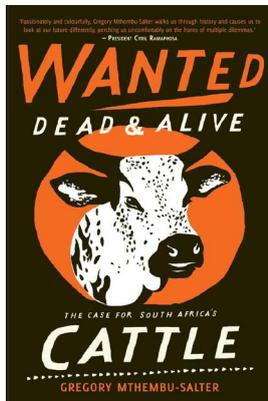




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Wanted dead & alive: The case for South Africa's cattle



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# Why do South Africans appreciate cattle farming so much?

Agricultural books are not widely available in popular bookstores in South Africa. And even when they are available, they tend to be written in a style that is not accessible to non-experts in the field. Such challenges usually mean that the literature is restricted to academics and practitioners in the agriculture sector alone. While it could be argued that this is not a phenomenon unique to agriculture, the conditions are different, especially if we take a South African perspective. Agriculture is one of the sectors in which the South African government aims to increase the participation of black people, and also to ensure that farming of all kinds will assist to revitalise the rural economy and create jobs.

The dearth of accessible agricultural books is what makes Gregory Mthembu-Salter's new book, *Wanted: Dead & alive: The Case for South Africa's Cattle*, so important. Mthembu-Salter takes the reader on a historical, social, economic and cultural journey around cattle in South Africa. Mthembu-Salter is neither farmer nor animal scientist, but he does a brilliant job in narrating cattle farming in this book. Born in the United Kingdom and a South African immigrant in the 1990s, as a researcher and journalist, his curiosity about the value (not merely in economic terms) of cattle can be traced to his lobola negotiation days, and through various cultural activities that followed after his marriage.

Upon appreciating how valuable cattle were in African culture, Mthembu-Salter took it upon himself to trace the history of cattle in South Africa, going back to the Khoekhoen era in the 1400s. He begins by walking the reader through this historical journey, relating how European explorers in 1488 first encountered the Khoekhoen and their cattle, moving on to colonial times when black South Africans experienced massive losses of cattle through wars and diseases, until our democratic era in which cattle are part of modern farming in South Africa.

The second chapter is particularly important to readers with an interest in understanding the cultural relationship that South African black families have with cattle. Mthembu-Salter captures this vividly through observations of various events he attended in the process of his research. He describes, in the smallest of details, how meat is served at cultural gatherings, and what specific pieces are reserved for the elders.

The third chapter will possibly answer questions that some readers might have about why South Africans are so fond of eating beef or meat in general. The per capita consumption of beef in South Africa is 17.42 per kg as per 2019 data from the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development. This is the highest in Africa, albeit lower than that in several developed economies. Aside from a general narrative of what drives meat consumption – which is boosted by higher income levels to a certain extent – Mthembu-Salter presents the reader with a 'taste' of various meats that South Africans enjoy and provides their history. This includes biltong, whose story is told from the perspective of the San people, moving on to boerewors, to processed meat cuts and off-cuts and also Jewish kosher meat products that were introduced into South Africa. The home braai (barbecue), shisanyama and steakhouse are some of the venues in which South Africans consume their meat. The value of the book is in providing the reader with a clear picture of the setting and history of these meat-eating venues.

Chapter four deals with what may be familiar to some readers: the structure of a modern beef value chain, from farm to fork. This information is provided through the infusion of both hard science research and the narratives from various farmers whom the author interviewed. This will also be an important chapter for anyone interested in starting a beef farm or other business within the value chain. Mthembu-Salter gives a broad view of the industry, although perhaps the author could have given more detail about the economic or commercial business side of the beef industry – which is what the chapter title promised but failed to deliver.

An important component of the livestock industry is dairy farming, which is not often covered in various popular agriculture books in South Africa. Mthembu-Salter gives a brief window into this important sub-sector, but he leaves the reader yearning for more information on the structure of the dairy industry, both its commercial and non-commercial aspects. Perhaps there may be further writing from this author that could include a contribution that captures the evolution of the dairy industry in South Africa through the various centuries, along with government policies and changes in consumer preferences that influence the industry.

The book ends with important discussions that locate cattle farming in the land reform and democratic state agricultural policies. Cattle farming is positioned within the current rural economy and the author emphasises its potential role in uplifting rural economies, especially in the provinces that were former homelands. This is particularly significant because an estimated 34% of cattle in South Africa in 2019 were owned by black farmers according to the National Agricultural Marketing Council. The persistent question is how best to ensure that these farmers' cattle are integrated into the formal beef value chains. On the positive side, however, there are private-public-partnership models such as those spearheaded in the Free State by the Sernick Group, a diversified agricultural organisation, which are doing encouraging work into commercialising black farmers.

The book was published in 2019 but it will increasingly become more relevant as agriculture is one of the key sectors that government hopes will drive economic activity and job creation as the country recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic. The publication carries an important history of cattle farming and explains the structure of the industry which will be useful to any non-specialist joining the sector. Importantly, Mthembu-Salter should be commended for ending his work by positioning it in current agricultural development policies. Overall, this is a welcome contribution, rich with history, culture and insights into the economic development of cattle farming in South Africa.