Ankole cattle, God's gift to man

In the beginning, Ruhanga, the creator, lived in space with his brother Nkya. Nkya who was younger and restless complained that he was bored with everything being mundane and dull. Ruhanga created heaven and earth for his brother. He threw a stone in the air and it became the sun. Nkya was happy with this but soon started to complain again about the constant sun and no shade. Ruhanga moved the sun to the West and covered it with a cloud. He then threw another stone in the air and created the moon. He ordered Nkya to sleep and created the rooster to crow and wake Nkya up when night had passed. He also created grasses and trees for more shade and then ordered Nkya to stay on Earth whilst he returned to attend to matters in Heaven.

Nkya soon became restless and demanded something of beauty to look at. Ruhanga created the Ankole cattle which pleased Nkya immensely and he was then finally content.

It is from this story that Ankole are known and believed to be God's gift to man.

Ankole and Ankore

John MacAllister was the first residential British representative sent by the British administration, whom wanted a firm hold in Nkore (Uganda) to protect their territory against the other European colonial countries. The Nkore region, south of Uganda, was near the territories of the Germans in Rwanda and Tanzania. In the west, they also bordered the larger Belgian territory of Zaire.

MacAllister altered the name of the kingdom from Nkore to Ankole in 1898 as Ankole was easier to pronounce for the British. This name change was maintained over time.

Bahima and Biru

The Bihima people were a nomadic tribe whom entered Uganda during the era of the 1300s. The people were a combination of the Kushite’s people from the Horn of Africa region of Ethiopia, Eritrean and Nubians from Southern Sudan.

They were warrior tribes that clustered in clans and chiefdoms and eventually settled in South-western Uganda, which was known as the cattle corridor, due to the pasture and water along the Rift Valley. They intermarried with Bantu tribes here, mainly the Biru. Although their Ethnic identity is now very diverse, the nomadic culture and Ankole longhorn cattle keeping are some of the few things that remained and defined the culture until today.

Bahima were a ruling minority of pastoralists and Biru were a working class majority of cultivators, the two groups were forced to co-exist but one could only own land if they possessed cattle.

The Bahima lifted cattle to be the highest factor of wealth. Cattle were the standard measure of time for the day, this means that the time of day originated from
the cattle activity at that moment. These cattle keepers dedicated up to 19 hours per day to cattle activities.

In addition, cattle became the measure of wealth, status and prestige, and cattle ownership was the most important traditional status index. The number of cattle owned by an individual, directly determined his status. The Bahima kings were the Bahima with more cattle than the rest. It was the number of cattle an individual chief owned, which decided his position and status in the chiefs’ assembly with the Omugabe, the monarch of the kingdom of Ankole. The Ankole cattle were raised to be the main source of economic, political and social power. The Bahima did all they could to monopolise cattle, and to prevent the Biru from owning them in order to maintain power and control.

From the combination of these two people over decades, many Banyankore clans were formed. Each clan had its own identity and special relationships with their Ankole cattle. For example, the Abagahe clans in the Kigezi regions have the totem of what they described as the striped cow. This colour is known to modern day cattle breeders as brindle colour. Brindle is a rare coat colour of Ankole cattle and it was believed to be taboo, as it was forbidden to slaughter and consume the meat of such cows. Wars have been fought over these brindled coloured cattle.

**History of Ankole cattle**

The origin of the Bahima and their Ankole cattle have been traced to the Ethiopian highlands and there is evidence in Saudi Arabia depicting Ankole on ancient rock art.

Ankole long horned cattle are evident as early as the fifth millennium in the Nile valley, Egypt. These cattle were depicted in Egyptian arts, on pyramid walls and as the hieroglyphs, such as that of the sky bull and the seven cows of Hathor, on the walls of Nefertari’s tomb that dated back to 2300 BC. They are also evident as depictions on Rock in the Sahara region.

The Bahima travelled down the Nile River and entered Uganda in the 1300’s. Ankole long horned cattle have played a vital role in African tribes for over 6000 years. This breed has spread to Kenya, Sudan, Uganda and other parts of Eastern Africa. The cattle are presently kept by the Banyankole, who are a tribe from South West Uganda. These African long horns were kept by numerous nomad groups across East Africa, for example, the Bahima, nomads of Ankole, Tutsi and nomads of Rwanda.

The fact that these tribes were nomads, land laws in the 1960’s to 1980’s marginalised these groups, leading to many young men and women joining armed struggles against their government. In Uganda, President Museveni, led the National Resistance Army which captured power in 1986. However, since the
early 2000’s those concerned about the Ankole cattle’s threatened status, including the President Yosweri Museveni, started a campaign to revive the breed and other farmers followed suit, albeit in an uncoordinated manner. Incidentally, many Rwandan young men were a part of this struggle.

These Rwandans were born in Uganda, their parents and grandparents migrated to Uganda during the 1950’s genocide in Rwanda. This same group led the core that formed the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), which in 1994 captured power in Rwanda and ended the genocide. President Paul Kagame and others first liberated Uganda before liberating Rwanda. Again, the struggle for these young men at the time, was land for their Ankole cattle to graze, as Ankole need extensive land due their grazing habits.

With a change in Government in 1986, the farming methods altered and the farmers moved to the more economical cow, in terms of milk-profit. The Friesian and the Ankole cow, which was a more traditional cow with less milk and no commercial value in Uganda at the time, was abandoned. Already the extinction threats started becoming visible. The high population pressure on land had forced the pastoralists to consider alternative breeds which can be reared on limited land. The drive for more economic gain rather than prestige, also forced some herdsmen to acquire exotic breeds like the Holstein Friesian, which produce a greater quantity of milk.

At the entrance of Mbarara town, the capital of Western Uganda, is a statue of the Ankole long horned bull. This immortalised stone symbol is a reflection of just how significant the long horned cattle are to the people in this region. Traditional Kinyarwanda dancers even mimic their horns with their arm movements in their choreography. These cattle are clearly a reoccurring theme deeply rooted into the Ugandans culture and history.

**Beauty with Purpose**

The Ankole horns knock together with the tone of African drums, whilst they move through the land with the rustle of a veld fire. They are intelligent, fertile, adaptable, built to survive and thrive in the harshest of African climates. They are proven to stand the test of time and are rightfully called the cattle of the ages.

A trademark of the Ankole is their contrasting half crescent-shaped ivory white horns that halo their heads like crowns. The gentle slope inwards and the angle of the horn is perfectly in balance. The collection of these crescent-shaped horns gives the “Ankole effect” of a wall or sea of horns when they group closely together and is positively selected for by Ugandan farmers. The structure of the horn curving up has a low centre of gravity which allows them to carry more horn mass and weight with energy efficiency.

Their horns are used for display, fighting, protection, social hierarchy, thermoregulation, communication and even for the function of breaking branches
which enables browsing during drought. Ankole cattle share the traits of strong maternal, paternal and family bonds of their originators.

The bright white horns and dark deep red coat highlights a contrast that is intimidating to predators. Ankole have noticeably exaggerated nodding of the head, along with a concertina body motion and rocking gait which aid in their energy efficient movement.

Their bodies are narrow with a small surface area exposed to the sun, fine bones enable a light bone compared to muscle ratio, a high shoulder height, high hips with an exceptionally long body and legs, which enables them to take considerable strides, allowing the Ankole to cover large distances with less effort. Their sloping rump like, facilitates the ease of calving. These cattle can gain weight if conditions are favourable and lose weight when necessary in order to conserve energy in “survival mode”. The ideal 45 degree angle of their half crescent horns, allows for a low centre of gravity which enables them to carry large horns with relative ease.

Other environmental adaptations, which make the Ankole breed so well suited to so many areas of the country, include the ability to utilise lower quality feed to walk far distances for food and water, to resist insects and external parasites whilst withstanding vast climactic differences. They also have the ability to reproduce on a regular basis in a stressful environment and do not show any effect from extremely high temperatures.

An abundance of loose skin and dewlap aids in its ability to withstand warm weather by increasing the body surface area exposed to cooling. A factor which contributes to the Ankole’s unique ability to withstand temperature extremes, is a short, thick, glossy hair coat which reflects much of the sun’s rays, allowing them to graze in midday sun without suffering.

In colder weather the skin is contracted, increasing the thickness of the hide and density of the hair, which aids in retaining body heat. They can grow a protective covering of long, coarse hair beneath, where a dense, downy, fur-like undercoat can be found.

The Ankole cattle are best adapted to semi-arid conditions. Information available on the website of the Pastoral Environmental Network in the horn of Africa, also maintains that the Ankole can endure seasonal movement and do not require expensive investments in water points, veterinary or extra supplementary care, making it the backbone of the pastoral economy. In a report it was noted that during the long drought spells some farmers who had kept their hardy Ankole breeds survived, as they were able to walk the long distances to water sources, whilst those who had traded the Ankole for imported breeds lost their entire herds.

Ankole have been reported to be able to go without water for 3 days and food for 5 days. The low water needs and feed survival abilities have allowed them,
as a breed, to not only survive for centuries in Africa, but also become established in Australia, Europe, North America and South America. The Ankole breed easily surpasses other breeds in longevity and fertility into later years, with their average lifespan of over twenty years. It has been recorded that cows can live to thirty years and have over twenty five calves. With the treatment of herbs by the Ugandan people, the Ankole are able to live long healthy lives. Their horns made them easily traced by Ugandan cattlemen in the thickets. Ankole has been known to have the intelligence and ability to hoard milk when milked by people, and only allow their calves to feed.

Their tolerance to extreme drought, heat, direct sunlight and disease makes them the uncontested, most hardy cattle on the planet. Long hollow honey combed horns are the enlargement of their nasal cavity. They are filled with blood vessels used during thermoregulation. The cows have a small, tight udder that would not be an easy target for predators or thorn bushes, yet they produce milk to nourish their young, which tests out extremely rich milk off-takes, which is much higher than any other indigenous breed in pastoral systems.

The calves are observed to be especially alert and are capable of running along their mothers and the herd within a short time after birth. These cattle are highly social, preferring to stay in a group for company and protection. At night they tend to form a circle with adults lying on the outside, horns out to protect the calves located in the inner circle. The calves will hang in nursery groups by day but always in close proximity to at least one adult and when frightened will instinctively run in front of the horns of a retreating mother or under her belly for protection.

One theory on their horn function is that animals in colder climates with higher latitudes and altitudes tend to be bigger in body size because overheating is less of a factor. Bergmann’s rule states that in general a more massive animal has a lower surface area to volume ratio, a bigger animal radiates less body heat per unit of mass and therefore holds higher body temperatures and can therefore suffer from heat stress. This means Ankole cattle can comfortably handle their massive body sizes of over 900kg in bulls and over 600kgs in cows in 40 degree heat because of the thermoregulatory function of their horns.

The whole genome scan revealed the genetic signature of these Sanga long-horn Ankole cattle and their potential for higher quality beef. The study has reported that Ankole produce better quality beef with lower shear-force, larger soluble collagen, shorter myofibrillar fragment length, higher percent drip-loss and larger rib-fat thickness. Results from the genome scan showed several positively selected genes involved in different biological and cellular functions, including those affecting meat quality characteristics. The genes identified in relation to meat quality characteristics are involved in muscle and lipid metabolism, which affect tenderness and intramuscular fat content of meat. Their fine grained soft meat is high in poly-unsaturated fatty acids, high in Omega 6 and 9, low in cholesterol and calories compared to other meat, making it a healthy alternative.
Those who kept cattle in Uganda and Rwanda’s diet did not consist of meat, they tapped blood from the veins of cows and was mixed with milk in a protein rich and nourishing drink, which was then consumed. In the Ugandan culture it was seen as a form of cannibalism to slaughter a healthy cow. Infertile cows and surplus bulls were slaughtered from time to time for special occasions, but no part of the slaughtered cattle would be wasted. Hides would be made into drums, mats and clothing, the dung of cows was used to plaster buildings and even to create art on buildings. An art-form called “Imigongo” can still be found in Rwanda near Akagera National Park, where women create cow-dung art on wood which is sold to visitors and gift-shops. The horns were made into jewellery and musical instruments. For a long time the Bahima always believed that every man should own Ankole cattle and it is no wonder many families rear them.

Bahima men believe they must have Ankole cattle and without them they are not worthy men. They attach a lot of importance to the Ankole cattle when it comes to marrying off their daughters or sons. The cattle are used in paying the bride price, a mandatory requirement among these pastoral communities. Parents claim they do not trust marrying off their daughters to families that have no wealth, which is depicted through the possession of Ankole cattle. It is these Ankole cattle that stage an uncompromised requirement for marrying a woman.

Marriages are cemented with the payment of dowry in the form of cattle. This exchange is reciprocated during the marriage ceremony or after the birth of each child. Friendship and patronage are also cemented through the giving and receiving of Ankole cows. This reciprocal relationship is a form of social bonding.

When one accumulates one hundred cattle, a bell is put around the neck of one of the most prized cows to demonstrate one’s achievement. The sound of the bell not only pleases the owner of the herd, but also guides the herdsmen towards the herd if they stray. The bell guards them against theft because the herdsmen are always listening out for the sound of the bell. Every cow is named and some even respond to their name when called. The names relate to their behaviour, character, skin patterns, size, shape of horns and their position in the herd. Cow products like milk, ghee, meat, hides, even dung and urine are an important part of the pastoralist lifestyle. These are used in the homes and also sold for income. In the morning after milking and at the watering trough in the afternoon, the cows are inspected thoroughly. Sick cows are tended to and from time to time minor surgical procedures take place, including the tying of fractures and branding. This is all through traditional knowledge systems often with the use of traditional tools and herbs. The children watch on, learning from the old and will pass this knowledge on to the next generation.

Traditionally Ankole were seldom slaughtered for meat. It was only in ceremonies such as the coming of adulthood. The cows are frequently milked and bled to make Ghee and a yogurt-like high protein drink that nomads used to at times, survive on alone. Preliminary tests by Kobus Rall in South Africa proved that Ankole cattle responded and performed better in a feedlot than all other indigenous African cattle breeds housed at Ntaba Nyoni.
Ankole cattle have low birth weight which helps with ease of calving. This low birth weight makes Ankole bulls useful for first-calf heifers of other breeds. Dairy farmers in the US have used Ankole to cross onto their dairy cows in their herds to boost the butter fat levels.

Ankole are a perfect design selected not by man’s wise hand but by the harsh merciless judge that is Africa. Every year, for thousands of years, only the most fit have survived to pass on their genetics. Every last gram of weight is muscle, bone and sinew which aids its energy efficient rocking gait and concertina-like body motion. Every form of the Ankole has its function and every trait and behaviour its vital purpose. Ankole cattle are made to survive in times of severity and they thrive in times of abundance.

It is clear that Ankole cattle possess desirable traits of great importance to farmers which have been lost in many modern, composite and synthetic breeds. This multipurpose cattle breed has a striking appearance, they have the elegance and the beauty of wildlife, yet they handle with the ease of cattle. Resilience, adaptability and fertility are paramount considering the harsh African climate and in time the potency of Ankole genetics will become understood, respected and appreciated.

**Naming Ankole**

The naming of Ankole cattle has a long history, the first official names are believed to have been coined one thousand years ago. As years have passed new names formed which have been documented and some older names vanished. The names are recorded in recitations called Ebyevugo.

The pastoral Bahima culture and Ankole cattle are intrinsically interlinked and the demise of one would inevitably be the demise of the other. The Bayankore and especially the Bahima people show appreciation for the beauty of their Ankole cattle by taking pride in naming them. Important factors when naming Ankole are the colour of their coat, whiteness and shape of the horns, body structure and behaviour. Each has a specific and descriptive name. The names allowed farmers to describe individual cattle and refer to them with universally understood accuracy, which was also helpful in managing one’s herd.

This allowed single animals to be picked out and helped in the selection of breeding. The ability to distinguish between the more than ten shades of red from Kisa, which is a red dilution that looks like cream, to Kyozi which is a melanistic black, made it possible for farmers to choose individual combinations in an effort to produce the sacred and preferred colour of purple, Bihogo.

**Story of Bihogo, the sacred cow**
According to traditions passed on by word from generation to generation, it is believed that the Batembuzi were the founders of the Bunyoro Kingdom. They are believed to be gods hailing from heaven and their existence is shrouded in legends and myths. Their reign dates back to the time of Africa’s Bronze Age. In total there were 22 kings who ruled over Bunyoro, with a king named Isaza being the last of the Batembuzi.

A king called Bukuku ruled over the kingdom after overthrowing Isaza and claiming his massive wealth in a herd of Ankole cattle. He was so proud of his wealth and named every single cow relative to their coloration and markings on their hide. The pride of his bounty was a solid brown cow, so perfect it had no colour marking breaking the earth-brown colour on its skin. He named it Bihogo. His pride and joy and the darling of his herd.

Bihogo, the dark red, purple is the name today, still describes the traditional ideal colour of Ankole cattle. The colour purple has been connected with royalty, power and wealth for centuries. Purple’s elite status is derived from the rarity and cost of the dye, originally used to produce it. Purple fabric used to be so extremely expensive that only kings could afford it. The dye first used to make purple came from the Phoenician trading city of Tyre, which is now in modern day, Lebanon. Fabric traders obtained the dye from a small mollusk which was only found in the Tyre region of the Mediterranean Sea.

In Ruyankore the suffix to root name determines the sex of the Ankole in naming.

Example, preferred colour; deep red (purple):
Ruhogo: bull
Bihogo: cow
Kahogo: heifer

“In naming the cows the ‘K’ stands for heifers and when they give birth they stop being Kahinda and then become Lhinda, or Kagabo becomes Ngabo, for example. Essentially going from a heifer to a cow, with the exception of ‘Kiroko’ and ‘Shamaitu’.
Bulls retain the ‘Ru’ from birth; for example:
Rugabo, Ruhinda, Ruroko, Rwozi.” Ugandan Ankole rancher.

“Rule number one: All cattle have colour, as long as it has a spot it can’t be named on colour but you can decide to use horn structure or behaviour. If you have many kyasha in your herd then you can name it Nkome to avoid duplicating the same name.” Ugandan Ankole rancher

**Names by solid colour**

All cattle possess one of three basic solid colours: Black, Red, or White. Ankole coat variation is focused around these main colours.
The black is dominant to red and both black and red are co-dominant when combined with white. One black or red gene with a white gene would result in either a black or red roan animal. In order for an animal to be red or white, they must have two genes for either red or white genes. There is another set of genes that control the intensity of that colour. Dilution causes black to be faded to grey and red to be faded to yellow/cream in Ankole.

Although the traditional preferred colour is one single unbroken solid colour, many Ankole cattle have various sized white spots or patches. The specific distribution, intensity and location of these markings determine the name. It is important to realise that the dark colour is the “base” colour, regardless of how large the white “covering” colour is. In general the fewer and smaller the white patches, the better.

A few individual Ugandan farmers have become renowned for breeding their specific preferences of colours or markings. There are over one hundred names for these colour markings. If spotted or patched the name changes from describing the solid colour to describing the colour marking.

Examples of suffix to root name changing, depending on the gender of the Ankole cattle.

Cow/ Bull/ Heifer
• Kyasha/ Rwasha/Kasha:
• Kiremba/Rubamba/Karemba:
• Bugondo/Rugondo /Kagondo:
• Mayenje/Ruyenje/Kayenje:
• Kiroko/Ruroko/Kagondo:
• Nshanga/Rushanga/Kashanga:
• Ntanani/Rutanani/Katanani:
• Ngobe/Rugobe/Kagobe:
• Ihinda/Ruhinda/Kahinda:
• Ibamba/Rubamba /Kabamba:
• Shamaitu /Rushamaitu/Kashamaitu:

Names of the structure of Cattle

Horns shapes

The horns of Ankole are their most unique and distinctive feature. Horn shapes that are graceful and elegant in curve, are favoured. Ideal horns should be large, long, heavy in mass and ideally forward pointing. The whiter they are the better and Ugandan farmers select for horns that are white from the base to the horn tip. They should have a “wet” and “glowing” look to them. For Ugandans, however perfect a cow is visually, phenotypically, physically or structurally, if its horns are not ideal is cannot be considered a beautiful Ankole.
Body frame

• Mirundi: long legs
• Nfundo: short legs
• Rurembezi: without horn growth spirals
• Kabango: big hump
• Kiromba: long naval flap
• Mbogo/ Kabogo: wide head, like a buffalo

Livestock and Wildlife integration in Africa

Throughout the ages there has been conflict between farmers and conservationists when wildlife and livestock have competed for resources such as grazing, land and water.

Ankole are hardy cattle that are able to survive on game reserves, national parks and conservancies alongside wildlife. Hardy African breeds such as Ankole cattle are leading the initiatives which promote the mutually beneficial coexistence and dynamic farming of livestock and game species together, when in the past livestock and game were always farmed separately.

The most well-known reserves that house Ankole cattle are Lake Mburo National Park, Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary in Uganda and Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya. Ankole are kept at Ol Pejeta alongside lions, leopard, cheetah, rhino, buffalo, hippo and elephant. At Ol Pejeta a model has been proven where in a savanna ecosystem in central Kenya, wildlife and livestock co-exist in a mutuality beneficial relationship. Treating livestock for ticks offers the benefit of removing the loads of these external parasites from the grass landscape. There are financial benefits from wildlife, through eco-tourism and from livestock through food production, which result in stronger economic viability and stability for an “agri-tourism” conservancy than when income is attained from only one source. Ol Pejeta integrates cattle with wildlife and uses livestock as a means to manage and utilise the land more effectively. The cattle graze on the plains of Ol Pejeta and at night, the cattle are herded in a predator resistant boma enclosure. Ol Pejeta employ 100 cattle herders; one for every 60 head of cattle. The herders know the terrain very well and spend all day out in the bushveld with the livestock, herding them to water points, pasture and back to the boma at night. The management of wildlife and livestock together can simultaneously improve human health and wildlife conservation. The cattle are guarded by experienced Masaai herdsmen and Ankole cattle have never succumbed to predation in the history of their existence on the reserve. Whilst lions, leopard and cheetah have killed other local cattle housed in the reserve. The Ankole cattle have become experts at using their horns to protect themselves. The Masai herdsmen have described how the cattle will gather in a circle with their horns all facing outwards and calves protected in the centre of the circle. This is what makes it impossible for predators to take advantage. The Ankole’s high intelligence has assisted them well in their survival.
These cattle are very tick resistant and need to be dipped half as often as the other local cattle. They are also more resistant to ECF (East Coast Fever), transmitted from buffalo to cattle. At Ol Pejeta Ankole cattle are a tourist attraction and have been rated the third most popular animal to see after the last northern white rhino and lions.

Over the past 10 years, Ol Pejeta has proven that wildlife and livestock integration is beneficial to the habitat, soil, fauna and flora of the game conservancy. High density grazing of cattle fertilises the soil and breaks up the hard ground in times of drought. This allows a regrowth and rejuvenation of grass in these areas, which attracts herbivores from all over the Conservancy. Ol Pejeta’s Ecological Monitoring Unit has set camera traps in the areas where the cattle have grazed and recorded a substantial amount more herbivores in these areas than others where cattle have not grazed. The challenges faced by this integration of livestock are predation from big cats, and tick-borne diseases carried by wildlife, particularly buffalo. Ol Pejeta only loses around 1% of its livestock to predators each year.

**Sourcing the next generation of Ankole in Uganda**  
Written by Martin Joubert, Fullblood Genetics.

For my wife and I, our journey began with a 7 hour flight from Johannesburg International Airport, South Africa to Entebbe Uganda. After landing and glancing at the scenery I couldn’t help but think of the movies: “7 Days in Entebbe” and “Raid on Entebbe”, however, my wife and I were not so lucky to experience such action yet. For my wife, Claire, and I giving up any holidays and weekends went from being a habitual necessity to a lifestyle. Although exhausting and stressful, we considered this expedition as much of a holiday as we were going to get. We called it our honeymoon.

Our first glimpse of Uganda was an astonishing view landing on the edge of the picturesque Lake Victoria at Entebbe airport. A freshwater lake so massive that you could mistake it for the ocean. The body of water is so large that there are even small waves on the shores. The end of the lake is not visible, as far as the eye could see there was just water and only a few small scattered islands. From the moment we left the plane it was immediately clear that this was the most beautiful country we had ever seen. This land of high rainfall and dark soils is prime pastoral and farming land, and it is no wonder the communities here have thrived hand in hand with their cattle. Uganda truly is the pearl of Africa, the land of milk and honey.

Our first interaction outside the airport was with a policeman who looked and behaved as if he was a soldier in the Ugandan Army. He shouted at us to get out of the vehicle, I hesitated in confusion as to what I had done wrong. The officer then shouted again waving his AK-47 in our faces. When we exited the vehicle, he scanned the contents of the vehicle and rummaged through our bags, told me to “listen faster” and allowed us to be on our way.

A contact of ours warned us that in Kampala, we should not even take our cell phones out of our pockets in our vehicle as they will be stolen from us. The
streets were jam packed with the notoriously dangerous boda-boda motorcycle taxis, filling the entire roads and most times at a complete standstill. Motor bikes are the most common form of transport for local Ugandans. The roadsides are covered with stalls selling fresh Jackfruit, sugarcane, milk, meat and airtime. It seemed as though every Ugandan was a small business owner. The eerie picture of Marabou stalks all over the city of Kampala, is at first very worrying when the thought comes to mind of what these scavengers are eating in the streets.

We quickly realised Uganda is a country of extreme duality. There were times of bountiful rains, two raining seasons annually and other times the harshest droughts possible. The biggest rivers and lakes I had ever seen and then other areas bone dry with not a drop of water for hundreds of kilometres. Uganda is rich in culture and heritage but poverty was rife and clear to see.

Our search for Ankole began immediately. We had no idea where to start or where to go, so we picked out a few village names and started driving to them using Google Maps when there was signal. The roads were either dirt roads or riddled with potholes. The narrow lanes made it very difficult when trucks came flying towards us head-on, especially considering that any space on the road is likely to be occupied by the motorbikes. I’ve never driven in such dangerous conditions in my life. We were the only non-Ugandans who didn’t have a driver. The few tourists we saw had a driver and a guide accompanying them.

Uganda was a totally different world. With great excitement we saw our first example of what looked like Ankole on the roadsides between villages, but there was something missing. Most of the cattle we saw looked crossbred. Some, although having longer horns than regular cattle, were thin in diameter or white in colour, the cattle looked tainted with dairy cattle blood.

Little did we know what mountainous challenges lay ahead of us. The questions we considered were how would we find pure Ankole from a reputable breeder? How would we find a breeder we could trust with our money in this foreign land where we knew no one? How would we find Ankole that were not compromised by disease? We had heard stories about how farmers had been swindled out of money, buying large numbers of Ankole and never receiving the cattle or hearing from the sellers again. These were only some of the difficulties Claire and I were facing.

We spent days traveling from village to village and farmer to farmer with no success, until we went to a small town in western Uganda. We did not have much time and the situation was looking hopeless. This is where we met with my most promising contact whom I had been in communication with for quite some time. This was our ace in the whole game of the odds against us. He is a businessman and master Ankole rancher. A large, imposing man with a deep voice and always with at least one firearm at his side, smartly dressed with his iconic black cowboy boots and his double cab land cruiser. This man was serious about Ankole cattle. After meeting with him multiple times at a local gathering area, each time him questioning us for over an hour, he told us he would finally take us to see his Ankole cattle. Something that caught us off-guard was that he wouldn’t tell us where the Ankole were and we weren’t allowed to drive
in our own car. So we climbed into his land cruiser and off we went. We drove for some time until we crossed over a river and from there our cell phone signal was gone. He shared stories of being misled and cheated by buyers himself and, therefore, was a cautious man when handling any cattle transactions. We drove for another hour winding down seemingly endless dirt roads and through villages until we finally stopped in an open area.

Uganda was in the worst drought in 100 years. The rancher hadn't visited his cattle in months and explained to us how worried he was about what their condition would look like. He was afraid to see them in a skeletal state, which he assumed they may be in, considering the lack of rain in the area. The rancher told his herdsman to fetch the Ankole and the herdsman ran off into the bushveld.

While waiting for the Ankole to be brought to us, I had the opportunity to ask the rancher everything I've ever wanted to know about Ankole. I had prepared a long list of questions and he patiently shared his knowledge with us. He explained his story from a young village boy tending to his grandfather's Ankole to a prominent Ugandan businessman. He explained to us that the Ankole breed should never be tampered with or tainted by the blood of other breeds through crossbreeding. He shared with us what makes a perfect Ankole and guaranteed me with pride that I would find no better Ankole in Uganda.

The most breath-taking and life changing experience was seeing over one thousand Ankole come out of the thickets at one time. With white crescent horns knocking like drums and the calming bellowing of cows, was an unparalleled sight. It was almost as if a wave from an ocean was moving towards us. These were not like any of the other Ankole we had seen before in Uganda, on the sides of the road, the ones we doubted to be fullblood. These Ankole were something special, they were immaculately pure. When the Ankole arrived, he was surprised at how good they looked and I could see his face light up instantly with joy. Almost like a father seeing his children after time away. Although very low in condition score, considering how dry it was, they looked healthy and as always they were surviving. “These cattle are never spoon-fed” he said proudly. He told us they are not treated with antibiotics or fed any supplementary licks or feed.

We then meticulously hand selected a number of standout Ankole out of the massive herd. Painstakingly we went through each of their specific traits, looking at horns, phenotype, structural integrity as well as balance of body and milking abilities. These Ankole were from two different herds of bloodlines that had been in his family for hundreds of years, passed down from generation to generation. This rancher was a true stockman and used only the very best Ankole bulls he could find on his cow herds. Bulls were specifically selected for superior traits and were changed, swopped and traded with Ankole rancher friends and associates every few years, like clockwork. Thus ensuring a herd of rich genetic diversity and low inbreeding coefficient. He had two bulls in each herd for every 100 cows. One old bull and one young bull. The bulls always were slightly different and complimented each other. These Ankole truly were by far some of the finest Ankole in Uganda. They had the most extravagant horn shapes, their
balance and quality was the best I had ever seen. They were incredibly hardy as they had little to no input whatsoever, other than dedicated herdsman whom watched over them, mainly to prevent stock theft. For hundreds of years these animals were never fed supplementary feed or ever treated with antibiotics and medicines but only treated with local herbs and traditional medicines when necessary. These Ankole were not only true survivors but exceptional representations of the breed. The Ankole rancher specifically selected for high fertility, milking traits, large frames, good capacity, long average horn length and horn mass. The rancher had interest from farmers inside Africa as well as around the world for his specific Ankole bloodline. I had always in the past personally preferred mottled Ankole, but it was only until that moment when I saw large numbers in one area, that I was absolutely blown away by the visual effect of a sea of white horns above the contrasting, solid, unbroken deep dark red body of the Ankole. From that moment onwards I knew how I would breed my Ankole.

We then needed to source Ankole bulls. They had to be completely unrelated as we knew what we chose would contribute to the future of Ankole in South Africa and, therefore, genetic variety was paramount. Over the next few days we did nothing other than sourcing these bulls. During this time our environment was something quite difficult to get used to. Any kind of meat was hard to find. Claire and I suffered from an extreme bout of food poisoning during this time, Claire more so than myself. After living off yogurts and apples from any Sasol garage we could find, Claire decided to bravely order a chicken dish at one of our accommodations. We were both quite surprised when the dish was served, chicken wings, marinated and fried, with half the feathers still on. On the same night I was asked by the waitress to help them catch a bat in the kitchen. I was so in shock that I simply obliged, caught the bat and threw it out the window. This situation pretty much sums up our dining experience in Uganda. After both of us had lost a combined 15kg from stress, lack of eating and constant food poisoning, finally after a few weeks 8 bulls from different bloodlines in 7 different districts, all along the cattle corridor of Uganda, were chosen. In addition to that we were lucky to source one of the rarest colours, brindle. Clans had fought wars over this colour as it was unique to one group of people. Each selected for their own special and unique traits, different to one another. Some of these bulls, although very young, were already the horn size of the top Ankole bulls in South Africa. Having these new quality bloodlines in South Africa would be a massive asset to the South African populations of Ankole and conservation of the breed.

During this expedition we were faced with many challenges, one included the arrangement for the state vet to test the Ankole for any diseases. Paying money from South Africa to Uganda was the most limiting factor and obstacle as the South African Reserve Bank, out of protocol, blocked all transactions as money moving between these two countries was largely regulated.

Once cleared of any diseases we came back months later for loading, but first we had to try making payment to the Ugandan farmer. The South African Reserve Bank would not allow us to send any large amounts of money from South Africa into Uganda without special permission. Without our partner’s contacts I
do not believe it would have been possible to move the money from South Africa to Uganda to pay for the Ankole. The only problem was it was estimated to take 8 weeks and we didn’t even have half the time before our import permits to Kenya expired. Little did we know our export permit had already expired.

We were in Uganda and ready to load the cattle but nothing could be done until our payment reflected in the farmer’s account. We waited knowing we paid the money but nervous about whether this money would ever reach the cautious farmer. Understandably he told us that unless the money reflected he could do nothing further in our transaction, as going forward without payment was a financial risk for him. Two nights before our permit expired and we were to start loading, our payment to him had finally reflected in his account but our rancher had not planned any trucks and the bulls we selected had not yet arrived. Our import permit to Kenya was about to expire the day we planned to move the cattle. Twelve hours before we were to load, we could not find any trucks. We then discovered that our export permit out of Uganda had expired. This was a serious problem.

The next morning we were told to meet at the fuel station in town at 6am. We waited for 4 hours in the rain and still no news of any trucks or the Ankole rancher. Our contact was struggling to organise the trucks at such short notice. The truck drivers were notoriously untrustworthy and some were very hard to do business with. Not only was the language barrier very significant but they seemed to make the price higher and higher each time we spoke. Eventually the rancher made contact with us and told us to follow him to the paddock where the Ankole were. We waited at the loading ramp for hours in the rain and finally the first truck arrived. It was pouring with rain whilst we loaded the Ankole. This was challenging as there wasn’t a proper ramp or loading dock, just a slippery mud hill the Ankole had to climb up. Finally the other trucks started arriving, these trucks looked like large versions of modified Hi-ace South African taxis. It seemed like every 10 minutes the truck drivers demanded another 100 to 500 US dollars from us for inexplicable expenses. Even though we knew this was a form of extortion, we had no choice but to pay them everything we had, down to our last cent, as they held our precious cargo hostage.

We left the loading completely broke, exhausted, drained and still sick from the previous night’s dinner. We now started our travel to Kenya.

The Ankole were to travel to Kenya where they were to stay at the Ol Pejeta reserve, then in a Quarantine centre at the conservancy until they were eligible to be flushed for embryos destined for South Africa. We had to drive alongside the trucks to the border of Uganda to Kenya to make sure the trucks drove in convoy. Yet again the language barrier was a frustration for us, as the drivers kept stopping for no apparent reason. Our representatives had to drive in front, as well as behind the trucks so that they were not hijacked and so that the truck drivers could not break away stealing the trucks and the precious Ankole load. The anxiety began again when we heard word that the trucks were stopped at the border and were held back for an entire day. Our biggest concern was that the Ankole had not had food or water for 24 hours already, a day waiting at the border pushed this to 48 hours. We tried to plead with the truck drivers to give
them buckets of water but we were laughed off and not taken seriously. Another serious concern was that they were going to be blocked at the border and refused entry. This is when we were notified that our export permit had expired. Luckily our Ankole Rancher had contacts that could issue us a new export permit on the spot.

Another 12 hours had gone by and we had not heard from any of the drivers or our representatives. We couldn’t get hold of them or find out what happened at the border. During this time we had driven back from the Ugandan/Kenyan border to the airport in Entebbe during the night. We dropped off our rental car, boarded a flight to Kenya, arrived in Nairobi and drove to Ol Pejeta. We escorted the Ankole as far as we could in Uganda but we were told: “Your appearance which is clearly not local at the border and along the trip will cost you more than a fortune”. We were sure to assume that this meant we were susceptible to traffic officers stopping us and demanding outrageous bribes in US dollars to let us continue our journey. From our experience in Uganda so far, we had been stopped countless times and ‘fined’, when we didn’t money to give them, they took our food and bottles of water. The stress of not knowing what had happened to our Ankole or our representatives was unbearable. Finally we received a call, the Ugandan truck drivers crossed the border into Kenya and all of a sudden their cell phones stopped working. Apparently they were unaware that different countries need different sim cards. This was a huge problem because not only could we not communicate with our representatives but the drivers no longer could use GPS on their cell phones for directions. They had no knowledge of Kenyan road networks, as they had never driven before. The trip took even longer than expected. We had no idea of whether the cattle were alive, let alone still on their way. Everything we had worked for depended on these cattle arriving safely and if they did not, I knew we knew we would never financially recover from the loss.

An estimated 16 hour and 1000 kilometre trip across Africa to Ol Pejeta, took 2 and a half days. To see the silhouettes of the trucks arriving on the horizon over the African plains in Kenya at Ol Pejeta was an emotional experience. At this point nothing mattered to us except the Ankole’s safety and wellbeing. When the trucks pulled up to the loading ramps the condition of the Ankole was unspeakable. Upon laying eyes on them Claire burst into tears and frantically started running back and forth with water buckets, trying to give the down cows some much needed water whilst I tried to coordinate safe offloading with these incredibly weak Ankole. This was heart-breaking and rewarding at the same time. After seeing the hundreds of trucks filled with Ankole in Uganda going to the abattoir, as well as the extent of crossbreeding, I am convinced that the Ankole in Uganda will be extinct in less than the predicted 20 years’ time. Although this journey for the cattle was harrowing, we found our only solace in knowing that this was essential for conserving the Ankole breed and these precious bloodlines. They had finally made it and against all odds we had pulled it off! However, it was not over yet. The Ankole now had to survive free ranging a 36 000 hectare big 5 conservancy of Ol Pejeta, Kenya. Here they were to stay for 6 months to earn their Kenyan residency, surviving amongst lion, leopard,
cheetah, hyena, elephants, buffalo and rhino with only a Masai herdsman between them and the wildlife. After this they would have to go through a battery of tests and clearance in order to have their embryos brought to South Africa. It was in Kenya that the real challenges began...

Ankole embryos sell for R102 500

The South African record price for embryos sold was shattered on the 4th of September 2019. Four embryos of the Ankole cattle breed were sold at the Stud Game Breeders’ auction for an astounding R102 500 each to Philip Botha from Leliepan Farming. The embryos represented a mating of the magnificent late Dymabo, an Ankole bull owned by President Ramaphosa of Ankole Stud Ntaba Nyoni, combined with top Ankole cow Akira, owned by Dr Morné de la Rey and Simon Hodgson of Ankole Genetics Stud.

President Ramaphosa became interested in Ankole when he visited the Ugandan president, Yoweri Museveni, in 2004. Museveni offered to sell him some of the cattle, but the Department of Agriculture, Forestry & Fisheries prevented the importation, citing inadequate disease control measures in Uganda.

Determined to solve the problem, Mr Ramaphosa began by enlisting the assistance of Dr Morné de la Rey, a reproductive veterinary specialist and Director of Embryo Plus, whom has been extensively involved in embryo transfers, especially in Boran cattle. They then purchased 43 Ankole cows from Museveni and shipped them to Ol Pejeta in Kenya, where Embryo Plus runs an embryo quarantine station. The cows were artificially inseminated, and the embryos flushed and sent to South Africa. Here they were transferred into recipient or surrogate cows, which were then quarantined for two months.

The breed has gained considerable traction since its official debut in South African markets in 2017 where the highest priced bull, Maximus sold for R640 000 and highest priced cow, Kyasha sold for R540 000. The Ankole Cattle Breed Society is one of the fastest growing breed societies with already over 30 members. The South African Ankole national numbers are roughly 1000 cattle. The insatiable demand for Ankole in South Africa can be explained by key factors, including but not limited to, their unique and regal appearance, hardiness which allows them to be farmed anywhere, low veterinary input and feed input, disease resistance, internal and external parasite resistance, ease of handling, heat tolerance, crossbreeding potential, quality of milk and meat, to name a few. President Museveni of Uganda has been on the forefront leading the cause to conserve this dying breed and has in a short time, improved the milk and meat yield of Ankole bloodlines substantially. These cattle are productive cattle with large frames and rich milk with butter fat of up to 10%, and the quality of meat is high in poly unsaturated fats and Omega 6 and 9 oils and low in cholesterol. Their longevity is outstanding with individuals living up to 30 years of age and having over 25 calves under Ugandan conditions. They leave...
a low carbon footprint, have low impact on the environment and can maintain themselves on very little nutrients and water. They have not only survived the harshest African conditions but have thrived.

The Ankole breed with its diverse genetic variety of colours and horn shapes attract an array of South African enthusiasts all over the country. Ankole are a breed like no other cattle breed with their wide range of versatility. Besides their obvious visual aesthetic draw of their magnificent horns and aforementioned traits of hardiness, this multipurpose breed has the added angle of tourism potential and is already found at wedding venues, wine farms as well as game and cattle farms.

**Ankole under threat of extinction**

While in Uganda the sight of truck after truck full of Ankole cattle destined for the abattoirs drove me to investigate the claims that Ankole cattle are at a critical conservation status. The answer as to why there is such a drastic decline in Ankole numbers is twofold: One from the propaganda, spread in the past by the Ugandan government and initiatives such as “one dairy cow per household” by Canadian, US and dairy consortiums from the Netherlands going to Uganda and encouraging breeding and crossbreeding of European diary breeds over native Ankole. These diary consortiums have no knowledge of the value and potential of Ankole.

Secondly is the unsustainable and relentless daily slaughter of Ankole for horn product. The Ankole horn is misleadingly conveniently labelled an “ethically sourced by-product” although the truth is that the Ankole cattle’s (which are slaughtered) highest value is in their horns only, as most of the cattle held very little meat as there are no feedlots in Uganda where they can be properly fed up.

It was hard to find the national Ugandan Ankole herd number as no one actually knows. The closest I could get is 1 million or less. They are slaughtered at an alarming and unsustainable rate. This excludes what is lost due to crossbreeding. Studies suggest that if Ankole in Uganda continue to be lost at the rate they are today they can be extinct in Uganda in less than 20 years. Keeping in mind there are very few of the Ugandan quality Ankole outside of its borders. Soon the only Ankole left, if they are not later poached, may only be in Lake Maburo National Park, Ziwa Rhino sanctuary, Ol Pejeta conservancy and South Africa. Like with Rhino, when the horn is perceived to be worth more than the live animal it becomes a serious issue of conservation.

In Uganda, a five-year, $8 million dairy-modernisation project was completed, and about half the money went toward artificial insemination. This means that
over $4 million dollars went to artificially inseminating local cattle breeds with dairy semen straws.

Many tropical breeds such as Ankole possess unique adaptive traits. The problem is that we do not fully understand or know what is being lost. The U.N.’s Food and Agriculture Organisation released a global assessment of biodiversity in livestock and found that one breed per month has gone extinct over the last six years.

Ankole are geographically isolated. The 11 Ankole Longhorn cattle sub-populations can be considered to consist of four main groups with slight genetic distinctions. There are sub varieties of Ankole in South Sudan and Rwanda but the Ugandan Ankole are renowned for their large size and exceptional quality.

The Ugandan Wildlife Authority, a government agency in charge of wildlife management and other conservationists have collected Ankole cattle and put them in Lake Mburo National Park for conservation purposes. The Ankole cattle are being looked at for their tourism potential. It is believed that if they are conserved in the National Park it may, in the near future, be one of the last places they can be found.

Conservation efforts worldwide are essential in preserving the valuable genetics varieties in the valuable Ankole bloodlines.

In the words of Ugandan Ankole ranchers

“Ankole were carefully and purposefully bred for thousands of years to preserve their genetic identity, the Ankole cattle are the oldest, surviving animal, selective breeding project undertaken by man. That is what makes them special, and divine”.

“This breed has so far lasted more than 10 centuries, 40 times more than the 18th Egyptian 250 year Dynasty”.

“The most ancient name by which the hamite community was identified is “Kama”, expressed in Rutara as “ba Kama”. It initially meant “those who milk”, in reference to cattle-rearing. Eventually, however, the “BaKama” came to be associated with kingship. The BaKama are known to have dominated the earliest civilization of the post-Ice-Age era in Africa – known as the Bovidian Era – which existed about 10,000 years ago. It is from the “Kama” that we get the names Kem, Khem, and biblical Ham, all of which came to refer to the original name for all of Africa including Egypt. The name “Egypt” is a recent innovation by Greeks who first appeared in Africa in 1400 BC”.

“Ankole cattle are kept for their prestige and resilience. They differ, traditionally a darkish burgundy or wine colour with horns so white they looked bleached, which is preferred.”
They differ in horn shape, they must be long but heart-shaped and “U”-shaped horns are popular.
The point is to have animals of one colour and similar horn shape”.

“Ankole must be a single colour, mainly dark brown. Light brown and black are the most common. Others may be double coloured, such as brown and white or dotted brown and white. Horns are long and straight or curved, curved is preferred. Body height should be tall with an elegant neck. Temperament should be friendly and easy to manage. You must be able to touch and massage the cattle anywhere without them running away or becoming irritated”.

“No one knows how many Ankole cattle exist”.
“We’ve been saying the Ankole are 50 percent of the national herd, but I don’t think that’s true anymore”, “The crossbreeding over the past five years has been so intense”.
“Extinction of Ankole could happen much sooner than people predict”. Dr Denis Mpairwe, animal scientist at Uganda’s Makerere University.

“They can produce milk and they put on meat”,
“People don’t know what they have”.
Dr. Dan Semambo

“If cows are like factories, you could say an Ankole is powered by a water wheel, while the Holstein requires a nuclear reactor”.

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