The Tuli Cattle

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Southern Africa is a region renowned for its high quality beef which has been favourably compared with beef from Argentina, Brazil and other parts of South America. The breed from Southern Africa which epitomizes this reputation is the Tuli which was developed on the Guyu Creek, a tributary of the Tuli River in South-western Zimbabwe. The breed is currently found in Australia, USA, Canada, Mexico, Argentina and others. In Southern Africa, neighbouring countries, especially South Africa and Botswana also share this magnificent transboundary breed.

The Tuli breed is of Tswana descent (from Botswana). The Tswana breed was a Bos taurus animal that migrated down through to Southern Africa where by mutations and natural selection over 5000 years it became ideally suited to a wide range of conditions across Zimbabwe while retaining a high level of fertility, early maturity and good meat carcass (Zimbabwe Tuli Society, 2015).

Origins of the Tuli

The Tuli breed was developed and created circa 1949-50 from the yellow Sanga-type cattle by Mr. Len Harvey working in the Department of Conservation and Extension (CONEX) in the Ministry of Agriculture of the then Rhodesia Government (now Zimbabwe). The breed was developed at a Government station on the banks of the Guyu Creek near the border between Botswana and Zimbabwe. It was recognized

in those early days, that the country needed an indigenous breed that would withstand the hot and semi-arid conditions of south-western Zimbabwe. A Tuli Breeding Station was established with the objective to select and breed bulls which could be used in improving the local stock. This was an unusual development during that period, especially when the then Government policy and commercial practice was to promote exotic breeds of livestock (Moyo, 2001).

Working meticulously through selection and breeding of animals he thought would produce such a breed, Mr. Harvey developed this wonder breed which has brought fame and a lot of interest to the Southern African region. He selected animals he believed would be good foundation stock and after years of hard work and toiling, the Tuli breed was born. The name Tuli is derived from "utulili" a Ndebele word which means dust and illustrates the predominant colour of this breed..

To highlight the importance of this breed, when the war of liberation intensified, the whole Tuli herd was urgently relocated from the Tuli Breeding Station to Matopos Research Institute which became its new home and from where it apparently proliferated throughout Zimbabwe and beyond.

Young Tuli bull (Photo: Matopos Research Institute)

Tuli cow at the Zimbabwe International Trade Fair (Photo Courtesy of Zimbabwe International Trade Fair)

Breed Characteristics

Physical traits:
The Tuli is a Sanga, a predominately sub-Saharan African sub-species cattle type bearing the scientific name of Bos taurus africanus. The breed is reported to be closely related to the Tswana breed of Botswana. Tuli cattle have an erect small cervico-thoracic hump, are uni-coloured: yellow, golden-brown, red, white, brownish-grey, beige, tan but cannot be black. The coat pattern is uniform, hair is straight and short. The face profile is flat with a muzzle which can be pigmented or not. The breed can be horned or polled. Horns are long, with upward orientation and narrow spacing. Ears are round-shaped with lateral orientation and pigmented at the ends. The body frame is medium-sized with a straight or hollow back profile. The rump is sloping. The dewlap and navel flap are both small with a tail wide at base with a multi-colour switch. The udder is small with medium-sized teats.

Production traits:
The Tuli is considered a medium-sized cattle breed. The breed has a neat compact frame, has very good maternal traits (high fertility, calf survival and weaning weight) and is known for its hardiness and adaptability to hot and dry conditions withstanding intense heat without showing signs of stress. The Tuli breed is also known for its early maturity, highly docile nature and good mothering ability. But probably best of all, the Tuli breed is renowned for its exceptional beef qualities. The beef from the Tuli breed has been described as relatively of low levels of fat but sufficient enough to give excellent marbling, making the meat tender and

juicy. The Tuli has the unique ability to convert poor quality grazing into top quality beef. The Tuli has good milking qualities. It has been noted that due to its unique genotype, the Tuli breed still offers high hybrid vigour and therefore, widely suitable for crossbreeding programmes. In South Africa, a composite breed, the "Tulim", has been created through crossbreeding of the Tuli and the Limousin breed.

Some adaptive traits: (adapted from the Zimbabwe Tuli Society)
- The Tuli breed is tolerant to high environmental temperatures
- Bulls are ready to work at 2 years of age; Heifers ready for bulling at 20 to 24 months of age
- Tuli cows rarely have calving problems and the calves are relatively small
- High level of natural resistance to ticks, flies and internal parasites. The short, straight and glossy coat is tough and supple making it difficult for ticks to latch on or flies to bite. The long active tail can remove flies from the length of its body. This breed has been exposed to many African tick and fly-borne diseases and parasites over time and mutations and natural selection have increased their hardiness when compared with other breeds.
- The Tuli has a natural ability to survive and reproduce in some harsh environments ranging from semi-arid desert to sour-veld (pasture) from hot to cold conditions
- The Tuli is easy to handle (except for cows with new born calves indicating good protective mothering instincts); Bulls are extremely docile and oxen can be easily used for draught power.

Parting shot

While this excellent breed may not be faced with imminent extinction, mainly because it is now widely dispersed in various parts of the world, it faces some serious challenges in its country of origin. The population of the Tuli breed is reducing particularly since the Land Reform Programme which saw a large number of Tuli breeders forfeiting their farms and studs. Some very famous Tuli studs, such as the Lebar Tuli Stud belonging to the family of the founder of the breed Mr. Harvey, were recently disposed of through public auction. Although Matopos Research Institute, purchased and saved 58 head (10 bulls, 38 cows and 10 heifers) from this world-famous stud, it is not clear what happened to the rest of the breeding stock. It would be a great loss if the Tuli breed were to become extinct in its country of origin. The Zimbabwe Tuli Society was formed in 1961 (then known as the Tuli Breeders Association) and the number of breeders joining this Society increased, indicating the high interest in this breed. However, since the start of the Land Reform Programme, the Society has lost some members and corresponding studs. Fortunately, there are still 11 active members in the Zimbabwe Tuli Society with over 2607 animals registered with the Zimbabwe Herd Book and still offering a wide selection of quality genetic materials. However, this is a situation which requires constant monitoring to ensure that this invaluable breed of Southern Africa is not lost.

References and Further reading:

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