Uganda-DRC border and back depending on where grazing resources are available. Cattle mean life in the Batuku pastoralists’ settings and culture. A cow is an institution of togetherness/solidarity; a gift to appreciate others; a resource for inheritance; a commodity for selling, buying, and

exchanging to meet other needs; a mechanism for marriage; and a field on which the division of labour and social engendering is based. This can be understood in Appadurai's context that things, like persons, have social lives. He explains that the social life of things is engrossed in their forms, uses, and their trajectories (Appadurai, 1986). To him, commodities are things with a particular type of social potential, and they are distinguishable from "products", "objects", "artifacts", and other sorts of things (1986: 6). Connecting to Appadurai's argument is James Ferguson's "prestige complex", which he explained as an ever-negotiated tradition tied to the wage earnings of young migrants of Lesotho working in the mines in South Africa (Ferguson, 1985). According to Ferguson's explanation, the wages that men earned were not stored monetarily but were stored through purchases of livestock, which were, by tradition, men's property to be used in the socio-economic affairs of the community. For Batuku, wherever cattle can find satisfaction and peace, the Batuku pastoralists would find peace and settlement. Cattle are the source of well-being in the Batuku culture. They enable marriage and childbirth. They determine the position of an individual among his community, clan, family, and within their peers.

The number of cattle a person owns gives him/her power and influence among the Batuku pastoralists. Being born in a household with a significant size of cattle herd elevates the individual to a higher position in society. This position is definitive in that it can determine whom to marry or from whom to get married. Cattle not only enable individuals to pay bride wealth but also determine the goodwill of the bride's family toward the family of the husband. This goodwill stems from the need for prestige; the feeling that comes with associating with a well-to-do family, especially one which can respond in times of scarcity, is the motivation for wanting to get married or to marry from a family with a sizable number of cattle among the Batuku pastoralists. These days, it determines the possibility of acquiring formal education up to higher levels of the individual's choice. Families with a sizable number of cattle can pay school fees for their children even to university levels. This positions such families and their members higher than the rest of the pastoralists, including those who cannot pay for their own children's school fees because of the insufficient numbers of their herds. The number of cattle among the Batuku pastoralists is counted in accordance with the number of kraals one person owns. A person with many kraals (Amasyo) is held in high esteem among the Batuku pastoralist community. This is what Ferguson refers to when he says that livestock is perceived as a reserve asset or property of pride rather than as a commercial commodity. Traditional reasons for keeping cattle, e.g., bride price, prestige, investment, etc., make farmers unwilling to sell their surplus unproductive stock. Herdsmen value quantity rather than quality. Unproductive animals are "retained merely as status symbols". There is a traditional attitude against selling animals, particularly cattle (Ferguson, 1990). He attempts to demonstrate the fact that cattle as a property is a special domain engulfed in rules that structure the range of options from which people make rational choices.

Considering the above importance attached to the cow and the sizes of the herds, it is possible to deduce that cattle connect people through marriage in the form of bride wealth. They pay bride wealth, and the goodwill that comes with payment is created between families, clans, and individuals who are involved in such transactions. Through these transactions, families can share in the resources that are held in such high esteem. They, in addition, help people to get married. Brothers use bride wealth paid for their sisters to also pay their own bride wealth and, in the process, also get married and produce children of their own. One of the practices associated with the cows that are paid for bride wealth is tagging them with their owner's names (the cows are named according to the payee by the recipient). This keeps the information about the payee in circulation so much so that even a visitor who never knew the payee gets to know him/her and understands the relations the two families have. Through these activities, the cow gives power and prestige to the owners and their associates. The power that comes when a parent receives bride wealth for his/her daughter and the prestige that is associated with that feeling is what needs to be understood from the pastoralist's perspective. When that feeling is understood in that perspective, it can be revealed that it is a social feeling, not just individual. It is expressed at the family, clan, and community levels. It is at this point that the cow becomes a link on which relationships rotate in the Batuku pastoralist society. Ferguson stretches this in his bovine mystique when he asserts that livestock is never the concern of one household alone. It is the most embedded in the social relations of the community. Bride wealth payments are one form of this embeddedness (Ferguson, 1985).

The cow is also a property to inherit, share, and create networks among the Batuku pastoralists. The cow is inheritable from father to son and sometimes from mother to son. It is kept in the line when the father dies and his cows are shared amongst his children, especially the sons; when they also die, they leave their cows with their sons as well. When the children are still young, the paternal male relatives or the deceased's wife takes over the custody of the cows on behalf of the children, but the home is named after the eldest son of the deceased. They prohibit the mentioning of the dead persons' names. They always refer to them in relation to their sons, like the father of so and so. The cows must be grown in numbers. Children must preside over a growing number of their inheritance, or else they dwindle and then the children will be despised by the relatives, friends, and the community at large for "eating the cows" (as it is referred to among the Batuku pastoralists) that the father left for their inheritance and not being able to also pass them on to their children in the future. This contempt is intended to protect and preserve the cow as a resource and its importance in the life of Batuku pastoralists. This community contempt and ridicule can be well compared with the one-way barrier that Ferguson describes among the Basotho community, where livestock can only be bought but not to be sold for cash and household necessities (Ferguson, 1990). Cattle, much in the same way as capital, serve both as standards of value and as a means of accumulating and transforming it into other kinds of

wealth in the political economy at large. Cattle, as a focus of everyday activity, are the epitome of social and symbolic capital, the capital that links the material economy of things to a moral economy of persons, and so constructs a total economy of signs and practices (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1990).

Children also share their father's cows as a way of continuing his patriarchal line as sumptuary exclusivity. Girl children are most times not given the opportunity to inherit their fathers' property since they get married to other clans and therefore, should not take the property to their husbands' clans. The essence here is keeping the resources within the family and the clan. While boys inherit their fathers' cows within their homes, girls are expected to get married and what they are supposed to inherit from their fathers is given to them on the day they are given to their husbands. The cow is one of the first gifts that reach the matrimonial home of a girl, that is called "ensagarrano" among the Batuku pastoralists. This is a cow that the father of the bride sends to the groom's home, symbolising his contribution to the well-being of the couple. The sumptuary exclusivity of women from cows among the Batuku needs to be elaborated here. Women are forbidden from milking and all other physical activities that relate to the cow. Their relationship with the cow is limited to the caring of the milk and milking utensils' hygiene. It is because of this exclusion and the patrilocal residence patterns that women are not allowed to inherit their fathers' cows among the Batuku pastoralists. This is what Ferguson talks about among Sotho people on how women ideologically assault and denounce as old fashioned the traditional pride in livestock. According to Ferguson, women challenge the prestige complex and discourage their husbands from buying what they regard as useless animals with "household money" (Ferguson, 1990, 1985). The capacity of the cattle to carry social identity, both individual and collective, is most vividly marked in two sets of conventional practices. The first involves the "cattle linkage" of siblings and bride wealth, the second arose out of inheritance. Inheritance places males in the social field. The devolution of property is a gradual process, cattle being passed on to children, and distributed among houses, throughout the lifetime of their father.

The cows are categorised according to the way they were acquired by their owners in the Batuku community. These categories include genealogical cows; bride wealth cows; and market/cash cows. This categorisation is a revelation that cattle are an embodiment of meaning, and their capacity to reproduce a total social system links processes of production and exchange. They are the prime media for the creation and representation of value in the material economy of persons and the moral economy of things (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1990: p. 204). Genealogical (heirlooms) cows include those that have been in the home for many generations. They have been inherited from fathers to sons over a long period. They are perceived as cows that run within the family line. These cows are more prestigious. They are highly respected and referred to as "ente enzumu", implying that they belong to the ancestral spirits, which gives them a high leverage over other categories of cows, especially the market/cows of cash. With this category of cows,

the owner establishes contacts with the ghosts and spirits of his ancestors. Evans-Prichard's studies among the Nuer clearly reveal that "if one is able to obtain the history of each cow in a kraal, one obtains at the same time not only an account of all the kinship lines and affinities of the owners but also of all their mystical connexions" (Evans-Prichard, 2008: p. 120). They have ancestral blessings to multiply much faster than other categories of cows. On the other hand, market or cows of cash are those that individuals did not inherit from their forefathers but just bought from the market with cash. Or it was someone's father who bought them, and the son inherited them. These cows are perceived to be less entrenched in the community's ethos and can easily be depleted because they lack the ancestral connection and blessings. They are most of the time believed to be baseless. The way they were acquired could be the way they could go. These "cows of the money" are momentarily on the increase because of the increase in people in salaried employment. Most "absent herders' men" own this category of cows. They use their salaries to buy land and later buy cows and hire people to take care of cows on their behalf.

The other category of cows is the bride wealth cows. These are cows that have accrued to the family through bride wealth payments. They are a product of the daughter(s)' marriages, and their well-being and usefulness depend on the stability and durability of the marriage. These kinds of cows are highly regarded by the community as long as the marriages are not broken and repayment (*okuzumurra*) is required. Therefore, their sustainability depends on the sustainability of the daughters' marriages and the good relationships they create with their in-laws. The children that are born in these marriages also make these bride wealth cows more rooted in the family ethos and, in the long run, become inheritable cows. The three categories of cows offer distinct levels of prestige to their owners in the eyes of the community. However, these have associated reciprocal obligations; there are benefits that accrue to the husbands' families that are associated with bride wealth cows. Every first born in the marriages is entitled to cows from their maternal side of the parents, and this is due to the bride wealth that was paid by their fathers. This makes the bride wealth cows not so much esteemed among the Batuku as the genealogical cows are. Using the words of my participant:

"Our cows here are differentiated... the category a person owns grants him some level of prestige among his associates and community members... For instance, inherited cows are more esteemed than those that are bought with money. When an individual owns cows that stretch as far back as the line of his great-grandfather, it is something to be appreciated within the family; the lineage, the clan, and the community have to acknowledge it."

This kind of categorisation is very fundamental in the conservation of cows in the lineage and family lines of the Batuku pastoralists. It is enculturated within the values and beliefs that are passed on to children by the parents. It is for this reason that children who deplete their fathers' inherited cows are unkindly ridiculed and scoffed at by the community. This differentiation of the characters of the cows and

the levels of prestige their owners receive from their community helps to reveal the position the cow holds in the social life of the Batuku pastoralists at the Uganda-DRC border. This same position is what the cow holds in the cultural topography of wealth among the Batuku pastoralists. When cows are compared with other types of animals that form the cultural topography of wealth among the Batuku, like goats and sheep, the cows are ranked highly as I will explain in the following section. One of the reasons why the cow could be given this special position on the Batuku cultural topography of wealth is perhaps the benefits that people get from it. The cow provides milk to the family all the time. It gives blood, which is a reliable food for the Batuku in drought periods. It should be noted that none of the above foods are provided by goats or sheep on the Batuku food lists. The Batuku pastoralists do not milk or draw blood for food from either goats or sheep as they do from cows. They eat goats' meat but not sheep. They sell these animals and use their skins for sitting on in their houses.

## 5. The Batuku Cultural Topography of Wealth

In this section, I analyse the domain of wealth among the Batuku pastoralists. As James Ferguson points out, this domain remains uncaptured by the linear-continuum model of wealth, where a scale is used to measure the amount. Accordingly, he contends that the cultural, legal, and moral paths governing economic exchanges should be expressed as wealth different in kind, and not only in amount (Ferguson, 1992: p. 68). Ferguson advocates for an economic ranking by wealth that must go hand in hand with the analysis of commodity paths and the structure of property. Among the Batuku, cows are on top of every other domain of wealth. The position they are given in this domain is number one. They are the wealth of men; they give prestige to those who own them. The rich among the Batuku pastoralists can only be one who has many head of cattle. Omuguuda (the well-off) is the man who owns big herds of cows and has given most of his friends, relatives, neighbours, in-laws, and associates cow loans (empaano). Living among the Batuku pastoralists, I easily learnt to identify the man owning many head of cattle. He moves with a special stick, wears a flat hat that is unique from other kinds of hats. Most of the time, he does not remove it even when he is talking to other people. Those who own big herds of goats, sheep, or chickens cannot even speak about it publicly. **Table 1** below shows the hierarchy of the wealth domain, their roles to the community, and those entitled to them.

**Table 1.** The Batuku cultural topography of wealth.

Type of Wealth	Role to the People	Who Owns It
Cow	Gives milk, blood, bride wealth, can be lent to others, can be given as a gift, sold, eaten as meat, and hide and skin are used in houses.	People with power, elders (both men and women), and children who have inherited them from their fathers

**Continued**

Goats	Slaughtered for meat, sold for money, given as gifts to children and women, as well as to friends who are not occupationally pastoralists.	Women own them as a source of income, children receive them as gifts, and any other person.
Sheep	Sold for monetary and ritual purposes	Women, children, and hired herdsmen own them as a way of saving the money they earn from their job.
Chicken	Eggs, eaten as food by men most times and sold for money, also tell the time.	Children, women, and hired herdsmen
Land	Community, clans, and the government (state)	Grazing and water resources

Source: Modified from [Nuwamanya \(2023\)](#).

In the above table, I show how the Batuku pastoralists rank their wealth from the highest to the lowest. This table is drawn from the conversation I had with the Elder and other participants. From that conversation and my own observations during fieldwork, it was revealed that the cow is the greatest possession of the Batuku. It holds the highest position in the hierarchy of wealth. It is respected, protected, and preserved for posterity. Whereas other animals are reared, the positions they are given, as the table above shows, are not comparable to that of cows. Notice that the position of land in this region has moved higher due to the state's policy of privatisation and liberalisation of the economy. As I shall show in the following sections, land is now more valued than the cow. People apparently sell cows to buy land, which had never been witnessed in the Batukuland before. Pulling this further, I draw from Jean and John Comaroff's view of cattle as a measure of value and standard of price for all other commodities. They are a currency and a capital simultaneously; they have the unusual ability to make commensurable different forms of value and convert one form into another. It is this capacity to equate and transform, to give worth and meaning, that quite literally animates cattle over other objects ([Comaroff & Comaroff, 1990](#): p. 195). They draw on Marx's notion of fetishism to understand the strange attributes of cattle as objects, which seem to have a logic all their own, able to do things, to forge relations, and to increase on their own accord without ever disclosing the forces that fabricate them. Appadurai's definition of the commodity as an "object in motion" seeks to capture the "social life of cows" primarily in exchange with other objects ([Appadurai, 1986](#): p. 3). This clearly shows what James Ferguson means when he takes property not as a relation between people and things but as a relation between people concerning things and, therefore, a social relation that is always structured ([Ferguson, 1990](#): p. 142). Among the Batuku pastoralists, valorising is not for all livestock, but it is for cattle as the top of the property

domain, and the rules to valorise them continue to be maintained and recreated amidst contesting forces.

The Batuku pastoralists are said to be connected to each other by either blood or marriage. A person is related to other persons by blood ties from his father's and mother's sides. These connections are symbolised and articulated through cattle. Marriage connects people through payment of bride wealth called "Omukaaga". It is the mandate of the family head (father) to marry a wife for his son(s); this is done by ensuring that there are cattle to pay for bride wealth. There are many other obligations that clans, lineages, and families have over raising children and organising the whole society. During the marriage ceremony, people give the boy many cows; his uncles from both maternal and paternal sides give him cows, including his friends, brothers, clan relatives, and in-laws. It is said that after marrying, the boy is expected to move with cattle to wherever there is fresh pasture and water, including crossing the border to Uganda or DRC according to the changes in the seasons. The daily life and settings of the Batuku pastoralists revolve around the cow and its milk, meat, blood, and the prestige it gives to their owner. They take the cow and milk as important aspects of their lives and culture; their work, relationships, systems and structural organisation, clan, marriage, reciprocity, and mutual assistance interactions are hinged on the cow and the milk.

Generally, cattle remain a shared property of pride; as David Turkon puts it, cows and other animals occupy such an important place in the local plans and programmes. Livestock exchanges and sharing are managed in non-commercial traditional forms. The condition of the cattle industry has remained unchanged. Many livestock owners tend to regard livestock more as a reserve asset or property of pride than as a commercial commodity. Malleable—flexible, liable to change. Redefinition occurs by those eager to engage in new or emerging behavioural options, as well as by those invested in conserving ideals and behaviours that they see as respectable or advantageous. Institutional structures constitute arenas for conflict over the nature of property and associated behaviours (Turkon, 2003: p. 147). This malleability of identity, social mobility, and latitude for action has helped to transform social capital of all forms into tactical assets that serve to separate and differentiate individuals rather than integrate them with a "collectivity". This brings vestiges of "clientage" and influences how people relate to material things and plays a vital role in forming their social identity. The status of bovine has been transforming from highly desirable social capital in a reciprocal economy to assets in a market economy in which grazing land is in short supply, social capital is diminishing in significance, and stock theft and raiding are rampant (Turkon, *ibid.*). The precarious nature of herding as a livelihood and the changes this has brought to Batuku at the Uganda/DRC border can well be understood in Turkon's perspective. In this region, apparently, people conduct their affairs in more than one social sphere. Cattle now take on the qualities of assets in a capitalistic sense.

## 6. The Cow and Community

*“Ente, n’abantu, n’obuntu”*: cow, people, and personhood.

As James Ferguson writes in the context of Lesotho that the cow is never the concern of one household alone, so it is among the Batuku (Ferguson, 1990: p. 152). Cows are the most embedded property in the social relations of the Batuku community. Cattle exchanges through bride wealth payments, loans, and lending are one form of this embeddedness, and nearly every household is in this way linked to the other households through cow exchanges.

Livestock loans (empaano): This is where herders give cows to friends, relatives, in-laws, and neighbours on a long-term basis. The recipient is expected to care for the cow and return one of its progenies in the near future to the giver either on demand (okwenza) or at his wish. This works as conventional loans, only that it does not include interest. It is based on trust and relations. Strangers do not qualify to enter this exchange. They must first create relations with those they would like to enter these exchanges with. The need to enter such relations arises from desire, loss of cows due to drought, disease, or other calamities. The one in need always approaches the person he/she believes will loan him a cow, who is often a relative, a friend, an in-law, and “asks for a cow”. This is a very special moment and must be handled with utmost responsibility. Approaching someone for a cow starts with giving gifts to the prospective giver by the intending recipient. These gifts are in the form of alcohol, sugar, or soft drinks that are carried by the person in need of “asking for a cow”. These gifts create obligations for each of the persons in the cow loaning activity. The obligation to receive comes with the obligations to give and repay. Cow loans come with relations that are built on other relationships that have been created for that purpose or were already in existence before the desire to ask for a cow loan. In this form of exchange, the receiver is the client, and the giver is the patron. However, this patron-client relation is more about obligations and trust than power and subordination. Empaano (cow loan) refers to the relations generated by the livestock lender/borrower, which can also be termed as patron/client, but something that goes beyond the two personalities and extends to families, clans, and the whole community at large. Livestock is a social form of wealth, which participates in the economic life of the community in a way that more “personal forms” of wealth such as money do not.

There is also livestock “lending for custody” (okuhereeka): This is where herders give cows to friends, relatives, in-laws, and neighbours for a specified period. This is mostly done due to a lack of enough pasture or water at their owner's place, or a lack of a good herdsman to care for the animals, and the owner may not have time to take care of them him/herself. This exchange is initiated by the owner of the cows. The recipient is requested by the animal owner. When the recipient accepts, then he/she must take care of the stock and return them to their rightful owner on demand or when the owner has put in place all that was lacking at the time he/she opted to ask another person to take custody of his cows. In this

exchange, the custody giver receives the use of the animals and all the proceeds and profits arising from them, and usually some of the offspring of such animals. This is based on the good relations the owner created with the recipient. It is also a relation that is built on other earlier created relations. This is a give and take kind of exchange and can be described as one that is characterised by a balanced reciprocity of all exchanges in the cattle economy of Batuku pastoralists. Okuhereeka (livestock lending for custody)—a man with a large herd may place some of his animals with friends, relatives, and neighbours on a temporary basis, and even smaller herders are usually enmeshed in networks of reciprocal favours, patronage, and dependence. Thus, although livestock is legally the property of a single household, it is a kind of property to which many dependents, and in fact, the entire community may be said to have some sort of claim.

Lending cows for milk (*okuha amata*): This is where lactating cows are given to relatives, friends, in-laws, and neighbours for the purposes of milking them to meet their own milk needs in their households. This is initiated by the household that is in need of milk and has enough grazing space but has insufficient cows to milk. The household head approaches one of their relatives, friends, in-laws, or neighbours and requests lactating cows to support his family with milk. If the request is granted, cows are taken to the household of the person who requested them. The recipient looks after the animals, gets milk from them, and returns them to the rightful owner on demand or after attaining his/her own sufficient milking cows. In this case, the recipient does not take any of the animals or their offspring. In all these exchange situations, livestock owners can take advantage of distant pastures, relieve themselves of management responsibilities, and establish relations of clientage with the recipient of the loaned, lent, and given animals. In this exchange, there is a power imbalance and patron-client relations do characterize its processes. Using Ferguson's explanation, the owner of a large herd can become a "big man" both through patron-client relationships so established by ostentatious display of his animal wealth through the village and beyond (Ferguson, 1990: p. 153; Krätli, 2023). A man with cows may also establish himself in the community by helping others with animals in ceremonies, access to enough milk, and sacrifices. Livestock are always embedded in these relations of dependence, and whenever one finds an animal performing a technical task, one will usually find that it is performing a social task as well. In all these social tasks of livestock, too, the number of animals is of more importance than their "productivity" in the narrow economic sense.

A man who is wealthy in livestock, known as *omuguuda* (*abaguuda* plural) among the Batuku, regards his herd as a resource which contains both social and economic benefits. Livestock are nearly always involved in relations of patronage, and a man with many animals is for this reason greatly respected—he is a man "who can help the people". The respect does not merely come from wealth, but from the sociality of the wealth, which "belongs" in some sense to the whole community. Most times, neighbours, relatives, friends, and in-laws with economic

challenges visit the home of the cattle-wealthy man (omuguuda) and register their various challenges. He gives them money, bulls, oxen, cows, or even herding jobs in one of his kraals to look after his cattle and get paid. This accords power and influence over other members of the community. This kind of power is more relevant in the current situation because such a person is called to buy land by the smallholders and can easily influence the land board official to process his land titles without verifying whether the land they are processing belongs to him. To summarise what the exchanges mean among the Batuku pastoralists, I capture the words of one of the participants: “Akuuha ente aba akuhaire obwomeezi; aba akuhaire amata; aba akuhaire omukazi; sente; n’omukaago.” This is to literally say that one who lends a cow to another person gives that person life in the form of milk, a wife, money, and relations. Therefore, the cow influences relations and builds power blocks and influence among the Batuku pastoralists. It is because livestock is a social and shared domain of wealth that borrowers and debtors may be expected to promote the prestige complex that makes the “big man” to be respected (Ferguson, 1990). Likewise, these dependents have no interest in valorising the accumulation of “self” forms of wealth such as money and consumer goods, since they will have no access to these. Clients can be expected to resist such an occurrence, and thus to support the “one-way barrier”. Tradition is never a residue of the past, but it is created, re-created, negotiated, fought, and challenged. If culture rules governing livestock keeping persist, it is because they are made to persist; continuity, as much as change, must be created and fought for. These rules may be “traditional”, and they may be resistant to change, but they are not inert; they are perpetually challenged and always at issue, and always there is something at stake.

“Ente eta ahabi n’aharungi; ente ehonderwa ahabi n’aharungi; Ruteerana enganda, amahanga n’ebirwa” (the cow puts its owner in a good and bad place; the cow is followed in a good and awkward situation; it is the one that unites clans, nations and territories). This summarises the relations people have with each other through the cow. The place of cattle in Africa is especially interesting in this respect. Livestock are first and foremost metaphors of social community, signifiers of the human condition. (Evans-Prichard, 2008: p. 120 [1940]) saw that cattle provide the meeting ground of ecology and symbolic value, and that their prominence in indigenous consciousness and social life went well beyond the purely utilitarian. Not only were social identities and relations represented by means of beasts (1940: 18, 89), in the “bovine idiom” and “cattle clock” of the Nuer (1940: 19, 101) lay a bridge between material conditions and collective meaning, between practical activity and its cultural construction.

## 7. Conclusion

The Batuku pastoralists operate a system of networked institutions and practices as they produce their livelihood necessities. This system of practices continues to be a source of their solidarity, social well-being, and social capital. They have

indiscriminately served all Batuku in their social diversities. That is to say, both the poor and the rich benefit from these institutional mechanisms of livelihood production. It is within the operation of these institutions and practices that the Batuku border cultural context was constructed and operated. This border context does not emphasise citizenship but the well-being of the people in the region through the practice of pastoralism. Access to pastoral resources in the region is built within this border cultural context of the Batuku. This border context facilitates the operation of these institutions and practices, whether on the Ugandan side of the border or on the DRC border side. Therefore, the changing dynamics in the border region can perhaps be articulated very well when conceptualized in view of how they have impacted the operations of the Batuku pastoralists' border cultural context that has been a thread that tied the institutions and practices together. The changing of the character of the border from being a porous to a hard border; the state activities in response to the violent militia operations in DRC; the militia abductions of pastoralists and raiding of their livestock; and the Ugandan state push for land reform from communal land to privately owned land use have greatly weakened the effectiveness of these institutions and practices as sources of Batuku resilience and have exposed them to a situation of vulnerability. This vulnerability greatly comes into effect when cattle become depleted due to drought and failure to cross to either side of the border. With depletion of cattle, which are the thread that has for long tied together the institutions, practices, and networks, vulnerability and destitution become part of the Batuku pastoralists in the region. The roles played by the cow in the clan, the family, and in marriage are lost with the depletion of cattle in the region.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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