

# Research Update

## Town Camels and Milk Villages: the growth of camel milk marketing in the Somali Region of Ethiopia

By Abdi Abdullahi Hussein

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### Summary

- Recently, the growth of small towns in the Somali region of Ethiopia has spread to pastoralists seeking ties to important new markets
- Camels are the most important signifier of wealth and determinant of status in the community; their milk has been mostly used for domestic purposes
- In Gode town, one pastoralist struck on an idea to market camel milk in towns
- Today, this innovation is spreading widely and hundreds of camels are forming 'milk villages' around towns to meet increasing demand

### Background

The growth of small towns in the Somali region of Ethiopia in recent decades has encouraged a wealth of innovation, often small in form and quite localised, but which has spread as pastoralists seek to strengthen ties to these important new markets. One innovation that has become widespread is the marketing of camel milk in towns throughout Somali region, as well as in Addis Ababa to serve its expanding Somali population.

Camels, traditionally an animal that is husbanded in remote bush far from settlements, increasingly are kept in and near to towns. These 'town camels' support a growing camel dairying industry to supply milk to town populations.

The growth of towns spiked in the Somali region as refugees from the Ogaden War returned to Ethiopia during the 1990s after civil war spread in neighbouring Somalia. Over time, these towns have continued to expand, drawing an ever growing population of Somalis who have settled.

### Methodology

Beginning in May 2010, research began to better understand the growth in urban markets for camel's milk and innovation in Somali pastoralist production systems to this trend.

The research team visited towns in Somali region, speaking with camel-keepers and milk sellers, other townspeople, bush pastoralists, as well as government officials. They returned several times to Gode, an expanding district centre in Somali region, to dig more deeply into camel milk marketing trends in a particular place. Their work included a household survey and informal discussions with 'town pastoralists', including an elder who was the first camel-keeper to begin selling camel's milk in Gode.

This research details the drivers of camel milk marketing and the growing prevalence of 'town camels' and 'milk villages'. By examining the growth of marketing in camel's milk in Gode, the research examines change in the provision of fodder and labour, land use planning of rangelands near to town, and cultural attitudes that support this growing enterprise.

### Analysis

The growth of small towns and new opportunities for pastoralists in Somali Region

Pastoralism in the Somali region of Ethiopia has been transforming for some time and the growth of small towns is one manifestation of how the region is changing.

Many factors help to explain the growth of small towns in Somali region including:

- District (woreda) capitals such as Gode grow as development planning and resource distribution becomes focused at the district-level.
- Inflow of development funding and improved infrastructure and connections to larger regional centres
- Social services in areas of health and education are brought closer to pastoralists than ever before
- Access to school is improved, giving youth from poorer pastoralist backgrounds more options to move into non-livestock work



Gode fodder market

Photograph: Abdi Abdullahi Hussein

This growth of small towns is feeding the commercialization of livestock production:

- Holding pens and livestock sale yards are being established in woreda centres nearer to where pastoralists live
- Prominent traders are procuring camels from towns to supply the booming export markets in Egypt, Sudan and the Arabian Peninsula.
- Spreading network coverage for mobile phones means that herders can access more accurate market information on livestock prices in the region.
- With markets being established closer to 'home', herders are spared having to trek animals to distant sale yards, which cause them to lose weight, and can fetch a better price.

As towns become more important in pastoralist production systems, some herders and townspeople are producing fodder on enclosures near to centres to sustain 'town camels' as well as livestock brought to towns for sale.

Customarily, camels are the most important signifier of wealth and determinant of status within Somali society. Camel keeping has also been the preserve of pastoralists living in the bush. Camels were kept far from settlements and the milk produced by camels was used mostly for home use. In the past, sale and exchange of camel's milk was not part of the many connections that bonded bush pastoralists with town. Pastoralists from the bush would bring fermented camel's milk (*susa'i*) to give as gifts to family and friends they visited when travelling to towns.

In Gode town, the former capital of the Somali Regional State, the sale of camel's milk has very modest origins in the efforts of a former refugee who sought to sell a she-camel to pay a bill at a local health centre.

Over the past twenty years, keeping camels and selling milk in town has spread from a single innovator to over 100 households. The Somali Region Pastoral and Agro-pastoral Research Institute estimates there are between 100-150 camels living in the centre of Gode. Based on observations of the research team, hundreds more camels live on the periphery of Gode, in so-called 'milk villages' where the camels can be moved more easily to nearby rangelands. Most camel-keepers in town have fewer than five camels. The herd consists mostly of lactating camels and calves.

Innovations in accessing fodder, looking after camels, treating sickness and disease, and cultural attitudes have been necessary to support small-scale camel dairying in towns.

Access to fodder is a major constraint on keeping camels in towns. In the wet season, camels are fed on rangelands lying outside of town, particularly in the Suban area approximately 7KM from Gode. Feeding camels is naturally more difficult in the dry season. In addition to purchasing hay from enclosures near to town and driving camels to locations up to 20 KM from the town centre, camel keepers

have developed exceptional ways to feed camels, including boiling a 'soup' made from the meat of shoats, oil and sugar. The chaff of wheat is also boiled with sugar and fed to camels during drought.

Herding camels is skilled work and requires time when camels living in towns must be driven to rangelands beyond to find sufficient fodder. Further, camel keepers in town, who are mostly poorer, have other demands on their time and little excess labour within their household. Camel keepers negotiate these constraints by forming informal cooperatives. Camels are herded in a larger group and households rotate responsibility for looking after the larger herd. Sharing the burden in this way frees up time for camel-keepers to pursue complementary activities in towns since herds are smaller and do not provide for all household's livelihood needs.

### Looking ahead

Camel dairying began with a few individuals who exploited an emerging market in growing small towns, as many newcomers to towns came from pastoralist backgrounds and prefer drinking camel's milk. Many innovators are from poorer backgrounds although some wealthier individuals are also beginning to keep camels in towns seeing the benefits of diversifying their production into new areas. Significantly, the objective of keeping camels in towns is very different from bush pastoralism, where breeding and maximizing the size of the herd is an objective shared by many. Instead, small-scale dairying and tapping new markets is the primary objective of those who keep camels in towns.

Selling camel's milk in towns has proven lucrative for some 'town pastoralists', who have used their income to purchase plots in town and build houses. Furthermore, keeping camels in towns has created new income for women, who mostly are the buyers of camel's milk and sell this in the market as well as to restaurants.

Town pastoralists keeping camels explained to the researchers that herding in and near to towns also has some advantages, such as easier access to markets, veterinary treatment for livestock, and diversification to complement keeping few livestock. Pastoralists in towns also noted that they were able to organize themselves more easily than when they lived in the bush to lobby the government to provide treatments for camel diseases, a still neglected issue.

This **Research Update** was written by **Abdi Abdullahi Hussein** of the **Future Agricultures Consortium**. The series editor is David Hughes. Further information about this series of Research Updates at: [www.future-agricultures.org](http://www.future-agricultures.org)

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