

AFRIKARA

By Elisabeth Dancy

Afrikara Co-operative operates on a 38,5Ha mixed farm set in the spectacular Breede Valley in the Western Cape of South Africa. It is a tiny bijou of a farm dwarfed by its neighbours; commercial sized polytunnels, bare earth and tree felling on an industrial scale. Blink and you drive past this tiny gem of greenery. Aletta Venter, one of the founding members of this brave endeavour, is no stranger to the world of small scale or novel approaches to food and social welfare in South Africa.

In 1995 her father purchased the land to retire on and she and her late partner ran a conventional dairy and sheep farming operation on the land. Reportedly disillusioned (more likely inspired by yet unknown elements) she left to find a better solution to care for the land and the animals. Travelling the world, Aletta discovered Biodynamics and started her life-long journey of studying Rudolph Steiner – initially biodynamic agriculture and later especially his social and economic works. This satisfied her ethics and in 2002 she returned to South Africa to start converting this bit of land to something more sustainable. “I realised that a single woman from a privileged background was just not me” says Aletta of herself. The community of Afrikara was born.

Afrikara is run as a co-operative, a legal entity in which all resources belong to the members who may benefit from the food produced by the farm and who participates in decision making around what is produced and how. The land belongs to a Land Trust that prevents the land from being sold, divided or used for industrial purposes or construction. The trust makes the land available to Afrikara

in perpetuity. The farm is operated by 3 of the co-operative members who live and work on the land.

When we visited the farm it was in the grip of a 2 year drought, with 100 days water supplies remaining for the Western Cape. Never mind that the farm has no water supply and that the solar panel of the solar water pump had been stolen – the farm team just carry on. The pond is nearly empty, but a handful of contented cattle with calves at foot drink their fill. Hay has to be bought in and tree branches are cut on a daily basis to supplement the meagre rations. The cattle would normally be grazing the fields, but now only the sheep can still find enough food there. The cattle are a mixed breed, primarily Fleckvieh (or also called the Swiss Simmental), a dual purpose meat/milk breed. Most were bought as young animals but the herd is being built up with stock from home-grown calves as these are noticeably calmer, healthier and more suited to her farm. Aletta has some veterinary experience so this is helpful in her management of the animals, although they are mostly treated with homeopathy. She recounts the story of the oldest cow in the herd (fifteen years old and currently carrying her fourteenth calf) who suffered a traumatic avulsion of a horn. Previously a healthy beast, this cow then developed recurring bouts of milk fever until the horn completely healed a few years later. Interesting. This cow has now returned to full health. Her milking parlour is semi-automatic; the cattle produce between 4 and 13L per day, depending on the season and grazing quality. During spring the milk production doubles, enabling the farm to produce an amazing array of milk, cream, cheese and yoghurt products. These supply members and other local outlets such as the Steiner School in local Stellenbosch, an affluent University town about one hour’s drive from the

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farm. Even in the current drought the farm produces enough dairy products to supply all the members of the cooperative as well as other customers and shops.

Chickens scratch around in the heat finding scraps of vegetation amongst the dry earth. Egg production is currently down but sufficient to supply local demand. Even in this delightful setting the chickens are prey; the birds to lynx, the eggs to mongoose and the young chicks to birds of prey. The farm now successfully rears their own chicks. These remain securely housed until old enough to go outside. The chickens are locked away at night and are then moved to a slightly bigger enclosure for the morning egg laying before being set free into a larger fenced area for the rest of the day. The chickens have a full coat of feathers and venture out into the hot summer sun.

We went primarily to learn about sheep parasite management; endo-parasites, flies and ticks. Over the years Aletta has been fiercely culling out those sheep that show signs of weakness to parasites (scouring, ticks) and with good animal nutrition and a stress-free environment has noticed that even fly strike is a rarity. The sheep lamb naturally outdoors although closer to the farmhouse. From time to time Aletta needs to intervene. The lambing % is 1.45 lambs per ewe and they manage to wean on average about 98%.

The farm team makes the BD preparations when they can and have been using a lot of BD 500 in the last 2 years. Aletta believes that this has allowed the land to withstand the drought far better than it would have otherwise. The health and vitality of the animals is a testament to the biodynamic approach.

True to Steiner's teaching, the farm is not just a farm. It is a social enterprise and it even has a small school on the property where the children of the co-operative members are educated by one of the farm team. Elaine is a feisty young woman who teaches the children on the farm – they learn both English and Afrikaans. We recognised the children's verses adorning the walls from our own childhood – a suggestion that the old days really were better and we were glad to see the old values pervading the children's education. Elaine also works on the farm.

It would not be hard to imagine such a perfect life, but

paradise comes at a cost and Aletta, like many small scale farmers across the world, has endured her share of hardship. In 2005 she suffered the loss of a partner, in 2015 her son disappeared; his remains were later found in the mountain gorge not far from the farm and in 2008 the farm suffered a devastating bush fire and not to mention the theft of the livestock and equipment. Undaunted, Aletta and the team carry on. I asked her what the current obstacles were.

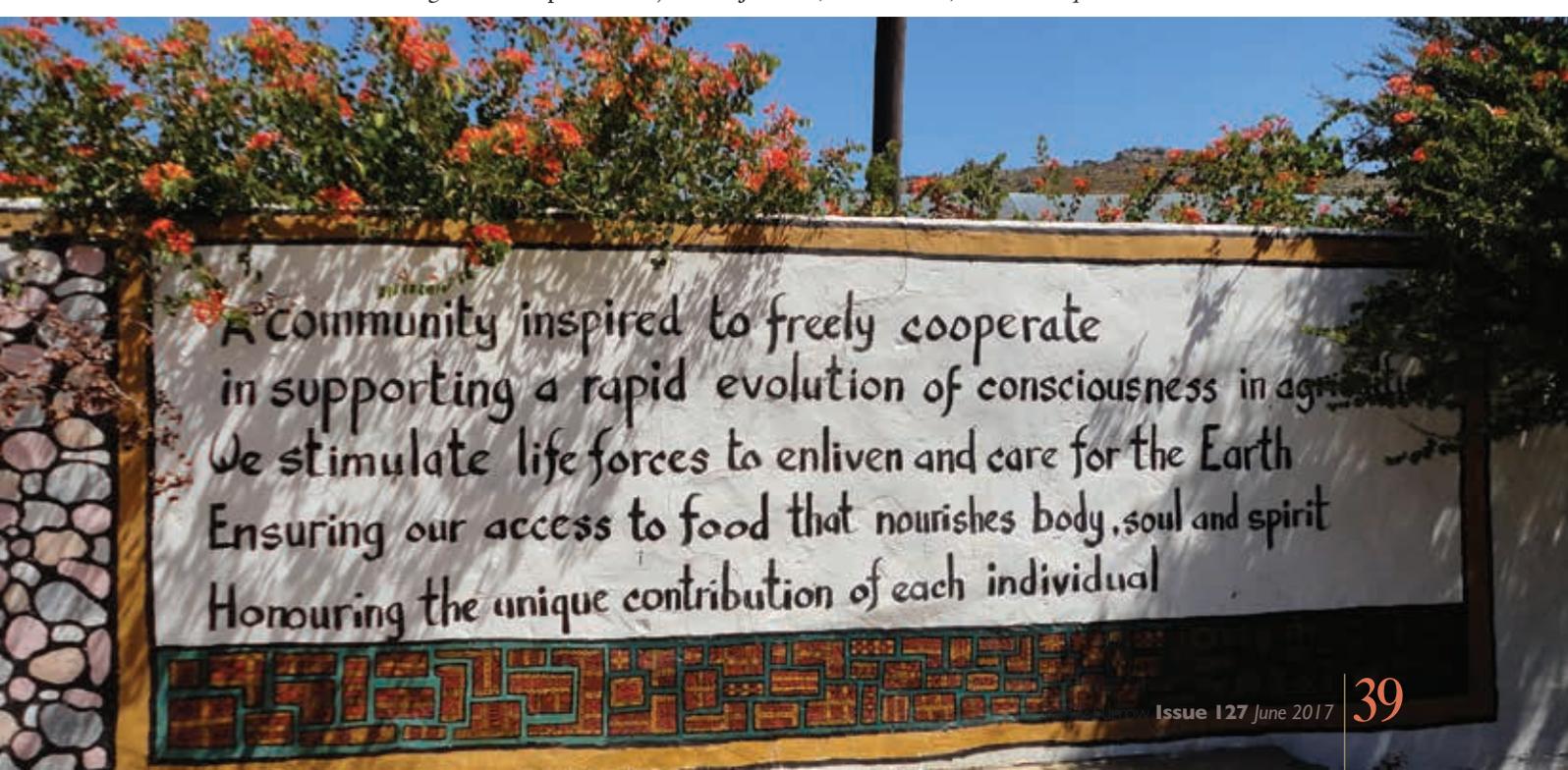
South Africa is a country that has been run by the white minority. The mindset of integration with the majority black community is being supported by legislation and welcomed by most of the population. Projects like Afrikara demonstrate that all members of the community can work together. However the concepts of biodynamic farming need to be embedded in a local african culture, and this has simply not happened yet. "The history of black involvement in the biodynamic movement is dismal".

Farmers are not supported by the state. There are no subsidies or handouts for environmental or social schemes. Money is tight. Biodynamic certification is prohibitively expensive. The members at Afrikara often feel that the local Biodynamic Association does not really offer any concrete assistance. Afrikara is guided by BD principles but is not certified owing to the cost and other limiting factors such as sources of organic feed and seed.

Nobody deals with the vast social issues associated with farming. Labour is cheap and workers still have very few rights. The class differences remain. Taking care of the land is not part of the culture of being a farm labourer. The general population needs more education and awareness raising to enable them to feel an affinity with and respect for the land.

Afrikara is one of the few enlightened farming operations in South Africa. Aletta's openness and enthusiasm for biodynamics is matched only by her love for the land and the wide community; black, white and coloured. Her desire for social integration and the message of Steiner pervades her life at all levels. Her persistence with Afrikara matches her patience for the rains to return and for the farm to restore itself to pre-drought levels.

Afrikara, Hoekiesdam, Western Cape.



A community inspired to freely cooperate
in supporting a rapid evolution of consciousness in agriculture
We stimulate life forces to enliven and care for the Earth
Ensuring our access to food that nourishes body, soul and spirit
Honouring the unique contribution of each individual