

ROOIBOS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

A study of the origins and nature of the traditional knowledge associated with the *Aspalathus linearis*

By Boris Gorelik

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the last couple of decades, the origins of rooibos tea and of the traditional knowledge associated with the rooibos plant (*Aspalathus linearis*) have become a contested, politicised issue. Many people in the rooibos-growing areas have come to regard that knowledge as part of their cultural heritage.

Studying contemporary social relations associated with rooibos, Sarah Ives of Stanford University 'found that Coloureds and mostly Afrikaans-speaking residents in the rooibos-growing area expressed what I interpret as a love of rooibos that collapsed distinctions between human and plant. Coloured rooibos farmers, however, put forth an alternative politics of indigeneity. They articulated their understanding of indigenous belonging through rooibos farming.'¹

The term 'Coloureds', as used in this paper, predates apartheid and means 'people of a mixed, predominantly European and Khoisan, descent'. In South Africa, such people are generally thought to be members of a single racial group, just like those of a predominantly European descent are known as 'Whites'. The term 'Coloureds' is utilised here without any derogatory connotations. Record of early utilisation of rooibos is so scarce and vague that it is often impossible to identify the community or ethnic group to which it refers. In these cases, we write about these people using their accepted racial appellation.

A part of that understanding is the conviction that the traditional knowledge associated with rooibos originated among their San and Khoi ancestors in the region in antiquity, most likely in precolonial times. In a recent study conducted by Siyanda Samahlubi Consulting for the South African Department of Environmental Affairs, members of various, predominantly Coloured, communities of rooibos- and honeybush-growing areas were interviewed. The researchers have established that 'community interviewees associated the knowledge of rooibos to the indigenous people (KhoiSan) and in turn, believe that the local people transferred this knowledge to the European settlers, particularly the Moravian Missionaries.'²

This notion has been generally accepted not only by inhabitants of the Cederberg, the Olifants River Valley and the Suid Bokkeveld but also by the media, academics and some of the rooibos manufacturers and marketers.

As will be shown in this paper, most of those who have spoken or written on the traditional knowledge associated with rooibos or the origins of rooibos tea in the last four decades have adhered to the following postulates:

1. The rooibos plant was used by San and Khoikhoi peoples in precolonial times.
2. Specifically, the hot beverage we know as rooibos tea originated in precolonial times.
3. The traditional method of harvesting and processing rooibos for making that infusion or decoction is of a precolonial origin.
4. Colonial-era settlers learnt about rooibos tea from the indigenous peoples of the Cederberg.

It seems that these postulates have never been tested and are based largely on perceptions of those who bring them forward. To date, no record of precolonial or even early colonial uses of the *Aspalathus linearis* has been presented. We have seen no direct evidence that would demonstrate that the indigenous pastoralist (Khoikhoi) or hunter-gatherer (San) population utilised rooibos to prepare food, beverage or medicine, or in any manner at all, before the advent of colonial-era settlers.

¹ S Ives, 'Farming the South African "Bush": Ecologies of belonging and exclusion in rooibos tea', *American Ethnologist*, vol 41, no 4, 2014, p 699.

² Siyanda Samahlubi Consulting, *Traditional Knowledge Associated with Rooibos and Honeybush Species in South Africa*, [Pretoria], 2014, pp ii-iii.

There are serious social, political and economic reasons for wishing to root that traditional knowledge in the precolonial era or, at least, in the culture of the San and the Khoi in general. But surely, we cannot fully rely on contemporary perceptions in tackling this sensitive matter.

Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, Research Director of the Institut des Mondes africains, Paris, was among the first academics who called for verification of the abovementioned postulates. He warns us against the so-called ‘invention of tradition’:

It is speculated that traditions might not be static, as ‘they adapt, are constantly renewed and incorporate new data. It is quite possible to find people arguing that the rooibos usage is very old, but this does not prove that it is the case; it just means that, *at present*, the notion of this ancientness is very much alive.’³

The reason why people — from ordinary citizens to the South African Government - have come to treat the ‘common wisdom’ as fact is that no systematic, comprehensive historical research into the origins of traditional knowledge associated with rooibos has been done. There have been several studies on the medicinal properties of rooibos, the state of the rooibos industry or efficient methods of rooibos farming. But a simple search in the Google Scholar database would demonstrate a lack of publications on the history of usage of the *Aspalathus linearis*, one of the world’s most famous South African plants. Neither has anyone summarised and analysed the available ethnobotanical data on rooibos.

According to John Parkington, a distinguished South African archaeologist who has explored the origins of current utilisations of plants in the Western Cape, the history of rooibos ‘has all the hallmarks of a complicated academic issue, set into a much bigger issue of indigenous knowledge. It is very dangerous to make assumptions in such matters. In order to investigate these issues, one needs to do proper archival and archaeological research.’⁴

Before making any statements about the origin of the traditional knowledge associated with rooibos, we need to examine the historical record, which includes published material, manuscripts, archival evidence, and oral history. Apart from other considerations that make this task relevant, even for academic reasons it is important to elicit the truth, which might differ from the ‘accepted truths’.

As a writer and historian, who has explored the origins and development of the rooibos industry for many years and written on the subject,⁵ I was approached by the South African Rooibos Council in 2015 with a request to research early uses of the *Aspalathus linearis*. My mandate was to ‘find as many verifiable facts as possible, whatever they may be’.

The council gave me free rein as to the choice of research methods, and sufficient funding to carry out the study in Gauteng and the Western Cape for several months. I was to investigate the historical record objectively and to report on the earliest documentation of usage of the rooibos plant, the direct and inferential evidence of utilisation of the *Aspalathus linearis* in precolonial times and the origins of the infusion or decoction known as rooibos tea.

I would like to reiterate that, whatever the council’s motives might have been for commissioning this study at this time, I was not briefed to substantiate any contentions or advocate any views. My task was only to search for historical data, and I have done so to the best of my ability. This paper presents my findings.

I focused on verification of the abovementioned postulates as well as on documentation of the existing traditional knowledge of utilisation of the *Aspalathus linearis* for medicinal purposes and for

³ Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, email message to Boris Gorelik, 1 March 2016.

⁴ John Parkington, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 19 December 2015.

⁵ B Gorelik, ‘Teetyd: Rooibos 110’, *Rapport*, 7 December 2014.

making an infusion or decoction as well as the role this knowledge has played in the development of the rooibos industry. The paper represents perhaps the first attempt to research these matters using the historical record. For the purposes of this project, we are not concerned with claims of descendant communities or population groups to be regarded as owners of this traditional knowledge and with the related moral, ethical and economic issues.

The research relies on primary written sources (archival documents, manuscripts), secondary written sources (such as the early travellers' records, anthropological and archaeological publications, theses) and testimonies from archaeologists, historians, ethnobotanists, ethnologists, and sustainable development facilitators from current or former members of communities residing in the original rooibos-growing areas. As far as early rooibos applications are concerned, we cannot accept these memoirs as evidence unreservedly, since they were produced and publicised much later than the periods with which they dealt.

Much information was collected during my field trips to the Cederberg and the Suid Bokkeveld in March and October 2016. In many cases, oral testimonies are the only sources of evidence relating to the early uses of the rooibos plant. The anthropologist Maya Leclercq, who interviewed small-scale rooibos farmers of Wupperthal and the Suid Bokkeveld in 2006, noted that whenever her respondents alluded to the experience of their 'forefathers', it applied to 'the two or three previous generations, who have known the rooibos cultivation and the mechanization evolution'.⁶

Face-to-face unstructured interviews with present or former residents of rooibos-growing regions were conducted in Nieuwoudtville, Onder Melkkraal, Clanwilliam, Wupperthal, Esselbank, Brugkraal, Heuningvlei, Bosdorp, Jamaka and Lambert's Bay. Additional interviews were taken in Cape Town and by telephone with respondents currently residing in Cape Town, Langebaan, and Newbury, England.

Older people have been regarded as the custodians of traditional knowledge. They have utilised traditional remedies longer than younger members of the community and have imparted this knowledge to others.⁷ Therefore the respondents were sampled using several criteria:

- a. born or spent most of their lives in the original rooibos-growing areas;
- b. aged fifty or older;
- c. seen as custodians of tradition, including knowledge of plants and their properties;
- d. recommended by their communities or by experts from outside of their areas (for instance, by academics that I have interviewed in connection with this project).

Those interviews were conducted during the last phase of the project, once all the available written data had been identified and processed, and the referrals and recommendations regarding the potential respondents had been obtained. Many of the interviews, particularly with Coloured respondents in rooibos-growing areas who do not speak English, were conducted with a generous assistance of Professor Ben-Erik van Wyk, University of Johannesburg, acting in an informal capacity as a native speaker of Afrikaans. During two interviews in Clanwilliam, Marijke Ehlers of Rooibos Ltd interpreted from Afrikaans into English.

The Wupperthal Original Rooibos Cooperative decided not to participate in this project. However, its managing director, Barend Salomo, in his personal capacity, answered several questions regarding usage of rooibos practised in his family.

⁶ M Leclercq, 'Localised production of rooibos in South Africa: Practices, territories, and prospects of a geographical indication definition', *Agritrop*, [website], 2006, p 49, https://agritrop.cirad.fr/549848/1/document_549848.pdf (accessed 28 Nov 2015).

⁷ M Ferreira, K Charlton and L Impey, 'Traditional medicinal use of indigenous plants by older coloureds in the Western Cape', in H Normann, I Snyman and M Cohen (eds), *Indigenous Knowledge and Its Uses in Southern Africa*, Pretoria, Human Sciences Research Council, 1996, p 89.

Since the respondents were carefully selected for this study for their perceived wide experience and knowledge, I interviewed only eighteen people: eight White and ten Coloured. My oldest respondent was born in the 1910s, and the youngest in 1958. Most of the interviewees were born in the 1930s. They either currently have their home in the Cederberg region and the Suid Bokkeveld or lived there for many years in the 1930s-70s. On the average, their families have resided in the area for two to three generations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. General considerations

As will be shown, most authors who have written on traditional knowledge associated with rooibos or the origins of rooibos tea proceed from the said unverified postulates. As Susanne Reuther, the author of the most comprehensive book on rooibos and its health properties, points out, ‘Many myths and tales have been told about the beginning of rooibos history’.⁸

With regards to the publications aimed at general readership, this reliance on common wisdom is understandable. But it is uncanny indeed to realise that many bona fide historians, ethnologists and botanists repeat these statements in their academic works without checking. More often than not, they fail to cite any sources to substantiate these claims, as does ethnologist Sarah Ives, Stanford University, asserting that in ‘precolonial times, local Bushmen, or Khoisan, harvested and consumed wild rooibos.’⁹

Even when there is a citation, it inevitably leads to another unsubstantiated postulation. For example, in an article by Julia F Morton in the *Economic Botany*, cited in over one hundred other works according to Google Scholar, the author stated that rooibos’s ‘beverage use by the Hottentots was first reported by the botanist Carl Thunberg in 1772’. Unfortunately, she did not specify in which work by Thunberg and on which page such usage was supposedly reported.¹⁰

Few authors concede that rooibos’s ‘ancient history as beverage, medicament and palliative for the Khoi and San people is lost in the eons of time.’¹¹ More often, you would come across pre-emptory statements.¹² Such as:

‘It was the indigenous inhabitants of the Cederberg who first discovered the pleasure of drinking an infusion made from the leaves of *A. linearis*.’¹³

‘Long, long ago the Capoid people, who inhabited the Cedarberg, were the first to discover the exceptional qualities of the rooibos.’¹⁴

Apparently, these authors believe that they are citing firmly established facts, which no longer require validation. Meanwhile, until recently, no consistent effort was made by researchers to trace the origins of rooibos tea or at least to gather and analyse the versatile traditional knowledge associated with that plant. The only exception could be the work of Rhoda Malgas, Stellenbosch University, who has studied traditional methods of growing and harvesting wild rooibos in the Suid Bokkeveld to encourage sustainable smallholder agriculture.¹⁵

The available literature on early usage of rooibos is scant indeed. Before we start gleaning information from diverse, often very unlikely, sources, let us look at the more obvious choices — the published works to which the researcher would turn in the first place when studying the history of rooibos.

⁸ S Reuther, *Das Rooibos Buch*, Cape Town, Amaphiko African Arts, 2004, p 294.

⁹ Ives, *American Ethnologist*, p 698.

¹⁰ J F Morton, ‘Rooibos tea, *Aspalathus linearis*, a caffeineless, low-tannin beverage’, *Economic Botany*, vol 37, no 2, 1983, p 164.

¹¹ B Neall, ‘God’s great gift to South Africa’, *Food Review*, November/December 2004, p 23.

¹² Even in books dedicated to the Khoisan history and culture, such as A Mountain, *The First People of the Cape: A Look at Their History and the Impact of Colonialism on the Cape’s Indigenous People*, Claremont, David Philip, 2003, pp 79-80.

¹³ S Gess, ‘Rooibos: refreshment for humans, bees and wasps’, *Veld & Flora*, March 2000, p 19.

¹⁴ M Roberts, *Indigenous Healing Plants*, Halfway House, Southern Books, 1990, p 25.

¹⁵ See, for instance, her thesis, written under her maiden name: R Louw, ‘Sustainable Harvesting of Wild Rooibos (*Aspalathus linearis*) in the Suid Bokkeveld, Northern Cape’, MSc Thesis, University of Cape Town, 2006.

2.2. Rooibos research

Published rooibos research focuses on taxonomic investigation, processing, phytochemical and biochemical analysis, quality-related aspects, ecological studies, sustainable harvesting methods, social relations and trademark protection, among others.

‘I have never come across any published studies into the origins of rooibos tea or the traditional knowledge of its medicinal properties’, says Professor Elizabeth Joubert, who has been engaged in product research of rooibos and honeybush at the ARC-Infruitec-Nietvoorbij, Stellenbosch, since the 1980s.¹⁶

Yet it is not unusual to come across unsubstantiated declarations on this subject in otherwise sound academic articles. This one appeared, without citations, in the *S A Pharmaceutical Journal*:

‘More than 300 years ago, the indigenous KhoiKhoi tribe of the Cedarberg and the Elephants river valley region of the Western Cape first discovered that the leaves of the Rooibos plant can be used as a tea, with an exceptional taste and aroma.’¹⁷

A number of authors, particularly those from outside of South Africa, have refused to accept the ‘conventional wisdom’ unreservedly. They have recognised the need to explore the origins of rooibos tea and traditional utilisation of the rooibos plant.

Jörg Zittlau, who authored one of the two books in existence dedicated solely to rooibos and its health properties, remarks, ‘[N]o one knows when the first people in the Cederberg Mountains began to prepare it as tea.’¹⁸

The socio-anthropologist Maya Leclercq has opted for a very careful wording when writing on this subject: ‘San people were probably the first to discover and use rooibos, though no reference exists in the 18th and 19th centuries’ literature San people might have known rooibos but probably for a minor use.’¹⁹

Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, Research Director of the Institut des Mondes africains, National Centre for Scientific Research, Paris, has called for a critical review of the rooibos ‘mythology’:

‘It is suggested that there exists a connection between San and rooibos, and even that the use of the plant as a type of tea, reached us through them. We are required to believe that this is part of their heritage and that using rooibos is somehow primeval, or at least extremely old, going back to Prehistory (the San being commonly associated with the beginning).’²⁰

When writing on rooibos, Le Quellec searched for evidence of early usage of rooibos as a beverage in the existing literature but found none.²¹

In the last forty years, most of what has been written by various authors on traditional knowledge associated with rooibos can be traced back to an article by James van Putten, a senior employee of the Rooibos Tea Control Board in Clanwilliam. That article appeared in the *Veld & Flora* magazine in 1976. Van Putten invited the reader to ‘travel’ to the beginning of the twentieth century, when communities of Coloured people, living on the slopes of the Cederberg mountains, brewed rooibos

¹⁶ Elizabeth Joubert, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 15 December 2015.

¹⁷ C van Niekerk and A Viljoen, ‘Indigenous South African medicinal plants. Part 11: *Aspalathus linearis* (‘Rooibos’), *SA Pharmaceutical Journal*, vol 75, no 10, 2008, p 41.

¹⁸ J Zittlau, *Rotbuschtee für Gesundheit und Schönheit*, München, W Ludwig, 2002, p 7.

¹⁹ M Leclercq, E Biénabe and P Caron, ‘The case of the South African Rooibos: Biodiversity conservation as a collective consensus’, *Agritrop*, [website], undated, p 2, <http://agritrop.cirad.fr/551253>, (accessed 28 Nov 2015).

²⁰ J-L Le Quellec, ‘Revisiting the image of “Bushmen Tea”’, *Lesedi*, no 10, 2009, p 7.

²¹ J-L Le Quellec email message, 23 February 2016.

tea in their cooking sheds, next to their huts. 'It is they who know the art of making rooibos and would later teach it to others', he wrote.²²

This passage implies that rooibos tea originated among the Coloured population of the area. No indication of the period when the beverage was invented is given. We are only told that the Coloureds harvested, processed and prepared rooibos in the early 1900s. No information on the sources was provided by Van Putten, who was not a professional historian or ethnobotanist. Nor could this be regarded as a first-hand account; he was born long after the events he described. For these reasons, his declaration cannot be considered undisputable. This erodes the credibility of the later works, whose authors have based their statements on that premise.

It has also been claimed that rooibos tea was first commercialised by Benjamin Ginsberg, a young Russian Jew who settled in the Cederberg after the Second Anglo-Boer War.²³ According to Van Putten, Ginsberg learnt about the beverage from 'his Coloured clients from the mountains on his peddling trips'.²⁴ But, as will be shown later, rooibos could be purchased in the Cederberg, and possibly other areas, even earlier. The role of Ginsberg in commercialisation of rooibos, and the source of his knowledge should be explored further.

Until recently, modern descriptions of traditional methods of harvesting and processing wild rooibos could be traced to interpretations and reinterpretations of the account found in the same article by Van Putten.²⁵ As he did not cite his sources, it was not easy to determine whether his statement was accurate.

However, the traditional agricultural practices have now been studied by Rhoda Malgas. She conducted field research in the Suid Bokkeveld for her thesis in 2003-4 and has continued this work. Local knowledge helped her to formulate recommendations for sustainable harvesting of wild rooibos tea in the area. For her project, Malgas interviewed experienced harvesters aged between fifty and sixty-seven.²⁶ Some of her findings will be used in this paper.

A recent study of traditional knowledge associated with rooibos and honeybush, commissioned by the Department of Environmental Affairs, included a pioneering survey in the Cederberg region (Wupperthal, Esselbank and Clanwilliam). It was undertaken by Professor Nokwanda Makunga, Stellenbosch University, with help from the Cape Bush Doctors Association. Through structured interviews with long-time residents of the area (median age: 38; oldest respondent: 85), they attempted to document and quantify information on traditional and current utilisation of the rooibos plant. The data was partly incorporated into a report prepared for the department by Siyanda Samahlubi Consulting.

This could have been an invaluable source of information on the subject. Unfortunately, the survey findings were presented in a rather confusing manner. The same questionnaire was employed when finding out about uses of rooibos in rooibos- and *honeybush*-growing areas, but in the publicly available report, the data are not clearly attributable. The authors of the report did not distinguish between feedback from members of the Cederberg communities and that from others. As will be shown in this paper, rooibos tea usage spread outside the Clanwilliam district, to the honeybush-growing areas, only from the early twentieth century. Rooibos usage patterns in those localities have

²² J W van Putten, 'Die verhaal van rooitee', *Veld & Flora*, September 1976, p 28.

²³ Rooibos Tea Control Board, *Annual Report of the Rooibos Tea Control Board for the Year 1959*, Clanwilliam, Rooibos Tea Control Board, 1960, p 1; B-E van Wyk, *Food Plants of the World: Identification, Culinary Uses and Nutritional Value*, Pretoria, Briza, 2005, p 77; S Olivier, 'A Russian custom brings a boom in rooibos tea', *Cape Argus*, Magazine Section, 18 July 1964, p 3; F le Roux, 'Wholesome rooibos', *South African Panorama*, September 1989, p 38.

²⁴ Van Putten, *Veld & Flora*, pp 28-9.

²⁵ For example, E Joubert et al, 'South African herbal teas: *Aspalathus linearis*, *Cyclopia* spp. and *Athrixia phylicoides*—A review', *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, vol 119, no 3, 2008, p 377; Van Wyk, *Food Plants of the World*, p 77.

²⁶ Louw, 'Sustainable Harvesting of Wild Rooibos', pp 33, 58.

been largely influenced by marketing and the media. It is crucial to focus on the region with the oldest tradition of using rooibos.

I have not been able to obtain permission from the Department of Environmental Affairs to view the original data collected by Makunga and her associates in the Cederberg. That is why I have to rely on the summary that she provided to me during an interview in Stellenbosch. This information has been employed in the current paper.

2.3. Colonial travellers' accounts

The most common fallacy regarding the earliest documentation of a rooibos beverage has been caused by a misreading of a travelogue by the celebrated Swedish botanist Carl Thunberg.

It has often been maintained that, during his travels in the Cape Colony in 1772, Thunberg recorded that Khoikhoi made tea from the rooibos plant.²⁷ Some authors, including Susanne Reuther in her book on rooibos and its health properties, have asserted that he was the first to report the application of rooibos in preparing an infusion.²⁸

Thunberg made an important contribution to early ethnobotanical exploration of the Cape, having recorded dozens of names and uses of local medicinal plants. A pupil of Linnaeus, He was highly interested in substitutes for tea (*Camellia sinensis*). That is why in his journals, entitled *Travels at the Cape of Good Hope 1772-1775*, he mentioned various infusions and decoctions consumed by inhabitants of the Cape Colony.

He clearly differentiated between habits of the settlers and those of the indigenous people of the Cape (whom he called 'Bushmen' and 'Hottentots'). For instance, he noted that the 'Hottentots eat the fruit of the *Brabejum stellatum* [*Brabejum stellatifolium*, or wild almond]'. That plant, he added, was also 'sometimes used by the country people instead of coffee: the outside rind being taken off, the fruit is steeped in water to deprive it of its bitterness; it is then boiled, roasted, and ground like coffee.'²⁹ The English expression 'country people' is a translation of the original Swedish word '*lantmanner*', which means 'husbandmen, people who cultivate land, farmers'.³⁰

Thunberg alluded to only four substitutes for tea and coffee in his memoir: *Aspalathus cordata*; *Adiantum aethiopicum*; *Viscum capense*; *Brabejum stellatifolium*. In each case, he placed them in the context of consumption by settlers: farmers, colonists or 'the country people'.³¹ Thunberg did not specify whether those beverages were invented or even prepared by the Khoisan population. In fact, he pointed out that the Khoikhoi had no word for 'coffee' in their language.³²

While visiting Paarl in July 1772, the Swedish traveller noted that 'of the leaves of the *Borbonia cordata* the country people made tea.'³³ [*Borboniæ cordatæ blader brukades til Thé på landet*]³⁴ — literally, '*Borbonia cordata* leaves are used for tea in the countryside.'] The same designation is found in another passage, where he states that the plant was a common tea replacement.³⁵ The current botanical name of that plant is the *Aspalathus cordata*. According to Rudolf Marloth, this tea

²⁷ For example, Joubert et al, *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, pp 376–7.

²⁸ Reuther, *Das Rooibos Buch*, p 294; Morton, 'Rooibos tea, *Aspalathus linearis*', p 164.

²⁹ C P Thunberg, *Travels at the Cape of Good Hope 1772-1775*, ed V S Forbes, trans J and I Rudner, Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1986, p 45.

³⁰ C P Thunberg, *Resa uti Europa, Africa, Asia, förrättad åren 1770-1779*, vol 1, Upsala, 1788, pp 150-1.

³¹ Thunberg, *Travels at the Cape of Good Hope: tea substitutes* — pp xli, 44, 162, 189; coffee substitutes — pp xli, 45.

³² Thunberg, p 93.

³³ Thunberg, p 44.

³⁴ Thunberg, *Resa uti Europa, Africa, Asia*, p 150.

³⁵ Thunberg, *Travels at the Cape of Good Hope*, p xli.

was popularly known as ‘stekeltee’.³⁶ Although it belongs to the same genus as the *Aspalathus linearis*, it is not the rooibos species.³⁷

Bruce Ginsberg, in one of the first detailed essays on rooibos published in the United Kingdom (1977), pointed out that ‘*Borbonia* was an earlier classification of *Aspalathus*.’³⁸ Many of his readers concluded that the *Borbonia cordata* was the same plant as the *Aspalathus linearis* (rooibos), which led to the misconception surviving to this day.³⁹

The claim was repeated and reinforced in Ginsberg’s advertising materials to launch rooibos tea in Britain the same year.⁴⁰ Since then, the Thunberg anecdote has often been cited and erroneously associated with rooibos tea.

Although Thunberg’s travelogue has no mention of the rooibos plant, it is important to point out that his testimonial regarding to the *Aspalathus cordata* is the earliest known record of the utilisation of the *Aspalathus* genus as a source of herbal tea.⁴¹

In fact, at least four other species of that family have been known as sources of herbal tea: *A. angustifolia*, *A. cordata*, *A. crenata* and *A. alpestris*.⁴² Similarly to the rooibos, each of these plants has rigid, spine-tipped leaves, and the tea made from them has been commonly known as ‘stekeltee’ (literally: ‘prickle-tea’).

No remark about any uses of the *Aspalathus linearis* has been detected in dozens of accounts by travellers who visited the Cederberg, the Olifants River valley or the Suid Bokkeveld before the twentieth century. Thunberg also failed to recognise the existence of rooibos tea.

Among those early travellers were such highly educated and observant people as the ‘father of South African geology’ Andrew Geddes Bain (1854)⁴³ and Her Majesty’s astronomer at the Cape of Good Hope, Sir Thomas Maclear (1843).⁴⁴ Another distinguished guest was Sir James Edward Alexander, on an exploring expedition for the Royal Geographical Society (1836), who stopped by at the local mission stations of Wupperthal and Ebenezer among other places.⁴⁵ All of these had nothing to say about the rooibos and its utilisation in their writings.

No mention of rooibos is found in Cuthbert John Skead’s *Historical Plant Incidence in Southern Africa*.⁴⁶ This valuable reference work documents the observations of European travellers and botanists who explored various parts of the Cape Colony, including areas to which the *Aspalathus linearis* is endemic.

Many colonial travellers bypassed the mountainous Cederberg area, opting for an easier route over the flat country. Another reason for the absence of information on rooibos in early travelogues

³⁶ R Marloth, *Dictionary of the Common Names of Plants*, Cape Town, Speciality Press, 1917, p 81.

³⁷ Le Quellec, *Lesedi*, p 8.

³⁸ B Ginsberg, ‘Rooibos tea’, *The Herbal Review*, vol 2, no 2, 1977, p 7.

³⁹ B Jolley, ‘Development of Quality Control Tools and a Taste Prediction Model for Rooibos’. PhD Thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2014, p 8; R Wynberg, J Silveston and C Lombard, ‘Value adding in the southern African natural products sector: How much do patents matter?’, in *The Economics of Intellectual Property in South Africa*, [Geneva]: World Intellectual Property Organization, 2009, p 42.

⁴⁰ ‘A very special cup of tea’. [1977]. Rooibos Ltd archive, Clanwilliam.

⁴¹ B-E van Wyk and B Gorelik, ‘The history and ethnobotany of Cape herbal teas’, *South African Journal of Botany*, vol 109, 2017, p 3, 4.

⁴² Van Wyk and Gorelik, p 9.

⁴³ A G Bain, *Journals of Andrew Geddes Bain: Trader, Explorer, Soldier, Road Engineer and Geologist*, Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1949, p xxxii.

⁴⁴ H F Glen and G Germishuize (eds), *Botanical Exploration of Southern Africa: An Illustrated History of Early Botanical Literature on the Cape Flora*, Pretoria, South African National Biodiversity Institute, 2010, p 451.

⁴⁵ J E Alexander, *An Expedition of Discovery into the Interior of Africa: through the Hitherto Undescribed Countries*, vol I, Philadelphia, E L Carey and A Hart, 1838, p 33.

⁴⁶ C J Skead, *Historical Plant Incidence in Southern Africa: A Collection of Early Travel Records in Southern Africa*, Pretoria, South African National Biodiversity Institute, 2009.

could be that rooibos is rather inconspicuous plant, compared, for instance, to honeybush, whose usage as a tea substitute was better documented in colonial literature.

John Rourke, formerly President of the Botanical Society of South Africa and Director of the Compton Herbarium, Kirstenbosch, has suggested that early travellers could easily overlook wild rooibos, a small semi-prostrate, creeping shrub with needle-like leaves and small flowers. 'You would notice it only if someone pointed it out to you. Honeybush plants, on the other hand, can be seen from hundreds of metres away, a bright splash of colour in the veld. Rooibos was an exact opposite.'⁴⁷

2.4. Colonial botanical literature

Although the Bible is older than the European colonisation of southern Africa, we must start this section with it, to dispel yet another rooibos myth.

Some authors have professed that the rooibos plant (*Aspalathus linearis*) was first mentioned in the Bible.⁴⁸ We find the following verse in the Book of Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Sirach (24:15):

'I gave a sweet smell like cinnamon and aspalathus, and I yielded a pleasant odour like the best myrrh, as galbanum, and onyx, and sweet storax, and as the fume of frankincense in the tabernacle.'

Comments on a prickly shrub named *Aspalathus* producing a fragrant oil can be found in various works of the Ancient World (Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, Dioscorides' *De Materia Medica*, Theophrastus' *Enquiry into Plants*). It has been suggested that the designation derives from a Semitic word that means 'caper' (*Capparis spinosa*). This is confirmed by Pliny's description of the plant.⁴⁹

This old meaning has no relation to the genus of flowering plants in the legume family that botanists have named *Aspalathus*. So a biblical connection with rooibos can be ruled out.

Possibly the primary descriptions of the rooibos plant can be found in early botanical literature. Professional naturalists started exploring the Cederberg only in 1828. And the first scientific descriptions of the rooibos plant were based on samples collected in other parts of the Cape.⁵⁰

Ralph Dahlgren, the Swedish botanist who gave rooibos its current scientific denomination, *Aspalathus linearis*, suggested that some of the entries in the pioneering works on taxonomy, such as John Ray's *Historia plantarum* (1686) or Leonard Plukenet's *Phytographia plantarum* (1691—96) allude to rooibos.⁵¹ None of those botanists visited the Cape.

The first valid description of the rooibos plant was provided by the Dutch botanist Nicolaas Laurens Burman in 1768 (as the *Psoralea linearis*).⁵² He had studied under Carl von Linné (Linnaeus), 'the father of modern taxonomy'. Burman had never been to the Cape and was concerned mostly with classification of plants, not their usage.

Linnaeus and his pupils were very interested in tea substitutes — particularly, because they were searching for an affordable replacement for the imported Chinese product. He even promoted a surrogate he named 'Cape Tea', to capitalise on the popularity of colonial goods. The main ingredient was the twinflower, a medicinal plant of the indigenous people of Lapland.⁵³

It is no wonder that his first pupil who reached the Cape and conducted botanical research there paid much attention to local ersatz teas. The Swedish naturalist Carl Peter Thunberg, known as 'the

⁴⁷ John Rourke, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 17 January 2016.

⁴⁸ For example, L Green, *In the Land of Afternoon*, Cape Town, Timmins Publishers, 1951, p 52.

⁴⁹ N F Miller, 'The *Aspalathus* Caper', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, no 297, 1995, p 55.

⁵⁰ H C Taylor, *Cederberg Vegetation and Flora*, Pretoria, National Botanical Institute, 1996, p 9.

⁵¹ R Dahlgren, 'Revision of the genus *Aspalathus*. II', *Botaniska Notiser*, vol 121, 1968, p 168.

⁵² N L Burman, *Flora indica: cui accedit series zoophytorum Indicorum, nec non prodromus florum Capensis*, Amsterdam, 1768, p 22.

⁵³ L Koerner, *Linnaeus: Nature and Nation*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999, p 79.

father of South African botany', was commissioned by Burman to collect specimens in Japan and the Dutch colonies. In 1772-5, he undertook three expeditions in the Cape interior.

Thunberg explored the northern Bokkeveld escarpment to the Nieuwoudtville plateau and beyond to the Roggeveld.⁵⁴ As shown in the previous section, he did not mention the rooibos plant in his memoir *Travels at the Cape of Good Hope*, which he compiled from his travel notes on return to Europe. But in his *Prodrum Plantarum Capensium* (1800), a pioneering work on Cape plants, Thunberg introduced rooibos as the *Lebeckia contaminata*, although no information on the plant's uses was given.⁵⁵

In 1825, Augustin Pyramus de Candolle, a Swiss botanist who invented the concept of biological clock and influenced Charles Darwin, described the rooibos plant and named it *Aspalathus tenuifolia*. As he had never visited the Cape, he employed the specimen from Aylmer Bourke Lambert's herbarium, collected in 1816.⁵⁶

In one of the earliest local studies of indigenous plants of the Cape (1829-30), James Bowie described the honeybush and pointed out that its infusion was 'much used by the colonists as a restorative'.⁵⁷ Yet he did not remark on rooibos at all.

Ernst Mey, a German botanist, proposed a new designation for the rooibos plant, *Aspalathus corymbosa* (1832). The name was adopted by various prominent naturalists and taxonomists — including Karl Zeyher, the pioneer of botanical exploration of the Cederberg.⁵⁸ He collected there in 1828 and 1831.⁵⁹

The horticulturalist and botanical collector Franz Drège travelled in the Cederberg (Clanwilliam and Wupperthal areas) in 1830-4.⁶⁰ A rooibos specimen he brought was studied by Karel Presl, a professor of natural history in Prague, who called the plant *Aspalathus cognata*.⁶¹ In his book, Presl only described and classified plants, providing no further information. We do not know whether the Drège brothers saw local people utilise the rooibos in any manner.

The first botanist who identified the rooibos as the ingredient of a beverage known as rooibos tea was German-born Rudolf Marloth. I have not been able to find information on *any* applications of the rooibos species in writings of other botanists in the Cape Colony before Marloth.

Terming rooibos the *Borbonia pinifolia*, Marloth told the Royal Society of South Africa in May 1911:

'... the *Borbonia* is of economic importance, being the source of a colonial tea, viz., rooibosch tea The plant is of special interest, as it supplies the "rooibosch-tea", which is now so largely used in South Africa either under this name or as "naald-thee" or "koopmans-thee".'⁶²

This announcement was hardly newsworthy at that stage because the rooibos tea industry had emerged a few years before, and the product was being packaged and distributed across the Cape Province.

Why Marloth had not written about this beverage before remains a mystery. He was married to a lady from Clanwilliam since 1891 and carried out expeditions to the Cederberg and the Bokkeveld in 1901-3.⁶³ Marloth spent much time in the Clanwilliam area and questioned local residents about

⁵⁴ Taylor, *Cederberg Vegetation and Flora*, p 9.

⁵⁵ Dahlgren, *Botaniska Notiser*, p 169.

⁵⁶ Dahlgren, p 169.

⁵⁷ J Bowie, 'Sketches of the botany of South Africa', *South African Quarterly Journal*, vol 1, 1829-30, p 29.

⁵⁸ C F Ecklon and K Zeyher, *Enumeratio plantarum Africae australis extratropicae*, vol II, Hamburg, 1836, p 204.

⁵⁹ Taylor, *Cederberg Vegetation and Flora*, p 9.

⁶⁰ Glen and Germishuize, *Botanical Exploration of Southern Africa*, pp 154-6.

⁶¹ K B Presl, *Botanische Bemerkungen*, Prague, 1844, p 126.

⁶² R Marloth, 'Some new South African succulents and other plants', *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa*, vol II, no 3, 1912, pp 237-9.

⁶³ Glen and Germishuize, *Botanical Exploration of Southern Africa*, p 285.

plants and their utilisation.⁶⁴ It is hard to believe that he had not known about rooibos tea before 1911. Yet I have not been able to find any comment on the rooibos plant and its uses in his earlier work or among his papers at the Stellenbosch University Libraries.⁶⁵

John Rourke has pointed out that the tradition of usage of leguminous plants as replacement for Chinese tea in the Cape was well established and documented.⁶⁶ Honeybush (genus *Cyclopia*) is another South African leguminous plant used as tea and medicine. According to Ludwig Pappé, who produced the first systematic and comprehensive account of Cape medicinal plants in the mid nineteenth century, honeybush tea helped to promote 'expectoration in chronic catarrh, and even in consumption'.⁶⁷

The authors of the abovementioned report for the Department of Environmental Affairs remark that Pappé also identified the *Borbonia parviflora*, currently known as the *Aspalathus crenata*, as a medicinal plant.⁶⁸ Yet the presence of another species of the same genus *Aspalathus* in Pappé's book does not imply that rooibos was traditionally regarded as a curative. He did not touch on the rooibos plant in any of the three editions of his work. In any case, Pappé's book is not a source on precolonial utilisation of indigenous South African plants. Its subtitle suggests that it is a guide to species 'used as remedies by the colonists of the Cape of Good Hope'.

The review of early botanical literature has not given us any insight into the origins of rooibos tea or traditional utilisation of the rooibos plant. Most likely, it is due to the fact that botanists, even those who travelled to the Cederberg, were more concerned with collecting and describing specimens than with the traditional knowledge about those plants. They tried to classify the species, to find the right place for them within the global arrangement they wanted to trace. Few of the botanists and travellers showed interest in ethnobotanical aspects.

2.5. Post-colonial botanical literature

If we turn to more recent literature on South African flora, we will still have trouble finding valid ethnobotanical data on the traditional knowledge of rooibos, as beverage or medicine. Yet, unfounded assertions regarding the nature and the origin of that knowledge have persisted.

Professor Ben-Erik van Wyk, University of Johannesburg, South Africa's leading authority on indigenous medicinal plants, did not avoid this pitfall an early stage when he wrote, 'We know that [rooibos] was the traditional beverage of the Khoi people from the Cedarberg region of the Cape'.⁶⁹ Having realised that such statements could not be supported by research data (as no research into the history of rooibos had been done), he has referred to rooibos tea as 'a traditional beverage of the Khoi-descended people of the Clanwilliam region'.⁷⁰

If the rooibos knowledge is rooted in the Khoikhoi tradition, then there could exist an indigenous name for it or for that beverage, as is the case for most of the other important plants endemic to the Western Cape.⁷¹ But all the common denominations of the *Aspalathus linearis* that have been

⁶⁴ J Rourke interview, 17 January 2016.

⁶⁵ Rudolf Marloth Collection, 1887-1931. [MS 326] Stellenbosch University Libraries.

⁶⁶ J Rourke interview, 17 January 2016.

⁶⁷ L Pappé, *Floræ Capensis medicæ Prodrômus; or, an enumeration of South African plants used as remedies by the colonists of the Cape of Good Hope*, Cape Town, W Britain, 1857, p 9.

⁶⁸ Siyanda Samahlubi Consulting, *Traditional Knowledge Associated with Rooibos*, p 12.

⁶⁹ See, for instance, H Dugmore and B-E van Wyk, *Muthi & Myths from the African Bush*, Pretoria, Marula Books, 2008, p 94; B-E van Wyk, 'A broad review of commercially important southern African medicinal plants', *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, vol 119, no 3, 2008, p 347; B-E van Wyk, *People's Plants: A Guide to Useful Plants of Southern Africa*, Pretoria, Briza Publications, 2000, p 100.

⁷⁰ B-E van Wyk, B van Oudtshoorn and N Gericke, *Medicinal Plants of South Africa*, Pretoria, Briza, 2009, p 50.

⁷¹ Ben-Erik van Wyk, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 19 January 2016.

established to date are of Afrikaans, Dutch or English origin.⁷² These are rooibos, *naaldtee*, *swarttee*, *koopmanstee*, *bossiestee* and *bush tea*.

As Le Quellec has pointed out, a Khoisan name for rooibos could have simply been forgotten in the now predominately Afrikaans-speaking region.⁷³ Another reason could be that rooibos was of minor importance in the precolonial times and for most of the colonial era, which is why it is known only by names in the currently prevailing language of the area.

However, not only rooibos and honeybush but the overwhelming majority of plants employed to prepare Cape herbal teas lack documented vernacular names. Out of more than fifty species of South African plants known to have been consumed as ‘tea’ in infusion or decoction in the Cape, only one has a recorded Khoi or San name (*t’kamma* (*Mentha longifolia*)).⁷⁴ This excludes buchu and channa because they were originally recorded as being used not as tea but as topical cosmetic and masticatory respectively.

Cape herbal teas have been known as beverages for regular consumption. If these beverages were part of the traditional plant consumption by Khoi and San people in the pre-colonial era and introduced by those people to colonial settlers, it is very likely that their vernacular names would have been recorded and preserved.

Some of the recent literature on African medicinal plants maintains that the ‘*Aspalathus linearis* is a major South African medicinal plant and has been used in the Cape region of that country for centuries. Its main uses in South African traditional medicine include alleviating infantile colic, allergies, asthma, and dermatological problems.’ Yet no citations are provided to substantiate this statement.⁷⁵

If we turn to an earlier period, we will find John Mitchell Watt listing rooibos as a South African medicinal plant in his acclaimed study (1932). However, he did not specify for which ailments the plant should be applied.⁷⁶ Since no academic research into the healing properties of rooibos had been conducted at that stage, we may only assume that Watt included rooibos because of some traditional knowledge of which he was aware – and on which he, unfortunately, did not report.

These remedies make use of seven ‘bush teas’, including one belonging to the *Aspalathus* genus (*bergtee*, or the *Aspalathus crenata*) and at least two that often occur in the Clanwilliam area (buchu: the *Agathosma betulina* or the *Agathosma crenulata*; *hongerblomtee*, or the *Senecio arenarius*).⁷⁷ However, the rooibos plant is not part of any of the recipes.

Only after Annemie Theron, a homemaker from the Transvaal, realised that rooibos tea can cause cessation of vomiting and diarrhoea in infants (1968) and publicised her findings in the popular media across South Africa did academics become interested in exploring the curative potential of the *Aspalathus linearis*. The first results were published in 1974.⁷⁸ That being so, the scientific

⁷² See, for example: P Kies, ‘Revision of the genus *Cyclopia* and notes on other species of bush tea’, *Bothalia*, vol 6, 1951, pp 171-2; J M Watt and M G Breyer-Brandwijk, *The Medicinal and Poisonous Plants of Southern and Eastern Africa*, Edinburgh, Livingstone, 1962, pp 590-1; C A Smith, *Common Names of South African Plants*, Pretoria, Department of Agricultural Technical Services, 1966, p 395; *Flora of Southern Africa*, vol 16, pt 3, fascicle 6, *Crotalariae* (*Aspalathus*), Pretoria, Department of Agriculture and Water Supply, 1988, p 85; J Manning, *Field Guide to Fynbos*, Cape Town, Struik, 2007, p 298; Van Wyk, Van Oudtshoorn and Gericke, *Medicinal Plants of South Africa*, p 50; M M Iwu, *Handbook of African Medicinal Plants*, Boca Raton, FL, CRC Press, 2014, p 147.

⁷³ Le Quellec, *Lesedi*, p 9.

⁷⁴ B-E van Wyk and B Gorelik, ‘The history and ethnobotany of Cape herbal teas’, p 15.

⁷⁵ Iwu, *Handbook of African Medicinal Plants*, p 147

⁷⁶ J M Watt, *The Medicinal and Poisonous Plants of Southern Africa: Being an Account of Their Medicinal Uses, Chemical Composition, Pharmacological Effects and Toxicology in Man and Animal*, Edinburgh, E & S Livingstone, 1932, p 70.

⁷⁷ Smith, *Common Names of South African Plants*, p 249.

⁷⁸ F O Snyckers and G Salemi, ‘Studies of South African medicinal plants. Part I. Quercetin as the major *in vitro* active component of rooibos tea’, *Journal of the South African Chemical Institute*, vol 27, 1974, pp 5-7.

research was not prompted by the traditional knowledge associated with rooibos – if only because such knowledge was confined to the rooibos-growing areas at the time.

In the post-1968 publications, both popular and academic, descriptions of traditionally recognised medicinal benefits of rooibos can be traced to Theron’s findings. This is evident, for example, in the work of Margaret Roberts, a recognised South African expert in indigenous medicinal plants, who wrote:

‘Traditionally rooibos is best known for its use in allergic disorders. It is so full of nourishment that it can replace milk in milk allergic babies and is helpful in vomiting, diarrhoea and gastric complaints. Not only is rooibos tea a healthy tonic tea but, given to children who suffer from hay fever or to babies with colic, it is a sure cure.’⁷⁹

Roberts’s reliance on Theron’s statements as the source of traditional knowledge associated with the rooibos plant was natural, because no academic research into such knowledge had been conducted by the early 1980s. It is surprising that no such research was done, or, at least, published, even much later. In modern works on the subject, the *Aspalathus linearis* has been regarded as a medicinal plant based on the results of scientific research conducted from the 1970s onwards.⁸⁰

A likely source of information on traditional utilisation of rooibos would have been *The South African Pharmacopoeia*, a major project by The South African Traditional Medicines Research Group. Established in 1997, with funding from the South African Medical Research Council, the group comprised scientists from the School of Pharmacy at the University of the Western Cape and the Medical School at the University of Cape Town. They drew up pharmaceutical monographs for dozens of medicinal plants indigenous to South Africa. However, those did not include the *Aspalathus linearis*.⁸¹ According to Professor Peter Smith of the University of Cape Town, a former director of the group, they did not research the rooibos plant.⁸² This unit is now defunct.

African Herbal Pharmacopoeia (2010), produced by the Association of African Medicinal Plants Standards, Mauritius, with funding from the European Union, has identified rooibos as one of the continent’s fifty-one most important medicinal plants. The authors point out that rooibos has been mainly used as a ‘health drink’, with ‘traditionally proven’ tonic and antispasmodic efficacy.⁸³ No source of this information is cited, and no further details on ethnopharmacological applications of the rooibos plant are provided in this work.

2.6. Conclusion

Authors of the government-commissioned study, having examined some of the existing literature, found ‘no evidence that disputes that the Khoi and San as [sic!] holders of T[raditional] K[knowledge] for these species’.⁸⁴ Our review has confirmed this postulation. Yet it does not allow us to make any further declarations without additional research: for instance, to state that the San and the Khoikhoi were *the only* holders of such traditional knowledge. Or that the San and the Khoikhoi were the first to make rooibos tea. In fact, the literature we have reviewed so far has not shed light on any uses of the rooibos plant by the indigenous inhabitants of the rooibos-growing areas.

We have established that no applications of the rooibos plant, under any of its previously known scientific designations, were recorded in any of the important works on South African taxonomy

⁷⁹ Roberts, *Indigenous Healing Plants*, p 25.

⁸⁰ Dugmore and Van Wyk, *Muthi & Myths from the African Bush*, p 94.

⁸¹ J T Mukinda and P F K Eagles (eds), *The South African Pharmacopoeia Monograph Project*, Cape Town, South African Medical Research Council, 2010, p 1.

⁸² Peter Smith, email message to Boris Gorelik, 21 January 2016.

⁸³ T Brendler et al, *African Herbal Pharmacopoeia*, Port Louis, Association for African Medicinal Plants Standards, 2010, pp 43-5.

⁸⁴ Siyanda Samahlubi Consulting, *Traditional Knowledge Associated with Rooibos*, p iii.

published in the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries.⁸⁵ Neither have we found any mention of the rooibos plant or its utilisation in the surviving accounts by colonial-era travellers who passed through the original rooibos-growing areas.

⁸⁵ See the list in J Hutchinson, *A Botanist in Southern Africa*, London, P R Gawthorn, 1946, pp 554-91.

3. UNDOCUMENTED HISTORY OF ROOIBOS

3.1. Before the introduction of Chinese tea (*Camellia sinensis*)

3.1.1. HUNTER-GATHERERS AND ROOIBOS

The default thinking in the modern literature, seems to be that early colonists in the Cape Colony learnt much, if not everything, about the natural environment from indigenous people: hunter-gatherers (collectively known as San, or Bushmen) or pastoralists (Khoikhoi). In the Cederberg, this learning process would have started in the last quarter of the seventeenth century (the arrival of the first Dutch travellers) and the early decades of the eighteenth century (the arrival of colonial settlers).

It is crucial to distinguish between knowing how to identify a plant and knowing how to use it. We need to ensure that indigenous hunter-gatherers and pastoralists had utilised the *Aspalathus linearis* before they encountered colonial settlers in the areas to which rooibos is endemic. If we succeed in this, we will be able to root the origins of usage of this plant in the precolonial era. No written record of that era exists for the relevant region, apart from early travellers' accounts. The latter contain no remarks on rooibos, and therefore we can search for evidence in the surviving archaeological record.

Plant remains have often been discovered at cave sites in the Western Cape, and their samples have been analysed and identified since the 1970s. The identification task is complicated by many factors such as the degree of preservation of the deposits.⁸⁶

Some plants, including the *Aspalathus linearis*, have left little evidence of their presence in the cave sites. 'People could know about an indigenous plant and use it, but if it did not leave a detectable trace in the archaeological records, we may not find it', says Professor John Parkington, a well-known South African archaeologist who has spent decades working in the Cederberg. 'And if we find it, we still need to determine how it was used and for what purpose.'⁸⁷

At this stage, the only publicised find of rooibos remains from an archaeological site is the material recently identified by Caroline Cartwright of the Department of Conservation and Scientific Research, British Museum. The fragment was present in the Middle Stone Age charcoal from the Diepkloof Rock Shelter, some fifty kilometres south-west of Clanwilliam.⁸⁸ With a help of scanning electron microscopy, Cartwright dated the remains to 71,900 to 59,500 years ago (the Stillbay and the Howiesons Poort cultural periods).

With archaeological record, understanding the context of utilisation of the plant is very difficult. First, as Cartwright reminds us, 'charcoal is present on any archaeological site as a result of many different factors: anthropogenic, taphonomic [related to fossilisation] and incidental'.⁸⁹ So we cannot ascertain that the appearance of these *Aspalathus linearis* fragments in the cave was caused by humans.

Secondly, even if we assume that the identified *Aspalathus linearis* remains were indeed brought in by people, it is impossible to determine how this plant was utilised by them, or whether it was utilised for any purpose at all. Commenting on this find, Parkington says that it 'does seem to mean that the woody shrub was used as firewood kindling, but we would be pushed to go further.'⁹⁰

⁸⁶ C Liengme, 'Botanical remains from archaeological sites in the Western Cape', in J Parkington (ed), *Papers in the Prehistory of the Western Cape, South Africa. Part i. BAR International Series 332 (i)*. Oxford, BAR, 1987, pp 237, 252.

⁸⁷ John Parkington interview, 19 December 2015.

⁸⁸ C R Cartwright, 'Identifying the woody resources of Diepkloof Rock Shelter (South Africa) using scanning electron microscopy of the MSA wood charcoal assemblages', *Journal of Archaeological Science*, vol 40, 2013, p 3467.

⁸⁹ Cartwright, p 3467.

⁹⁰ John Parkington, email message to Boris Gorelik, 2 May 2016.

Given the available data, we cannot establish the manner in which ancestors of the San people could have availed themselves of the rooibos plant.

People have lived in the Cederberg for at least 10,000 years.⁹¹ About 2,000 years ago, San hunter-gatherers witnessed the migration of Khoikhoi pastoralists into the region. By the early nineteenth century, the San had largely disappeared, driven northwards by Khoikhoi as well as by White and non-White ('Bastaard') settlers.⁹²

In spite of the global scientific interest in the Cape flora and the indigenous people of the region, its ethnobotany has been poorly recorded and researched. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the colonial and the pre-colonial societies first came into contact in this part of the world, no systematic study of the local useful plants was undertaken. Even at a later stage, ethnographical and anthropological records on hot beverages consumed by the San and the Khoi have been scarce.⁹³

Consistent academic research, involving fieldwork, into the culture and traditions of hunter-gatherers of southern Africa began only in the 1950-70s. It was conducted mainly by American anthropologists in the Kalahari regions of the present-day Namibia and Botswana. In South Africa, there had been hardly any Bushmen left by the early 1950s.⁹⁴ When South African researchers realised the urgency of studying the 'plantlore' of the subcontinent, in the 1980s, much of the ethnobotanical knowledge of the San had been lost through acculturation.⁹⁵

According to Professor Andrew Smith, Department of Archaeology, University of Cape Town, who has excavated in southern Africa and worked with Ju/'hoansi San in Namibia, no evidence of rooibos being employed by Bushmen has been discovered to this day.⁹⁶ In the absence of relevant ethnobotanical data from the Cederberg and other rooibos-growing areas, we should try a comparative approach. Through this, we can try to extrapolate, very cautiously, from our findings about the diet and medicine of various Bushmen peoples in other regions to understand what hunter-gatherers were likely to have done with rooibos in the precolonial era.

While there is no uniformity among Bushman peoples of southern Africa even in terms of language and social structure, it is certain that hunter-gatherers roamed within defined territories for many generations.⁹⁷ They utilised a high percentage of plants in their landscape. For instance, over a hundred plant foods sustained the !Kung people of the Kalahari.⁹⁸ The botanist Robert Story, who researched the diet of hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari in the 1950s, remarked:

'Their knowledge of field botany is astonishingly good Differences which escaped me would enable them to distinguish between edible and harmful plants, and they had a thorough knowledge of the areas and habitats in which their food plants grew.'⁹⁹

George Silberbauer, an anthropologist who studied the sociocultural system of the G/wi Bushmen in the central Kalahari in the 1950s-60s, noted that they could identify most of the local trees, shrubs and herbs by the age of puberty.¹⁰⁰

⁹¹ L Mitchell, *Belongings: Property, Family, and Identity in Colonial South Africa: An Exploration of Frontiers, 1725-c. 1830*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009, pp 8-9.

⁹² D Nell, "'Treating people as men": Bastaard land ownership and occupancy in the Clanwilliam District of the Cape Colony in the nineteenth century', *South African Historical Journal*, vol 53, 2005, p 134.

⁹³ B-E van Wyk and B Gorelik, 'The history and ethnobotany of Cape herbal teas', p .

⁹⁴ A Bank (ed), *The Proceedings of the Khoisan Identities and Cultural Heritage Conference*, Cape Town, Institute for Historical Research, University of the Western Cape, 1998, p 23.

⁹⁵ F M Archer, 'Ethnobotany of Namaqualand. The Richtersveld', MA Thesis, University of Cape Town, 1994, p 2.

⁹⁶ Andrew Smith, email message to Boris Gorelik, 23 February 2016.

⁹⁷ A Barnard, *Anthropology and the Bushman*, Oxford; New York, Berg, 2007, pp 142, 146.

⁹⁸ L Marshall, *Nyae Nyae !Kung Beliefs and Rites*, Cambridge, Mass, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 1999, p 41.

⁹⁹ R Story, *Some Plants Used by the Bushmen in Obtaining Food and Water*, Pretoria, Government Printer, 1958, p 7.

It would be hard to imagine that the San population of the Cederberg were unfamiliar with the rooibos plant. The *Aspalathus linearis* could even have some perceived nutrient or curative properties for them, although it is only a possibility.

Despite the ‘environmental utilisation of the Bushman’ in the recent decades as ‘an exemplar of understanding of animals, native skill and ingenuity’¹⁰¹, we cannot state with certainty that the indigenous hunter-gatherers availed (or did not avail) themselves of the rooibos. Silberbauer remarked that the G/wi saw some species in their habitat as useless to man.¹⁰² According to him, all shrubs of economic importance had specific, non-derived names in their language.¹⁰³ It seems that no indigenous name for rooibos has been known to exist, which might indicate that the *Aspalathus linearis* was one of the ‘useless’ plants or, at least, those of minor importance.

3.1.2. BEVERAGE

We have no direct evidence that the San utilised the rooibos plant in the precolonial era. If we suppose that they did, it could have been in a way completely distinct from making a hot beverage. Archaeologists and anthropologists have not reached a consensus on whether the San consumed infusions or decoctions (like rooibos tea) in the precolonial era.

For example, Alan Barnard, professor of the anthropology of Southern Africa at the University of Edinburgh, believes that they could have such beverages, because he witnessed iKung make and drink hot beverages similar to tea or coffee and based on infusions of Kalahari plants.¹⁰⁴

His colleague, Professor Mathias Guenther, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada, holds the opposite view:

‘I know of no reference to Cape Bushmen (the /Xam) using drink infusions of any kind. Likewise, I have not come across it among Kalahari groups, in either my own fieldwork or in the ethnographic literature.’¹⁰⁵

The moot point is the ability of the San to boil water in the precolonial era. This process is necessary for making what we know as rooibos tea or any other infusion or decoction.

John Parkington has pointed out that hunter-gatherers in southern Africa had no containers suitable for boiling water until the last 2,000 years, the appearance of pastoralists, or the Khoikhoi. Even afterwards, hunter gatherers, who emphasised mobility, tended not to accumulate heavy artefacts. Instead, they used to stash objects in a landscape and return to them later.¹⁰⁶

An ethnographer Professor Isaac Schapera noted that hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari rarely owned more than what they could conveniently carry about with them. He reported that the San who maintained no contact with the colonial society employed only light wooden pots, when he conducted his fieldwork in the mid twentieth century.¹⁰⁷

According to Parkington, Schapera’s observations are complex because that particular group of San people, while living in isolation from the colonial society, may have derived the idea of a ‘pot’ from recently arrived pastoralists. ‘It is not impossible that hunter-gatherers were boiling water in pots

¹⁰⁰ G B Silberbauer, *Hunter and Habitat in the Central Kalahari Desert*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p 94.

¹⁰¹ Barnard, *Anthropology and the Bushman*, p 144.

¹⁰² Silberbauer, *Habitat in the Central Kalahari Desert*, p 77.

¹⁰³ Silberbauer, p 79.

¹⁰⁴ Alan Barnard, email message to Boris Gorelik, 23 February 2016; A Barnard, *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa: Comparative Ethnography of the Khoisan Peoples*, Cambridge; New York, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p 142.

¹⁰⁵ Mathias Guenther, email message to Boris Gorelik, 24 February 2016.

¹⁰⁶ J Parkington interview, 19 December 2015.

¹⁰⁷ I Schapera, *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa: Bushmen and Hottentots*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951, pp 94, 143.

500 or 1000 years ago', says Parkington. 'It would just be unusual.'¹⁰⁸ In contrast, Professor John Speth, Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan, has suggested that 'one can easily and effectively boil in perishable containers made of bark, hide, leaves, placed directly on the fire and without using heated stones'.¹⁰⁹

Silberbauer noted that, as soon as the specimens were located, the gathering of plants by the G/wi Bushmen required little skill.¹¹⁰ Another anthropologist, Paul John Myburgh, who lived with the same San people in the Kalahari for seven years, in the 1970s, never saw them make anything like tea or utilise complicated procedures to prepare food or drink.¹¹¹ Preparation of wild rooibos, as we know it, involves cutting, chopping, bruising, drying and, eventually, making an infusion or decoction. Would hunter-gatherers, with the time and technology available to them, go to this trouble? What would be the potential uses and benefits of a rooibos beverage for them? We do not know.

3.1.3. MEDICINE

If the San believed that the *Aspalathus linearis* had medicinal properties, this could have been a reason for them to make a beverage from this plant or employ it in another way. However, we cannot assume that they did so, because most of their medicinal lore, particularly in the areas south of the Kalahari, has been lost.¹¹²

Lorna Marshall, who was engaged in fieldwork among the !Kung of the Kalahari in the early 1950s, reported that this San people depended on their deep knowledge of the environment for their lives. Minor ailments were treated not by healers, but by people themselves, with medicine they made from plants that they believe have curative or protective n/um [energy].¹¹³

It is thought that the original way of taking medicine by the San (and perhaps also the Khoikhoi) was by chewing, not drinking. According to Van Wyk, preparation of such medicine does not require chopping or bruising, which is part of the production process for wild and cultivated rooibos tea.¹¹⁴

However, making infusions and decoctions by San in the Kalahari has been documented. In the 1920s, Viktor Lebzelter, an influential Austrian ethnographer, noted that Damara medicine in Okombahe included powdered decoctions. Such practice, as well as boiling water, might have originated after 1870, when a German Rhenish mission was established there. It is said that the local Damara had been considerably acculturated.¹¹⁵

In the 1950-60s, Silberbauer recorded that G/wi Bushmen drank an infusion of the *Ammocharis coranica* as antidote for arrow poison and a decoction of the *Terminalia sericea* as laxative.¹¹⁶

In 2001, Chris Low interviewed dozens of San in Namibia for his doctoral thesis on Khoisan healing methods. Some of his respondents (Damara, Hai//om and Ju/'hoan; the oldest were born in the 1920s) stated that they utilised decoctions of various local plants as treatment for cough, itchy throat, chest pain, gonorrhoea and even Aids.¹¹⁷ Low argues that '[d]rinking a decoction of particular

¹⁰⁸ J Parkington interview, 19 December 2015.

¹⁰⁹ J D Speth, 'When did humans learn to boil?', *PaleoAnthropology*, 2015, pp 54-67.

¹¹⁰ Silberbauer, *Hunter and Habitat in the Central Kalahari Desert*, p 94.

¹¹¹ Paul John Myburgh, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, Cape Town, 3 February 2016.

¹¹² N Gericke, 'Traditional herbal medicines: Some key issues in the gathering, recording and development of indigenous knowledge', in H Normann, I Snyman and M Cohen (eds), *Indigenous Knowledge and Its Uses in Southern Africa*, Pretoria, Human Sciences Research Council, 1996, p 42.

¹¹³ Marshall, *Nyae Nyae !Kung Beliefs and Rites*, pp 40-1.

¹¹⁴ B-E van Wyk interview, 19 January 2016.

¹¹⁵ See C Low, 'Khoisan Healing: Understandings, Ideas and Practices', PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 2004, pp 118-9.

¹¹⁶ Silberbauer, *Hunter and Habitat in the Central Kalahari Desert*, pp 82-93.

¹¹⁷ Low, 'Khoisan Healing', pp 195, 206, 219, 222.

parts of a plant, often the roots, is probably the most common form of medication amongst Khoisan communities'.¹¹⁸

However, there is hardly any evidence of un-aculturated San making infusions and decoctions in the nineteenth century or earlier. All the data quoted above were collected less than a hundred years ago, when the relevant communities could learn how to make infusions and decoctions from other population groups whom they contacted.

3.1.4. PASTORALISTS AND ROOIBOS

Until the 1990s, the anthropological and ethnobotanical studies of the indigenous people of southern Africa were mostly dedicated to the Kalahari San. Researchers started to explore the plant utilisation of the pastoralists in the north-western parts of the region only afterwards.¹¹⁹ However, some important data have been gathered since then, which might be valid for traditional employment of rooibos by the Khoikhoi as well.

Before we consider if there is inferential evidence that Khoikhoi could avail themselves of rooibos as a beverage or medicine, I would like to draw your attention to a statement by Abraham Ockhuis of Heuningvlei, Cederberg. He reports that when he was a child in the 1950s, local women mixed rooibos with fat and applied it to their skin to give it a pleasant reddish colour.¹²⁰

Nama speakers in the Kalahari are known to have mixed powdered red ochre with fat to produce a red facial paint, which was applied 'especially after illness or after childbirth, to make her feel better and to be different'.¹²¹ The custom of using rooibos as pigment could have ancient Khoikhoi roots.

3.1.5. BEVERAGE

The question remains of whether hunter-gatherers of the rooibos-growing regions could boil water before the arrival of the colonial-era settlers might also apply to the pastoralists. Janette Deacon, a South African archaeologist specialising in heritage management and rock art conservation, commented on this assumption that 'it is not clear whether the earthenware pottery made by the Khoekhoe was suitable for boiling water to make tea, or from which to drink it, in precolonial times. Perhaps they only began to prepare and drink rooibos as a tea when metal pots, kettles and mugs were imported and became available through European households.'¹²²

However, allusions to indigenous infusions can often be found in literature. Renata Coetzee, a foremost expert in the history of South African cookery, notes that the Khoisan drank 'tea', brewed from over fifteen plant species — both as refreshment and medicine. She does not specify whether these beverages emerged before or after the arrival of settlers.¹²³

Writing in the late 1940s, Isaac Schapera remarked that the Khoikhoi had used 'infusions of various legumes and herbs' until tea and coffee, introduced by European settlers, supplanted those drinks, 'except perhaps in case of illness'.¹²⁴

Ansie Hoff, whose doctoral thesis explored the traditional worldview of the Khoikhoi, has suggested that they might have originally utilised rooibos as flavouring. She found that the Khoikhoi in Namaqualand liked to add pieces of various plants to milk and black tea 'for taste'.¹²⁵ Schapera gave further evidence to such practice by recording that the Khoikhoi employed to blend fresh milk with a

¹¹⁸ Low, p 206.

¹¹⁹ Archer, 'Ethnobotany of Namaqualand', p 2.

¹²⁰ Abraham Ockhuis, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 7 March 2016.

¹²¹ I Rudner, 'Khoisan pigments and paints and their relationship to rock paintings', *Annals of the South African Museum*, vol 87, 1982, p 150.

¹²² Janette Deacon, email message to Boris Gorelik, 1 January 2016.

¹²³ R Coetzee, *Kukumakranka: Khoi-Khoi Culture, Customs and Creative Cooking*, Pretoria, LAPA, 2010, p 68.

¹²⁴ Schapera, *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa*, pp 240-1.

¹²⁵ Ansie Hoff, email message to Boris Gorelik, 26 February 2016.

vegetable substance that was chewed and spat into it. This way, they produced a thick sour milk, one of their staple foods.¹²⁶ We can even speculate that this custom has partly survived in the Cederberg practice of mixing rooibos tea and milk for feeding babies (see the section II.2.2).

Chris Low has found that drinking concoctions for alleviating stomach problems, cleansing and as a general tonic is 'an essential part of Khoekhoe life and, I have no doubt, has been for centuries, well before colonial times.' At the same time, he doubts that consuming hot beverages like rooibos tea just for pleasure would have been 'a part of their lifestyle.'¹²⁷ Low has not come across any information on indigenous use of rooibos as a beverage in the earliest times. In his opinion, the rooibos infusion may have been one of the wide range of Khoikhoi drinks from indigenous plants that were utilised 'for reasons that bordered pleasure, therapy and nutrition'.¹²⁸

3.1.6. MEDICINE

Andrew Smith considers it possible that the use of rooibos had been part of the pharmacopeia of the Khoikhoi in the Cederberg even before the arrival of early colonists. Due to the inferior status of Khoikhoi and their descendants in the colonial society, 'few people thought of asking them about their pharmacopeia; thus much of this valuable information has disappeared as the older generation died off.'¹²⁹

In the north-western regions of South Africa and southern regions of Namibia, where many of the Cederberg Khoikhoi migrated in the colonial era, their medicinal knowledge has been endangered.¹³⁰

Use of infusions and decoctions for medicinal purposes by Khoikhoi peoples has been documented in the twentieth century. For instance, kanna (*Sceletium tortuosum*) is traditionally utilised in Namaqualand as an infusion and decoction to treat baby colic.¹³¹ A similar usage of rooibos tea became well known after it was publicised by Annekie Theron.

In 1994, Fiona Archer completed her thesis on traditional plant use among the descendants of the Nama-speaking Khoikhoi pastoralists in Namaqualand, South Africa. Although their communities had been considerably acculturated, they still partially relied on local plants for subsistence. Archer established that preparations employed by the Khoikhoi in the Richtersveld included hot infusions, decoctions, vapour baths (the patient inhaled the fumes of decoctions) and lotions made from infusions.¹³²

She listed dozens of plants traditionally utilised by the Khoikhoi in the Richtersveld for therapeutic purposes in infusions and decoctions. The list comprises various plant genera but not the *Aspalathus*. With rare exceptions, the data cited in her thesis in connection with medicinal infusions and decoctions were obtained in the second half of the twentieth century.¹³³

Ansie Hoff also commented on various infusions in her thesis on the traditional worldview of the Khoikhoi in the north-west of South Africa and the south of Namibia.¹³⁴ However, it should be remembered that Hoff did her fieldwork in the 1980s, after 'the political organisation and economic structure of the Khoikhoi had been seriously affected by the process of westernisation'.¹³⁵ On the

¹²⁶ Schapera, *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa*, p 237.

¹²⁷ Chris Low, email message to Boris Gorelik, 26 January 2016

¹²⁸ Chris Low email message, 26 January 2016

¹²⁹ Andrew Smith email message, 23 February 2016.

¹³⁰ Gericke, *Indigenous Knowledge and Its Uses in Southern Africa*, p 42.

¹³¹ N Gericke, 'Ethnobotanical Records from a Corporate Expedition in South Africa in 1685', *HerbalGram*, no 102, 2014, pp 52-9.

¹³² Archer, 'Ethnobotany of Namaqualand', pp 69-70.

¹³³ Appendix I. 'Useful Plants of the Richtersveld', in Archer, 'Ethnobotany of Namaqualand', pp 69-70.

¹³⁴ A Hoff, 'Die tradisionele wêreldbeskouing van die Khoekhoen', PhD Thesis, University of Pretoria, 1990, p 211.

¹³⁵ Hoff, p 23.

ethnic level, intermarriage with the White and Coloured population had been widespread.¹³⁶ The relatively recent data collected by Hoff cannot, as it is, imply that the making of infusions for medicinal purposes by the Khoikhoi originated in precolonial times.

3.1.7. CONCLUSION

Archaeological record suggests that the rooibos plant could have been utilised by people sixty thousand years ago or earlier. However, the context and nature of such usage is not clear.

No direct evidence of utilisation of the rooibos plant by pastoralists or hunter-gatherers in precolonial times is known to exist. Inferential evidence, mostly from areas to the north of the original rooibos-growing region, might suggest that the *Aspalathus linearis* could have been employed in infusions or decoctions before the eighteenth century. Yet the issue of the lack of suitable containers for boiling in the precolonial era would apply.

Even if such infusions or decoctions were prepared by the indigenous people in the region before the arrival of colonial settlers, it is not known what purpose those liquids could have served. Potential applications could range from medicinal remedies to pigments and food flavourings. For all that, indigenous pastoralists and hunter-gatherers were unlikely to consume beverages simply for pleasure, as we drink rooibos tea nowadays.

3.2. **After the introduction of Chinese tea**

3.2.1. TEA DRINKING IN THE CAPE COLONY

Considering that the rooibos infusion has usually been perceived as an alternative to Asian tea (*Camellia sinensis*), we should consider the history of tea drinking in the Cape Colony to see if the tradition of consuming the rooibos infusion or decoction could have been brought about or influenced by the introduction of Chinese tea in the original rooibos-growing region.

The Dutch, the majority of the early White colonists in the Cederberg, had strong connections with the tea-producing areas of the East and a longer tea-drinking tradition than that of any other European peoples.¹³⁷ The Dutch East India Company, which governed the Cape Colony at the time, imported tea into Europe since 1610. All the tea was shipped from Asia by sea via the Cape of Good Hope, where much of it ended up. Tea drinking in the Cape was first documented in 1676.¹³⁸

Chinese tea, a very expensive commodity, was sold to Cape inhabitants by passengers proceeding from the East Indies when their ships called at the colony's ports. The habit of drinking tea was very popular among the settlers of various walks of life.¹³⁹ According to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travellers, most settlers had tea at least twice a day: at breakfast and at three or four in the afternoon.¹⁴⁰

Yury Lisyansky, a Russian naval officer who stayed at the Cape in 1798, wrote of the settlers' customs, 'From the morning to the evening, women have a kettle on the table; they drink tea all the time, or, it would be better to say, tea water, and more often than not, without sugar.'¹⁴¹

Petrus Johannes van der Merwe, in his acclaimed history of the farmers' lifestyles on the Cape Colony frontier, noted that tea was the favourite drink of migrant farmers at least from the eighteenth century. 'The constantly filled teapot on the little table in the drawing room was one of

¹³⁶ Hoff, p 24.

¹³⁷ E Bramah, *Tea & Coffee: A Modern View of Three Hundred Years of Tradition*, London, Hutchinson, 1972, p 135.

¹³⁸ E Rosenthal, *Old Time Tea Trade and Tea Growing in South Africa*, [?: 196?], pp 2-3.

¹³⁹ Rosenthal, pp 3-4.

¹⁴⁰ R Coetzee, *Spys en drank: die oorsprong van die Afrikaanse eetkultuur*, Pretoria, LAPA, 2012, p 125; H W Claasens, *Die geskiedenis van boerekos 1652-1806*, Pretoria, Protea Boekhuis, 2006, pp 113, 358.

¹⁴¹ B Gorelik (ed), *'An Entirely Different World': Russian Visitors to the Cape, 1797-1870*, Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 2015, p 8.

the first things that struck the traveller. Any time of the day one could count on at least a cup of tea. In regions where the water was brackish, tea was drunk from morning till evening.¹⁴²

Otto Friedrich Mentzel, a German who travelled into the interior of the colony, towards Swellendam, in the 1730s, reported that tea and coffee were highly valued by settlers at the frontier, ‘the best “cheques payable on sight” for which one can get all manner of things at their disposal from the farmers living in the most distant places and in the deserts.’¹⁴³

After the colony had been taken over by the British, tea continued to be a costly item due to the British East India Company’s monopoly on tea trade in the empire and other restrictions. Writing in 1819, Major John Wedderburn Dunbar Moodie remarked that tea was still ‘a favourite luxury’ among the Dutch settlers, consumed throughout the day, ‘when they are able to afford it. Were the prices more reasonable, the consumption would be immensely increased.’¹⁴⁴

The traditional way of preparing rooibos tea in the Cederberg is decoction, when the pot is kept simmering on the stove all day (see the section II.1.4). This method could have been influenced by the Dutch technique of making ‘tea water’, as recorded in Lisiansky’s account cited above. Moodie noted that tea water was prepared ‘by a decoction or rather an infusion of the leaf, being diluted with a certain proportion of boiling water, without any addition of sugar or milk.’¹⁴⁵

It appears that the introduction of coffee and Chinese tea drinking by early European settlers stimulated the use of dozens of Cape plants as tea and coffee substitutes. The earliest existing accounts of Cape herbal teas were produced in the second half of the eighteenth century.¹⁴⁶ The lack of early ethnobotanical data and vernacular names for the majority of Cape herbal teas might indicate that all or most of these beverages emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, after the word ‘tea’ and the concept of tea drinking had been introduced by European settlers.¹⁴⁷

The expensiveness and, quite often, the lack of Chinese tea in the colony’s interior prompted settlers to search for readily available alternatives in their habitat.¹⁴⁸ Carl Thunberg, who travelled in the Cape extensively in 1772-5, recorded that colonists utilised several indigenous plants as tea replacement: *Aspalathus cordata*, *Adiantum aethiopicum* and *Viscum capense*.¹⁴⁹

In the Cape interior, with its small farmhouses and general poverty, farmers, their family members, slaves and servants often shared the living and sleeping space.¹⁵⁰ Such proximity led to adoption of European customs by non-White members of households. As a result, early travellers recounted, consumption of tea was not restricted to the European population.¹⁵¹ However, it is not always clear whether those authors spoke of Chinese tea or of infusions and decoctions made from local plants, such as the honeybush.

Mentzel recounted that, in the 1730s, both White and non-White farm dwellers drank tea ‘at all hours of the day and sometimes even fairly late at night In the districts where vines are not grown, it serves as a refreshment for the farmers, and a tonic for the slaves. For this reason, many colonists give their slaves a little tea of the ordinary kind, if not daily then quite often; and hardly a housewife will send her slave with the laundry to the washing place without giving him or her some

¹⁴² P J van der Merwe, *The Migrant Farmer in the History of the Cape Colony 1657-1842*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 1995, pp 181-2.

¹⁴³ O F Mentzel, *A Geographical and Topographical Description of the Cape of Good Hope*, part 3, Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1944, p 23.

¹⁴⁴ J W D Moodie, *Ten Years in South Africa*, vol I, London, Richard Bentley, 1835, p 126.

¹⁴⁵ Rosenthal, *Old Time Tea Trade and Tea Growing in South Africa*, p 6.

¹⁴⁶ B-E van Wyk and B Gorelik, ‘The history and ethnobotany of Cape herbal teas’, p 18.

¹⁴⁷ Van Wyk and Gorelik, p 18.

¹⁴⁸ Claasens, *Die geskiedenis van boerekos*, p 359-60.

¹⁴⁹ Thunberg, *Travels at the Cape of Good Hope*, pp 44, 162, 189.

¹⁵⁰ Mitchell, *Belongings*, p 111.

¹⁵¹ Claasens, *Die geskiedenis van boerekos*, p 359.

tea and candy At harvest time, too, every prudent farmer gives his slaves a little tea after their midday meal; without it they would suffer from thirst in the afternoon heat in the field.¹⁵²

Non-White migrants, such as people of mixed European and Khoisan descent (then known as 'Bastaards'), who moved to frontier regions, were known to have the tea-drinking habit. This is evidenced by William John Burchell, a famous British explorer and naturalist, who visited Klaarwater (the present-day Griekwastad, Northern Cape) in the 1810s. He reported on its inhabitants, representatives of a mixed-race people (Griqua) who had migrated to the area from the Cape interior:

'All are exceedingly fond of tea, and when the Chinese kind is not to be procured, they make use of the leaves of various wild plants: next to tobacco and brandy, they esteem tea the greatest luxury, as a beverage.'¹⁵³

Some of those Klaarwater residents had descended from the Griqua, the original Khoikhoi inhabitants of the Cederberg.¹⁵⁴

3.2.2. ADVENT OF THE TEA-DRINKING TRADITION IN THE CEDERBERG

The tradition of drinking Chinese tea came to the Cederberg and the other original rooibos-growing areas together with the early travellers and settlers from the Cape.

The poor pastures and rugged terrain of the arid Cederberg region did not appeal to pastoralists from the Cape who did not rush to settle in that isolated region.¹⁵⁵ The first farms along the Olifants River were registered in the 1720s. The settler population remained comparatively small throughout the eighteenth century, with farms located twenty or more miles away from one another. In 1753, only about two dozen farms existed along the Olifants River and in its environs.¹⁵⁶

The period was also characterised by confrontation with the local San and Khoikhoi tribes. Some of them were eventually assimilated into the frontier labour system, mostly as herdsmen, drovers and seasonal labourers, or driven northwards by colonial settlers' commandoes.¹⁵⁷ By the 1830s, San communities had virtually disappeared from the Cederberg. Khoikhoi could still maintain relative independence as communities of kraal dwellers.¹⁵⁸

The farm labour in the region consisted of chattel slaves brought by settlers and of indentured or free San and Khoikhoi. Bastaards were hired as servants or became tenant farmers on European-owned land. Shortage of European women resulted in frequent miscegenation, which, in its turn, increased the local Bastard population.¹⁵⁹

Since the eighteenth century, deserters and runaway slaves took refuge in the Cederberg and the surrounding areas. Those fugitives mixed with local non-White population, forming the nucleus of 'Bastard' and 'Bastard-Hottentot' communities.¹⁶⁰

The European influence in the region was growing since the beginning of the eighteenth century, not only through arrival of White and Bastard settlers but also through intermarriage and acculturation of the indigenous population, whose economic links with settlers intensified steadily. At the same

¹⁵² Mentzel, *A Geographical and Topographical Description*, p 258.

¹⁵³ W J Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, vol I, London, Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1822, pp 364-5.

¹⁵⁴ M C Bilbe, *Wupperthal: The Formation of a Community in South Africa, 1830-1965*, Köln, Köppe, 2009, pp 43-4.

¹⁵⁵ Bilbe, pp 45-6.

¹⁵⁶ Legassick, Martin Chatfield, *The Politics of a South African Frontier: The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana and the Missionaries, 1780-1840*. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2010, pp 50-1.

¹⁵⁷ Bilbe, *Wupperthal: The Formation of a Community*, pp 48-9.

¹⁵⁸ Bilbe, p 49.

¹⁵⁹ Bilbe, p 53.

¹⁶⁰ Nell, *South African Historical Journal*, p 138.

time, settlers were, most probably, acquiring some of the traditional knowledge from the indigenous peoples with whom they were in contact.

3.2.3. VILLAGES AND FARMS

The earliest record of tea drinking in the Cederberg area that I have come across dates to the second half of the eighteenth century. In a 1780s inventory of household items from Halve Dorschvloer, a cattle and sheep farm belonging to Schalk Willem Burger, tea cups, pewter serving kettles and porcelain teapots were listed.

This record is cited in Laura Mitchell's study of colonial identities in the Cape. 'Did the Burgers drink black tea imported from Asia, or local rooibos?', she asks. The available data is insufficient to answer this question. However, as Mitchell points out, the very possibility that the local rooibos could have been utilised might hint at the transfer of Khoisan knowledge implicit in colonial domestic life.¹⁶¹

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Clanwilliam district remained sparsely populated. According to Sir James Edward Alexander, a British traveller who visited the region in 1830, there were less than 9000 White and non-White inhabitants in the entire district.¹⁶² Clanwilliam, at the time, consisted of just over a dozen houses.¹⁶³

Goods had to be transported by ox waggons over poorly negotiable roads. Local inhabitants could visit Cape Town to pay the quitrent and buy the items they needed only once every two or three years. Hawkers played a crucial role in the economy of the Cederberg and the surrounding areas, at least from the second half of the eighteenth century, peddling essential wares, such as food, clothing or medicine.¹⁶⁴ Possibly, they also offered Chinese tea. The goods were sold for money or bartered for farm produce.

Hawkers would have catered not only to White settlers but also to Bastaard farmers. Many of those farmers accessed their land through tenancy arrangements, which survived on a small scale into the early twentieth century.¹⁶⁵

The first shop in Clanwilliam opened in 1822.¹⁶⁶ When Wilhelm von Meyer, a German traveller, visited the area in 1840, he bought *Camellia sinensis* tea in the village.¹⁶⁷ Cases of theft heard by the Circuit Court for the Division of Clanwilliam in the mid nineteenth century attest to the fact that at least some local shops stocked Asian tea.¹⁶⁸

As Eric Rosenthal demonstrated in his pioneering historical study of the South African tea industry, inhabitants of the remote areas of the Cape Colony, like the Cederberg, could not afford to drink imported tea regularly. Viable *Camellia sinensis* tea plantations in South Africa were only founded in the late 1880s and could not satisfy the demand.¹⁶⁹ The rooibos infusion, as we know it, would have been a palatable, easily available alternative to those people in the region who enjoyed Chinese tea.

¹⁶¹ Mitchell, *Belongings*, p 111.

¹⁶² Alexander, *An Expedition of Discovery*, p 38.

¹⁶³ *Clanwilliam: 150 jaar, 1814-1964*, Clanwilliam, Feeskomitee, 1964, p 14.

¹⁶⁴ *Clanwilliam: 150 jaar*, p 25.

¹⁶⁵ Nell, *South African Historical Journal*, pp 137-8.

¹⁶⁶ P L Scholtz, 'Die historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier 1660-1902', *Argiefjaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis*, no 2, 1966, p 85.

¹⁶⁷ W von Meyer, *Reisen in Süd-Afrika während der Jahre 1840 und 1841*, Hamburg, J P Grie, 1843, p 127.

¹⁶⁸ For example: Record of proceedings of criminal case. Circuit court, Worcester and Clanwilliam. The Queen versus Willem Ritter, alias Willem Schenk. Store-breaking with intent to steal and theft, 1847 [source CSC, vol 1/2/1/39, reference 1] Cape Town Archives Repository (KAB), National Archives of South Africa.

¹⁶⁹ Rosenthal, *Old Time Tea Trade and Tea Growing in South Africa*, p 29.

Rooibos farmers know that leaves of the *Aspalathus linearis*, once removed from the plant, can turn brownish even without bruising.¹⁷⁰ This transformation alone could have attracted the attention of local tea drinkers in search of a replacement beverage.

The demand for an ersatz tea would have risen during the drought and the economic depression of 1859-64, when many impoverished farmers lost their land and means of subsistence. The Clanwilliam Civil Commissioner reported in 1862 that the 'cost of living is high the poor classes are sometimes unable to procure the most ordinary necessities of life'.¹⁷¹ Another drought and economic depression affected the Clanwilliam district in the early 1880s.

'I think that rooibos functioned as a tea substitute amongst poor country people of European descent and Dutch-aculturated people of indigenous mixed Khoisan descent in the western Cape — particularly as a cheap "bush" alternative to blend with more expensive imported black tea', says Bruce Ginsberg, an East Asian scholar and grandson of a pioneer of the rooibos tea industry.¹⁷² Ginsberg has researched origins of the utilisation of rooibos in the context of the expansion of the global tea trade. He has found no historical record of any uses of the rooibos plant until the very end of the nineteenth century. He explains the absence of such record by the fact that rooibos 'was a small, very localised product from a backward area at the edge of the desert'.¹⁷³

There were several 'Cape bush teas' in many parts of the colony, using indigenous plants to simulate the taste of the Chinese beverage. The best known of them was the honeybush (*Cyclopia* genus) infusion, documented since at least the early nineteenth century.¹⁷⁴ In an 1836 catalogue of plant specimens from various corners of the Cape, Karl Zeyher recorded that the honeybush ('*Cyclopia genistoides*') was employed to make 'Honingthee' (honey tea).¹⁷⁵ Although this pioneer of botanical exploration of the Cederberg, who collected there in 1829 and 1831,¹⁷⁶ described the rooibos plant ('*Aspalathus corymbosa*'), he did not record any applications for it.¹⁷⁷

Specimen sheets (labels attached by botanists who had gathered the specimens) would have been a source of information on early utilisation of the rooibos plant. But according to the curators of South Africa's three largest herbaria — the National, the Compton (both SA National Biodiversity Institute) and the Bolus (University of Cape Town), — none of the sheets attached to colonial-era specimens of the *Aspalathus linearis* in their collections contains such data.¹⁷⁸

Honeybush grew in south-western parts of the Cape that were colonised fairly early. White colonists, travellers and officials — authors of early written records — had many opportunities to learn about this plant and its properties, which could also be communicated to them by the local Khoisan population. Rooibos, on the other hand, is endemic to the north-western Cape — particularly the Cederberg area, which was populated by colonial settlers relatively late. Travellers usually did not stay there long enough to gain proper knowledge of local customs, although many of their accounts were detailed and thorough.

The rooibos plant could have been employed in some way, including making an infusion or decoction, before the second half of the nineteenth century. Some evidence of those uses could have accumulated at the Clanwilliam archive. But that depository burnt down during the Second

¹⁷⁰ Jannie Nieuwoudt, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 6 March 2016.

¹⁷¹ Nell, *South African Historical Journal*, p 137.

¹⁷² Bruce Ginsberg, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 16 December 2015.

¹⁷³ Bruce Ginsberg interview, 16 December 2016.

¹⁷⁴ Anon, 'Medical statistics of the U. S. Ship *Constellation*, on her present voyage', *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, vol XXVI, no 20, 1842, p 311.

¹⁷⁵ Ecklon and Zeyher, *Enumeratio plantarum*, p 153.

¹⁷⁶ Glen and Germishuize, *Botanical Exploration of Southern Africa*, p 469.

¹⁷⁷ Ecklon and Zeyher, *Enumeratio plantarum*, p 204.

¹⁷⁸ Email messages to Boris Gorelik from A-L Fourie, Assistant Director, South African National Biodiversity Institute Libraries, Pretoria, 23 March 2016; E Marinus, Curatorial Assistant, Compton Herbarium, South African National Biodiversity Institute, Cape Town, 29 February 2016; T H Trinder-Smith, Curator, Bolus Herbarium, University of Cape Town, 2 March 2016.

Anglo-Boer War.¹⁷⁹ No such evidence has been found in early records from the Clanwilliam district that have been preserved at the National Archives of South Africa branch in Cape Town.

3.2.4. MISSION STATIONS

Although the old Clanwilliam archive was lost, the archives of the Rhenish Missionary Society, which established a network of stations in rooibos-growing areas starting from the 1830s, have survived. This is particularly fortunate: the oldest of those stations, Wupperthal, and its outstations are said to be 'the cultural point-of-origin for rooibos', where residents drank wild rooibos tea 'for breakfast, lunch, and dinner'.¹⁸⁰

In the nineteenth century, the Rhenish Missionary Society constantly expanded its base in the region by purchasing land from White and non-White farmers. Living under the auspices of the missionaries presented many advantages to Khoisan, former slaves and Bastards. They could work on land independently from the often hostile White farmers. Missionaries taught them how to read and write. Conversion to Christianity also heightened their status both in their communities and in the colonial society in general.

Throughout the nineteenth century, many Bastards still owned farms in the Clanwilliam district. But in the second half of the century, as racial distinctions and divisions became more relevant in the colonial society, their rights and status were challenged by White colonists accumulating land, often with support from the authorities.¹⁸¹ In this situation, transferring their plots to the Rhenish Missionary Society allowed non-White farmers to retain access to the land.¹⁸²

One of the traditional names of the rooibos infusion is 'koopman's tea'. The Afrikaans word 'koopman' means 'a merchant, trader'. But it is also a common surname in the Cederberg. Many people bearing that surname have lived on mission land. Some of them could be descendants of a farmer Cornelius Coopman who lived in the Pakhuis area in the eighteenth century and was married to a woman of mixed parentage, European and Khoikhoi.¹⁸³ Others could have traced their ancestry to the Khoikhoi Koopman nation, which once lived to the south and west of Caledon.¹⁸⁴

The Cederberg Koopmans were among the wealthiest Bastard farmers and landholders in the area. Several Koopmans resided in Wupperthal at least since 1836 and handed their households over to the mission.¹⁸⁵ There is a possibility that wild rooibos had been harvested on their land even before the existence of the rooibos infusion was recorded.

Families of Bastards and emancipated slaves were the elite of Wupperthal: teachers, artisans, deacons and elders.¹⁸⁶ Thanks to their closer association with the culture and lifestyles of the European settlers and missionaries, they were likely to be tea and coffee drinkers. However, even the mission underclass, Khoikhoi, San and their direct descendants, had a chance to acquire a taste for these beverages: they often worked on White farms as shepherds, servants or seasonal labourers.¹⁸⁷

The Rhenish missionaries' goal was conversion and acculturation of the local non-White population. They were probably among the few local Whites who tried to introduce industries and promote enterprise among the non-Whites inhabitants of the area. The Rev Johann Gottlieb Leipoldt, the

¹⁷⁹ J C Kannemeyer, *Leipoldt: 'n lewensverhaal*, Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1999, p 46.

¹⁸⁰ J A Keahey, 'Emerging Markets, Sustainable Methods: Political Economy Empowerment in South Africa's Rooibos Tea Sector', PhD Thesis, Colorado State University, 2013, pp 24-5.

¹⁸¹ Nell, *South African Historical Journal*, pp 123, 126.

¹⁸² Nell, p 132.

¹⁸³ P Cullinan, *Robert Jacob Gordon, 1743-1795: The Man and His Travels at the Cape*, Cape Town, Struik, 1992, p 149.

¹⁸⁴ G S Nienaber, *Khoekhoense stamname: 'n voorlopige verkenning*, Pretoria, Academica, 1989, pp 646-7.

¹⁸⁵ Bilbe, *Wupperthal: The Formation of a Community*, pp 60-5.

¹⁸⁶ Bilbe, pp 1-2.

¹⁸⁷ Bilbe, p 2.

founder of the Wupperthal mission, came from the artisan class and considered it his duty to impart artisan skills to his flock.¹⁸⁸

Leipoldt and his successors brought in experienced shoemakers, hat makers and carpenters from Europe to train mission residents.¹⁸⁹ The headquarters of the mission required that stations become self-supporting. Proceeds from the goods manufactured at the mission were supposed to cover its running costs. An especially recruited German agriculturalist managed the farming at the Wupperthal mission.¹⁹⁰ To generate additional income, the Wupperthal Institute even attempted to produce and trade in wool and ostrich feathers.

Missionaries were always looking out for business opportunities for their stations. In their diaries and correspondence, they reported on logging of cedar trees for timber, a profitable trade practised by local Bastaard communities from the eighteenth century. They noted that mission inhabitants as well as squatters on the Crown land stripped kliphout and waboom bark and harvested buchu. Such practices were also documented in 19th-century government reports.¹⁹¹

Besides, missionaries were interested in local substitutes for European beverages. For instance, in 1853, the Rev Leipoldt recorded that a species called *ghoe*, or wild almond (*Brabejum stellatifolium*), could be utilised to prepare an ersatz coffee.¹⁹²

In this context, it is remarkable that the earliest existing record of rooibos harvesting by inhabitants of the Rhenish mission stations dates to 1909, long after rooibos tea had become commercially available within and outside of the rooibos-growing areas. At least, this is the earliest mention of rooibos in the doctoral thesis and the book by Mark Bilbe who has produced the most comprehensive history of the Wupperthal community in existence. The reference appears in a document that Bilbe discovered among the records of the Rhenish Missionary Society at Wuppertal-Barmen, Germany.

In 1908, the Wupperthal economy succumbed to the economic depression in the Cape Colony. Some of the mission's industries became unsustainable, which caused residents to seek employment outside the mission. In an official letter of 12 August 1909, the head of the mission, the Rev Gustav Schmolke reported that some Wupperthal families were coping by selling the 'Rother Buschthee' [red bush tea]. Until then, according to Schmolke, rooibos had not been seen as a valuable commodity by the mission.¹⁹³

I asked Bilbe if he knew of earlier references to rooibos in the archival record of the Wupperthal mission, but he did not provide any additional material.

Academic research into the history of the Rhenish mission stations in the Cederberg had also been done by Elfriede Strassberger, who grew up in Wupperthal in the missionary's family. She also looked for material in the Rhenish Missionary Society's archives. The earliest evidence rooibos harvesting in her book relates to the 1920s.¹⁹⁴

Contemporary researchers have pointed out that selling wild rooibos provided income to Coloured landless harvesters and seasonal farm workers in Wupperthal and the Suid Bokkeveld at least since the establishment of the rooibos tea industry.¹⁹⁵ However, the earlier period, before the commercialisation of rooibos tea, was poorly documented. The existing record gives no indication of

¹⁸⁸ Bilbe, pp 72-4.

¹⁸⁹ Bilbe, p 102.

¹⁹⁰ Bilbe, p 106.

¹⁹¹ R H Andrag, 'Studies in die Sederberge oor (i) die status van die Clanwilliam seder (*Widdringtonia cedarbergensis* Marsh) (ii) buitelugontspanning', MSc Thesis, Stellenbosch University, 1977, p 10.

¹⁹² E Strassberger, 'Die werk van die Rynse Sendinggenootskap in Noordwes-Kaapland 1830-1855, met besondere verwysing na die Instutuut Wupperthal', MA Thesis, University of South Africa, 1953, p 60.

¹⁹³ Bilbe, *Wupperthal: The Formation of a Community*, pp 173.

¹⁹⁴ E Strassberger, *The Rhenish Mission Society in South Africa, 1830-1950*, Cape Town, C Struik, 1969, p 58.

¹⁹⁵ Louw, 'Sustainable Harvesting of Wild Rooibos', p 22.

when non-White squatters and mission inhabitants started to harvest rooibos in order to make an infusion or decoction.

Jennifer Keahey has tried to fill in the lacunae in our knowledge of the origins of rooibos tea by interviewing older residents of Langkloof and Heuningvlei in 2010, while engaged in ethnographic research in connection with a development project. Her oldest respondent, who could not remember her age, told Keahey of the time when Khoikhoi families were still living in the area, over fifteen kilometres south of Wupperthal. She and some other respondents said that the Khoikhoi who taught their families how to collect and process rooibos and make a beverage. According to Keahey, they were alluding to the late nineteenth century, when rooibos was harvested on a small scale, only for household consumption.¹⁹⁶

Although those respondents would have been too young to be born in the nineteenth century, they would remember what their parents or grandparents told them about rooibos. The memories they shared with Keahey demonstrate that there was a perception among at least some the area's oldest residents that the traditional knowledge of rooibos had been imparted to their families by the Khoikhoi.

3.2.5. CONCLUSION

Although no record of using the rooibos plant to prepare an infusion or decoction in the first 150 years of colonisation of the Cederberg is known to exist, it appears that the practice making such infusion or decoction, or at least, its consumption as a 'tea', is a phenomenon of the global expansion of tea trade.

Tea drinking in the Cape Colony was a long, established tradition, upheld by both White and non-White inhabitants. Those of them who migrated to the rooibos-growing region since the eighteenth century introduced that tradition to the Cederberg, the Olifants River Valley and the Suid Bokkeveld.

Colonial settlers appreciated rooibos as a local, readily available substitute for Asian tea. The latter was expensive and often unavailable in that remote part of the colony. The traditional way of preparing rooibos tea by making a decoction, rather than an infusion, corresponds to an early technique practised by Dutch colonists in the Cape when brewing Asian tea.

We have no evidence that would allow us to determine which community started to prepare and consume rooibos as tea. There is a possibility that such usage originated with Bastards who could have synthesised some indigenous knowledge of the rooibos plant with the colonial tradition of tea drinking. Compared to Whites, they had less means of purchasing Asian tea and a greater need for a replacement beverage.

¹⁹⁶ Jennifer Keahey, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 9 March 2016.

4. DOCUMENTED HISTORY OF ROOIBOS

4.1. Beverage

4.1.1. FIRST EVIDENCE

It appears that colonial-era academics and officials were unaware of rooibos tea until the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Curator of the Kew Museums, London, writing on ‘African tea plants’ in 1873, made no mention of the plant we know as the *Aspalathus linearis*.¹⁹⁷ Over twenty years later, in an article dedicated to the South African ‘bush teas’, Government Botanist of the Cape Colony, listed a dozen kinds but not rooibos.¹⁹⁸

Even in the absence of written record, we have reason to believe that a hot rooibos beverage was made and consumed in the Cederberg at least from the second half of the nineteenth century.

In my interviews, older residents of the region stated that their parents and sometimes their grandparents drank rooibos tea. Benjamin Zimri of Brugkraal remembers that his father (born in 1898) and grandfather harvested wild rooibos and made tea from it.¹⁹⁹ Theunis Jooste, ostensibly Clanwilliam’s oldest resident (born in the 1910s), reports that his parents collected and drank rooibos.²⁰⁰

The earliest record of usage of rooibos that I have managed to find was made at the very end of the nineteenth century by a famous South African writer, C Louis Leipoldt (1880-1947). He spent his childhood and teenage years in Clanwilliam, from 1884. Besides, Leipoldt’s family had a long connection to Wupperthal. His great-grandfather established and managed the first Rhenish mission stations in the Cederberg. Leipoldt’s father was the head of the Dutch Reformed congregation of Clanwilliam, which had non-White members.

Leipoldt seemed to allude to rooibos in one of his first published works: an essay about Clanwilliam that appeared in the *Cape Illustrated Magazine* of May 1898. According to Leipoldt, a local shop, which catered to customers of all races, stocked ‘a chest of tea and sack of bush tea’.²⁰¹

His comment proves that, apart from Chinese tea, general stores in the Clanwilliam district had started to offer teas made from indigenous plants by the 1890s. As explained before, we have no such record for the previous period, although the fact that shops in the area offered Chinese tea at least from the 1840 is documented.

Rooibos was not the only infusion or decoction consumed as tea in the original rooibos-growing areas. Other varieties were *geelblommetjies* (*Leysera gnaphalodes*), *litjies* (*Viscum capense* or *Thesium spicatum*) and *vaaltee* (*Plecostachys serpyllifolia*). Before strict quality standards had been imposed by the rooibos industry, manufacturers often mixed rooibos with those species for the market.²⁰²

Still, Leipoldt could be writing about rooibos in the quoted excerpt. Even later, when writing specifically about cultivation of the *Aspalathus linearis*, he called that beverage ‘bossiestee’ (bush tea), not ‘rooibos tea’.²⁰³

¹⁹⁷ J R Jackson, ‘African tea plants’, *The Pharmaceutical Journal and Transactions*, London, 29 November 1873, p 421.

¹⁹⁸ PMO [P MacOwan], ‘Cape tea (so-called)’, *Agricultural Journal of the Cape of Good Hope*, 17 May 1894, pp 236-7.

¹⁹⁹ Benjamin Zimri, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 7 March 2016.

²⁰⁰ Theunis Jooste, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 9 March 2016.

²⁰¹ FWB [C L Leipoldt], ‘The winkel: A South African sketch’, *Cape Illustrated Magazine*, May 1898, p 281.

²⁰² Anon, ‘Tee van ons berge’, *Sarie Marais*, 3 May 1950, p 4.

²⁰³ C L L [C L Leipoldt], ‘Die Nortier-Reservaat’, 1940s, article. Dutch Reformed congregation, Clanwilliam.

Leipoldt's statement may be corroborated by a 1950s article in South Africa's leading agricultural publication. The author asserted that rooibos had become available in the Cederberg general stores by 1890.²⁰⁴

However, not every remark on 'bush tea' in Leipoldt's writings on the Cederberg and the Olifants River Valley can be construed as a reference to rooibos.

In his youth, Leipoldt believed that Clanwilliam, a quiet village with some 800 residents, and its district were not inspiring enough to become a setting for a three-part novel.²⁰⁵ But he did eventually produce such a trilogy, known as *The Valley*, much later. For this study, particularly the first part would be of interest: the novel called *Gallows Gecko*, or *Chameleon on the Gallows*. The trilogy covers nearly 100 years in the history of the region, starting from the 1830s, the timeframe of *Gallows Gecko*. Leipoldt touched on 'bush tea' in the other two novels as well (*Stormwrack* (set in 1895-1902) and *The Mask* (in the 1920s), but only in passing.

Gallows Gecko was produced in the early 1930s, long after Leipoldt had relocated from the Cederberg.²⁰⁶ Leipoldt did not write it as an eyewitness: he was born nearly fifty years later than the period he described. But we may assume that he was relying on the local oral history, which he learnt in his youth, keeping acquaintances with both White and non-White inhabitants of the region.²⁰⁷

Telling about the produce of a local farm in his novel, Leipoldt mentioned 'buchu and bush tea, which were readily saleable in the valley and beyond'.²⁰⁸ In another passage, commenting on goods available from a farm shop, Leipoldt pointed out that Asian tea, sold in lead wrapping, was expensive even for White customers. 'As a result', he wrote, 'most of the valley folk contented themselves with tea made from a local composite plant which was pleasant to the taste, contained much less tannin than the imported article, was healthier to drink and had the added advantage of being procurable by all those who took the trouble to gather it from the hillside.'²⁰⁹

This fictional account by a former Clanwilliam resident who was too young to be an original source of information about the period in question (1830s) cannot be regarded as a historical document. However, since Leipoldt had extensive knowledge of the flora as well as oral and written history of the Cederberg, we can interpret the above comments as an indication that a tea made from a certain African plant originated long before the 1890s and was seen by local inhabitants as an affordable alternative to imported Chinese tea. It also suggests that there was a perception among residents of the region at the end of the nineteenth century (when Leipoldt lived in Clanwilliam) that at least some local plants were utilised for a tea-like infusion and sold even in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The adjective 'composite' used by Leipoldt, who had a thorough knowledge of botanical terminology, shows that he had in mind not the *Aspalathus linearis* but the *Leysera gnaphalodes*, or *geelblommetjies-tee*. The latter is derived from a flowering plant belonging to the *Asteraceae* (*Compositae*) family, not a legume like the rooibos.²¹⁰

'Very few of our indigenous plants are so much in domestic use as this one, known as Geele bloemetjies-thee', testified Ludwig Pappé in the 1850s.²¹¹ His younger colleague, Rudolf Marloth, called that beverage the 'Tea of the Cederbergen' in 1909. He stated that the drink made from the *Leysera gnaphalodes* was the most popular tea of the region, and not rooibos tea:

²⁰⁴ Anon, 'Nuwe toekoms vir rooibostee', *Die Landbouweekblad*, 4 March 1958, p 21.

²⁰⁵ Kannemeyer, *Leipoldt*, p 50.

²⁰⁶ C L Leipoldt, *Gallows Gecko*, Cape Town, Cederberg Publishers, 2007, pp vii-ix.

²⁰⁷ F W B [C L Leipoldt], 'Sketches in C—', *Cape Illustrated Magazine*, March 1897, p 227.

²⁰⁸ Leipoldt, *Gallows Gecko*, p 66.

²⁰⁹ Leipoldt, p 129.

²¹⁰ B-E van Wyk and B Gorelik, 'The history and ethnobotany of Cape herbal teas', p 15.

²¹¹ L Pappé, *Floræ Capensis medicæ Prodromus*, p 18.

‘In the Cedarbergen the people do not use the *Cyclopia* [honeysbush], but quite a different plant, viz., *Leyssera gnaphalioides* L., a composite with needle-shaped leaves the beverage prepared from it has a pleasant aromatic flavour without any stimulating action.’²¹²

I have found two published statements on early utilisation of rooibos tea that were based on first-hand experiences. Yet both of those accounts appeared in print half a century after the described events had taken place.

Colonel Herbert Wynne Vaughan-Williams’s memoir of his 1889 journey to the Ndebele kingdom gives the impression that the utilisation of rooibos as tea had spread outside the Cederberg by then. One of his travelling companions in the Tati country, a middle-aged Afrikaner named Greef, spent most of his life on the road. ‘He only worried if he ran out of coffee, bush tea or milk’, recounted Vaughan-Williams. ‘He introduced me to some very nice bush tea He called it “rooibos” tea, (red bush tea) and it came from the Cape.’²¹³

The other published first-hand report is by Albert Jackson, who owned a shop in the Backveld in the 1890s. According to him, bush tea was sold in that region by travelling traders from Boland. It was, as Jackson remembered sixty years later, ‘a very cheap and healthy herb from the Cederberg and elsewhere, much used by our farmers in sickness and in health.’²¹⁴ Then again, this could have been a remark about *geelblommetjies*.

4.1.2. HARVESTING AND PROCESSING METHODS

Researchers and sustainable development practitioners who have studied traditional methods of harvesting and processing of wild rooibos, such as Rhoda Malgas and Noel Oetlé, reported that Coloured communities of the original rooibos-growing areas have preserved those practices. They point out that ‘wild rooibos has been harvested for domestic use by countless generations of the members of the rural communities of the Cederberg and Suid Bokkeveld The same process is used today in Wupperthal and in the Suid Bokkeveld, with a few modern adaptations.’²¹⁵

One of the earliest descriptions of this technique is found in a letter from Assistant Conservator of Forests, Western Conservancy, to Chief Conservator of Forests in Cape Town, in September 1907:

‘The present method of preparing tea from “Rooibosch” appears to be as follows: The branches are first cut and collected; the leaves are then beaten off; moistened and rolled up tightly in sacking for a few days. After that, they are dried in the open air and the tea is ready for market.’²¹⁶

Some of my respondents in the Cederberg and the Suid Bokkeveld, both White and Coloured, reported that the tool for bruising wet green rooibos on a flat surface was known as a *moker*, from the Afrikaans verb ‘to thrash’.²¹⁷ The bruising extracts juice from the rooibos leaves and starts the oxidation. According to Theunis Jooste of Clanwilliam (born in the 1910s; grew up in Wupperthal) and Jakob Kotze of Onder Melkkraal, Suid Bokkeveld (born in 1934), this tool was originally a heavy plain pole.²¹⁸ This was also confirmed by interviews with small-scale farmers taken by Maya Leclercq in the Wuppertal and the Suid Bokkeveld areas in 2006.²¹⁹ The *moker* was made from a hard, durable wood material such as wild olive or wagon tree (*Protea nitida*). Later, possibly in the first

²¹² R Marloth, ‘The chemistry of some vegetable products of South Africa’, *Agricultural Journal of the Cape of Good Hope*, vol 34, 1909, p 636.

²¹³ H Vaughan-Williams, *A Visit to Lobengula in 1889*, Pietermaritzburg, Shuter & Shooter, 1947, p 67.

²¹⁴ A Jackson, *Trader on the Veld. As told to Eric Rosenthal*, Cape Town, Balkema, 1958, p 36.

²¹⁵ R Malgas and N Oetlé, *The Sustainable Harvest of Wild Rooibos: A Guideline for the Northern Cederberg and the Suid Bokkeveld Plateau*, Cape Town, Environmental Monitoring Group Trust, 2007, p 4.

²¹⁶ Cape colonial tea (*Cyclopia Vogelii*) or rooi bosch, 1907-9 1847 [source FOR, vol 28, reference 1737] Public Records of Central Government since 1910 (SAB), National Archives of South Africa.

²¹⁷ Elsabé Kotzé, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 10 March 2016; Koos Kotze, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 8 March 2016; Barend Salomo, email message to Boris Gorelik, 14 March 2016.

²¹⁸ T Jooste interview, 9 March 2016; Jakob and Katriena Kotze, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 8 March 2016.

²¹⁹ M Leclercq, ‘Localised production of rooibos in South Africa’, p 49,

decades of the twentieth century, that tool evolved into a heavy mallet, such as the one displayed at the Clanwilliam Museum.

Susanne Reuther, the author of *Das Rooibos Buch*, has speculated that the traditional method of processing rooibos could have been imparted to the indigenous peoples of the region by slaves who worked on farms.²²⁰ I have not come across any evidence to confirm this suggestion.

Another early description of the process dates to 1926. An employee of the Elsenburg School of Agriculture, after a visit to Nieuwoudtville, Suid Bokkeveld, recorded it as follows:

‘The twigs, with their needle-shaped leaves, are collected from the bushes as they appear scattered along the mountain slopes. In some parts, it is held that the twigs should on no account be cut off by knives, but must be plucked or broken off by hand. These twigs and leaves are afterwards chopped up by a chaff cutter, stamped down (or bruised) by a heavy mallet and allowed to “ferment” or sweat for some days in tightly packed and covered heaps. During this fermentation, the colour of the twigs and leaves changes to a reddish brown or blackish brown colour according to the species of bush used. The tea is then allowed to dry, and is bagged and sold, usually to the local storekeepers, who re-grade and sift it where necessary.’²²¹

The fact that the *moker* was initially just a stick and that rooibos twigs and branches were removed without cutting might be sign that the traditional harvesting method could be practised before the appearance of metal and metal tools (like knives or sickles) in the region.

Petrus Hanekom of Bosdorp (born in 1940) recounts that sifting was also done by harvesters themselves, ‘[I]t was sifted in a big tea sieve by two men and was swung again, so that the fine tea could pass and sticks would remain. Now it was ready to be loaded on donkeys and transported to the buyer.’²²²

Harvesters in the Cederberg had special tea-making points (known as ‘tea stations’) where they camped when processing tea, from January to March. They were also utilised by collectors of buchu and kliphout bark.²²³ According to Petrus Hanekom, some of the main stations were located at:

- Kruisrivier and Groothoek (near Algeria)
- Warmhoek, Jamaka (northeast of Algeria)
- Warmhoek, Boskloof (south-east of Clanwilliam)
- Kleinkliphuis (Rocklands)
- Bokveldskloof (south of Wupperthal).²²⁴

According to Abraham Ockhuis of Heuningvlei (born in 1953), there was a tea station in his village as well, and he witnessed the processing there in his childhood.²²⁵

After the Nortier variety (the so-called *mak tee*, or cultivated tea) was introduced in the 1930s, harvesting of wild, or veld, rooibos tea decreased. After 1969, the Rooibos Tea Control Board, the government-run body that managed the industry, no longer purchased wild tea crop.²²⁶ However, wild tea was still harvested for household consumption, particularly by members of Coloured communities. Inhabitants of Wupperthal were particularly reluctant to engage in cultivated rooibos

²²⁰ Reuther, *Das Rooibos Buch*, p 294

²²¹ Anon, ‘Production of Rooibos Tea’, *Farming in South Africa*, April 1926, p 22.

²²² P Hanekom, *Diep spore: Petrus Hanekom gesels oor sy leefyd in die Sederberge*, Kenilworth: SilverSedge Books, 2012, pp 24-5.

²²³ Petrus Hanekom, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 6 March 2016.

²²⁴ Hanekom, *Diep spore*, pp 24-5.

²²⁵ A Ockhuis interview, 7 March 2016

²²⁶ Andrag, ‘Studies in die Sederberge’, p 11.

farming. The first recorded bulk delivery of *mak tee* from Wupperthal to the Control Board took place only in 1981.²²⁷

In the early 2000s, to formulate recommendations for sustainable harvesting of wild rooibos in the Suid Bokkeveld, Rhoda Malgas conducted a comprehensive study of traditional practices and methods in the area. Apart from field experiments, one of the main sources of information for her were interviews with experienced harvesters, aged over fifty.²²⁸

Malgas has established that collecting of wild rooibos usually starts one month after the cultivated variety has been gathered in. Respondents told her, among other things, that harvesting once every second year produces better yields than doing so every year. They tended to choose harvestable material from the crown of the plants, about an inch above the previous harvest scar.²²⁹

Before that pioneering academic study, such knowledge had only been preserved in oral tradition. As the oldest respondents were born in the mid twentieth century, we can only speculate whether it predates the earliest written record of rooibos usage. However, we can conclude that Coloured communities, such as those interviewed by Malgas, have kept and used the traditional knowledge associated with wild rooibos, its harvesting and processing.

4.1.3. COMMERCIALISATION AND CULTIVATION

Although we have established that shops in the Cederberg stocked rooibos at least from the 1890s, the product itself, judging by the surviving archival data, did not sell in large volumes.

Standard Bank was the first financial institution to open a branch in Clanwilliam. The earliest surviving report for that branch is dated 'January 1904'. Inspectors submitted such reviews every year, with an outline of the area's economic situation, including important and developing local industries. They did not regard rooibos to be worth mentioning until 1910, and that only in passing.²³⁰

For a 1909 court case, statements from traders in the Cederberg were obtained. They testified that rooibos was known locally as 'naalde tea' or 'rooibosch tea', and that 'until a few years back the article itself did not command much attention. The traders stated that they had started to stock rooibos no earlier than in 1902.'²³¹

Perhaps because of the remoteness of the rooibos-growing region and difficulties in transporting the product to Cape Town and other parts of the colony, rooibos tea became available outside of its area of origin much later than honeybush tea did.

Benjamin Ginsberg, a young immigrant from the Russian Empire, has been credited with discovering the marketing potential of that beverage.²³² It is said that he was the first trader to begin consistent promotion of rooibos outside the Cederberg: in Cape Town and other parts of the colony.²³³ Besides, he created the oldest existing brand of packed rooibos tea, Eleven o'Clock.²³⁴

²²⁷ A Kaplan, 'Wupperthal — Strategy for Action: A Case-study in Co-operative Rural Development', MA Thesis, University of Cape Town, 1985, pp 64-5.

²²⁸ Louw, 'Sustainable Harvesting of Wild Rooibos', p 33.

²²⁹ Louw, pp 58, 66-7.

²³⁰ Inspection reports on the Clanwilliam branch, 1903-28 [Insp 1/1/203] Standard Bank Archives.

²³¹ Motion. Charles Beeton Heatlie and Sydney Glaeser Heatlie trading as Heatlie Brothers, and Krone and Co. Ltd. versus James Hodgson Hartley, 1909 [source CSC, vol 2/6/1/366, ref 783] KAB, National Archives of South Africa.

²³² L G Green, *On Wings of Fire*, Cape Town, Timmins, 1967, p 142.

²³³ Rooibos Tea Control Board, *Annual Report of the Rooibos Tea Control Board for the Year 1959*, p 1; Van Wyk, *Food Plants of the World*, p 77. Olivier, *Cape Argus*, p 3; Le Roux, *South African Panorama*, p 38.

²³⁴ R Kenyon, 'Rooibos: Just Our Cup of Tea', *Reader's Digest*, March 1987, p 27; Le Roux, p 38; *Brands & Branding in South Africa*, vol 2, Johannesburg, Affinity, 1994, p 49.

Having arrived in the Cederberg after the Anglo-Boer War, Ginsberg joined his father, who ran a trading post over thirty kilometres south of Clanwilliam, on the present-day Hexrivier farm.²³⁵

‘He began trading at a time when successful general dealers were the primary suppliers of everything that country and people living in isolated areas required: fuel, fencing wire, fertiliser, farm equipment, groceries’, says his grandson, Bruce Ginsberg, who has researched his family history and that of the rooibos industry.²³⁶

From about 1903, Benjamin Ginsberg peddled in the valley and the mountains on foot and with a mule cart. In that period, he learnt about rooibos tea. Van Putten suggested, apparently, based on his interviews with Ginsberg’s widow, that the young travelling salesman was introduced to rooibos in the Grootkloof valley, ten to fifteen kilometres from Hexrivier.²³⁷ Ginsberg could have been offered the beverage on a visit to local farmers. He would have also seen Coloured harvesters process their crop at tea stations near Algeria.

Ginsberg started buying rooibos from harvesters and selling it to his customers in the area. By 1912, he had relocated to Clanwilliam and opened a shop in the present-day Visser Street.²³⁸ From there, he expanded his operations over the Cederberg and further afield. Reportedly, Ginsberg also encouraged White farmers to collect and process rooibos on a large scale.²³⁹

By 1917, rooibos had become a ‘fairly common’ beverage with ‘well-known tonic properties’, according to South Africa’s Department of Forestry.²⁴⁰ A prominent South African writer Lawrence Green, who personally knew Leipoldt and Nortier, recorded that all rooibos was then harvested ‘by the same bands of coloured people who brought in the buchu’.²⁴¹

To stimulate sprouting of rooibos bushes and meet the increased demand for tea, farmers and harvesters regularly burnt the land where the plant occurred, often immediately after gathering in the crop.²⁴² To a lesser extent, this method is still employed by Coloured communities and cooperatives that harvest wild rooibos. The practice could have evolved from indigenous techniques. Isaac Schapera reported that the north-western tribes of the San burnt veld at the end of the dry season so that edible plants could germinate better when the rains began.²⁴³

Excessive veld burning led to soil degradation and erosion in the Cederberg, as evidenced by Pieter Lefras Nortier, the district surgeon in Clanwilliam and avid naturalist. In 1931, he reported that ‘the soil, unprotected by vegetation, is washed away by the rains and nothing but bare rock is left’, over which ‘the rain water rushes to scour out the valleys’. Further, he remarked:

‘It is generally held by farmers that periodically burning of veld is necessary to encourage tea and buchu to grow for a few seasons as these would otherwise be choked and stunted by other scrubs. Undoubtedly, this is the most important urge for veld burning.’²⁴⁴

As a remedy, Nortier proposed to develop a cultivated variety of rooibos, which would be raised on appropriately situated land.²⁴⁵ He was already working on cultivation of the *Aspalathus linearis* in

²³⁵ Bertha Ginsberg, interviewed by James van Putten, 1965.

²³⁶ Bruce Ginsberg, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 16 December 2015.

²³⁷ Van Putten, *Veld & Flora*, pp 28-9.

²³⁸ Bertha Ginsberg interview, 1965.

²³⁹ Van Putten, *Veld & Flora*, pp 28-9.

²⁴⁰ Department of Forestry, Union of South Africa, *Annual Report of the Department of Forestry*, Cape Town, 1917, p 42.

²⁴¹ Green, *In the Land of Afternoon*, p 53.

²⁴² Andrag, ‘Studies in die Sederberge’, 1977, p 10; D P Bands, ‘Prescribed burning in Cape fynbos catchments’, in *Proceedings of the Symposium on the Environmental Consequences of Fire and Fuel Management in Mediterranean Ecosystems, August 1-5, 1977, Palo Alto, California*, Washington, Forest Service, US Department of Agriculture, 1977.

²⁴³ Schapera, *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa*, p 140.

²⁴⁴ Nortier, N L, ‘Soil erosion. District of Clanwilliam 1931’ [Pieter le Fras Nortier Collection, MS 411, document 411.Pe.1(12)], Stellenbosch University Libraries.

partnership with farmers Oloff Bergh and William Riordan, and with encouragement from Benjamin Ginsberg. From early 1930, the first experiments were carried out on Riordan's farm Klein Kliphuis (fourteen kilometres north-east of Clanwilliam) and Bergh's Varkfontein (west of Cederhoutkop in the Pakhuisberge).²⁴⁶

During this project, Nortier collaborated with members of the local Coloured community, who assisted in procuring rooibos seeds.²⁴⁷ At the time, those were scarce and expensive: £5 per matchbox²⁴⁸, which would have been approximately R7,000 today. Rooibos seeds are minuscule and hard to spot in the sandy soil once the pods split and dispersed them.

Nortier collected rooibos seeds in the Rocklands and the Grootkloof areas with the help of Coloured labourers, who were paid by the amount they brought in.²⁴⁹ Among them were Hans and Tryntjie Swart, who realised that ants collected seeds and stored them underground. Ants ate out the shell of the seeds, leaving the inner parts.²⁵⁰ Hans and Tryntjie would dig anthills open, remove rooibos seeds and deliver them to Nortier.²⁵¹

Although, according to a recorded interview with Tryntjie Swart, she claimed to have discovered the method with her husband,²⁵² its origins could have been rooted in more distant times. Schapera noted that Khoikhoi were known to break anthills open, ransack their stores of seeds and boil those seeds in milk 'making a very agreeable dish'.²⁵³

We do not know anything about Hans and Tryntjie's ancestry. But they could have been related to Fytjie Zwart, a Bastaard woman who owned the farm Heuningvlei, which was later taken over by the Rhenish Missionary Society.²⁵⁴

The variety developed by Nortier (the so-called *mak tee*, or cultivated tea) is more erect than the semi-prostrate wild rooibos. It lives from five to fifteen years and cannot survive fires. Uncultivated tea is more robust and produces crop for longer. Reportedly, rooibos can be harvested from some wild plants for fifty years or more.²⁵⁵

Yet the cultivated variety has become the mainstay of the rooibos industry enabling it to expand and create income and jobs for inhabitants of rooibos-growing regions. It is said that Nortier did not capitalise on his invention but, instead, shared it freely. One of his friends remarked that Nortier 'was more than satisfied that the problem that had been worrying him for years was solved'.²⁵⁶

4.1.4. USES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Most of the available information on traditional utilisation of the rooibos plant has been obtained and recorded after the 1900s. Though it might reflect earlier practices as well, we cannot simply extrapolate from it to the nineteenth century or even precolonial times. That is why I believe that it

²⁴⁵ Nortier, p 5.

²⁴⁶ James van Putten, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 9 March 2016; E Smit, *Rondom die Sederberge: noord en oos*, Clanwilliam, 2004, p 16.

²⁴⁷ R van Reenen, 'Oor só 'n man kan 'n vrou mos spog', *Die Burger, Byvoegsel*, 4 October 1958, p 3.

²⁴⁸ P J van der Merwe, 'Baanbrekers in die Land van Rooibos tee', *Die Burger, Byvoegsel*, 31 December 1949.

²⁴⁹ J van Putten interview, 9 March 2016.

²⁵⁰ *Juweel van die berge: handleiding vir die organiese rooibosboer*, Cape Town, Environmental Monitoring Group, 2002, p 18.

²⁵¹ Van Putten, *Veld & Flora*, pp 29-30; J McKenna, 'Right refreshing rooibos', *SA Digest*, 5 August 1983, p 12; Green, *In the Land of Afternoon*, pp 52-3; Anon, 'Profile — Dr Peter Nortier', *Cape Argus*, 27 September 1947.

²⁵² Tryntjie Swart, interviewed by James van Putten, 1970s [?], audio recording, Rooibos Ltd archive, Clanwilliam.

²⁵³ Schapera, *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa*, p 238.

²⁵⁴ Nell, *South African Historical Journal*, p 131.

²⁵⁵ *Juweel van die berge*, p 17.

²⁵⁶ Anon, 'Short sketch of the life and work of Dr Piet le Fras Nortier of Clanwilliam, Cape Province, SA', H Strauss's personal archive, Clanwilliam.

would be correct, from a historical point of view, unless or until other record is discovered, to assume that such information refers to the twentieth-century usage only.

It appears that the earliest method of preparing rooibos tea in the twentieth century was not infusion but decoction. This has been communicated to me by several respondents, both White and non-White, born in the 1950s or earlier. Elsabé Kotzé, who grew up on a farm in the Cederberg in the 1940s-50s, remembers that a pot of rooibos tea was kept on the stove all day.²⁵⁷ Ben-Erik van Wyk, who lived in Nieuwoudtville in the early 1970s, recounts that a kettle of rooibos used to stay on a simmer plate on the stove from morning to evening. ‘You added water and tea regularly and cleaned it up once a week’, he says. ‘The traditional tea was very strong. You cannot get that taste by infusing rooibos within a teabag.’²⁵⁸

According to Rhoda Malgas, rooibos tea is still made that way by Coloured communities in the Suid Bokkeveld. This strong decoction serves as a tonic, a ‘pick-me-up’ to be consumed on the way out to work.²⁵⁹ This was also the traditional way of preparing the rooibos beverage in Wupperthal. Allan Kaplan, who first visited the area in the 1950s, recounts that local people brewed rooibos leaves and *stokkies* (sticks) in blackened pots over a fire, stirring it, day after day.²⁶⁰

‘I remember the farm kitchen with the pot of rooibos tea that stood on the side of the stove and brewed’, reminisced a reporter for the *Die Landbouweekblad* in 1967, “‘Because,” say seasoned rooibos-tea drinkers, “the longer rooibos is brewed, the better it becomes.””²⁶¹

The social status of rooibos remained low nearly throughout the twentieth century. In White communities, it was regarded as an affordable replacement for the imported tea.²⁶² That is why rooibos was served in hostels and boarding schools.

Christo Nieuwoudt (born in 1935) says that, at his boarding school in Clanwilliam, he always had rooibos, never black tea: ‘The church, which was running the school, had to keep the expenses down, and everybody was very poor.’²⁶³ His sister, Esna Ehlers, who also attended a boarding school in Clanwilliam, recounts that the rooibos there was made from tea dust. She disliked it so much that she cannot drink rooibos anymore.²⁶⁴

James van Putten, born on a farm in the Clanwilliam district in the 1930s, remembers that his family did not consume rooibos tea, ‘because the quality of the product was so low at the time that we didn’t like it’.²⁶⁵ A popular way of serving rooibos was to mix it with Ceylon tea, to make the latter, more expensive item last longer.²⁶⁶ Rooibos was also blended with other ‘bush teas’. Ernst Smit, a Cederberg citizen historian, wrote that bloublommetjie tea (*Felicia echinata*), with its intense flavour, was added to rooibos tea to make the beverage stronger.²⁶⁷

Several respondents informed me that in the 1940s-50s, it was ‘not a good idea socially’ to serve rooibos tea to guests. Visitors would always get Ceylon tea.²⁶⁸ Thelma Harding (born in 1931), a daughter of Oloff Bergh, a pioneer of rooibos cultivation, recounts that her family did not use

²⁵⁷ E Kotzé interview, 10 March 2016.

²⁵⁸ B-E van Wyk interview, 19 January 2016.

²⁵⁹ Rhoda Malgas, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 15 December 2015.

²⁶⁰ Allan Kaplan, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 14 December 2015

²⁶¹ Anon, ‘Magriet gesels’, *Die Landbouweekblad*, 14 March 1967, p 67.

²⁶² E Kotzé interview, 10 March 2016.

²⁶³ Christo Nieuwoudt, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 10 March 2016.

²⁶⁴ Esna Ehlers, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 10 March 2016.

²⁶⁵ J van Putten interview, 9 March 2016.

²⁶⁶ E Ehlers interview, 10 March 2016.

²⁶⁷ Smit, *Rondom die Sederberge*, p 45.

²⁶⁸ C Nieuwoudt interview, 10 March 2016; Thelma Harding, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 12 March 2016.

rooibos at all: 'It was seen as a tea for the poor. My parents didn't drink rooibos, although they did grow it.'²⁶⁹

In Coloured communities, as much as in the White ones, consumption of rooibos seems to have been associated with hardship and poverty. Theunis Jooste, who was born in the 1910s and grew up in the Wupperthal area, says that they normally served coffee to guests in his family, although they also collected and processed wild rooibos for using at home.²⁷⁰

A 1950 sociological study of the Wupperthal community established that residents bought coffee at the village shop. They had no need to purchase tea because 'a tea plant grows in the surrounding mountains, which is considered very good. The Coloureds regularly stock up on it in the mountains.'²⁷¹ Strangely enough, respondents in that study did not provide any details on consumption of any tea (Asian or local) in their households. It was only recorded that black coffee was taken with every meal.²⁷² Possibly, respondents did not want to admit the usage of the 'lowly' rooibos and preferred to tell the researcher that they had the more 'prestigious' coffee at breakfast, lunch and supper.

Barend Salomo (born in 1958 in the Wupperthal area) told me that bread and pure rooibos, without milk, was a usual breakfast in his family. His mother (born in 1918) also always had bread and rooibos in the morning.²⁷³ Benjamin Zimri (born in 1939), living in Brugkraal, about ten kilometres north-west of Wupperthal, also reported that bread and rooibos were a staple food in his area.²⁷⁴

A similar statement was made by Petrus Hanekom (born in 1940), whose family has been living in the Grootkloof valley since the mid nineteenth century. According to him, rooibos served as a traditional morning drink. At the same time, 'the people of Grootkloof were real coffee lovers. If they had coffee, life was good. "Bread-and-coffee" was a meal.'²⁷⁵

'In the old days, you got coffee in beans from a shop and ground them', recounts Willem Farmer of Esselbank, who had worked for the Strassberger rooibos business in the 1950s. 'If that coffee wasn't available, we used to drink rooibos.'²⁷⁶

The fact that coffee was the community's favourite beverage has been confirmed by some of the oldest residents of Heuningvlei, another of Wupperthal's outstations. Johannes Ockhuis (born in 1934), a small-scale rooibos farmer, told me that they used to drink little rooibos. 'The coffee in beans used to be almost like food for us. That's why few people drank rooibos tea.'²⁷⁷

According to Rhoda Malgas, making rooibos tea as a decoction is still common in the Suid Bokkeveld Coloured communities.²⁷⁸ Another widespread practice that her respondents have reported was the mixing of wild rooibos with Ceylon tea.²⁷⁹ Coffee, however, is still the preferable hot beverage in the area, both for consuming by the family or serving to guests. In Malgas's opinion, this could reflect the negative image that rooibos tea had for decades as a 'poor man's drink'.²⁸⁰

Another common notion in Coloured communities is that rooibos stimulates appetite. As maintained by Nokwanda Makunga, many of the respondents in the survey of traditional knowledge associated

²⁶⁹ T Harding interview, 12 March 2016.

²⁷⁰ T Jooste interview, 9 March 2016.

²⁷¹ J J Swanepoel, 'Wupperthal: 'n gemeenskapstudie van 'n sendingstasie', MA Thesis, Stellenbosch University, 1951, p 85.

²⁷² Swanepoel, p 86.

²⁷³ Barend Salomo, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 7 March 2016.

²⁷⁴ B Zimri interview, 7 March 2016.

²⁷⁵ P Hanekom, P, *Cederberg-stories uit Grootkloof*, Kenilworth, SilverSedge Books, 2015, p 48.

²⁷⁶ Willem Farmer, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 27 October 2016.

²⁷⁷ Johannes Ockhuis, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 27 October 2016.

²⁷⁸ R Malgas interview, 15 December 2015.

²⁷⁹ Louw, 'Sustainable Harvesting of Wild Rooibos', p 22.

²⁸⁰ R Malgas interview, 15 December 2015.

with rooibos, commissioned by the Department of Environmental Affairs, told her that ‘rooibos tea makes you hungry’.²⁸¹ This view is shared by some of the people I interviewed in the Cederberg.²⁸²

Ben-Erik van Wyk says that the Coloured people he interviewed in the Cederberg, as part of his survey of traditional knowledge associated with indigenous medicinal plants, even spoke of the beverage as ‘hongertee’ (hunger tea). They explained, ‘Sometimes you don’t want rooibos because it makes you hungry. But then you don’t want to be hungry, because you don’t have food.’²⁸³

Bruce Ginsberg, who grew up in the Cederberg and managed his family’s farms there, talks of his failed attempts in the 1970s to have his Coloured labourers drink rooibos tea. ‘Its reputation was that “it made you hungry”, and it was therefore undesirable as a beverage’, he says. ‘Ordinary tea or coffee, with its stimulating caffeine, were their beverages of choice.’²⁸⁴

Speaking of appetite, despite the recent popularity of rooibos as a cooking ingredient,²⁸⁵ such usage does not appear to be rooted in history. C Louis Leipoldt, who, apart from spending his childhood and teenage years in the Cederberg, was an expert in South African cooking traditions and authored many collections of recipes, did not record any culinary uses of rooibos. It is possible that neither White nor non-White residents of the region made dishes with rooibos in the 1880s-early 1900s, when Leipoldt lived in Clanwilliam. Otherwise, Leipoldt would have known them: his cooking mentor was a Coloured woman called Hanna who worked for his family.²⁸⁶

No dishes with rooibos have been found in popular South African cookbooks before the 1970s.²⁸⁷ In fact, no other ‘Cape bush teas’ were mentioned in those books. Perhaps the only exception was *The Colonial Household Guide*, Mrs A R Barnes’ manual for Victorian-era homemakers in southern Africa. She provided instructions on how to make a decoction of a bush tea. Most likely, Barnes was alluding to honeybush, the most popular and readily available herbal tea in the Cape Colony.²⁸⁸

That the rooibos infusion or decoction was not viewed as a cooking ingredient until the last forty years has been confirmed by Renata Coetzee. She did not comment on rooibos in her seminal study of the history of South African cookery, *Spys en drank*, in the 1970s, because ‘there was not much to say about its culinary uses’.²⁸⁹

According to Coetzee, to her knowledge, the earliest recipes with rooibos appeared in a booklet, prepared and published by the Rooibos Tea Control Board.²⁹⁰ However, that collection comprised only beverages.²⁹¹ To my knowledge, the first recipe book that featured recipes of dishes with rooibos as an ingredient was a 1973 publication, also brought out by the board.²⁹² Annekie Theron

²⁸¹ Nokwanda Makunga, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 2 February 2016.

²⁸² B Zimri interview, 7 March 2016.

²⁸³ B-E van Wyk interview, 19 January 2016. Confirmed by my interview with Abraham Ockhuis, Heuningvlei, October 2016: ‘It also stimulates appetite. They tell adults, “Don’t drink rooibos tea or you will want to have much food, because rooibos tea makes you hungry.”’

²⁸⁴ Bruce Ginsberg, email message to Boris Gorelik, 26 February 2016.

²⁸⁵ G de Wet and D van der Merwe (eds), *A Touch of Rooibos: Over 100 Delicious Recipes from 14 of South Africa’s Leading Chefs*, Clanwilliam, Rooibos Ltd, 2009, p 10.

²⁸⁶ Kannemeyer, *Leipoldt*, p 61.

²⁸⁷ South African cookery books that survived many editions and printings from the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries: E J Dykman’s *Kook-, koek- en resepboek*; Jeanette C van Duyn’s *The Household Science Cookery Book*; *Mev. Slade se Afrikaanse kookboek*; S van H Tulleken’s *Practical Cookery Book for South Africa*; Roy Hedrie’s *Ouma’s Cookery Book*; *Belinda’s Book for Colonial Housewives*; and Hildagonda J Duckitt’s *Where is It?* and *Diary of a Cape Housekeeper*.

²⁸⁸ A R B [A R Barnes], *Colonial Household Guide: A Housewife of the Colony*, Cape Town, Darter Bros and Walton, 1889, p 13.

²⁸⁹ Renata Coetzee, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 15 March 2016.

²⁹⁰ R Coetzee interview, 15 March 2016.

²⁹¹ ‘Recipe booklet’, *Annual Report of the Rooibos Tea Control Board. 1967*, Clanwilliam, 1968, p 14.

²⁹² Rooi Tea Control Board, *80 Rooi Tea Wonders*, Pretoria, Muller & Retief for the Rooi Tea Control Board, 1973.

asserted that those recipes had been produced by her, after her experiments with rooibos tea in the late 1960s.²⁹³

4.2. Medicine

4.2.1. FIRST EVIDENCE

My most senior respondent, Theunis Jooste (born in the 1910s), who grew up in the Wupperthal area, has told me that rooibos was seen in his community primarily as a functional beverage (medicine, tonic) and only later came to be enjoyed for its taste (as tea).²⁹⁴

It is the only evidence of this kind that I have been able to find. Neither do I know of any early sources that can corroborate it.

C Louis Leipoldt, a writer, botanical collector and British-educated medical doctor, could have known about therapeutic properties of the *Aspalathus linearis*. His interest in the Cederberg medicinal plants and natural remedies started in his youth.²⁹⁵ Leipoldt corresponded with the Cape's foremost botanists — Rudolf Marloth, Rudolph Schlechter, Peter MacOwan and Harry Bolus — and joined them on their collecting trips to the Cederberg.²⁹⁶ As a boy in Clanwilliam, he spoke to old Coloured people, including former slaves.²⁹⁷ One of those, Outa Klaas, was a prominent herbalist, in whom 'centred the knowledge of a whole pharmacopeia; he knows the value and effect of every plant and every drug that is to be found in C[lanwilliam].'²⁹⁸

Leipoldt, with his outstanding knowledge of the Cederberg flora and folklore could have been aware of early medicinal application of the rooibos plant, However, it seems that he never commented on them in writing. At least, no mention of them has been found in his published works or his surviving papers, including his correspondence with Harry Bolus and Pieter Nortier.²⁹⁹

Probably the earliest published information on medicinal properties of rooibos can be found in the advertising that appeared after rooibos had been introduced to the rest of the Cape Colony.

An advertisement in the *Cape Times* (1909) presented rooibos as 'a certain cure for indigestion and nervous disorders. Recommended by the medical profession.'³⁰⁰ And in promotion materials designed for the South African Exhibition in London in 1907, it was declared that this tea had a 'soothing effect upon the system. Dyspeptics [those who suffer from indigestion], and those troubled with nervous disorders, drink this charming beverage with impunity.'³⁰¹

In 1909, the *Rand Daily Mail* reported that the New Somerset Hospital in Cape Town was using about 200 pounds of rooibos a month because of its 'medical qualities', beneficial for those who suffered from 'indigestion and nervousness'.³⁰²

No biochemical studies of the perceived medicinal properties of rooibos were conducted until the 1970s. Therefore we can assume that these advertising claims were based on the traditional

²⁹³ A Theron, *Manna: my verhaal van rooibostee en wonderwerke*, Johannesburg, Dr Annique Theron, 2009, p 139.

²⁹⁴ T Jooste interview, 9 March 2016.

²⁹⁵ J M H Viljoen, *'n Joernalis vertel; met jeugherinneringe van C. Louis Leipoldt*, Kaapstad, Nasionale Boekhandel, 1953, p 178.

²⁹⁶ C L Leipoldt, *Dear Dr Bolus: Letters from Clanwilliam, London, New York & Europe*, Cape Town, A A Balkema, 1979, p ix.

²⁹⁷ Kannemeyer, *Leipoldt*, pp 60-1.

²⁹⁸ F W B [C L Leipoldt], *Cape Illustrated Magazine*, p 227.

²⁹⁹ See Leipoldt, *Dear Dr Bolus*, pp 1-10; Leipoldt recipe books collection [manuscript], 1650-1957. National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MSB 837; C Louis Leipoldt Papers [BC94 B13.1-B13.5] University of Cape Town Libraries.

³⁰⁰ *Cape Times*, 13 August 1909.

³⁰¹ Cape Bush Tea: encouragement of industry, 1907-10 [source AGR, vol 611, ref: T83] KAB, National Archives of South Africa.

³⁰² Anon, 'Bush tea', *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 February 1909, p 3.

knowledge existing in rooibos-growing areas — in the early twentieth century and, possibly, much earlier. As we will see in the next section of this paper, the ‘soothing effect’ of rooibos tea in case of anxiety and stomach complaints has been widely recognised as part of the traditional knowledge associated with this beverage, to this day.

4.2.2. USES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The 2014 survey of traditional knowledge associated with rooibos in the Cederberg has shown that a significant number of the respondents utilised the *Aspalathus linearis* infusion or decoction both for enjoyment and for medicinal purposes.³⁰³ In this section, we will identify therapeutic qualities of rooibos that have been traditionally recognised by various groups of inhabitants in rooibos-growing regions.

Knowledge of useful properties of local plants is more common in rural areas, where they grow and can be harvested in their natural environment. ‘Such knowledge’, writes Monica Ferreira, Director of the HSRC/UCT Centre for Gerontology, ‘appears to be diffuse among rural users, who have learned the traditional remedies from earlier generation family members and through observing the practices within the family household.’³⁰⁴

In the 1980s, Ferreira conducted a qualitative study among ninety Coloured people, aged over sixty-four and residing in rural localities of the western Cape, including the Cederberg and other traditional rooibos-growing areas. She questioned the subjects, who spent their entire lives within that rural region, about their therapeutic practices based on indigenous plant materials.³⁰⁵ The data collected by Ferreira demonstrated that the most commonly employed plants were wildeals (*Artemisia afra*) and buchu (*Agathosma betulina*; *Agathosma crenulata*). Rooibos did not appear in the published report of the survey.³⁰⁶

Although this comprehensive study, probably the first of its kind, has not supplied us with any information on the *Aspalathus linearis*, it allows us to conclude that Coloured people in rooibos-growing areas throughout the twentieth century, like their ancestors a century before, utilised infusions and decoctions of local plants for medicinal purposes. Ferreira specifies that such infusions and decoctions were inhaled, applied externally or drunk as teas to treat colds, influenza and hypertension or as a purgative.³⁰⁷

Indeed, as indicated by Abraham and Johannes Ockhuis of Heuningvlei, rooibos was known as a ‘very good remedy’ in the mid twentieth century. ‘Using it was much easier than going to a doctor’, explains Johannes Ockhuis. ‘If you were poor and had no money, you had to make use of the herbs that grow in the area. And, in many cases, it was more successful than using proper medicine.’³⁰⁸

If we turn to the recent data, collected in rooibos-growing areas by Makunga (2014) and by me with a generous assistance from Ben-Erik van Wyk (2016), we can compile the following list of conditions, for which rooibos has been traditionally employed by local Coloured communities:

- abdominal pain³⁰⁹;
- indigestion (‘upset stomach’) in babies and adults³¹⁰;
- dermatophytosis (‘ringworm’)³¹¹;
- rashes in babies and children³¹²;

³⁰³ N Makunga interview, 2 February 2016.

³⁰⁴ Ferreira, Charlton and Impey, *Indigenous Knowledge and Its Uses in Southern Africa*, p 94.

³⁰⁵ Ferreira, Charlton and Impey, p 90.

³⁰⁶ Ferreira, Charlton and Impey, pp 94-9.

³⁰⁷ Ferreira, Charlton and Impey, pp 94-8.

³⁰⁸ J Ockhuis interview, 27 October 2016.

³⁰⁹ K Kotze interview, 8 March 2016; C Nieuwoudt interview, 10 March 2016; W Farmer interview, 27 October 2016.

³¹⁰ N Makunga interview, 2 February 2016; P Hanekom interview, 6 March 2016.

³¹¹ K Kotze interview, 8 March 2016.

- restlessness in babies (sedative, mild soporific action)³¹³;
- poor lactation.³¹⁴

Some people in Coloured communities believe that rooibos can be utilised to treat a wider range of conditions, from headaches and influenza to cancer.³¹⁵ Yet the above list includes the complaints more frequently cited by respondents.

Rooibos can be applied externally: usually, in cases of rashes. Respondents have commented on bathing in rooibos tea with rooibos *stokkies* or with oats.³¹⁶ Barend Salomo learnt about rooibos bathing as treatment of eczema from his mother, who was born about fifteen kilometres east of Wupperthal in 1918.³¹⁷

Internal use of rooibos for medicinal purposes is practised, most often, to alleviate symptoms of baby colic and anxiety or restlessness in babies. To achieve this effect, rooibos tea is given together with, in addition to or instead of milk.³¹⁸ Abraham Ockhuis of Heuningvlei (born in 1953) says that blending milk and rooibos in a bottle and feeding babies with that mixture has been done in his family for generations, to stop infants and toddlers from crying or stimulate their appetite.³¹⁹

Sarah Ives, an ethnologist from Stanford University, recounts that farmers and farmworkers told her that their babies drank rooibos in addition to breastfeeding or even instead of breast milk.³²⁰ ‘When babies are crying, you give them rooibos’, says Christo Nieuwoudt (born in 1935), a son of a White farmer from the Cederberg. According to him, in his youth, this was mostly done by Coloured people. Their farmworkers mixed donkey milk with rooibos and gave it to babies.³²¹

The fact that rooibos tea was utilised as replacement for mother’s milk when weaning was confirmed by Abraham Ockhuis.³²²

On a more general level, respondents believe that rooibos tea is good for any kinds of abdominal conditions. Petrus Hanekom of Bosdorp, near Algeria (born in 1940), remarks that in case of stomach pain, ‘people say: don’t drink coffee, have rooibos tea.’³²³

This perception is shared by Coloured and White inhabitants of rooibos-growing areas. And, apparently, it was so at least from the beginning of the twentieth century. Writing for *Die Burger* in 1949, P J van der Merwe noted that ‘old people strongly believed that [rooibos] was good for the stomach.’³²⁴ In the first decades of the twentieth century, a reporter for the *Sarie Marais* recalled, it was thought that children should drink rooibos ‘because it was healthier than the shop tea that gave children “fleas in the stomach” [upset the stomach]’.³²⁵

The traditional medicinal applications of rooibos reported by White respondents in rooibos-growing areas do not appear as varied as those reported by their Coloured counterparts. No external applications have been mentioned by White respondents. For instance, Ilse Lochner of Clanwilliam, a

³¹² A Ockhuis interviews, 7 March and 27 October 2016; N Makunga interview, 2 February 2016; B Salomo interview, 7 March 2016.

³¹³ N Makunga interview; P Hanekom interview, 6 March 2016; C Nieuwoudt interview, 10 March 2016.

³¹⁴ N Makunga interview.

³¹⁵ B-E van Wyk interview, 19 January 2016; J Keahey interview, 9 March 2016.

³¹⁶ A Ockhuis interview, 7 March 2016; N Makunga interview, 2 February 2016; B Salomo interview, 7 March 2016.

³¹⁷ B Salomo interview.

³¹⁸ P Hanekom interview, 6 March 2016.

³¹⁹ A Ockhuis interview, 7 March 2016.

³²⁰ Ives, *American Ethnologist*, p 708.

³²¹ C Nieuwoudt interview, 10 March 2016.

³²² A Ockhuis interview, 27 October 2016.

³²³ P Hanekom interview, 6 March 2016.

³²⁴ Van der Merwe, *Die Burger, Byvoegsel*.

³²⁵ Anon, *Sarie Marais*, p 3.

granddaughter of a Rhenish missionary in Wuppertal, had eczema as a child, but her family never used rooibos to treat it.³²⁶

This comparatively narrow range of applications would suggest that White inhabitants started to utilise rooibos for medicinal purposes at a later stage. Tielman Nieuwoudt (born in 1927), a retired White farmer from the Cederberg, recounts that rooibos was not seen as a remedy in his youth. His parents (born in the 1890s) only utilised it as tea.³²⁷

But White respondents born in the 1930s-40s have reported that, in their families, rooibos was given to babies with ‘running tummies’ or ‘tummy sickness’.³²⁸ It was plain rooibos, without milk, but sometimes with sugar.³²⁹

Results of my survey show that medical workers in the Cederberg were also aware of these perceived therapeutic properties of rooibos. Olive Nieuwoudt (born in 1932), a trained nurse and midwife married to a local farmer, claimed that she had been giving rooibos tea to children suffering from gastroenteritis in the 1950s. ‘There were no doctors in our area, so mothers came in from ten kilometres away with their children to our farm’, she recounted. ‘I used to have the children drink rooibos, and they walked out feeling better.’ There was always wild rooibos growing on their farm, Kromrivier, and her husband’s family collected it. Nieuwoudt believes that she learnt how to employ rooibos for medicinal purposes from her mother-in-law.³³⁰

Traditional knowledge of these rooibos properties was highly localised and poorly documented. By the 1930s, even South African rooibos manufacturers and distributors stopped emphasising health benefits in their marketing messages — apparently, for the lack of scientific research that could prove them. And when Annemie Theron, a homemaker from the Transvaal, realised that rooibos was helping her daughter who suffered from baby colic, she thought she made a discovery.

Theron had never been to rooibos-growing areas. In her childhood on a Bushveld farm, the only rooibos that she knew was a rooibos tree (*Combretum apiculatum*).³³¹ Apparently, Theron was introduced to that beverage at boarding school and used it in her household ever since.³³²

In April 1968, exhausted by her daughter’s fourteen months of crying, vomiting, diarrhoea and rejection of milk, Theron started feeding her with a mixture of milk and rooibos. The experiment was a success: the baby could sleep longer, stopped vomiting. After several weeks, the colic symptoms disappeared.³³³

Wanting to learn more about rooibos’s medicinal properties, Theron looked it up in the two-volume *Volksgeneeskuns in Suid-Afrika* (Folk Medicine in South Africa), a compendium of home remedies assembled as a result of a survey by the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns (South African Academy for Science and Art) in the early 1960s.³³⁴ Much to her surprise, none of the recipes featured the rooibos plant.³³⁵

Theron contacted academics in Pretoria to see if they knew anything about the effect that rooibos had on her baby – and on other colic babies to whom she started giving rooibos. According to Theron, none of the specialists could provide such information. Scientific research into medicinal

³²⁶ Ilse Lochner, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 10 March 2016.

³²⁷ Tielman Nieuwoudt, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 9 March 2016.

³²⁸ C Nieuwoudt interview, 10 March 2016.

³²⁹ Elsabé Kotzé and Janette Marais, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 10 March 2016.

³³⁰ Olive Nieuwoudt, interviewed by Boris Gorelik, 10 March 2016.

³³¹ Theron, *Manna*, p 13.

³³² Theron, p 214.

³³³ A Theron, *Babies, Allergies, and Rooibos*, Pretoria, Annique Theron, 1992, p 203.

³³⁴ *Volksgeneeskuns in Suid-Afrika*, p 2.

³³⁵ Theron, *Manna*, p 221.

properties of the *Aspalathus linearis* only started in the early 1970s, prompted by her findings (cessation of vomiting and diarrhoea in infants).³³⁶

She also wrote to the Rooibos Tea Control Board and received an enthusiastic reply. They understood that her findings could benefit the industry. The board employed their media connections to publicise Theron's story.

'It all started in 1968 when I discovered by chance that rooibos has therapeutic value', Theron wrote later. 'Until then, nothing special had been known about rooibos. Of a frame of reference that in any way would shed light on rooibos, there was no question There was no previous knowledge of any positive feature of rooibos. If it were so, then not just me but millions of other people would have already used it, for whatever reason.'³³⁷

As we have shown earlier, residents of rooibos-growing areas had been using rooibos tea for medicinal purposes before 1968. Such usage was common among both White and non-White residents in the region. The popular notion that rooibos can be applied as treatment for symptoms associated with baby colic had already existed in the rooibos-growing areas.

James van Putten, then Research Officer for the board, remembers that, after the press had covered Theron's findings, local inhabitants 'started coming forward and telling us the same story: "When your baby's stomach is running, you give them rooibos tea. And you should give rooibos to colic babies." They said that they had been doing it long before Theron.'³³⁸

She was not the first to discover medicinal properties of rooibos tea. But she did discover them for herself in April 1968 and shared that knowledge with the rest of the country through her articles, books and media appearances. After she publicised her story, consumption of rooibos increased by 29 per cent in 1969 and kept on growing fast.³³⁹ However, the impact of her publicity efforts was even stronger: it transformed rooibos from a cheap, low-class replacement for Ceylon tea into a product with attractive benefits of its own.

'All the honour and thanks should be credited to her who unveiled this still dormant product', the Rooibos Tea Control Board remarked in their annual report for 1968. 'Her discovery overnight changed Rooitea from its still stodgy existence to the most popular Wonder-health drink.'³⁴⁰

4.2.3. CONCLUSION

The existing early record as well as interviews with some of the rooibos-growing region's oldest residents demonstrate that the rooibos infusion or decoction was made and consumed as tea at least from the second half of the nineteenth century. Such usage was common among both White and non-White inhabitants of the region, cheapness and ready availability being rooibos tea's advantages compared to the imported article.

The early method of harvesting rooibos originated, most probably, among non-White residents and represents an amalgam of precolonial harvesting techniques and more recent procedures inspired by the culture of tea introduced by colonists. The initially basic tools evolved as metal became available (the transformation of the *moker* from a simple hardwood stick into a mallet; the breaking or plucking of twigs replaced by the cutting).

The traditional knowledge associated with harvesting and processing of wild rooibos, at least as documented in the early twentieth century, has been preserved and practised by Coloured communities in the region. That process was used by the industry since its inception. Traditional

³³⁶ Snyckers and Salemi, *Journal of the South African Chemical Institute*, pp 5-7.

³³⁷ Theron, *Manna*, pp 213-5.

³³⁸ J van Putten interview, 9 March 2016.

³³⁹ Bezuidenhout, R, 'Rooibos producers' cup runneth over', *Farmer's Weekly*, 25 August 1971, p 10.

³⁴⁰ Rooibos Tea Control Board, *Annual Report of the Rooibos Tea Control Board for the Year 1968*, p 4.

knowledge held by Coloured residents of the region was also utilised during the development of the cultivated variety of the *Aspalathus linearis*.

Rooibos tea, particularly when prepared as a decoction, has been seen as a tonic. It was not traditionally utilised in cooking, but its range of medicinal applications is relatively broad. Both White and Coloured inhabitants of the region considered it a remedy for various kind of stomach complaints, from symptoms of baby colic to indigestion. Another important perceived property of rooibos tea is its calming effect, particularly on babies and children.

Although rooibos was not among the most important medicinal plants for the Coloured population of the northern parts of the present-day Western Cape, the range of its therapeutic applications, both external and internal, was comparatively broad. This might suggest that the rooibos infusion or decoction was originally employed as medicine by non-White residents of the region.

5. FINAL STATEMENT

Let us now return to the postulates we formulated at the beginning of this paper, reflecting the currently prevailing opinion about the origins of rooibos tea and of the traditional knowledge associated with the *Aspalathus linearis*. Do the conclusions that we have made confirm or disprove them?

1. 'The rooibos plant was used by San and Khoikhoi peoples in precolonial times.'

It is possible. We have archaeological record that suggests that the *Aspalathus linearis* could have been utilised by humans many thousands of years ago. Yet we do not have information that details such uses. It is crucial to distinguish between knowing the plant and knowing how to use it.

2. 'Specifically, the hot beverage we know as rooibos tea originated in precolonial times.'

Although the indigenous pastoralists and hunter-gatherers could have utilised this plant, it does not imply that they made the beverage we know as rooibos tea in precolonial times.

3. 'The traditional method of harvesting and processing rooibos for making that infusion or decoction is of a precolonial origin.'

This method could have, at least partly, originated in precolonial times. But it does not necessarily imply that San and Khoikhoi utilized this method to prepare a beverage that they consumed for pleasure, as tea. For example, if they had the means and knowledge to prepare rooibos infusions or decoctions, they could have utilised them mainly for medicinal purposes.

4. 'Colonial-era settlers learnt about rooibos tea from the indigenous peoples of the Cederberg.'

They could have learnt about some properties of the *Aspalathus linearis* from pastoralists and hunter-gatherers of the region. Yet we do not have sufficient information to determine the nature of that knowledge. As far as rooibos tea is concerned, given the available data, it is more logical to place its origin in the context of the global expansion of tea trade and the colonial habit of drinking Chinese and later Ceylon tea. In this case, the rooibos infusion or decoction served as a local replacement for the expensive Asian product.

The historical record of rooibos uses in precolonial and early colonial times is mostly a record of absence. My research has not established any direct evidence of such applications before the second half of the nineteenth century. There is inferential evidence that other endemic Cape plants could have been employed at an earlier period, including preparing an infusion or decoction similar to rooibos tea. But most of that inferential evidence was obtained in the colonial era or even in the last seventy years. It can be interpreted in many ways, depending on the researcher's objectives.

We do not have sufficient record that would allow us to attribute the origins of traditional knowledge associated with rooibos to any particular community or population group. It appears that, as James van Putten has suggested, both the indigenous (San and Khoikhoi) and the colonial (Bastaards, Whites) inhabitants of rooibos-growing areas contributed to that knowledge in some way.³⁴¹ For instance, medicinal uses might have been introduced before the eighteenth century, by Khoisan pastoralists or San hunter-gatherers. And the utilisation of the *Aspalathus linearis* for making tea, including the production processes, such as bruising and oxidising the leaves, are more likely to have been introduced in colonial times, by settlers accustomed to drinking Asian tea or its substitutes.

If studies into the origins of traditional knowledge associated with rooibos are to be continued, in the absence of historical record, one might consider conducting a genetic inquiry into the material excavated by archaeologists at sites like Diepkloof Rock Shelter. According to John Parkington, some

³⁴¹ J van Putten interview, 9 March 2016.

of the existing advanced techniques allow botanists and archaeologists to collaborate in searching for traces of rooibos or a rooibos infusion or decoction in fragments of ancient pottery. Such techniques make it possible to identify genetic material that may not be recognisable otherwise. This archaeobotanical investigation should be grounded in ethnographical, chemical, botanical and genetic postulates.³⁴²

³⁴² J Parkington interview, 19 December 2015.

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