

# Magic in Africa: From the Cattle of the Ages



by President Cyril Ramaphosa

*“If I have ever seen magic,  
it has been in Africa.”*

- John Hemingway

During October 2003 I discovered a new, unexpected fire in my heart. There are many things I'm intensely passionate about: my country and its people, my family, education (especially youth empowerment), fly fishing, the African National Congress, and economic transformation – more especially the development of small to medium Enterprises. Little did I know, however, that there was space in my heart for one thing more.

I was on a business trip to Uganda, travelling with the Chief Executive Officer of the telecommunications company, MTN at the time, Phuthuma Nhleko, when the fire was lit. By all accounts, it seemed to me that this trip to Uganda would be a standard business trip but that was soon to change. Upon hearing that I was visiting his country, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni wanted to see me and therefore invited Nhleko and I to visit him at his cattle ranch. I wasn't the Deputy President of South Africa at the time, but I was told that inviting heads of state and business leaders to his ranch was something of a tradition for him, so naturally we accepted the invitation.

I first met President Museveni in 1992 after my election as Secretary-General of the African National Congress. During that first meeting we had extensive discussions on various political matters, but more importantly about his dreams and vision for the African continent. It was a joy to hear him articulate his clear vision on how African countries could develop their economies in a smart manner by utilising the resources that our continent is so well endowed with and adding value to them before they left African shores. He laid great emphasis on education and how it could be utilised to turn the fortunes of our continent around.

After leaving active politics, I met President Museveni again at a number of Commonwealth conferences. Tony Blair asked me to be Deputy Chairperson to Simon Cairns of the Commonwealth Business Council. Participation at these conferences gave me an opportunity to observe President Museveni's great intellect when it came to political and economic matters.

So, on receiving an invitation to visit him on his cattle ranch, it was easy to accede to the invitation as I knew that we would have a great opportunity to discuss, not only the political situation of Uganda, but of the whole continent.

We chartered a helicopter to get us to the President's ranch. When we finally arrived at the ranch, finding a spot to land was turning out to be slightly difficult. So the pilot took us around the ranch for a bit and we circled several times. I have fond memories of the moment. Below us were the green, rolling landscapes of Uganda, and I was looking forward to spending some time out of the hustle and bustle of the Kampala city life. But as we took another turn, my eyes were suddenly drawn to something remarkable on the ground.

"What is that down there?" I thought. I might have even said it out loud. I doubt anyone would have heard me over the roaring noise of the helicopter blades, but to say I was taken aback by what I saw, would be an understatement. Down below there were magnificent creatures that simply astonished me. They each had long white beautiful horns, glinting in the African sun, and I suddenly became fixated and could not stop looking at them. Their coats were an array of different colours – some deep red, some black, some grey, some mottled red-and-white, and a mix of others. I realised at once that I was about to behold some of Africa's most well adorned animals. I knew we were in for a treat and grew a little impatient as we circled again and finally found a spot to land.

At last we landed and it was safe to exit. As I got out, I saw President Museveni standing close by, wearing one of his customary large-brimmed cricket hats. Next to him was a tall young woman – a true picture of the grace and charm of the Ugandan people. Yet despite her being as beautiful as she was, my eyes could not stop looking at the exquisite cattle surrounding us. The President introduced me to his daughter Patience next to him. I introduced him and her to Phutuma Nhleko.

After the introductions I remember just watching the cattle, taking in their beauty, absorbing the unbelievable and spectacular size of their horns. The melodic clock-clock of their majestic horns, some as wide as two meters, reminded me of the rhythmic call of the African drum. A line from Engeline Gerichke's poem, *Memoirs of an African Drum*, comes to mind as I recall the moment –

*Come dance to the ancient rhythm  
That pulses through marrow and bone  
And bellows through beast and stone*

I was intrigued, in awe and fell in love with these creatures immediately. President Museveni and I exchanged a few pleasantries but I couldn't help myself. "Please," I said. "You must tell me about these cattle. They are simply beautiful."

He smiled. "They are called the Ankole." He then began to tell the story of the Ankole, in his methodical and precise way.

East of Lake Edward, the smallest of the African Great Lakes, was once the kingdom of Ankole, in which lived the Banyankole — the people of the Ankole, these magnificent beasts. They settled in south-western Uganda, with Mount Rwenzori to the West - a hilly land with beautifully green rolling plains and fine grass.

"I am from this tribe," he told me. "Our people and the Ankole, as we call them, have always been closely attached."

Like all Bantu groups, the Banyankole can be traced to the Congo. Legend states that the tribe originates from a common ancestor, Ruhanga, the creator who came from heaven to rule the earth, and who brought his three sons with him — Kairu, Kakama and Kahima. The time came for Ruhanga to decide which of his sons would be his heir, so he set up a little test. Each received three pots full of milk which they had to keep on their laps all night and hand over full in the morning. Kairu was the first to fail, falling asleep and spilling the milk. Kahima got hungry and so sipped on his milk all night. But Kakama had the self-control to deliver the milk to his father the next morning just as he was meant to. And thus he was crowned King.

For failing the test, however, Kahima was ordered to look after Kakama's cattle, while Kairu would become a cultivator. This legend explains the social structure of the Banyankole, whom are divided into three groups: the Bahima, descendants of Kahima whom are the pastoralists; Bairu, descendants of Kairu, whom are the agriculturalists; and Abakama, the royals descended from Abakama, the king.

Some scholars, however, believe that the region of Ankole was originally occupied by the Bantu-speaking, agricultural Bairu. Later, Ankole provided a passage for Hamitic people whom were migrating from Ethiopia southward. These pastoralists, however, conquered the Bairu and proclaimed themselves to be the rulers of the land. The more numerous Bairu were the serfs and the (now)

Bahima were the dominant ruling class. For the most part, the two groups coexisted peacefully and never declared open war with each other.

When the British created Uganda as a protectorate in 1888, Ankole was a relatively small kingdom ruled by a king (Mugabe) with supreme power. In 1901, the British enlarged the kingdom by merging it with the similarly small kingdoms of Mpororo, Igara, Buhweju, and Busongora. The power of the Omugabe was curtailed considerably once his kingdom was under the British legal system and constitution. However, as the Omugabe of Ankole, the king was entitled to all the titles, dignities, and preeminence that were attached to his office under the laws and customs of Ankole. A political relationship based on serfdom, slavery, and clientship ceased to exist under British rule, and the Bairu became less marginalized and despised.

Each of the three groups in the Banyankole tribe were also broken down into numerous subdivisions, each of which had a function. Among the Abahinda there were warriors, herdsmen, guards, princes, and those who purified and painted the king with white clay; royal shoemakers, carriers of the royal spear, milkers, and those who bathed the king during coronation ceremonies. The Banyankole also engaged in art in a huge way, involving music, literature, sports, weaving and dancing as part of their artistic culture. Poetry is an important part of their history, and many events that have taken place in the Banyankole society, are expressed and written down by the poet. In the evenings and other times, children and parents will often share stories depicting events and episodes in society. The epic poetry of the Banyankole was often composed to celebrate raids of various kingdoms, with songs praising the warriors, their valour, and their invincible weapons. But there were also numerous and beautiful songs of cattle, where they are praised as objects of eternal beauty and joy. And so we arrive at the other name of the Ankole which highlights their mythical, timeless quality — the "Cattle of Kings".

I certainly felt like a king amongst them, with their incredible horns — some said to grow up to 2.4 meters (eight feet)! The horns are also known to have the largest circumference in any cattle breed. According to Guinness World Records, an Ankole-Watusi bull named CT Woodie from Utah in the United States holds the world record for

circumference at 103.5cm (40.7 inches). Pictures of CT Woodie can be found on the Internet. CT Woodie had very unusually shaped horns — rather than growing upwards, they grew sideways, giving him an odd t-shape when looked at from the front.

One of the first Ankole I saw on President Museveni's cattle ranch had horns about as long as they can get, strong and majestic, curving at the top into a heart shape; coat shining brown, with a brown and white spotted face, and deep brown eyes. I was amazed. Quietly and calmly they grazed, occasionally looking up at us, and I felt that these magnificent beasts could soothe the soul of even the most restless man alive. It was as if I was transported into another world entirely.

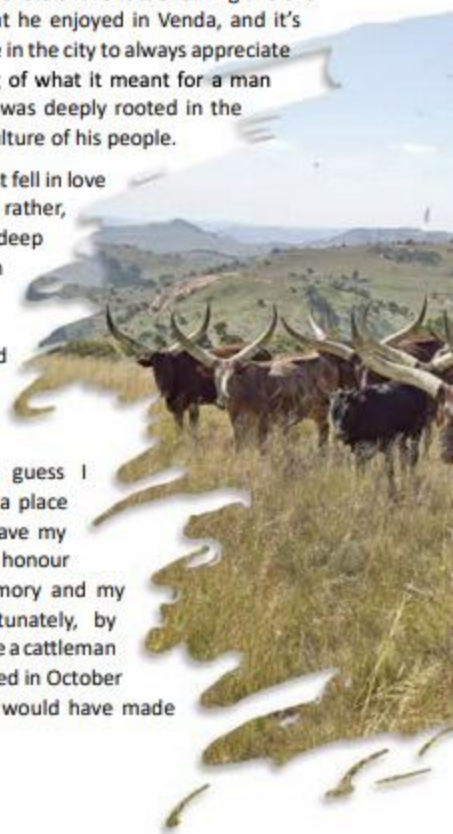
As we continued our discussion, I didn't hesitate to tell President Museveni about my own farm and love for cattle. But my experience was not like his at all. My love for cattle did not come with direct contact. In fact, I had no physical connection whatsoever with cattle as a young boy, growing up in the apartheid years of Johannesburg's dusty streets in Soweto. I was born in the city, just four years after the National Party (NP) came into power — in Western Native Township — the second of three children to my parents. The only encounter I had with cattle was buying meat at the local butchery, and for many years I thought the milk man who delivered milk every morning simply produced milk. I never even thought to question where it really came from!

But I guess in every man is his father, and his father's father, and his father before that - and so it always goes. Somewhere in the depths of my skin, my soul and my spirit is the connection my father had with his cattle, the hills of Khalavha and his people. A man only feels it — or perhaps, comes to understand what it was he was feeling all along — when he gets older, and wiser, and has come to fully sense his own mortality and comprehend the significance and miracle of life. My love for cattle could well be a reflection of my father in me, or some form of agency on behalf of my father, Samuel Ramaphosa whom, as he grew up in northern Limpopo in Khalavha Venda, herded his father's and uncle's cattle. As with most African cultures, cattle are a sign of wealth and stature. Later on he would also have his own. But, sadly, he never got to enjoy them. Like with many of the fathers of my father's generation, he had no choice

but to go to the city of Johannesburg to find work. His traditions and his wealth and his very identity were left behind and would later be eroded. Along with him came his strong and beautiful wife, my mother, Erdmuthe Munyadziwa Ramaphosa, and they settled in the big city. Perhaps, "settled" is the wrong word, as I don't believe they were ever truly settled. My father always yearned for his cattle and the place where he was born. But he spent most of his life in the city, totally removed from his ancestral home, his joys and his passions, and the rural life of his people.

This does not mean to say he found Johannesburg so alienating that he did not create a happy home for his family or that my parents were always full of sorrow. That was not the case at all — my parents created the best home that they could, and I never remember being other than as happy as possible as a child. We lived in a cosmopolitan neighbourhood in Western Native Township and Soweto and grew comfortable with the many languages and cultures around us. Indeed, I think much of that was to my advantage. But it did mean that all this weakened my father's links with his ancestral and pastoral origins, and eventually he lost his cattle. He would often bemoan the loss of the cattle rearing and the breeding life that he enjoyed in Venda, and it's difficult for those in the city to always appreciate the full meaning of what it meant for a man like him, whom was deeply rooted in the traditions and culture of his people.

For my part, I first fell in love with cattle - or rather, discovered how deep my father's own love for cattle in me was - when I acquired a farm in the Mpumalanga province of South Africa. I guess I wanted to have a place where I could have my own cattle to honour my father's memory and my heritage. Unfortunately, by the time I became a cattleman my father had died in October 1987. I know it would have made



him happy if he knew that his son had followed in his footsteps and had done what he was denied and longed for. I do it, probably without realising it, on his behalf - to complete his joy and therefore also confirm mine. I always imagine what he would say if he could see my cattle. It makes me immensely proud to think of it. I imagine the deep satisfaction he would have experienced, the knowing smiles, nods and encouraging words about how to breed with them, and the conversations we would have had about each of them, sitting amongst them on a warm summer's day at sunset. There must be some truism in the age-old adage, "like father, like son", even though the son (in this case) never really experienced what the father went through.

Ultimately, it is my father's legacy that I am taking forward, and I am so grateful to be joined in this endeavour by my wife, Dr. Tshepo Motsepe. Her own father, ABC Motsepe was a cattleman through and through. She and her siblings often accompanied him on many journeys to his own cattle ranch, where they would spend many weekends amongst their cattle. My wife often tells me how she would help cows that had breech births. My father-in-law's love for cattle was such that when I married his daughter, the required lobola (the

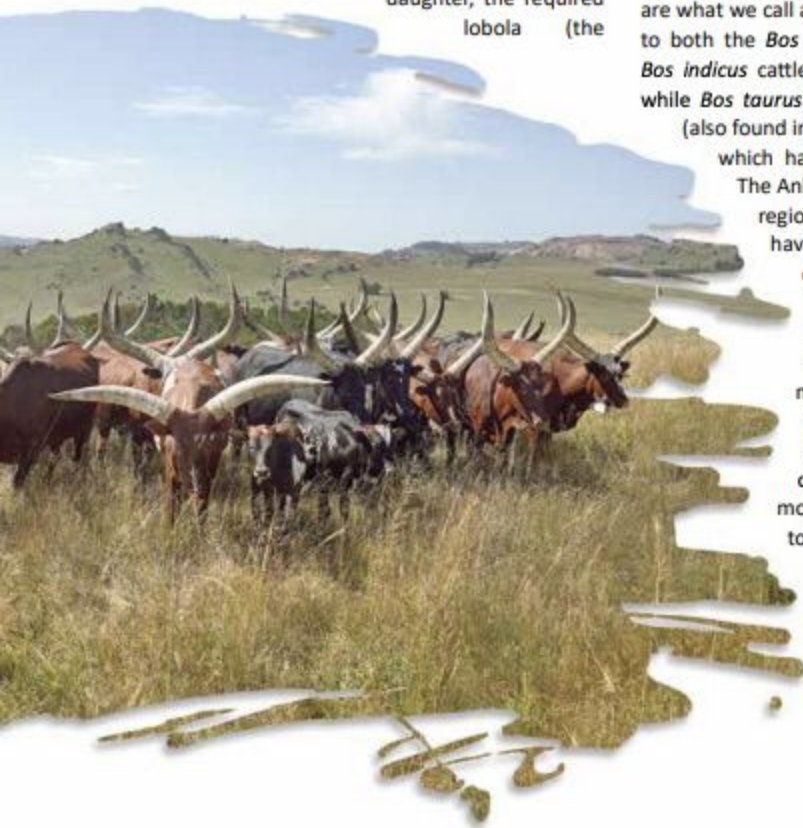
dowry offered to the bride's father) had to be in cattle and not in cash, unlike how it is now done in urbanised African communities.

After telling President Museveni of my own love for cattle, in much less detail than I've outlined, it dawned on me that he was a kindred spirit indeed. So what then followed was a deep discussion about cattle. President Museveni impressed me with his extensive knowledge about the land, soil, grass and about how to take care of all these natural resources which support human and animal life. His understanding of cattle diseases and their treatment was mindboggling for a person who is not a Veterinarian surgeon. The in-depth details he had about how to manage the Ankole inter-calving rate was informative. He related details about their dipping and handling. He told me about their hides and their horns and how long they live. What was even more impressive is that he knew many of them by name. It was fascinating and impressive to listen to President Museveni explain all this. I listened with great admiration and interest and almost forgot I was talking to a head of state.

The Ankole as a breed belong to the Sanga group of cattle, indigenous to sub-Saharan Africa. The Sanga are what we call an 'intermediate' type, belonging to both the *Bos indicus* and *Bos taurus* breeds. *Bos indicus* cattle have adapted to hot climates, while *Bos taurus* are the typical European types (also found in eastern Asia and parts of Africa) which have adapted to cooler climates.

The Ankole, hailing from the Great Lakes region of Central and West Africa, have adapted to incredibly stressful climatic, nutritive, disease and parasitic environments and so are incredibly, and rather uniquely, strong animals. This means they can make use of very poor quality forage and can live on very limited quantities of food and water. One of their most outstanding attributes is their tolerance to ticks.

The Ankole breed is also known by many names - Bahima, Kigezi, Ntuuku, Watusi, Nkuku, Inyaruguru, Inyambu, Enyambu, Malagarasi and



Bashi. The names of these are generally derived from the names of the tribes that are custodians of them. While indigenous to Africa, Ankole can be found even in America — apparently having come via Germany (imported as zoo animals and introduced in New York State by cross-breeding with a Canadian Bull in the 1960's.) I actually first saw an Ankole when I took my children to Disney World in the United States of America. I was curious when I first saw them but dismissed them as circus-type animals. But I have since concluded that had I seen even a single one on the African continent, I would have been blown away. Seeing them in a zoo-like situation dulled my impression of them. The sight of them evoked visions of slavery in my mind regarding how a living organism from Africa was kept in captivity. It was for that reason that I air-brushed them from my memory. Until I saw them as free creatures in Uganda.

Ankole cows can grow up to about 540kg (1200 pounds) while the bulls can grow up to 900kg. Their great horns have a fascinating dual purpose — protection, obviously, but also as a natural air-conditioner to cool the animal down. They are relatively tall and long-legged, with medium-long heads, a short neck with a deep dewlap and a narrow chest. You can barely see the hump on the cow (it is what we call cervico-thoracic). Their tail is quite long and rope-like and works as an excellent tool for swatting insects.

A healthy horn — what truly makes them beautiful and sets them apart — curves outwards, then upwards, and then inwards, when it comes to the Ugandan breed. Their horns are surprisingly light as they are, in fact, hollow and an elongation of the frontal sinuses, but this doesn't mean they cannot cause significant damage. Inside the horns are blood vessels that help to thermo-regulate the cattle in hot temperatures. It's quite fascinating — the blood moves through the horns and is exposed to the air, which cools it down. The blood then flows back down to the body and therefore lowers its temperature. The Ankole come in all sorts of colours, but are generally classified in red, black, white, grey, light brown or dun, fawn and pied.

Ankole count for more than half of the indigenous cattle population in Uganda, which is why the country is truly their home. It is the centre of their domestication. It is part of the Ugandan way of life. And so I watched and enjoyed President

Museveni's way with them. As many of them have names they could easily be picked out in the herd, and he told a story about each one, like they were his children. Having learned from him I have found myself doing the same with my own Ankole, and in this book you will meet many of them. You will meet their sires (fathers) and their dams (mothers), their daughters and their sons, their grandfathers and grandmothers.

"These cattle - they are placid and gentle," he told me. "They are truly a breed of their own."

It was time to ask the question — the question on the tip of my tongue all this time.

"President, would you be willing to sell some of them to me?" I said.

"I wouldn't hesitate at all!" he replied. "It would please me immensely if you were to take them with you to South Africa."

I was delighted. But it was not only the sheer beauty of these animals that drew me to them and made me ask the question, it was the massive potential the Ankole would have for cattle farming in South Africa. I realised at once that it would be to our tremendous advantage to have them added to the many cattle breeds in South Africa.

But it was not as simple as that. I was to face many obstacles in bringing them to South Africa — and it would take some years before I would have the pleasure of walking among them on my own farm.

