

**Framing the “Other”: Literary and Media Representations of Pastoral Conflict in
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Article Info	Abstract
<i>Article History:</i> Received 08 February 2026 Approved 16 March 2026 Published 30 April 2026	Pastoral conflicts in East Africa are frequently narrated through discourses that construct pastoral communities as cultural “others,” shaping public perceptions and policy responses. Although scholarship has examined pastoral conflict from political, environmental, and socio-economic perspectives, less attention has been paid to how literary texts and media narratives together frame pastoral identities across national contexts. This study addresses this gap by comparatively examining representations of pastoral “others” in Kenya and Uganda through literary and journalistic narratives. The study draws on framing theory and the concept of othering to explain how narratives construct social identities by emphasizing difference, marginality, and cultural stereotypes. Methodologically, it adopts a comparative qualitative design that integrates literary analysis with media discourse analysis. The Kenyan case focuses on depictions of the Maasai in the works of Henry Ole Kulet, while the Ugandan case examines media portrayals of Balaalo herders in selected newspaper reports and digital news platforms. Texts were purposively sampled to capture dominant narratives of pastoral conflict and inter-community relations. The findings reveal that both literary and media narratives frame pastoral groups through discourses of cultural alterity, mobility, and contested land relations. However, important differences emerge: Kulet’s fiction tends to humanize the Maasai by foregrounding cultural identity, resilience, and historical marginalization, whereas Ugandan media coverage frequently constructs Balaalo herders through conflict-centered frames that emphasize land disputes, insecurity, and tensions with subsistence farming communities. By juxtaposing literary imagination with media representation, the study demonstrates how narrative forms shape public understandings of pastoral conflict in East Africa.
Keywords: <i>Framing Theory, Othering, Pastoral Conflict, Media Discourse, Literary Representation, Maasai, Balaalo Herders.</i>	

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INTRODUCTION**Background and Context: Pastoralist Societies,
Conflicts, and Othering in Kenya and Uganda**

Pastoralist communities in Kenya and Uganda depend heavily on livestock herding for their livelihoods. Among the most widely documented groups are the Maasai of Kenya,

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whose population is estimated at about 360,000. Their socio-political organization is structured around age-sets, clans, and spiritual leadership, which regulate resource management, social cohesion, and conflict resolution within and across communities (Sankan, 1971). These institutions have historically enabled the Maasai to sustain pastoral livelihoods despite ecological pressures and political change. In Uganda, pastoralist groups such as the Balaalo have traditionally relied on cattle herding in regions such as Acholi, Lango, and West Nile (Behrend, 1999). Similar to the Maasai, the Balaalo have faced persistent challenges in accessing land and grazing resources, often due to environmental pressures and the expansion of agricultural activities (Nalule, 2010).

Pastoralist communities in both countries operate within socio-political contexts characterized by marginalization, restricted access to resources, and recurring instability. Conflicts over land and water are frequently linked to broader political and economic dynamics, including regional power struggles and state policies (Markakis, 1993). The introduction of land privatization disrupted communal tenure systems that had historically regulated pastoral mobility, thereby intensifying disputes and inter-community tensions (Galaty, 1992). Population growth, climate variability, and the expansion of sedentary agriculture have further increased competition for grazing areas, reinforcing cycles of low-intensity conflicts across pastoral regions (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Recent studies also show that unregulated pastoral mobility can exacerbate tensions between nomadic herders and subsistence farmers, particularly where institutional regulation of grazing rights and land access is weak (Ocan et al., 2025).

While scholarship has extensively examined the political, ecological, and economic drivers of pastoral conflicts in East Africa, comparatively limited attention has been paid to how cultural narratives shape public understanding of these conflicts. In particular, literary texts and media narratives often frame pastoral communities through discourses of difference that portray them as socially or culturally deviant from dominant agrarian populations. Such representations contribute to processes of *othering*, a concept that refers to the construction of marginalized groups as

fundamentally different from dominant communities, thereby legitimizing their exclusion from social, political, and economic spaces (Said, 1978). In Kenya and Uganda, pastoralists are frequently depicted as backward, primitive, or inherently conflict-prone, narratives that can influence public opinion and policy responses to pastoral conflicts (Dyson-Hudson, 1980).

Despite the growing recognition of narrative framing in conflict studies, few comparative studies have examined how literary and media discourses jointly construct pastoral identities across national contexts in East Africa. This article addresses that gap by analyzing representations of pastoral “others” in Kenyan and Ugandan literary texts and media reports. The study is guided by the following research question:

The study is guided by the following research question: How are pastoralist communities represented in selected literary texts and media narratives in Kenya and Uganda, and in what ways do these representations construct pastoralists as cultural or social “others,” while also revealing similarities and differences in the narrative framing of pastoral conflicts across the two national contexts?

This article argues that literary and media narratives play a significant role in shaping the social construction of pastoralist identities. By comparatively examining Kenyan and Ugandan texts, the study demonstrates that representations of pastoral communities often reproduce discourses of othering that frame pastoralists as marginal, disruptive, or incompatible with modern state structures, thereby influencing broader public perceptions and policy debates surrounding pastoral conflicts.

Implications of Othering on Conflict Dynamics

Othering has significant implications for the escalation and perpetuation of pastoral conflicts. Marginalized communities often experience restricted access to essential resources, political participation, and social services, conditions that foster resentment and mistrust among groups (Said, 1978). This exclusion frequently generates cycles of retaliation and violent confrontation, particularly over contested grazing lands and water sources (Behrend, 1999). Moreover, othering may become institutionalized through policies that

privilege certain groups, reinforcing structural inequalities and deepening inter-communal divisions (Markakis, 1993). Understanding the mechanisms of othering is therefore essential for developing conflict resolution strategies that address both the material and symbolic dimensions of pastoralist marginalization.

Towards Inclusive Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution

Addressing the consequences of othering requires inclusive approaches to peacebuilding and policy-making. Recognizing the legitimacy of pastoralist livelihoods and integrating community perspectives into governance frameworks are vital steps (Markakis, 1993). Traditional knowledge systems and indigenous conflict resolution practices such as those employed by the Maasai and the Balaalo offer valuable mechanisms for fostering reconciliation and sustainable peace (Ocan, et al, 2025; Galaty, 2016). By revitalizing these systems and promoting narratives that challenge stereotypes, policymakers and scholars can work towards more inclusive and resilient pastoralist societies in Kenya and Uganda. Such efforts are crucial for bridging divides, reducing conflict, and promoting equitable development in pastoralist regions.

The study of East African pastoral conflicts has long been dominated by localized accounts that focus either on ethnographic realities or on media reportage, often neglecting the transnational and narrative dimensions of these conflicts. While scholars have analyzed pastoral societies within Kenya and Uganda separately, there remains a significant gap in understanding how cross-border narrative representations shape perceptions of identity, belonging, and marginality. In particular, the framing of pastoral communities such as the Balaalo and the Maasai in both local and transnational media often reinforces stereotypical tropes, yet these representations are rarely contextualized against the broader literary narratives that depict similar socio-political tensions (Said, 1978). This gap limits our comprehension of how narratives circulate across borders, influence policy discourse, and inform public imagination about pastoralist groups in East Africa.

Equally notable is the absence of systematic comparative work that juxtaposes media portrayals with literary depictions of pastoral conflicts. While media narratives frequently emphasize immediacy, sensationalism, and moral binaries, literary texts such as the works of Ole Kulet tend to explore the historical, cultural, and psychological dimensions of these communities with greater nuance (Kulet, 2008, 2011). Without integrating these two discursive domains, scholarship risks producing fragmented analyses that fail to capture the complex interplay between representation, power, and conflict. Addressing this gap would not only enrich African conflict studies but also contribute to postcolonial and media studies by demonstrating how literature and journalism collectively shape the contours of social memory and collective identity across the East African region (Behrend, 1999).

This article therefore aims to critically examine the representation of the Balaalo and Maasai across distinct narrative mediums, focusing on media portrayals of the Balaalo herders in Uganda and Kenya, alongside Ole Kulet's literary depictions of the Maasai in *Vanishing Herds* and *Blossoms of the Savannah*. By juxtaposing these portrayals, the study investigates the narrative strategies through which each group is framed and seeks to uncover the ideological, cultural, and normative assumptions that underpin such framings. Guided by this objective, the study addresses three key questions: How do Ugandan and Kenyan media frame the Balaalo herders, and what broader socio-political or cultural discourses inform these representations? How does Kulet's fiction depict the Maasai, and what narrative techniques are employed to construct their identity? Finally, what assumptions underlie these differing portrayals, and how do they shape perceptions of "the Other" within the context of pastoral conflicts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pastoral Conflicts in East Africa: Socio-Economic and Historical Dynamics

Pastoralism has constituted a central mode of subsistence in East Africa for centuries, with communities such as the Maasai, Borana, and Rendille developing adaptive strategies for survival

in arid and semi-arid environments (Galaty, 1994; Ocan et al., 2022). The mobility inherent in pastoralism enables the sustainable use of scarce resources and underpins complex social, economic, and political networks (Markakis, 1993). While early anthropological scholarship emphasized the ecological adaptability and social organization of pastoral societies, later studies have increasingly focused on the pressures that threaten pastoral livelihoods in contemporary contexts. Climate variability, population growth, and state-led land reforms have significantly altered traditional grazing patterns and resource governance (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Similarly, the expansion of sedentary agriculture and processes of land privatization have constrained pastoral mobility and access to water resources, thereby intensifying inter-community tensions and increasing the likelihood of violent conflict (Dyson-Hudson & Dyson-Hudson, 1980).

These structural pressures are compounded by the political regulation of pastoral mobility across national boundaries. Transhumant systems that historically depended on seasonal cross-border movement now face restrictions imposed by modern state borders and security regimes (Behrend, 1999). Scholars therefore increasingly interpret pastoral conflict not simply as resource scarcity but as the outcome of competing governance regimes, economic marginalization, and ecological change. The socio-economic consequences of such conflicts are substantial. Communities affected by recurrent violence frequently experience chronic poverty, reduced access to healthcare and education, and deepened social marginalization (Nalule, 2010). Moreover, recurrent resource disputes weaken both customary and formal institutions of conflict management. Traditional mechanisms such as elders' councils and inter-clan negotiations, once central to maintaining pastoral peace, have become less effective in addressing disputes shaped by contemporary political and economic pressures (Sankan, 1971). While these studies illuminate the structural drivers of pastoral conflict, they pay comparatively limited attention to how pastoral communities are discursively represented in public narratives—an analytical gap that this study addresses.

Framing, Othering, and Discourse Representation in Media Studies

A key analytical concept guiding this study is framing, which refers to the process through which communicators select and emphasize particular aspects of reality in order to shape interpretation and evaluation (Entman, 1993). In media discourse, framing operates through narrative emphasis, lexical choices, and thematic structuring that guide audiences toward specific understandings of social issues. Closely related to framing is the concept of othering, understood as the discursive construction of groups as culturally or socially different from a perceived normative center (Said, 1978). Othering functions through representational practices that portray certain communities as exotic, backward, or threatening, thereby reinforcing hierarchies of power and legitimacy.

Within media studies, discourse representation refers to the ways language, imagery, and narrative conventions collectively construct social identities and political realities. These concepts provide an analytical framework for examining how pastoralist communities are portrayed in public narratives and how such portrayals shape broader socio-political perceptions.

Existing scholarship on African media demonstrates that pastoral communities are frequently framed through conflict-centered narratives that portray them as violent, archaic, or resistant to modern governance (Eisei, 2008). These representations echo colonial-era discourses that depicted African societies as objects of administrative control and development intervention (Said, 1978). Scholars such as Nyamnjoh (2005) argue that such framings do not merely reflect reality but actively shape public perception and policy responses. For instance, persistent portrayals of pastoralists as sources of instability can influence governmental security policies and the allocation of development resources.

However, some scholars caution against treating media representations as uniformly negative. Skjerdal (2011) demonstrates that African media outlets occasionally incorporate local perspectives that challenge dominant stereotypes, though such narratives remain

comparatively marginal. Similarly, Okello (2012) notes that sensationalized reporting often amplifies perceptions of political and economic risk, which can influence investment and development priorities. These debates suggest that media narratives about pastoral conflict operate within a contested discursive terrain in which competing frames coexist. Building on this scholarship, the present study operationalizes framing and othering as analytical categories for examining how pastoralist identities are constructed across media narratives in Kenya and Uganda.

Literary Depictions of Pastoral Communities: African Fiction on Nomadic Life and Identity

African literary scholarship has similarly explored how pastoral identities and rural transformations are represented in fiction. Literary texts frequently examine the tensions between pastoral traditions and changing socio-economic landscapes, thereby providing nuanced cultural interpretations that complement anthropological and media analyses. For instance, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* and Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* interrogate issues of land ownership, rural transformation, and community resilience within agrarian and pastoral settings (Head, 1969; Ngũgĩ, 1977). These narratives highlight how struggles over land and resources shape identity, belonging, and social relations.

More recent literary works continue to engage with themes of ecological stress, displacement, and mobility in pastoral contexts. Writers such as Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor and Mukoma wa Ngugi depict landscapes affected by climate change and socio-political upheaval while simultaneously foregrounding pastoral resilience and cultural continuity (Mukoma wa Ngugi, 2019; Owuor, 2014). Unlike many journalistic accounts, these literary narratives often resist reductive portrayals of pastoral communities as either victims or aggressors, instead presenting complex human experiences shaped by historical memory and cultural identity.

Within literary theory, the figure of the nomad has also been interpreted metaphorically as a symbol of fluid identity and resistance to rigid territorial boundaries. Postcolonial scholars argue that nomadic identities challenge fixed notions of nationality, ethnicity, and belonging, thereby

illuminating broader questions of hybridity and mobility in African societies (Mbembe, 2001). While literary analyses provide valuable cultural insights into pastoralist subjectivities, they are rarely examined alongside media discourse, leaving the relationship between fictional and journalistic representations insufficiently explored.

Positioning the Current Study within the Scholarly Gap

The preceding scholarship demonstrates that pastoral conflicts have been widely examined from anthropological, political, and environmental perspectives, while media studies and literary criticism have separately explored representational dynamics. However, these bodies of research remain largely fragmented across disciplinary boundaries. Much of the existing literature treats pastoral conflict primarily as a socio-economic or ecological problem, with comparatively limited attention to the discursive construction of pastoral identities in public narratives (Markakis, 1993). Similarly, literary analyses often focus on thematic interpretations without systematically comparing fictional narratives to media representations.

This study builds upon these scholarly foundations while addressing their limitations by integrating insights from media studies and literary criticism. Specifically, it employs the concepts of framing, othering, and discourse representation as analytical tools for examining how pastoralist communities are portrayed across journalistic and literary texts in East Africa. Through a comparative analysis of Kenyan and Ugandan narratives, the research investigates how different narrative forms construct pastoral identities, how these representations converge or diverge, and how they contribute to broader socio-political understandings of pastoral conflict. In doing so, the study advances interdisciplinary scholarship by bridging media and literary analyses and by demonstrating how narrative representations shape perceptions of pastoral societies within contemporary African discourse.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Media Framing Theory

Media Framing Theory provides a foundational lens for understanding how

information is structured and interpreted in complex sociopolitical contexts. Goffman (1974) introduced the concept of “frames” as cognitive schemata through which individuals organize experience and interpret social reality. He distinguishes between primary frameworks, which serve as general interpretive patterns, and secondary frameworks, which are context-dependent and socially constructed. This distinction is critical for analyzing how media narratives selectively highlight or suppress aspects of pastoral conflicts, shaping public understanding and policy responses.

Building on Goffman, Entman (1993) operationalizes framing as the process of selecting particular aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient to promote specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and/or treatment recommendations. In the context of this study, Entman’s framework guides the identification of narrative emphases in media and literary texts, such as how pastoralist actions are portrayed, which dimensions are foregrounded or marginalized, and how these representations influence perceptions of pastoral and farming communities.

Postcolonial Theory and Othering

Postcolonial theory interrogates the enduring legacies of colonial power in cultural, epistemic, and political domains. Said (1978) demonstrated how Western constructions of the “Orient” as exotic, backward, and Othered functioned as discursive tools of imperial domination. Knowledge production, he argues, is inseparable from power, with epistemic hierarchies underpinning these representations.

Spivak (1988) further develops the concept of Othering, particularly analyzing how marginalized groups such as women and colonized communities are systematically silenced within hegemonic discourse. Her insights are applied here to examine how pastoral communities are represented in media and literature: as “others,” their voices and experiences are often obscured or misrepresented, reproducing social hierarchies and shaping collective memory.

Trauma and Identity in Literature

Trauma theory provides tools for analyzing how psychological, cultural, and historical wounds are represented in literature and media. Caruth (1996) argues that trauma disrupts linear experience and conventional forms of memory, often producing fragmented and non-linear narrative structures. Herman (1992) and Kaplan (2005) emphasize trauma’s collective dimensions, showing how political violence, oppression, and historical subjugation reverberate across generations, shaping both social and individual identity.

In this study, literary trauma frameworks illuminate narrative strategies such as fragmented temporality, symbolic repetition, and unreliable narration that convey the intensity of pastoral communities’ lived experiences of conflict and marginalization. These strategies help trace the interconnections between personal suffering, communal memory, and broader sociopolitical conditions.

Integrating Framing, Othering, and Trauma

The combined application of media framing, postcolonial perspectives on Othering, and trauma studies provides a multidimensional analytical lens. Media frames structure perception while potentially reinforcing hierarchical narratives (Entman, 1993). Postcolonial theory reveals how Othering perpetuates marginalization and shapes collective memory (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). Trauma theory complements these insights by highlighting the psychological and emotional consequences of marginalization (Caruth, 1996; Herman, 1992; Kaplan, 2005).

This integrated framework directly informs the analytical categories used in the findings section, specifically, the framing of pastoral communities, processes of Othering, and the representation of trauma, allowing for a critical understanding of the reciprocal relationships between power, representation, and identity in East African pastoral conflicts.

METHODS

This study adopts a comparative qualitative design that integrates media discourse analysis with literary criticism to interrogate how “Others” are framed within Kenyan and Ugandan pastoral

conflicts. Comparative qualitative designs are particularly effective in identifying thematic continuities and divergences across narrative mediums, thereby revealing how social identities are constructed through both journalistic and fictional discourses (Maxwell, 2013). The discourse analytic approach, drawing on Entman's (1993) framing paradigm, provides a lens through which to examine how mass media shape public understanding by selectively emphasizing certain dimensions of conflict. In parallel, literary criticism specifically close reading enables an exploration of the symbolic and narrative strategies employed in fictional texts to construct representations of marginalized communities (Barry, 2017). Together, these methods facilitate a holistic exploration of the pastoral "Other" by positioning media and literature not as isolated cultural products but as interlinked discursive fields (Fairclough, 1995).

The corpus consisted of two primary strands: mass media texts and literary texts. The media corpus comprised 48 texts in total: 32 newspaper articles and 16 television news segments, all published or broadcast between January 2024 and December 2025, a period marked by heightened pastoral conflict and cross-border tensions. Media outlets included Uganda's *Daily Monitor* and *New Vision*, and Kenya's *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*, selected for their national reach, influence on public opinion, and regular coverage of pastoralist issues (Nyabuga & Booker, 2013). Television segments were drawn from NTV Uganda and Citizen TV Kenya, chosen for audience reach and archival accessibility (BBC Media Action, 2020). Sampling focused on news reports, feature stories, and editorials addressing Balaalo migrations in Uganda and Maasai land disputes in Kenya, using purposive criteria that prioritized relevance, prominence, and topicality.

The literary corpus centered on two novels by the late Kenyan writer Ole Kulet: *Vanishing Herds* (2011) and *Blossoms of the Savannah* (2008). These works were selected for their explicit engagement with pastoral life, ecological change, and inter-ethnic contestations, and are recognized as seminal explorations of Maasai identity within East African literary studies (Kanogo, 2013).

Analytically, media texts underwent thematic and frame analysis informed by Entman's

(1993) typology of frames, which categorizes content according to problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. Thematic coding was conducted iteratively, identifying recurring portrayals of Balaalo herders and Maasai communities, with attention to blame attribution, moral positioning, and proposed remedies (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Literary texts were examined through close reading, focusing on character construction, narrative focalization, and symbolic motifs, particularly representations of land, livestock, and mobility. Postcolonial theory guided the analysis to understand constructions of "Otherness" and the politics of representation (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994). This dual framework allowed comparative interrogation of discursive production across media and literary genres.

Ethical considerations were foregrounded, given the study's focus on marginalized communities. Textual interpretations were guided by sensitivity to pastoralists' lived experiences and aimed to avoid essentialist readings (Galaty, 2016; Markakis, 2011). While the research does not directly represent pastoral voices, it interrogates the structures through which they are portrayed (Nalule, 2019). By juxtaposing media and literary representations, the study highlights the risks of oversimplified framings and underscores the importance of nuanced, culturally informed perspectives (Hogg, 2021).

The study is constrained by the selection of only two literary works and a limited set of media texts within a specific time frame, which may not capture all possible representations of pastoral conflicts. Furthermore, the reliance on published sources means that informal or community-based narratives are not included.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Media Portrayals of Balaalo Herders

Ugandan media representations of Balaalo herders are overwhelmingly framed as invaders, environmental degraders, and economic competitors. Headlines and reports in outlets such as *Daily Monitor* and *New Vision* frequently depict Balaalo as outsiders whose movements into Bunyoro, Acholi, or Lango are framed as land grabbing and the displacement of local

communities (Johnson & Francis, 2022; Atuhairwe, 2021; Okello, 2020). One report notes, “The Balaalo invaded the farmland, leaving destruction in their wake” (Daily Monitor, 2021, p. 12), exemplifying the “invader” frame, which casts the Balaalo as existential threats to land rights and local sovereignty (Byaruhanga, 2022).

Closely tied to this is the environmental degradation frame. Articles associate Balaalo cattle with overgrazing, deforestation, and soil erosion, portraying herders as agents of ecological decline (Kagolo, 2020). Testimonies from agronomists, environmental activists, and government officials lend authority to these claims (Nalule, 2019). Similarly, the economic competition frame positions Balaalo herders as aggressive commercial actors whose large herds undermine subsistence farmers and small-scale pastoralists, with accusations of political patronage heightening perceptions of structural inequality (Mwesigwa, 2021; Sserunjogi, 2021).

Linguistic analysis reveals that descriptors such as *illegal grazers*, *foreign herders*, and *encroachers* emphasize exclusion and criminality (New Vision Editorial, 2020). Visual imagery in Ugandan photojournalism depicting overcrowded kraals, emaciated land, and confrontations symbolically reinforces ecological strain and social disorder (Daily Monitor, 2021). Together, these linguistic and visual devices construct a persistent discourse of otherness around the Balaalo in public culture (Byaruhanga, 2022).

Literary Depictions of the Maasai in Ole Kulet’s Works

In contrast, Ole Kulet’s literary representation of the Maasai (Maa) combines heroic romanticization with cultural realism. In *To Become a Man* (1972), *Is It Possible?* (1971), and *Blossoms of the Savannah* (2007), the Maasai are valorized as custodians of bravery, honor, and cultural integrity, while simultaneously negotiating pressures of modernization, gender tensions, and socio-economic vulnerability (Kulet, 2007). Kulet emphasizes pastoral life as a site of dignity and resilience, representing cattle-keeping as both a spiritual and existential practice (Galaty, 1994). This heroic framing resonates with postcolonial literary currents seeking to recover

African identities through valorization of pastoral traditions (Sankan, 1971).

Yet Kulet avoids uncritical romanticization, portraying challenges such as educational pressures, the exploitation of women through early marriage, and the intrusion of state development policies on Maasai livelihoods (Markakis, 1993). Gendered narratives are salient: female characters navigate between patriarchal tradition and modern opportunities, while young male warriors symbolize cultural continuity amid shifting economic and social realities (Behrend, 1999; Hodgson, 2001). This dual framing positions Maasai identity as contested, dynamic, and culturally negotiated, rather than static or idealized.

Comparative Analysis

Comparing Ugandan media portrayals of Balaalo herders with Kulet’s depiction of the Maasai reveals both convergences and divergences. Both construct pastoralist groups as socially significant “Others,” but with contrasting moral valences. Balaalo are criminalized through frames of invasion, degradation, and competition, while Maasai are imbued with dignity and cultural depth, even when their practices are problematized (Said, 1978).

Land and cattle function as central markers of identity and conflict in both contexts. Balaalo are framed as exploitative commercial grazers, while Maasai are depicted as traditional custodians of cattle wealth (Dyson-Hudson & Dyson-Hudson, 1980). Narrative tone diverges: journalism emphasizes urgency, sensationalism, and political accusation, whereas fiction allows for nuance, interiority, and cultural exploration (Nalule, 2019). Medium-specific strategies reinforce these differences. Journalism relies on episodic conflict accounts, authoritative quotations, and visual imagery, whereas literature deploys symbolism, characterization, and historical trajectories to situate pastoralists within broader cultural contexts (Kulet, 2007; Daily Monitor, 2021). This comparative perspective underscores how media and literary discourses operate as parallel yet uneven sites of pastoral representation.

Framing and Socio-Political Interests

Framing rarely functions in a political vacuum. Both literary and journalistic texts reflect socio-political interests of states, elites, and transnational institutions that shape conflict discourses (Ramirez, 2024). Entman's (1993) framing theory posits that media selectively emphasize aspects of reality to promote interpretations aligned with ideological stakes.

In Kenya, Kulet situates Maasai communities within heroic pastoralist ethos while highlighting land dispossession and marginalization under the postcolonial state (Mkutu, Müller-Koné, & Owino, 2021). His narratives operate as socio-political commentary, resisting deterministic readings of media influence by foregrounding literary nuance and cultural introspection (Said, 1978). Insights from such literary portrayals can inform conflict-sensitive policymaking, suggesting the need to engage local narratives and cultural memory in land reform and development interventions.

In Uganda, Balaalo are depicted as "outsiders" and "encroachers" across regions like Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, reinforcing political narratives of land governance, resource access, and identity-based exclusion (Mariam, 2020; Laing, 2024). Such framings operate as mechanisms for managing competing claims to territory and legitimacy (Vergara, Siles, Castro, & Chaves, 2023). Recognizing these frames can inform interventions that reduce conflict escalation, improve media literacy, and promote inclusive governance.

Cultural Memory and Identity Politics

The construction of the "Other" is closely linked to cultural memory and identity politics. Kulet inscribes Maasai pastoralist identity within a historical continuum, valorizing tradition and communal cohesion as resistance against state assimilation (Till & Robinson, 2025). Literature thus functions as a medium of cultural resilience, preserving collective memory and countering homogenizing state narratives (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1992; Mwangi, 2024; Ng'eno, 2023). Policymakers and cultural practitioners can leverage these narratives to strengthen community heritage initiatives and development programs sensitive to pastoralist identity.

Conversely, Ugandan media frames situate Balaalo as disruptors of indigenous communities' memory, resonating in areas scarred by insurgency and forced displacement (Kandasamy & McDonnell, 2025; Botha, 2025). Media selectively amplifies aspects of reality, weaponizing collective memory to reinforce social boundaries (Entman, 1993; Mwamari, 2021). These findings highlight the need for journalists, educators, and conflict mediators to critically engage with historical memory to avoid stereotyping and escalating tensions. Policies on land use, pastoral mobility, and conflict resolution should consider how memory and identity intersect in contested spaces.

Literature Versus Journalism in Shaping Perceptions

Literature and journalism shape public perception in contrasting but complementary ways. Kulet employs allegory, symbolism, and moral questioning to invite empathy and reflection on Maasai socio-historical realities, complicating stereotypes and highlighting structural injustices (Unks et al., 2023; Rwelengera, 2024). Literature embeds marginalized communities within cultural and historical imaginaries, fostering nuanced understanding and challenging dominant narratives.

Ugandan journalism, by contrast, privileges immediacy and sensationalism, framing Balaalo as perpetual outsiders and threats, reinforcing social polarization and "othering" (Ewuzie & Ilo, 2024; Tunanukye & Atwebembeire, 2024; Baligira, 2020; Klaasen, 2020; Brouwers, 2021; Budd, 2024). While literature humanizes pastoral groups, journalism risks entrenching stereotypes, underscoring the need for conflict-sensitive reporting, ethical standards, and narrative complexity.

Implications for Intercommunal Understanding and Peace-Building

Divergent framings carry implications for intercommunal relations and peace-building. Kulet's narratives, though occasionally romanticized, humanize pastoralists, foreground existential struggles, and cultivate narrative empathy (Luciani, 2020; Ocan & Okumu, 2025). Literature thus fosters cross-ethnic understanding and inclusive national identity, complementing

cultural mediation and conflict-sensitive storytelling frameworks (Killen, Luken Raz, & Graham, 2022).

Ugandan media, by portraying Balaalo as perpetual outsiders, reinforces social boundaries and structural othering (Ocan, 2025; Komakech, 2023). Neglecting ecological, policy, and security contexts risks legitimizing exclusionary practices and heightening intercommunal conflict (Twinomuhangi, Sseviiri, & Kato, 2023). Policy and practice should integrate narrative-based approaches, emphasizing shared vulnerabilities such as climate change, land scarcity, and institutional fragility. Storytelling that bridges rather than divides can support peace-building, and future research could examine intersections between literary and media narratives in shaping perceptions, empathy, and policy responses (Mbaziira et al., 2023).

Comparative Insights

The analysis reveals shared and divergent patterns in pastoralist representation. Both Ugandan media and Kulet's literature construct pastoralists as socially and culturally distinct, yet Ugandan frames moralize and criminalize, while Kenyan literature valorizes and contextualizes. Commonalities include the centrality of land and cattle, agentive asymmetry, and the role of narrative in framing social identity. Divergences arise in tone, medium-specific strategies, and the extent to which internal perspectives of pastoralists are included. These findings demonstrate that the same social category—pastoralists—can be constructed in multiple, contextually contingent ways, reflecting the ideological stakes of media and literary discourse (Said, 1978; Goffman, 1974; Maxwell, 2019). Comparative analysis underscores the importance of integrating micro-level linguistic scrutiny with broader socio-political and cultural contextualization.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that narratives play a decisive role in shaping perceptions of East African pastoralist communities, with the Maasai of Kenya and the Balaalo herders of Uganda serving as focal cases. Ole Kulet's literary portrayals of the Maasai reveal how fiction

constructs cultural identity, resilience, and communal memory through symbolic and thematic strategies. In contrast, Ugandan media frequently frame the Balaalo as intruders, land grabbers, or security threats, producing reductive and stigmatizing images that reinforce the pastoralist as the disruptive "Other." These differing yet intersecting representations underscore that narratives are not neutral mirrors of social tensions; they actively shape public perception, influence policy debates, and mediate inter-community relations.

Theoretically, the study contributes to media framing and postcolonial scholarship by illustrating how "Othering" operates differently across literary and journalistic domains. By bridging Entman's media framing framework with Said's notion of the "Other," it highlights the dual function of narratives: legitimizing power hierarchies while creating space for contestation. Practically, the findings reveal that both media portrayals and literary tropes have concrete consequences—they can either perpetuate marginalization or foster understanding and empathy. Comparative analysis clarifies how pastoral identities are socially constructed, contested, and mobilized within distinct historical, political, and environmental contexts.

Future research should extend comparative studies to other East African contexts, such as Ethiopia and South Sudan, using interdisciplinary approaches that integrate discourse analysis, ethnography, and media studies. Such work could illuminate how narratives shape policy decisions, conflict dynamics, and social inclusion.

In conclusion, whether literary or journalistic, narratives are central to the social construction of pastoral identities. Understanding these narratives is crucial not only for advancing theoretical debates on framing and postcolonialism but also for guiding conflict-sensitive media practices and literary engagement that recognize the agency, diversity, and resilience of pastoralist communities in East Africa.

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