



Challenges and Perspectives of African Heritage

African Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in the Globalization Process

Intangible Cultural Heritage: Rooibos in South Africa

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Rooibos cooperative in Nieuwoudtville, South Africa
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South Africa is one of five African countries that have not yet ratified the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. However, this does not prevent it from taking a close interest in its rich natural and cultural heritage. The country has many endemic species, eleven national languages and it is very likely that this convention will be signed in the long run, in any case, research is underway to move in this direction.

How can the know-how and culture of rooibos be considered as "heritage"? Rooibos, which means red bush in Afrikaans, is a tea endemic to South Africa, which means that it only grows in South Africa, and particularly in the south-western part of it. This is called localised production, sometimes also called local product. What are the characteristics of localised production? They are products that have a history; that are inscribed in the territory of production and harvesting; in the case of rooibos, that are linked to the place by the endemic character of these species; and the localised know-how that has been built up to harvest, cultivate and transform rooibos. It also has a collective dimension in that it combines skills shared by a community of producers. Here we see that localised production and heritage have a common base, namely a collective, historical and geographical dimension. Not all foods are necessarily heritage. If we think of wines or cheeses in France, not all are considered as heritage. On the other hand, localized productions that have this link with a historical, collective and geographical dimension are often considered as heritage or have very strong links, in any case.

Recently, rooibos was recognised as a geographical indication, what does this label mean? Rooibos was registered as a Geographical Indication (GI) in South Africa in 2013, recognised by a bilateral trade agreement in 2015 in Europe, and more recently, recognised as a PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) by Europe in May 2021. What do these labels mean? A GI marks the recognition of a distinctive sign on a food or craft product, and a PDO is a form of geographical indication, which is recognised in the European Union. Both GIs and PDOs impose specifications, or even a defined area for the production of the product. But the PDO is more restrictive than the GI: it requires that production and processing take place in a delimited territory, which is specified in the specifications. In fact, it is a recognition of the specificity of the product in question.

Why are some products labelled and others not? The work of the CIRAD (Centre for International Cooperation in Agronomic Research for Development) shows us that there are criteria for setting up geographical indications. The first is the potential of the product to be recognised as a GI and therefore linking it to a particular terroir or territory, but also the collective capacity for action of local actors, the commercial potential and the need to have the specificity of the product recognised. In other words, is there a market for this product? And finally, the support of the state or other bodies such as NGOs or development donors.

Why did rooibos become a GI? We have already described these characteristics and the fact that it is a localized production. As far as the sector is concerned, there are less than 500 producers, which makes it a fairly structured sector. However, there is a great diversity of farms, farm sizes, but also producer profiles. On the one hand, there are Afrikaner farmers, descendants of European settlers, and mixed-race

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producers, who are descendants of the Khoisan, the ancient indigenous peoples, better known as Bushmen and Hottentots in South Africa. In terms of market potential, the annual production is 15,000 tonnes. This makes it a sector with high commercial potential. I would also like to point out that the main export market is Europe, with the Germans, in particular, and the Dutch being very, very fond of it. And finally, rooibos has been the subject of several attempts to cultivate it in other countries, notably Australia, but also to register trademarks containing the name rooibos. This was done in the 1990s and 2010s in the US and Europe. Each time, it raised a wave of protests and concerns on the part of producers, which in fact strengthened the support of the South African government and led to a process of enhancement and protection that is shared by the state and which resulted in the establishment of a geographical indication.

Can the geographical indication contribute to the safeguarding of this heritage? If, until now, the GI, geographical indication in English, has protected the name rooibos, today the PDO marks a stronger level of protection recognised by the European Union. So, the PDO protects the name, but also the production practices and thus the resource itself which is now to be safeguarded in South Africa.

What are the other objectives of a GI? A geographical indication aims first of all to protect a resource, its name and its production method, and therefore the know-how associated with it. If we look at products widely produced in the world, such as coffee and rice, it is often in fact particular productions that are protected, that are the subject of a geographical indication. For example, Sidamo coffee in Ethiopia, or Basmati rice in India. In the case of rooibos, it is the whole resource. The entire South African rooibos sector is protected by GI and now by PDO. For rooibos there is a conventional sector, but there are also fair trade, organic and wild rooibos sectors. In the long term, it is not impossible, even if it is not the preferred route for the moment, that labels could be a way of recognising these specific production territories, or terroirs, or recognising certain qualities of rooibos, some of which are beginning to be recognised in South Africa, but also in the world.