On the making of The Abundant Herds

David Hammond-Tooke*

The germ of The Abundant Herds lies in Marguerite Poland’s life-long love affair with Sanga Nguni cattle. Her first meeting with these beautiful animals was on a farm in the Eastern Cape when, at the age of two years, she hung over the farm gate as the doe-eyed, moist-nosed bovines trotted past.

I first met Marguerite at Rhodes University when she joined my classes in social anthropology in about 1967. Her other major was African Languages, specializing in the Xhosa of the Eastern Cape. On my acceptance of the chair of anthropology at Wits in 1970, I lost touch with her for over thirty years.

Marguerite soon commenced writing the four adult novels that have resulted in her present status as one of South Africa’s distinguished authors. Recessional for Grace (2003), obviously semi-autobiographical, is a moving, multi-layered account of Marguerite’s relationship with Nguni cattle and their symbolism, but transferred back half a century. In this book she connects her heroine’s life to

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that of Robert Godfrey, 19th-century Transkeian missionary, who published extensive listings of Xhosa bird-lore. Practically nothing is known of Godfrey’s personality or biography. Marguerite links her protagonist (C.J. Godfrey, professor of African Languages at an Eastern Cape University from 1933–1947) with another episode in her life. One day an elderly friend, Bert Schroeder, who had spent many years promoting and studying Nguni cattle, called and presented her with an extensive collection of annotated photographs of Nguni cattle, gathered over the years by Schroeder and his friend, Roger de la Harpe. This she built on, in her academic doctoral study of the subject, by fieldwork and by an exhaustive study of the available literature, both historical and culled from oral tradition.

The uniqueness and richness of the material she had gathered immediately raised the problem of publication. This was the point at which I was consulted by Marguerite and then given a share in the completion of the project. At first sight it seemed daunting. Academic theses are not written for a popular market and the rigorous and exhaustive discussion required of an academic work (not to mention the table-like lists of terms) almost caused us to give up hope. At least I had no worries about Marguerite’s ability to transform the text’s readability. It was clear that a possible solution lay in the book’s presentation. What kind of book had we written? How to market it?

It is difficult to classify The Abundant Herds. It includes consideration of the origins of the Sanga Nguni breed, describing the involvement of the Zulus with their beasts, which leads to a symbolic identity of both humans and animals; strong Zulu patriliney accompanying exogamy rules that symbolize women and cattle as both equal and other; and cattle as sacrifice in the ancestor religion. Every aspect of the traditional culture is shot through with cattle symbolism. But the book is essentially about verbal creativity. The vividly coloured coats of the Sanga Nguni trigger images from nature that act as poetic metaphors. It is thus a unique contribution to the little-understood world of Zulu aesthetics.

In a fundamental sense the material had opened the door to a much wider question than that of animal husbandry. We had come face to face with the Zulu people’s perception and imaginative response to beauty, which was a dual one as they transferred the visual image into words. The cattle terms, frankly originating in the highly practical job of identifying property, had been transformed into a rich art form of unexpected beauty. They now form part of the stock of indigenous knowledge, the cultural heritage of the Zulu people. Marguerite has likened the creation of their evocative word pictures to ‘small Imagist poems’.

Hence we describe our book as a ‘celebration’ — with all the ambivalences this term contains. It thus, we hope, caters for the widely differing interests that are undoubtedly contained in the book’s potential readership. The historical, social and cultural background of the Zulu people is discussed as the basis for the striking manner in which all things related to cattle are deployed in ways that speak symbolically to a number of important aspects of Zulu life — economics, politics, kinship, religion, marriage and health. Any one of these would merit a volume on its own. Our book reveals the extraordinary intimacy between the Zulu family and its herd, and, for the first time, shows how poetry works in Zulu.

Our ‘celebration’ would not have been possible without the magnificent illustrations in Leigh Voigt’s artwork. Her flawlessness and colour tone constitute a perfect link between the analytical dryness of the text and the rich reality of the savanna where the Sanga Nguni cattle have evolved over 2000 years. As Marguerite insists: a true appreciation of the beauty and aptness of the cattle terms can only be attained in the pastures themselves where proud owners spend hours discussing animatedly the correct name to apply to a particular beast.

The recent realization of the value of the Sanga Nguni breed for the South African farmer, after centuries of being dismissed as ‘scrub cattle’, is based on the hardness of these beasts, their excellent meat and milk yield and resistance to parasites, but also to the discipline deriving from two millennia of close relationship with human beings, namely, their great docility, especially with children, and their habit of keeping together in a group while grazing, thus facilitating herding.

Celebrating the Nguni cattle of the Zulu people

Marguerite Poland*

He came from Him-who-owns-the-stars, Father-of-beauty; He was born with the star of morning; When the red light of dawn appeared, He stretched himself to his full height, this wonderful bovine.1

That description of a bull from a traditional South Sotho praise poem to cattle has always held me for its beauty and its grandeur, perhaps because of my closest and earliest recollection, as a small girl, of red oxen going by in the road — their movement, their colour, the sweep of their horns. The smell of them. So, it is not surprising that when Bert Schroeder, a Zulu linguist, retired headmaster, and school inspector, introduced me to the mysteries of naming and describing cattle, I was enchanted.

Brought up in the Eastern Cape, I studied Xhosa and social anthropology. Moving to KwaZulu-Natal, I faced a new African language: Zulu. As with Xhosa, I was absorbed by the descriptive nuance of the language, especially the way in which nature was perceived and described, and fascinated by the poetry and imagery in this branch of the oral tradition.

When I met Bert Schroeder and saw Roger de la Harpe’s astonishing photographs of the various colour-patterns, I realized that here, within a classificatory system, which defined the identity of property of great value to the Zulu people, was a body of terms exemplifying, quite specifically, the uniquely aesthetic way in which Zulu people use their language to describe things with significance for them.

I explored the world of cattle and their poetry, and the way in which they are perceived and celebrated, not only by the Zulu people, but by the pastoralists of Africa. I discovered how the idiom of cattle enriches the Zulu language, through the image of cattle and the complex naming-practice relevant to the colours of indigenous cattle that makes metaphorical association and analogy with birds, animals, plants and other natural phenomena. The aesthetic of cattle is part of a wider aesthetic. The perception and celebration of nature in general, and the facility to create, in complex poetic compound noun structures, the most apt images and descriptive phrases, is one of the special beauties of the indigenous languages of Africa.

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