

## **The traditional knowledge and practices regarding the endemic herbal tea “rooibos” in South Africa: effects of the recent social dynamic on the production process**

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### **The problematic of the study**

This study focuses on the *knowledge, the know-how and the practices* related to rooibos and its production process. This paper intends to show a recent evolution of production practices and related knowledge and know how, and to present the main changes that have been affecting the production process over time. The main hypothesis for this article is that the global economic stakes have social impacts, which involve changes in the distribution of the farmers' and other stakeholders' knowledge and practices related to this crop. Amongst all these changes, we will try to emphasize the social dynamics and labour organisation evolution, especially regarding migrations and seasonal work: this phenomenon could to a certain extent be considered a “total social fact” (Mauss 1923), as it involves all aspects of the social life: economy, history, politics...

I will first introduce the historic and social contexts, before presenting the different steps of the production, the knowledge involved in each of these steps and the distribution of this knowledge amongst stakeholders, including an analysis of recent changes. I will also intend to show the consequences of those changes for the rooibos farms, and then for the rooibos industry in general.

### **The rooibos: an endemic resource in South Africa**

The Rooibos is an endemic plant in South Africa, which is used to produce a herbal tea. *Aspalathus linearis* (the scientific name of the rooibos) is a leguminous plant; typical of the natural habitat *fynbos*. The wild rooibos distribution area extends from the Cape Point to the southern part of the Northern Cape.

Rooibos is allegedly supposed to have been collected in the wild by the local people, the Khoisan, during the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Khoisan are also supposed to have been aware of its medicinal properties. However, there seems to exist no description of this use in the literature<sup>1</sup>. Recent scientific research confirms that rooibos contains no theine, few tannins, and that the tea does seem to help infant colic, although no formal studies have been done (Erickson 2003). Rooibos literature is very scarce before the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the commercial interest for this plant only started in the early 1900s, with the first marketing of this resource, and later on its domestication. The rooibos gradually transforms from a “poor people tea” consumed only locally into beverage consumed worldwide. Up to 95% is now cultivated, and has its own scope in on the tea market.

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<sup>1</sup> The Swedish botanist Carl Thunberg travelled in the Cape region late in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is usually referred as quoting the use of rooibos by local populations. He actually refers to *borbonia cordata*. (Thunberg, 1795) which is not rooibos, but another plant called “Stekeltee” (Marloth, 1917).

### **What makes the rooibos specific?**

Overall we could describe the main characteristics of the rooibos market as follows: the recent domestication of the resource, the increasing heterogeneity of producers and other stakeholders, and the dynamism of the market (which is opening towards different products and different labels).

Rooibos is a product with a well established industry: at least 450 producers supply it, and 8 companies process and package it, selling it either to local brands or abroad. The study focuses on the first process in the industry, which involves the primary producers. Their roles in the rooibos industry are very different according to three main characteristics: the size of the farm, the location of the farm in the rooibos production area, and the social background of the farmers. The survey sampling was done based on these criteria, and this paper is based on sixteen interviews conducted on ten different farms. Ten interviews were conducted with farmers, four with workers, and two with contractors.

The smallest farms produce a few kilos of rooibos per year, whereas the biggest farmer produces over 1,000 tons of rooibos per year, which comprises 8 to 10% of the total production.

Some factors are related to the location of the farms: the distance to towns like Clanwilliam or Citrusdal, the aridity of the area (some places are so dry that farmers can only farm sheep and rooibos), and the quality of the rooibos according to the area where it grows (some areas are largely reputed to produce a better quality rooibos in term of taste).

Most of the rooibos producers are white farmers who own or rent their lands, but many small-scale "coloured" farmers are also producing rooibos. Some of the small-scale farmers are part of two organisations (Heiveld and Wupperthal); others are independent, and considered as "emerging farmers" or PDI (Previously Disadvantaged Individuals). They are generally part of BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) programs; some of them benefited from grants to buy their farm. Taken together, the farmers considered as small-scale produce around 5% of the global rooibos production.

Regarding the dynamism of the market, the increase of the production had many impacts on the technical, social and economic aspects of the farms. We can quote, for example, the development of the mechanisation, the extension of the production area (which went from 14,000 to 30,000 hectares between 1991 and 2003 (TISA 2004)), and the development of contract workers employment.

### **The dynamic social context**

Field work shows that human migrations have dramatically increased over the past ten to twenty years. At the farmers' level, different movements can be described. Most of the farmers I met started producing rooibos between the 1950s and the 1970s, whereas many other producers settled down in the rooibos production area and started producing this crop in the past ten years. Some farmers located in areas that are not considered part of the "traditional rooibos production area"<sup>2</sup> have also converted their fields for the production of rooibos.

Regarding the labour force, farmers in the Western Cape have only been employing the local workers, generally referred as "coloured people", for the last century; however they have recently been employing more and more seasonal labourers from other areas for rooibos harvesting. This seasonal labour force consists of migrants from the Eastern Cape, the North

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<sup>2</sup> Most of the producers describe the "traditional rooibos production area" as the Clanwilliam, Graafwater, Nieuwoudtville and North of Citrusdal areas. They generally consider Lambert's bay, Piketberg, Porterville and Varhynsdorp areas as the extension area.

West or the Free State provinces, but some of them are now permanently settled in Clanwilliam or Citrusdal.

To understand this specific change, it seems important to describe the origin of relationships between farmers and the so-called coloured in the Western Cape, which started in the mid-seventeenth century. People who describe themselves as “coloured” have different origins; slaves formed the original core of the coloured population of South Africa (Denis-Constant 1998) and there are also strong linkages between Khoekhoe and Coloureds (Barnard 1994). The farm labourers in the Western Cape in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century were generally Khoisan or “Bastaard”, which used to refer to those born of miscegenous relationship (Penn 2005). The need for a labour force in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century was such that getting new labourers became part of the Commando task, sometimes even in a violent way<sup>3</sup>.

Later on in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the National Party set up the CLLP, the Coloured Labour Preference Policy, to promote the interests of persons designated as “coloured”. The policy was mainly confined to the Western Cape, and strictly controlled the labourer migrations (Goldin 1984) until the demise of apartheid. Migrations of black labourers in the Clanwilliam area only started in the early 1990s, according to the Clanwilliam Municipality.

### **From the bush to the tea bag**

It seems important in this section to describe the different activities in the rooibos production process, to understand what kind of knowledge and stakeholders are involved at the different stages of the production.

The first activity in the rooibos production process is the seed collection. Every year rooibos seeds are collected on the fields during the hottest months of the year (between November and January). There are mainly two techniques used to collect them: either sifting the sand around the rooibos plants, or following the ants which collect different seeds. Most of the farmers recognize that it is a very difficult job, which requires a certain knowledge (especially regarding the anthill digging<sup>4</sup>). All the seed collectors interviewed are coloured people, either permanent workers on a specific farm or independent workers who travel from farm to farm to collect seeds. They have learnt this practice from their parents (generally the mother), and if ever they have transmitted it to somebody else it is generally to one of their children, or another member of their family. Seed production is adequate enough at the moment, but many farmers and seed collectors testify that fewer and fewer people are learning this practice because it is a very hard job.

The seeds are then planted in nurseries. Taking care of the nursery is also considered an important activity and is generally managed on the farm by the producer himself. The seeds are planted between mid-February and April. The seedlings are then transplanted into fields after the winter rain, between June and August. This activity must be done quickly, when the soil is still wet from the last rain. For that reason, farmers generally employ seasonal workers, because they need an important labour force during a short period. Seedlings can also be planted with a machine, but for many reasons<sup>5</sup> farmers still plant largely by hand.

The plant is then topped the next winter, in order to prevent it from growing straight. The topping gives the plant a bushy shape, which strengthens it for the next harvesting. This

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<sup>3</sup> “Commandos from the General Commando onwards would have twin objectives: the crushing of opposition and the acquisition of labour. The trekboers had been given carte blanche to pursue their own interests. They could either sweep the Khoisan out of their path or incorporate them into their economy as unfree labourers.” (Penn, 2005:117-118).

<sup>4</sup> This activity requires knowing where are the anthill from one year to the next one, and seeds collectors explained that they can’t explore the same nest every year, in order to prevent the ants to move out...

<sup>5</sup> Building machines for rooibos industry is still very expensive, as it is considered as a small industry. The machine is also recent, and some farmers do not think it is really effective.

activity is similar to the harvesting, except that it is only done once. It also involves more seasonal workers.

Rooibos is harvested for the first time the following summer; 2 years after the seeds have been sowed. Harvesting generally takes place from December to April. The process is very simple: plants are cut at about 1/3 of the height with a sickle, and laid down on the ground or on plastic bags before being bundled. Nevertheless it involves a number of skills which are very important for the quality of the tea and for the survival of the plant. The plant must be cut at the right height: above the harvesting scar of the last year.

Farmers need a lot of labour force for this activity: machines have been built since the 1970s, but about 50% of the rooibos is still harvested by hand. Farmers complain that it is becoming more and more difficult to find labourers willing to do this activity. Sometimes seasonal workers leave before the harvesting is finished. Most of the farmers employ seasonal workers for this activity, which requires the biggest seasonal labour force in the rooibos production. It is difficult to estimate how many people are employed, but it seems that the workers staying in the Clanwilliam Township, Khayelitsha, are insufficient or, according to some farmers, are not willing to work on rooibos fields. Many farmers said they have to go to other provinces to find workers.

The rooibos is then delivered to the processing place, the Tea Court. Rooibos is shopped, then collected on the yard and watered to promote fermentation<sup>6</sup>. It is generally spread the next morning, after about 8 hours of fermentation, to the drying part of the Tea Court. The tea is laid into a thin layer, and turned over a few times to evenly dry. It is then put into bulk bags.

This process is considered to be very simple: a farmer wrote down the different steps to make a record of it, and it was no longer than 5 lines... However, this process is one of the most important, as the colour and the taste of the tea depend on the fermentation. For this reason, the checking of this process is a very skilled activity, and we can note that the person in charge of it is often designated the "tea maker" or the "sweat master". Seasonal workers can be employed at the Tea Court, but only to move the bundles, or to lay the fermented tea, but they would never be in charge of the fermentation process.

The last step of the production consists in sterilizing and sifting the rooibos, before selling it in bulk or packaging it. Sterilization can only be done in one of the eight processing factories.

It is noticeable that the migrations entail some changes in term of rooibos production stakeholders and practices: some practices do not involve specialised workers anymore (especially harvesting and seedling planting) whereas others still require a very specific know-how which is still familiar to local labourers and other specialised workers (seed collecting and fermentation of the rooibos). Indeed, most of the farmers think that rooibos is an easy crop to grow, but in reality we can see that there is a clear boundary between the easy practices that can be delegated to seasonal workers and the skilled practices that are still carried out by permanent qualified workers or by the farmer himself.

### **The distribution of knowledge in the rooibos industry according to the different "social groups"**

The economic context of the rooibos industry has gradually translated into an increased number of stakeholders, as well as a wider social diversity. The study of the knowledge, practices, and know-how of the rooibos producers and labourers shows that these are connected to specific social groups.

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<sup>6</sup> This operation is commonly called "fermentation" or "sweating", but it is in fact an enzymatic oxidation. This oxidation is determinant for the flavour and the colour of the tea (Ginsberg, 1976)

The workers categories are clearly distinguished by the farmers: most of the permanent workers are designated as “coloured”, “locals”, or “brown”, whereas most of the seasonal workers are described as “black” people. Farmers explain these categories by a difference of “culture”. The uniformity of the white producers and other rooibos industry stakeholders’ discourses is amazing; they use the same adjectives to describe each category of workers. They generally recognize having a lot in common with the so-called coloured people (« we’ve got the same religion, the same language » indeed « we trust them ») but regarding their work they also say « they don’t want to work », « they are lazy », and «they drink». The discourses relating to the seasonal workers defined as “black” are basically the opposite: « we don’t have the same language », but « they are proud people », « they want to work », and «they don’t drink».

It would be interesting to try to understand to what extent these categories are socially and historically built, even if it is not the purpose of this article. Indeed, these categories are not as homogenous as they are described: many “coloured” workers I have met spent a while in Cape Town to work, and some have learnt to speak English there. With regards to the migrant labourers, many of whom have learnt Afrikaans<sup>7</sup>, some are settled in Clanwilliam where they have been for more than 10 years, and their children generally go to schools where they learn Afrikaans... We could also question to what extent being a migrant is a strong motivation in finding a job or the cause of the very low salary on the regular attendance at work. It is also important to recall that Apartheid policy also concerned the working area, leaving “a legacy of racism, low trust, low skills, high absenteeism, adversarial industrial relations, and a lack of identification by employees with the goals of the enterprise.” (Webster 2005).

As we already pointed out, the boundary between qualified and non qualified practices almost overlays the permanent and seasonal work on the rooibos farms. This is not the only difference between the permanent and the seasonal workers: permanent workers have a closer relationship with the farmer and are generally accommodated on the farm; whereas the seasonal workers do not even meet the farmers and do not stay on the farm. They are not even paid in the same way.

### **Changes on the farms**

Changes in workers’ employment require a new kind of organisation: seasonal workers are on piecework rate, which is regarded as more effective in term of quantity of work. On the other hand, it requires employing foremen to supervise the work. The organisation of the seasonal work then implies a strict and complicated hierarchy, which involves more stakeholders: farmers, contractors, foremen, and seasonal workers. Relationships between farmers and the labourers thus change to some extent. Seasonal workers only communicate with the leader and the contractor, whereas the farmer only communicates with the contractor and sometimes with the foreman, but not with the seasonal workers anymore.

This new organisation is very different from the “Paternalism of the Western Cape farmers”. According to du Toit, the notion of *mekaar verstaan* (understand each other) is important on the farms. Farmers “often argue (...) that there is a ‘special relationship’ or ‘special understand’ between them and their workers – an understanding that does not exist in urban areas.”(du-Toit 1992). We could probably add: “that also does not exist with seasonal workers”.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, this is quoted from an interview with a seasonal worker « Afrikaans and English guys give us some job. You can’t say you don’t speak Afrikaans”

Permanent workers are generally accommodated on the farm and paid a fixed salary, whereas seasonal workers are fetched from town every day or every week. Many farmers also have the impression that the law overprotects the workers in spite of themselves: they have to give accommodation to their permanent workers but cannot withdraw the accommodation if the workers decide to stop working, or even to work for another farmer. In that case, employing seasonal workers is also considered as protecting themselves, as the law is far less strict.

On the one hand, this change in relationship between farmers and workers breaks the long term dependence of workers on the farmer, which concerned “every aspect of their material survival: money, water, electricity – often even food and drink” (du-Toit 1992).

On the other hand, it is difficult to measure if the wage from piece work enables workers to live a better life; we also need to consider that many workers are not registered.

Sometimes workers from different origins have to work together, which can create tensions for different reasons: they do not speak the same language, they are not paid in the same way, and they do not stay at the same place... Labour migration is still controversial, and marked by nationalistic tensions and xenophobia (Matlosa 1995).

### **Changes for the industry**

Rooibos production is increasing, and farmers have to adapt their way of production. Some of them have chosen the “mechanisation way”, which is very expensive but has its own advantages: harvesting is faster and requires only a few workers. Most of the rooibos producers are rather employing seasonal workers. This new kind of employment certainly has an impact on the tea quality and may affect the plant lifespan as well.

Foremen are employed to control the different aspects of the work: teaching the new workers how to proceed, ensuring that the work is done properly, checking the weight of the bundles for every worker (who are paid according to the weight of rooibos they cut). Piecework rate is considered more effective for many farmers in terms of quantity, but it is probably less effective in term of quality. For example, some foremen testify that workers try to make their bundles heavy in different ways: by adding stones, branches or even sand. Stones will certainly be taken out on the Tea Court before the rooibos is shipped, but small branches and sand will probably be processed with the rooibos. The rooibos is obviously sifted before being packaged<sup>8</sup>, but these different practices could affect the final quality of the tea.

We could also suggest the possibility that because the seasonal workers are paid on piece work rate, they could be willing to cut the bush lower than it is supposed to be cut. Foremen testify that they are supposed to control this as well<sup>9</sup>; but a long-term study of the bushes' lifespan would be necessary before making any conclusion.

Another change that could affect the rooibos industry is the lack of qualified workers in the future. None of the stakeholders I have interviewed until now is particularly worried about this, but a few of them testify that there are becoming fewer and fewer seed collectors. A lack of seeds would be tragic for the rooibos industry, as this is the only way to reproduce the cultivated rooibos. Most of the farmers do not worry because they think that as long as the rooibos industry provides job opportunities there will always be people willing to claim them.

### **Conclusion**

The full consequences of the migrations are difficult to draw for the moment; nevertheless we tried to figure out what they may be for the rooibos farmers and industry. It appears that relationships on rooibos farms are changing, and that seasonal work may have

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<sup>8</sup> You cannot prevent all the dust around the Tea Court to blow and to mix with the rooibos

<sup>9</sup> Foremen supervise teams of ten to fifteen people, it seems difficult to strictly control everybody on the fields

consequences on the tea quality. Long term studies are necessary to go anywhere further regarding these aspects.

It is also necessary to keep in mind that the seasonal work phenomenon is common in the Western Cape, and does not concern only rooibos farms. It would be also interesting to draw a comparison between different kinds of farms. Agriculture is one of the three fields, together with construction and mining, where a significant proportion of the temporary labour force is mobilised through labour brokers and involved in sub-contracting employment arrangements. (Crush 1997).

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