

In Great Company

# The other Milky Way

Camel Milk could be the next dairy alternative and Vital Camel Milk could be pioneers up this milky way, writes **Kimemia Mugo**

**H**ave you ever wondered what is the best cover that an individual can offer as a seal to their inner convictions? Be it a cause, a loved one, a project or a business venture.

For Martin Luther King it was equality and justice for black Americans, for Mahatma Gandhi it was freedom for the people of India. These people and many other world renowned icons, are remembered because unlike the rest of us they were ready to die for what they believed in.

Can you give out your life as insurance for an undertaking to transform the lives of people in a foreign land? In Nanyuki town, there is one man who has devoted the rest of his life to changing the lives of the adjacent pastoral communities.

In his own way, Mr. Holger Marbach is certain that producing camel milk is the key to unlock poverty, under-development and restoring hope across the semi-arid northern district of Kenya.

With archetypical passion, Marbach narrates how his ideas have changed lives: "Recently, a Maasai youth whom earlier in the year we had met clad in the characteristic Maasai regalia came to see me at the factory adorned in a smart suit complete with a cowboy hat and sunglasses. At first I was bewildered about this 'business executive', but on removing the hat and glasses, I was astounded by the metamorphosis," he quipped.

Listening to him articulate his vision, one is taken aback by the genius that is causing ripples among the Somalis and other camel rearing communities in Kenya from Nanyuki to Mandera.

Talk about an investor who has done his homework well. Holger Marbach believes it is not only good enough to have brilliant ideas, but it is just as important to have the dedication to spend time pursuing their implementation.

When I managed to nail him for this tete-a-tete, he had come to Nairobi from Nanyuki to market his favourite product. In fact, Marbach divulged, he was aching to cruise back to the factory where he spends time overseeing operations.

During his agricultural development work in Latin America, Zambia and Tanzania, where he says he has practiced for over 15 years, Marbach discerned something that was to influence his decision to set up base in Kenya later in his life.

The German-born agro-economist discovered that besides its high nutritional value, camel milk had medicinal properties that were not documented.

That breakthrough prompted him to embark on extensive research on the rare milk as he explored ways to give credence to his case and enable him exploit the products uniqueness.

In his years of research, he stumbled on documented scientific evidence that showed that in addition to camel milk being "an excellent health food", it was well known to the pastoralists communities of Pakistan, Russia and Somalis that it reduced difficulties for people with blood pressure, heart ailments and ulcers.

That was only the beginning though, later it even emerged that camel milk was almost similar to human insulin in substance composition and therefore could reduce routine injections for diabetic people by over 30 percent.

Marbach set base in Kenya early this year. Under the flagship of Vital Camel Milk Limited, he says he is excited about the progress he has made so far.

"We have been able to kick-start our research by taking in Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI) and the MP Shah hospital to study the reactions of diabetic patients to camel milk," he revealed during the interview.

Other interesting aspects about the milk have also come up including its anti-allergic effects on people who suffer various types of allergies. But Marbach is quick to point out that those with an allergy to lactose (a substance found in all kinds of milk) cannot consume camel milk.

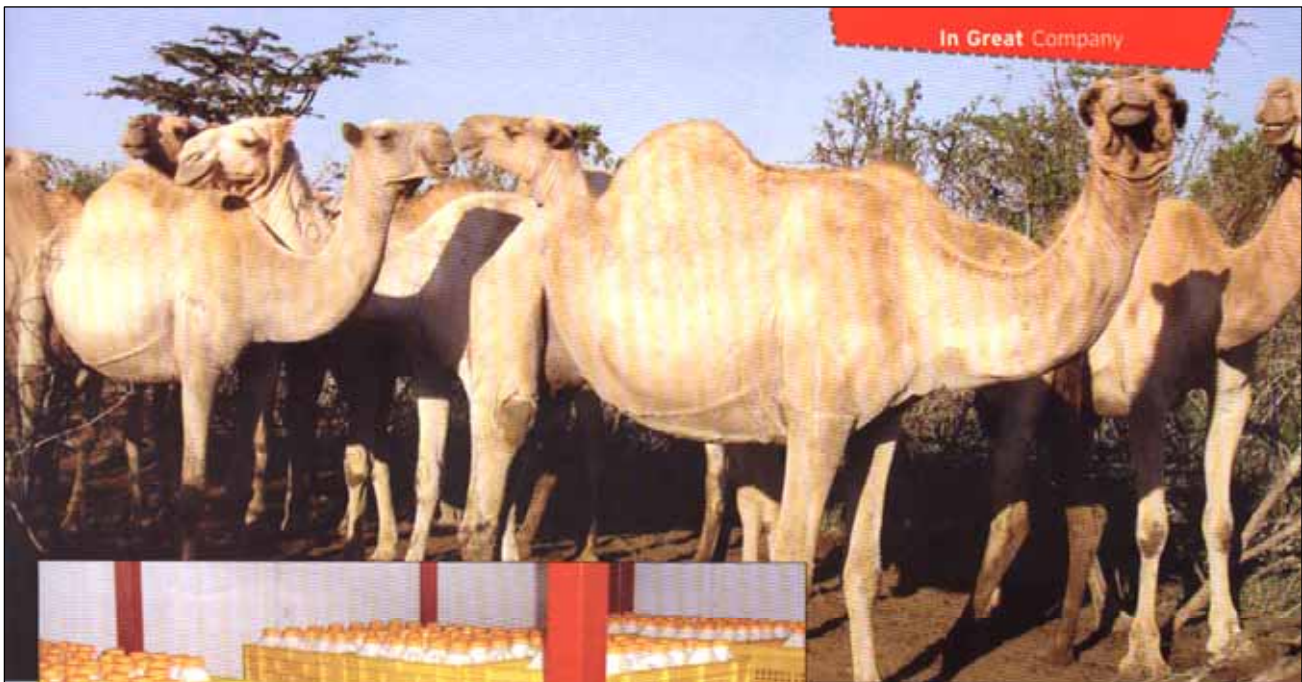
Vital Camel Milk Limited is also working on product standards development in conjunction with the Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS) to ensure that the market gets a safe and hygienic product.

"We are aiming at global product standards because we have already surpassed the mandatory standards for cow milk. Camel milk is however a very sensitive product because it is produced in high temperature environments and it has to be handled diligently until it reaches the factory cool hub," he explains.

Currently, Nairobi consumers can purchase a packet of the milk from any Health U Shops outlets in the city, for example Sarit Centre, Yaya and Dagoretti Corner.

But Marbach is convinced that the milk's "supreme quality as a superior organic health food" is bound to gain widespread acceptance with the right approach.





"Here in Kenya I am working very hard to see that camel milk gets to the shelves of leading supermarket stores like Nakumatt. I can assure you that the product will also find its way to major global cities of Washington and London in the next five years," forecasts he.

Vital Camel milk is on a training programme to enlighten camel farmers on the best ways to handle the milk in order to retain its nutritional value and prolong its shelf life.

In a grandiose project supported by GTZ, Vital Camel is inculcating skills to opinion leaders in pastoralists communities with a view to their conveying information to other members of the communities.

To date, the training turnover has superseded 500 people and Marbach says he is targeting over 1,000 in 18 months. In the KSh 27 million contract, Vital Camel is to take care of 54 percent

of the costs while GTZ covers 46 percent.

Besides, the company has committed itself to establish a fair market price for camel milk. Vital Camel offers KSh 40 for every litre of milk delivered at their gates unlike other processors whose prices fluctuate to as low as KSh 17, depending on the season.

Marbach is also working closely with the Kenya Camel Association to promote camel rearing in the country. With a camel population of approximately 1 million, Kenya is ranked number two in the world after Somalia with 7 million.

The two countries represent 49 percent of the total global camel population, which currently stands at 18 million.

The potential in Kenya is high, according to Marbach, because camel feeding habits are environmentally friendly: "A camel feeds only on selected leaves of a vegetation unlike cattle which

consume everything, so there are minimal problems associated with overstocking camels."

The company has entered into an agreement with Nairobi based Kalu Works to provide hygienic tin packaging of international appeal. Marbach says the marketing effort will soon go full throttle to target the tourist market.

The major challenge to camel milk production according to Marbach is transportation. Camels are generally concentrated within the semi-arid districts of Kenya where road networks are not so good. Indeed, the Somalia was unable to sustain marketing of camel products singularly because of transport hitches.

The market is also not well informed about the product and Marbach has to initially educate the consumer before selling. But he says there are positive indicators starting from the home turf.

"People in Nanyuki are increasingly drinking camel milk and have come to identify with the company. They regard it as their company due to our focus on promoting local enterprise," he says.

A half litre packet of camel milk goes for KSh 180, which is good value for money especially for diabetic people, those with allergies and infants. Scientific evidence is also in support of consumption of an average half litre per day. ■

In Great Company

# An investor perspective

By Mambo Team

**F**atuma Mohammed has been breeding camels for as long as she can remember. Currently she is the proud owner of over 120 camels bred inside a number of hired farms near Nanyuki town where she resides.

One such farm is located on the way to Doldol some few kilometres from Nanyuki. Here Fatuma has a healthy herd of over 60 camels, 57 of which produce an average 50 litres per day.

Visited this farm where learnt about the rigours of camel breeding in real life. The experience is, to say the least, exhilarating, the beautiful herd in their splendid shrubby setting was relatively calm and quiet compared to what one would expect in a similar situation with cattle.

"Camels are relatively peaceful domestic animals and can only turn nasty if extremely mistreated. A female camel that has just given birth tends to be over-protective" explained Fatuma.

Camel breeding, Fatuma says, is not an easy activity; it is one that requires a lot of patience and hard work. She recalled that when she started with less than 10 camels, she never thought that one day, she would achieve what she has accomplished today.

The major challenge that faced Fatuma and her contemporaries in the camel milk trade was the unpredictable public means of transport for their product to be ferried to Nairobi's Eastleigh area every morning.

She recalled that on several occasions, the milk would get "lost" before reaching the traders in Nairobi under questionable circumstances. There was also the issue of proper preservation. Farmers would carry the milk in 20-litre containers and bundle it milk alongside other goods in the few available buses in Isiolo and Nanyuki.

This often resulted in a lot of wastage, as the milk would get sour before reaching the market. However, a

lot has changed with time, besides the re-carpeting of the Nanyuki- Doldol road; a new company has tremendously changed the way of life for camel milk farmers.

Vital Camel Milk Limited opened its doors at Nanyuki next to the Kenya Co-operative Creameries factory in January this year. Eight months down the line, the local people are full of praises for the new venture, which they say, has immensely improved their living standards.

For Fatuma, the litres of milk that used to disappear on transit to Nairobi, are a thing of the past. She can deliver her milk to the new factory now closer home and is further assured that she will fetch KSh 40 for every litre delivered without a fuss.

To her and hundreds of other camel rearers, the fact that their dependence on the unscrupulous Eastleigh traders is finally coming to an end is a great cause for celebration. The transport problems aside, the loss of milk due to poor storage is also history.

This is because Vital Camel Milk Limited has ensured that field milk collectors have cooling hubs close to the farmers so that immediately after milking, the extract is put in the special hub to avoid bacterial infection.

Ali Isaak, also a camel farmer, is upbeat about the benefits they are deriving from the initiative of Mr. Holger Marbach, a German agro-economist.

He says that the new company not only insists on very high standards of hygiene while handling milk, but also gets involved in keeping the animals healthy, which is instrumental to improving their yield.

Isaak is optimistic that the partnership between the locals will take development in the area to a new level as more people expand their herd in response to the readily available market.

Isaak Hassan, a son to Fatuma Mohammed recalls that two years ago,

he would be forced to school with frequent trips to Nairobi to ensure that his mother's milk consignment was safely delivered to Eastleigh.

And the tribulations would not stop there; many are the times when the traders would sell the milk but delay payments to his mother for weeks on end. Many are the times that they defaulted on the payment, which wasn't much.

*"Hao wamama wa Eastleigh ni wajeuri sana. Wakati mwingine wameuza maziwa lakini wanakwambia mara mtoto alikuwa mgonjwa au nilipatwa na wageni na inakubidi kungoja kwa sababu huna lakufanya.* (Those Eastleigh ladies are very cunning. Sometimes they give lame excuses after selling your milk and spending your money and you have no choice but to wait)," he decried.

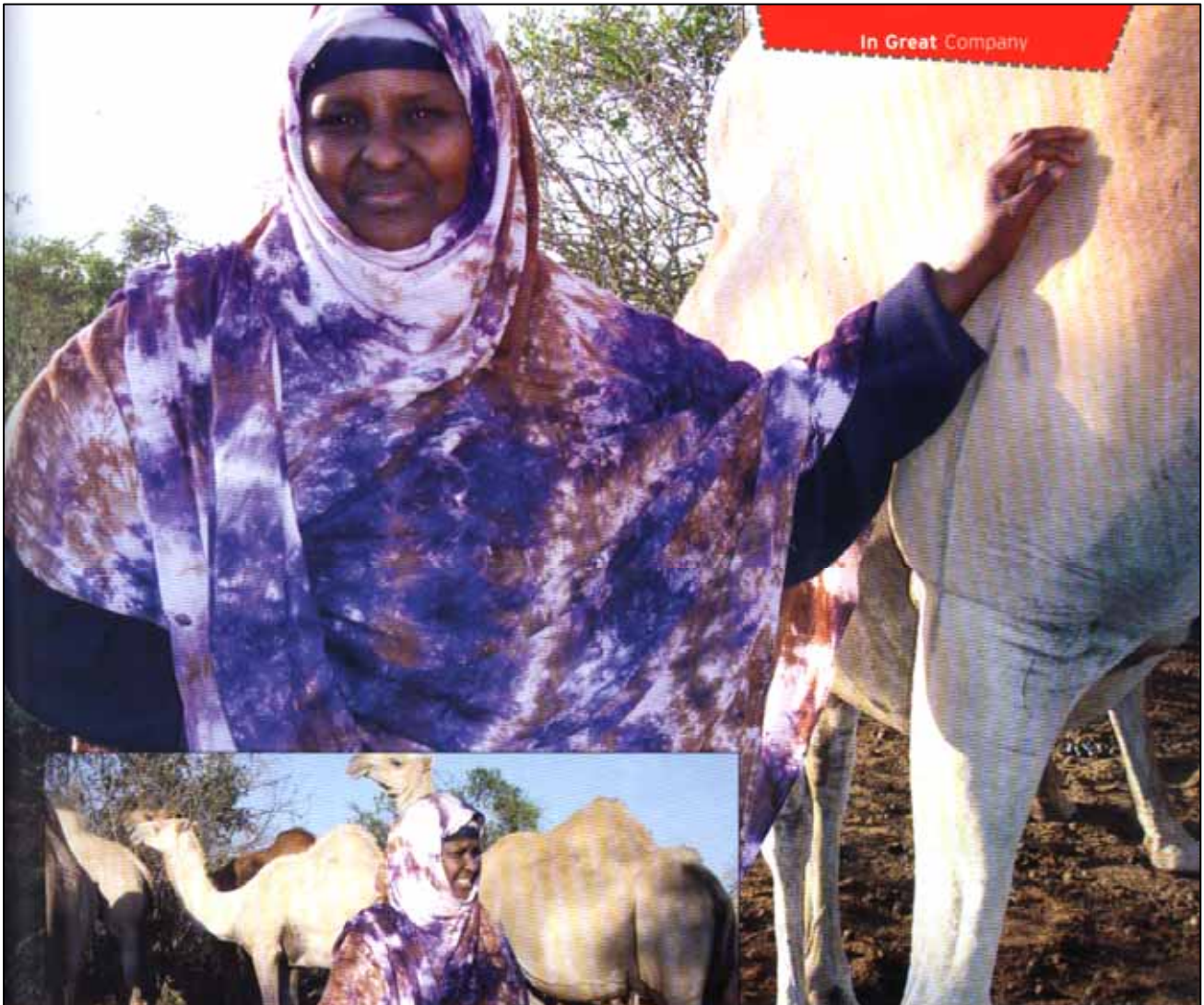
Hassan views the partnership between the community and Vital Camel Milk Limited as a gateway to prosperity. This is because prompt and consistent payments are the slogan at the new factory.

"We deliver the milk and get receipts for everything. The era of tall tales is over and farmers can look forward to paying school fees for their children in time," he observes.

And besides prompt payment, the company has also invested in treating camel maladies and researching on them with a view eradicating them from Northern Kenya. Indeed, the company has a roving Veterinarian who travels across the region to attend to sick camels.

Over the short period that Dr. Mario Younan has been with Vital Camel Limited, the veterinarian has become almost a celebrity to the local herdsmen.

"Dr Mario is highly regarded by the locals due to his experience with the Somali and Garre people. He even understands some terms in our language and is well informed about our way of life," says Hassan.



When *Mambo* asked him about his secret while dealing with the community, Dr. Mario is rather modest; "You simply have to understand that the camel holds a special place in the hearts of pastoralists."

Dr. Mario is so well versed with camel breeding that immediately we arrived at the manyatta, he could spot out a Turkana camel from the rest of the Somali herd.

The former visiting Lecturer at Egerton University has studied Veterinary medicine for over two decades. For the last 10 years, he has been crisscrossing East Africa practising among the pastoralists.

He says there is enormous potential for Kenya to become a leading exporter of the highly regarded milk with proper marketing. Dr. Mario observes that camels are increasingly becoming

popular in West Pokot and even with some Maasai herdsmen along the Kenya Tanzania border.

"In the arid regions, the survival of the family sometimes depends on the camel, which can supply a regular amount of milk even after over a whole year of drought. A camel can also go for two weeks without a drop of water," he adds.

Dr Mario recalls that in the year 2000-2001, about 35 per cent of the cattle herd within in northern Kenya was decimated. Only about 1 per cent camels died.

There are a lot of myths surrounding the value of a camel to the herdsman. The director of Vital Camel Milk Limited Mr. Holger Marbach even warned the *Mambo* team, "It is safer to joke around with a pastoralist's wife than laying your hand on his camel!" ☞