

Little miracle that's camel milk

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When a friend suggested camel milk as therapy for Rose Mwango's autistic son, six-year-old Shaun Keno, she had little faith it would work.

She had tried about almost everything, with little success, and thought camel milk was just one of the "miracle" cures that were bound to fail.

In the event, she was pleasantly surprised. After taking camel milk for some time, Shaun, who could hardly talk since the age of two, and had difficulties following instructions, became calmer and more focused.

"I would say it is a miracle," says Mwango. "I thought I had lost my son forever, but the camel milk brought him back to me," she says joyfully as her second-born son plays at her feet.

The youngster, now studying at St Bakhita Kindergarten, relates with the peers that he detested before, has a longer attention span and better sleeping patterns. He eats better, too, and his digestive problems disappeared.

These are some of the many medical "miracles" attributed to camel milk, the product of the animal normally referred as the "ship of the desert," and usually associated with the nether regions of East Africa and the Horn.

Despite the growing medical interest in the treatment of autism and other conditions, camel milk production in the country is yet to catch on.

KORAN MENTION

It is rated better than milk from camels from Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, where the animal is widely revered due to its favourable mention in the Koran.

One local farmer who is trying to change things is Holger Marlbach, the founder of the Nanyuki-based Vital Camel Milk Limited, which he formed in 2005 primarily to exploit the economic opportunities presented in camel milk production. It's a decision he does not regret.

"I discovered that a lot of camel milk was going to waste and decided to do something about it since I knew of its medical advantages. At first, my friends tried to discourage me, but I held on and it is now bearing fruit," he said.

His company produces a variety of camel milk products, mainly fresh and sour milk and yoghurt, in small quantities. He produces up to 500 litres of milk

weekly, which he says is far below his company's processing optimum potential.

"Ours is a niche product as of now," he says, referring to the fact that most of those who use it are people mainly seeking therapy for various ailments. But this is not to say that his products do not have a ready market.

"I get calls almost twice every week for more supplies," he says.

"This is testament to the growing awareness about the benefits of camel milk." He has established a depot in Nairobi's Eastleigh to serve the Somali community, who are his other main consumers.

With support from the Innovation Fund for Agriculture and Agri-business (IFAA), a fund administered by Agricultural Sector Co-ordination Unit (ASCU) at the Ministry of Agriculture, Marlbach hopes to expand his business.

He intends to increase his camel stock from 40 to cushion against unexpected shifts by herders who are his main suppliers.

"Sometimes the herders wake up one day and move their camels far away for months. Such drastic movements almost cripple our operations," he said.

Through IFAA, ASCU is charged with catalysing semi-commercial enterprises to their optimum production and productivity levels. The fund targets semi-commercial enterprises — those producing or offering services for profit but are operating below their optimum levels, such as Marlbach's.

