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Pastoralists' Perspectives on Multi-functional Role of Small Ruminants in their Production Systems in Arid Areas of Northern Kenya

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Abstract

Pastoral systems in sub-Saharan Africa are characterised by a high temporal and spatial variability of resource availability. Livestock is the only production asset of pastoralists and has thus to fulfil a broad range of functions for the household. We generated descriptive data on the different functions of the eight age and sex classes of sheep and goats respectively in northern Kenya. Using semi-structured interviews, we interviewed 22 and 33 Gabra and Rendille livestock keepers, respectively. We further used six group inquiries to get explanations of the different functions and their ranks. In both communities, animals of the different age and sex classes have a number of different functions. They are geared either towards fulfilling household needs and cultural and social obligations or towards maintenance and reproduction of the flock. Pastoralists have preference for animals of specific age and sex classes for selling or slaughtering for nutritional or financial reasons, respectively. Yearling ewes and rams are slaughtered more often than reproductive ewes and sheep castrates. Especially, the old goat castrates are sold during periods of high household financial requirements. Besides milk and meat, especially sheep fat is used for a variety of uses that include human therapy and skin beauty. The old sheep castrates are valued for supplying fat when required in large quantity. The young castrates are a preferred source of curative fat. Also for cultural functions, animals of specific age and sex classes are used. For instance, ewes are used during the almado ceremony which does not involve the slaughtering of an animal. The old ewes are slaughtered during a camel blessing ceremony called *sorio harafa*. Sheep and goats in the studied systems have partly different and rather complementary functions in the system. In the meeting of household food needs, sheep are for example relied for meat while goats for milk. Furthermore sheep are used more often for the ceremonial functions than goats. By assigning different functions to the different species and especially to different age and sex classes, pastoralists make strategical use of diversity to obtain more options and thereby increase resilience of the production system.

Keywords: Age and sex classes, cultural use, goats, income, Kenya, multi-functional, pastoralists, sheep

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