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Distributed Skills in Camel Herding

Cooperation in a Human-Animal Relationship in Somaliland

Raphael Schwere

Universität Zürich

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ABSTRACT

This article examines interspecies cooperation in camel herding in Somaliland. It presents the case of a particular joint activity in this task-scape: moving a camel herd, by leading and driving it, from the night-camp to the daytime grazing area and back. The analytical aim is to clarify the role that skills and nonhuman agency play in the constitution of cooperative human-camel relationships. On the basis of empirical data, collected in a multispecies ethnographic project by following and observing one herd and herder closely, this article demonstrates how nonhuman agency, as an individual capacity to engage in an activity and an epistemological potential, manifests in this human-camel cooperative task. Cooperation is made possible through human-camel sociality and intersubjectivity, through the ability to interpret and respond to each other, and it depends on the empathetic acknowledgement of the enabling or disabling powers of each counterpart, her or his agency. Leading and driving camels is a skilled practice requiring the responding and enabling capacities of the cooperation partner. Hence, it is a case of distributed skills – distributed in the sense that skills of humans and nonhumans are intertwined in this practice, that they complement each other.

Keywords: affective apprenticeship; camelidae agency; camels; distributed skills; dromedaries; ethnocamelology; herding; human-animal cooperation; multispecies ethnography; Somaliland.

1. INTRODUCTION

My first experience of camel herding on my own in Somaliland was demoralizing. The herd clearly expressed their indisposition toward my naive and desperate efforts to assume control and make them move toward the nearby well – which was the task I had been given on that September morning in 2017. The camels only got under way grudg-

ingly, pausing after every couple of meters, and dispersing in all directions. They did not understand the purpose of my fussing. When they eventually realized that they were being offered water from the *Berkad*, the water-harvesting basin, they proceeded in their own way, refusing to queue and wait until the previous group had finished drinking. One even kicked me. Luckily, its two-toed leathery padded foot did not hit me with full force [1]. I failed at my task and was subjected to this vehement snub because the camels and I were not (yet) acquainted. The camels seemed to consider my actions an affront. There was no social relation between us, and therefore no cooperation.

This article examines interspecies cooperation in camel herding in Somaliland. It presents the empirical case of a particular joint activity in this task-scape: moving a herd, by leading and driving it, from the night-camp to the grazing area and back. The analytical aim is to clarify the role that skills and nonhuman agency play in the constitution of cooperative human-camel relationships. By following and observing the herd and herder closely, it became apparent that this collective endeavor was a result of skills distributed between human and camels.

When reviewing literature on camel herding, it is easy to lose yourself in the vast world of pastoralism research. What is immediately interesting here is that pastoralism has also been viewed through the prism of the anthropology of work and labor (for an overview see Beck and Klute 1991). This body of research on pastoralists' labor includes studies on camel herding. The German anthropologist of labor Gerd Spittler, for example, differentiates two forms of camel herding: to pasture ("Weiden", unattended by the herder) and to tend ("Hüten", to shepherd), the main difference being that the former involves the work of searching for camels at one point – an endeavor that can take "days or even weeks" (Spittler 2016, 213-219; 1998, 121-135). What struck me most, however, when reviewing social anthropological pastoralism research on camel herding and labor, was that the animals do not appear as actors in the texts: neither as laborers, nor as beings recognized as "persons" – as Piers Locke (2017) would put it – with their own minds and their agency.

[1] Mild violent encounters with animals seem to be a common fieldwork experience of multispecies ethnographers. For example, Radhika Govindrajan was "butted" by goats she was supposed to herd (2018, 29-30), Piers Locke was surprised by a "reprimanding slap" from the trunk of a working elephant (Locke 2017, 365-366), and Aline von Atzigen was stung by a bee while collecting honey (personal communication). None of the three interpreted their experience as a random mishap, seeing it as carrying meaning in their interspecies cooperative work context.

The absence of analysis of animals as laborers has only recently become the subject of criticism and lively debate in human-animal studies. The anthropologists Sarah Besky and Alex Blanchette (2019), for example, explain this lacuna as a result of what they call the "naturalization of work". This is a normative socio-cultural process that defines labor as an integral, "unquestionable", "necessary and inevitable", and "even desirable" component of life (*ibid.*, 7-12). This pertains to human and (most) animal lives. Hence, at this moment in the "history of human-animal interaction as a continuum of exploitation", animals are conceived as "natural laborers" (Noske in Braidotti 2006, 104). But what kind of labor is it that animals provide? The human geographer Maan Barua sheds light on animals as "workers in the shadow of capitalism" with "their unwaged labors […] rendered invisible, both by working practices of accumulation, and conceptualizations reducing them to raw material […] or fixed capital […]" (Barua 2019, 653). He differentiates between ecological (e.g. pollinators), affective (e.g. pets) and metabolic animal labor. The latter is performed in the camel herding setting I am describing in this text. The camels' metabolic labor is their "fleshly becoming" or "body work" of reproducing and producing commodities (milk and meat) (Haraway and Wacquant in Barua 2019, 653).

The human laborer counterpart of the camel is the herder. His (camel herding is a male bastion in Somaliland) task assignments are both legwork and supervision. On the one hand, he has to provide for the camelidae laborers (access to food, water, shelter, medical care, etc.) and, on the other hand, he has to discipline the camels according to the regime and vision of the herd's owner. Hence, there is some sort of mutuality in their relationship. Along these lines, the findings of sociologist and zootechnician Jocelyne Porcher and the agricultural engineer Tiphaine Schmitt on the question of what dairy cows' "animal work" consists of, are no surprise. Porcher and Schmitt attest that cows "invest their intelligence and affects in the activity of work", that they adapt to and trust each other, sometimes "cheat" (e.g. pretending to submit to a farmer's will, only until she/he faces away) and – as per the focus of this article – they *cooperate* (Porcher and Schmitt 2012, 56). Following Barua's structural argument, I would like to contour camels as laborers and, at the same time, follow Porcher and Schmitt in rendering them visible as personas with individual minds and agency. Hence, the interspecies cooperation I am analyzing is between human and camelidae laborers who engage together in leading and driving the herd, on the basis of distributed embodied knowledge.

2. Situating human-camel relations in Somaliland

It was coming up to eight o'clock in the morning. Camels (*Geel* in Somali, sg., i.e. dromedary) and herders, both wide awake, started to get jittery. The milking of the dairy camels (*Irmaan*) that had started at daybreak was finished and the herd was set to leave the *Xero* for the relatively close browsing and grazing grounds.

The *Xero* (pronounce "Hhero") is a circular, roofless camel enclosure (*corral* in Spanish/American-English) built by herders from cut-off thorny brushes, divided into four or more compartments. These are meant to separate different groups of camels. One section is designated for camel foals (*Nirig*) with their mothers which are still allowed by the herders to be suckled (*Xagjir*); another is for the other females (*Hal*), young camels (*Qaalin*) and the stallion (*Barqab*). A third space is used for the other mature males (*Rati* or *Awr*), and at least one section reserved for the herders (*Geeljire*) and their campfire [2]. This particular *Xero* was located just a few meters from the herd owner's family homestead. The camels had been corralled there because the vegetation around the homestead of the settled family was still relatively green at that time of the year, in September 2018, in the transitory period between the second minor dry season (*Xagaa*) and the minor rainy season (*Dayr*). Moreover, the camel herd owner had access to what he referred to as a "garden" (*Beerta*), an area nearby with lush and ample vegetation; a stretch of land of approximately fifteen walking minutes' length and width. This kind of arrangement is popular with commercial camel milk traders, like Nur, who can afford renting private land for grazing and for whom the closeness to the urban milk market is crucial. If it were not for this opportunity, which allowed the camel herd to browse and graze nearby, the *Geeljire* would probably had left this *Xero* in order to relocate the animals from pasture to pasture. The *Beerta* lay approximately five kilometers in a beeline southeast from the homestead – both located between Garabis and Sheik Moldhle, about a one-hour ride by pickup on a track leaving Somaliland's capital Hargeysa toward the southwest.

Before returning to the action this article is concerned with, the empirical material on distributed skills, I will first outline how camel-human relations are "situated" in the study context, following the philosopher Thiemo Breyer and the social and cultural anthropologist Thomas

[2] The corpus of Somali camel terminology is vast (e.g. Liberman 2004). The terms mentioned here do not include their plural and gendered forms. *Geelxir* is the plural form of *Geeljire*, for example.

Widlok (2018, 7). To begin with, certain animals are considered more or less important than others. For Somalilanders, the camel is thought superlative in every respect: in Somali, it is called *Boqorka Xoolaha*, the king of all animals. It is culturally iconic, social decisive, politically pivotal [3], and economically essential [4]. Among the Somali regions, which host by far the largest camel population worldwide, Somaliland claims the most – approximately 6,855,000 heads. This is, with around 10.75 camels per km^2, the highest camel density globally (Breulmann *et al.* 2007, 15).

Somaliland, which declared its independence from Somalia in 1991, is a fully-fledged, yet not internationally recognized country. But despite the territory's lack of international recognition and its fragile political status in the region, it is consolidating and expanding its area of control and domains of influence within its self-proclaimed borders with Ethiopia, Djibouti and the Puntland State of Somalia [5]. Concurrently with this political stabilization [6], economy and life in the "de facto state" (Pegg 2017) are changing at a fast pace. It is experiencing new migratory trends, most importantly youth emigration, diaspora returnees and internal rural-to-urban migration. There are economic reconfigurations, like the advancing commercialization of the camel market and commodification of animals, new livestock trade relations with Asia, and diasporic investments. These changes are altering the social fabric of the country – and so are ecological changes such as the higher frequency of droughts, and environmental degradation.

In the midst of this turmoil, however, the importance of the dromedary for human socio-economic organization and identity construction, seems to have persisted. The one-humped camel remains the iconic animal of the region that it has been for a long time, and human dependence on it endures, even though the role of camels and people's relations to them have changed and are continuing to change. Camels are witness-

[3] E.g. Mansur (1995, 108-109).

[4] The livestock industry is the country's largest economic sector, estimated at 28 percent. 65 percent of all Somalilanders, about 3.5 to 4 million people, make a living by working in animal production or in related lines of business (Fox 2015, 11; Somaliland Ministry of National Planning and Development 2015, 4-12).

[5] Bradbury (2008) and Walls (2014) provide the most comprehensive overviews of Somaliland's political history.

[6] Somaliland's recent history of civil disruption: colonialization, independence in 1960, changes of government, the Ogaden war, state collapse, and the disastrous Somali civil war (in Somaliland between the late-1980s and 1991) which led to secession from the then-Somali Democratic Republic and its self-declaration as the Republic of Somaliland (formerly the British Somaliland Protectorate).

ing an increasing physical distance from humans and are experiencing the intensification of human-camel production and trade strategies first-hand due to the growing consumption of their milk and meat [7]. These days, for example, it is likely for a camel in Somaliland to experience being relocated from an open ranching life to a zero-grazing camel stable.

This growing distance between humans and animals and concurrently an unvarying dependence on and abundant consumption of animal products, is exactly what the historian (and camel expert) Richard Bulliet describes as part of a current global transition period from the domestic to the post-domestic era of human-animal relations (2005, 3). At first glance, this historical narrative of a unidirectional transformation of human-animal relations – at least from a structural macro-perspective – seems to apply to my case as well. With my micro-perspective on skills and camelidae agency, however, I aim to critically interrogate the unilinearity of this narrative using the empirical insights gleaned during my fieldwork. I am interested in the specificity of the case of camels in Somaliland, in how camels and human agents are actively shaping their relationship in the wake of the described social and ecological dynamics.

Hence, human-camel relations in Somaliland are situated in a singular social and ecological environment that has been, and is still being, shaped by the duo's mutually dependent lifestyle, which, in turn, is constantly adapting to endo- and exogenic dynamics that impact on their shared lifeworld.

3. Hermeneutics of skill and affective apprenticeship

As direct interactions between camels and camel professionals take place on the level of the body and are mediated through body practices, the starting point for this study is an examination of the skilled practices performed in human-animal relations. According to Tim Ingold's definition (2000, 5), skills are:

> […] capabilities of action and perception of the whole organic being (indissolubly mind and body) situated in a richly structured environment. As properties of human organisms, skills are thus as much biological as cultural. […] Skills are not transmitted from generation to generation but

[7] According to Delgado (2003), meat consumption in developing countries has grown thrice as much as in developed countries, resulting in environmental and health issues. Somaliland is no exception in this regard.

> are regrown in each, incorporated into the modus operandi of the developing human organism through training and experience in the performance of particular tasks.

Furthermore, "environmentally situated agents" develop skills in "histories of continuing involvement with human and non-human constituents" (Ingold 2000, 5-10). Hence, if skills are inscribed into human and non-human bodies through practice, and are socially and environmentally embedded, I am asking: What role do skills play in human-animal relations? Or, more specifically, how do skills form human-animal relations, and how are they formed in such? Furthermore, are skills shared or co-conditioned with non-human actors?

The data and conclusions presented in this text are based on participant observation during nine months of fieldwork, which I conducted during three research stays (2016, 2017, 2018) in Somaliland, in two urban and two rural areas that I chose for their ecological and social characteristics. I started my doctoral fieldwork with no prior knowledge or experience of living or working with camels. This limitation prompts some methodological questions.

The interdisciplinary methodological debate on how to conduct ethnographic research with animals has only just begun. Promising starting points, approaches and arguments can be found in the works of the philosopher Dominique Lestel, the social anthropologist Florence Brunois and the cognitive psychologist Florence Gaunet (2006), or the social anthropologists Raymond Madden (2014) and Irina Wenk (2016). Within this growing body of methodological literature, the human-elephant studies scholars Piers Locke and Nicholas Lainé have inspired me greatly. Following Locke, I aim to contribute to the advancement of multispecies ethnographic approaches by testing what he calls "affective apprenticeship" with "non-human informants" (2017).

"Affective apprenticeship" is participant observation tailored to obtain more-than-human understandings of the research subject. Engaging with camels in direct bodily interactions as an apprentice of a camel herder enabled me to shift my perspective to the animals' lifeworlds. Participating in their lives between the day grazing areas and night camps or *Xero* through waking and walking with, touching, calling, hitting (gently), tethering, guarding, searching, watering, feeding, corralling, milking, branding, cuddling or mourning them, bestowed me with interspecies encounters that ultimately led me to concede personalities to individual camels and experience interspecies acquaintance, companionship, and cooperation at first hand. The respective autoethnographic notes from my field diaries form parts of the basis of this text.

The apprentice-master relationship was with, among others (including the camels themselves), the *Geeljire* Jamaac. Jamaac is a calm, kind, single man in his fifties from Benaadir in southeastern Somalia, near Mogadishu, with no relatives in Somaliland. Every year he works for the herd owner and city trader Nur, he earns a camel. He has earned twelve so far. All expenses for the needs of his modest and dedicated lifestyle are met by Nur. That is why Jamaac only very rarely leaves his work (for example, merely to buy new clothes in the city). Day in, day out, year after year he is with the camels. Jamaac was my *Macalin* (teacher) and I his *Arday* (student). He did not talk much. The guiding principle was: "Just watch me doing it and do as I do!" [8].

Above, I narrated how I was caught on the wrong foot when starting my herding apprenticeship. A few days after that incident, however, my relation to the herd improved. I lost my fear, which made it possible to start establishing relationships with some individuals. With Marwo, for example, a then-five-year-old female camel, I intuitively felt an affective bond. Since we became acquainted, after I was told that she was a very social being, we interacted through exchanging caresses. She sought bodily contact by bending towards me, touching my head and shoulders with her head, and I petted her neck.

Directly engaging with camels, I learned – as Thom van Dooren *et al.* formulate it – paying "attention to how they craft shared lives and worlds" (2016, 6) and thereby, I have to admit, experienced "being perpetually pulled beyond the limits of [my] own taken-for-granted world" (Narayan in McGranahan 2014). Furthermore, "in paying attention to others [I gained] a new understanding and appreciation of the human" (van Dooren *et al.* 2016, 14). I was profoundly and lastingly impressed by the herders' knowledge, explicit and tacit, their sensory capabilities, and intuition, empathy, sensitivity in interacting and cooperating with nonhuman actors. For this paper, I deeply dived into my data to recall the sensory and affective impressions with the animals and herders in the respective environments. In the following sections, I return to this empirical material.

[8] In a herding setting like the one I am describing it is common that a herder works alone. In other settings, when the herd is far away from the homestead on its transhumant journey for example, herders work in a team of two, three or more. Another human-human relation that is outside the scope of this article is the dynamic between me, the researcher, and Jamaac. In short, this research benefitted greatly from Jamaac's generous and patient, wordless instructions and trust, which eventually resulted in human-human cooperation, in the form of my assistance under his guidance, as well.

4. Leading and driving camels to the "Xero", the empirical case

Once he had driven the herd from the *Xero* to the garden, the *Geeljire*'s day, spent in the shade of a tree, was calm, only occasionally interrupted by his inspection rounds in order to ensure that the freely strolling munching animals did not disperse too far. Then, in the late afternoon, at around half past four, the herder set out to spot the animals that had wandered around on their own accord, to first gather and then walk them back to the *Xero* where they all needed to arrive at dusk. In order to find the scattered camels, he combed the *Beerta* by circumnavigating the largest possible area to which furthest ranges he suspected the animals could have roamed. From the periphery he sent the animals to an inner circle. Once the 360-degree circuit was completed, he narrowed his round, until he succeeded in gathering all the camels on one spot, from which he then walked them from the grazing area back to the resting place for the night.

In the process of gathering the camels, interspecies cooperation is required. From where Jamaac found the camels in the *Beerta* he sent them to the gathering spot by shooing them in that direction. After a few meters, the camels understood, relented to Jamaac's intention and moved, some more, others less disciplined, towards the meeting place. The cooperative effort of the camels was to walk, more or less independently, to the gathering place, which they knew, and to wait there patiently until the herder signaled their joint departure for the *Xero*. Instead of waiting, the camels could have departed on their own. They knew the way, there was no fence hindering them and the herder was out of reach looking for other camels. But they waited. They were aware of the herder's role and included him in their plan for retreating to the safety of the *Xero*. From the camels' perspective, the herder was "drawn into the process as an active co-participant" (Stépanoff 2012, 309) [9].

[9] Vice versa, the camels are drawn into the herder's routine to extract their milk in the *Xero* or follow the camel owner's plan to drive the fattened he-camel, via the livestock market, to the slaughterhouse. In fact, "human and animal knowledge is highly asymmetrical, although complementary" (Stépanoff 2012, 309). Hence, this paper's focus on cooperation and distributed skills tends to disguise the reality that animals are (too) often worked with against their will and by employing brute force and deadly violence. This is, of course, also true for the cooperation between camels and herders. Ultimately, their relationship is far from symmetrical. And in this regard, a critical scrutiny of the human ethics of (camel) care and a discussion of animals' resistance, how they refuse to work (Dave 2019), revolt (Despret 2016, 21-27) or strike back, like the camel that kicked me, are unaccounted for in this paper.

After gathering, the controlled moving of a camel herd required the herder to command further skills. Not least, of course, a thorough knowledge of the place but, most importantly, driving skills. Accomplishing this task is impossible without the cooperation of the animals. The camels do not walk neatly in a bunch or in an orderly line, or at the same pace, or even toward the same direction. They walk at their own tempo, pause, shear off, stop to nibble here and there, quarrel with their mates or even decide they have not sufficiently filled their stomachs and (try) to return to the garden. Others cannot wait to reach the *Xero* and speed off on their own. Hence, they do not simply react to the stimuli of the herder, conditioned like a Pavlovian dog. They meet their bodily (hunger, tiredness, or bulging udder) and social (walking with a significant other or alone, playing, etc.) needs and act independently and nonuniformly. This expresses their individual agency. But the time of the day, the verbal and nonverbal communication with the beings of their own and the human species, the direction, the longing for their place of rest, safety before dusk and, for some, their full udders being milked after sunset, evokes a general atmosphere of departure and brings to mind that the collective is homeward bound. At this moment, camels and herders know both the way and the why.

At the rear of the moving trek, driving for humans means steering the animals at the end and flanks of the band in the direction towards the *Xero*, while the cooperating animals lead the rest and largest number of the group on the right path, directly, without detours, independently, back to the *Xero*. One of these leaders is the *Barqab*, the dominant stallion. His body is massive and muscular, and he is the tallest in the herd. Moreover, he features distinctive authoritarian character traits. His physique, charisma, competence, and demeanor (cf. Max Weber's charismatic leadership) are efficacious to the extent that his leading does not need much active intervention on the herder's behalf. The herd follow him. The caring camel mothers chivvy along their meandering offspring, and the playful youngsters gang up and walk together [10].

Notwithstanding, the fact that the herd arrives at the *Xero* before the driving herder underscores the claim that camels cooperate with

[10] Alpha male, female carer, and gendered hierarchy sound like anthropomorphic gender stereotypes. I am neither equipped to formulate nor inclined to reproduce a "theory of dominance" in the camel herd. Despite the fieldnotes above, I would answer Vinciane Despret's question, "Might the dominance of males be a myth?" (2016, 59) affirmatively. Female camels are leaders as well, and this view is clearly attested by the "metaphorical representation of the nation-state as the she-camel" (*Maandeeq*) (Orwin 2016) in a well-known Somali poetry debate.

humans in the task of leading the party home, and that the leading camels fulfil their part in the interspecies congregation in a skillful manner. The demands of the job for the cooperating human and the trouble they encounter in conducting even the unruliest among the camels toward the corral, further stresses the claim that: considering that one human (if not supported by colleagues) can drive a group of up to a hundred animals makes the inevitability of human-animal cooperation evident. It is impossible, for example, to visually keep track of all the camels. The herder needs to visually focus on the stony ground in order not to stumble, whilst keeping an eye on the near and far distance. He must not lose direction, must watch out for any dangers (e.g. predators like hyenas) but, most importantly, must not miss any camel that could easily and quickly disappear in the dry and dusty bush of withered small-leaved thorny shrubs, behind groups of umbrella thorned acacia trees (*Qudhac*), thickets of the invasive Prosopis juliflora (*Garanwaa* or *Cali-garoob*), patches of succulent, or the red or yellow flowered Aloe megalacantha (*Dacar Dhegweyn*) (cf. Pickering and Awale 2018, 13, 22, 90, 98, on the respective flora on the Hawd plateau.). Furthermore, driving is strenuous. Due to the relatively short legs of a human compared to a dromedary, the herder has to keep up with the fast pace, and remain sensorially concentrated for quite some time. The walk home from the gathering spot that particular evening overran by a full hour.

Furthermore, driving is communicating. The herders whistle and shout, "He!" or "Aha-Aha-Aha!" meaning "walk" and "go". Messages like "This way!", "Stop eating!" or "Let's move" are communicated nonverbally by gesturing with hands or a stick, or by approaching the animal – depending on the message, in a slower or faster, kinder or more menacing manner. Sometimes, the herder tries to make the camel run off in the right direction (and catch up with the group) by imitating a hyena. He does that by running crouched towards the camel, blowing up dust by dragging his herder stick behind him. Mostly, however, communication is much easier. Walking assertively toward a camel, like the *Barqab* does, suffices to get the message across. If that does not work, or simply to ensure that some characters do not get into mischief, the herder touches, lightly slaps or pushes them, with his hand or stick. The *Geeljire* hardly ever hit the animals hard.

For their part, the camels communicate back. I observed that they signal their attention with a nod-like movement of the neck and, by extension the head, toward the herder, without turning toward him entirely. Whether they are willing to comply, however, only becomes clear from their ensuing action. Refusal or resistance is marked by turning toward

the herder and staring, puffing themselves up, roaring, kicking, biting, or spitting.

Hence, human-camel cross-species communication is equally "both vocal and tactile", as Nicolas Lainé remarks in his study on human-elephant relations (2016, 180), it requires interspecies sociality (cf. Hurn 2012, 115, about elephants), and the limits of communication are set by one's familiarity with the other's abilities to "respond and understand". Therefore, camel herders "do not tend to 'talk' to the herd animals, as people converse with pets in Western society", they do not speak to them "like small children", thus, they "do not tend to anthropomorphise" (cf. Fijn 2011, 123, about Mongolian herders and their herd animals). Because they spend their lives together, camels and humans know how to interpret each other (cf. Haraway in Fijn 2011 on farmer-sheep-dog communication).

Furthermore, the herder's choice of their mode of communication is not generic or arbitrary, but individualized. Meaningful communication requires knowing the individual animals and recognizing them as personas with agency. Recognizing camels individually (cf. cow herders' recognition abilities in Italian alps in Grasseni 2004, 42) is also vital for knowing whether the herd is complete and for keeping an eye on the condition and wellbeing of each and every animal at all times. The herder knows them all – and all the camels know the herder. The animals are said to have good memory and recognition skills themselves.

The *Geeljire* knows the camels under his watch as personalities. Facets of their personalities that are relevant for the herder to know when driving are traits like an animal's role as a forerunner who leads his or her peers on the trail, or as a maverick who dislikes trotting with the group. Some like walking in the group, some beside it, some fast, some slow, at the front or the end. And others behave stubbornly and do not want to walk at all. It can happen that the latter must even be left behind and collected later when the rest of the herd is safely enclosed in the *Xero* or looked for the next morning (after worrying the whole night that it could have been attacked by a hyena). Camels with this personality trait are called *Gooni Daaq* (lit. isolated grazing), meaning a "loner".

Eventually the herd and the herder arrive at the *Xero*, where the camels are directed into their respective compartments. There the herder is supported by a human helper, who then also assists in milking. Once milking is done and the campfire is lit, it is time to rest. The herder eats his supper – a favorite being the Somali corn porridge *Shuuro* refined with camel milk and ghee – while the camels chew the cud.

To take a camel herd from one place to another, to safely reach a *Xero* before nightfall and the thick darkness of Somaliland's non-electrified countryside, interspecies cooperation is indispensable. Completing one's duties in this cooperative interspecies relationship successfully requires being equipped with experiential knowledge inscribed to one's human or nonhuman body through practice, and embedded in the interspecies sociality. Hence, moving a herd is a matter of distributed skills (in leading and driving) between humans and camels.

5. Distributed skills and camelidae agency

My ethno-camelological and more-than-human perspective is inspired by lively current debates in the interdisciplinary (hitherto, regrettably, mostly Eurocentric) human-animal studies (Ritvo 2007, 119). Since "the animal turn" (*ibid.*) in the early 2000s (Pedersen 2014, 13) in the wake of the "ontological turn" (cf. "narrow ontological turn" in Kohn 2015), the new materialism and actor-network theory, scholars in this field postulate that animals are intricately entangled with human lives and hence must not be reduced to "mere objects to be utilized by the human subjects of ethnographic inquiry" (Hurn 2012, 1). Accordingly, a shift in anthropology towards acknowledging animals' agency and subjectivity can be observed (e.g. in the growing number of publications and conferences on the subject).

Next, relating my own concept grounded in my empirical observations to recent work in human-animal studies, I will argue that relocating a herd of camels from A to B by hoof and by foot is a cooperative practice accomplished on the basis of skills distributed between human and camelidae actors. The key parameters of distributed skills are embodiment, interspecies sociality, intersubjectivity, and transformability.

The skills required in this cooperative practice are leading (i.e. spearheading, routing, conducting a group of camels), and driving (to hurry along a group of camels). Skills, as mentioned above, are inscribed into human and non-human bodies through practice in an intimate environment. Skill is embodied knowledge. Leading and driving is body work (walking, trotting, running, gesturing, shouting, spotting, listening, touching, kicking, etc.), and human and nonhuman bodies are finely attuned to each other and the sentient environment in a sensorial way. It is skills that form these perceptions and actions.

The acquirement of these skills, through embodied knowledge transmission (e.g. through observation and imitation of master by apprentice),

is socially embedded and is a result of the process that Donna Haraway calls co-evolution (2003, 26-32), Natasha Fijn termed "phylogenetic enculturation" (2011, 124) or Marianne Lien titled "biosocial becomings" (2015, 15-16). Specifically, the distributed skills under consideration are socially embedded in a "hybrid human-animal community" (Lestel *et al.* 2006 in Stépanoff 2012, 288) that is characterized by mutual percipience, engagement and "co-dependence" (Fijn 2011, 241-242). The herders' and camels' lives overlap temporally and spatially. They live in a "cross-species ecosocial landscape" (Fijn 2011, 241) in which they share both domestic spaces (the *Xero*) and pasturage (the *Beerta*). Their daily routines are synchronized. They even wake up and go to sleep at around the same time.

The human-camel community depends on interspecies intersubjectivity. Camels and humans recognize each other as individuals with certain character traits (hotspur, playful, earnest, indifferent, cuddly, etc.) and roles (leader, driver, follower, loner, guardian, etc.). In the group there is "mutual trust and empathic and communicative understanding" (Lainé 2016, 200-201), developed in processes of co-evolution (since camels and humans started living together in the Horn of Africa) and co-socialization (while growing up and coming of age in a camel pastoralist community). Cross-species communicative strategies are passed on from generation to generation, and individual enskilment occurs while inhabiting a lifeworld together. Habituating is a matter of co-dependence (meat, milk, protection, water, salt, etc.) and affect, which "enables animal agency and subjectivity to emerge" (Nyman and Schuurman 2016) and "[e]mpathy, the ability to read emotions or body language and recognize how another is feeling, leads to much more effective and meaningful communication […]" (Frans de Waal 2009 in Hurn 2012, 118-119). Interspecies sociality enables "collaborative labour" (Lainé 2016, 200-201).

Lastly, skills are not invariable. In Somaliland, social and ecological dynamics are transforming the skills under consideration. There are examples of deskilling processes that render distributed skills obsolete, like for example the transportation of camels by lorry, or camel breeding in zero-grazing farms that do not require joint mobility. However, the opposite can be observed as well: an example of enskilment is the case of "city camels" that guide rural camels from the outskirts of the capital Hargeysa to the livestock market in its center. This phenomenon is a consequence of social and ecological dynamics that have propelled urbanization and compelled humans and camels to adapt their distributed skillset of leading and driving to a new setting (this case will be presented in my forthcoming PhD dissertation). Thus, animals are not only agents but

also historical actors (Ingold 1994, 8-9; Steinbrecher and Krüger 2016), whose transformative role as close companions in human history and active co-constituents of their relations to, and the lifeworlds they share with, human communities, must be acknowledged (Shipman 2011 and Noske 1997 in Ogden *et al.* 2013, 10).

6. Conclusion

In this text, I have shown that nonhuman agency, as an individual capacity to engage in an activity and an epistemological potential (the purposeful acquisition and application of knowledge/skills), manifests in human-camel cooperative tasks. Cooperation is made possible through human-camel sociality and intersubjectivity, through the ability to interpret and respond to each other, and it depends on the empathetic acknowledgement of the enabling or disabling powers of each counterpart, her or his agency. Leading and driving camels is a skilled practice requiring the responding and enabling capacities of both cooperation partners. Hence, it is a case of distributed skills; distributed in the sense that skills of humans and nonhumans are intertwined in this practice, that they complement each other.

Addressing nonhuman agency and distributed skills in this way provides a interesting analytical opportunity. A post-anthropocentric perspective allows the co-construction of social worlds by multi-species communities in unison to be revealed, thereby unmasking the "privileged ontological status of humans as knowers" (Kohn in Hurn 2012, 204-205, 214). Hence, I am putting forward this claim for discussion – that animals are skilled agents whose cooperation with humans is essential for certain labor relations – in order to argue against human exceptionalism, a long-held social anthropological key premise. With this argument, my work is aligned with anthropologists in current human-animal studies as mentioned above, since the animal turn. When human-animal relations are thought of as not simply hegemonic and reified, but intersubjective and based on mutual dependencies, it becomes apparent that cooperation between humans and (co-domesticated [11]) animals not only occurs in the realm of the animal body, e.g. as physical animal labor that humans avail themselves of, but also in the sphere of the nonhuman mind [12]:

[11] The term "co-domestication" emphasizes "symmetrical relationships of coevolution" (see the "domestication reconsidered" debate in Cassidy 2007).

[12] Theorizing "the nonhuman mind" and "nonhuman agency" generally involves a risk of neglecting the specificity of a particular species. In my forthcoming dissertation,

human-animal cooperative teams depend on each other's sociality, shared experiences, and skills. For this reason, I understand camels as agents in *inter-* and *intra*species relationships.

Moreover, a post-anthropocentric perspective epistemologically decolonizes notions of animals and their relationships to humans that were previously marked and devalued as beliefs of "pre-modern" animistic societies. Actually, the current rethinking of what animals are and how humans actually relate to them seems to be a predominantly Western concern. In Somaliland, on the contrary, to attribute agency to animals is to state the obvious. Camelidae agency is an experiential fact in Somali pastoralist communities. Jamaac, who instructed me how to drive camels and interact with them as camelidae agents, would not be impressed by the findings of this article. What this paper has demonstrated is that, to him and other herders like him, interspecies cooperation is a self-evident part of everyday life.

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I aim to highlight how the uniqueness of human-camel relations is a result of the specific characteristics of this animal too.

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