

Nguni cattle of SOUTHERN AFRICA

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It was a stifling hot day as I stopped next to the road in rural KwaZulu-Natal to admire some Nguni cattle grazing next to the road. As my eyes feasted on the beautiful shapes and colours, I noticed a wizened old man leaning on a stick, also gazing at the cattle. It was a timeless moment when I asked him where these cattle come from. With a far-off look in his eyes he nodded and slowly said: "These cattle have always been here".

And so it seems with the Nguni cattle breed – that it has always been with us: for as long as there were people in Africa, their lives have been intrinsically tied to their cattle. DNA evidence suggests that the Nguni descends from both *Bos Taurus* and *Bos Indicus* cattle and drawings and hieroglyphics from ancient Egypt show the multicoloured cattle with their lyre-shaped horns. One can imagine the cattle from Europe and the East being funnelled into Africa through the narrow bridge of land at Egypt, and the fusion of genetics that formed the foundation of the African cattle breed.

Archaeologists date these Egyptian pictures to around 8000 years ago; since then, man's unquenchable appetite for more land and open spaces drove him relentlessly southwards across the African continent. Africa must have had a great deal to offer ancient cattlemen, but the move also brought everything else that Africa could offer in terms of harsh weather conditions and disease. Drought and erratic rainfall took their toll and the fast-growing, high-fibre grazing offered poor nutrition in the dry months. Food shortages and heat caused stunted growth and appetite loss and reduced fertility. The various diseases that Africa boasts, some wide-spread and others specific to certain regions, some carried by insects and predators, all provided a natural selection gauntlet for these cattle to run.



These cattle not only overcame, but the ones who got the genetic nod thrived under the African sun. Cattle became symbolic of man's wealth and status and, as ancient man trekked south into Africa, his life, culture, language and entire existence revolved around and depended on his cattle.

This symbiotic pastoral and nomadic lifestyle brought the Nguni cattle to the banks of the Limpopo River around 2000 years ago. As the tribes split up to settle in different areas, distinctive cattle ecotypes developed, but they are still collectively known as the Nguni – the same name attributed to the tribes identified by this collective name.

Today we refer loosely to ecotypes such as Pedi, Swazi, Gazankulu and Makatini and, whilst the environment shaped these animals into these ecotypes, we can surmise what role their owners played in the selection process. As they were a measure of wealth, very few were slaughtered; when necessary, only the old or infertile animals, or those with obvious shortcomings, were slaughtered.

Prior to Chaka's reign and mfecane, animals were kept close to the pastoral household and a certain amount of inbreeding occurred, deleting poor genetics and favouring early maturing animals. Chaka realised the importance of cattle for the survival of his ideals and for the first time in recorded history, we see major interference in the genetic selection of the Nguni cattle. He grouped animals of the same colour and linked these herds to his Impis, giving them a source of wealth and food supply, and – above all – identity. The war veterans, his most famous regiment, were identified by white shields from a herd of white cattle that was believed to breed white offspring.

When Europeans started entering Southern Africa in significant numbers during the mid to late 1800s, they considered the local cattle inferior to their own cattle and started importing mostly European cattle into South Africa. These animals required intensive husbandry; ironically, the added attention showed in their generally better condition compared with the Nguni cattle found in the tribal areas, where cattle were kept under extensive farming conditions.

The better appearance of the exotic breeds did not go unnoticed by the local cattle owners and soon cross-breeding with European breeds started to dilute the pure genetics of the Nguni cattle. Although the exotic breeds appeared superior and more productive than the Nguni cattle, they were more prone to disease and required more intensive inputs. The perception of inferiority of indigenous breeds caused acts and policies to be promulgated and introduced which classified indigenous cattle as commonplace and not worthy of existence. Cattle inspectors had the authority to castrate bulls and the government introduced exotic bulls into the communal farming areas, supposedly to enhance the abilities of the indigenous cattle.

These practices and policies had a negative effect on the purity of the genetics of the Nguni breed and represent a lamentable period in the history of the breed.

Thanks to individuals like the late Professor Curzon, some true-to-type Nguni cattle survived this genetic dilution. He started a pure Nguni herd in 1932, in an effort to breed true-to-type Nguni cattle, which resulted in the formation of the Bartlow Combine breeding station in the late 1940s. This herd played an enormous role in the preservation of pure Nguni genetics as it provided the foundation stock for many of today's Nguni studs.

It soon became apparent that European cattle breeds did not thrive under the African sun, which showed in their poor reproductive qualities and a general decline in functionality.

The failure of the exotic breeds caused a new appreciation for the indigenous cattle. The Department of Agriculture appointed a committee in 1947 to investigate the preservation of the country's indigenous livestock, which resulted in the Bonsma report of 1950, in which the appreciation of this adapted breed was highlighted. Final recognition came in 1986 when the Nguni Cattle Breeders Society was accepted as a member of the South African Stud Book and Livestock Improvement Association.

Whilst formal recognition of the breed was a momentous occasion in the history of the breed, the spectacular popularity of these cattle and the positive scientific evidence of its economic potential, finally ensured its continued existence as a pure breed. It is recognised today that the Nguni performs well under all farming conditions. Its good performance under natural conditions is the legacy of its epic and extended trek through Africa.



The Nguni breed is ideally positioned today to capitalise on environmental, economic, political and consumer trends. The fact that it lives in harmony within its environment and is therefore more resistant to disease than other breeds, makes it less dependant on veterinary inputs, which in turn has a positive influence on the environment and removes a significant input cost.

Economic cost of production, expressed in kilogram of meat produced against total cost, is low. This makes it ideal for government programs to establish emerging farmers. As it is a smaller-framed animal and leaner than most other breeds, it is more attractive to the health conscious consumer, who prefers a smaller, less fatty, cut of meat.

Refined by time, its genetic code sifted by the harshness of the continent, the Nguni has earned its rightful place in the eyes of agricultural stakeholders, who now recognise its economic, social and cultural value. It is a symbol of the achievements of the ancient continent; it seems, some say, that the Nguni has always been here.