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The XXI International Grassland Congress / VIII International Rangeland Congress took place in Hohhot, China from June 29 through July 5, 2008.

Proceedings edited by Organizing Committee of 2008 IGC/IRC Conference

Published by Guangdong People's Publishing House

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## From nomadism to agro-pastoralism :strategies to survive ecological challenges by the maasai community in Kenya

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**Key words** : Nomadism , agro-pastoralism , survival strategies , ecological challenges

**Introduction** Over the years , nomadism was practiced by the Maasai to exploit forage resources of the extensive arid and semi-arid lands of south-eastern Kenya for livestock production . Like in other communities , changes in national priorities , land tenure , influence from farming communities and effects of global climatic changes forced them to new ways of life in the last 30 years or so (Desta and Cappock , 2004) . This paper summarizes the coping strategies practiced by the Maasai to cope with ecological challenges as they transformed from nomadism to agro-pastoralism .

**Methods** The study was undertaken in Kajiado District which is largely semi-arid to arid and livestock production is the main farming enterprise by the Maasai community . Data collection was through literature reviews and community brainstorming sessions . Additionally , interviews with the elderly , key informants and agricultural and livestock extension workers were conducted .

**Results and discussion** Ecological challenges outside the control of the Maasai made them slowly abandon the relatively simplistic nomadic way of life for agro-pastoralism practices by devising survival strategies to cope with what nature provided . The traditional *in situ* conservation of pastures was enforced through clan ownership of fall-back dry season grazing resources , pasture rotation and deferment . Other strategies were restrictions and conservation of important trees and shrubs for medicine , woodfuel , etc . During severe droughts in 1961 , 1975/76 , 1984 , 1994 and 2000/01 , the community shifted to keeping small ruminants ( relative to cattle) as the forage base was altered . During 1980's , land tenure systems changed from group ranching to individual parcels of land (Rutten , 1992) . The result was ecological degradation due to overgrazing by enlarged herds and fencing of farms and homesteads with thorny vegetation materials , charcoal burning and sale of land . Establishment of permanent homesteads required that herders moved away livestock to other places in search of pasture and water while the rest of the homestead remained . Diets changed from milk , blood and meat to processed foods and planting of drought resistant cereals and leguminous crops . Those with irrigation water adapted to growing market-oriented crops such as horticultural and fruit crops as an extra source of income . Establishment of preserved pastures (*Olepololi*) in 2-3 ha enclosures near homesteads ensured livestock feed for calves and lactating and sick cows during the dry seasons . Also , green forage from trees such as *Balanites glabra* , *Lannea stuhlmanii* and *Acacia seyal* (also for nutritious pods) became an important source of feed for the small ruminants during dry seasons .

**Conclusions** Understanding the transformation process of the Kajiado Maasai from basic survival strategies to diversified livestock , food and cash crop cultivation demonstrated the dynamic nature of a pastoral production system . The onus to researchers , government and private agencies is to assist the Maasai and other agro-pastoralist communities to find strategies aimed at intensification of crop and livestock production from their land . However , development plans aimed towards these communities need to blend policies and technologies with indigenous knowledge systems held by the communities . An important lesson from past livestock development efforts that were imposed by donors through the government in the 1980's collapsed shortly after implementation due to lack of ownership as the communities were never involved during the planning stages . Therefore , understanding and involvement of such communities will lead to focused development plans which will have higher probabilities of success upon implementation .

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