

The highway herdsman

Kenya is suffering a historically severe drought, seriously affecting the livelihood of cattle keepers such as the Masai tribe. In a desperate effort to survive, many have walked to the big city with their cattle. There, it is still possible to find patches of grass in parks, along highways, and in cemeteries. Climate scientists warn that the drought might spur violent conflict in Kenya.

By Hakon Mosbech and Anders Birch (photo)

Every morning when Joel Ole Ntenkese walks out his door, he travels a couple of centuries into the future.

From the narrow wooden shack he steps out into the centre of a traditional Masai village. The place is alive with bleating cows, goats, and sheep. There is a smell of muckheap and burned carcasses. Straight-backed men carrying swords and clubs in their belts are pointing to the sky and talking about rain.

Suddenly, they see a plane roaring towards the village. Joel Ole Ntenkese watches its course, and there, just behind his shack, he sees the modern world: the plane lands 200 metres away from him at Wilson Airport, one of East Africa's busiest domestic airports. Joel's village could have been an Iron Age settlement, but it is situated at the centre of the modern city of Nairobi. On one side, there are towering luxury apartment buildings. "Extravagant condos", says one sign. On the other side, there is a water world, a go-cart track, and one of the city's most popular expat-restaurants, The Carnivore, where the rich drink cocktails, eat crocodile meat, and listen to house music. Behind the airport, where planes are constantly landing and taking off over Joel's village, Kenya's tallest skyscrapers are reaching towards the sky.

As always, Joel is taking his cattle out today. The 33-year-old Masai wraps himself up in a red shawl, straps his sword to his belt, and checks his mobile phone.

First, he passes by the Splash water world. He has never tried the waterslides – it would cost him a week's pay. Actually, the water is *the* problem for Joel and the rest of the Masais. Since April, vast parts of Kenya have suffered a merciless drought. No rain means no grass, so

most of the Masais' cows are dead. Like other cattle keepers, the tribesmen live off their cows which they milk, eat, or sell. Consequently, Joel and the other 40 desperate Masais have left their parched village on the Kajiado plains in search of pastures. And two months ago, Joel arrived in Nairobi with his wife, Sarah, and their three children.

"Once we had lots of cows in my village. It was raining, and there was plenty of milk for the children. But now it hasn't rained for years" says Joel. "The drought has been very severe for us."

Joel used to have 170 cows. Now there are 27 left. The drought killed the rest of them.

It is difficult and often dangerous to find pastures for one's cattle in Nairobi. Though Kenya's capital used to be Masai country, it is now a modern city with highways, highrises, parks surrounded by fences, slums, and enclosed neighbourhoods for the rich, for instance the Karen district which is named after the Danish writer Karen Blixen. So, the Masais have to be creative and take their cattle to any place where the grass is sufficiently high.

And today is no exception. Joel is walking along one of the city's highways with a herd of cattle. The cars are rushing by, the cows walking at a leisurely pace on the pavement. Suddenly you hear the screaming brakes of a minibus. A cow has strayed onto the highway. One of the herdsman quickly chases the cow off the road with a stick. However, they are not always this lucky. Many cows are killed in traffic accidents or are so seriously wounded that the Masais have to put them down.

"It hurts to lose a cow. I can feel the pain," says Joel. Besides, the motorists may be injured in the cow crashes, and the Masais could be sued for damages.

"Stop," Joel shouts. He lifts his arm and steps onto the two-lane highway. The cows have to cross. The cars stop, and a long tailback builds up. Joel stands between the cars and the cattle, while his assistants are herding the cows across the road. Another one of Nairobi's many tailbacks is causing traffic jam.

The hunt for pastures has taken Joel around the entire city. His cows have grazed in the cemetery. They have grazed along the roads, on central grass verges, and in the parks. They have grazed on railroad tracks and in military zones. And they have even grazed on the lawn of the Statehouse, the official residence of Kenya's president.

"The biggest problem is the guards. They'll chase you, and if they catch you, you'll go to prison or get fined. And if they bring you along,

the cows will spread around the city. Then I'll have to go looking for them," says Joel.

Therefore, he prefers fines, and so far he has paid three of 5,000 shillings or the equivalent of a small cow.

However, the most spectacular pasture is Nairobi's national park. There, you can go on safari and see wild animals such as lions, zebras, and rhinos. But there is also lots of grass, and it is only a convenient 10 minute walk from Joel's shack. Consequently, the Masais are stealing their cattle in there at night, through a whole they have cut in the electric fence. Then the cows will graze in the dark along with zebras, antelopes, and buffalo. Predators are also hiding in the high grass, however. Joel and his cows have been attacked by lions, rhinos, and a leopard. A few nights ago, the lions killed six Masai cows. But Joel and the other herdsmen readily put up a fight against the predators with their spears, clubs, and swords. "We're used to killing wild animals, so we're not afraid. We can't afford to be afraid," says Samuel, a 20-year-old Masai wearing a hip hop cap. He sometimes looks after Joel's cows.

The worst part is the guards who are on patrol duty at night, Joel explains:

"What I fear the most is the park attendants. We can fight the wild animals. But the guards can catch you and beat you and send you to prison and demand money.

However, the Masais are not giving up. Joel points to a big hole in the fence of the national park where a few cows are still standing in the late morning sun. They were too weak from malnutrition to come out with the herdsmen last night.

The latest drought began in April when, once again, the rain failed to come, seriously affecting the livelihood of the Masais and other cattle keepers. According to the government and experts, the drought has killed hundreds of thousands of cows, goats, sheep, and even camels – animals that can go a long way without water.

"When you witness camels die, you know that it is a bad drought," says Dr. Dominic Walubengo, climate scientist and director of the Forest Action Network. He represented Kenya at the COP15 climate convention in Copenhagen recently, and he has prepared several of Kenya's environmental protection acts.

Dr. Walubengo explains that cattle keepers such as the Masais depend on cattle to survive. The cows deliver milk and meat and they can be sold. They are the banks of the Masai people, so to speak.

"And consequently, the herdsmen are very poor. Their banks have disappeared."

Because of the drought, five million Kenyans were short of food this autumn. And the government has asked donors to provide food aid for 10 million people – or 25 per cent of the total population.

Dominic Walubengo's calculations indicate that droughts strike more often and are more severe than earlier, i.e. every 4 or 5 years instead of every 10 years, making it almost impossible to recover from one drought before the next one comes along.

Experts believe that the phenomenon has to do with global warming. "The present drought is closely connected with climate change," says Dominic Walubengo.

Or in the words of Cary Farley, a cattle keeper expert with the Care relief agency:

"With the raising drought rate and what is clearly increasing severity, we see the effects of climate change."

"This is where my cows sleep," says Joel, pointing at the exclusive 'Amash Funeral Home', which is situated in a villa surrounded by a fence. Joel shouts through the grillwork, and a man appears with a key. Joel gives him some shillings. Then he opens a metal gate – and there are Joel's 27 cows in a little lawn.

"The Masais are suffering, so we have let him have his cows sleep here," says a fat man in a white shirt. He is in charge of the place, and he is earning most of the money that Joel pays.

Joel and two other herdsmen direct the cattle into the street. Today, the cows will be grazing at the Kenyatta National Hospital, which is Joel's favourite place at the moment.

"I was walking around town looking for pastures, and then I spotted the hospital. There was a lot of grass, but no cows," he says. The problem is that the grass in front of the hospital is situated right opposite Kibera, one of Africa's biggest slums with over one million inhabitants, and therefore, it is filled with waste, broken bottles, and injection needles that the cows may cut themselves on.

Today, he is leading the cows to a place between some terraced houses, where hospital nurses and doctors live. The cows are grazing underneath the clothes lines in front of the houses. A woman calls out, because a cow is eating her bed of vegetables. She threatens to call the police, but Joel is acting very calmly. He pushes the cow away and then continues chewing on the twig which is also his toothbrush. Things calm down, and people start ignoring the cows in their back yards. They are used to the Masais.

There are carcasses everywhere on the cracked, black ground. Cow craniums with empty eyes and barely dead bodies that still smell. We could be witnessing the remains of a massacre that swept through the village. "There is so little meat that the hyena won't bother to eat it," says Joel, pointing at a poorly nourished, dead cow.

We are in Kajjado, Joel's home village. Or village is perhaps not the right word. It is a small group of shacks made of dried mud and cow dung strewn across an expansive, hilly landscape. The sky is arching over the parched, wind-swept, grassy plains, and the sun is burning. Now, the only inhabitants are Joel's mother and some cousins and orphaned nephews. Joel has brought rice, tobacco, oil, and soap for his mother, a wrinkled woman with the distinctive big holes in her ears that make the lobes oblong and dangling.

"This is the worst time," she says. "All the animals are gone. No cows. I feel the poverty, because I depend on the animals."

One of Joel's former neighbours presents two of his cows. Though they are still alive, they look dead. They are both lying on the ground, too weak to get up. A cloud of flies are already buzzing around one of them. "It's almost dead," Joel says.

He helps his neighbour make the cows stand, and they take a staggering few steps forward.

"Every time a cow dies, a Masai also dies a little bit," says Joel. "It fills me with pain. The cows are our jobs. They are our bosses."

But when a Masai loses his cattle, he does not only lose a crucial source of income. His cultural and social status is very much determined by the number of cows. In traditional Masai tribes, a man without cows was called *dorobo*, i.e. a kind of outcast who had to leave the village in shame and live his life wandering around the woods. Today, the social consequences are still severe if a man loses his cattle, says Dominic Walubengo:

"Several Masais have poisoned themselves to death these last weeks. They have simply lost hope."

In the worst case, the drought could be instrumental in wiping out a whole lifestyle – the cattle keepers might simply disappear, Cary Farley warns.

"In the past few years, we have witnessed an increasing number of families that have had to give up the traditional cattle keeper lifestyle," he says.

In 2009, approximately 60 per cent were believed to have given up living off their cattle.

"A whole lifestyle and all its cultural elements could disappear," says Cary Farley.

One reason is the present low social status of the Masais and other cattle keepers, he believes. They are considered to be a colourful part of the tourism industry rather than a people contributing properly to Kenya's national economy and identity.

"It would be a loss for mankind and for the countries involved – and a terrible tragedy for these people."

However, the cattle keepers of Kenya are not the only ones being affected by the drought. According to Dominic Walubengo, the lack of food and water can lead to a massive migration from Kenya and even cause conflict in the country.

"If people don't have food and don't have water, I can see social mayhem," he says.

After the latest presidential and general elections in December 2007, there was a violent conflict between some of the country's many ethnic groups. More than 1,000 people were killed, and many more were wounded and homeless.

"I think the conflict caused by climate change could be worse than the post election conflict because it's about resources," says Dominic Walubengo.

Other experts believe that this kind of conflict – a struggle over resources – is already taking place in Kenya. Julius Ochieng Ayoma is a programme coordinator working for the NGO KCODA in Kibera; a slum city in the middle of Nairobi with more than one million inhabitants. According to him, climate change is already causing conflicts, as an increasing number of people are forced to leave the dry rural areas and move to the big city in search of work. They settle in the Kibera slum that is already overcrowded, and the lack of space, food, and other resources ignites the conflict.

"The struggle over resources causes conflict. 10 days ago, it was the struggle over space that caused violent rows, as some shop owners and a church were fighting over space. Six people died and many were wounded," says Julius Ochieng Ayoma.

"I'm afraid these small-scale, very concrete conflicts in Kibera could catch fire and explode into something very serious," he says.

Or in the words of Dominic Walubengo: "So we really must improve the climate. Otherwise Kenya as we know it will become a very difficult country to live in."

Back in the new Masai village by the airport, a cloud of birds are wheeling around in circles. Those are marabou storks, vultures, and other birds of prey that are attracted by the many carcasses on the ground. The airport authorities have told the Masais to burn or bury

the dead animals, as the birds are flying in front of the landing planes, causing risk of accidents.

But right now Joel is not thinking of his dead cows. He is thinking about football. There is an improvised sunset football match going on in the dust between the runway and the village. "Here I come," Joel shouts, running into the field and dropping his red Masai shawl and club off at one of the goal posts.

"I love football," he says afterwards. "It makes me feel light."

He stops for a while to watch the planes taking off and landing.

"One day, I'll board a plane and go to England to see Arsenal or Manchester United play," he says.

However, his dream is mostly about football, not about starting a whole new life. Joel will not give up neither his life with the cows nor the dream of returning to his village.

"If I go, I'll come back to take care of my cows," he says. It won't change me."

"I'll always be the same."

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