The Ankole's Story:
From the Cattle of the Ages

- By Cyril Ramaphosa

our cattle are gone
My countrymen!
Go rescue them. Go rescue them
Leave the breechloader alone
And turn to the pen
Take paper and ink
For that is your shield
Your rights are going
So pick up your pen
Load it, load it with ink
Sit in your chair
Repair not to Hoho
But fire with your pen
— IWW Citashe, 19th century

Much debate abounds amongst archaeologists and scholars on how and when cattle were first domesticated, and more specifically, for our purposes here, where and when the Ankole first emerged. Some say domestication of cattle can be traced as far back as 10,000 years in the Near East and Indian subcontinent with the aurochs (or urus), now an extinct species of wild cattle which inhabited Europe, Asia and North Africa. The last of the aurochs were reported to have been seen in 1627 in a forest in Poland. Many people get confused between a wisent (European bison) and an auroch, but they are not the same. European bison are classified as a vulnerable species and are allowed to roam freely in forests in Europe. Auroch's are completely extinct — although, who knows (as we shall see), with the wonders of today's science, if they will always be extinct?

Most modern breeds share characteristics of the aurochs - the shape of the horns or a dark colour in the bulls, and the cows being lighter. According to a mitochondrial DNA study, all domesticated taurine *(Bos taurus)* cattle originated from about 80 wild female aurochs in the Near East. Cattle thought to be domesticated in the Near East and on the Indian subcontinent are thought to have been bred with local types, which is what gave rise to the two main domestic types of cattle I mentioned earlier, which we have today — *Bos taurus* (humpless) and *Bos indicus* (humped cattle, also called *zebu*).

As humpless sanga cattle from the *Bos taurus* family, the Ankole are thought to have originated from East Africa, on the west of Lake Victoria, and from there they spread up the river Nile all the way to Egypt. Archaeological evidence shows ancient Egyptian murals depicting these beautiful beasts. Despite this, some date the first sanga cattle to only as far back as 1600BC, but other evidence points to bones found in East Africa that date to 7000 years ago. The Ankole can be traced to that lineage, all the way to the Nile Delta. Here a group of humpless Longhorns are said to have migrated from the lower Nile for Abyssinia. Some say that the Ankole, as they are bred today, originated over 2,000 years ago and appear to be interbred from the Egyptian Longhorn cattle and the Zebu longhorn from India. But the Ankole's predecessors can be found in cave drawings all over Africa. Their connection to the people of the African continent is both ancient and eternal.

Hearing the traditional stories of Ankole is always fascinating as it is often filled with a measure of mysticism and African fables. In Rwanda, the Tutsi called these beautiful cattle *Insanga*, which means "the ones which were found". This echoes their eternal quality, as they always appear in stories as creatures who came from somewhere else — a gift from God himself to the people. The question is, of course, who was it that found them? According to tradition, they were found by the first kings. Ankole cattle were allowed to graze wherever they pleased, and the king would never try and control

where cattle owners could take them. They became such an integral part of the way of life and so the people of Ankole invented many names for them - many times with affection. Those Ankole with the longest horns were called *Inyambo* — the "cows with long, long horns". Some traditional accounts report horns as long as 3.6 meters (12 feet)! Those with the longest horns were considered sacred and only owned by the king. Hence, once again, the Ankole were always referred to as the "Cattle of Kings".

In other Ugandan traditions, the Ankole were brought to the Ankole kingdom by the ancestors of the Banyankole tribe — the Abachwezi. (It's worth noting that "Ankole" is probably the incorrect spelling, with the true spelling being "Nkore". "Ankole" was developed by colonialists who struggled to pronounce "Nkore", according to writer G.N. Kirindi). Another legend claims that cattle became extinct during the reign of King "Omugabe" Nyabugarobwera Ntare. This meant that, instead of cattle, people paid fruits *(enyonza)* as dowry. The king's servants used to roast *ebitookye* — plaintains (cooking bananas) for the king — and one day the king noticed one of his men eating them. He felt guilty for him, so he got his bow and arrow, which was called "Enfumura Iguru", and shot at the sky. This made it rain for four days. On day number five, when everyone woke up, their homes were full of cattle - and they have grazed them in the land of Nkore ever since.

Ankole have always been seen to be everlasting - created by God, brought to the people by God, and came to bless the people. In many ways once I encountered them I got a sense that the hand of Providence must have played a very affectionate hand in their make-up. However, special as they might be, some quarters worry about them becoming endangered to a point of becoming extinct in years to come. China Daily, the Chinese newspaper, reports that the beauty and pomp around the Ankole cattle is likely to come to an end due to the threat of extinction that the cattle face, according to conservationists.

The Pastoral and Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa (PENHA) warns that if necessary intervention to conserve the Ankole is not put in place now, at about 2027, these beautiful cattle will be extinct. Because land is scarce, many pastoralists consider alternative breeds which they believe can be reared better on limited land. Plus, what is more important to many people these days, is economic gain over prestige, which is why some herdsmen rather acquire breeds such as the Holstein-Friesian which produce a lot of milk. In addition to this, pastoralists that cannot afford the Friesians are instead crossbreeding their Ankole with exotic cattle from the northern hemisphere.

As these concerns grow, the Uganda Wildlife Authority, a government agency in charge of wildlife management and other conservationists, have collected some Ankole cows and put them in Lake Mburo National Park for conservation purposes. As stated by Patrick Patrick, a pastoralist and conservationist in Uganda, conservation of Ankole is also being looked upon as a tourism potential. "If we conserve them, in the future when they are extinct elsewhere but we have a stock here, we can have a gene pool for the Ankole. The future generation will come to see what the Ankole cow looks like."

The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in 2007, along with the Nairobi-based International Livestock Research Instituted (ILRI), wrote a report entitled *The State of the World's Animal Genetic Resources,* in which it was claimed that there is an over-reliance on the Holstein-Friesian cow, which may be causing the loss of an average of one livestock breed every month. There is, however, much effort which has been going into reversing this.

The Ankole cattle have been victim of the overall perception that indigenous tropical cattle breeds have low potential for improved beef production. But the successes achieved in the South African beef industry through use of Nguni cattle (Strydom, 2008; Strydom *et al.*, 2008) bears commendable evidence for utilisation of these animals for beef production. This study was conducted to test whether the Ankole cattle and its crossbreds with Boran and Friesian are not similar in performance under supplementation of the traditional grazing system and feedlot finishing.

African culture has always been wrapped around cattle. Cattle represent wealth, dignity and stature. Any man who owns cattle is regarded as a man of great standing, wealth and influence. In some religious traditions, a sacrifice of cattle will cleanse

sins and, of course, cattle can be used to resolve conflict and are used as a dowry when one takes a wife.

The cattle's function in most African cultures is to connect the community, today and yesterday. They reflect our memory, our history, and our future. It's important that as Africans we never forget this. I experience this myself when I think about how, in such a unique way, these animals connect me to my own father - to his memory, to his history, to his pains and his joys. As explained by Uhuru Phalafala, "Cows exist in a liminal space between the human and the divine, the physical and the spiritual, the alive and the ancestors, the worldly and the universal. " That is why many cultures do not even consider them to be animals.

Other than this, farming cattle has, historically, been shown to be quite a practical and massive contribution to the growth of populations. Having cattle means a community has a form of stability. The community can settle and have its children, raising them in a common history and training them how to provide for their family and their people. Cattle are able to empower the community. This is a historical fact which will continue. When examining these concepts with African people, and especially looking at how the Africans developed their warrior culture, historian and author Noël Mostert notes that they became "elitist masters of a particular concept of universe and self, with a royal aristocratic, religious and emotional attachment to cattle that involved their entire sense of social structure and law. "

Outside of its social and spiritual elements, cattle are a great source of food and nutrition. The Ankole in particular, represent many advantages in this respect as their meat and milk is very low in cholesterol when compared to other breeds. Ankole live very long lives and are very resistant to hunger and drought, able to survive on very little. They have incredibly strong hides and the horns provide many resources for us. During my visit to Uganda, I realised that these cattle could bring with them many advantages to our farming community in South Africa, and so I set to work in bringing them in.

But there were walls that came up against me. When I got back home after reaching my deal with President Museveni, I immediately contacted the agriculture department to see how I should go about bringing the Ankole to South Africa and getting them registered as a new breed of cattle. I was told a simple 'no', I cannot do it. The reasons for this were due to what the department viewed as the different strains of animal diseases as well as South Africa's lack of knowledge in animal disease control measures in Uganda. I found this incredible and was almost mortally disappointed at this prohibition; I however understood all the reasons and appreciated the Department's vigilance. Yet as much as I was disappointed, I knew I could not give up so easily.

The question of what to do seemed to constantly be at the back of my mind, and I think that contributed to the idea I eventually hatched upon - an idea that

has resulted in Ankole breeding in Mpumalanga province in South Africa. Almost by accident, and not long after all this, I read about how the first cloned cow in Africa was born in May 2003 (only a few months before my visit to Uganda), in the small South African town of Brits. The cow's name was Futhi, which means "replica" or "repeat" in Zulu. I wondered about this deeply. The technique used to clone the cow was different to the world-famous Dolly the sheep, which was the world's first animal cloned from an adult cell. In this case, Futhi was cloned using an "egg-shell free" or "zona-free" oocyte technique, which has to do with the transfer of embryos. This got me thinking. And then an idea suddenly struck. If they could do this, why could we not transfer embryos and have the Ankole here in South Africa? That way we can avoid the disease concerns entirely! After all, Futhi was cloned right here in my own country. We do it already!

For most of the day I could not stop thinking of the prospect, and when I finally had some time to myself I took to some research and found the contact details for Dr Morné de la Rey, who was one of the team of scientists and veterinarians behind Futhi's remarkable story. I contacted Morné and he immediately took the project, excited with the prospects.

So, it happened that about a year later, 19 April 2004, Morné and I went back to Uganda where President Museveni received us at his ranch. He, too, was very excited about the idea. Morné helped me with the selection process and we selected some really fine cattle. We had the opportunity to spend 2 full days with his herd of more than 3000 cattle, with a young man that knew every cow by name. He could explain the complete family-tree of every animal. Interesting is that this herd is built from 8 cows surviving the Rinderpest outbreak of 1914. Therefore the hardiest disease resistant animals. I am proud of them. An interesting discussion with President Museveni on his farm lead to me buying forty of President Museveni's cattle - cows and heifers - as well as three bulls. Since these cattle were sacred we were not allowed to do pregnancy diagnoses the conventional way and relied upon their observation.

But obviously we couldn't bring them into South Africa. Yet today, they are here. So how did we do it?