SEEKING HEALTH AND FINDING COLLECTIVE JOY UNDER LOCKDOWN: THE COVID-19 MEAT CAMP AMONG MAASAI OF SOUTHERN KENYA

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Abstract

The *olpul* (pl. *ilpuli*) is a gathering of Maasai men who spend several days or weeks in a secluded wooded area slaughtering livestock and consuming large quantities of meat and medicinal plants to strengthen themselves. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, *ilpuli* and associated celebrations multiplied and were enthusiastically adhered to by Maasai (agro)pastoralists of southern Kenya, even as social interactions were criminalised. This study, based on digital and field-based collaborative research in the Maasai Mara and Loita, Narok County, examines the characteristics of *ilpuli le corona* – the meat camps that emerged during the lockdown. We show that Maasai sought immunity and nutrition in *ilpuli* and found communitas – the sense of intense social bonding and collective joy that can emerge during disasters. We show that participation in *ilpuli le corona* and their wider social dynamics dispelled anxieties, promoted a reconnection with Maasai norms and pastoral values, and built resilience to future calamities.

KEYWORDS: communitas, disaster, food security, immunity, olpul, pastoralism.

Introduction

On 14 March 2020, news of the global spread of the SARS-CoV-2 reached the pastoralists who live around the Maasai Mara National Reserve (MMNR), in Narok County, Kenya. Shortly thereafter, as the government enforced strict lockdown measures, groups of Maasai men 'ran for the forests' to join *ilpuli* (s. *olpul*), or 'meat camps'. Staying in secluded wooded areas, away from their families for days or weeks , the men slaughtered domestic animals, consumed their meat together with phytomedicinal soups and beverages, socialised and prayed. Back home, out-of-school children herded their families' animals, and women prepared *kule naaoto* (sour milk) to welcome and celebrate their husbands and sons after their meat-eating stints in the bush. 'This is how we survived the first two weeks', co-author Stanley ole Neboo explained

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in October 2020.[1] 'Seven to ten of us, we organised to go to olpul. We took some cows and we [ate them] for the whole two weeks, just enjoying meat and natural herbs.' At the same time, elsewhere, in Loita, 'there were many ilpuli. People ran to olpul, to the medicine of the forest', co-author Matinkoi ole Mowuo described.[2]

Colloquially known in English as a 'meat camp', a 'slaughtering camp' or a 'meat feast' (ole Ndaskoi, 2005; ole Saitoti, 1988; Rutten, 1998), 'olpul' denotes both a place and an event: a secluded, ritual gathering of men (Talle, 1990), typically elders or *ilmurran* ('warriors'),[3] who consume copious amounts of meat and herbal medicine – and no other food or drink – to build their strength. It has historically been described as a martial institution, associated with brotherhood, virility and the preparation for cattle raids and warfare (Hodgson, 1999; Spencer, 1988; Talle, 1990) – often stereotypically so (Hughes, 2006).

Under national and county-level COVID-19 lockdowns, men across the Purko and Loita Maasai sections in Narok County,[4] Kenya, flaunted strict physical distancing rules to seek immunity against the SARS-CoV-2 in *ilpuli le corona* – 'corona meat camps'. Given the association of the olpul with 'warriors' in the literature, an easy interpretation of this phenomenon could have been that it was another 'War on COVID-19' instance (Chapman and Miller, 2020). However, as Stanley explained, the gatherings were not about fighting anything – there was no aggressive undertone. Rather, they were friendly, enjoyable and 'interesting' occasions where participants 'immunised (their) bod(ies) against corona', sang, prayed, relaxed and felt good.

In the Maasai Mara, where attendance at ilpuli had been declining in recent decades, participants' families and neighbours joined post-olpul celebrations, which were held for the first time in a long while. Participants in both the meat camps and festivities (including two co-authors) enthusiastically depicted their enjoyable experiences. They appreciated the intense social interactions while subjected to 'stay at home' orders, in addition to the ilpuli's positive effects on physical health and enhanced access to pastoral foods. In organising and being at ilpuli, some found new purpose while unemployed. Others (re)learned Maasai medicinal knowledge and hospitality norms. Yet others collectively practised their Christian faith at olpul as churches were closed. And everyone, across gender and age groups, rejoiced at the post-olpul celebrations. The intense, joyful festivities unleashed pleasant feelings, and extended generosity

1 Stanley is a Purko Maasai from Kenya.

2 Matinkoi is a Loita Maasai from Kenya.

3 *Ilmurran* (s. *olmurrani*): 'the circumcised ones', also known as 'morans'.

4 Sections (*olosho*, pl. *iloshon*) are Maasai socio-territorial subgroups with their own historical and cultural specificities.

and solidarity all around. The social dynamics associated with ilpuli deepened friendships and relationships within and across disparate groups.

The positive emotions and outcomes fostered by ilpuli suggest that participants found 'communitas' – the ineffable sense of togetherness and collective joy (E. Turner, 2012). This, paradoxically, happened at a time of heightened anxiety and uncertainty, as social life was outlawed.

This optimistic outlook contrasts with early prognoses on how pastoralists would fare under COVID-19. Some expected pastoralists to struggle with governmental measures targeting their mobility and social lives (see Rodgers and Semplici, 2023; Griffith et al., 2020). Others anticipated that pastoralists would be well placed to navigate the pandemic thanks to multiple knowledges and collective solidarities (Scoones and Nori, 2021). Research has henceforth uncovered cases in which pastoral knowledge, practices and institutions clearly supported pastoralists' responses to pandemic impacts (Ahearn et al., 2026; Morinaga and Batjav, 2026; Roque de Pinho et al., 2023; Sternberg et al., 2021).

We show that the olpul is one such pastoral institution; and describe how its social dynamics unfolded during Kenya's lockdown periods (approximately March 2020–May 2021). Among the Maasai, the COVID-19 lockdown measures, rather than casualties from SARS-CoV-2 itself, most impacted lives and livelihoods (Roque de Pinho et al., 2023). We therefore approach the lockdown as a disaster (Dhamija et al., 2021) – albeit an atypical, protracted one where the State contagion control measures, commonly known as 'social distancing', strived to limit social interactions over long periods.

This study asks how ilpuli le corona helped Maasai (agro)pastoralists respond to and recover from the lockdown. Based on remote digital collaborative research (Hahn, 2020; Postill, 2016), including collaborative autoethnography (Pepa and Pamdandi, 2025), and fieldwork by all the authors, we analyse how ilpuli and their social dynamics may have alleviated impacts of the COVID-19 lockdown disaster. We firstly characterise the ilpuli le corona that occurred in two Maasai areas of Narok County. We highlight emerging meanings and post-pandemic legacies of ilpuli le corona. Secondly, we show that ilpuli le corona promoted health and food security. Thirdly, we engage with the notion of *communitas* as originally coined and theorised by Victor Turner (1964; 1996) and further developed in connection with disasters (E. Turner, 2012; Matthewman and Uekesa 2021) to examine how ilpuli nurtured social relationships when social life was criminalised. Communitas is 'the sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full meaning' (E. Turner, 2012: 1). It is about camaraderie, undifferentiated and egalitarian bonding, collective joy and even happiness, pleasure and fun. It may arise unexpectedly in a range of social circumstances, and is often observed in times of stress

and social upheaval like disasters (E. Turner, 2012; Matthewman and Uekesa, 2021).[5] These are times when people are in 'the same boat', sharing a moment of drastic change and 'liminality' freed from status distinctions and the regular structures of life (E. Turner, 2012). The Kenyan COVID-19 lockdown disaster, with its disruption of daily rhythms and suspension of public life, was such a liminal period. Communitas is a short-lived phenomenon that dissipates after the disaster (Matthewman and Uekusa, 2021). We show that Maasai (agro) pastoralists sought immunity in ilpuli and found communitas. By promoting health, nutrition and communitas, we argue that participation in ilpuli le corona and their wider social dynamics alleviated impacts of the lockdown and helped build resilience to future disasters.

'Meat camps' and the olpul

The olpul features prominently in early writings on the Maasai. In his exploration memoir, Joseph Thomson writes that before raiding the Kenyan coast for cattle 'warriors retreat to the forest and gorge on beef to build as much muscle and ferocity as possible' (Thomson and Bernard, 1886: 283).[6] Subsequent scholarship highlights the symbolic dimensions of meat and blood (Århem, 1989), as well as the consumption of large quantities of strength-building meat and bravery-inducing psychoactive herbs (Hollis, 1905; Western, 1997) at these 'meat feasts of warriors' (Mol, 1996: 337) that prime them for warfare (Spencer, 1988) and large, multi-day ceremonies.[7] Overall, the olpul, from which adult women are excluded,[8] is said to promote aggressiveness, virility, solidarity, unity and brotherhood among its male participants (Århem, 1989; Rutten, 1998; Spencer, 1988; Talle, 2007).

Studies of Maasai botanical expertise (reviewed in Nankaya et al., 2019) document ilpuli as sites of consumption of therapeutic plants and intergenerational transmission of medicinal knowledge (Hedges and ole Kipila, 2022a; Ibrahim and Ibrahim, 1998).[9] The more recent literature moves beyond mas-

5 It can also emerge in rituals, during prayers, at carnivals, during musical and sports events, in work situations, etc. (E. Turner, 2012).

6 First author's translation.

7 Angela recalls how prior to the *eunoto* ceremony that celebrated the end of moranhood in 2005, there were ilpuli all over Loita.

8 Married, 'circumcised' women are restricted from ilpuli as ilmurran may not eat meat seen by them. Their unmarried, girlfriends may attend (Spencer, 1988).

9 While being sick, Joana experienced the olpul's healing properties when ilmurran from an olpul made her drink an herbal brew that quickly alleviated her symptoms. A young boy accompanied them, who was at that olpul to acquire medicinal knowledge from them.

culinity tropes and phytomedicine. Burford et al. (2001: 550) characterise the olpul as a 'holistic indigenous system of primary healthcare … that attends to the physical, psychological, spiritual and even social dimensions of illness'. Health benefits stem from both the ingested herbs and the collective dynamics of participation that include singing, praying and counselling. Hedges and ole Kipila (2024) make a similar argument and call the olpul a healing ritual and a communal antidote to the stressors of urban life.

There are different types of slaughter outside of the homestead that also include meat and herbs, which Maasai and others may also call an 'olpul'. We clarify the distinction. Recent scholarship (Hedges et al., 2020; Hedges and ole Kipila, 2022) calls an *olpejet* an 'olpul'. An olpejet (pl. *ilpejeta*), however, is held for family members, friends or neighbours, and occurs in a bush close to home for a few hours to one day. At an olpejet, the host 'slaughters a specific animal for a specific person for a specific reason. The special guest, e.g., a new mother, a sick person or a child who is back from boarding school, gets the biggest share', Stanley explains. In Loita, there is a variant called 'family olpul' – also known as olpul for children (*olpul loo nkera)* and olpul for the sick (*olpul loo ltamueyiai*). It is a several-day meat-eating retreat in the forest or bush that is held for medical treatment. Here the 'whole family goes together. Sometimes, different families, or an extended family, or friends and families go together', according to Lenaai ole Mowuo.[10] While men spend the nights in the bush, women and children go home to sleep. The goal is healing: 'we look for a specific (herbal) medication to cure' someone who is ill. 'We also slaughter for a mother who has delivered a baby … so she eats enough meat to recover from when she was not allowed to eat enough [before birth]', Lenaai explains. Burford et al. (2001) describe something similar but call it an 'orpul forest retreat'.[11] Hereafter, we limit the term 'olpul' to the men-only meat camp in the forest. We use 'meat camp' in a generic sense when highlighting similarities between the olpul, the olpejet and the family olpul. Following local usage, we employ 'ilpuli le corona' to refer to the ilpuli that occurred during the lockdown.

Study sites and methods

Our research took place in the Maasai Mara and Loita, two areas of Narok County. Mpuaai, Stanley's home, is a cluster of homesteads, including Stanley's and his three brothers', which abuts the MMNR, a Kenyan international

10 Lenaai is a Loita Maasai from Kenya and the elder brother of Matinkoi.

11 The pronunciation of olpul/orpul varies both geographically and in the literature.

tourism and conservation hotspot. Located near Talek town, within the former Koyiaki Group Ranch,[12] Mpuaai features private land holdings of varying sizes, on and across which Purko Maasai landowners raise cattle, sheep and goats. Increasingly fenced (Løvschal et al., 2022), these plots feature diverse housing styles (from traditional cow-dung houses to cement-block ones). They are interspersed with small trading centres, schools, a growing number of churches, water provision facilities and private tourist camps owned by Maasai landowners and/or external investors. In this thriving tourism scene, hotels and conservation initiatives provide income through employment, monthly fees from wildlife conservancies (Cavanagh et al., 2020) and small food and craft businesses.

In Loita, Olorkete and Olorien, the neighbourhoods where Lenaai and Matinkoi live, respectively, are located close to each other in the same hilly bushland along the main river that runs through Loita from north to south. This area is located some sixty kilometres to the southeast of Talek (as the crow flies) on the western highlands of the Rift Valley. It features a school, churches and shops, and is crossed by a road connecting various trading centres. Residents combine pastoralism with rainfed cultivation. Loita was undergoing an official process of land demarcation and adjudication when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, which would see men and women owning their own pieces of land afterwards.

In Talek and Loita, processes such as land privatisation, formal education, economic diversification and urbanisation have led to more individualised lives, whereby resources are increasingly concentrated at the household level (Hedges and ole Kipila, 2024).[13] For example, settlement patterns have changed from large semi-permanent multi-family homesteads to smaller, more permanent homesteads accommodating just a few families and increasingly only one (see Lamprey and Reid, 2004; Kronenburg García, 2015).

'Moranhood', erstwhile a feature of local life, has disappeared (see also Hodgson, 1999). In our study areas, there have been no 'long haired ilmurran' for the past seven years.[14] The youth now privilege formal education, which is incompatible with extended periods away from home and dedication to community service. The consequences of this change for Maasai society have yet to be analysed, but we will show how it may have contributed to changing the meaning of olpul, previously associated with ilmurran.

A momentous force of change around Talek in the past decade, and recently

12 Subdivided in the 1990s.

13 At the same time, we would argue that membership in Pentecostal churches is accompanied by intense sociality and numerous community-wide support mechanisms (Roque de Pinho, unpublished data).

14 Young men committed to the full-time olmurrani life.

in Loita, is Pentecostalism. By embracing a 'complete break with the past' (Meyer, 1998) and promoting what our Maasai interlocutors view as 'modernity' (i.e., being formally educated, having a nuclear family, farming and going to church), Pentecostal churches have challenged Maasai practices, age-gender relations and family and other social hierarchies (see Parsitau, 2019; Roque de Pinho et al., 2014; Roque de Pinho, unpublished data). Our interlocutors who are Born-Again ascribe their rejection of Maasai norms and practices, such as the olpul and the construction of ceremonial homesteads (*imanyat*, s. *emanyata*, commonly known as 'manyatas') for age-group ceremonies (Kronenburg García, unpublished data) and moranhood, to their 'salvation' (i.e., conversion to Pentecostalism).

We collected data in two phases. First, in the early stages of the pandemic, the authors worked together to examine responses to lockdown measures in 2020–21 in the study areas through a remote digital collaboration. Lenaai, Matinkoi and Stanley took up leading research roles in Kenya, as they reported on their lockdown experiences, collected data on those of others and contributed their analytical insights via WhatsApp and Zoom (Roque de Pinho et al., 2023).[15] In a second phase, the authors conducted fieldwork together (October 2022; February–March 2023). Walking interviews around Mpuaai, while collecting medicinal plants, and in Loita on the way to past olpul sites, illuminated phytomedicinal aspects and ecological settings (Figure 1).

In-depth semi-structured interviews with Stanley, Lenaai and Matinkoi, and two group interviews with participants of the ilmurran age-grade in Mpuaai, targeted personal olpul experiences. In both areas, forty semi-structured interviews with women and men of different ages, including Pentecostal pastors (Roque de Pinho, unpublished data; Kronenburg García, unpublished data), added economic, social and religious context to Lenaai's, Matinkoi's and Stanley's personal accounts and reports.

Finally, Joana's and Angela's recent participation in four ilpejeta provided them with embodied understandings of the relaxing and joyful aspects of meat camps. Participant sensation (Howes, 2019) and observation at ilpejeta enabled a sensory exploration of the effects of ingesting combined meat and medicinal plants and pleasant social dynamics on bodies and minds (documented in field notes). Each olpejet occurred from morning to evening, close to homesteads. Special goats were selected for slaughtering; and *ilkeek* (literally, 'trees', roots, barks, leaves with medicinal properties) collected to make *emotorik*, a broth made of boiled and emulsified bone, entrails, meat, animal stomach content, herbs and fat. At the ilpejeta, men slashed the goats' necks, then meticulously

15 Collaborative researchers regularly shared their findings through online oral presentations with members of the *COVID-19 in African, Asian, and North American Drylands* Working Group.



Figure 1.

Collecting a root of *olngongwenyie* (*Acacia gerardii*) to be boiled together with meats and other herbs to make *emotorik*, a medicinal broth. *Olngogwenyie* was used as anti-COVID medicine.

Photo: Joana Roque de Pinho.

cut and divided the meat into parts, and cooked them according to their respective beneficiaries (elders, women, children) at home. Others prepared the emotorik. Sitting and lying under trees, we drank the emotorik that helped us digest and build appetite for more fried, boiled and roasted pieces of meat, while having deep conversations, joking and watching children, including our own, play or sit quietly. As Angela and Joana experienced the ilkeek's effects, they learned about their properties, and the practicalities and norms of making and *being at* a meat camp. Going home at sunset, rather than 'heavy', they each time felt 'light' and good.[16] Our qualitative analysis is grounded in connections between ilpuli, health, food provision and communitas suggested by our data. Our dataset includes transcripts of audio messages, field and phone interviews, and online presentations; WhatsApp text messages and photographs; and field

16 The 'lightness' was surprising given the enormous amounts of meat and fat we ate all day long.

notes. We conducted thematic analysis, supported by Nvivo, a Qualitative Data Analysis software, coding text into predefined and emerging analytical categories. The team regularly triangulated their data and held analytical discussions via WhatsApp, Zoom, phone conversations, and several in-person meetings in 2024.

'Men ran away from their homes': Olpul le corona experiences in Talek and Loita

Talek

In Talek, we distinguish two phases in pandemic ilpuli experiences. In the first phase (14 March–end of April 2020), a harsh lockdown forced tourists out and urban and hotel employees back home and without a job. Airstrips, markets, schools, and churches closed. Roadblocks and a curfew ensued. These first weeks were beset by rumours, fear and preoccupation with food because access to urban areas like Talek and Narok and their food stores was restricted (Roque de Pinho et al., 2023).[17] Domestic animals became the only source of sustenance, as Stanley described:

> Everyone was afraid of this animal called COVID. … The first [governmental] measure … was staying at home … The whole day you can't go anywhere. People are asking, what's going on? Some mentioned the end of the world. What's next? What do we do? How many cows do I have? I kept selling [animals] because there was no alternative … It became a very hard life. We became livestock-reliant, nothing else – only milk and meat.

A senior elder remembered how 'Ilpuli started immediately after the schools closed on the second week of the lockdown'. Stanley elaborates: 'Men ran away from their homes. We went in groups … This was the first measure. We were at olpul, just having meat and lots of herbal medicines to immunise our bodies.' Stanley participated in several ilpuli. The olpul he seriously coorganised took place for eight days in May 2020 on the premises of a tourist campsite that offered access to lots of medicinal plants and water. The hotel manager even provided a small tent to protect the meat from the heavy rain. There were about fifteen adult men (of four age-groups) and seven boys (6–12 years old), who feasted on two cows, three sheep and three goats. Each man must contribute animals to the olpul. To acquire a cow for the olpul in the

17 In Loita, additional factors contributed to the absence of food trade, namely: the Kenya-Tanzania border closure; heavy rains and the inter-county lockdown that prevented transportation of foodstuffs to Loita. Also, maize and beans were not ready for harvest (details in Roque de Pinho et al., 2023).

absence of circulating cash, Stanley took a loan. Young men traded small stock for oxen at illegal bush markets (see also Roque de Pinho et al., 2023).

Hosting ilpuli at hotels and lodges on wildlife conservancies became common. The possibility of charging smartphones also made these locations attractive. Ilpuli members returned the favour by sharing olpul meat with the few remaining employees and protecting the facilities against deterioration and theft. Their olpul blessings and prayers brought the hotels good luck. In some hotels, ilpuli members even enjoyed 'stay[ing] in the rooms, in the beds while enjoying the meat … Even politicians at the top joined. Even an MP [Member of Parliament]. Everyone was accepting [it]', Stanley reported. In another twist of the rules, young men of the ilmurran age-grade, employed as herders, conducted ilpuli in bushes *inside* the MMNR and wildlife conservancies, which are usually off-limits to pastoral activities for the majority of the year.[18] This time, game rangers acquiesced to it and told them, 'Do not disturb the [wild animals] … Go to olpul and come back'.

Stanley also noted that, over the past two decades, ilpuli have become rarer. They were not well organised and would host very few participants. And 'I'd be there for two days, then be called by clients and leave the olpul'. Instead, ilpuli le corona were 'carefully planned' and frequently hosted more than twenty people. But what most surprised Stanley this time was *who* participated:

> Everyone went! Young boys getting trained in herbs, educated people getting trained in slaughtering, politicians and non-politicians, Christians and non-Christians. The whole society was brought together … It was compulsory to go. Everyone was doing it!

In contrast, 'before the pandemic, [olpul was] mostly for ilmurran or people needing treatment'. Others also observed an unfamiliar mixing of age-groups (ilmurran, boys *and* elders) within the same ilpuli. In the past young boys did participate in ilmurran's ilpuli to 'learn about the herbs from older participants'. This practice was galvanised during the lockdown, with many young, and old, people (re)learning medicinal knowledge from experts (see below).

Stanley, a devoted church elder at Full Gospel Church of Kenya,[19] also approvingly noted how Christians (some of them newcomers to ilpuli), and non-Christians, respected each other at ilpuli le corona: 'I told them

18 Conservancies open to cattle grazing from March to early June during the long rains. The national reserve allows herders inside in September and October (when very dry). As reported by Roque de Pinho et al. (2023), during the pandemic, the conservancies allowed cattle grazing within their boundaries because they could no longer pay their dues to the private landowners and because the tall grasses due to the heavy rains called for additional grazing by domestic herbivores.

19 A Pentecostal church.

[non-Pentecostals] I don't take blood and they respected it'.[20] Also, both groups gave each other space for their respective worshipping, both 'traditional' Maasai and Pentecostal: 'We set a time at olpul to pray, me and a pastor. [The others] gave us time.' At other ilpuli, some 'pastors even shared the Word'. Finally, ilpuli le corona underpins the development of the olpul as an electoral campaigning tool:

> The olpul is now used politically. This strategy appeared after the pandemic. Politicians now fund ilpuli. Everything that is discussed there is protected by the seal of secret. Ilpuli have become political retreats.

Only women did not take part in ilpuli le corona. However, their role in broader ilpuli le corona processes was crucial, as we show below.

As fear of contagion subsided, a second phase started in April 2020. Although gatherings were still officially forbidden, people started reveling at festivities that welcomed olpul-goers back home. After coming out of the bush with his companions, Stanley 'went for six days roaming the *bomas* (homesteads), celebrating'. Everyone joined these joyful dancing, singing and eating celebrations.

> People lost fear of COVID … Men are coming out of the [ilpuli] and attending celebrations … People now dance with each other and even local leaders, the Chief and [others], joined … People travel boma to boma. Even those who haven't gone to olpul, they're enjoying each other.

The only food that olpul-goers can have when they come out is kule naaoto because 'in the first weeks when you arrive from olpul, you must not eat agricultural food. Only milks',[21] which women prepare: 'When their husbands are away, they do a lot! They're busy making and storing kule naaoto', a WhatsApp message from Stanley reported in June 2021.

The celebrations were re-activated during the lockdown. In recent pre-pandemic life, Stanley explained, 'some people would go to eat meat for health but there were no [post-olpul] celebrations because these ilpuli were unplanned and women couldn't prepare the milks'. For him, these post-olpul celebrations 'were like (age-group) [ceremonies] … there was a lot of entertainment, even competition about how much milk you'd drink'. His own experience was that

> we came out of olpul, then slept at a boma. In the morning, we'd wake up and drink tea.[22] At 10, 11h, women would bring all the milks. 11h to 13h,

20 Stanley, being a Pentecostal Christian, does not consume blood as done traditionally because 'the Bible says you mustn't drink an animal's blood because it's the animal's life'. See Leviticus 17:10–14, Leviticus 7:26, Genesis 9:4 and Deuteronomy 12:23.

21 *Kule* (Maa), always plural.

22 Sugary milky tea.

> we gather for Maasai dances, people perform. We drink the milks, five litres or more, as much as our stomachs can hold. At 15h, 16h, we go to the next boma. Sleep there if far. We start having milk at night then move again … [We drank] only kule naaoto.

However, these festivities fueled tension with Pentecostal Christians. 'Immoral customs' resurfaced. Stanley censures them:

> Those Maasai songs, they don't please God. They please the elders, the mamas, and the ilmurran. The church fears that they lead to immorality … These dances lead you to get lost … I fought a lot with the Christian ladies: 'your husband has the right to eat meat, drink milk. Ok. But don't do that dance. Just say no to that.'

Some pastors also condemned ilpuli as a general practice 'because [they] reconnect people with practices that the church rejects, like eating meat without cutting the animal's throat and drinking blood from the jugular'.

Loita

In Loita, more remote and disconnected from international travel, the threat of contagion was initially seen as 'a joke', according to Lenaai – that is, until urban acquaintances got infected. Ilpuli started later than in Talek, in August 2020. In Loita, too, there were noticeably more, and larger, ilpuli occurring than before and after the pandemic, according to multiple interlocutors. When the lockdown began, few had been participating in ilpuli, especially among the youth: 'Some people didn't know ilpuli before the pandemic.'

In October 2022, Joana and Angela walked with Lenaai downhill from his home to the location of the olpul le corona he co-organised in the dry season of September 2020. While an olpul is a transitory phenomenon, physical traces remain visible for years across the landscape. As they followed him, Lenaai showed the signs of past ilpuli. In fact, this 'hidden' wooded area close to the river but distant from the homesteads and grazing areas and therefore largely devoid of movement of people or cattle, had been a favoured spot for holding ilpuli. Lenaai, who had previously shared a homestead with Matinkoi, had only recently pioneered settlement just up the hill – 'booking land' (Kronenburg García, 2013) in anticipation of land demarcation had been one of the reasons. After pointing out trees from which roots, branches and bark had been removed for medicinal use (ilkeek), they arrived at a now dry seasonal stream and found a 'refuge': this had been the olpul le corona of Lenaai and his companions. The outline of a thornbush fence, with an opening for the gate, was still visible, as was a three-stone stove and a stick-made shelf where meat had hung. Walking around reverently, Lenaai reenacted how space had been divided into a 'living room', a kitchen, a space for firewood, and a sleeping area (Figure 2).



Figure 2.

An olpul le corona's sleeping area, Loita, Narok County.
Photo: Joana Roque de Pinho.

Still neatly delineated by four logs, the latter had fitted five adult age-mates and Lenaai's twelve-year-old son. Engulfed by the soothing smells and sounds of the bush, they had slept on a bed of *shukas* (blankets) and velvety *oleleshwa* leaves,[23] beneath the tree canopy.

'[At this olpul], we ate day and night … Why our group? Because we share the same ideas, we have the same mentality, we wished to go to olpul, we're very close friends. We decided "let's contribute".'

In July 2020, they started the preparations. First, they decided on slaughtering four huge goats. Each member

> contributed 15,000 shilling (approx. 130 euros) for the goats, then one of us bought them at the [hidden bush] market and brought them to my home.[24] Those goats shouldn't come from our own flocks. Members should also contribute a goat for their wives and children, for slaughtering at olpejet' (see below),

23 *Tarchonanthus camphoratus*.

24 See Roque de Pinho et al. (2023) for hidden livestock markets in the bush.

Lenaai explains. Selecting the olpul site was the next step. Lenaai and his companions scouted different areas together and chose this place – secluded, but not too distant from his home. Then they agreed on a day to collect herbs, locally and in the Naimina Enkiyio Forest. In total, they collected 'almost twenty ilkeek [which] we don't really know how to mix [but one of us was] an expert'. Additional herbs were purchased at an [illegal] market outside Loita. Finally, in September, shortly after fencing the olpul, they moved in. They ate 'goat after goat', finishing 'the first one in three days!' In Loita, phones are not allowed at ilpuli, but this time, 'we had them and communicated with our families'.

Though he had not been to any olpul recently before the pandemic, when he did it this time (in September 2020) it was also to gain strength for the heavy work of farming in January. '[I organised this olpul] to increase my immunity against corona and my energy for cultivation. Also, because we were idle, without places to go. Many neighbours were going to olpul. You heard their stories.' As in Talek, 'everyone is going' and Loita *ilpuli* accommodated Pentecostal dietary restrictions: 'According to the churches, we mustn't suffocate the animals. Instead, we cut their necks and remove the blood' so that 'Pentecostals can sleep at olpul'.[25] Upon leaving the olpul after about ten days, Lenaai and his friends were celebrated in intense festivities that took place in the homesteads of all the participants. Relatives and neighbors joined for blessings, a lot of kule naaoto and soda, and some beer drinking by elders – though no singing and dancing happened as 'we're not ilmurran anymore'.

The harshest lockdown measures eventually eased. International and intercounty travel resumed in July and August 2020, respectively. Employment in tourism and wildlife conservation-related restrictions on livestock grazing returned to Talek. There were debts to be repaid and children to send back to boarding school. There was again little time for olpul and fewer animals to contribute as pressure from wildlife conservation authorities to control cattle numbers and movements mounted. The tolerance for holding ilpuli inside conservation areas also dissipated. In Loita, a complex land demarcation process has left people too busy to organise ilpuli, and many of those secluded places much preferred for ilpuli were now being allotted to individual owners anyway, casting doubt about their future accessibility. In 2021, the situation was compounded, says Lenaai, by 'a shortage of rain and high prices. Life was unstable so there was no olpul planning … [I had] lots of responsibilities, no rain and low harvests … There was no time for olpul.' Like before the pandemic, Stanley now leaves an olpul when called by safari clients. Yet, ilpuli le corona left legacies that we examine below.

25 Lenaai and Matinkoi are Catholic. Catholicism is more accommodating of Maasai traditions than Pentecostalism (Hodgson, 2005).

‘Every olpul is like a celebration’: Health, food and communitas

Ilpuli le corona and their celebrations alleviated some impacts of the lockdown on health, food provision and sociality.

Herbs and meat

In both areas, pursuing good health – immunity and vitality – was the prime and most immediate motivation for attending ilpuli (and ilpejeta) during the lockdown. Asserting his trust in the Maasai pharmacopeia, a Mpuaai senior elder described how ‘Maasai looked for medicine in the forest … We know different trees, that’s why Maasai can’t get corona. We don’t believe in medicine from clinics, we believe in ilkeek.’

Seeking immunity at ilpuli le corona was a strategy rooted in experience with past disease outbreaks. For Lenaai,

> very few people were going to olpul [before] … During the pandemic, we heard from elders that there was a time when a disease almost killed the Maasai. So, with these stories, people realised that olpul is the only cure … that this COVID-19 can be cured by herbs … Almost everyone went to olpul to control this virus.

The strategy paid off and ‘no one died from corona’, we repeatedly heard from interviewees – a proof in their eyes of the efficacy of Maasai medicine. Lenaai further explains: ‘people think the Naimina Enkiyio Forest really helps them with these herbs! … They get roots that cure malaria, the common cold, pneumonia.’

Experts in Maasai medicine are key actors. They are ‘[unschooled] men, real Maasais who have been to many ilpuli and have really learned. They eat and sleep at olpul without contributing animals.’ Their knowledge is crucial because ‘they know how to balance the herbs’, says Matinkoi. ‘When mixing herbs, [any] imbalance can have negative consequences’, adds Lenaai. In the past, olpul participants targeted specific conditions with herbs. Some herbs ‘build your thinking’, says Lenaai, while ‘others make morans shake’,[26] or ‘strengthen their bones and bone marrow, make them run without panting, survive without food, and strong enough to kill lions … Elders go to retain youth and strength.’ As new herbal combinations were tried against ‘corona’, Matinkoi feared their effects on his chronic condition and did not attend any olpul le corona.

Stanley ‘[learned] so much!’ about herbs and their benefits at the ilpuli le corona. Daily use of ilkeek spread, and businesses developed: ‘After COVID,

26 Trance.

people stopped taking tea with black tea leaves: they only take it with herbs from the bush. Now, people are selling the herbs they discovered during the pandemic.' The reinforced trust in Maasai medicine possibly paused (at least momentarily) the documented downward trend in medicinal knowledge transmission (Busmann et al., 2018; Hedges et al., 2020).

To prevent 'corona', another line of defence was meat itself. Both olpul meat and emotorik are 'body builders' (see also Hedges and ole Kipila, 2022). 'When you don't have energy, the body needs meat. Olpul builds the body with meat', Matinkoi explains: 'There's no other food [than meat] at olpul. The more [specific herbs] you take, the more meat you eat' – an effect that Angela and Joana directly experienced at the ilpejeta. Even when disapproving of its 'immoral' aspects, some pastors supported the olpul as a health boosting practice. The strengthening function of olpul meat is particularly emphasised in Loita, where men attend ilpuli in anticipation of farming work (ploughing, fencing and harvesting). Lenaai elaborates:

> Initially, olpul was a place where ilmurran slaughter a cow, an ox, or a goat and take meat and emotorik to become strong, healthy and courageous … It encouraged them to work hard [acquiring cows] and care for their families … Now, there's no cattle raiding. You go to olpul to [support] your other world: herding and farming.

Lenaai reckons that 'this olpul le corona … really [made me] stronger. We really worked on our *shambas*.'[27]

During the lockdown, Stanley re-experienced another benefit of meat camps: how they 'clean the body' and counteract adverse effects of 'modern' foods.

> Now … when kids come home from boarding school, where they eat agricultural foods without protein, the family gets together, we slaughter and eat natural meat [with emotorik]. My wildlife guiding job makes me eat a lot of agricultural foods, so I slaughter to improve my body.

Hedges and ole Kipila (2024) also noted how ilpuli nowadays occur in Narok's urban homes to remove 'toxins' linked to alcoholism, biomedical treatments and the urban lifestyle. Our findings support the emerging notion of the olpul as a healthcare institution (Burford et al., 2001; Hedges et al., 2020; Hedges and ole Kipila, 2022, 2024). This role may have been critical as health facilities were under pressure during the lockdown.

Food sharing

Many participants received their first training in proper meat handling and roasting at ilpuli le corona. 'Schooled guys didn't know how to slaughter. They

27 Agricultural fields.

learned at [ilpuli le corona]. They also learned how to roast meat. It was a training', says Stanley.

Ilpuli le corona softened lockdown impacts by providing nutritious pastoral foods at a time of food scarcity caused by forced market closures, disrupted transportation of goods, and inflation (see Roque de Pinho et al. 2023). Lenaai describes how people joined ilpuli 'also to get food because there was a shortage'. Food sharing is key to the olpul, making it a critical food redistribution mechanism during the lockdown.

Many (re)learned the egalitarian olpul meat serving etiquette: 'I've learned to respect duty', Stanley explains. '[It goes] like this: there's [roasted] meat that I'd prefer to eat but the person dishing out the meat does it out without looking at it. So, I get meat randomly and I must eat whatever I'm given. I may not choose!' Visitors to an olpul are always fed. Neighbours and relatives came, who visited Lenaai's olpul and blessed it. They were offered meat and emotorik, although, as visitors, they remained at a respectful distance of the olpul. Built into the rules that govern the relations around meat, solidarity and hospitality are also emphasised through elders' stories – 'a training in learning to share', says Matinkoi.

In both areas, meat was also shared *beyond* the ilpuli. Fat, skin, entrails and specific cuts had their respective recipients among wives, elders, and young boys and girls. Every member of Lenaai's olpul also hosted an *olpejet* close to their home, thus multiplying the nutritional benefits of the olpul. Lenaai and his companions each contributed two goats: one for their olpul, and one for the olpejet of their family. While their absence at ilpuli is often noted (Spencer, 1988), married women are nevertheless major beneficiaries. Lenaai explains how each wife received a kilogram of special, 'very nice', fried goat meat without blood. They, in turn, welcomed their husbands home with a lot of kule naaoto.

Hospitality is central to the homecoming celebrations. Stanley reported that 'whoever is present drinks milk, not just the olpul participants … Those who are homeless become privileged. You take as much milk as you can, you don't need to look for food. It's an open buffet for everyone.' In Loita, as well, 'we shared [the kule naaoto mixed with goat fat and porridge prepared by our wives] with everyone around us, and the other bomas'. Lenaai elaborates: 'When we move out of the olpul, we must celebrate! It is like a party to taste the goodness of olpul. Your neighbours bless you, "Okay, you went to eat meat alone, but we bless you".'

In Talek, the medicinal and nutritional properties of ilpuli and their celebrations spurred a positive valuation of emotorik *and* of the very act of sharing food. In 2024, looking back at 2020, Stanley observed that 'before corona, people were reluctant to do [meat camps] because they didn't have time. It was

easier for them to buy meat and emotorik in butcheries in town for mamas to cook' (see Talle, 1989; Hedges and ola Kipila, 2020). 'During corona', Stanley continues,

> we found that the olpul emotorik is richer in meat and ilkeek than the town emotorik. So now people demand more [of that] and set aside one month each year to go to olpul, April or December. We save money throughout the year to buy animals and contribute. Also, before COVID, donating a sheep or a cow for olpul was considered a loss.[28] After COVID, it's now seen as beneficial. [We realised] it's important to slaughter a cow for our family, for our friends, so we more easily donate cows.[29]

This, in Stanley's view, helped to even out rising disparities in wealth: '[A long time ago], it was difficult to distinguish rich from poor [thanks to slaughtering for other people]. The pandemic brought the idea back'. Under lockdown, contributing livestock to collective causes like ilpuli, ilpejeta or celebrations promoted more egalitarian relationships and reinforced hospitality (see Hillman, 1994) in the face of rising individualism (see Hedges and ole Kipila, 2024). This was particularly appreciated in the Maasai Mara, where relationships had become the most commodified (see Cavanagh et al., 2020).

'Olpul brings people together': Communitas

Making and being at an olpul is a relational experience characterised by bonding, respect, trust and camaraderie. Everything about an olpul is shared: one 'cannot say "my olpul" because it is shared', explained Lenaai.

At olpul, members share a small, secluded space for many days (Figure 1), as well as responsibilities. Matinkoi explains, 'in the Maasai way, there are prayers every morning before opening the [olpul's] gate. One member's duty is to open it; another's duty is to close it … Other duties include fetching water, collecting firewood, and making the beds by changing the oleleshwa leaves daily.' Shared duties promote bonding and egalitarianism, as 'there's no leader. Everyone respects everyone, and you do your duties', says Matinkoi.

Ilpuli both create and deepen friendships: 'an olpul brings people together. When we gather in the forest, you get to know people that you didn't know before. You share a lot. You become real friends', says Matinkoi. Stanley adds, 'it's like at the manyata! You create new friendships, strong relationships.' Participants perceived ilpuli le corona to have been more interesting and intense than those before. In his first WhatsApp report (June 2020), Stanley

28 Lenaai counters that 'this is a Maasai Mara thing: slaughtering for others was never seen as a loss in Loita. Some animals are never sold, instead kept for slaughtering for children.'

29 See also Roque de Pinho et al. (2023), on increased donations, exchange, gifting and trading of livestock during the lockdown.

enthused about his experience: 'I joined an olpul. It was very nice! Very interactive. Very very very interesting!' Lenaai, too, enjoyed it 'very much!' Deep conversations helped him deal with the uncertainty: 'Corona was part of all our chats. "What will happen if this goes on? Will it be like Ebola? HIV? Is this a cold?" How will it affect our friendships, our social life? We discussed corona a lot.' Collective meaning-making is well-known for helping people process a disaster in its aftermath (Quinn et al., 2021). Ilpuli le corona may have played a significant part in this process.

Ilpuli, of course, were also a satisfying way to pass time and 'fight idleness'. Many men, formerly with jobs in tourism or urban centres, were now unemployed. Most enjoyed going out with the cows again, and

> you [would find] in one herd of cows more than five people looking after them because there is nothing else that you can do … So, [if] we can't go to the shop … and you are not into the animals, you remain alone loitering in the villages. So, we came back to that system, the [olpul],

Stanley explained.[30] Many felt that they had 'nothing else to do' and 'nowhere to go'. To these men, ilpuli provided a shared purpose. The ilpuli's structured environments and tasks gave a sense of agency to those who had suddenly become jobless, worried and disempowered. A hotel chef in Mpuaai explains, 'I went to olpul in April 2020 for a month. We were twenty men and slowly ate five cows. There was nothing else to do. I was idle at home. No one was in town. Hotels were closed.' Ilpuli also contributed to rebuilding the sense of belonging that used to come from schools, jobs, and churches before the pandemic disruption. For Matinkoi, 'people were … not allowed to go to town, so they ran to the forest. They're meeting there like … at the centre and the church.'

The reactivated joyful post-olpul celebrations brought together lots of different people who thoroughly enjoyed themselves. The revelry strengthened relationships, (re)uniting people who might not have interacted frequently in daily life, or who even had strained relationships, like Pentecostal and 'traditional' Maasai in Loita. Matinkoi stressed how conversion to Pentecostalism '[had been] dividing people. A saved son cannot go and see his non-saved mother! A group of saved people will not walk together with a non-saved friend.' With Christian converts breaking Pentecostal rules of behaviour and indulging in the 'immoral' singing, teasing and dancing of 'traditional' Maasai society, the post-olpul celebrations in Talek had a strong carnivalesque element (Godet, 2020). As one pastor put it, 'Corona didn't help the church: it

30 The lockdown allowed children and men who went back home in the Maasai Mara to take up herding again. After the first weeks, men also started trading livestock as the demand for cattle boomed. These dynamics are explored in Roque de Pinho et al. (2023).

helped members to leave. Culture became stronger. Corona brought people together outside the church.' At the same time, these festive occasions may well have provided participants of all ages and genders with the togetherness, the rejoicing, the solidarity, the emotional release and the collective singing that characterise the Pentecostal services many would attend before the lockdown.

The spiritual dimension of ilpuli le corona was crucial for both non-Christian and Christian participants. The praying and aura of sacredness that characterise the olpul (Talle, 1989) are known to support healing (Burford et al., 2021; Hedges and ole Kipila, 2024). Traditional prayers acknowledge the agency of the *forest* itself in supporting humans, Stanley explains:

> In traditional Maasai life, [at olpul], we pray [collectively] before the birds sing. And when we leave the forest[31], we bless it, we thank it by burning special trees.[32] The smoke goes up, and we sing 'My forest, we appreciate you, you fed us, we promise we will be back' (*Entim ai tareto iyiook amu kipuoo kiitu*).

As we saw, ilpuli le corona helped fill the spiritual void created by the closure of the churches. Despite Pentecostalism's rejection of certain Maasai customs, 'believers' and 'non-believers' generously shared ilpuli le corona and accommodated each other's beliefs and practices. In Loita, where Pentecostalism is a more recent phenomenon, this may have contributed to healing rifts between the two groups.

Hedges and ole Kipila (2024) call the olpul a system of healing and giving hope in life. While this role was widely sought and fulfilled during the lockdown, some people were left out. Matinkoi, clearly, did not benefit from it. Because he feared contagion by SARS-CoV-2 and potential impacts of the ilkeek on his chronic condition, he stayed away from ilpuli. He, then, ended up 'lonely! Just waiting to die!'[33]. This suggests how important the human connection, and a sense of belonging, the mutual support, the fun, the joy, the shared purpose, the working together and the interconnectedness promoted by ilpuli were. All helped people counteract anxiety, cope with harsh anti-social measures and even think about and build a post-pandemic world that felt a little bit less individualistic than before (at least for a while) (see Matthewman and Uekusa, 2021).

31 i.e., when we leave the *olpul*.

32 Olorien (*Olea Africana*): wild olive.

33 Similar situations occurred with people who had to stay in cities, like Narok (see Roque de Pinho et al. 2023).

Conclusion

We showed how ilpuli le corona boosted health, supported food security and generated communitas among (agro)pastoralists of Narok county. We contribute to the limited literature on the olpul in two ways. First, we documented and analysed the post-olpul celebrations for the first time, thereby showing how perceived therapeutic, nutritional, social and spiritual benefits of the olpul extend beyond all-male participants to include women and children at home, neighbours, friends and relatives. By highlighting its broader social and gendered dynamics, we argue for a more inclusive interpretation of the olpul. Second, we historicise the olpul by demonstrating that, more than an expression of 'resisting modernity' (Hedges and ole Kipila, 2024: 152), it proves to be a flexible and changing institution. While participating in ilpuli le corona was an important way in which many people (re)connected with some Maasai norms and medicinal knowledge, ilpuli le corona also incorporated a range of new relationships and meanings that reflect its adaptation to both an exceptional epidemiological context and ongoing broader societal changes and tensions like the disappearance of ilmurran and widespread conversion to Pentecostalism.

Additionally, we contribute to the scholarship on pastoralism by bringing in the notion of communitas as it is developed in the communitas and disasters literature (E. Turner, 2012; Matthewman and Uekusa, 2021). Studies on pastoralism have documented how social mechanisms and institutions are key for dealing with times of change and uncertainty. Concepts like social capital, solidarity, moral economy, relationality, reciprocity and care are mobilised to capture the importance of social relationships for pastoral responses to and recovery from crises (Ahearn et al., 2026; Galvin 2009; Scoones and Nori, 2021; Scoones 2023; Semplici et al., 2024; Simula et al., 2021). Likewise, disaster studies have demonstrated how community members 'come together' in the aftermath of disasters (Oliver-Smith, 1977). They also show how belonging and relationality (Quinn et al. 2021) and communitas (Matthewman and Uekusa, 2021), as they emerge during or in the aftermath of disasters, help build resilience against future calamities. Through the notion of communitas, we contribute to the literature on pastoralism by capturing the overlooked elements of collective joy and the sudden, emergent experience of unity that can manifest in times of disaster. We showed that ilpuli le corona, which started somewhat spontaneously shortly after the announcement of the Kenyan lockdown, sparked not only solidarity, hospitality and equity (all of which are built into olpul norms) but also a fleeting, intense moment of pleasure and joy in togetherness that helped dispel apocalyptic anxieties and fostered social relationships in a unique disaster context where state enforced rules undermined

sociality. Even if hosting ilpuli has become challenging after the pandemic, we argue that legacies of ilpuli le corona, such as a reinforced trust in Maasai medicine and a renewed interest in contributing animals to collective food sharing events, build resilience to future disasters. This supports Scoones and Nori's (2021) assertion that, despite more individualised and commodified pastoral lives, the pastoral cultural values that underpin redistributive practices and reciprocal arrangements are often remobilised in crises.

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