

History and utilisation of donkeys in Namibia

by

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Abstract

The introduction of donkeys into Namibia can be traced to white settler movements in South Africa to where donkeys are reported to have been imported in 1656. The settlers used donkeys as pack and draft animals for on-farm activities including pulling of carts. They also used them to pull wagons for trekking over long distances. The major donkey drift into Namibia probably started at the beginning of the 19th century when the settlers began to move into the country. This paper reviews the history of draft animals in Namibia; before the end of the 19th century and until the South African rule. The paper also discusses the present use of donkeys in various parts of Namibia. These include plowing, transport with carts, riding and as pack animals and in one location use for meat.

Introduction

The donkey is a widely known animal in Namibia. Many people have seen donkeys in various situations; pulling carts, carrying goods or people on their backs, grazing, sitting on roads, plowing and weeding in crop fields. Different groups of people have different perceptions about donkeys, as agricultural livestock, farm work animals and rural transporters. Some people have described the donkey as a very stupid and wasteful animal which has no benefit to the general public, while others have found the donkey to be useful and important in their rural lives.

Unlike other draft animals such as oxen, horses and mules, there is very little literature about donkeys and their use in Namibia. The agricultural literature does not mention much about donkeys, even where donkeys have been used extensively for rural transport. Authors have not written much about donkeys, probably because of the bad name the donkey has among certain people. The users of donkeys, especially farmers, have often valued the donkey's work although its use on farms has been limited to mainly transport. To improve on the information about donkeys in Namibia, the Draft Animal Power Programme started gathering information on their history and utilisation. This

was done through discussions with people in rural areas, literature reviews and field observations. The information collected is reported below.

The history of donkeys and other draft animals in Namibia

The introduction of donkeys in Namibia is strongly linked to the coming of white settlers in the early 19th century. The arrival of the Dutch in South Africa in 1652 had a great influence on the introduction of draft animals such as horses and oxen and their later spread to Namibia. The first draft animals the Dutch introduced at the Cape were horses which they used to pull carts. Oxen came to be used as draft animals when the settlers started trading, by barter system, with the local people to obtain cattle. The first donkeys and mules were landed at the Cape in South Africa in 1656 (Joubert, 1995).

The settlers started moving into southern and central Namibia in the second half of the 18th century and by the end of the 18th century most parts of southern Namibia had been visited by the Dutch explorers. In 1837 some settlers are reported to have crossed the Orange River from the Cape into the Nama community in the southern part of Namibia. In 1851 another group of white settlers is reported to have landed at Walvis Bay. This group later entered central and northern Namibia and had contact with the Owambo communities. Missionaries were also travelling through Namibia., in 1851 they were reported in the Caprivi Strip. It is probably during such European movements that the technology of work animals such as oxen and donkeys was introduced as most were travelling by wagons pulled by draft animals.

More contact with the use of draft animals could have come in the German era between 1884 and 1915 when thousands of Namibians were employed on settlers' farms as labourers. By this time white settlers had acquired as many as 1300 farms totalling 13.4 million ha of land (Wood, 1988). The arrival in Namibia of South African settlers brought in more donkeys. The migration of

local farmers from one region to another distributed donkeys around other parts of Namibia. It is now not rare to find donkeys in places such as Bushmenland where until recently the local people (the San, also known as bushmen) were mainly associated with activities such as gathering and hunting.

Donkey population and distribution

Work done in recent years estimates about 120,500 donkeys in the northern communal areas of Namibia, with North Central having more than 90% of the total. It is estimated that Kavango Region has more than 500 donkeys. Less than 100 donkeys are found in the Caprivi strip.

In 1995, it was proposed that the National Draft Animal Power Programme be started to purchase donkeys for poorer households. It was estimated that 9000 households were potential beneficiaries.

The reaction to increasing donkeys in certain regions is mixed. Some people do not want more donkeys in their areas because of the stories they have heard about donkey grazing habits, while others would like to get more donkeys or replace the donkeys that have died.

Utilisation of donkeys in Namibia

In southern Namibia there is very little crop production, thus donkeys are mainly used for transport. Donkeys are normally used to pull light carts usually made of old car axles. Since these carts are used to transport people with light loads,

springs are included in the design to make journeys more comfortable. The framework of the cart is made from old car parts. The tyres are usually second-hand.

In northern Namibia, comprising North Central, Kavango and Caprivi Strip regions, donkeys are also used mainly for transport. Sometimes donkeys are seen pulling big carts meant for oxen. The use of donkeys as pack animals is common. Riding on donkeys by herdsman is also practised. Children like riding on donkeys too.

It is not rare to find donkeys in these regions plowing and, more recently, weeding. Except for the light French and Senegalese cultivators that are being tried for suitability, donkeys pull the normal ox plow.

Female-headed households may own donkeys which they use for rural transport. Previously the culture did not allow women to own cattle or donkeys, now women own one or both species. Most of the women who own donkeys and cattle acquired them through inheritance.

While many users of donkeys in the south are familiar with the harnessing systems of donkeys, in the north it is common to find donkeys yoked and using exactly the same system as that of oxen. The knowledge of donkey harnesses and harnessing appears to be limited. Even some extension technicians are unfamiliar with these systems. However, as a result of donor-funded projects the technical aspects of donkey

The introduction of donkeys in Erongo Region

The farmers interviewed during the study tour to the Erongo Region described the introduction of animal traction in the region in three parts. These included; before the end of the 19th century, the German time and the South African time. The period before the end of the 19th century was characterised by activities such as gathering, hunting and cropping using wooden hand spades.

During the German time (1884-1915) many local farmers exchanged semi-precious stones for old German carts and heavy plows imported by the Germans. These implements were very heavy and were pulled by 10 to 18 oxen. The Germans also brought in the skills of harness and yoke making, and the training of work animals.

Because of these developments the ways of farming changed. The area cultivated was extended with the use of the oxen-pulled plow, and use of the carts allowed transport of goods, wood, water and manure. In the South African period many donkeys were imported and organised markets were developed. Donkeys were seen as more disease resistant and also faster animals than oxen when used for transport, consequently, many farmers acquired them.

As a result of the increased use of donkeys, the design of the carts and plows changed. The plows became lighter, smaller and could be pulled by fewer donkeys. The carts also became lighter and a system of harnessing was introduced.

Source: MAWRD, 1996

harness-making are being addressed. Moreover, the establishment of the draft animal power programme by the Ministry of Agriculture Water and Rural Development will soon bridge the gap through provision of technical knowledge on various aspects of donkey traction. In addition the introduction of light plows and cultivators will accelerate the use of donkeys in the southern African region including Namibia.

Consumption of donkey meat

Most authors of animal traction literature have reported that donkey meat is not eaten and this appears to be one disadvantage in the adoption of donkeys as draft animals. In Namibia the extent to which donkeys are eaten is probably underestimated. Some people are now openly eating and selling donkey meat. In the early sixties donkey meat was not eaten in rural societies; but by the seventies people started eating donkey meat openly without any problem especially in Erongo, Kunene, and the south of the country. These people are not only utilising donkeys for meat, but also for rural transport, because crop production in these areas is minimal due to harsh climatic conditions.

Damaras, Namas and Tswanas are known to be large consumers of donkey meat. Among the Ovambos, Hereros and Kavangos, the consumption of donkey meat is very low. Donkey meat is normally eaten with maize meal which is the staple food for the Damara people. Donkey meat is sold in rural markets. This business has become an important source of income for rural people, mainly single mothers and unemployed, low-income people. Over the years the consumption of donkey meat has increased from being a laughing matter to a major business.

Some people buy donkeys from others and sell them at rural markets. This is obviously to generate more money. A donkey bought for farming is usually cheaper (about 300 Namibian dollars or US\$ 70) than one bought for business (N\$ 450 or US\$ 100). The price of a donkey depends on: size, age, and availability. For those

selling donkey meat, the fat content and quality of the meat is of great importance in determining the price of the carcass. Most of the people eating donkey meat prefer it fat. The fat must be well distributed over the carcass, and the meat must not be tough. Depending on the above factors a big donkey may be bought at N\$ 300 (US\$ 70) live weight and after slaughter, may generate N\$ 1600–2000 (US\$ 350–450).

At the local markets in Erongo and Kunene Regions donkey meat is referred to as ‘Him’ and not as donkey. The people are not shy to call donkey meat by its actual name but ‘Him’ has become a popular trade name for the meat. Most consumers understand when sellers talk about ‘Him’ when selling donkey meat.

Donkey slaughter and the preparation of meat

There is a cultural belief that not everybody can slaughter a donkey, because if someone with “bitter blood” carries out the slaughtering the meat will have a particularly strong odour. So there are only certain people who normally slaughter donkeys. Irrespective of who slaughters a donkey, the meat tends to have a very strong smell like that of a zebra. According to cultural beliefs if a donkey is slaughtered by those regarded as having ‘good blood’ the meat doesn’t smell so much and is tasty.

It is advisable that the donkey meat is well and slowly cooked, with salt and spices if available. The meat can be treated like beef, but must be well cooked. The meat can also be dried, and treated with some salt and pepper for later use.

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