

# MY JOURNEY TO CAMEL SCIENCE AS A SCIENTIST OF INFECTIOUS DISEASES OF CAMELIDS

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## My Interest in camels was born

It was in the year 1975 when I was hit by the camel bug. To that time, I was working with the German Development Ministry in Somalia producing Rinderpest and Contagious Bovine Pleuro Pneumonia (CBPP) vaccines in Mogadishu, in an institute at kilometer seven which is now sadly destroyed by tribal fighting (Fig 1). Both bovine diseases were endemic in Somalia and eleven well-equipped vaccination teams, one in each district, went out every day vaccinating cattle. With a small device a piece of skin was cut out of the ear of each vaccinated cow and over the years, when travelling through the countryside, one saw more and more cattle with ear holes. Soon I realised, that dromedary camels which often accompanied cattle herds to new grazing grounds were unaffected by these two diseases. During these days, one morning two Somali pastoralists, who travelled the whole night to see me in Mogadishu, told me that one of their dromedary camel had contracted Foot-and-Mouth Disease with severe salivation. FMD was also endemic in Somalia. It was still dark when we arrived at the camel borma having passed a terrible truck accident in which two young Somalis had hit a parked unlighted truck from behind being killed, sitting dead in their truck cabin.

The adult sick female dromedary salivated profusely. We restrained it and while opening its mouth, I saw an acia twig entangled in its throat. These two incidents made me alert and I started to contemplate, to admire and to learn about the ship of the desert, as I did not know a lot about camelids and nothing we had learned about camels during our study of Veterinary Science at the Free University in Berlin. They did not exist. My interest in learning more about this animal slowly spread among the Somali pastoralists and I was asked more often to help, when camels were diseased, but these were often minor injuries, tick infestation, some wounds, nothing really serious except for some cases of jidri

(camelpox). During these early days, I learned a lot and the camel owners showered me with gifts which often consisted of beautifully carved-out hair combs or head rests (Fig 2).

The contact to Somalia is still alive even after 50 years and sometimes I give zoom lectures on camel diseases to the Somali students in Mogadishu.

## Collecting camelid literature

During this 2-year tenure in Somalia with 6 million head of dromedary camels, I never came across a camel with FMD, PPR, Rinderpest, CBPP or African Horse Sickness and I wondered why? Here I made a decision for the rest of my professional life: I must work with camels; the camel bug had hit me. And the chance came in 1987, eleven years later. Serious camel research began in that year at the Central Veterinary Research Laboratory, in Dubai. His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashed Al Maktoum who established CVRL two years earlier deserves the gratitude of camelid owners and veterinarians all over the world for having the foresight to establish a camel research institute. The beginning was bumpy as scientists knew nothing about the *Camelidae* family and my first step was to establish a camel library. There was very little camelid literature available and publications were in different languages, which I did not know. However, many people helped me retrieving the available literature. Prof Rolf K. Schuster, who had studied veterinary science in Moscow, translated many camel scientific papers of Bactrian and dromedary camels from Russian into English, originating from the former Russian states which had a serious interest in their indigenous camel population. This source has now completely dried up. Only Kazakhstan had recently started some research in camel diseases and milk. Today, nearly 40 years later, CVRL has collected several thousands scientific camel papers. Through my study of the camelid literature, I soon realised a gap in camel science, giving me and my colleagues at CVRL a huge chance of camelid research, which

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