

## Tea with F.W. DeKlerk

As the food we eat becomes more and more political, we begin to hear the story it tells. In too many cases, it is a story of environmental destruction and human despair.

The story of rooibos tea is no exception. It begins in the most infamous system of racial segregation in our planet's history. The Apartheid era in South Africa was a direct extension of colonial policies designed to extract resources and profits from the land and local populations. The native ethnic groups of South Africa were pushed off their ancestral homelands to make room for large-scale, colonial plantations. European magistrates and foreign businesses seized the now-famous gold and diamond deposits near Johannesburg, enslaving local populations to mine the shiny baubles that made De Beers a household name and South Africa the only "developed" nation on the continent.

The National Party that ran Apartheid for 40 years used military and police to separate black South Africans from the most profitable sectors of the economy. They were legally denied the right to own land, or businesses, in "white areas" or to benefit from some of the world's greatest mineral wealth. The regime relocated millions of farmers, creating impoverished communities like the Soweto Townships. The Homelands were transformed into barely self-sufficient pools of cheap labor to work the gulags of the South African economy, and subsidize the unprecedented wealth of the tiny white elite. As Apartheid came to end, the Afrikaaner President, F.W. DeKlerk, won the Nobel Peace Prize, while the farmers that survived were left with miniscule plots of land in the least productive areas of a generally arid and unproductive landscape.

## The History of Rooibos

The history of rooibos is just one more chapter in the tragedy of Apartheid. For thousands of years, indigenous Khoi and San farming communities, perhaps the oldest inhabitants of South Africa<sup>1</sup>, survived the arid and unforgiving bush, eking a living from the Kalahari through subsistence agriculture and rooibos cultivation. Enter the Dutch and English colonial bandits in the 1500s. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Khoisan population was in ruin- murdered, fled or absorbed into the subjugated and enslaved Xhosa population. The indigenous *khoisan* language was replaced by the Dutch-hybrid *Afrikaans*<sup>2</sup>. Their storied culture, the product of 2,000 years in Southern Africa, was now largely a memory. The medicinal bush became another cash-crop for European invaders. By the 1940s and the rise of Apartheid, rooibos seeds were among the most precious in the world<sup>3</sup>, but its growers sank deeper into poverty and despair, slaves on the land they once owned.

If there is a silver lining to this story of apartheid, it is the miracle of rooibos. This herb, one of the only crops that thrive in the dry and unwelcoming bush, grows nowhere else in the world. The few small Khoisan farmers who survived the Bantu Expansion, the Dutch invasion, then the British, and the oppression of Apartheid, found themselves on some of harshest, most unsuitable agricultural land in the world, dismissed by the white elite... but perfect for rooibos production. Working together, the farmers germinated hope in a desert of despair.

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<sup>1</sup> (Crawhall, Nigel: "The Human Figures") Canadian University Service Overseas Online.

<sup>2</sup> ("San(Hunter-Gathers in South Africa)") ThinkQuest. <http://library.thinkquest.org/27804/HISTORY.html>

<sup>3</sup> (Green, Lawrence: "In The Land of the Afternoon") Standard Press Ltd. 1949

## **The Rise of Fair Trade Rooibos**

In the village of Wupperthal, located in the Cederberg Mountains, the Afrikaans-speaking descendants of the Khoisan formed a rooibos co-operative, the Wupperthal Tea Association, in 1998 with 16 founding members. North of the Cederberg Mountains, approximately 60 farmers and their families live scattered throughout the rocky terrain. They received assistance from the Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG) and the Heiveld Co-operative was created in 2000 with 14 members. When they visited Wupperthal and saw the farmers' success, they became excited as they envisioned new possibilities for the future. Today, over 100 small farmers are producing rooibos and exporting it to the European and U.S. markets.

Access to international markets and higher Fair Trade prices have dramatically improved the farmers' incomes. In her book, Boiling Point, Leonie Joubert describes the impact of this new market on the Heiveld cooperative: "The community's fortune is changing. All the co-operative members have their first bank accounts. One person had a set of dentures made; another took a family member to hospital for treatment – both healthcare 'luxuries.' These are quiet signals that a community, whose education often does not extend beyond grade four, is dipping its toe into a viable mainstream market."<sup>4</sup> Fair Trade represents the first opportunity for black South Africans to benefit from their labor and invest in their own development.

## **The (Uncertain) Future of Rooibos**

Today the progress of the Heiveld and Wupperthal cooperatives is threatened once again by white land-owners, and this time, by the very people who champion "Fair Trade." The system has abandoned small farmers and begun incorporating plantations into its model. The same landowners whose ancestors destroyed the native cultures and stole their land are currently the primary beneficiaries of rooibos' inclusion in the Fair Trade register. While granting workers a slight increase in wages, Fair Trade serves to strengthen the plantation economy, to the detriment of small farming communities. Not only does plantation-based Fair Trade divert premiums from the small farmers that need it most, it serves as an investment in their competition. Plantations are becoming more efficient, expanding production, their share of rooibos exports (already 98% of total production<sup>5</sup>), and the prosperity of white landowners.

While the story of rooibos is not over, the ending has yet to be determined. Equal Exchange is proud to work exclusively with small farmer organization, to strive for an empowering conclusion. Our rooibos tea is an investment in the communities of Heiveld and Wupperthal - never the plantation model upon which colonialism and Apartheid were founded. In the 1980s, millions of citizens around the world stood up to Apartheid and demanded that their colleges, employers and mutual funds divest from South Africa to end our subsidization of structured racism, inequality and exploitation. Purchasing rooibos tea from small farmers is the next step - not just an economic transaction that empowers small farmers - but an investment in justice and equality.

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<sup>4</sup> (Joubert, Leonie: "The Boiling Point") Wits University Press. 2008.

<sup>5</sup> (Oettle, Noel: "Rooibos Tea and FLO Issues", *letter from EMG to FLO*) Environmental Monitoring Group. 2006