



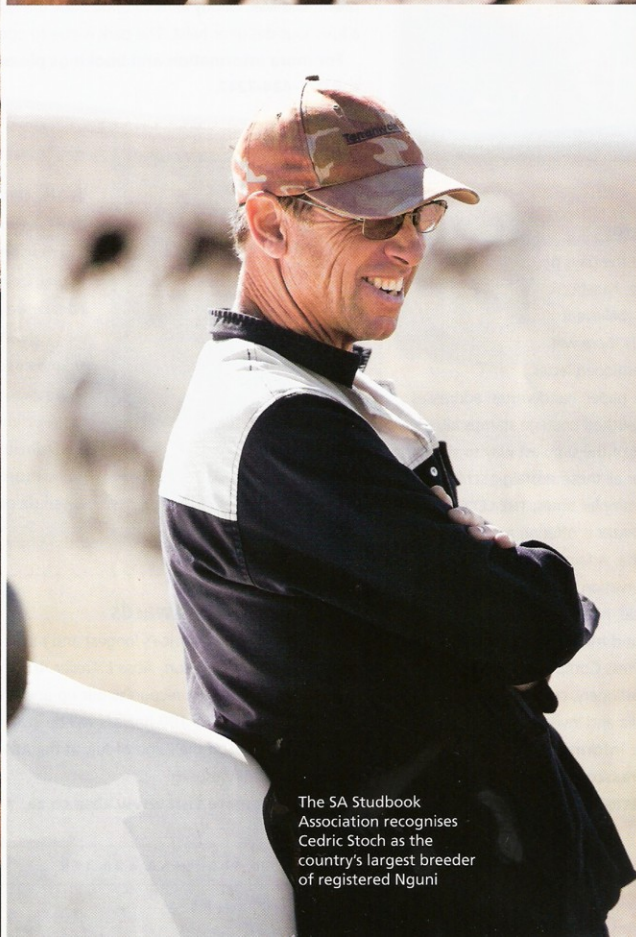
Few cattle species can match Nguni for productivity



Ancient Egyptian tombs depict multicoloured cattle with lyre-shaped horns



Nguni are replacing the zebra as SA's favourite animal emblem



The SA Studbook Association recognises Cedric Stoch as the country's largest breeder of registered Nguni

The Beautiful *Nguni*

BY HILARY PRENDINI TOFFOLI

PHOTOGRAPHY C&D HEIERLI

“That the Nguni cattle are still with us is one of nature’s small miracles,” says Darling Nguni breeder Cedric Stoch. “Both the British Army and the government of the time did their damndest to eradicate them, and they almost succeeded.”

You can’t miss the Ngunis in the fields round

Darling. They’re the ones with the varied and colourful patterns on their hides, and the large, distinctively-shaped horns—even the cows have them. If you stop your car and go up to the barbed-wire fence, chances are they will come close and check you out with their melting-chocolate eyes. They’re exceptionally sociable. Because they’ve lived close to humans for centuries—always in the heart of the Zulu kraal—they’re tamer than other cattle.

Cedric is one of South Africa’s biggest Nguni

breeders. He rears them on the West Coast farm on which he was born 57 years ago, in the days when the Nguni were regarded as inferior to the European cattle brought in by settlers. He bought his first seven Ngunis in 1987 and has bred well over 7 000.

“I first saw Ngunis when I was doing my military service in Caprivi in the seventies. Very different animals from the Aberdeen Angus my father and I were farming. In those days we imported semen for artificial

As the planet heats up, hardy, indigenous beasts like South Africa’s legendary Ngunis will be the continent’s cattle of the future



Indigenous low-maintenance
breeds are the answer to
Africa's problems

insemination. Then sanctions came and we had to go sanction-busting, getting the semen via co-operative countries. One day, while ill in bed, I saw Nguni being advertised in Swaziland and I said, 'This is the answer!'"

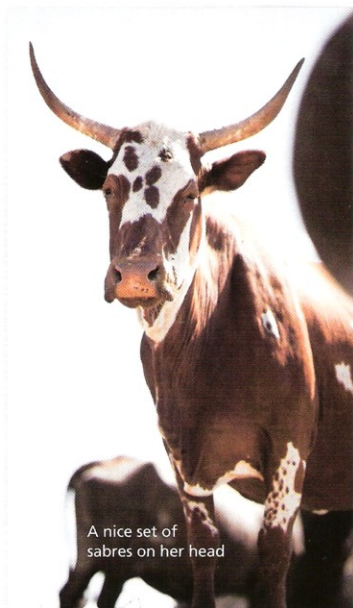
At that stage the Nguni were just beginning to be recognised as animals whose genetic adaptation to Africa's difficult climatic conditions gave them advantages over the less resilient European cattle.

The Nguni had been in Africa for at least 8 000 years. Ancient Egyptian tombs depict multicoloured cattle with lyre-shaped horns. Nomadic cattlemen brought them south over the millennia, an epic trek. They ran the gauntlet between drought and disease, a test of stamina which only the fittest survived. Grazing was varied. Intense heat had an impact on growth and fertility. Yet these ordeals weeded out the weak.

"The result of this natural selection," says Cedric, "was an animal that matured early, remained fertile even under harsh conditions, and calved easily. It lived long, could handle tick-borne diseases and the harsh sun of its native land, and provided its owners with everything they needed. Food, clothing, utensils. They even used its dung for the fire."

The wellbeing of both cattle and humans was so interlinked that the Zulus evolved a rather poetic naming system for the various physical types, affectionately inspired by the colour of their hides or the shape of their

ng'ombe



A nice set of
sabres on her head



Cattle imagery abounds in
Zulu folklore



Herds are divided
by genes and colour

horns. Marguerite Poland and social anthropologist David Hammond-Tooke provide a full breakdown in their widely acclaimed book *The Abundant Herds*, whose illustrations by Leigh Voigt are in the Openheimers' Africana Collection. Published in 2003, the book gave the Nguni such cult status that they replaced the zebra in South Africa's curio shops, art galleries and décor studios.

The Zulu naming terminology is imaginative and droll. Horns that curve backwards in the typical Nguni lyre shape, for instance, are seen as women throwing up their arms in disagreement, the Zulu name translating as *The Women Dispute the Case*. Scattered tiny black dots on a white hide remind the cattlemen

of *Flies in the Buttermilk*. The white underbelly that flashes when a dark animal walks by gets the apt term *The Hornbill Takes Flight*.

Cattle imagery abounds in Zulu folklore and proverbs. The Zulu version of "Don't judge a book by its

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cover", for example, is "Don't judge fighting skill by the size of the horns".

This compelling book, which has had numerous reprints, estimates that in KwaZulu-Natal alone, the Nguni

numbered something like five million by the mid-1800s. That was when the white settlers started arriving in the north-eastern parts of South Africa, and marked the beginning of the end for the beautiful herds. Reduced by *rinderpest* towards the end of the

century, they now faced the Anglo-Zulu War, followed by the government's short-sighted policies.

"Many animals were eradicated after Rorke's Drift," says Cedric. "The British had given the Zulus a hiding, and now they got rid

of thousands of their cattle."

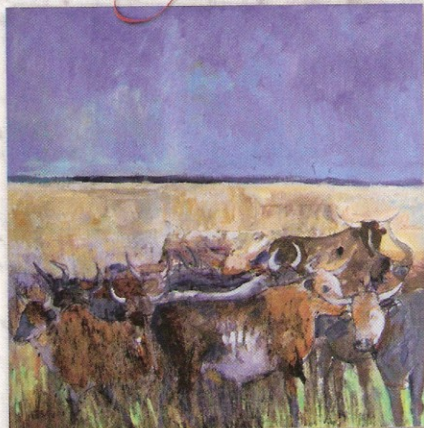
The strategy was deliberate. Having broken the power of the Zulu kingdom, the British determined to finish it off by killing and confiscating the

Get Close to Ngunis

Nguni breeder Cedric Stoch is holding an **NGUNI OPEN DAY** on his farm Droërug near Darling on Sunday 23 May. It's in aid of Evita se Perron's charitable projects. Evita will open the day at 11am, after which Cedric will talk about the future of the Nguni. Then visitors will be taken round the farm on lorries, seated on straw bales, viewing the 11 Nguni herds. Nguni can also be photographed, drawn, painted, and so on in the vlei area below the farmhouse. Farm food will be available.

ON SALE will be Nguni hides at discount prices, Nguni paintings by Darling artists, and Ngunis made from beads, as well as the acclaimed coffee table Nguni book *The Abundant Herds*, and the children's book *The Cool Nguni*.

The farm Droërug is 7km from Malmesbury on the R315 between Darling and Malmesbury. R30 adults, R15 children. Gate opens at 10am. Booking required, call 083-961-0556 or email hilarypt@megaserve.net.



royal herds—the pure white Nguni originally bred by Shaka for his warriors, who carried pure white shields.

The next setback was the growing perception that the Nguni were an inferior breed.

“It became government policy to have every Nguni bull they could lay their hands on castrated,” says Cedric. “Fortunately, the black farmers didn’t obey, and fortunately, in the forties, the government had the foresight to establish a herd of Ngunis in Natal that they could propagate to prevent them from dying out. Eventually they began repopulating the tribal areas.”

But it was only in the eighties that lasting recognition of the breed came,

along with scientific evidence of its potential. That was when Cedric, who has an honours degree in Zoology from the University of Cape Town, had his light-bulb moment and joined the Nguni Pioneers. It would become a lifetime project that he and his wife Rene, who does all the farm administration, are hopeful will be continued by their children. They have three sons and two daughters ranging in age from 10 to 24.

On a viewing trip around the farm, pointing out distinctive beasts, the lanky, sunburned farmer in his camouflage cap looks and sounds like

a game ranger. He knows every one of the 1 500 cattle in his 11 placidly grazing herds, which are divided according to genes and colour. “That bull was an easy calf at birth. His mother was born in 2000 and she’s still delivering the goods like clockwork...” He watches affectionately as a cow with a black and white freckled face rubs her head against a pile of dead branches: “She’s got such a nice set of sabres on her head...”

In view of the coming climatic challenges and the diseases that are the scourge of Africa, he’s concerned about the future of all of Africa’s traditional cattle species. Many are under threat.

“These indigenous low-maintenance breeds have all the answers to Africa’s problems. The Nguni is flatter, not barrel-shaped like the European species. That flat shape is one of nature’s ways of dissipating heat. Cattle operate best between 16 and 24 degrees. To protect them from the sun, the extremities of the Nguni are darkly pigmented. Even the enamel of their teeth is denser than that of European cattle so that they can handle dry vegetation.”

If Cedric can get the UN to sponsor the project, he will obtain embryos and build up satellite herds where cattle are most endangered. **GT**