Draft Cattle Use in Northern Uganda

Claus Kropp, Boniface Okumu

Abstract

Following the end in 2006 of the 20-year civil war, northern Uganda once again has a large number of draft cattle in use. However, a survey covering 13 districts in 2023 also revealed a number of problems, including issues with harness systems, the health of draft animals, and ways in which suggestions for improvement, such as improved yoke designs, animal training techniques, can be implemented in the long term.

Résumé

Après la fin de la guerre civile qui a duré 20 ans jusqu'en 2006, le nord de l'Ouganda utilise à nouveau un grand nombre de bovins de trait. Cependant, une enquête menée dans 13 districts en 2023 a également révélé un certain nombre de problèmes, notamment des questions liées aux systèmes de harnais, à la santé des animaux de trait et aux moyens de mettre en œuvre à long terme des suggestions d'amélioration, telles que la conception de jougs améliorés et les techniques de dressage des animaux.

Kurzfassung

Nord Uganda verfügt nach dem Ende des zwanzig Jahre andauernden Bürgerkriegs 2006 wieder über eine hohe Anzahl an im Einsatz befindlichen Zugtieren. Im Zuge eines 13 Distrikte einschließenden Surveys aus dem Jahr 2023 wurden allerdings auch eine Vielzahl an Problemen deutlich, darunter im Bereich der Anspannungssysteme, in Bezug auf den Gesundheitszustand der Zugrinder aber auch in der Art und Weise wie verbesserte Jochformen überhaupt langfristig implementiert werden können

Resumen

Tras el fin de la guerra civil que duró 20 años en 2006, el norte de Uganda vuelve a contar con un gran número de ganado de tiro en uso. Sin embargo, una encuesta realizada en 13 distritos en 2023 también reveló una serie de problemas, entre ellos cuestiones relacionadas con los sistemas de arneses, la salud del ganado de tiro y las formas en que se pueden aplicar a largo plazo las sugerencias de mejora, como el diseño de yugos mejorados y las técnicas de adiestramiento de animales.

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Fig. 1 Woman plowing with a team of bulls in Oyam district (Picture Boniface Okumu).

Introduction

Between March 30th and May 25th 2023, a total of 133 farmers from 13 districts in north and north central Uganda participated in a survey[1] on the use of draft cattle. The interviews were done by community-based trainers of the Oxen Clinic Uganda which randomly selected the farmers in the respective districts[2]. There were some challenges that were encountered that need mentioning at this point:

a. Rainfall irregularities: the districts of Lamwo, Pader, Gulu and Omoro received rain later than usual which led to delay of the activities in those areas subsequently making the survey taking longer than planned.

b. Local leaders' interference: for unknown reasons, some local leaders were discouraging some farmers from participating in the survey. The districts of Kole, Kiryandongo and Gulu were the most affected by this and as a result the majority of the farmers refused to take pictures.

c. Accessibility: in some districts, the road infrastructure was very poor and therefore getting to the farmers was oftentimes a challenge for the community-based trainers.

d. Natural death: the death of a prominent community leader affected the activity in Omoro district because farmers released cattle from work (to let them roam free again) earlier than usual and subsequently before any photos could be taken.

The authors had several reasons for conducting the survey in this particular region. On the one hand, northern Uganda has a very fertile soil and over 80% of the population rely on agriculture for livelihood. It had a long-standing tradition of draft animal use, which was almost completely destroyed by the civil war from 1987 until 2006. Much traditional knowledge was lost across the region, and in many respects, it was necessary to start almost from scratch when it came to working with draft animals. Government of Uganda in collaboration with the different development partners such as Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Gulu Archdiocese, Peace Harvest, US organization Tillers International and many others, work was finally undertaken to re-establish working practices and, at the same time, improve the methods of harnessing draft cattle (e.g., yokes). The Oxen Clinic Uganda Company Limited, which was established as a result of this project, continues this work to this day, and the survey project thus made it possible to evaluate the success of the measures taken over the past decades.

Survey Results

First, it should be noted that the combined results from all 13 districts are evaluated and analyzed here. It can be seen that the average farm size was between 2.5 and 5 hectares of cultivated land[3]. A team of animals is generally used for this purpose – in most cases oxen and bulls, and less frequently cows. In only a few cases four or more animals were hitched together. Traditional withers yokes were the main harnessing system, but in about ten percent of cases an improved bow yoke was also utilized (see ***Fig. 2***).

The breeds used were equally divided between Zebu and Watussi Ankole. The average age of the working an-

1 For the general structure of the survey sheets please see Kropp / Dumitrescu in this volume.

2 The breakdown were as follows: Gulu district 10 farmers, Kole district 10, Omoro district 10, Oyam district 10, Nwoya district 10, Masindi district 10, Dokolo district 11, Kiryandongo district 10, Lira district 10, Alebtong district 10, Lamwo district 10, Pader district 11 and Amuru district 11 farmers. Kole district initially was not among the districts but due to the cattle rustling taking place in Agago district by the karamojong worriors, the survey could not be carried out there due to security reasons and subsequently Kole district replaced it.

3 There is a possibility that some farmers did not give the correct size of their land and the number of draft cattle for fear of taxation from the Government, fear that they may not be given free things by development partners. This is a common occurrence basing on previous experiences.

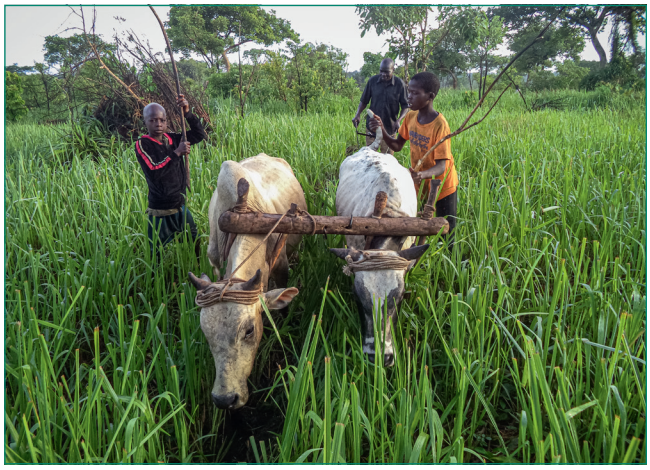
imals was determined to be five years, and the weekly work intensity is three to five hours.

95.5% of the farmers surveyed were male, and the main field of work for cattle was stated to be mainly field work, although it should be emphasized that this primarily refers to plowing. Planting and weeding, on the other hand, were only very rarely mentioned. Other, much less common uses for cattle were transportation and logging.

Challenges

If attempted to rank the main problems mentioned by respondents, the following picture emerges:

1. Animal diseases and parasites
2. Spare parts procurement
3. Injuries caused by harnessing
4. Availability of drinking water for cattle
5. Poor veterinary care
6. Poor road conditions



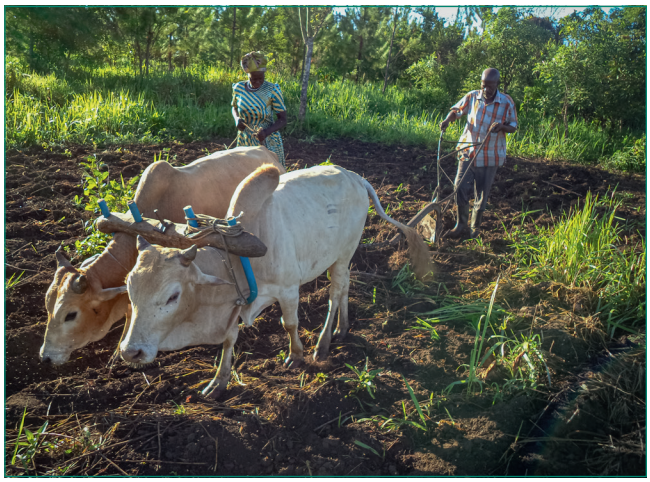


Fig. 2 *Traditional Ugandan Withers yoke (on the top) in comparison to an improved bow yoke (at the bottom), both Nwoya district (Picture Boniface Okumu).*

At this point, it is necessary to take a closer look at the second and third points mentioned above. As already mentioned in the introduction, the work of Tillers International and the Oxen Clinic Uganda has provided local farmers in northern Uganda with support in the use of soil cultivation equipment and the development of more effective yokes. In many cases, for example, a new yoke was developed for one of the teams in the community and then made available to them. During the surveys, it was found that although these yokes and the plows were gratefully accepted and used, the farmer returned to the traditional method of harnessing once repairs became necessary. The main reasons cited for this were a lack of financial resources.

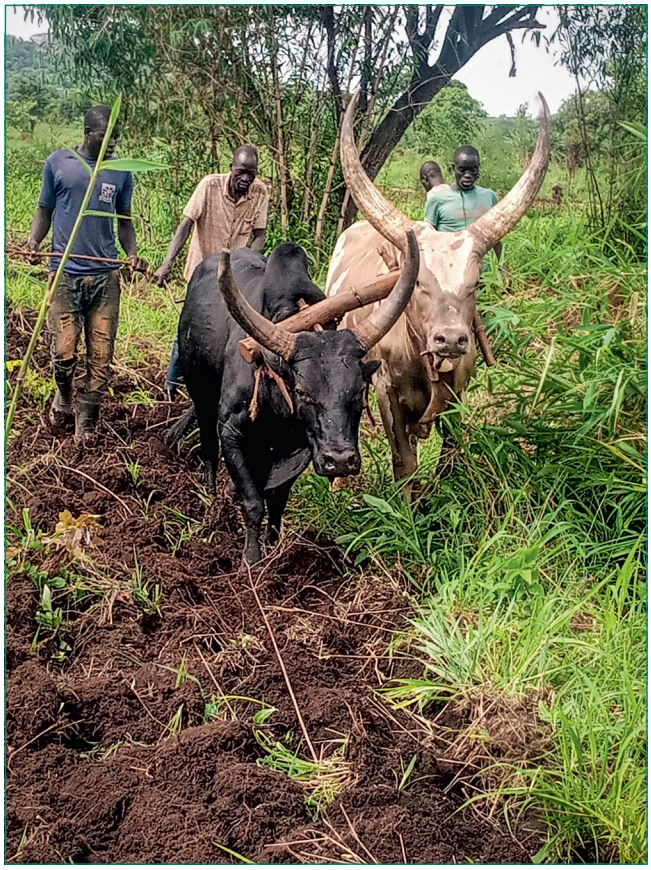


Fig. 3 *Pressure points on the hump of an ox (on the left) during plowing in Lamwo district (Picture: Boniface Okumu).*

The above observation has a direct impact on the third-ranked issue, namely injuries to animals caused by the yoke. Since many of the traditional withers yokes are not optimally adapted to the animals and the yoke pins can also cause sensitive pressure points in the neck area of zebu cattle (see ***fig. 3***), the improved yoke system offers a solution here. This is all the more important given that the animals are also more productive when harnessed in an improved manner.

Reasons for draft cattle use

The main reason given for using draft cattle was the time saved, especially when compared to using hand tools alone. In addition, many of the respondents also emphasized the simplicity of handling the cattle and noted that their use led to an improvement in soil fertility (without going into further detail why, however). Another particularly important reason cited was that draft oxen also contribute to generating new financial resources (especially through increased yields and an expansion of the area that can be cultivated and also providing tillage services to neighbouring farmers at fee), which in turn provides new opportunities for education, especially for children.

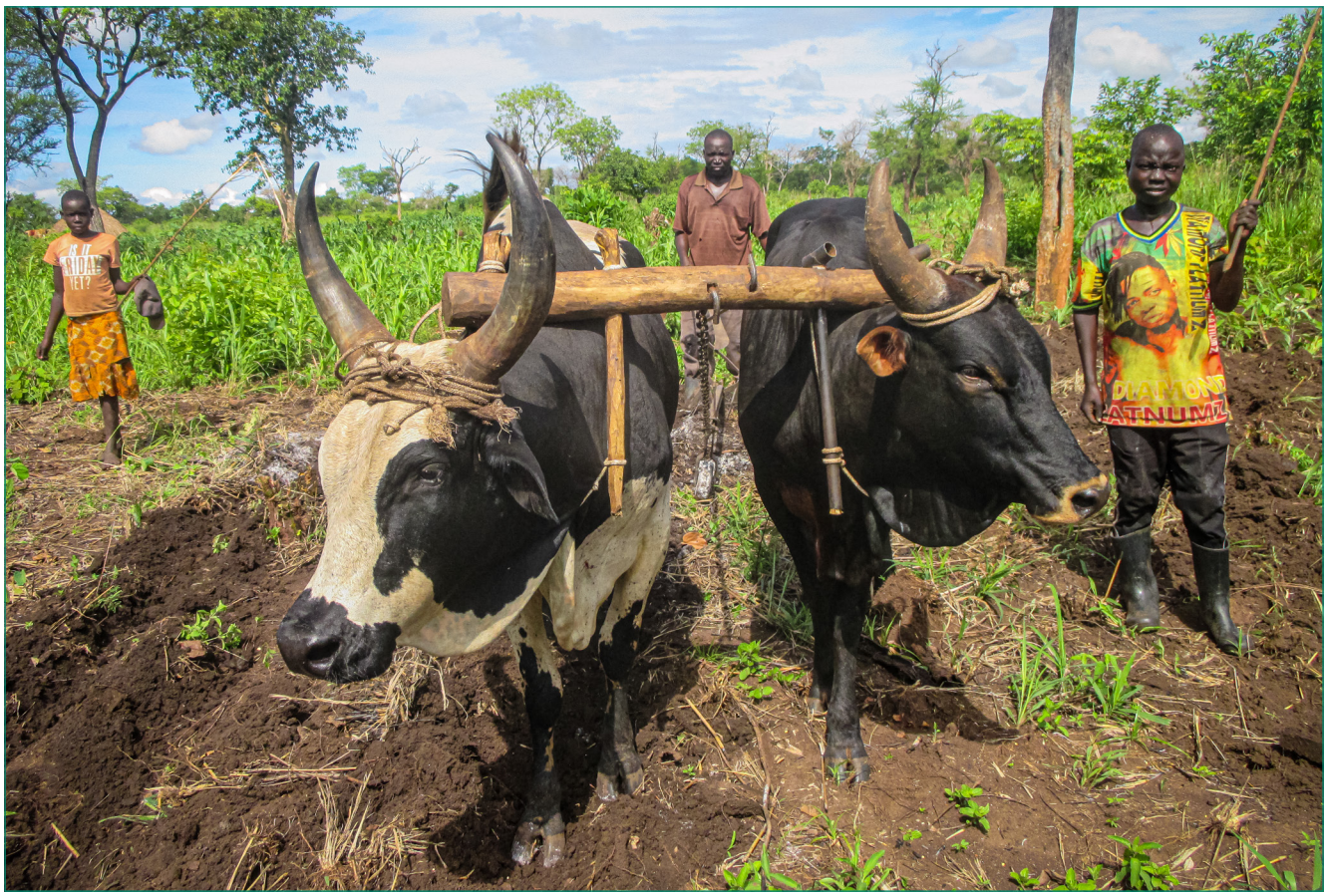


Fig 4 Farmer Richard Onek with his kids in Pader district (Picture: Boniface Okumu).

Summary

The current situation regarding draft cattle use in northern Uganda is extremely complex, and both conducting the survey as well as its results reflect the unstable political situation and the ongoing socio-cultural trauma suffered by society particularly in Acholi sub region due to the long civil war. In many ways, this is slowing down positive developments, and according to the surveys, decades of support and provision for the population by public authorities have meant that many farmers now lack the self-help potential that is once again required.

Nevertheless, working with draft animals in northern Uganda is of enormous importance for securing people's livelihoods and, as mentioned above, indirectly enables a higher level of education for the population.

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