

Could Cheese Be the Missing, Hard, Stable Currency To Fortify Self-Sufficiency of Pastoralist Communities?

Dagmar Schoder^{1,2}, John Laffa²

¹Vetmed University Vienna, Institute of Milk Hygiene, Milk Technology, and Food Science, Austria.

²Veterinarians without Borders Austria, Austria.



INTRODUCTION

Pastoralism – extensive livestock production in rangelands – is one of the most sustainable food systems on the planet. It plays a major role in safeguarding natural capital across a quarter of the world's land area. Traditional pastoral existence in Africa has always necessitated close, sustainable interaction with a harsh natural environment (1).

Maasai are among the few African ethnic groups that still live as small, socially intact associations close to nature. Their life-style thereby places great value on cattle, land for grazing and excess milk that may be exchanged for other goods. Milk and fermented milk products remain their main sources of nourishment. Today for the Maasai milk has become a marketable commodity that contributes to their regular family income. However, milk storage is particularly challenging in an arid climate without refrigeration (2).

MAIN GAP

Over the past decade the political establishment has been able to incorporate a negative stereotype of pastoralists. Today pastoralists, such as the Maasai, are seen to be environmentally destructive, sources of animal diseases, enemies of wild life and practitioners of economically unviable lifestyles. Increasingly, the Maasai are becoming victims of land conflicts and are being made up their traditional lives and move to the cities for day-paid jobs. This principally satisfies the economic interests of investors, who buy land to mine gold in the form of large areas that can be used as commercial hunting grounds or large-scale farms (3).

OUR APPROACH

We describe an ongoing pilot project that has attempted to address these hardships, facilitate traditional subsistence and the economic autonomy of the Parakuyo Maasai. We propose that one simple solution might be cheese production.

The “Maasai-cheese” project (www.vsf.at) was successfully implemented in the Tanzanian homeland of the Maasai (Fig. 1) in 2011. It instructs sustainable cheese production on the Maasai boma using locally sourced assets, combining Austrian experience of cheese production with Maasai experience of arid dairy farming. Anticipated gains for the Maasai are becoming realised. These can be grouped as follows:

- (i) Family income increases significantly and can be assured during hardship: During the dry season Zebu cattle do not produce enough milk that can be sold or exchanged. Cheese produced and matured earlier can be sold at this time.
- (ii) Antibiotic abuse in cattle can be drastically decreased: Cheese has become a valuable commodity and there is a strong disincentive to treat cattle with antibiotics, which prevent fermentation.
- (iii) Cheese is a sought-after commodity in Africa: This pilot initiative is being well received as the demand for cheese in Africa is enormous.

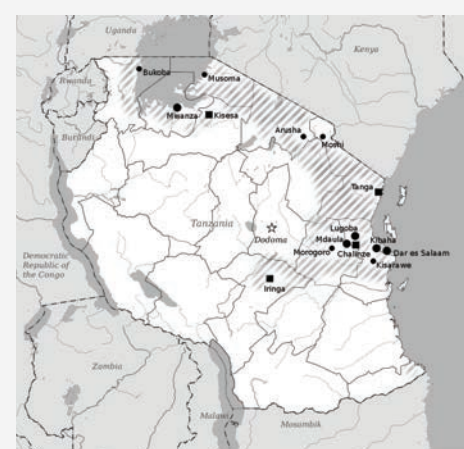


Fig. 1 Tanzanian homeland of the Maasai

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