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Indigenous Characterization of Local Camel Populations and Breeding Methods of Pastoralists in Northern Kenya

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Abstract

Dromedaries provide nomadic livestock keepers in Northern Kenya with the mobility they need and milk for their daily diet. Because of their high adaptability, camels (*Camelus dromedarius*) are particularly suited for areas with seasonally varied forage supply and a high production risk due to recurrent droughts. In the past the characteristics of local camel breeds, which are named after the ethnic groups of their owners, were described only superficially. Knowledge on characteristics of local camel breeds and indigenous breeding methods is a prerequisite for the understanding and development of means to improve the pastoral system of camel keeping. Therefore the aim of this study was to record the indigenous characterization of local camel breeds and the breeding methods of Rendille and Gabbra pastoralists.

Both, open and structured interviews were conducted with 20 Rendille and 23 Gabbra pastoralists. The results comprised the two main areas indigenous characterization of local breeds and pastoral breeding methods and are as follows:

The Rendille and the Gabbra categorise camels of their own local breed into different types. These types are determined by a certain combination of characteristics: **a)** low drought tolerance and high milk yield but only in the rainy season and; **b)** moderate drought tolerance and moderate milk performance throughout the year; **c)** high drought tolerance and low milk yield. The categories are also reflected in the breeding concept: In view to breeding, a herd with an ideal proportion of the various types is considered more important than breeding towards one ideal camel with specific characteristics. Hence there is no single breeding aim. Combination of animals with different characteristics in the herd, and splitting up these animals to stationary and mobile camps reduces risk for the camel keepers.

The study shows that pastoralists in Northern Kenya have a comprehensive knowledge of camel breeding. The herewith recorded indigenous knowledge gives an insight in breeding-redundant concepts of pastoralists, in marginal areas under high risks. Breeding strategies that have proven to be suitable for these areas should be included in the set-up of modern breeding programs, that aim at dynamically maintain and further develop local breeds.

Keywords: Breeding methods, breeds, dromedary, indigenous characterization, indigenous knowledge, local camel populations, pastoralists, pastoral system