A Rural African Story of Hide Sourcing

TOM MARCUS

Before I embark on this story, I offer a preliminary thought: Our Society is a society of technologists as well as chemists. Being technologists is an ancient skill and it could pay to at times, to either look back historically or further afield geographically with some advantage. What If an abattoir which presently manually flays bovine carcasses using pneumatic powered flaying knife decided to robotise that function? How might we advise the cyber technicians?

Possibly the archaic practise of hammering all over the carcase to loosen and coruscate the hide might be revisited?

Or picture the African rural practise of wheelbarrowing the ovine or caprine carcase to the petrol station with its air compressor and inserting, subcutaneously, a football inflating needle attached to the air supply. Provided that *rigor mortis* has not set in then, flaying is easy.

As to my story:

Before the end of Apartheid many hides from indigenous rural farmers would be dried and could be carried on the roof of green Putco (non-white passengers) buses in South Africa. These hides and skins entered the leather supply and were being sold to merchants in country towns. They would be baled and then enter the supply chain. With the decline of the Putco bus service and the rise of smaller Kombis (minibuses), the transporting of these hides became more difficult for indigenous farmer from outlying places. The Kombis didn't want hides on their roofs.

I ran a bovine hide-sourcing company in Southern Africa for some years. The company was called Tholanizikhumba Trading cc. which translated from the IsiZulu language means 'come let us go fetch hides/leather' (In IsiZulu, it is the same word '*skhumba*' for both leather and hide).

I had worked for some years in a tannery near Pietermaritzburg in Kwa Zulu Natal. The tannery had been active from 1879. During the second World War Pietermaritzburg aided the allied war effort with a significant shoe industry. She was known as a Northampton of the South.

In the early 1990s I had managed a lime yard and rocker pit veg tanning sections before implementing Quality Management Systems. However, by 1995 the landscape changed as imported footwear shoes from Asia decimated the local leather shoe manufacturers

South African Hide Trade

In South Africa there is an, in principle, well-regulated hide and skin trade. The Skin and Hide and Leather Council (SHALC) had control over much of the trade. A levy is made on butchered meat at registered abattoirs. SHALC funds training and other activities. However, we believed around the periphery of this established set-up, trade opportunities existed.

The directors at the tannery encouraged me to access these peripheral unregulated vendors as a separate business

The hides from these herds owned by indigenous farmers who live in out of the way places or neighbouring countries were traded. We developed a business model which brought these hides into the leather supply chain with the support of the local tannery.

This rural herd was quite large. We recruited Simphiwe Sithole a local worker as a driver with a regular 'day' job but who could take time off for our company business. We would enlist local agents. They would have a cleaned out cubic plastic chemical Schütz container which had had the top cut off and a copious supply of salt (Fig. 1). The purpose of container was to corral salted hides safe from rats and dogs until it could be collected and transported to the local tannery.

Figure 1. Simphiwe and container.

The agent needed to encourage skilful flaying (it was not the time for a young lad to have a go for the first time). A single deep flay cut in the butt very much reduces the hide's value. Educating the indigenous farmers in ways of reducing hide damage either pre-mortem, during slaughter or post mortem was important; as well as demonstrating good curing practice we also produced illustrated training booklets with tips in English, IsiZulu or Sesotho.

In return for the training and basic equipment, the agent would collect and salt freshly-flayed bovine hides following ceremonial slaughter. These would then be rolled up and stored in the Schütz container.

* Corresponding author: E-mail: tom.marcus@btinternet.com

When the container was full, we would collect the salted hides with a bakkie (pick up) and transport them and sell to the tannery when they had been satisfactorily inspected and weighed. The agent would be paid on an agreed rate per hide. Money was paid directly into the agent's bank account.

There was an element of trust which in some cases was not honoured. Hides which are to be salted require 30% of their weight in salt. Therefore, if we brought 400kg of salt we expect about a tonne of hides down the line. Some agents used the salt for other uses. Some would place a crudely sun-dried hide in a flowing river to rehydrate and then salt the hide. A sub-standard product results. Some of these agents were dropped.

Zulu Nguni hides

Often the well-preserved Zulu Nguni hides would command a premium because of their hair patterns. For this to occur the hair should some show mirror symmetry (inkone) across the backbone. Two or three different hair colours needed to be present.

Stockmen would name cattle according to the patterns and images on the animal indicating the closest representation of nature images such as cloud formations, movement of grasses, birds and their eggs, stones and trees. Maybe the beast's fecundity and its function in a particular *lobolo* (bridal price) negotiations might be alluded to:

Some visually evocative examples patterns are *Inhlakuva* (sugar bean) or *imatshehlethi* (stones of the forest).

The kill of these rural herds is seasonal. When the grass dies back in the winter, the herds would be culled. These often coincided with traditional weddings where 5 of 10 cattle would be slaughtered. Cattle slaughter also accompanies funerals. Should one be offered food at such a time you may well be expected to eat a gargantuan plateful of meat. Now the advent of solar powered or motorised mobile freezer units mitigated the necessity to consume the meat so quickly (Fig 2).

Figure 2. Nguni hide.

Quality problems

At times, I would be presented with hopeless putrid, fly-ridden hides or skins with hair that was very loose. What was a potentially significant asset for someone who was very poor had been completely wasted and my hope was to try to redress this in the future Besides the disappointment of the vendor with their useless hide, I had the frustration of having driven kilometres and used expensive fuel and then had to make the return journey with no load. The vendor's futile use of wood ash sprinkled on the flesh side in this case was of course useless.

It would be good to offer a workable cure in the future.

Wattle cure

Even a simple reagent like common salt becomes expensive when transport is factored in. I think that the method of curing with black wattle bark should be tried. Wattle trees were introduced to South Africa from Australia in the late nineteenth century. Mimosa powder from the black wattle tree is now sold all over the world principally to the tanning industry. The wattle tree itself has spread as a weed beyond its farmed South Africa plantations. If the hide could have been layered with stripped off wattle bark in a lined pit it could have been saved. Other local tannins could be researched. The advantage of this local imparting of knowledge is that the curing knowhow could be used on future hides and skins without needing transport of reagents and using local natural products.

We had a regular understanding with traders in the Kingdom of Lesotho, a mountainous sovereign state in the centre of South Africa. We facilitated cross border trade from Lesotho. Several Sesotho hide collectors would assemble pallets of hides at a depot in Maseru, Lesotho's capital and the tannery's truck would collect them when the Lesotho veterinary certificate and South Africa VAT had been paid. The truck returned to the tannery laden with salted hides. I would oversee the weighing of the pallets back in Pietermaritzburg.

Let me add a few other observations that are somewhat disparate but may be of interest:

Annual sheepskin opportunity

When thousands of sheep are being killed in rural areas for the annual Muslim feast of Eid-ul-Adha this often results in worthless cut/putrefied sheepskins. If the slaughter and flaying were skilfully done under the auspices of a local mosque, the families could take home the meat (some is given to the poor) and the skins can be pickled and sold.

Untanned hide usage and traditional garb and funereal leather

I mentioned the ambiguity of word *skhumba*. It is a word that is applied to both the tanned and the untanned dermal products.Thousands of untanned hides are used to make drum skins, traditional shields and other knick-knacks. The *Shemba* 'church'

processes and markets much of this large and lucrative market.

Traditional attire is can be made from animal skins. Some hides and skins end up in this niche.

Even as in British ceremonial culture there is a place where, for example evening dress, a morning suit or a kilt is appropriate, traditional Zulu attire is worn occasionally: at a wedding the groom would wear a calfskin skirt called an *ibhesha* or beaded trousers called *umbhala*. The bride would wear a leather skirt called *isidwada* her breasts would be covered with an *isicwaya* garment, her head with an *inkehli* hat. Oxtail fringes might adorn her elbows and knees.

The use of the *skhumba* carries on beyond death: at a funeral, a coffin could be handsomely enhanced by on-laid panels or a shroud of hair-on Nguni hides.

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Further Reading:

* Hides and Skins for the Tanning Industry (FOA) Ian Leach 1995
* The Abundant Nguni Herds 2005 3rd Reprint Dr M. Poland, ISBN 1974950695