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Interview with Elise Sormani

(Founder and Chief Executive Officer at We All Share Roots — Cape Town, South Africa)

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Watermill Society**

Introduction

Meet Elise Sormani, Founder of and Chief Executive Officer at We All Share Roots in Cape Town, South Africa. Her fascinating journey from the French Ministry of Environment to launching a fashion brand is one that inspires. In this interview, The Thinking Watermill Society converses with Elise to understand her love for South Africa and how she expresses it through her sustainable social enterprise.



1. You own a very impressive fashion brand, We All Share Roots. It is one of the very few brands in South Africa that uses Piñatex. What inspired you to work in the sustainable and ethical fashion industry?

Doing business in a sustainable way is something that has always appealed me. Before landing in South Africa, I had studied Sustainable Development, worked for the French Ministry of Environment and in a recycling group. Moving the lines, working with a purpose and changing people's habits is a real passion for me.

When I moved to Cape Town, I didn't know what to do. Initially, I had accepted to follow my life partner who had a job opportunity there. I quickly fell in love with the country, its energy and its beautiful handcraft. I then decided to create a project that could benefit from South Africa's dynamic vibe and image; AND be of benefit to some of the many communities who still live in real poverty.

As the company went along, it was natural to incorporate sustainable materials, limit waste, try to educate our consumers, etc. And 5 years later, I realize that I have created a very committed brand and contributed to promote ethical fashion on a small scale.



2. We All Share Roots incorporates and celebrates stories of hope, upliftment, and the spirit that makes South Africa such a hub of Afri-coolness. What pulled you to launch your brand in Cape Town?

As I mentioned previously, my husband received a job opportunity in Cape Town in 2014 and we both decided to make the move to South Africa (we're French). It is an amazing and fascinating country but sadly economic inequality remains a large issue here and contributes to extreme poverty. The World Bank and the Gini index recognize South Africa as one of the most unequal countries in the world, meaning that the local economy does not equally benefit all of its citizens. This is the reason why I wanted to create a project that could bring income, skills and employment to some of the many underprivileged communities here.

If you visit Cape Town (which I encourage anyone to do so, it is one of the most beautiful cities in the world!), you can see very diverse realities here: beautiful neighborhoods, world-class restaurants, a vibrant

touristic sector, but also countless homeless, poor workers, townships, etc. I wanted to try to create a bridge between these 2 realities.



3. What module of operations does your brand follow to achieve its goals as a social enterprise?

It is still a very small company so there is nothing very formal here. All our purchases (with the exception of Piñatex — this is a natural alternative to leather) are made locally, from fabrics to zips.

All our waste (leather and prints offcuts) is kept with the objective of being re-purposed. All our production is handmade in one of Cape Town's most underprivileged area. Our production process allows our seamstresses to work from home, saving on expensive transportation costs and, most importantly, taking care of their kids after school (which finishes at 2:00 pm) and preventing their recruitment by local gangs.

4. Garment workers in South Africa are predominantly women, often single mothers and their family's sole breadwinner. Which communities does We All Share Roots work with in their production process?

Seawinds is a suburb in the Cape Flats, situated in the southeast of Cape Town CBD. Less famous than its neighbor, Lavender Hill, the community suffers from the same plague — massive unemployment, crime, poverty and gang-related violence. In spite of this, it is also a vibrant multi-racial community trying to offer its kids a better future. I'm really proud of the ladies I'm working with. They are hard-workers and they not only sustain their own families, but also their community.

During lockdown in 2020, they shared the little they had to organize daily soup kitchens for the poor in their neighborhood and the kids. They are now busy creating a community garden to get access to fruits and vegetables.

And last but not least, helping women to be the breadwinner of their families also contributes to slowly changing women's status in a country with so many gender-issues and violence.

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5. It is clear that you interact with different people of vast ages and backgrounds. What have you learnt from working with new and different people so often?

It wasn't easy at first to arrive as a white foreigner, with a strong French accent, a dream and a vision. I could see some distrust from everyone — from the suppliers ("another girl willing to have her own fashion brand"), to the ladies in the communities. But, I have gained the respect and appreciation needed after years of showing hard work, being committed, working through my 2 pregnancies, and always being kind and fair. And, I valorize it a lot.

Here are 2 interesting facts :

1. Don't expect to arrive in a poor community on a red carpet with smiles and thankful attitudes all around, even if you offer jobs. Life is tough there, there is no space for eternal gratitude. You have to believe in your own positive impact and forget about any "thank you".


2. On the other side, I'm always amazed to see my clients being interested in what happens behind the bags. Actually, they are the ones who are grateful for the commitment and action taken in the communities!



6. We All Share Roots is an overall mindful company, from your workers to your incredible products. How do you manage to maintain the flawless balance between being sustainable and a social enterprise?


Being sustainable and social is the right balance to find. I remember that when I launched our very first vegan range, I had contacted PETA for their “PETA-approved” vegan certification. Obviously, they saw I had previous ranges with leather and questioned me about them. I had to explain the social project behind it all. To date, the leather ranges were (are still) the ones which allowed the company to maintain its social commitments. So in my opinion, it is necessary to have a sincere global picture of your company, with all its impacts, social and environmental, but sometimes you have to make baby steps so that everything being can live together.

Clearly, my objective was to create a company I could be proud of and I could tell my kids about, without having to shadow some parts. I like to be challenged on



what needs to be reconsidered and tackle the topics one by one. Obviously, I have to follow a wise agenda (financially-sustainable), but I want to go in the right direction.

7. Your work with the children at Lavender Hill/Seawind shows your clear passion for leaving a sustainable legacy. What moment in your journey stands out as an important lesson?



I always visit my seamstresses, in particular Heather, who is the head of production and a respected community leader. I know her well, she has her own struggles. Her husband died many years ago and she had to raise her kids and grandkids by herself with an income you would consider as pocket money and in a neighborhood with so many dangers for little ones and grown-ups. In spite of all her problems, she cares for her community and is very involved in supporting the kids, the single mothers, the elderly, etc. She organizes a soup kitchen in her own backyard, teaches kids music

as a form of empowerment, leads our seamstresses' group and acts as interface with local authorities.

She never complains... or very little. For instance, the other day she was so busy supporting 15 families whose kids have been abused. I can tell you that going back to the office or to my home and seeing my own problems, I feel incredibly lucky and protected.



8. It is fascinating that your brand incorporates Piñatex. Which other sustainable and ethical materials/practices do you look forward to incorporating in the future?

During lockdown, I had time (well, as much time as an entrepreneur and mother of 2 kids under 3 can have) to educate myself a bit more about sustainable fashion and ethical materials. This is why I have revisited all my ranges and launched a new eco-mindful collection last week, where leather is replaced by upholstery offcuts, polycotton and cotton replaced by hemp, and ready-to-use fabrics replaced by our own designs, locally printed with eco-friendly pigments.

It is a trend I would like to pursue. I'm passionate about recycling and upcycling and I would like to have more materials deviated from waste.

It is a lot of work in practice as we, in the society, don't have many years of experience in this field at least in terms of fashion upcycled materials. Also, I'm obsessed

with aesthetics and the results have to reach my own high standards which is not always easy with waste!



9. To follow up on that, what are the challenges of sourcing locally produced materials in Cape Town?

Sourcing materials for a business is not an easy task in Cape Town. First of all, you can definitely still feel the

impact of years of embargo in South Africa, which only ended about 20 years ago. Not everything is available locally.

And secondly, the country is geographically far from everything. It is surrounded by sea or by non-industrial African countries. So you can either import and pay high prices and taxes, or deal with local suppliers. I obviously opted for the second option, not just for financial reasons but mainly because I wanted to create a positive local eco-system with other SMEs, handcrafters and retailers/wholesalers.



10. It is noteworthy that you have a background in sustainability and marketing. With that, does green marketing influence a consumer's choice to buy sustainable products?

That's a good question. But first, I don't really like the idea of "green marketing", it sounds like greenwashing. In our case, it is more than green marketing. We communicate, share and promote our reality. It is not glamorous and profit-oriented smokes and mirrors.

I do believe in education and awareness, this is why I spend so much time explaining why we choose one material over another, why our production times are slow, and what happens in the township where we work. I sincerely want to educate our consumers and open their eyes. But in my opinion, it is important to never underestimate the product itself, most of our clients buy the bags because they like them. The social and environmental impact is a decisive plus, but the product itself is the first purchase-motivation.

Thank you for your cooperation on behalf of The Thinking Watermill Society. All the best in your current and future endeavours, Ms Elise Sormani.

Learn More About Elise Sormani

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About The Thinking Watermill Society

The Thinking Watermill Society is a non-profit organization. In particular, it promotes the debate and exchange of ideas among its members regarding the changes underway in the economic, cultural and social landscape, together with the analysis of the consequences that said changes entail, so as to identify the possible opportunities of economic, cultural and social growth related to said changes.

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