

The Origin and Development of the Ennobled Boer Goat

A heart-warming story by Prof Etienne Terblanche

After Solomon had been anointed as a king, the successor to his father David, he negotiated with King Hiram of Tyre for cedars to build the temple, which his father had wished to build but could not achieve in his lifetime. Once the agreement had been concluded, Solomon told Hiram (1 Kings 5:6) "Now therefore command that cedars of Lebanon be cut for me. And my servants will join your servants, and I will pay you for your servants such wages as you set, for you know that there is no one among us who knows how to cut timber like the Sidonians."

As an analogy to this and in retrospect one cannot but say, "because you know yourselves that among us there is no one who understands how to breed a boer goat like the South African farmer."

The African renaissance already started 80 years ago – at the beginning of the 20th century – with breeding the ennobled boer goat. The resurrection and renaissance by breeding the boer goat – that forms an integral part of the African goat - complies with the basic principles of a Renaissance. A regeneration of thinking and an amendment in the view of life of a group of farmers in the Eastern Cape converted the indigenous boer goat into the best meat goat breed in the world. Seen against the background that 341 goat breeds are distributed across the world, it makes this a unique achievement. Compared to where boer goat farmers found themselves 70-80 years ago and where they are today, it has been a remarkable effort. The small group of farmers in the Eastern Cape who took the initiative to improve the boer goat, had no choice but to play the hand they had been dealt with through circumstances. In this hand was the former indigenous goat breed that was an integral part of the greater whole, namely the African goat. It was the goat that the farmers acquired from the indigenous people to farm with. ***Thus the name boer goat gradually evolved.***

The farmers who advocated an improvement of the breed accepted working with the available breeding material that they were familiar with. At the same time they realised the excellent properties and features of the boer goat and formulated a resolute breeding policy. With vision, fine collaboration and a spirit of goodwill these people strove to breed a uniform boer goat with excellent meat features, a high growth rate and fecundity, and that would retain its hardiness and adaptability. The end product was a goat that could produce the maximum meat under veld conditions. What makes this achievement even more remarkable was that the breeders did not use modern objective criteria. They depended on observation and judgement based on phenotype. The so-called hand-and-eye method triumphed.

The road the ennobled boer goat had to travel was even more uneven and rougher. Boer goat breeders did not have the benefit of a newly created breed with its specific qualities and advantages to follow. No, they had to challenge the centuries-old African goat, later called boer goat – with all its baggage of poor conformation, being a veld destroyer, a vagrant and a type less medley. They had to convert it and clothe it in a new mantle; it was selected and developed into a "new" breed. They achieved this by breeding phenotypically from the indigenous boer goat and by selection without using cross-breeding with another pure goat breed. This emphasises these early boer goat breeders' ability to select.

A further important aspect to remember is the fact that the boer goat farmers initially had to generate their own introduction and publicity to introduce the new improved boer goat. The Department of Agriculture was not involved in the early development of the ennobled boer goat and was also not involved in introducing the breed by researchers and information officers. The boer goat breeders were on their own, but what they bred – the ennobled boer goat – provided enough publicity. The new boer goat addressed fellow farmers and the world.

To retain a balance in the discussion of the boer goat we must not disparage the old boer goat – the one from which the ennobled boer goat was selected - to emphasise the phenomenal progress of the new product. It is true that there was a mixture of colours and types, showing great variation in conformation and size. Among them there were numerous well-built meat goats of different colours that established a large gene pool. If they had not been there, there would not have been a basis for selection and breeding. **Eventually "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (Ps 118:22).**

In those days, rural areas, compared to today, were densely populated and farming practices were moulded on a more self-sufficient foundation. The boer goat was therefore an important role-player on the farm as a provider of meat and milk. Farms were relatively small – larger farms often accommodated sub farmers – and the farmer and his family, his workers and sub farmers depended on the boer goat as a source of food. Everyone with a small herd of goats tried to breed a goat that met his specific needs. Consequently there were farmers who selected for greater meat or milk qualities depending on circumstances. The farmer retained his own ram that was, in his opinion, the best for his needs, or he exchanged or bought a ram from a neighbour or fellow farmer.

Furthermore, in that time erf holders in rural towns were entitled to grazing rights for small stock and/or cattle on the town common according to a permit system and depending on conditions! The small stock component usually consisted of goats as they easily adapted to a kraal and herding system. It was a common sight to see a flock of goats coming along the street when the communal goatherd took them home. An old world atmosphere pervaded the air, reflecting the life style and needs of the residents. In the mornings the goatherd took the goats to the veld, watched over them by day and saw them to their owners' properties in the evening.

When we mention the founding of the South African Boer Goat Breeders' Association in 1959 and the preceding era, we immediately commemorate three persons. They coincidentally had the same first name, Theunis. The first was the late Mr Theunis Jordaan, or TB Jordaan of Buffelsfontein, Somerset East; a man who gained renown as a breeder and judge of Friesians, Merinos and his beloved boer goats. One morning we visited the farm Karkotskraal, to the south of Somerset East, where a flock of boer goat ewes were grazing. The old man who looked after the goats, Mr Antoon Fourie, was a veteran of the Anglo-Boer War. When we drove into the yard the goats were on their way to the kraal. About 50 metres away from us they stopped, sniffed the air with their heads alert and inquisitively approached us in their creaking boots, as only a boer goat can. What a sight! It was a flock of about 400 ewes – all of them white with red heads and good conformation – and one looked exactly like the other. That day I realised that this man owns something that could rock the world. It was about nine years before the establishment of the SA Boer Goat Breeders' Association. This stud of TB Jordaan, whose stud master he was from 1930 to 1960, was the first boer goat stud in the country that was registered as such. This is the information he chronicled himself: "This stud of ennobled boer goats was founded in the year 1931, with the purchase of one ram from the late Mr Jeremias Triegaardt of the farm Van Wyksvlei, Bedford, and half of the boer goat ewes that belonged to the partnership WG Jordaan and Sons, of which I was a partner. Around 1918 my father, the late WG Jordaan, bought about fifteen goat ewes from Mrs Van de Venter of the farm Slot, district Somerset East. They were white smooth-coated goat ewes with light red heads. Then he bought a ram from the late Mr IB van Heerden of Kaalplaas, Cradock. It was a particularly large red-dappled ram, with a strong constitution. These ram and ewes were therefore the foundation of the current stud. More or less sixty years ago many farmers each had a few boer goats. In those days, however, they were all the colours of the rainbow and many were long-haired. The only feature people then considered was constitution. The colour, evenness, uniformity and pigmentation did not matter at all. In 1925, while I was in Australia, my father and my brother, who was also a partner in the business, bought one ram from Mr Triegaardt and later another ram from the same Mr Triegaardt of Bedford."

TB Jordaan was the first chairperson of the Boer Goat Breeders' Association – an office he managed with dignity and competence from 1950 to 1968. It was not an easy road and at some meetings he had to hold a tight reign, because some members had strong personalities and sometimes wanted to impose their own views of what the boer goat should look like. A reconnoitre of the minutes of the annual general meetings of that that time relates the story of *sturm und drang* around the boer goat. I attended some of the meetings in those days and I remember the vehement discussions on the colour of the goat!
