

# farmer's weekly

110 YEARS ON THE LAND

7 MAY 2021

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## BIODYNAMIC FARMING: CREATING HARMONY BETWEEN LAND AND LABOUR



EARLY SUCCESS WITH  
DRAGON FRUIT IN  
THE WESTERN CAPE

CROCODILE FARMING IN SA  
AT A CROSSROADS

A WORLD-BEATING CHÂROLAIS STUD  
THANKS TO YEARS OF DROUGHT

HOW BOTSWANA CAN  
IMPROVE ITS AGRI TRADE  
BALANCE WITH SA

HISTORY OF RURAL SA  
EASTERN CAPE MILKWOOD  
TREES THAT BECAME  
NATIONAL MONUMENTS

MONTHLY TRACTOR  
PRICES REPORT



AFRIKARA means the divine light of Afrika



**ALETTA VENTER**

**Afrikara Agroecology Coop**

**GPS: S 33° 28' 42" – E 19° 10' 52"**

**Hoekiesdam Farm – Hoogwater -**

**Wolseley - 6830 - Western Cape**

**Afrikara Community on Google maps**

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**Afrikara Agroecology  
Cooperative**



# Reimagining work and land

In an attempt to restore harmony between people and the land, **Aletta Venter** is going against the status quo when it comes to land ownership and labour relationships. She spoke to **Glenneis Kriel** about this journey.

## FAST FACTS

The Afrikara Agroecology Co-operative was created to capture the true spirit of *ubuntu*.

Hoekiesdam has been placed in a land trust to safeguard it as agricultural land for future generations.

In biodynamic production, the soil and economy are seen as living, interconnected organisms.

Soon after she had started farming at Hoekiesdam near Wolseley in the Western Cape, Aletta Venter realised that traditional commercial productive practices were not going to work for her or the 38,5ha farm.

"My father, Barend Venter, bought the farm after retiring as the editor of a community newspaper in 1995. But it had little water and was considered too small to justify commercial production," she says.

These limitations did not bother him much, as he regarded Hoekiesdam as a place to retire on. She, on the other hand, had obtained a degree in agriculture at Stellenbosch University and always dreamt of having a farm with cattle and horses in the Kalahari.

"Wolseley isn't the Kalahari, but you have to work with what you have," she says.

Venter tried to restore the severely neglected vineyards that came with the farm, but the experience reinforced her notion that she was better off drinking than cultivating wine. From there, she shifted her energy to dairy cattle, sheep and pasture production, but always felt that there was a more sustainable way of doing things.

In 1999, she and her late ex-husband, Peter von Maltitz, had difficulties in making the small farm work as a traditional livestock farm and found it challenging living in the same space as her parents. So the two went overseas for a year-and-a-half, visiting and working at dairies in Ireland and New Zealand. The experience showed them that it was possible to do things differently.

Venter was particularly impressed by a biodynamic dairy farm in New Zealand, which operated in a totally different league in terms of animal welfare, food safety and social and environmental responsibility, almost a decade before these issues became mainstream market concerns.



**Afrikara Agroecology Cooperative is poised to become the Initiation for the next generation of Agroecology Centres of Excellence in the context of the Breede Valley Sustainable Development Initiative (BVSDI) promoting it as a Khoisan Indigenous National Heritage Site**







“The energy was amazing, and I instantly knew they’d found the missing ingredient,” she recalls.

She was even more delighted to learn that there was a biodynamic association in South Africa, with one of the movement’s pioneers, Jeanne Malherbe, living in Wellington, about an hour’s drive from Wolseley.

#### A NEW ERA

After a bumpy start, with Malherbe peppering Venter with many questions during their first meeting to discern her true intentions, the two became close friends. Malherbe was Venter’s mentor for the remaining seven years of her life, and Venter spent much time with her on her farm Bloublommetjieskloof to learn everything she could about biodynamic production.

Venter explains that biodynamics is rooted in the work of the scientist and philosopher Dr Rudolf Steiner, who in the 1920s presented lectures to farmers that created awareness of

the interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical world. His lectures were in reaction to the highly mechanistic view of nature that started taking hold in the early 20th century and that led to the development of synthetically produced fertilisers and pesticides.

“Steiner was the first to view a farm as a holistic and self-sustaining organism that thrives through biodiversity, the integration of crops and livestock, and the creation of a closed loop system of fertility, the idea being that nothing should go to waste on a farm,” explains Venter.

Along with this came awareness of the way in which cosmic forces, such as the position of the moon and planets, are believed to influence production, and this is used to govern farming practices such as planting, harvesting, weeding and the application of compost.

Steiner also developed a set of homeopathic-like preparations to help build a farm’s innate immune system, fertility and ‘vital forces’.

if it were accompanied by the social and economic principles introduced by Steiner.

“It didn’t feel right to have all this beautiful land and productive potential only to myself. The only people benefitting from it were me and my rich clients in Cape Town,” Venter explains.

In the bigger scheme of things, she also realised that meaningful change could only be achieved if the skewed relationship between landowners and their workers was fixed.

“Something is intrinsically wrong with a society where landowners make vast sums of money from the labour of people, who have to work themselves to the bone to make ends meet, even if the owner generates a thousand jobs,” says Venter.

The traditional capitalist system has come under fire in recent years for being too exploitive and there have been calls for it to be revised to take the social and environmental consequences of production into account. Yet in the 1920s, Steiner was already criticising capitalist models for being out of touch with social, ecological and spiritual realities.



# SACANI

## South African Comprehensive Agroecology National Initiative



# ATA

## Agro-ecology Training Academy



## TRUE ECONOMICS

Venter started implementing biodynamic principles while cultivating vegetables and herbs and farming dairy cattle, sheep, pigs and chicken at Hoekiesdam in 2002, upon her return from New Zealand.

"While I'd studied poultry production at university, the knowledge was completely useless when it came to free-range production. I had to relearn everything. For one, we had a terrible problem with poultry lice. I fixed it through the use of garlic and herbs, but it required a huge amount of patience not to jump in with a chemical solution," says Venter.

She managed to get the production side under control, but still had a nagging feeling that something was lacking. The interaction with Malherbe and the reading of Steiner's lectures on economics then made her realise that biodynamic farming would only reach its full potential in South Africa

Amongst other things, he called for a re-evaluation of fundamental economic concepts, such as land, labour and capital. He argued that land should not be seen as a commodity, but a common heritage that in a wider sense belonged to all, including future generations. As such, nobody should be allowed to own land; rather, it should be entrusted to those individuals or groups who were most capable of using and looking after it.

Labour and human creativity, in addition, were viewed as sacred gifts that could not be priced. What has a price, instead, are the fruits or the results of the labour or creation.

Venter explains that the importance of cleaning as opposed to making cheese, for example, is difficult to translate into money.

"Which is more important? Why is one more valued and why does it pay more money, when the one cannot take place without the other?"

She adds that capitalism has resulted in people entering a



### OPPOSITE PAGE:

Mutton Merinos are used for meat production, as they are hardy and thrive under the climatic conditions of Wolsley.

### BELOW LEFT:

Aletta Venter is a co-founder and director of the Afrikara Agroecology Co-operative.

### BELOW:

Free-range cows are pasture-fed on large, fenced meadows. A Fleckvieh mix, they are milked once a day, giving raw organic milk and cream from which the community makes feta, butter and labneh. PHOTOS: GLENNEIS KRIEL



**RESTORE**  
**DIGNITY & HUMANITY**  
**In**  
**MUNICIPAL ECOECO™ SYSTEMS**



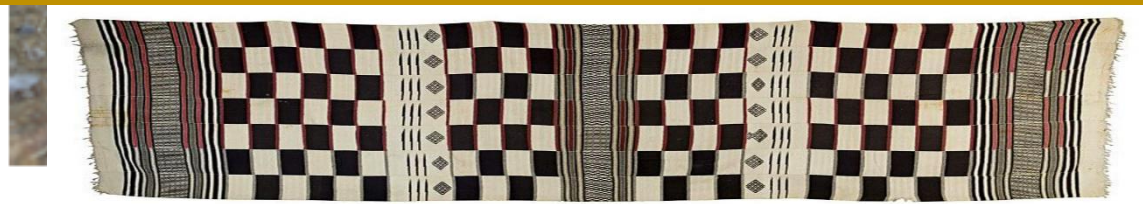
Afrikara Agroecology Cooperative is endorsed by the RESTORE Program an emanation of the MAGIC National Initiative as a National Learning and coordinating platform for municipal Sustainable Development Goals Focusing on the youth





**ABOVE:**  
These free-roaming pigs  
are of mixed breeds.

**ABOVE RIGHT:**  
Boschveld chickens are  
dual-purpose, hardy  
and well suited for  
production outside.



modern form of slavery, where it is no longer our bodies that are sold but our labour power and creative forces.

"Increased awareness of this over the past few years has sparked movements against modern slavery and calls for a living wage."

## THE SOLUTION

Steiner, nevertheless, did not give instant solutions to problems, but merely a way of thinking that would co-evolve with society's changing reality. Venter therefore started looking at different collective farming models to create a fairer environment, including the kibbutz system in Israel, Native American sanctuaries, and the traditional co-operative system.

In 2005, her path crossed that of Thierry Alban Revert, a macroeconomic strategist and founding member of Management Applied Green Initiatives and Concepts (MAGIC), whom she married in 2017. Revert focused most of his life

generating activities, while supportive members may buy products or services produced by the co-operative, or donate to or invest resources into the co-operative.

Activity rights members receive bonuses paid out from the surplus of the co-operative at the end of each year, whereas supportive members do not qualify for these. All members have preferential access to farm produce and accommodation at prices determined during the annual general meeting.

Members are permitted to participate in the activities of the co-operative, but those who wish to become actively involved or

**'I'VE NEVER OWNED THIS LAND; IT HAS RATHER BEEN THE OTHER WAY AROUND, WITH THE LAND OWNING ME'**



**UNI**  
**YOU AND I**

YOUTH WITH CONSCIOUSNESS



married in 2017. Revert focused most of his life on developing communities and convinced her of the potential advantages of the co-operative system, even though most co-operatives in South Africa at the time were privatising.

“The beauty of the co-operative system is that all the members are equal owners of the assets of the co-operative. Members are also equal in the sense that each has only one vote, regardless of the value they bring to the co-operative. This helps create equity amongst diverse members and helps protect the entity against opportunism and exploitation,” says Venter.

She then started sharing her idea of starting a co-operative with others. “I sold produce at the Waldorf market in Stellenbosch every Saturday, and after a while found like-minded people there who bought into the idea.”

They registered the Afrikara Agroecology Co-operative in July 2010, starting out as six members and subsequently growing to 23.

Two types of membership are offered: activity rights members contribute to the business potential by conducting income-

reside on the farm need to apply to do so. “The goal with the co-operative is to capture the true spirit of *ubuntu*, the idea that ‘I am because you are’. These are worthy ideals, but physical implementation proved much easier said than done,” says Venter.

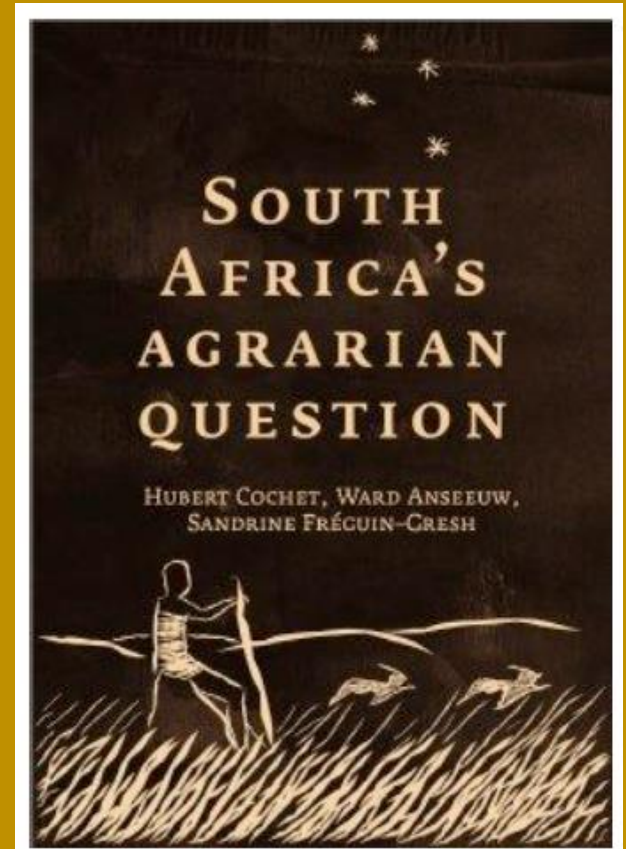
She identifies egotism as one of their biggest obstacles. “To make this model work, a shift is needed from looking at what you get out of the exercise to what you give. It is only when we become more service-focused that our society will start to heal.”

She also admits that she had very high ideals when she co-founded the co-operative, which attracted its own challenges.

“Communication and the management of relationships are incredibly important to prevent misunderstanding and ensure that everybody stays on the same page,” she says.

#### THE LAND ISSUE

Venter explains that the farm was placed in a trust when her father bought it in 1995, with





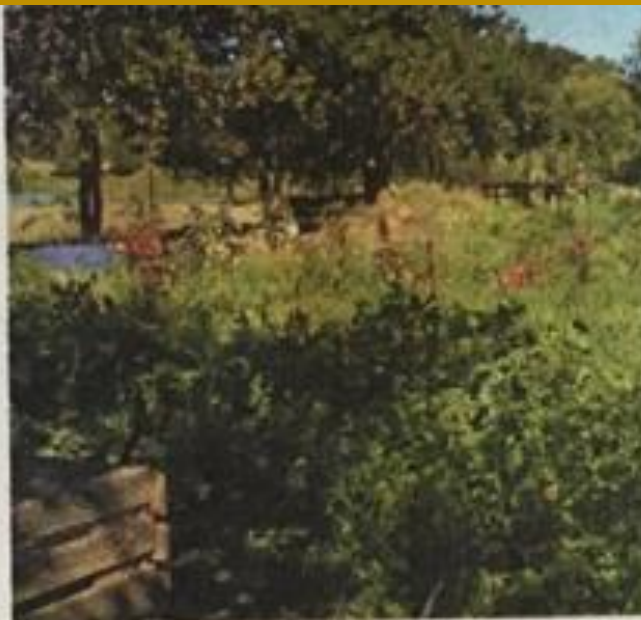
her, her siblings and parents being the trustees and the grandchildren being the beneficiaries, making it a very conventional family trust.

A new era dawned for the co-operative in 2012 when most of the trustees decided to sell the farm when they were confronted with the administrative burden represented by the introduction of the Financial Centre Intelligence Act.

Since Venter was the only one with a real interest in the farm, the trust was structured in a way that gave her a veto over other trustees, which she used to stop the sale. She and her late son, Gustav van der Merwe, then set out to convince the other trustees to convert the family trust into a land trust.

Once everyone agreed, they sat down with an environmental lawyer to structure a land trust to safeguard any land it owned for future generations and to ensure that it would only be used for agricultural production in an environmentally and socially responsible way, something that has probably never been done before in South Africa.

"The biggest difficulties in drawing up this legal document for what we named *Die Bevryde Grond Trust* ['freed land'] were the absence of legal terms, and coming up with concrete definitions



of things like sustainability and social and environmental responsibility," Venter explains.

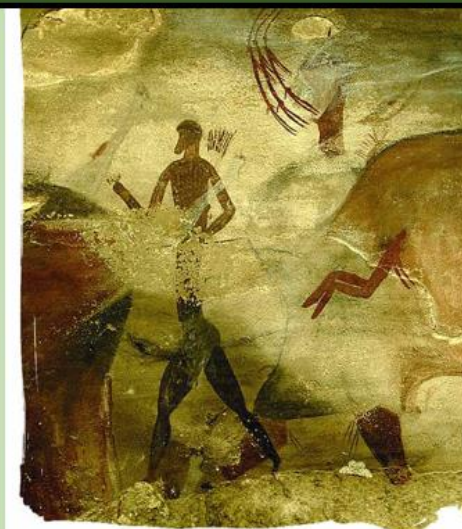
Care was also taken to ensure that the land could not be used to chase profits, by setting up the trust as a public benefit organisation and a non-profit organisation.

Venter's dream is to see the government and more landowners do the same with their land.

"I've had a long relationship with the Hoekiesdam farm, but I've never owned the land. It has rather been the other way around, with the land owning me."

Email Aletta Venter at [afrikaracooperative@gmail.com](mailto:afrikaracooperative@gmail.com). **FW**

## BREEDER VALLEY SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE\*



### ABOVE:

Vegetables and herbs are produced using biodynamic principles.

## ROUTE 2 ROOTS™



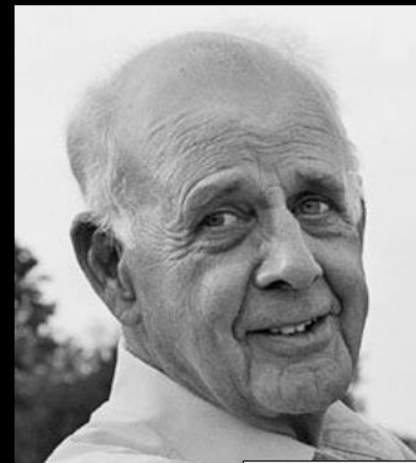


WHEN WE  
REFLECT...

...WE CAN SEE  
THE WHOLE  
PICTURE.

**THE NEXT REVOLUTION  
IS THE EVOLUTION  
OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

THANKS for WISDOM



I stand for what I stand on  
Wendell Berry



Indigenous edible waterbloomitjies