

Traditional sayings about donkeys in Ethiopia

by

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Abstract

In Ethiopia donkeys receive the least management attention of all draft animals. The social environment is the most important factor which hinders their improved management. Studies were therefore made on the traditional sayings about donkeys. Thirteen sayings were collected and studied for their significance in donkey management. Most of the sayings were found to have a negative influence on donkey use. Only four sayings were found to encourage donkey use and management.

Introduction

Donkeys are widely known in Ethiopia for their multipurpose use. They are used in agriculture and their main function is for transport. But donkeys receive the least management input of any work animal. The social environment, especially the oral tradition, is the most important factor which hinders the better management of donkeys in Ethiopia. A collection of traditional sayings about donkeys was therefore made and the significance of these sayings for donkey management was studied.

Traditional sayings about donkeys were collected in the Oromiffa and Amharic languages. These are widely spoken languages by people who are associated with donkeys. The sayings were collected by interviewing people in and around the

town of Nazareth, especially those who had used donkeys. Thirteen sayings were selected and discussed with a group of people who knew and used the sayings. The sayings are listed, together with their implications, in Tables 1 and 2.

Discussion

Four sayings were found to encourage donkey use and refer to the merits of owning and using donkeys (Table 1). Famous sayings such as ‘One who has one donkey can generate money for his daily needs’, indicate that the donkey is a poor person’s asset. It can be an insurance for their needs and promote the idea of owning a donkey. If someone has a donkey they can collect wood and bring it to the market or they can rent out their donkey. Another saying related to this is ‘An ox is for tomorrow but a donkey is for today’ which indicates that a donkey helps in generating immediate cash and for this is better than an ox.

There are nine sayings that act against donkeys (Table 2). Even if donkeys have a stubborn nature the people consider donkeys as weak, careless (not responsible), selfish and teachers of bad habits. Some sayings suggest that donkeys do not need to be cared for and that good things are not for donkeys. The meat of donkeys is not consumed by Ethiopians and this further contributes to their low status.

Table 1: Sayings that encourage donkey use and their implications

Saying	Implications
Donkeys and women can carry whatever reaches their backs	Donkeys do all types of work even under stress
Someone who has one donkey can generate money for their daily needs	A poor person’s asset: the poor can rely on the donkey for their living
An ox is for tomorrow but a donkey is for today	A donkey generates immediate cash
At the end of harvest it takes the harvest home to get a bonus	The donkey is more important for transport than the ox

Table 2: Negative sayings about donkeys and their implications

<i>Saying</i>	<i>Implications</i>
When the night comes a donkey will not lead the animals to their home	Careless, not responsible
Cows that have been together with donkeys learn bad things	Teaches bad thing
The husband of a donkey will not save his wife from the hyena	Weak
A donkey does not need to be in a good place	A donkey does not need caring for
Donkeys do not have to taste honey	Good things are not meant for donkeys
At the end, donkeys are for hyenas	Donkey meat is not for human consumption
A house that is made of donkey skin will collapse when hyenas cry	Weak and fearful
I do not have a donkey, so I do not quarrel with hyenas	Donkey meat is not for human consumption
You are making that like a donkey furrow	You are not keeping a straight line