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Rethinking identity in adaptation research: Performativity and livestock keeping practices in the Kenyan drylands

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ABSTRACT

Adaptation research often uses identity categories. This article argues that a performativity approach allows us to understand identity in ways that are important for adaptation. Performativity sees identity as constructed through practices in an ongoing process of negotiation and renegotiation. Individuals and groups can thus be understood as having the agency to redefine identity by changing their everyday practices; changed practices, in turn, can influence the construction of identity.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with pastoral and agro-pastoral livestock keepers in West Pokot County, Kenya, the article focuses on one set of identity-linked and adaptation-relevant practices: those involved in ensuring that livestock receive water regularly. Practices of livestock keeping reveal how identity is both implicated by and constructs the social context – between and within individuals, families, and communities, but also in relation to livestock and wider biophysical phenomena. By focusing on the changing practices of livestock watering within a changing social and biophysical context, it is possible to extract not only normative practices, but also a number of practices that disturb settled patterns, contesting or resisting identity constructs. This agency to change practices and identity has important implications for adaptation, which also requires changes in practice and behaviour. As this diversity and fluidity of identity as constructed and practised in the present emerges, so do the different ideas of what it can and will mean to be a livestock keeper in relation to the contextual challenges of today and the future.

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1. Introduction

The livestock-based livelihoods of pastoralists and agro-pastoralists in the sub-Saharan drylands are under pressure from climate change and other stressors (Niang et al., 2014). However, these livelihood strategies are both questioned and praised in terms of their sustainability. Some scholars have questioned the ability of pastoralists and agro-pastoralists to adapt to current and future dryland pressures, particularly in the face of increasing climate variability, soil degradation, population growth, and increased population density (Nardone, Ronchi, Lacetera, Ranieri, & Bernabucci, 2010; Pricope, Husak, Lopez-Carr, Funk, & Michaelsen, 2013). Other scholars praise the livelihood strategies of pastoralists and agro-pastoralists as sustainable and see these groups as creators of a robust and resilient dryland environment (Behnke, 1994; Benjaminsen, Rohde, Sjaastad, Wisborg, & Lebert,

2006; Flintan, Behnke, & Neely, 2013; Homann, Rischkowsky, Steinbach, Kirk, & Mathias, 2008; Oba, 2013; Solomon, Snyman, & Smit, 2007). The proponents base their conclusion on a documented understanding of pastoral and agro-pastoral livestock systems and management practices. These practices are based on extensive local knowledge, expressed in both formal and informal institutions, and ensure flexible and adaptable approaches to herd size, breed, and movement. They respond to variable local biophysical conditions using soil, pasture, and water management, controlled integration of crops, trees, and settlements, and the stimulation of dryland vegetation and soil fertility (Ayantunde, De Leeuw, Turner, & Said, 2011; Flintan et al., 2013; Galvin, 2009; Oba, 2013).

Nonetheless, the combination of changes in rainfall patterns together with temperature changes has the potential to create new vulnerabilities and tension between livelihood development and practices of adaptation (Agrawal & Lemos, 2015). In the drylands, this will interact with stressors and contextual challenges such as rangeland degradation, sedentarization, conflicts, weak social safety nets, and a lack of opportunities and access to water,

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land, markets, and resources (Catley, Lind, & Scoones, 2013; D'Odorico, Bhattachan, Davis, Ravi, & Runyan, 2013; Niang et al., 2014).

Given the complex relationships of multiple stressors in drylands, as well as the complex social dynamics of adaptation (Adger et al., 2008; Catley et al., 2013; O'Brien & Leichenko, 2000), researchers have called for a deeper understanding of the different interacting components of adaptation that can have implications for individuals and groups in specific places (Adger, Barnett, Brown, Marshall, & O'Brien, 2012). One way to analyse adaptation has been to look specifically at the adaptive capacities of a particular group, often coming to attention in research as a composite identity category. These approaches in turn rest on already nominated identity categories such as an ethnicity (Adger, Barnett, Chapin, & Ellemor, 2011; Frank, Eakin, & López-Carr, 2011; Nielsen & Reenberg, 2010), a gender (Carr & Thompson, 2014; Fisher & Carr, 2015; Van Aelst & Holvoet, 2016), or type of livelihood such as pastoralism (Herrero et al., 2016; Little, Smith, Cellarius, Coppock, & Barrett, 2001; Wangui & Smucker, 2017; Zampaligré, Dossa, & Schlecht, 2014).

Using such a composite identity category as a basis for generalizations about adaptation by a group of people can be problematic when the group is dynamic and diverse, and the contexts change and differ (Appiah, 2010; Butler, 2011; Said, 1978). Critics have objected that the identity categories so often employed in adaptation research are clumsy analytically because they are too binary to deal with the diversity and fluidity of identity; and/or fail to analyse the social institutions that link meaning-making through identity to actual individual and collective practices; and/or avoid analysis that recognizes how power relations saturate the construction of institutions and identity (Carr & Thompson, 2014; Crane, 2010; Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014). In short, categories mask the dynamics of identity construction that can be important for adaptation.

To rethink the way identity is approached in adaptation research, this article proposes a framework of performativity and practice, based in part on Judith Butler's work. Identity in this approach does not rely on analyzing pre-established categories but on empirically grounded practices (Butler, 2011, 2015). Practices are understood as both constituting the social and biophysical context as well as being implicated and embedded in that context (Butler, 2011; Foucault, 1980; Shove, 2010). For example, normative practices can change and shape a group identity as well as the social and biophysical context, but also dictate what practices are employed.

The understanding of identity through practice also affects how we view the agency of individuals in relation to contextual power relations, constraints, and opportunities. Agency, the ability and/or capacity to act (Allen, 2002), is important in propelling changes in identity and practices, and thereby also the changes in social and biophysical contexts that make adaptation possible. Through practice, identity is linked to agency and includes dynamics of identity that are important for adaptation to climate change and other practice-determining contextual factors.

Following the link between practice, identity, and agency, this article directs a heightened attention, empirically and analytically, to details in practices. These details reveal wider linkages to meaning-making, agency, diversity, fluidity, saturation by power, and social institutions – revealing these as part of identity construction in its constitutive moment, as implicated and embedded in the context. To accomplish a detailed analysis, the framework is applied to ethnographic data collected with the help of respondents who define themselves as belonging to an ethnic pastoralist group called the Pokot. The category of pastoralist suggests particular livestock keeping practices; however, this predefined idea of practices is too static to incorporate the reality of identity construction. Instead,

the data on livestock keeping practices have been collected in a holistic way that incorporates the construction of social institutions, identity, and power relations. This article chooses to highlight those (often daily) practices that ensure livestock get water. While there are many other important livestock keeping practices, livestock watering was chosen as a focus because of the vital implications of water for the survival of both livestock and people in the dryland areas; the daily reoccurrence of the task in the lives of livestock keepers; the need for the local and national governments to regulate and ensure access to water resources; pressure to adapt practices to the negative impacts of climate change on fresh water supplies; and the increased need of livestock for water when temperatures rise¹ (Thornton, Van de Steeg, Notenbaert, & Herrero, 2009). This does not mean, however, that a focus on other adaptation-relevant livestock keeping activities would lead to a different overall conclusion about identity and adaptation.

The article will continue with Section 2 which defines climate change adaptation and discusses the way identity has been approached by most scholars: as a category. The article then suggests the advantages of a different approach to identity in adaptation research: through performativity. Section 3 describes livestock watering practices and the empirical approach to understanding these practices in their context. Section 4 provides a background to livestock watering in the two locations under analysis in West Pokot, Kenya. This is followed by an analysis of practices in Section 5, including practices in the mundane and every day as well as in periods of water scarcity. By presenting both normative practices and ideas of identity in each area, as well as resistance to these, it is possible to show processes of identity construction at work, and what these can mean in relation to specific changes in the social and biophysical contexts, such as for adaptation. The view through performativity reveals both the intensity and the subtlety with which identity can be renegotiated. This process also reveals important power and identity dynamics as they are practised within, and in interaction with, the social and biophysical contexts. With this approach to identity, there are important implications for the success and failure of work on and understandings of adaptation at multiple scales, and within contexts that range from the individual to the county and international levels.

2. Adaptation, identity, and livestock watering

Identity categories are not static or uniform in reality, as becomes clear when we study changes and the adaptation of practices to these changes. The IPCC broadly defines adaptation as: "The process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects. In human systems, adaptation seeks to moderate or avoid harm or exploit beneficial opportunities. In some natural systems, human intervention may facilitate adjustment to expected climate and its effects" (IPCC, 2014). The definition is both broad and inclusive, often leading to an analytical focus on climate change adaptation research using temporal, social, and spatial scales (Burnham & Ma, 2015; Harmer & Rahman, 2014; Osbahr, Twyman, Neil Adger, & Thomas, 2008). One such focus in organizing data and analysis on adaptation has taken the form of pre-established identity categories (Carr & Thompson, 2014; Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014). While this article argues categories can be problematic, this does not mean that this article disregards the useful nature of generalizations within identities operative in climate change adaptation when it comes to understanding adaptive capacities. Nor does this

¹ The present article is part of a larger research project focusing on livestock keeping practices to reduce livestock mortality. Livestock watering practices are one set of many practices that have been highlighted as important by livestock keepers and respondents in the area. Future articles will continue to build both on the conceptual framework and the other practices highlighted by respondents.

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