

**Pathways to Resilience in the Karamoja Cluster**  
*A regional conference on recent research and policy options*

21-23 May 2019, Moroto, Karamoja, Uganda

**WORKING PAPER**

**Friendship, kinship and social risk management strategies among pastoralists in Karamoja**

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Abstract

This paper describes risk-pooling friendships and other social networks among pastoralists in Karamoja. Social networks are of critical importance for risk management in an environment marked by volatility and uncertainty. Risk management or pooling mainly takes the form of ‘stock friendships’: an informal insurance system in which men established mutually beneficial partnerships with unrelated or related individuals through livestock transfers in the form of gifts or loans. Friends accepted the obligation to assist each other during need, ranging from the time of marriage to times of distress. Anthropologists and economists claim that social networks are critical for recouping short-term losses such as food shortage, as well as for ensuring long-term sustainability through the building of social capital and rebuilding of herds. To this end, I present ethnographic data on friendship, kinship and other networks among male and female pastoralists in Karamoja. Using qualitative and quantitative data on risk-pooling relationships and norms of livestock transfers and other mutual aid, I show the enduring importance of social networks in the life of Karamoja’s pastoralists today. I also demonstrate how exchange networks were utilized by participants during a recent drought period. On this basis, I argue that appreciating historical and traditional mechanisms of resilience among pastoralists is vital for designing community-based risk management projects. I discuss how traditional safety net systems have been used successfully elsewhere by NGOs to assist pastoralists in the wake of disaster, and how the same can be done by harnessing risk-pooling friendships in Karamoja.

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## Introduction

In Karamoja, Uganda, pastoralism is the dominant way of life. Despite the myriad changes to the social and economic structure brought about by volatile events in recent history, the people of Karamoja strive to increase and safeguard their livestock assets by any means possible. In so doing, they confront some of the toughest environmental conditions on earth in the form of high temperatures, high rainfall variability, and recurrent drought. These and other threats to the wellbeing of people and animals, such as unchecked livestock diseases, intercommunity livestock theft, and relatively uncondusive agricultural conditions are the dominant preoccupation for those living in arid lands. Risk management, or the combination of strategies through which the effects of disasters can be moderated, is, thus inherent in the pursuit of pastoralism.

*Risk* is understood as “the unpredictable variation in environmental and economic conditions” or “the probability of loss or hazard” (Cashdan 1990, pp. 2 – 3; Wiessner, 1977). Although pastoralism is known to be well-suited for the drylands (Chang & Koster, 1994; Fratkin, Galvin, & Roth, 1994), the constraints make risk management of vital importance. Some of these constraints include the fixed biological cycles and limited fertility rates of livestock, a long recuperation phase in the event of loss of livestock from epidemic or drought, the labor needs of a household, among others (Bollig & Gobel, 1997; Catley, Lind, & Scoones, 2013; Dahl & Hjort, 1976). In order to persist in the face of these constraints, pastoralists use a few key strategies that can be viewed as *buffering* mechanisms or “practices designed to lessen the impact of variability by dampening its effects” (Halstead & O’Shea, 1989, pp. 3 – 4).

Besides such strategies as herd accumulation to avoid drastic losses, expansion of livelihood activities beyond livestock, and spreading of livestock in other management units, a key buffering or risk *transfer* mechanism is through informal networks of mutual insurance<sup>2</sup> (Dercon, 2002; McPeak, 2006). Risk transfer relationships among pastoralists are known variably as stock or bond friendships or associations. These informal yet institutionalized relationships allowed an individual herder summon his network of friends during times of livestock need such as during marriage, disputes, and stress to one’s asset base from idiosyncratic shocks (Bollig, 2006; Gulliver, 1970; Lybbert, Barrett, Desta, & Coppock, 2000). Informal exchange relationships help herders recoup short-term losses and ensure long-term sustainability of their herds with the help of others. Food, livestock and other gift transfers, although appearing ‘risk prone’ in the short term, are critical resources for avoiding destitution, as these relationships are the “social investments” that allow individuals and households to seek support during need or hardship (Shipton, 1990).

This paper examines social networks of gift and other exchange among Karamoja’s male and female pastoralists and how these help mitigate risks. Informal insurance through networks continues to be the dominant form of social protection among pastoralists and other rural communities due to the absence of formal institutions (Devereux & Getu, 2013). Through ethnographic data on risk-pooling relationships

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I use “informal insurance”, “mutual insurance”, “traditional social safety net”, “informal social protection” and “social networks of exchange” interchangeably. All these terms imply the system of risk transfer within social networks of support through exchange of livestock and other items.

and norms of livestock transfers and other mutual aid, I show the enduring importance of social networks in the life of Karamoja's pastoralists today. I also demonstrate how exchange networks were utilized by participants during a recent drought period. On this basis, I argue that appreciating historical and traditional mechanisms of resilience among pastoralists is vital for designing community-based risk management or social protection projects.

### Methods

Data for this paper were collected as part of my dissertation project over a period of 14 months between October 2013 and August 2015. Two field sites in Moroto District were chosen for the larger study: Rupa Sub-County and Tapac Sub-County<sup>3</sup>. A total of 50 men and 30 women participated in the study, which employed participant observation, interviews, surveys, focus group discussions and economic games. The same participants were interviewed several times over the research period in order to build trust, avoid respondent fatigue and understand time- and context-dependent strategies. The first interview consisted of a demographic and economic survey, livelihood strategies, and a social support questionnaire. A second interview examined details of stock friendships including attributes of friends such as names, locations, kinship, and items given to and received from them. Finally, a list of recent transfers 'since the last harvest' in the form of loans, gifts, and other help received was noted for all participants.

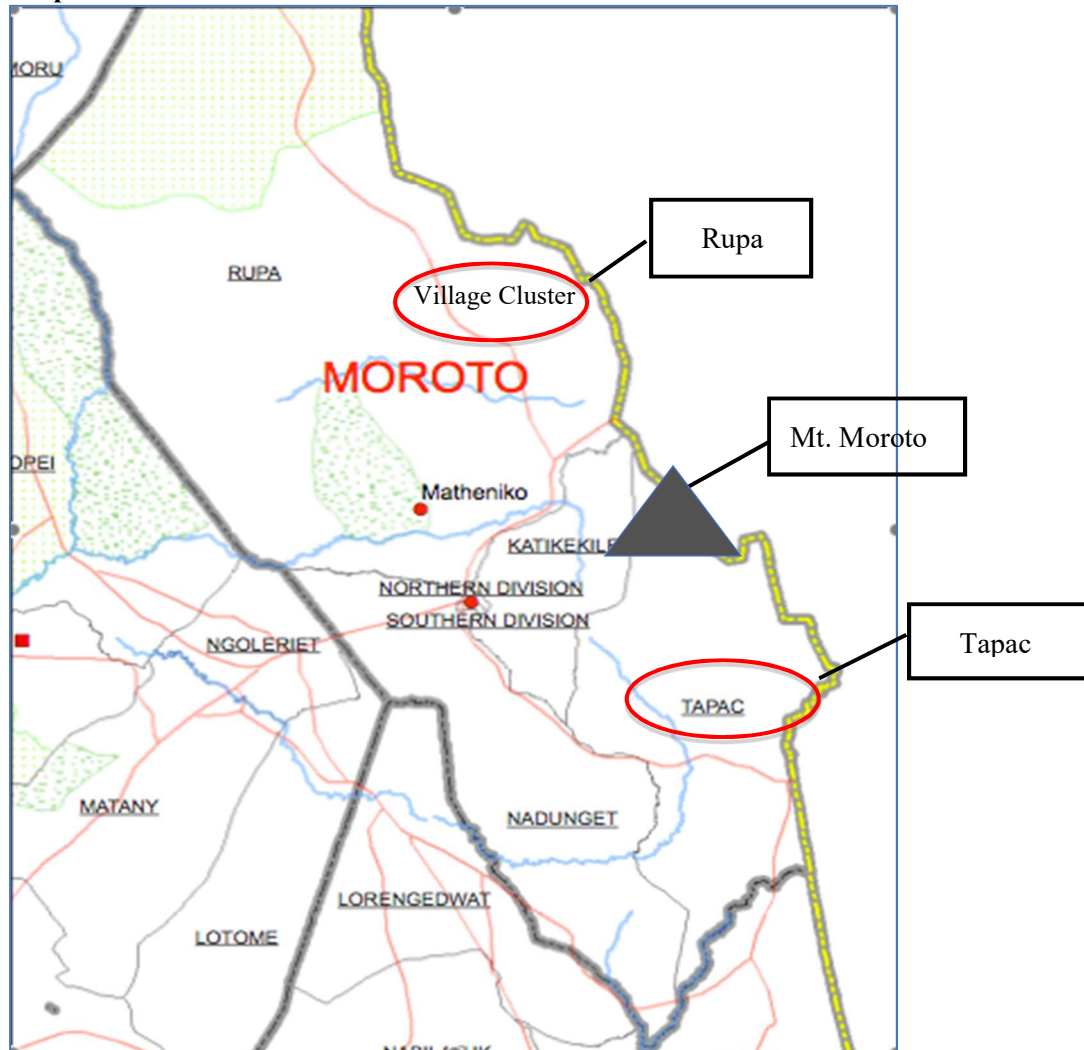
A follow-up study was conducted shortly after the end of the research period to collect missing data, verify qualitative information, and collect another list of recent transfers. This allowed for an understanding of flow of goods and services within the community within a limited timeframe as well as an assessment of study participants' actual network of social support, because the follow-up study coincided with an extended lean season and Integrated Phase Classification 3 or *Crisis*<sup>4</sup>. Findings presented below represent both field sites and communities.

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<sup>3</sup> Residents of the former field site are predominantly Matheniko Karimojong and of the latter, Tepeth. A cluster of villages within each Sub-County was sampled for the study. Although both field sites are located in the pastoralist zone, they differ from one another: for instance, Tapac Sub-County enjoys relatively favourable climate whereas Rupa greater urban market access. In my dissertation, I explore how these differences, among others, influence risk management strategies and informal insurance systems. In this paper, I provide a brief overview of informal social networks of risk management without delving into the differences.

<sup>4</sup> Where at least 1 in 5 households faced significant food consumption gaps with high or above usual acute malnutrition, or is marginally able to meet minimum food needs only with unsustainable coping strategies such as liquidating livelihood assets (FEWS NET, 2014).

**Map of Field Sites within Moroto District**



Social networks of exchange in Karamoja

*The animals you entrust to someone is like the money you put in a bank.*

Participant, Rupa sub-county

In Karamoja, social networks of exchange span geographic, economic, relational, and generational divides. Men and women develop and acquire relatives, friends, and other social relations at all stages of their lives, from various venues, and of both genders. These friendships are also intergenerational and can transfer from parents to children. Among men, stock friendships (*akoneo*) are established from childhood: young shepherds meet each other on the grazing grounds; young men befriend others during ceremonies or at kraals; and at every stage, no matter how old, men are introduced to new friends through their

existing friends or befriend others through marriage. Moreover, own and step/half-brothers may also be considered stock friends, although not every sibling. Whereas stock friends are but one category of friends, they are distinguished from other, looser friends known as “friends of the water” (*ekone ke a ngakipi*). Stock friends are considered “friends of the heart” (*ekone ke a etau*), signifying a deeper and long-lasting bond forged through animals<sup>5</sup>.

Sharing or exchange (*ameanakin*) of animals among stock friends, whether as gifts or during need, is a significant aspect of friendship. Despite the infrequency with which it happens (food, money and other immaterial help are shared more frequently), the transfer of animals from one friend to another allows for: increase of herd size through fertilization, provision of milk for family, dispersal of risk by entrusting animals to others, fulfilment of social obligations such as initiation and marriage, payment of fine in a dispute, and for other ceremonial and practical uses. Livestock transfers have implications for property rights in animals, and often, multiple people have rights over the same animal (Khazanov & Schlee, 2012). For instance, gifting of an animal for fertilization (*eketepan*) does not transfer property rights to the receiver, exchanges for ceremonial purposes transfer rights completely to the receiver. On the other hand, property rights over an animal given for milk (*alepunit* or *nakidala*) are more complicated where the giver becomes a ‘requestor’ for any animals that may be born of the milking animal despite retaining rights over the original animal. So, whereas many categories of transfers are technically debts, where the giver continues to ‘own’ the animal, the debt is symbolic in that the animal remains in the receiver’s herd and ensures the continuity of the relationship between the two friends.

Although norms of property rights according to context and need do exist, they are subject to tremendous variation depending on the nature and depth of friendship and the circumstances of giver and receiver. The notion of ‘debt’ between stock friends remains fluid; the long-running relationship that continues to hold parties to debt indeed strengthens their bond over time and reflects the trust between partners. Debts passed on from father to son benefits all parties involved such that the older generation has now ensured that their friendship continues through the next generation, and the younger generation, in turn, acquires a trustworthy partner in their expanding network. To circumvent the proposition that merely inculcating stock friendships provides insurance—the issue at the crux of the debate over the “utility” of these relationships (Moritz, 2013)—a better orientation to the study of pastoralist exchange systems is that the mutual indebtedness between associates is what provides insurance (Werner, 1998).

Women in Karamoja also possess a wide network of exchange relationships comprising kin and non-kin, men and women<sup>6</sup> (see also Pollard, et al, 2015; Renfrew, 1990). Although the process of friendship among women may not be as formal as among men, the underlying emotions and the accompanying rights and obligations are similar<sup>7</sup>. In many of the same ways that men build and maintain stock friendship networks, women cultivate relationships via exchange and activate these in a time of need. Small stock and food tend to be the most popular items of exchange between women. Although animal transfers are conventionally associated with men, data show that women also exchange livestock to build and nurture relationships with friends and kin.

However, the importance of friends for women goes beyond economic concerns. Several women reported taking care of friends’ children when hunger was unevenly distributed. At these times, those with nothing to feed their children handed over the responsibility to their friends. Consequently, the children came to treat the friend as their own mother and even after the passing of their biological mother continue to

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<sup>5</sup> See Dyson-Hudson, 1966, p. 91 for similar discussion on “cattle kin” and “water kin”.

<sup>6</sup> Studies on stock friendships have historically focused on male herders, with some notable exceptions.

<sup>7</sup> For e.g. women also differentiate between “friends of the heart” and “friends of the water”.

maintain a relationship with the friend. Intergenerational transfer of friendships between women mirrors the dynamics of male stock friendships, which are frequently passed on from fathers to sons.

In recent years, money has played a critical role in informal social protection among pastoralists, where stock friends or other kinds of mutual aid relations exchange cash. Although cash gifts were the least frequently cited item of exchange among friends<sup>8</sup>, money changes hands frequently – between close friends and others – in daily life in Karamoja. Monetary exchange is a relatively recent phenomenon and can be used as replacement, selectively, for livestock gifts (e.g. during bridewealth accumulation). Similarly, friends who are unable to contribute livestock may assist with the purchase of ceremonial beer for weddings and other occasions. In the sample, money was exchanged for the purchase of animals, food, medicine, clothes, and transportation.

#### Exchange networks during drought

Towards the end of 2014 and in early 2015, eastern Karamoja was dealing with the dual onslaught of a foot-and-mouth disease and poor rainfall resulting in low harvest conditions. Intensification of alternative livelihoods was the main coping strategy for most participants, since replenishment of household harvest stocks was not possible. Cash income was necessary to meet household consumption needs, particularly as prices of staple foods increased. To investigate networks of support during stress, I collected data in mid-2015 on all exchanges in the preceding six months.

Exchanges of livestock, money, food, and other items were extremely common in this period, with a total 551 transfer events (in and out) recorded for men and women. Despite the postponement of important events that require animals such as initiation/wedding, animal exchanges comprised 36% of all items exchanged during this period. Money featured as the next highest category of transfers, used to fulfill household nutrition and other needs. *Apwataria* (to eat) was a common response from participants when they were asked for the reason behind the transfer; while the meaning of *apwataria* implies food purchases, the word connotes general help where the receiver can make decisions over its use *ad libitum*. Finally, food transfers were the last most frequent commodity of exchange (21% of total observations) with women responsible for 75% of these.

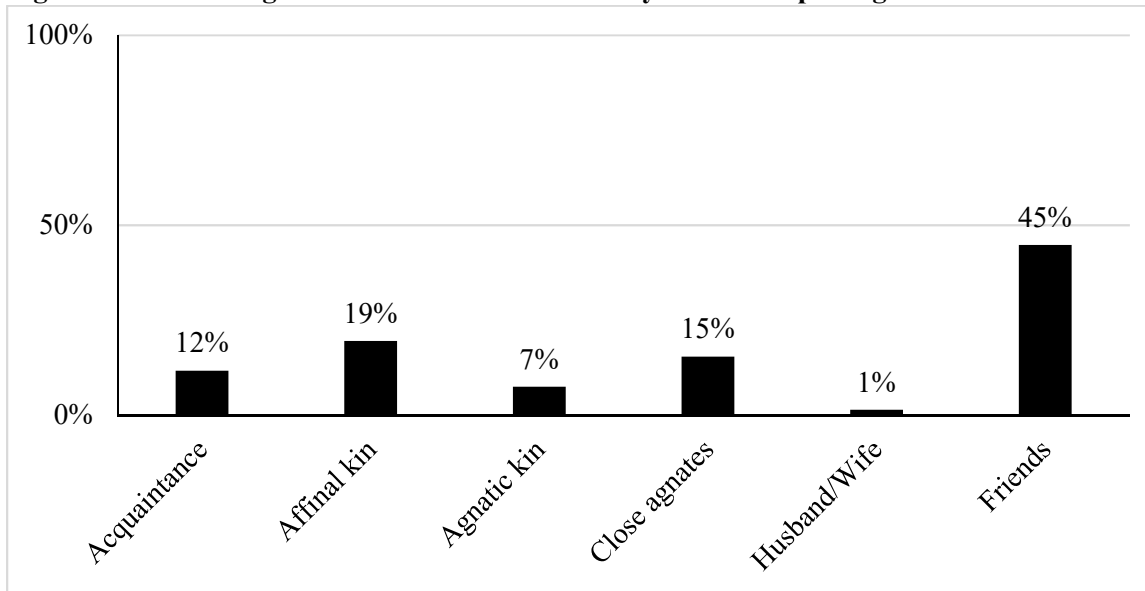
Importantly, the highest frequency of transfers occurred between individuals labeled as “friends” (see figure). Besides affinal and agnatic kin, transfers also involved individuals classified as “chat mate” (*akiruoret*), “village or walk mate” (*erukithoth*), “neighbors” and other acquaintances – these latter, although not as close as “water friends” and certainly not in the category of ‘stock friends’, comprise the vast and varied network of Karamoja’s pastoralists. Geographically, 58% of transfers in Rupa occurred within the village cluster, and an additional 38% within the same sub-county or within a day’s walk from residence. In Tapac, on the other hand, only 17% of transfers took place between participants and village residents; participants reported exchange events with 68% of individuals living in the same sub-county. This discrepancy is readily explained by the shifting residential patterns in Tapac where, because of failed

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<sup>8</sup> A likely reason for the low frequency of monetary gifts reported by participants is the disparate status of money and livestock. The types of bonds created by animals can hardly be rivaled by money: where animals solidify friendships, fortify existing bonds, and create a feeling of mutual obligation, money may create envy (Schlee, 2012). Furthermore, the fungibility of money makes it less emotionally or socially important as compared to animals, which are imbued with the complexity of multiple and overlapping rights of individuals connected to one another in an intricate web of social relationships (Broch-Due, 1999; Goldschmidt, 1986).

harvests and greater investment in alternative livelihoods, many able-bodied individuals tend to spend varying amounts of time in their village, the limestone mines, or at the trading centers.

**Figure 1: All exchanges in 2015 in both field sites by relationship categories**



- Close agnates: brother, sister, son, daughter, father, mother
- Acquaintances includes “neighbours”, “walk mates”, “chat mates” and “village persons”
- Transfers from government and NGO aid programs not included above

Upon further exploration of intra-village exchange trends in Rupa, I observed that animal traders from the village were a dominant source of monetary transactions and had the highest frequencies of “transfers out”. The frequent sales by the trade group results in a steady cash flow for traders, which makes them an important source of credit for the village. Traders are not necessarily the wealthiest individuals in the village when counting animal assets. However, cash-in-hand proves more valuable when individuals are less willing to liquidate assets during emergencies. Traders, hence, are the “prestigious lenders” in the village, or those whom many individuals named as lenders (Caudell, Rotolo, & Grima, 2015).

Among women, the primary help-givers were those who received relief food aid, and local brew traders. Recipients of food aid are typically allotted food in bulk and may use rations to assist other members of their extended kin network, friends, and neighbors with food shortage. Similarly, women engaged in the brewing business operate a system of credit for those who want to drink and cannot pay. At baseline, several women reported owing money to brew traders, and in 2015, this number increased drastically. The brewing business showed a sharp spike during the 2015 drought because of the increase in demand. Consequently, brewers in villages became critical sources of sustenance credit.

#### Discussion & Conclusion: Harnessing informal social networks

*They say in Karimojong that even if you have hundreds of something, you cannot solve your problems by yourself. Even if you’re rich, you go to a friend for help. This way you have also given your friend an opportunity to come to you for help when it is time. Suppose you have five herds of animals now and you’re rich, what will you do if something happens to your animals. If you reach out to friends, you’re keeping that connection for when something serious happens.*  
Participant, Rupa Sub-County

The brief snapshot of exchange during stress and the ethnographic data on stock friendships and other networks of friends, kin, and acquaintances shows the importance of informal insurance systems in Karamoja. Although wealth, geography and other variables have critical bearing on the ability of individuals and households to maintain their social networks of support, the critical role of social networks in short-term support and long-term sustainability is undeniable. A circle of friends unique to a person is advantageous as these are the people first approached for help during need. But the unpredictability of receiving help from a particular person necessitates that the flow of help extends over a wide network that includes those with whom there exists no profound and binding relationship such as kinship or close friendship. In an uncertain environment, the activation of need-based transfer arrangements with these individuals becomes critical for survival.

Understanding and incorporating exchange relationships into development programming has shown to increase resilience and simultaneously build social cohesion. A prominent example of this is the incorporation of the Wodaabe pastoralists' system of *Habbanae* – where a female animal is loaned out and stays in the borrower's herd for three calvings, following which it is returned to the lender (White, 1997). Much like the *akoneo* institution described among Karamoja's pastoralists, *habbanae* serves as a traditional safety net through which bonds were created and strengthened and materialized in asset, consumption and emotional support. *Habbanae* also serves a redistributive rather than lending function, because animals from better off households go to those experiencing constraints.

Several international organizations have incorporated the *habbanae* system into their social protection programming. Between 1974 and 1984, Oxfam initiated the *Habbanae Project* in Niger to provide support in the wake of the Sahelian drought. The project, run in accordance with local traditions and managed by community leaders, loaned 500 destitute Wodaabe households two to three cows or camels and other small stock to restock their herds. After five to eight years, recipients reimbursed the project following the rules of *habbanae*, and income acquired by the project from resale was injected into other initiatives (Calder & Tanhchareun, 2014). LWR has used *habbanae* in several projects in the Sahel in recent years and has learnt that not only does the system strengthen local level capital, it also tightens social networks of trust, aiding in long-term group formation and, ultimately, in resilience (Lutheran World Relief, 2019).

Similarly, understanding the traditional social safety net mechanisms of Karamoja's pastoralists can be instrumentalized to increase resilience in an area experiencing frequent stress. For instance, knowing the influential nodes (persons) in the village or area network, particularly those with greater wealth or reliable income, can serve as important lenders during a shock and can, therefore, be supported in conflict-sensitive ways. Similarly, understanding transfer norms can assist in developing a similar lending program as *habbanae* and aid in restocking of herds. Crucially, a context- and conflict-sensitive community project based on social networks of support could result in greater social cohesion, support to customary systems, and be a truly community-based approach.

It is important to note that informal social protection systems are far from ideal, and can exacerbate class divisions and poverty due to their inbuilt limitations and modern stressors (Calder & Tanhchareun, 2014). The poorest can be easily excluded from social networks due to their inability to reciprocate/support. However, poverty targeting has its own pitfalls where, other than being challenged for its effectiveness, it can stigmatize households and individuals. Therefore, conflict- and context-sensitive social protection programming is a well-researched amalgam of informal and formal social protection systems, which considers local understandings of fairness and justice, prosperity and resilience.



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