



ASEEL

– THE MISUNDERSTOOD BREED:
A SOUTH AFRICAN STORY

WRITTEN BY
WILLIAM JUUL
(JUUL GAMEFOWL)



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Written by
William Juul
(Juul Gamefowl)

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About the Author

William Juul is a fourth-generation South African Indian Game and Aseel breeder and a co-founder of the International Oriental Gamefowl Association (IOGA). Through his work with breeders in South Africa and abroad, he has focused on the preservation, documentation, and promotion of traditional Oriental gamefowl breeds, with particular interest in the history and diversity of the Aseel family.



*Dedicated to the breeders, fanciers, and
custodians of Aseel throughout South
Africa and the Indian subcontinent, whose
passion and dedication have preserved
these remarkable birds for future
generations.*



Introduction

There are few breeds of domestic fowl that inspire as much admiration, mystery, and debate in South Africa as the Aseel. Renowned throughout the world for its courage, intelligence, strength, and unmistakable appearance, the breed has captured the hearts and minds of generations of South African poultry enthusiasts.

From exhibition breeders and conservationists to gamefowl fanciers and rural hobbyists, the Aseel remains one of the most respected and sought-after breeds in the country.

If there is one question that many South African breeders would like answered, it is this: When did the first Aseel set foot on South African soil? Unfortunately, the answer remains elusive. Unlike many recognised exhibition breeds whose development and importation were meticulously documented, the history of the Aseel in South Africa is largely preserved through oral tradition rather than written records.

Historical documentation concerning the breed's arrival is remarkably scarce. As many breeders jokingly remark, genuine written records are almost as rare as genuine Aseel themselves. As a result, much of what we know today has been passed down through conversations at poultry shows, discussions amongst long-time breeders, stories shared within rural communities, and, undoubtedly, tales originating from South Africa's now-illegal cockfighting fraternity.

While separating fact from folklore is often difficult, these accounts collectively provide valuable insight into the breed's development within South Africa. This article seeks to examine the commonly accepted oral history surrounding the Aseel's arrival and establishment in the country, whilst also exploring how the breed is understood, bred, and perceived in South Africa today.

Chapter One: Where Did They Come From?

For many South African gamefowl enthusiasts, particularly those raised during the latter half of the twentieth century, the name Barney Barnard became almost synonymous with Aseel breeding. Stories of exceptional birds passing through his hands became part of local poultry folklore, and his influence on the development of Aseel bloodlines in South Africa cannot easily be overstated.

Among the bloodlines most frequently associated with Barnard is the famous Atkinson strain, developed by the renowned British breeder Herbert Atkinson. Oral accounts suggest that Barnard played a significant role in introducing and distributing these birds throughout South Africa. Over time, the Atkinson strain became particularly dominant in the Cape provinces, where it gained a reputation for its distinctive appearance, hardiness, and breeding consistency.

Closely linked to this history is the name Duncan Unsworth, a respected breeder whose contribution to the preservation and refinement of Atkinson Aseel in the Western Cape remains widely acknowledged. Many enthusiasts regard Unsworth as one of the foundational figures of Aseel breeding in Cape Town. His birds became highly sought after, and even today, birds carrying the designation “Unsworth Atkinson” often command considerable respect and value amongst breeders.

The influence of the Atkinson strain eventually spread far beyond the Western Cape. Today, descendants of these bloodlines can be found throughout South Africa and in various parts of the world. Yet the story of the Aseel in South Africa extends far beyond any single breeder or bloodline.

The Indian Connection

Long before modern importations occurred, South Africa experienced significant immigration from the Indian subcontinent. Beginning in 1860, thousands of indentured labourers arrived in the Colony of Natal to work primarily within the rapidly expanding sugar industry. Between 1860 and 1911, more than 150,000 Indians arrived in Natal under the indenture system, bringing with them not only their labour but also their languages, customs, traditions, and cultural practices.

Among these traditions was the keeping of poultry. Throughout India, Aseel had long been regarded as a bird of prestige and cultural significance. For centuries they had been selectively bred for courage, endurance, and distinctive regional characteristics. It is therefore unsurprising that some immigrants sought to maintain their connection to their homeland through the keeping of familiar livestock and poultry.

Although documentary evidence remains limited, numerous accounts from long-established Indian families in KwaZulu-Natal suggest that Aseel-type birds were present within Indian communities for many generations. Birds were often exchanged between families, gifted to relatives, or passed from father to son. Over time, certain families became known for maintaining particular strains, some of which are believed to have remained relatively unchanged for decades.

Even today, there are families in KwaZulu-Natal who claim to maintain bloodlines passed down through multiple generations. Whether every such claim can be historically verified is difficult to determine, but there is little doubt that the Indian community played a significant role in preserving and spreading Aseel genetics throughout the province. Many of the birds found in KwaZulu-Natal today trace at least part of their heritage to these early family-maintained lines.

The British Influence

Another possible avenue through which Aseel entered South Africa lies within the history of British colonial expansion. During the nineteenth century, British soldiers, administrators, and settlers moved extensively throughout the Empire, including India and South Africa.

The Aseel was already well known amongst British poultry enthusiasts during the Victorian era. Returning military officers and colonial officials frequently transported unusual livestock, poultry, and ornamental birds between colonies and Britain itself. Historical records confirm that Aseel had already been established in Britain during the nineteenth century, where they attracted considerable interest amongst poultry fanciers.

It is therefore entirely plausible that British soldiers, settlers, or colonial officials brought Aseel or Aseel-derived birds to South Africa during this period. While direct evidence remains limited, the movement of birds between various parts of the British Empire was commonplace, making such introductions highly likely.

The Formation of a South African Aseel

As the twentieth century progressed, South Africa continued to attract immigrants from across the Indian subcontinent, including individuals and families originating from India, Pakistan, and what is now Bangladesh. Many brought with them a deep appreciation for traditional gamefowl and, where possible, imported birds or maintained contact with breeders in their countries of origin.

Over time, these various bloodlines inevitably became intermixed. Birds were exchanged amongst friends, sold between provinces, and crossed with existing local strains. As a result, many South African Aseel gradually developed into a unique blend of bloodlines originating from different regions of the subcontinent.

Whilst purists may lament the loss of certain original strains, this process also created something distinctly South African. The birds found throughout the country today often display characteristics from multiple traditional Aseel varieties, resulting in a population that reflects both local breeding preferences and generations of adaptation to South African conditions.

In many respects, one could argue that a uniquely South African interpretation of the Aseel has emerged—one shaped not only by genetics but also by the country's diverse cultural history.

Modern Importations

The story of the Aseel in South Africa continues to evolve. Despite increasingly stringent import regulations, the demand for new bloodlines remains exceptionally strong. Throughout the country, breeders constantly seek birds displaying superior conformation, desirable traits, or rare regional characteristics.

Unfortunately, this demand has also fuelled illegal importation. Stories of fertile eggs and live birds entering the country through unofficial channels are commonplace within breeding circles. Whilst such practices remain unlawful and carry significant biosecurity risks, they highlight the extraordinary appeal that the Aseel continues to hold amongst enthusiasts.

The pursuit of new bloodlines, improved quality, and greater authenticity remains as strong today as it was generations ago. More than simply a breed of chicken, the Aseel has become part of a living cultural tradition—one that continues to fascinate, divide, and inspire South African breeders from all walks of life.

Chapter Two: The South African Aseel of 2026 – Understanding the Breed

To understand the Aseel in South Africa today, one must first understand how the breed is viewed within the country's organised poultry fraternity.

The South African Show Poultry Organisation (SASPO), the governing body responsible for recognised poultry breed standards in South Africa, recognises what is broadly referred to as the “South African Aseel”. When studying the standards accepted and maintained by SASPO, these birds can generally be divided into three primary categories:

- * Reza Aseel – A medium-sized bird closely resembling the traditional Sonatol-type fowl, often associated with the well-known Atkinson phenotype.*
- * Kulang Aseel – A larger, taller, more malayoid-type bird characterised by its stature and reach, although it should not be confused with the Malay Game.*
- * Madras Aseel – The largest of the three recognised varieties, a broad, powerful bird traditionally associated with the distinctive blue-red family.*

These classifications have served South African exhibition poultry well and have provided breeders with a framework through which birds can be judged and exhibited. However, the question remains: What exactly does the term Aseel mean?

The answer is far more complex than many people realise.

The word Aseel (also spelt Asil) originates from the Arabic word أصيل, meaning “pure”, “noble”, or “of distinguished lineage”. In Urdu it is written as اصیل, whilst in Hindi it is written as असली, carrying meanings such as “real”, “genuine”, “authentic”, or “pure”. The term therefore refers not merely to a physical type of bird, but to the concept of purity of descent and established lineage.

Historically, Aseel was never a single breed in the modern Western sense of the word. Rather, it represented a broad family of ancient gamefowl strains developed throughout different regions of the Indian subcontinent over many centuries. These regional populations evolved distinct genotypes and phenotypes, shaped by geography, breeder preference, cultural traditions, and selective breeding practices.

The result was a remarkable diversity of birds. Some strains were tall and upright, whilst others were compact and heavily built. Some displayed pea combs, whilst others carried single combs. Certain families possessed feathered shanks, crests, muffs, or distinctive colour patterns that would appear unusual to many modern South African breeders. Yet all were considered Aseel within their regions of origin because they represented established pure families with recognised histories and characteristics.

This is where much of the modern misunderstanding begins.

Over time, the South African interpretation of Aseel has become increasingly focused on a relatively narrow range of accepted phenotypes. Within many circles, the birds recognised under the SASPO framework have gradually become viewed as the only legitimate expression of the breed. Consequently, much of the historical knowledge surrounding the wider Aseel family has faded into the background.

The rich diversity that once defined the breed has, in some instances, been replaced by a singular image of what an Aseel is supposed to look like.

It is important, however, to understand how this situation developed. As organised poultry exhibitions became the primary platform through which Aseel were evaluated, breeders naturally selected birds that performed well under exhibition standards. This process is neither unique to South Africa nor inherently negative. Throughout the world, exhibition breeding has shaped the appearance of countless poultry breeds.

In some cases, breeders introduced blood from other oriental breeds to accentuate particular characteristics desired within the show ring. Crosses involving Malay, Indian Game, Yokohama, Sumatra, and other breeds have been discussed within South African poultry circles for decades. Whether these crosses occurred on a large or small scale is often debated, but their influence is frequently cited when discussing certain exhibition lines.

It is also important to acknowledge the historical context. Once organised cockfighting became outlawed and the traditional performance testing of gamefowl disappeared, breeders increasingly selected birds according to visual characteristics rather than fighting ability. Traits such as height, station, feather quality, body shape, colour, and overall presentation naturally became more important because these were the characteristics that judges could evaluate.

This should not be viewed as criticism of the exhibition world. On the contrary, the South African show fraternity deserves significant credit for preserving interest in Aseel and other gamefowl breeds. Without poultry exhibitions, many historic bloodlines and breeding traditions may well have disappeared entirely. The exhibition community continues to play a vital role in maintaining public interest in poultry breeding and encouraging high standards of husbandry and selection.

However, preserving the breed should also involve preserving knowledge.

The Aseel is not defined solely by a particular body shape, comb type, or feather pattern. The breed's historical significance lies precisely in its diversity. Knowledge of regional strains, family lines, and traditional phenotypes should be shared and embraced so that future generations can appreciate the full breadth of the Aseel heritage.

Perhaps the greatest misunderstanding facing the breed today stems from the overemphasis of a handful of visible characteristics.

As a result, birds exhibiting traits such as crests, muffs, feathered shanks, single combs, or other non-standard features are often dismissed as “not Aseel” by those unfamiliar with the breed’s broader history. Yet many such characteristics can be found amongst historically documented Aseel populations throughout India and Pakistan.

Likewise, numerous regional strains existed that would not comfortably fit within modern South African exhibition classifications, despite being recognised as pure Aseel within their countries of origin for generations.

The reality is that Aseel has always been far too diverse to fit neatly into a single box.

No written standard can fully capture a breed that evolved across thousands of kilometres, multiple cultures, and countless generations of selective breeding. Whilst regional populations have become relatively standardised over time and remain remarkably well preserved in both India and Pakistan, the breed as a whole continues to represent a spectrum rather than a singular type.

It is perhaps this gradual movement towards a single accepted phenotype that has motivated many breeders outside the exhibition world to seek new imports and alternative bloodlines. For these breeders, the objective is not merely to acquire different birds, but to preserve genetic diversity, protect regional heritage, and maintain connections to the broader Aseel family that exists beyond South Africa's borders.

Ultimately, understanding the Aseel requires an appreciation of both perspectives. The exhibition breeder and the preservation breeder are not necessarily working against one another. Both, in their own way, are contributing to the survival of a remarkable group of fowl.

The challenge moving forward is not deciding which interpretation is correct, but rather recognising that the Aseel has always been larger, broader, and more diverse than any single standard can fully describe.

Perhaps that is why, even after centuries of breeding and study, the Aseel remains one of the most fascinating—and most misunderstood—breeds in the world.