Its quiet disposition can be deceptive as it envelopes itself with an aura of timidity. Unlike other species that tend to flaunt an enviable attribute, this animal down plays the striking beauty of its horns and elegant gait with effortless grace. Its physical attributes makes it stand out amongst its fellow cattle counterparts. They are indeed genetic treasure troves. This animal is the Kuri, nature's gift to the transhumant communities inhabiting the marshy shores and islands of Lake Chad.

Origin and distribution
The Kuri is a rare cattle breed found predominantly in the North Eastern states of Nigeria (Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno and Sardauna), along Yobe river valley and Southern Chad. The islands of Djibadala, Koremeron, Debala and Bagabol are also home to this rare and unique cattle breed. There are also some remnants of this remarkable cattle population reportedly found in parts of Cameroon and Niger. The breed is traditionally reared by the Buduma and Kuri tribes of Chad. The origin of this breed still remains unclear though history indicates that the breed is a pure Hamitic humpless Longhorn (Bos taurus longifrons), a descendant of the ancient Egyptian longhorns as depicted in ancient Egyptians hieroglyphics and Saharan rock paintings. These animals are also known locally as Lake Chad, Kouri, Baharié, Buduma, Budduma, Budumu, Boudouma, Dongolé or Kuburi. Its closest living relative is the trypanotolerant N’dama, a humpless longhorn predominately found in parts of Western and Central Africa.
Unique adaptive attributes
The Kuri breed makes an excellent case study on evolution. Their physical appearance has evolved over generations making them well suited to their semi-aquatic habitat. The trademark feature of the Kuri cattle are their striking horns, the lyre shaped or bulbous pear-shaped horns that puff out at the horn base shrinking in abruptly at the tip, adaptive features primal to their survival. These horns are indeed an adornment enviable to many though their main purpose is not aesthetic but to aid efficient swimming as they serve as natural “floaters”. The spongy interior of the horns and thin external shell increases the buoyancy of these animals. Averagely in size, these horns are about 20 - 100cm wide (at times the basal circumference measures upto 60cm) and 70 – 150cm long. The horn size and shape variations are indicative of possible subtypes, a hypothesis that is yet to be determined through in-depth characterization. In addition, their long muscular legs act as powerful oars, enabling them to paddle effortlessly. These physical attributes couple up to make them excellent swimmers. Amazingly, their nostrils have also evolved with their habitat and are reportedly slightly upturned to allow the Kuri to completely immerse themselves in water only leaving their horns sticking out, a phenomenon similar to that displayed by crocodiles whose snouts are the only indication of their presence in water masses. Indeed these animals have evolved and adapted to their environment excellently. Reports of their introduction to other agro-ecological zones such as Tillabery (Niger) have been unsuccessful due to the animal's habitat specific adaptations. The Kuri cattle breed is synonymous with water and despite large tracks of land being available to these animals, they spend considerable periods of time immersed in the lake. It is documented that during the dry spells, as the herders and their families move from island to island in dug-out canoes, the Kuri cattle accompany them by swimming across in search of aquatic plants to feed on. This periodic practice is commonly referred to as aqueous transhumance.
The Kuri are intolerant to extreme heat and thus often wallow in the lake’s waters to cool off. This characteristic unfortunately makes them not hardy draught animals as they cannot withstand the direct sunrays for long periods of time. In contrast, this breed unlike the zebu cattle are tolerant to small biting insects that often swarm the lake region during certain times of the year but are susceptible to infectious diseases such as trypanosomiasis and Contagious bovine pleuropneumonia (CBPP).

**Physical traits**
The Kuri spot a park or “flea-bitten” coat pattern. Typically, the animal appears to be speckled whereby the general coloration is white with small coloured markings of black, brown, tan, dun or red. This is a coat pattern that has been associated with the ancient aurochs and further re-affirms its ancestral roots. It also is considered much taller than its counterparts (zebus), with its height at withers for bulls reaching 180cm. Their body length is approximately 165cm and 145cm for bulls and cows respectively.

**Production traits**
The Kuri is a dual-purpose breed. It is considered as a relatively good milker with an average daily milk yield of 3-6kg in 6-10 month lactation. The milk yield per lactation increases up to the fourth lactation before a decline is observed. The cows have a relatively high fertility rate with the first calving at 36 – 48 months and produce at least 12 calves within their lifespan. Steers also have good fattening ability and are reared for beef production, weighing up to 650kg at maturity. Daily weight gain is reportedly 620-650gms. Its beef is the meat of choice during traditional festivities as it is tender, juicy and well-marbled. The Kuri birth weight has been recorded at 25 and 22.5kg for male and female calves respectively.

**Parting shot**
However, of grave concern is the Kuri’s ever dwindling population size. Currently its population number is estimated at 10,000 head. This unique cattle breed’s population continual decline is due to various threats including unceasing civil unrest, rampant crossbreeding with the Arab Shuwa and M’Bororo zebu, disease ravages and most importantly the receding Lake Chad. This population is obviously threatened as their habitat (Lake Chad) continues to shrink as a result of shifting climatic patterns and man-made effects mainly over-use of the fresh waters for irrigation projects, major overgrazing resulting to land degradation amongst others. For the survival of this unique and rare cattle breed, there is need to put into place rehabilitation measures for their natural habitat (Lake Chad) and set the conservation ball into motion by initiating management strategies to facilitate the population’s recovery before the magnificent Kuri is referred to in memoirs, years after their extinction.

**Further reading:**
1. Mpofu, and Rege (2002). The Unique Kuri cattle of Lake Chad. AGTR training module
4. The Kuri: A unique study in Natural Selection. blogs.worldwatch.org/nourishingtheplanet/
5. DAGRIS www.cdad-is.org.cn/DAGRIS/Cattle/Kuri.htm