

Abstract:

The Somali are one of the multi-state communities of Eastern Africa. Somalia is their main state, but they also occupy a large part of Djibouti, northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia rangelands, loosely referred to as arid and semiarid lands (ASAL). Unpredictable rainfall, long periods of drought, limited water, and inadequate knowledge and technology of water resource management characterize the ASAL. There is also rapid population growth, coupled with low or declining real incomes, low nutritional levels, serious environmental degradation, and the externalities of modernization and economic development (Darkoh, 1996). Somali pastoralists are a camel community mainly because of the dry and harsh environment they live in; pastoralists, by definition, being those who primarily derive their living from the management of livestock on rangelands (Prior, 1994). There is no other community in the world where the camel plays such a pivotal role in the local economy and culture as in the Somali community. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 1979) estimates, there are approximately 15 million dromedary camels in the world, of which 65% are found in the northeast African states of Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan and Kenya. The Somali community (in Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia) has the largest population and highest density of camels in the world, and to the same extent this animal also pervades the Somali culture. Historically, the geographical area that is now Somalia may have been a focal point in the introduction and dispersal of the domesticated dromedary (Abokor, 1993). The possession of a certain amount of livestock and of physical strength are the primary requirements for survival and success in the demanding environment of Somali pastoral nomads. The climatic and geographic conditions prompt the Somali pastoral nomads to pursue animal husbandry with constant movement from place to place in search of better pasture and water. This economic system in part determines social relations and institutions and creates a division of labour whereby tasks essential for survival are allocated to particular groups of people. The camel is an important livestock species uniquely adapted to hot and arid environments (Schwartz, 1992) and therefore contributes significantly to the food security of the nomadic pastoral households. This unique adaptability makes it ideal for exploitation under the ASAL conditions. The contribution of camels to the human welfare of developing countries, including Kenya, is generally obscured by a combination of several factors, which tend to underestimate their true value. Firstly, the estimates of camel populations are usually inaccurate due to lack of regular census. Secondly, their products seldom enter a formal marketing system; thus their contribution to subsistence and the national economy tends to be grossly underestimated. As a consequence, less attention has been given to camel improvements for many years when planning national development. For example, the major livestock development effort in Kenya between 1969 and 1982 (funded by the European Community) aimed at developing range areas completely ignored the camel (Njiru, 1993). In Somali occupied northern Kenya, camels are raised under traditional management systems. However, the changing socio-economic and environmental conditions are leading to a change in pastoral production systems from mainly subsistence towards market orientation. Generally, there are few practical, result-oriented studies on camel production. Wilson and Bourzat (1988) stated that the vast amount of research in the last two decades has contributed little to increased productivity. This has been attributed to the fact that most studies have had little general application to the practical aspects of camel production under pastoral production systems. Pastoral camel production is under pressure because of multiple changes in the production environment. Increasing human population pressure on pastoral grazing areas and the economic

implications resulting from diseases and lack of veterinary services are some of the factors that adversely affect traditional camel production. Additionally, reproductive performance is low in camels due to late first parturition, long parturition intervals, and high calf mortality. Improvement of the reproductive performance and reduction of animal losses by management measures that are applicable to a mobile system appear to offer possibilities of increasing camel productivity and capacity to support the increasing human population. An adequate understanding of traditional camel production practices forms the foundation upon which improvement and innovations could be based. Using Moyale District as a case, this study was carried out in order to understand the status of traditional camel production systems of the Somali camel keeping pastoralists.