Fluid Spaces

Terroir and Power in the Sidama *Buna* Ceremony

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Coffee terroir research often focuses on marketing or connoisseurship. My research seeks to understand coffee place-taste association amongst the Sidama coffee growers of southwestern Ethiopia. I wanted to engage with producer-consumers and understand their valuations of taste before coffee brands create the narrative of terroir. Academic discussion of terroir looks at the tension between a territorial cultural artifact of place-taste and the universal, inherent properties that facilitate unique taste in food and beverage. Direct interviews and participant observation with Sidama coffee producers help to reorient the discourse of terroir back to the beginning of the coffee supply chain. My fieldwork found that simply trying to designate place-taste through the culinary frameworks of terroir and the legal protections of PGI (protected geographic indicators) fail to encapsulate the intangible value system of coffee in Sidama society. To try to protect just a taste of place misses the larger biocultural role that coffee plays within Sidama society. This research raises questions of what it means to preserve certain foods and fetishize tastes. Situated social objects are taken out of context when they are reified through the Third Wave coffee industry's value system, regardless of empowerment discourse. Understanding producers as discerning consumers helps to broaden inquiries into who exactly acts as tastemaker in the coffee value chain.

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DEDICATION

To the coffee farmers of Tukko, your kinship and reciprocity have sustained me in ways I can never fully repay. *Loo'ha gaay galateemohe*. *Maganuu-o'he*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section	Page
I. INTRODUCTION……	8
What's in a Name?.....	11
Terroir as Protective Legitimation……..	14
Terroir as Border…….	20
Terroir as Network……..	23
II. COFFEE, TERROIR, & SIDAMA…….	26
Situating Place…….....	30
Buna Research…….	34
Sidama Primer…….	36
III. POSITIONALITY AND METHODOLOGY……	40
IV. SENSORIAL ETHNOGRAPHY……	44
Land…….	44
Sense-world of the Sidama…….	47
Sweetness…….	49
Salt……	51
Smell…….	54
Sight…….	57
Constituting Coffee…….	58
Enset…….	60
Milk…….	63
Ceremony…….	66

Addiction……... 66

Respect……... 68

V. DISCUSSION…… 71

Troubled Terroir……. 72

Coffee-as-Medium……. 73

Adulterated Substance…… 75

Liquid Spaces……. 79

VI. CONCLUSION…… 81

VII. REFERENCES……..... 85

INTRODUCTION

My interest in coffee and taste is the result of my early career paths in both international development and artisanal cheesemaking. Working in central Haiti and southern Ethiopia introduced me to locally grown coffees and transformed my understanding of the diurnal beverage. I was able to brew coffee that I had picked, hulled, and dried while working as a Peace Corps volunteer in Sidama, Ethiopia. Working as an artisanal cheesemaker I interacted in tastemaker spaces for the first time. We would wander the underground vaults of natural-rind cheeses, take core samples and minutely label the texture, salt, and appearance of cheese. I saw first-hand the transformation in value from vat of milk to black-label reserve labeling. This research attempts to combine elements from these dissimilar career paths by examining the creation of value in place-based coffees in Sidama, Ethiopia. I will examine how terroir, value creation, and sensory analysis interact within the Sidama coffee ceremony space. The Sidama coffee ceremony serves as the local manifestation of the larger Ethiopian-Eritrean coffee culture complex which shapes coffee consumption through a cultural medium across the region. I argue that Sidama producer-consumers reify coffee taste in similar and dissimilar ways to Third Wave coffee tastemakers. I also examine the limitations of charismatic taste-objects through an ethnography of Sidama producer-consumers and their relationship to coffee. The project's initial research questions were:

a.) How does the *buna* ceremony engage with Ethiopian (specifically Sidama) valuations of place-based taste?

b.) How does terroir work as a narrative of taste valuation in the coffee industry?

c.) How does terroir function in the producer-consumer creation of heritage coffee products?

I attempted to articulate these research questions over the course of twenty interviews with thirty-two participants in Sidama. I used a semi-structured interview structure and ethnographic approach to engage Sidama producer-consumers on the role that coffee as a plant and beverage played in their everyday lives. I used the coffee ceremony as both an interview and studied space through participant observation and direct interaction with the daily coffee ceremony. I utilized these questions to probe at the association between coffee terroir and Sidama producer-consumers.

a.) Do you see a connection between coffee taste and place/origin?

b.) How would you personally describe coffee place-taste?

c.) What do you think gives specific coffee beans their unique tastes?

I'll explore in detail how these questions did and did not elucidate the understanding and meanings of coffee. Flexible and curious questions guided the research beyond the explicit terroir framework and helped me to understand the constituted and caffeinated role that coffee plays in Sidama society.

This thesis draws from interdisciplinary work that researchers in the social sciences and humanities have used to complicate the associations of taste, experience, and cultural constructions. Much of my conceptual background comes from anthropology and sociology, while also being informed by folklore, philosophy, and food science. The discipline of global studies lives at the crossroads of academic boundaries and this research, both in approach and concept-matter, plays within those blurred lines. The fuzziness of terroir makes the reification of taste value a continuum between discrete sensory analysis and ineffable connection between people, place, and product. The conceptual framework of this project hinges on both strong connective coherence between ideas, objects, and experiences and the resulting gaps between

consumption and abstraction. The warp and weft of the project help to build a structure, but meaning also lies within the void between layered ideas. The key texts that informed this research are Edward Fischer's 'Making Better Coffee' and Paige West's 'From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive'. Both researchers have beautifully laid out symbolic valuation and place-based taste power in Third Wave coffee supply chains. Fischer (2022) and West (2012) show how Global North tasting patterns and values come into conflict with producers' livelihoods and values in Guatemala and Papua New Guinea. Nicola Perullo's 'Epistenology' and Kenneth Liberman's 'Tasting Coffee' provided insight into how taste is created in liquid experiences and, even though I mitigated my ontological claims in this thesis, I found their work inspiring as we approach truth through tasting. Lastly, the recent anthology 'Food Beyond Terroir' edited by Anna Colquhoun and Katharina Graf, as well as 'Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene' by Anna Tsing and colleagues helped me to conceptualize a network-based approach to tasting regimes by both Global North and South tastemakers. Many of the references cited in this piece help to articulate the value world of Third Wave tastemakers, both as professional practice and system critique, but there is a paucity of data referring to Global South producer-consumers as equal arbiters of taste. I use the term producer-consumer to complicate that notion that coffee farmers are disenfranchised from the commensal and sensorial reification of their crops. While coffee habits are changing globally, partially thanks to the Third Wave, coffee has been a colonial crop for much of its history in the Global South. I do not mean to say that coffee farmers in Southeast Asia or the Americas have not historically been drinking and enjoying coffee, but Ethiopia does stand apart from other producing nations as the birthplace of coffee with a long historical entanglement with coffee as a plant, beverage, and drug-food. This project seeks to understand how local Sidama producer-consumers value coffee and how their

understanding of coffee helps to create taste. Coffee is a laden concept that we drink daily, my research examines the connections and dissimilarities between the value world of the Third Wave and coffee farmers. I hope to show how different ways of knowing, through embedded and embodied experience shape our interaction with coffee and how a deeper understanding of coffee terroir can help empower people in addition to product and place.

I. WHAT'S IN A NAME?

I'm drinking cold Maxwell House coffee out of a Waffle House mug while writing this introduction. How to bring the reader into the relational space of coffee, place, and value? In this section I will outline the lexicon of this thesis. I will place terroir, taste, objectivity, and commodification within a theoretical framework, while sipping on this acrid brew. I will then move on to an overview of the relationship between symbolic value and place-taste in the specialty coffee world before finally presenting the place of coffee and its attendant issues in the Ethiopian context.

Terroir slips off the tongue. A swallow and it's gone. Terroir manifests in the tastes of certain place-based foods; like wine, cheese, coffee, and more. The concept asserts that certain places impart distinct and noticeable flavors to the material or consumable objects produced in a region. Just like a fondly remembered meal, terroir as a concept lives on in the lingering after-taste. Terroir consists as a relational triad between product, place, and people (West, 2022: 1). Researchers are drawn to terroir studies due to the seeming disconnect between its ineffable, but discernible nature and the direct sociopolitical and economic effects of place-taste. Terroir is a French concept writ large and has become an essential component of the global specialty food industry. Recent scholars have troubled terroir as the operative term for the association between people, product, and place. Colquhoun et al. (2026) argue that concepts like *domacé* in Croatia

and *beldi* in Morocco can serve to better operationalize the relational space between place and taste in local contexts. While certain terms may better articulate place-taste in specific regions, terroir remains the celebrated, reviled, and over-used term de rigueur in both professional and academic spaces. It is problematic, evocative, and capacious.

Terroir derives from the Latin word *territorium* which described the land around a town, combining human habitation and social spaces with the agricultural nature of the land (Parker, 2015: 5). In his 19th-century French dictionary, Pierre Larousse defined terroir as "the earth considered from the point of view of agriculture" and expanded with *le goût du terroir* as "the flavor or odor of certain locales that are given to its products, particularly with wine" (Trubek, 2009: xv). Parker (2015) demonstrates that the concept was pervasive in the cultivation of both foodstuffs and wines in medieval and Renaissance France. Historically, terroir in France was not considered so much a point of view as an intrinsic part of reality (Trubek, 2009). Bérard (2016: 76) states that, for the French "terroir was a given factor; it had always existed, pre-dating man, who only served to reveal its potential." In France, terroir originated from a perceived causal relationship between land, food, and people that contributed to both regional and, later, national identities (Parker, 2015). To be clear, terroir is not a static entity and is subject to negotiation and appropriation even within France itself. Parker (2015) describes how terroir's connotations in France have shifted from a negative parochial trait to a cultured behavior of discernment over the centuries. Barham (2003) details how the French valorization of the concept can be seen as a reaction to national malaise in an era of modernization and globalization. Understanding the historic French association of terroir and food beyond wine becomes crucial context for understanding the global proliferation of concept in the 20th and 21st centuries. The concept's

role in the wine world was part of its dissemination and popularization beyond the Francophone sphere of influence. The sixth edition of *The World Atlas* of Wine states:

> There is no precise translation for the French word terroir…Perhaps this is why many Anglo-Saxons long mistrusted it as a Gallic fancy: a conveniently mystical way of asserting the superiority of French soil and landscape and the unknowable peculiarities that give French wines special qualities. Yet there is no mystery about terroir. Everyone – or at least every place – has one. (Johnson and Robinson, 2007).

Terroir's use in the wine world made latter uses of the term seem inappropriate or over-used when applied to other contexts. In France, the concept has latitude to wine and different foodstuffs, but in the English-speaking world the term became fixed within the social world of oenophiles and viticulturists. A 2024 bibliometric survey of 913 academic articles found that terroir literature focused predominantly on wine and viticulture studies but also noted a recent pivot towards terroir research in the business, economics, and social science fields (Moroz, 2024: 907). Terroir has been especially salient to researchers studying geographic indications (GIs) and legal protections of localities on a global scale (Moroz, 2024; Colquhoun et al., 2026; Barham, 2003). The concept is no longer tethered to just wine, it has come to permeate much of the global fine food industry. In recent decades the concept of terroir has been applied to a menagerie of locally created products: alcoholic beverages, fruits, vegetables, herbs, grains, pulses, seeds, nuts, dairy products, meats, fish, even handicrafts and precious metals or gems (Colquhoun et al. 2026: 4). It has been derided as purely a marketing tool or an overly saturated fad. Wilson (1998: 55) notes that overuse of terroir by English-speaking oenophiles has made it a buzz word that does not capture the ineffable link between land and taste. He goes on to recognize the that the term is "pedantic, strange, and certainly 'foreign'" but remains the best term to describe place-taste (Wilson, 1998: 56). In his abbreviated review of the concept, Monterescu (2017: 128) notes how various authors have referred to terroir as mythical, useless nostalgia, and a joke. The

concept has certainly been put to task by foodies, oenophiles, and over-eager grad students. Terroir's polysemic, seemingly mutable qualities do not diminish the powerful role it plays in consumer habits and tasting narratives. Monterescu (2017:128) posits, "The semiotic power of terroir lays in its untranslatable indexicality linking speaker to space. Terroir fervor is thus a way to touch posterity through nature." Regardless of over-use and issues with standardization, terroir's real-world impact on lives and markets asserts its relevance to social science researchers interested in the creation of value, communication of quality, place-taste dynamics, and food studies.

II. TERROIR AS PROTECTIVE LEGITIMATION

So, terroir can be a slippery term with multiple valences and meanings. In next three sections we'll examine how the same term can act as a regional advocate on the global stage, as a limiting border that enforces powerful binaries, and as a useful muddling network that troubles distinctions between people, place, and products along regional and global supply chains.

As previously stated, the tasting public and professionals can have a perception of terroir as a snobby attenuated phrase that is 'out-of-bounds' when applied to consumables beyond wine. Perullo (2021) laments that terroir often serves as an evocative, if oblique term in the wine world. Ocejo (2017) discusses how 21st century "foodies" represent new elites that often gatekeep the symbolic boundaries of food and debate what is considered authentic or not. Goodman et al. (2012) operationalize the term alternative food networks to discuss the new wave of social activism and identity-based worldviews that valorize change within the food system as a rebuke to neoliberalism. Foodies, hipsters, connoisseurs, and tastemakers all move within various peripheries of the alternative food movement and its ripple effects on supply chains and

ways of doing business. In this larger cultural milieu, the professionalization of language and jargon become shibboleths to demonstrate sufficient symbolic capital to comment on taste.

Terroir becomes part of the connoisseurs' and professionals' toolkit. Parker (2015: 3) states that connoisseurs use terroir "to add an intellectual framework to gustatory and sensorial experience, formalizing the culinary moment by means of a judgement about geographic authenticity." The correct use of the term can determine if a person is in the know and acts as a legitimation of their cultural value. While terroir remains contested amongst foodies, the term's use regarding food, in addition to wine, is a matter of historic record. I will examine several iterations of terroir designations showing how the institutionalization of place-taste protects regional products and consolidates symbolic value. Kindstedt (2012: 215) notes that while the French Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) was established for wines in 1919, the AOC's mandate quickly extended to food. Only six years later, in 1925, the AOC recognized Roquefort as the first place-protected cheese (Kindstedt, 2012: 215). AOC designations serve as a reification of the historic cultural fact of terroir and were originally created to protect French products on a global market (Trubek, 2009). The AOC protection of Roquefort cemented an understanding of French place-taste that dated at least back to the 15th century when King Charles VI granted the town of Roquefort and the caves of Mount Combalou the exclusive use of the name Roquefort (Kindstedt, 2012: 214). While debate of the proliferation of terroir beyond wine helps articulate the symbolic stickiness of the concept, its historic French roots show an understanding of place-based tastes in both beverages and material foods.

The French Institut National des Appellations d'Origine (INAO) was established in 1935 to regulate terroir-based foods and wines (Parker, 2015; Trubek, 2009). Before the INAO, French terroir laws worked to protect the descriptive natures of food (i.e. place names), but by 1935

legal terroir intonated quality and authenticity via institutional certifications (Trubek, 2009: 28). In 1992 the EU created system of GI protections for all of Europe with the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), modeled after the AOC (Kindstedt, 2012: 215). The creation of the AOC in 1919, the INAO in 1935, and the PDO in 1992 were all attempts to legislate place-taste and protect regional products from global counterfeits who used place-names to add symbolic value. Neal's Yard Dairy, the venerable London artisanal cheese retailer, states that: "The aim of the PDO is to protect sales of regional products from corner-cutting, tradition-distorting interlopers" (Neal's Yard Dairy, 2024). This system of acronymized bureaucracy rests on the assumption of that historic craft, provenance, and taste is under threat from globalized markets. I am not dismissing the pernicious threat that neoliberal markets pose for local producers and cultural products. I do believe that there are agents within the provenance legitimation schemes who believe in the positive force of delimitations, but labels can also be co-opted by markets and value systems to serve as another form of asset consolidation and market capture. The delimited regional markers specify the sourcing, processing, aging, material tools and procedures that can be used to create a true terroir-based object. Materiality and purity will be discussed later on, but it's important to emphasize that the institutionalization of European place-taste, and the GIs that were based on that system, act as a reaction to markets and economies that do not value the specificity of regional taste.

The various terroir designations also acknowledge how place-names have transformed over time. The Uruguay Round Agreement allows countries outside the EU to ignore PDOs if they deem a place-name to be generic (Kindstedt, 2012: 215). An anecdote: Whenever I help run cheese tastings or work at cheese festivals, I'm astounded how many people are not aware that cheddar is named after the town of Cheddar in Somerset County in England. This knowledge gap

can be partially blamed on the lack of adherence to terroir-based delimitations in the US, but it also shows the semiotic drift of place-names in global, capitalist economies. Cheddar has become the operative word for a style of cheese. In fact, 'to cheddar' is a verb denoting the cooking and stacking of curd. Similarly, champagne is legally delimited to the Champagne region in northeast France. The sixth edition of the *World Atlas of Wine* attributes the "combination of freshness, richness, delicacy,…raciness, and a gently stimulating strength" of AOC champagne partly due to "its combination of latitude and precise position (Johnson and Robinson, 2007: 78). Producers in Champagne took advantage of their environment to market the accidental nature of their sparkling wine and worked tenaciously to market and protect the terroir of Champagne-produced champagnes in a world of sparkling wine (Johson and Robinson, 2007; Trubek, 2009). To an American audience it can seem overly precious to trouble the legitimacy of such ubiquitous and friendly products like cheddar and champagne. And while these places-products have also become bywords for processes of creation, they are PDO and AOC protected comestibles. Regulation helps to keep the place attached to object in an era of global supply chains. Both protected cheddars and champagnes would be lost in a sea of similar products, but the label of origin helps to anchor the product and imply legitimacy to the customer. The AOC and PDO labels help customers navigate a supermarket of mirrored objects by easily communicating a place-based quality control scheme that connotes historic connection between people, place, and product. Place-based labels also allow customers to experience epiphanies by engaging with the "original" or "pure" variety of the product. We'll discuss how purity and authenticity are problematic terms, but nevertheless their market power is strong. It is important to note that while terroir labels can help legitimate value in the alternative food network, they can also be co-opted by corporate reframing narratives and market segmentation

strategies (Goodman et al., 2012). Saltzman (2015: 1369) elucidates that place-based trademarks can demarcate the area in which a product is produced but do not speak to the PDO or AOC protected production, processing, and preparation of foods often using historically situated, recognized methods. As we'll see with legal case of Ethiopia vs. Starbucks, corporate strategies often play on the association between quality and terroir by just trademarking place-names and leaving the customers to jump to the conclusion of assumed quality based by provenance.

All these schemas state that they hope to protect value-additive elements of commercialized associations between people and place. INAO official literature orients their mission as acting on ancient knowledge that certain lands help facilitate the creation of specific products (Trubek, 2009: 28). The protection of terroir is critical in the era of late-stage capitalism where material value must be buttressed by symbolic value of a product. Artisanal foods from the rural periphery can add material and symbolic value to products due to their claims of superior taste and morality (Mapes, 2019). Terroir designations help to justify the higher price tag of an item by making taste and purchase a valorous act against commercial homogeneity. Yet another acronymized agency, The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been an influential authority in legitimizing legal protections of place-based cultural customs and artifacts. The UNESCO lists of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) do not officially recognize food and gastronomy as cultural domains on its lists (Csergo, 2018: 449). Despite this official oversight, certain foods and food practices have been nominated onto the ICH lists to protect specific cultural elements of food from globalized and standardized commercial forces (Csergo, 2018: 449). Csergo (2018) argues that ICH can serve as another means of protection for foods in addition to origin and quality labels. Saltzman (2015:1369) enumerates how terroir protections also align with the World Intellectual Property Organization's

mission to protect intangible intellectual property. If we return to West's (2022) terroir triad of product, place and people we can see how the AOC, PDO, and GI systems protect products and places explicitly, while the ICH places human culture as the stated goal of protection. Arguably all place-based protection schemes can serve to protect threatened producers, artisans, and processes that face the very real threat of globalized capitalism, even if their mechanisms of protection are slightly different. Goodman et al. (2012) have shown how alternative food networks desire to create change in the food system or at least better morally navigate a perceived predatory neoliberal market. Consumers want to buy products that align with their worldview and, while certain actors may declaim the environmental toll of imports, terroir designations help consumers link their values onto a product. Producers' livelihoods are also protected by terroir legal protections and consumers' valuations of place-based products. It should be noted that the symbolic value of place-taste can help elites consolidate class status (Ocejo, 2017; Mapes, 2019) but also operates as an adequate communication strategy that is of use to consumers and their value systems.

Part of this reorientation of value within the food world has come from the revitalized interest in producers and craftspeople. Ocejo (2017) delineates how both hip craftspeople and the new cultural elite create a synergy of savvy, informed consumerism based on items and services that are perceived as unique or authentic. This cultural exchange often occurs around diurnal activities that are heightened by the knowledge base of both consumer and worker (Ocejo, 2017). As we will later explore, coffee shops and coffee occupy an elevated symbolic value while being an everyday food. Craftspeople, whether they be baristas or cheesemongers, serve as symbolic objects in and of themselves as they help guide consumers through the maze of saturated capitalism. Again, terroir can serve as a sign-post for quality and desired authenticity. Taste and

its biosocial dimensions will be further discussed in later sections, but it is worth noting that tastemakers also serve as guides with artisanal foods. Tastemakers have symbolic effects and material consequences on the culinary world through the arbitrage of "good" taste (Lane, 2014: 286). Craftspeople and tastemakers can occupy similar roles in food spaces in that they know and taste food while occupying respective "front-of-house" and "back-of-house" roles.

III. TERROIR AS BORDER

While terroir can serve as a benefit to the local producing communities it relies on the quantification of food and the systemization of knowledge. In the current institutionalization of terroir, borders act as delimitation of space, place, and taste. The social fact of specific place-taste is built upon a binary of distinction. Parker (2015: 9) points out that a binary essentialism often occurs as terroirs are negatively compared: "the quality of the product of one terroir are known not by what they are, but what they *are not* [original emphasis]." A larger part of this discussion hinges upon the ordering of knowledge in ephemeral interactions. We taste, we know, we don't know, and we make distinctions. But then we swallow and move on in our day. So how can we hold onto and give power to this sociobiological interaction? Borders fix the idea of terroir into a certain category that can be quantified and measured. The legal capture of food or ideas by the current provenance legitimations can limit future evolution and expression upon a theme. West (2022: 5) notes how "the terroir idea is a product of the very places and times in which it emerged and has been reproduced." Various terroir designations claim to the ever-present manifestation of place in taste, but the codification of process, taste, and heritage captures the concept in a certain time-place ideal. This preservation can help localities and producers preserve their livelihoods, but we should question the assertion of the timelessness of a foodway. Demossier (2026) outlines how terroir in Burgundy came to represent a monoculture

ideology that challenges experimental winemakers adapting to climate change. Wolkovich (2025) examines how anthropogenic climate change has already shifted the growing season in France and surrounding regions changing the ripening period and alcohol content of terroir-protected wines. Various scholars have written about globalization of cuisines, reactionary claiming of certain foods, and the use of gastronationalism to reify place-based food identities. Menely (2026) and Monterescu (2017) outline how wine and olive oil in the Holy Land becomes problematic when claiming who owns the land that creates the food. Caldwell (2026) talks about hominess and Russian identity in the Ukraine war. Lesiv (2022) discusses borscht as another embattled place-based food with both Ukraine and Russia claiming the soup as a cultural heritage. Terroir helps localities to claim their foodways, but it is also often entangled with systems of power and degrees of subversion. As we'll explore later, the 2006 Ethiopian attempt to trademark the Sidamo coffee appellation can cut both ways as a system of national empowerment and regional disenfranchisement. Additionally, we'll also examine how the ICH designation for Fichee-Chambalaalla helped reify the Sidama autonomy movement, in this case place-based labels helped to eventually create new regional borders. When the concept rests on a binary distinction it can further fuel us and them mentalities on global scales. Authenticity becomes a bargained element of place-based food and while it can help reorient customers to the joy and commensality of intentional foods, it can also become a method of elite status symbols. Mapes (2019) discusses how elites can use place-taste to claim degrees of elite authenticity. The resurgence of terroir can conversely help us consume our familiar localities in new ways while allowing us to make claims to intimate knowledge of far-off places through eating place-based foods. But the borders of terroir also serve to create a difference between the intimate knowledge of certain places and the subpar quality of other locations. We laugh at the New Yorker claiming

that bagels made elsewhere do not taste the same as those made with water from the East River, but we should not underestimate the underlying claims of "rightness." This seemingly minor distinction carries personal importance and can help us understand the worldview and value system of others.

In creating borders and systems of place-taste, we establish a right and wrong way to make (and eat) certain foods. 'Rightness' of food has a long history in the food world of being attached to purity. Atkins (2010) talks about how the sanitization and institutionalization of foodways often reflected Victorian or colonial forms of power. The echoes of these systems of thought are still seen in the food safety regulation and expectations that are perceived as normal. Food safety is critical to maintaining customer safety in a heterogenous and disparate global market. As Monterescu (2017) says, terroir-based wines can be presented as "ambivalent commoditized actors," but the claim of place-taste can be used to politically claim land and capture symbolic value. Perullo (2021: 170) states that "terroir is a dynamic area, a land of struggle and power relations where the winner reduces the spaces, casts aside the losers, and then, naturally tells a story." Terroir can preserve local processes and ensure producers' livelihoods, but the legitimation of place-based labels should not be perceived as intrinsic or neutral. Saltzman (2015: 1371) discusses how various communities must negotiate the role of authenticity in designations and descriptions of terroir. She discusses how time, process, and purity of food can influence how consumers perceive the authenticity a terroir-product (Saltzman, 2015: 1371). As we'll explore with coffee, whomever controls the story of a coffee varietal lays claim to the symbolic power of the product, often to the detriment of producers in the Global South.

IV. TERROIR AS NETWORK

As we've seen terroir can be operationalized to both protect and limit the appreciation of place-taste. The concept imposes a bifurcated logic between an environment and appreciated flavors even when attempting to protect heritage products. The institutionalization of the concept rests upon a history of food standards and the empiricist notion that we can quantify aspects of nature. It's ironic that in attempting to define the ineffable connection between place and taste, new ways to constrain that appreciation are put into effect. By defining we can lose the power of the idea.

Yet, I argue that terroir remains the best worst way to articulate the elusive connection between place, product, and people. Recent scholars following the relational turn and Science Technology Studies (STS) have been able to trouble the nature-human dialectic and productively muddy the waters of agential networks. Anna Colquhoun and Katharina Graf recently edited a volume called 'Food Beyond Terroir' that helps to complicate the concept and the reflexive role between place and taste. Colquhoun et al. (2026) question the assumption that place and taste are static assumptions and focus on the iterative practices of making taste and placing taste. The logic of terroir requires some shared assumptions that a place can be delimited, and a taste universally known. While the world of taste is subjective, and it can make sense to grasp at functional objectivity in terroir construction, Colquhoun et al. (2026) argue that taste and place are verbs or processes, not nouns or fixed things. This distinction helps to better treat terroir as both a tasted known experience and a moving target. Parker (2015: 9) also argues that terroir's association as the flavor of origin should be called into suspicion as people and plants can be transplanted and new terroirs can come out their entanglement. The concept has salience and power in the food world, and we discount the trouble of conceptual fluidity at our own peril. We

must stay with the trouble of place-taste stickiness. Donna Haraway may be an odd choice to bring into a discussion of place and taste, but her book 'Staying with the Trouble' was a useful framework for muddling the distinction between future arrangements of human concepts and nature. Haraway (2016: 1) uses the term "staying with the trouble" to orient perspective between potential human-nature futures, recognizing our role "as moral critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings." Terroir can be a useful way in which to foster greater connection between humans and their environments, but it is also simultaneously co-opted by existing powers, rebelliously discursive, and simply existing under the threat of the wider global issues of climate change and late-stage capitalism. Haraway's use of the term sympoesis ("making-with") looks to articulate the assemblages that continuously entangle live and dying constituents on Earth (2016). She uses sympoesis to distinguish the constitution and collaboration of networks through the idea of "worlding-with" (Haraway, 2016: 58). Making, existing, changing, and knowing can help envision the lively world in which place and taste are verbs, not static objects to fixate through sensory language, marketing, and elite authenticity. Perullo (2021: 165) states that saying that food expresses the characteristics of terroir is "both a senseless and banal cliché." He goes on to explain that we cannot assume that these terroir characteristics will always be the same as they are constantly being remade and rely on the correspondence of many different circumstances and elements (Perullo, 2021: 165-166). Something is happening when we taste terroir, and we must be wary of the words we use to articulate it.

Nicolo Perullo, a scholar-practitioner in the world of food studies, uses his background as a philosopher and embodied wine connoisseur to posit that "terroir is not a stable piece of space; terroir is made, always becoming something new [original emphasis]" (2021: 163). Perullo goes

on to state “terroir is not an abstract space to be rejected or exhibited, brandished like a banner or a trophy. It is rather a place to be built and flowed into, to be created continuously with care and attention” (2021: 165). The liquidity and reciprocal co-constitution of terroir within larger networks can help move the concept beyond territorial legitimation and boundary-protected spaces.

Anna Tsing and her colleagues in the ‘Feral Atlas: The More-Than-Human Anthropocene’ project also push the boundaries between networks of co-constituted processes. Tsing and colleagues use the term ferality as “the state of nonhuman beings engaged with human projects, but not in the way the makers of those projects designed” (2024: 10). Feral nature partly aligns with the phenomenon of producers claiming they are simply expressing the intrinsic nature of the land through their products. This claim can elide the human engineering and care that goes into production but also shows an existing more-than-human understanding in the relation between place and taste. Tsing et al. (2024) demonstrate how human-made environments and supply chains can be co-opted by more-than-human entities in an era of late-stage capitalism and climate change. The ‘Feral Atlas’ framework is a useful qualifier when seeking to understand the entwinned nature of the terroir in which place and taste are verbs. Trubek (2009: 10) recounts how the French food scientist Yolande Noël describes terroir as a double helix with multiple strands that twine around each other, adding up to the whole. Parker (2015: 9) echoes this sentiment by recalling Latour and stating that the mediation between climate, people, plant, and flavor discourses help to dissect the meaning of terroir. In the weft, warp, and voided spaces we can puzzle out the contours and meanings of terroir, while questioning the use of static empiricism and bound flavors when it comes to place-taste.

COFFEE, TERROIR, & SIDAMA

I will now place coffee into the terroir conversation. There may be some push back to consider your daily cup of coffee as a product of terroir. The coffee supply chain has obscured the specific origins of coffee for many years through blends, material transformation, and geographic attenuation from terroir-zones. Some scholars have debated whether coffee can be said to have terroir.

There have been three waves of coffee consumption; we can think of the First Wave as bulk blends like Maxwell House, the Second Wave as Starbucks, and the Third Wave as the local hipster establishment (like Farmer's Union in Eugene, OR). Fischer (2022) explains that the First Wave, beginning in the early 20th century was the consistent but bland blends sold by large businesses like Folgers. The Second Wave was the spread of local US roasters and urban coffee shops that hit its stride in the 1980s and 1990s, popularized by Peet's and Starbucks (Fischer, 2022). While the Second Wave began to focus on decommodification, broad geographic origins, and fair-trade principles, the Third Wave in the 2000s were zealous in their pursuit of artisanal single-lot varietals and a moralized market (Fischer, 2022). The Third Wave of coffee consumption has also improved supply chains and preparation styles so that single-origin coffees can claim to represent the flavor of a locale. Before the Second and Third Waves, coffee was blended en masse, and sourcing was communicated at a regional or country level. In this section I will examine how terroir has been applied to coffee and examine the specialty coffee world that helps shape the taste of coffee. Terroir designations suppose that consumers will recognize the inherent primacy of a strongly identified product and pay the higher price for quality (Trubek, 2009). Government terroir regulations can engender a sense of place-based advantage to local producers, allowing territorial protectionism to support promotional strategies and gastronomic

tourism (Storey, 2025). Locality as a construct can be used to convey meaning at a distance, translating into higher prices (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005). A place-based "economy of singularities" continues to disseminate market values with a new vocabulary, extolling the uniqueness of food products (Monterescu, 2017). The "economy of singularities" is critical to understanding how a diurnal beverage became an artisanal product. Place-based narratives and the marketing of unique flavors grant new subjectivity to the daily caffeine boost. Third Wave values and improved supply chains have facilitated the elevation of coffee as a terroir-based product.

Terroir in artisanal foods involves substantial material transformation; grapes into wine or milk into cheese. The economic realities of the global coffee trade exacerbate these material processes. Coffee is grown in tropical environments, picked, washed, pulped, dried, and then shipped to the Global North. Third Wave coffee establishments then roast the green coffee, grind the roasted beans, and brew the beverage using varying extractive methods. From plump red cherry to the dregs in your coffee cup, coffee is subjected to movement and transformation. While terroir is seen as important to determining a particular cup profile, the roast of the beans is seen as equally consequential (Fischer, 2022). Williams et al. (2022) question the assumption that coffee has terroir and argue that post-harvest processing, unlike wine, is an essential part of the place-taste creation. The authors demonstrate that the traditional levers of terroir must be augmented by the storage, roasting, grinding, and brew method of coffee (Williams et al., 2022). If roast is as important as growing methods, it makes sense that baristas and roasters in the Global North see themselves as tastemakers in the coffee value chain. But often this post-harvest tastemaking cuts out the agential role producers play in cultivating fine coffees. West (2012) discusses how the larger capitalistic value-added mindset cuts out the symbolic labor of

smallholder coffee producers. Various authors have documented how successful competition in the fine food industry relies on symbolic and material value in late-state capitalism (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Mapes, 2020; West, 2012). While we can credit Third Wave actors as stakeholders in the manifestation of single lot coffees, it is also important to counter the industry's aspirations of authenticity and quality with colonial legacies of economic power and racial exclusion (Fischer, 2022).

Third Wave companies consolidate tastemaking power through their sourcing, brewing, and dissemination of single lot coffees. Triolo et al. (2023) state that "[a]s coffee evolved as a market offering, it re-colonized local environments by repackaging translocal meanings into neo-artisanal discourses supporting localism." This coffee-shop localism is built upon using place-based products to foster elite authenticity amongst consumers in developed nations by using narratives, images, and flavors of perceived exotic locales (Mapes, 2020; West, 2012). Tastemakers in the Global North often see themselves as trying to source "better" coffee and make the coffee trade "better" (Fischer, 2022). It would be overly cynical to claim that actors in the Global North do not truly aspire to moralizing the market and improving livelihoods of smallholder farms. Liberman (2022) discusses how coffee cuppers (coffee tasting professionals) standardize their palates to best quantify specialty coffees according to specific flavor wheels and guidelines of the industry. Liberman (2022) studies how knowledge and practice help to create professionals in the coffee tasting world and how their finely trained senses attempt to apply objectivity to the subjective world of coffee taste. Fischer (2022: 46) elaborates on how Third Wave tasters use subjective judgements to codify objective measurements of coffee quality: "those who successfully define what 'quality' is (researchers, coffee aficionados, marketers, trade associations) are able to translate symbolic and imaginative values into material gains."

Taste in sensory analysis is more than applying discrete sensation to a consumed object. Across the disciplines, various authors (Hennion, 2007; Perullo, 2016; Liberman, 2022) have presented taste as a relational, constructed idea that evades easy quantification. In the Third Wave both connoisseurs and tastemakers seek exotic coffee varietals for both symbolic value in the market and for a sense of personal discovery and identity (Fischer, 2022; West, 2012). Weissman (2008: xviii-xix) describes the Godshot moment when baristas prepare a perfect example of their craft, allowing others to have specialty coffee epiphanies. Third Wave tastemakers see themselves as touching the pure source of coffee through the process of discovery and tasting. Quintão (2023: 205-206) states that, for coffee connoisseurs, " [a] small unit of quantity of beverage with intense taste, complexity, and free of other ingredients (e.g. sugar, milk, caramel, and so on) is superior, more mature, and of higher status." But we also have a duty to read between the lines and question normative assumptions of tastemaking power.

Triolo and colleagues et al. (2023) highlight how coffee is both a global marketplace icon as a symbolic product while also proving to be a slippery metamorphic object of social value. The authors briefly list how coffee has shifted continuously in cultural meaning since the 15th century; it was spiritual, satanic, rebellious, intellectual, an agent of colonialism, and a capitalist stimulant to name a few qualities (Triolo et al., 2023). In the current area of Third Wave coffee, tastemakers valorize coffee varietals, often from Ethiopia, as unique and valuable objects worth tasting and storying. West (2012) points out that when commodity's meanings and values are tied to semiotics, producers can be once-again disenfranchised by the rapid turnover of meanings. While terroir is claiming to link meaning and biocultural reality – the tools lie in Global North tastemakers' hands and can change based on marketing whims despite the claims to quality that Fischer (2022) points out that Third Wave tastemakers are making. Producers can be subjected to

variable connoisseur whims as industries seek to build out a tasting selection of world coffees in each Third Wave establishment. It is not enough to offer Harar or Yrgacheffe Coffee; you must also have Panama Gesha varieties or Vietnamese robustas. Fine taste is built upon a developing palate that has access to consistent variety, hence the need to story the world in each Third Wave coffee shop. In this way, power in the market comes not from control of means of production but from the ability to channel symbolic sorts of worth (Fischer, 2022). Prices are linked to terroir distinctions, but producers often do not have the social capital to communicate or foster the symbolic values that dictate ultimate coffee worth in the Third Wave (Fischer, 2022; West, 2012).

I. SITUATIONING PLACE

We've discussed why terroir is important, but let's explicate the place of Sidama within the conversation of coffee taste. I'll provide a brief overview of the study area before looking at name designations and attempts to protect Ethiopian coffee terroir on the global market.

Sidama is a region in southern Ethiopia located along the Great Rift Valley. It is one of Ethiopia's main coffee-producing regions, contributing 20% of washed coffee to the central market (Lefebvre and Inbusch, 2024). Most of the land is low highland with a moderate temperate zone that creates favorable conditions for growing coffee (Kumo, 2016). Often using traditional organic farming methods, smallholder farmers predominantly produce coffee in a garden system with limited shade trees. Farmers cultivate coffee along with intercropped enset (false banana), vegetables, spices, maize, and khat, a mild narcotic (Lefebvre and Inbusch, 2024). Up until 1991, Sidama was known as Sidamo which reinforced ethnic and class-based tensions based on decades of oppression under the Solomonic imperial dynasties and the Derg military regime. Sidama coffee has gained global recognition for its quality and is often marketed under the antiquated imperial term Sidamo. Terroir based products reaffirm the importance of names as

metonymic principles of quality. Sidama recently became a new regional-state in the Ethiopian federation after an overwhelming 97.7% 'yes' vote in a 2019 referendum (Tronvoll, 2022). Years of protests and sporadic violence allowed a renewed Sidama nationalism to advocate for self-agency under Ethiopia's ethnic federalist system (Tronvoll, 2022). Sidama authors lament the breadth of indigenous historical and sociological research into the Sidama region and people (Kumo, 2016; Hameso, 2004). Initial researchers and historians focused on the Sidama either through a foreign or Abyssinian colonial lens (Aalen, 2011). Scholars often portrayed the Sidama people as one part of a larger collection of southern peoples rather than as a distinct entity with the country's fourth largest ethnic population. Sidamo was originally used to describe all Cushitic-speaking people of southern Ethiopia (Hameso, 2004). The ethno-regional term Sidamo was said to originate when Bashah Aboye, a general in King Menelik II's imperial army, invaded the region in 1891-1892 (Kumo, 2016). Sidamo originates from Amharic, the language of the Shewa-based Abyssinian empire and the subsequent lingua franca of modern Ethiopia (Aalen, 2011; Kumo, 2016). The term was also used by the Oromo to describe strangers or enemies (Aalen, 2011; Kumo, 2016). Kumo (2016) contends that the term Sidamo serves as a colonial exonym that demonstrates the northern Ethiopian subjugation of Sidama. Hameso states that Sidamo "is a mere geographic description assigned to the southern region which contains several nations" (2004: 206). Until the 1980s coup, imperial administrators referred to a massive area bounded by the Rift Valley to the west, Bale Mountains to the east, and the Kenyan border to the south as the Sidamo province (Kumo, 2016). The Derg military regime kept the Sidamo name while reordering the ethnic homelands that comprised the province (Kumo, 2016). Even after the overthrow by the Derg, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia kept Sidama within the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Regional State (Kumo, 2016). For more than 100

years, governments based in Addis Ababa dictated Sidama's territorial integrity. Northern provinces during the imperial, Derg, and republic periods reflected ethnically homogenous lands for the Tigray and Amhara. Sidama authors have resented the subsummation of their homelands with other nations as it dilutes their ability for self-determination and territorial integrity (Hameso, 2004; Kumo, 2016).

The Sidama have been trying to reclaim their name and their territory. Sidamo has been used as an imperial province place-name, an exonym, an inaccurate grouping of people-groups, and a name for quality coffee. This struggle for accurate self-representation is reflected in the struggle for terroir-based coffee as a means of food sovereignty. Kumo (2016: 314) states that "importers of the Ethiopian coffee and the multinational retailers might not be aware of the history of the 'Sidamo' misnomer and hence cannot be directly responsible for the continued abuse of the identity of the Sidama people." Java and Mocha were originally geographically-specific types of coffee that became brand-like names for certain flavors and blends. Sidamo, as a brand name, unfortunately carries similar connotations. Kumo (2016: 314-315) points out that capitalism "is obsessed with brand names for profit. Once you alter a little bit of the spelling in the brand name, consumers would question the quality, and the demand may fall endangering the profit of the capitalist." In 2006, Ethiopia tried to copyright three coffee placenames (Harar, Yrgacheffe, and Sidamo) in the US; Starbucks, which had already copyrighted the place-name Sidamo for a proprietary blend, entered the into the fray (Palfrey, 2011). After being inundated with bad press, Starbucks ultimately withdrew its objection, and Ethiopia was able to trademark in the US (Palfrey, 2011). Ethiopia was following other coffee-producing nations like Jamaica and Colombia that have used IP laws to protect terroir-driven coffees (Sereke-Brhan, 2010). Ethiopia was also especially well positioned to leverage its weight in the coffee value chain due

to its high demand for specialty coffees, substantial genetic variety of endemic coffee, and the local knowledge of production (Sereke-Brhan, 2010). West (2012) describes how coffee can both symbolize and materialize the nation. I would argue that Ethiopia and Sidama are co-constituted by coffee. A national attempt to trademark the name Sidamo can be seen as a developing nation's trying to use what tools it has available to assert food sovereignty. But it also can be seen as an example of governmentality exerting power through a terroir name based on an ethnic slur. The government was both reacting to the existing cache of Sidamo coffee but, at the same time, was reasserting control over Sidama fortunes by trademarking the Sidamo name. The 2006 decision underscores an economic control of Sidama coffee through government trademark ownership underneath an imperial term used to subjugate the Sidama people. The multi-tiered conflict of the name Sidamo serves as an example of neoliberal neocolonialism guised as protecting an intangible heritage. Kumo (2016) and Hameso (2004) call out the culpability of both political and economic actors in continuing to use the Sidamo appellation for coffee. Sidamo allows the Ethiopian government to maintain that the south is an ethnic mélange and does not deserve separate nationhood status. By claiming the trademark to the coffee Sidamo, the government subtly subverted the Sidama independence movements. While the use of one letter versus another can seem trivial (Sidamo vs Sidama), Sidama leaders have pointed out the abusive nature of the term, and it shows an element of government exertion of control towards the specific coffee regions of Sidama. Using a Sidama appellation could potentially allow farmers to better market their crops – Third Wave value systems prize single lot origins and could negate the larger antiquated imperial term entirely, except for the legal protection that the trademark allows. Name is narrative and narrative is crucial to understanding the connection between place and taste.

So, while Starbucks and the Ethiopian government utilized trademark cases to contest the ownership over the terroir-zone of Sidama, the region has also asserted its territorial legitimacy through the UNESCO ICH framework. Different place-based protections can be used to empower and disempower local populations. In 2015, UNESCO included Sidama lunar new year, Fichee-Chambalaalla, to its ICH list (Csergo, 2018: 455). *Ayyaantto* (Sidama astrologists), wisemen, elders, and clan elders collectively decide on the new year date every year after consulting the movement of the stars and moon (Kumo, 2016: 225). Even though the new year celebrations include dances and clan rallies, it also revolves around celebrating with *borasamee*, buttered and salted *butla* (high quality enset flour). It is notable that the ICH designation for Fichee-Chambalaalla essentially protects a foodway as a major part of the ritual. The ICH designation for Fichee-Chambalaalla became a critical part of the Sidama road to regional independence as the community was able to position itself as legitimated cultural equals to other larger northern populations who held ICH designations for their holidays and UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Sidama are proud that their cultural traditions are recognized by the international community and used place-based designations to further reify their status as a separate entity within Ethiopia's federal ethnic state system. Kumo (2016: 232) states that the ICH status of Fichee-Chambalaalla "will create a climate conducive to nurture this unique cultural asset of the Sidama nation for perpuity."

II. BUNA RESEARCH

Before engaging with the larger study, let's examine the Ethiopian coffee ceremony and academic approaches to the social liquid space. Global coffee habits are changing (partly due to Third Wave values/aesthetics), but for decades Ethiopia was unique among Global South coffee-exporting nations due to its historic robust coffee consumption culture. For a long time, Brazil

and Ethiopia were the only two countries with strong domestic coffee consumption in a coffee-producing nation (Sereke-Brhan, 2010). Domestic consumption often accounts for over half of Ethiopia's production (Kumo, 2016). Ethiopia has a deeply imbricated cultural association with coffee as the land of origin for *Coffea arabica*. The etymology of the word coffee is supposedly derived from the Kaffa region in western Oromia where coffee still grows wild.

The coffee (or *buna* in Amharic) ceremony or *yäbuna mefïlat* (translated as coffee boiling) occurs multiple times a day across the country. Sometimes the buna ceremony is also called *jebena buna* (traditional coffee in Amharic), *yäbuna gïzew* (coffee time in Amharic), or simply *buna*. English translation attaches the word ceremony to the daily coffee habit, which both obscures and elevates *yäbuna mefïlat* from its cultural context. There are certain material and social constants in the liquid space of the *buna* ceremony, but the daily habit is subject to constant revision and attenuation. I've been to elaborate ceremonies that last multiple hours, and I've also sipped a *cini* (small cup) of coffee in minutes at roadside stands. In Sidama, the ceremony occurs 2-3 times a day and can serve as a caffeine boost, a work break, or a snack before dinner. Using a clay *jebena* (clay pitcher) or metal kettle, a wife or daughter brews coffee on embers in the family's thatched lodge. Small *cinis* of coffee are handed out to participants along with a snack like *emulcho* (enset flour flatbread), beans, or roasted corn. The same coffee grounds are used for each of the three rounds of boiled coffee, resulting in a steadily diluted drink each serving. Conversation ebbs and flows, with either respected guests or the man of the household guiding the conversation. A family meal and coffee ceremony are distinctly different, though they might occur right after each other. Passersby, friends, and elders are welcome to stop by for coffee but are potentially not welcome to stay for a meal.

The *buna* ceremony has been studied as an architectural space (Le Roux, 2017), a relational space for the Ethiopian diaspora in the UK (Palmer, 2010), and a space of gendered empowerment (Brinkerhoff, 2011). Little work has been done to examine the *buna* ceremony as a place of expert discernment, which places coffee producers in conversation with Global North tastemakers who use cupping spaces and coffee shops to situate the association between taste and place. In the following sections I will show how the *buna* ceremony served as the locus of my participatory research and ethnography, as well as how the liquid space of the ceremony subverted my expectation of tasting spaces. This introduction into the multispatial contexts of place-taste will serve to ground the stakes involved in producer-consumers engagement with coffee terroir. Through examining the reflexive roles of tastemaking between the Global North and South we can understand how coffee accumulates symbolic value on either side of the supply chain. Folklorists like Lockwood (2012) and Stryker and Schmidt (2020) have also examined how liquids inform social spaces and experiences. Lockwood (2012) breaks down coffee value worlds among immigrant population in the US and shows how socialization hinges upon the presence of coffee. Through her ethnographic research with Finnish-Americans, Lockwood (2012) shows the nested scales of material and symbolic coffee valuations via socialization, immigration, and acclimation. Notably her work contributes to this project by articulating how value systems work within coffee culture and demonstrates how local meaning can run parallel to larger commercial valuations of coffee.

III. SIDAMA PRIMER

The Sidama region is about the size of the Big Island of Hawai'i. The region's borders resemble a trapezoid bounded by Lake Awasa in the north, Lake Abaya in the south, the upper branches of the Loghita River to the east, and the Billate River to the west (Hamer, 1987: 12).

The village of Tukko is in the Aleta Wondo *woreda* (Amharic for district) in the south-central mid highlands. Tukko is technically a *kebele* (Amharic for sub-district) and consists of multiple neighborhoods spread out across forested green hills. All the spread-out houses and hamlets are located within a 5-30 min walk from the village market clearing; the *kebele* offices and a handful of general-good *suks* (Amharic for store) cluster around the sloped open space bounded by a few *zigba* trees (Amharic for East African yellowwood trees). The town and district capital of Tukko's *woreda*, Aleta Wondo, is a moderately large town about 20 km from the main highway that runs from Addis Ababa to Moyale on the Kenyan border. The town sits at a crossroads of major asphalt roads that run to the eastern Sidama highlands, and a southern road heading towards the city of Nagale in the Oromia Region. The village of Tukko lies roughly 3 km from the Aleta Wondo – Nagale paved road and is only accessible via dirt roads and paths traversed on foot, on motorcycles, horse-carts, auto-rickshaws, and trucks.

In our interviews, my collaborators used the Amharic terms for topographic environments to help demarcate the conditions that influence crop cultivation, mainly coffee. In general, the interviews included a mixture of Amharic and Sidaama Afoo phrases due to the hybrid nature of mixed languages in conversation and translation. My usage follows theirs. Tukko lies in the *weyna dega* or mid highlands with rapidly increasing elevation rising to western highlands and a steady descent to savanna plains on the eastern slope of the Rift Valley. Plains or *kola* are too dry and low elevation to grow good coffee. The *dega* or highlands of Sidama are known as particularly fertile and notable terroir-zones. The coffee grown in the *dega*, especially around Bensa-Daye and Arbe Gona, were sometimes referred to as *chaka buna* in interviews. *Chaka buna* (Amharic for forest coffee) can imply that coffee grows wild in uncultivated forest environments or a coffee-dominated agroforestry system. Davis et al. (2020) specify that forest

coffee has the least amount of intervention while semi-forest coffee system utilize natural and cultivated stands of coffee. Tukko's coffee cultivation would fall under classified forest garden coffee and garden coffee specifications according to Davis et al. (2020). Farmers often have multiple plots smaller than 2 ha and grow coffee in varying degrees of mixed agriculture systems with enset and corn. Garden coffee that is closer to a family compound would be more likely to contain mixed use agriculture and disjointed farm-plots would be more likely to focus primarily on growing forest garden coffee. Family compounds often consist of a *kokoro bet* (Amharic for tin house) and *sidaancho mine* (Sidamaa Afoo for large grass-thatched lodges). The *sidaancho mine*, which contains the cooking hearth of the household, often served as the location where householders hosted guests for the coffee ceremony. In addition to the *kokoro bet* and *sidaancho mine*, most households have a home garden directly between their houses as well as a fenced grass area for grazing cows.

Sidama extended families often live clustered together in hamlets, sometimes sharing a larger open field with *sidaancho mine* all facing around the yard. Farmers practice mixed-use agriculture and rely on coffee as their cash crop, in addition to corn, avocado, taro, and enset. *Ensete ventricosum* or the false banana tree is a giant form of banana that produces a nonedible fruit but roots and stems that are fermented and turned into Sidama food-staples (Hamer, 1987: 14) Enset (*weese* in Sidaama Afoo) is a central part of Sidama foodways. Women cook most household food and are primarily in charge of *weese* processing. When preparing for the enset harvest, the woman of the household instructs her husband on how deep and wide to build a pit to ferment and store enset roots (Hamer, 1987: 17). Hamer (1987) recounts pits that were often dug six feet deep, and six by four feet on the sides to contain the remains of forty large plants. I have seen large pits in Sidama gardens, but I've also seen much smaller, shallower pits. When

large enset trees are cut down, women process the plant by removing long strips from the soft inner core of the stem (Hamer, 1987: 16). Women use serrated bovine shoulder-blade bones to shred the stems and roots. They place the mixture in the pit, then cover it with large leaves to ferment from several months to a full year (Hamer, 1987: 17). Once the fermenting period is over, the women wring out the moisture from the root mash and fibrous stems before they knead and then sift the mass into a flour (Hamer, 1987: 18). Various aging and processing interventions can impact the quality and prestige of the food. *Waasa*, the finished foodstuff, can be used to make a dry pancake called *emulcho* or a sour-tasting flour that can be mixed with vegetables and legumes. High quality *waasa* is called *butla*, which is used to make a dish called *borasamee*. *Borasamee* is a highly buttered mixture of *butla* flour served in a specific black clay pot. Women bring *borasamee* to funerals and other special occasions. Locals use enset leaves to grab handfuls of buttered flour out of a communal clay pot. During these communal events, *borasamee* is often served with a tall glass of sour *adoo* (Sidaamu Afoo for milk) with chunks of *weira* wood charcoal. The coffee ceremony in Sidama society usually takes place one to three times a day within the *sidaancho mine*. Most Sidama ceremonies use a metal kettle, a clay or metal roasting pan (*mitad* in Amharic) and small ceramic cups (*cini* in Amharic). Often families will use their own cultivated coffee in the ceremony.

POSITIONALITY AND METHODOLOGY

I lived and worked in Sidama from 2018 – 2020 while I served with the Peace Corps. I was an extension agent specializing in nutritional permagardening, chicken husbandry, and apiary construction. I worked off and on with the local *kebele* bureau of the Ministry of Agriculture. During my initial service, I would accompany other extension agents as they planted project coffee seedlings, administered veterinary services, and distributed seeds throughout the *kebele*. I drew upon both this agricultural positioning and my other farming experiences to initiate conversations with coffee farmers when I returned in 2025. I was able to use contacts and friendships from my Peace Corps service to expedite my research and recruit participants. My connections to Tukko are relational and familial. In this project, coffee served as conversational and, to a lesser degree, commensal medium of exchange that helped limit both researcher and relational bias. Tukko farmers were able to expound on the biocultural role that coffee plays in their lives, and I was able to take on a curious, passive role in the discussions. My personal entanglement was mitigated by foregrounding coffee farmers as embodied experts in interview spaces. Kao (2025) discusses how both baristas and farmers utilize sensory labor to promote quality in the specialty coffee trade and that, even though the forms of labor are mutually constitutive, farmers are often the losers in the tradeoff. I was intrigued how smallholder farmers interact with coffee both as beverage and plant and whether they saw themselves as disenfranchised from the symbolic value of their crops. I was friendly with most of the participants of this research and spoke candidly about my perspective on the problems that Sidama coffee faces in articulating place-taste with equitable recompense. I would often explain the problem area to participants at the beginning of an interview. It was difficult to communicate the stakes of abstract taste narratives and explain my interest and persistence in the topic. My

audio transcriptions are punctuated by guffaws and laughter as jokes were exchanged and my expertise was called into question.

Initially I saw my exposure and knowledge of Tukko as a liability. I thought my position as a neutral observer and researcher would be compromised by the previously established rapport. While I am curious to see more in-depth research into Sidama value creation and taste distinction, I do believe using my contacts was the best use of limited time and funds. I was able to interview more than thirty-two individuals over the course of twenty separate meetings over the ten-day on-site research period. Regardless of whether coffee was served, various members of the community would come and go, sitting in on the meetings and occasionally chiming in from time to time. The coffee ceremony itself is a welcoming social space, but villagers would often treat the interviews, regardless of coffee, as an opportunity to sit and engage. I had initially planned to use the coffee ceremony as a place of conversation and taste distinction. Due to several different factors, I conducted only five interviews during the coffee ceremony. I was served coffee after the interviews on three occasions. When coffee was served, it was almost always accompanied by a snack. I will elaborate on the space of the ceremony in later sections; suffice to say – the interview was not analogous to the ceremony space or occasion. My questions and the presence of a translator rubbed against the convivial norms of the coffee ceremony. While only one quarter of the interviews were conducted over coffee, I attended ceremonies multiple times a day while I stayed in the community over the ten-day period. It is, after all, the primary means of caffeination and socialization. I tallied my daily coffee consumption while in Ethiopia and maxed out at twelve *cinis* of coffee drank over the course of four separate ceremonies.

The methodology of this project drew heavily from anthropology's tradition of fieldwork ethnographies. I used participant observation and embodied tasting to engage with the coffee ceremony as a space of study. I was influenced by Geertz and his successors' articulation of the thick description of an event or tradition. Liberman's (2020) approach to ethnomethodology and coffee tasting was also pivotal to treating coffee as a taste-object. Perullo (2021) and the wider Specialty Coffee Association's (SCA) lexicon helped shape my notions of tasting. I used community contacts and snowball recruitment to facilitate interviews. It was difficult to procure interviews and schedule meetings due to the corn harvest and encroaching Ethiopian New Year. The village gossip chain helped to disseminate my presence in the *kebele* and daily walks around Tukko and Baricho also helped to generate interviews. We held discussions on the roadside, on porches, front lawns, and in living rooms or *sidaancho mines*. I would make rudimentary notes over the course of the interview but quickly found that eye contact and gesticulated engagement helped to mitigate the translator and conceptual barriers. Recording interviews on the Voice Memo app on my personal iPhone helped capture substantial interview data while allowing me to participate fully in discussions. Research Compliance Services at the University of Oregon granted my study (STUDY00001927) an exempt determination. The IRB exemption required that a translated consent script be presented to all research participants. I was able to translate an approved copy of the script using the platform Upwork and the services of an Ethiopian-based translator. The consent script was translated into both Amharic and Sidaamu Afoo. My translator, Barakat Ashenafi, would present the script and the disclaimer before each interview; he emphasized that participation was optional and that names would be anonymized. In this thesis, I use a pseudonym for the village and anonymize individuals in compliance with IRB exemption standards. Interviewees gave verbal consent before each interview took place. The consent

structure is vitally important but also helped to highlight the liminality in social spaces. In some cases, I would be visiting and joking in broken Amharic with villagers, both introducing Barakat and subsequent interview structures. The verbal consent served as a vocal boundary that partly formalized convivial spaces. Over the course of the interviews, I asked participants a standardized series of questions:

a.) Do you see a connection between coffee taste and place/origin?

b.) How would you personally describe coffee place-taste?

c.) What do you think gives specific coffee beans their unique tastes?

Besides those questions, interviews were largely informal and un-structured. Over the course of the twenty interviews, I also developed several questions that helped to break the ice and allowed participants to engage with the subject area. The question that produced the most engagement was: is enset or *buna* the most important plant for the Sidama people? While this inquiry presented itself as an impossible binary, it opened the discussion to the symbolic dimensions of plants in the wider Sidama social world.

SENSORIAL ETHNOGRAPHY

In this ethnography, I will first introduce the place of Tukko before documenting participants' engagement with taste. I will then go on to describe how other factors constitute coffee as a plant, beverage, and social ritual in the Sidama social world. The sense-world section captures how my initial framework encountered researcher-bias problems. I learned that Third Wave valuations of discrete tastes did not fully apply to the coffee ceremony structure, especially due to the ubiquity of salt in coffee. My aspirations of terroir-driven taste evolved as I learned from my Sidama counterparts. I wish I had taken Perullo to heart before returning to Sidama. He stated: "terroir is a question that provokes experience rather than a predetermined answer; it is not the cause, it is a process" (Perullo, 2021: 166). I will elaborate further, but I frequently encountered research participants telling me "if you want to understand Sidama coffee you must understand X." Almaz wisely said "we are too close to taste" and I will demonstrate how a cadre of concepts such as separate foodways, respect, and addiction play a role in understanding the role of coffee in Sidama life.

LAND

Smallholder coffee cultivation in Tukko falls into three general categories: home garden, fragmented agriculture plots, and shared custody coffee groves. Corn, enset, sugar cane, various vegetables, and fruits grow alongside coffee and shade trees in home gardens. The disjointed plots are usually separated from the family compound and located further away from local neighborhoods. I only saw one shared ownership grove during my research period in Tukko. It is my understanding that the system of collectivized ownership dated back to agricultural consolidation during the socialist Derg government. These collective groves are rare in Tukko and most land has been historically owned by families with occasional selling and buying of land

to other community members. Davis et al. (2020) outline the different coffee farming systems in Ethiopia. Using the authors' framework, Tukko's home gardens and smallholder plots fall into forest garden coffee and garden coffee designations (Davis et al., 2020).

Bogale, one of the wealthier farmers interviewed, told me about a new government initiative to reward farmers with more than 2 hectares (ha) with connections and labeling to sell their coffee as single-lot batches. He said: "Nowadays our government [is] empowering our farmers and it's a big chance and opportunity for the farmers." A few farmers interviewed owned more than 2 ha, but they were in the minority in the larger *kebele*. According to Bogale, the government will certify individual farmers with a license to sell their coffee directly to foreign and domestic buyers. Most coffee farmers in Tukko sell their coffee to the local cooperative (*dïrijit* in Amharic) and, since their beans are mixed, their farms' taste of place becomes bundled into a larger micro-regional terroir. Bogale was excited by the prospective of being able to sell his coffee for a higher price, even though he realized that most producers in Tukko did not own more than 2 ha and would be unable to partake in the single-lot program. Balaynesh, another well-off farmer, lamented that her quality coffee was mixed into the *dïrijit* as she believed she could potentially get a higher price if her coffee was sold as a single-lot. Girma complained that the *dïrijit* professionals could hyperbolically buy a new car every three months while the farmers didn't make enough income from their coffee. Bogale had traveled to Addis Ababa in early 2025, accompanying the regional president Desta Ledamo, to provide the prospective of smallholder Sidama farmers to an international conference of coffee merchants. Bogale showed Barakat and I a poster from the conference with pictures of himself in Sidama traditional garb. The terroir-driven government program will allow larger farms to better compete on the market by selling single-lot coffees, but the smaller farmers in Tukko will

continue to have to sell to either the *dïrijit* cooperative or to private washing and drying stations in the region (referred to as the *gïloce* or private enterprises in Amharic).

Interviewees told me that the coffee grown in Tukko was either project *buna* or *ïnat buna* (Amharic for mother). *Ïnat buna* is the native coffee of Sidama and has been breed by farmers to be a productive crop for both market and personal consumption. Project *buna* is a newer bred varietal that I was told was developed at the University of Jimma. The varietals are sponsored by the government and promoted to farmers as smaller, more compact trees that can increase coffee exports. Research collaborators told me that project *buna* has been grown in Tukko since at least the 1970s or 1980s when the Derg regime attempted to increase national coffee exports. I would often hear participants referring to coffee or enset as the backbone of the Sidama people. Gossamo, who shared some party affiliation with the Derg, gestured to his back when quoting Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam: "coffee is the back of man." He went on to add that Colonel Haile Mariam's government introduced the project varietals 10, 11, and 12 to Sidama. The project *buna* varietals were referred to by the Amharic numerals: *asïr* for 10, *asïr-and* for 11, and *asïr-hulet* for 12. I will be depicting the varietals by their Amharic names throughout this paper. Gossamo liked discussing politics and claimed that in Ethiopia, "coffee is government." He compared the good coffee of the Derg (in regard to both taste and livelihood) with the bad coffee of the current republican government. He said that the administration of Meles Zenawi (1991-2012) allowed the rocky Tigray region in the north to become rich off the coffee exports of the southern forested regions. Most research participants agreed that *ïnat buna* was better tasting than the project varietals, but they valued the increased yield of the project coffees. Interestingly, whenever I asked if farmers were growing *ïnat*, they would often immediately say no. But when I probed a little deeper and asked if they grew *ïnat buna* in their home garden or for home

consumption, they would often caveat with a yes. Only one or two farmers claimed to not grow *ïnat buna* at all. I surmised that farmers saw their detached farmland as where they grew their real coffee crop and coffee in the home garden was seen as subsistence. The distinction between varietals was nuanced, with producers valuing the taste of *ïnat buna* while bemoaning its agricultural potential. Project varietals were often described as less delicious, providing no roast-smoke, or containing less oil when roasted as compared to *ïnat buna*. Some were emphatic that they only drank *ïnat*, but qualified that the best coffee went to market. The best coffee did not always mean the best tasting. Sidama participants brought the economic and agricultural benefits of coffee into conversations of taste and importance.

SENSE-WORLD OF THE SIDAMA

It's always too dark in the *sidaancho mine*. Only one door is open, and smoke skids around the enclosed lodge. Cows low in the corner. I am in the house of my community contact and friend Almaz for afternoon coffee. Almaz takes husked coffee and uses mortar and pestle to hammer the silverskin off the beans. A hand-smoothed ax handle acts as pestle. Her thin, strong arms rise with staccato rhythm down into the mortar. Her other hand cups the mortar opening in sync with the ax-handle pounding, the handle always seems poised to crush her hands. Almaz uses a metal plate to sift the exposed bright green beans. Her hands rock back and forth in a seiche that allows her to blow away the silverskin chaff. A dusting of silverskin and husk powder the hardened mud floor. A clay platter heats up over the fire. Spindly coffee branches mottled with lichen feed the flames. In a complete lifecycle, coffee wood roasts the beans and boils the drink.

The beans steam as they roast on the clay platter. Flames lick up the side of the dish.

Almaz perches on a stool sitting alongside the fire pit. She stirs the beans with a metal hook-rod and watches the changing color of the roasting coffee. Quickly, she takes a beaten metal plate and scoops the coffee off the sizzling clay platter. Delicious roasting fumes twine with wood-smoke around the lodge. She places a large charcoal-encrusted teapot on the fire, allowing the beans to cool – sprinkling a few water droplets that instantly sizzle on the brown-black beans. The black-barnacled teapot comes to a boil. Almaz stirs the roasted beans as they cool on the metal plate.

She repeats the uncanny trick with the mortar and pestle as she grinds the coffee. She sifts the grounds into an airtight hand before cupping the precious powder into the teapot. The pot is brought back up to a boil before taken off the fire. Almaz rests the hot teapot at a 45° angle on the mounded clay fire ring – coffee grounds filter out of suspension. She pours the coffee from the cumbersome teapot with practiced ease – her muscle memory makes the feat of pouring from the pot into the small *cini* all the more impressive. She keeps the coffee pour even as she does the trick—starting close to the cup before extending her arm out like drawing a bow – the brown liquid a constant arc from pot to cup.

Coffee is an embodied social reality for the Sidama people. The coffee-concept transcends specific engagement and approach – it is more than plant, crop, beverage, social lubricant, and economic livelihood. Tastemakers in the Global North interact with coffee as vibrant green beans imported from various global sources. These beans are roasted, ground, processed, and then discarded. Coffee as a beverage is an intimate part of our lived reality, but the daily cup and our attendant marketing and taste narratives can capture only part of the wider social world of the plant. In the following section, I lay out several sensorial approaches to coffee that reflect both participants' understanding of coffee and my own embodied observations.

I originally planned to use place-taste as the operative flavor dynamic in interviews. Participants engaged with what made Tukko coffee different from other areas, but they also brought up different approaches to understanding the same cup of coffee. I will look at the taste-descriptors, sweet and salty, as emblematic of the larger role that coffee plays in Sidama society. Sweetness and saltiness disrupt the sensory analysis approach to coffee and help articulate a Sidama understanding of coffee. I then go on to describe smell and sight as indicative of the co-constituted reality that coffee plays in producer-consumers' lives. As embodied workers who also taste and live their own labor, Sidama producer-consumers show a different approach to sensory analysis than the codified systems of tastemaking in the Global North. Smell in particular stands out as an evocative part of the flavor-discernment spectrum that represents a local understanding of place-taste.

I. SWEETNESS

My translator and I encountered this cognitive distinction over the course of our interviews in Tukko *kebele* [township]. Just as coffee is a slippery taste-object in Sidama society, it inhabits a hybrid sensuality that does not align with Third Wave discrete tasting regimes. There are limited words to describe specific tastes in both Amharic and Sidaamu Afoo. *Täfac* and *chomano* are Amharic and Sidaamu Afoo words that respectively both mean sweet, delicious, or good food. They were the most common terms that would come up when interviewees described coffee and place-taste. Sweetness as a descriptor quickly became a problematic but revealing concept over the course of research. Balaynesh's statement illustrates the issue with *chomano*'s meanings:

> Tukko is more tasty, a sweet taste, and they have similar size – the two seeds. The Daye one is big size, as you know, but the [seed] size are different – big and small. They have like concentrated – the sweet is concentrated. The Daye is more concentrated.

Balaynesh demonstrates the producer-consumers' engagement with coffee as a simultaneous plant and beverage. Sweetness of the cherry mucilage naturally elides into the sweetness and lightness of a Tukko cup of coffee. She describes both lower elevation Tukko and highland Bensa Daye as sweet, but the connotation of sweetness inferred that Tukko's place-taste was fruity and saccharine while Daye's sweetness referred to more hearty attributes. Concentration of Daye sweetness can be associated with the strength of coffee's caffeine or with the healthiness of the plant. Bogale also claimed that Tukko coffee tasted sweet because of its elevation as *weyna dega* (mid highland) and contrasted with the neighboring *kebele* of Dongora which he claimed was bitter due to its lowland (*kola*) elevation. Cultural context and mistranslation could explain away these misunderstandings around the simple term, but the continuous use by producer-consumers helped to show a multi-faceted definition of sweetness. Mesfin illustrated this seeming contradiction with his description of Tukko as having a sweeter taste than Bensa Daye, but he used the terms *tänkara* or *wefiram* to describe the larger seed size of Daye's coffee. Interestingly sweetness also implied strength of Tukko's coffee in this interview. Typically, *tänkara* or, to a lesser degree, *wefiram*, can also be used to describe the thickness or potency of coffee. Mesfin's role as both grower and consumer allowed for a natural continuum of plant-beverage to take place in conversation. Any discussion of place-taste was connected to the environmental and agrarian reality of coffee within the Sidama social world. Tukko's place-taste was often described as sweet in relation to other Sidama terroirs.

There is a worthy debate that interviewees' use of *chomano* for both good quality, deliciousness, or sweetness undercuts any larger analysis of sweetness. But participants were also able to verbalize sweetness as an inherent factor in taste distinction beyond the generic use of the term. Almaz corroborated my observation that natural fermentation in the *sidaancho mine*

could cause more fruity, sweet flavors to develop on the coffee. When Teklu said that Tukko *ïnat buna* tasted like *caramelo* (candy), sweetness referred to both the cherry and cup. He went on to claim that coffee grown with fertilizers is dry and has no sweet taste. The Sidama worldview does not see these taste descriptors as separate entities of fruit and beverage because cultivated and consumed coffee exist within a continuum of lived experience. In general, my SCA informed lexicon of coffee descriptors encountered significant language and conceptual barriers.

II. SALT

The ubiquity of salted coffee in the daily ceremonies was the biggest disruption to my sensorial approach and overall research plan. Almost without exception, every *cini* of coffee I drank in Tukko was flavored with salt. I did not remember the constant presence of salt from my time in the Peace Corps and originally thought that I would be able to engage with the plain taste of coffee as a research subject. Abera informed me that financial constraints in the community during August and September resulted in less grounds being used during the ceremony. The thinner, weaker brew would be flavored with salt to hide any off-tastes. Other participants intonated that the household coffee supplies were the lowest right before the autumn coffee harvest, hence the need for salt. The presence of salt was not purely an austerity measure; it is also a wider cultural taste preference. Coffee stands in larger cities throughout Ethiopia will offer sugar or a rue sprig with coffee *cinis,* but salt is often on-hand and not an unexpected request. Multiple participants said that they drank salted coffee growing up, but that they now avoided salt due to hypertension concerns. Tadesse used to drink coffee with salt but prefers plain coffee after being diagnosed with hypertension. Meles said: “In earlier time in the rural area they use different spices like salt, everything used in the coffee ceremonies to improve the taste but nowadays everyone knows the original taste of the coffee.” Interviewees made it clear that the

inclusion of salt was a preference issue and not purely socioeconomic. The *wosincho*, Kolmancho, said: "The peoples just add as they need. Like some peoples' need the salty taste, they add the salt, but coffee only used as a vitamin and everything, like a drug." He also explained that taste and ceremonial distinctions could vary interculturally with Ethiopia:

> "On the north…they not farm coffee but they sell and buy, by buying coffee and drink. But in our country, in our society, we have…coffee in the garden and they drink coffee by adding different things like butter, salt, different things like milk. Different things we add and this may be different from house to house."

These distinctions of personal preference were important caveats in conversations in which I asked Sidama villagers to compare coffee ceremonies among different cultural groups in Ethiopia. Though generalizations were contrasted, there was awareness that cultural institutions were not monoliths and existed with continuums of expression and taste. Even when outlining their personal coffee preference, farmers would defuse the idea of right and wrong ways to drink coffee in ceremony spaces. Tefera B. downplayed taste discretion between plain and salted coffee, saying that it's *cïgir yelem* or "no problem" to drink either way. I believe that in asking questions of preference between varietal, terroir, or additives – participants could engage with how they liked coffee while also expressing that drinking coffee is more than just flavor or pickiness: how someone prepares coffee is not as important as being present to drink coffee with others. Lagesse guided me through the differences in place-taste in Sidama by comparing Yrga Alem and Tukko's growing conditions and tastes. According to him, Tukko is colder than Yrga Alem and has wetter, heavier soil that does not allow it to produce as much coffee. Tukko was also described as having less available land to grow coffee due to mixed use agriculture, whereas Yrga Alem has more *chaka buna* or forest coffee. He said that the two *kebele*s' coffee tasted similar. And when pressed to elucidate how the taste was similar due to the contrasting growing factors, he responded: "It's difficult to differentiate because everyone uses salt." He

demonstrated the innate biocultural knowledge of the plant and beverage while also showing that personal taste could elide terroir distinctions. This circular logic of distinction and diminished taste is useful for understanding the space that coffee represents to producer-consumers: it transcends easy delimitations and binaries. Tariku mentioned that women can make bad coffee taste better by adding salt. He went on to state,

> "The taste is subjective. But I feel it's sweet, the other person may taste, it's not good. It's different, it's subjective. When I come [bring] bad coffee to house and she make better by adding some ingredients like salt etc…they have no big difference."

Tariku responded to my probing of discrete differences in taste with a slight exasperation. In his statement he shows that he understands and recognizes that taste distinctions exist, but that by focusing on the subjective some larger meaning is being missed. When Tariku said, "they have no big difference," he was downplaying the sensorial stakes of the coffee encounter. He recognized his personal taste and his expertise in engaging with growing and tasting his labor, while also noting that hyper-fixation on the individual taste was missing the point of coffee. Whether good or bad, salty or plain, coffee was still available allowing both daily ritual and social ceremony.

I chatted with six men while they were tending their cows on the village green, I'll refer to them as the group of cowherders throughout the ethnography. They agreed that there is "no big difference" between salted and plain coffee, but they said that they prefer salt in their coffees. On another occasion, Girma stated that the addition of salt was preferential but also said, "If somebody uses salt, it don't taste the coffee." He went on to say that the varietals *asïr*, *asïr-hulet*, and *ïnat buna* all taste the same when salt was added. The preparation method of daily coffee ceremonies should be mentioned in conversation with preferential taste. Coffee stands in Ethiopian towns and cities will have sugar, rue sprigs, and occasional salt to add to your coffee

whereas the communal brewing of daily ceremony coffee does not allow for individuated tastes. Coffee is made with a single vessel, and any additives are added to the common pot. So, when a man says he does not prefer to have salt in his coffee, he is really claiming that his wife, daughter, or *saritanya* (Amharic for helper) does not add salt to the common pot. Unlike at commercial coffee stands, it is less likely that guests or family-members will add individual sugar or salt to their *cinis* while attending a coffee ceremony. Individual preferences may exist but have communal ramifications in their relation to how the common coffee is brewed and whether it is spiced. For example, after our interview was complete, Barakat and I drank coffee with Tefera B. Out of courtesy or curiosity based on our questions, Barakat asked if salt in the coffee was fine for me, and I demurred as I like the plain taste of coffee. When translated back to the woman of the house she gave a little groan. The coffee was already brewed, which made any question of individual taste superfluous or unable to be accommodated. I quickly apologized once I realized my faux paus and said that the brewed coffee was "*cigir yelam*" (no problem) the way it was prepared. Tefera's wife served us strong, salted coffee with milk from her thermos. Unlike our highly specific Starbucks orders, communal ceremony coffee is not made to order.

III. SMELL

As I've previously noted, my initial research plan was to use the coffee ceremony space as a means of discussing place-taste and coffee distinction. But, for several different reasons, only a third of the interviews consisted of a coffee ceremony. The use of a translator and snowball requirement meant that interviews were more formal than my interactions as a Peace Corps volunteer when I could hang out without an explicit agenda. Interestingly, the presence of a translator impeded some of the rapport and loquaciousness of villager interaction. The research period was also right before the Ethiopian New Year celebration, which meant that many

villagers were busy with holiday preparations, social obligations, and prayer services. Even with these limitations, I found that the space of the coffee ceremony influenced participants' reflections and engagement with coffee-as-beverage.

Smell was reflected in discussions of taste in a way that surprised me. In the Global North, we are well acquainted with the delicious smells of coffee brewing on our stoves or the wafts of roasted coffee in cafes. But I would argue that average Western consumers primarily engage with coffee through oral taste; in contrast, the coffee ceremony provides a distinct olfactory engagement with the beverage. Participants of a coffee ceremony are inundated in roast-smoke from open fires or braziers in confined indoor spaces. In many parts of Ethiopia, frankincense and other incenses are added to the coals creating a heady aromatic experience within the ceremony space. Certain Sidama deride the inclusion of incense with coffee, but they do appreciate juniper branches and cones as a flammable aromatic. The *wosincho* or elder, Bulkaka, noted that "using *ïtan* [frankincense] in Amhara is witchcraft." He went on to say that he liked using juniper as an incense and appreciated its use outside of the coffee ceremony. Almaz noted that the smell of coffee wood burning was a pleasant aroma while making coffee. Interview participants repeated claims that they could smell distinct attributes of coffee when it was roasting. Often discussion of taste differences between Sidama *kebele*s included anecdotes concerning the oil production of roasting coffee and differences in smell. Mesfin claimed that Tukko coffee "gives more smell" than Bensa Daye coffee. He noted that when women roast coffee passersby can smell on the wind "a lot of smells." Tefera B. used smell to illustrate how to navigate hospitality culture,

> "*Mannu mine no* can be a lie, but when I smell good coffee – it's real…No smell, I know they are lying… I smell good coffee when people's *mannu mine no*…they are real and I can go…but when they are not real, they are lying. I don't go to them."

The phrase *mannu mine no* serves as an invitation into someone's house with the intonation to come drink coffee. It's a ubiquitous courtesy, but the invitation to drink coffee is a formality and not necessarily an honest indication of desire to host or even availability of coffee. I was familiar with this hospitable lie but found it particularly vexing as I tried to source interviews and nail down appointments in the summer of 2025. Lagesse claimed he could smell the difference in roasting project coffee and *ïnat* coffee from the road. This prompted me to ask: "Are you a *kimsir* [coffee cupper] because you can tell by smell?" He responded "yes" showing some acceptance of embodied expertise which other farmers rejected. Tariku claimed to both know his land and his coffee while also demurring about his expertise: "I am a farmer not a specialist."

Smell was intertwined with farmers' understandings of preferred taste and quality. The fact that the *asïr* and *asïr-hulet* project varietals did not "give oil" when roasting showed they were less delicious to drink. Multiple interviewees claimed that the *ïnat buna* varietal "gave oil" when roasting as compared to project varietals. The daily coffee ceremonies allowed participants to witness the sweating of different varietal beans and note the resulting taste and smell, much like Third Wave tastemakers noting the roast and flavors in a cup. Mesfin and other farmers claimed that they could smell whether a roasting coffee was grown with fertilizer or compost. Mesfin went on to claim that the cultivation style rather than varietal determined the smell of the roast-smoke. If a farmer used compost apparently the project and *ïnat* coffees would both smell good. Tefera B. noted that his sense of taste was better than his sense of smell, but he also went on to add, "I can differentiate by smell [whether] they use compost or not, [whether] it's *ïnat* or *asïr*. I can differentiate by smell." Tadesse agreed that compost coffees smelled good; "The difference in Tukko, they only use composts, they don't use fertilizer. Because of this,

when we roast the coffee – the smell…goes to Dobi [a neighboring *kebele*]." He further outlined how the material nature of roasting coffee can also impact the aromatic properties:

> In the earlier time, our society used *chekla mitad* [clay roasting platter] but nowadays they use metal ones. When the *chekla* one gives, when roasting the coffee, it gives oil. But the *bïrt mitad* [metal roasting platter] is not good. The iron is not good [for] the oil. And the only difference is when using *madaberiya* [fertilizer] coffee, but they don't give oil in nature.

Even though men were not responsible for the preparation of coffee, they had insight into roasting and brought their farming insight into tasting spaces. The *wosincho* Kolchamo reflected on the change in Tukko's coffee taste:

> The taste is different. In the earlier time, when the girls is roasting, it gives oil. The taste is best, but nowadays – some changes. The cause is when, some years later, they use fertilizers. And that fertilizers gives a taste such that – it's not good, not as much as the earlier days. But nowadays they use compost. The compost one is good.

IV. SIGHT

When I asked Teklu how he think taste develops in Tukko coffee, he responded that the main difference in taste creation was the coffee collection method. Teklu used color to break down how to best harvest coffee. He said that unripe or green coffee cherries will turn black during processing and can pollute a batch of processed beans with off flavors. He also pointed out that certain coffee diseases can turn cherries red or yellow, which can confuse harvesters looking for red cherries. These false ripe cherries contain no seeds. The Tukko producer-consumers must gauge the color of the coffee to ensure that their crops are economically viable, untainted, and suitably delicious. Teklu said that coffee harvesters look for the red cherries to shine before they harvest them. The distinction between red coffee cherries is vital as coffee farmers will do multiple passes through the groves during harvest season. By selecting only red cherries with a shine, leaving other duller red cherries on the tree, farmers can discern when the fruit is at the peak of ripeness.

Tefera B. welcomed us into his *kokoro bet*. With our legs spread attempting to avoid the corn which covered the floor, we stepped down into the living room. Settling into the worn couch we could see the mounds of cobs piled everywhere. Couch, chairs, and glass-topped coffee tables were islands in a sea of cobs. The corn still needed to have their shucks tied to dry over the house's exposed beams. Tefera took a break from tying corn to chat with us. His legs crossed and feet submerged in the unstable mass of corn. Staccato rain beat on the tin roof, causing us to raise our voices to hear one another. Our interview was wrapping up when we were interrupted for coffee. There was a tangible shift in social energy as the semi-organized interview gave way to casual conversation. In a narrow area free from corn, Tefera's wife perched on a stool while she poured the coffee from a thermos into *cinis*; a plastic *rakabot* served as a service platter as she washed the *cinis* in a small amount of water between the three traditional servings. Her coffee was mixed with milk and salt. It was hearty and warming to drink.

The corn harvest was almost over when I returned to Sidama. I came to Tukko at the end of *Kiremt* or the winter rainy season. The roads and trails were slick suggestions of paths and my boots became rafts of tacky red mud. Barakat and I played hopscotch along the road trying to avoid puddles. The late rainy season proved to be a difficult research period. Interviews and shared coffee ceremonies were difficult to schedule consistently due to the coinciding corn harvest and Ethiopian New Year (September 11, 2025). Villagers were busy and time was short to answer questions about taste and meaning. Like so many elements of this research, I found that I no sooner would I engage with coffee concepts than I would be redirected in a seemingly tangential direction. The modality quickly became, "if we are going to talk about coffee we need to talk about X." The social reality of coffee in the Sidama worldview necessitated engaging with

the wider picture of the land and cultural foodways. Ironically my focus on discussing taste as a discrete entity could get in the way of the imbricated terroir of Sidama.

The reality of coffee in Sidama requires that this mélange of strange bedfellows is examined together. Thus, this section will focus on both agriculture and the coffee ceremony. I will examine the biocultural role of coffee-based agriculture and coffee-based socialization play in Sidama daily life. The theories of Tsing and Mintz, which explore the embedded and embodied contexts of fetishized foodways, influence my approach to the biocultural. This approach is based on the concept of foodways and the reciprocal relationship between the farmed land and shared table. When we "follow the thing" in food studies or larger social sciences, we can sometimes forget the other objects and circumstances that also clutter the dining table. I hope to show how particular foods also affect the lived reality of Sidama coffee, as well as how ideas of respect influence the social space of the coffee ceremony.

My background in working on agriculture international development helped me to engage with farmers about the local growing coffee conditions and practices. I knew that cultural barriers and trilingual translation could impede direct engagement with symbolic value and terroir concepts. I also realized that research participants were busy, and I wanted to use my limited interview time slots as effectively as possible. My agricultural background and the previously established rapport from my Peace Corps service allowed me to initiate conversations that teased at the association between place and taste. Lots of my fieldnotes contain agriculture anecdotes about coffee varietals, best cultivation practices, and how to prevent disease from impacting coffee harvests. Inhabiting this familiar space reestablished the flow of conversation as it mimicked meetings I had with farmers from 2018-2020. Using this dynamic I was able to inquire and listen to farmers' ideas regarding the creation of place-based taste. As I listen back to

my interview records, I'm struck by the joviality of the encounters. I believe the joking dynamic comes from both my personal awkward friendliness and a general conviviality that occurs in Sidama socialization. Also, my earlier position as an educated ignoramus during my time in the Peace Corps shaped the interview spaces where questions, jokes, ribbing, and exasperated explanations all held equal space. My research positionality may be called into question, but the rapport served to facilitate patience and engagement with more abstract concepts. The enset versus coffee question became a way to discuss the symbolic role that plant-based foodways play in Sidama society.

I. ENSET

I quickly discovered that I couldn't isolate coffee's cultural role in the larger society without discussing enset. Questions of symbolic worth or agricultural livelihood would often come back to enset, reflecting both the Sidama association to place-based environment and the direct reality of growing coffee in mixed-use agriculture plots. Coffee was only one part of the Sidama agricultural and culinary mélange; enset, corn, and milk were attendant qualifiers when we discussed coffee. For example, when I would ask interviewees about how they could smell the difference between coffee roast-smoke, they would point out that they appreciate the smell and taste of coffee grown with *composto* (compost). The insinuation was that coffee exposed to fertilizers had either no roast-smoke smell, which was considered bad, or the taste was not as pleasant as non-fertilized coffee. The use of fertilizer is directly linked to Sidama farmers' growing corn for the marketplace. Teklu mentioned that the *weyna dega kebele*s like Tukko often use DAP (diammonium phosphate) or urea fertilizers on their mixed-use plots, and that their coffee is often indirectly exposed to fertilizer runoff. He contrasted Tukko's coffee with highland areas of Sidama that can grow coffee without fertilizers because they plant single-use coffee

groves or use *chaka buna* (forest coffee). Just as a conversation about coffee roast-smoke became attached to using corn, inquiries into societal value of plants quickly became a conversation about enset. I asked almost every participant whether they thought enset or coffee was the most important plant for the Sidama society. I would inevitably get small groans or inhalations at the question. Participants would exclaim that it was an impossible question. It became clear that villagers saw both plants as inextricably connected to their reality and conception of symbolic worth. And while this ranked hierarchy of importance might have been artificial, the question helped to tease apart the role both plants play in the larger society. Tadesse put it well: "For Sidama society – corn is temporary. They grow sometimes and they don't grow long times. It's same for our daily conceptions on these. But coffee and enset is our father and mother, so we don't live without them."

Bulkaka the elder acknowledged the importance of both plants but claimed that coffee was the most important. He outlined that enset was just for the family and coffee was for everyone. His implication was that the enset foodway provided sustenance whereas coffee provided socialization and economic livelihood. Ashenafi and the group of cowherders asserted that enset was more important than coffee:

> Coffee is for three months only but… enset is for every year and for our life… the sheeps use enset, the man use enset. When he passed away…for the *luxxo* (Sidaamu Afoo for funeral) ceremony we use that [enset]. It is essential.

And when asked to elaborate on the role of coffee in Sidama society, the group of men said that "It's our culture, we prioritize enset but the second one is coffee, it's part of our life. When someone [comes] to eat, they come in and drink coffee. Not come in and eat some lunch." Both enset and coffee are essential to the cultural rhythms of life. In their statement coffee, not food, provided the medium of daily casual socialization. The group of men explained that funerals and

certain types of socialization are predicated on the presence of enset-based foods (in this case *borasamee*) or coffee respectively. The cowherders went on to reiterate: "The number one is enset, and second is coffee, and third the cattle. It is our backbone and we breathe from those things. And second to God, we can worship this." This seemingly inane question enabled me to tease apart the foundational agricultural value-systems of the region. Tafasay echoed the cowherders: "In Sidama's culture, in addition to income generation, the coffee gives as welcoming of peoples. Just like '*amo*, *buna agatto'* (Sidaamu Afoo for "come, drink coffee"), not 'come to eat lunch.' It's one culture." But he still saw enset's role as a sustaining foodway as more important.

Multiple participants would echo these claims of symbolic attachment to coffee and enset. Tefera B. said "The coffee promotes our Sidama society. Without *buna*, no Sidama." But then when I asked him the enset vs coffee question he expressed incredulity and said with humorous exasperation that enset was the most important. He explained it saying, "Without food, I can't drink *buna*." Sustenance and enjoyment create a causality dilemma in which both crops facilitate cultural lifeways. Akelaylu and his father Kolchamo also agreed that enset was more important than coffee, claiming that it was a lifesaver. Regarding the comparison between the two, they said:

> *Weese* (enset) first for life. But economically, coffee is important because we choose houses and we buy clothes, different things. Without coffee, we [can] not pay the tax of the government and different things. It's important, but for life – it's *weese*.

My interview participants were overwhelmingly male. When I asked Balaynesh the enset vs. coffee question, she responded "as women [sic] I prefer enset." The gender dynamics of preferential companion crops did not skew along bifurcated cultivation of crops. Typically, in Sidama, men are responsible for the cash crops, such as coffee and corn, while women process

enset into *waasa* and *butla*. Balaynesh positioned her response as a natural assumption based on her womanhood. She stated that enset was the more symbolically important plant and that coffee was the more materially consequential. Housing, clothing, and aspirations are linked to the taste and quality of the coffee in that it facilitates the purchasing of material possessions. She mentioned that "we wait for harvest to build"; the livelihood of coffee anchors economic resilience. The connotations of a livelihood and lifeforce came up throughout this imposed either-or question. Interviewees claimed both crops to be a life source. Even though Lagesse said that enset was more important than coffee, he also insisted that with "no *buna* in Sidama, there is no life."

These dramatic declarations of life-sustaining plants and seeming contradiction between claims elucidate the interwoven nature of cultural companion crops. Tadesse explained that the *weyna dega* elevation and environment was better suited for enset cultivation. He said that Tukko's "wet soil needs enset" and that coffee grown in the same soil flowers only once. Tadesse's claim of only one harvest season in Tukko was contradicted by other farmers who claimed that the flowerings can differ from year to year. Beyond just cultural and culinary sustenance, the condition of place facilitates the cultivation of enset. The land helps to define what can be grown in a place and the symbolic attachments that can manifest out of that connection.

MILK

The presence and hospitality of *adoo* (Sidaamu Afoo for milk) helped me understand subtle differences in regional beverage valuation. I was staying with friends while I was in Tukko, sharing most breakfasts and dinners with the family of Almaz and Tefera S. I would leave the family compound in the mid-morning after the first coffee ceremony of the day and the

subsequent breakfast. Almaz would always check in with me when I returned in the early evening: did I eat during the day and did I have coffee? It was assumed that that I would drink coffee throughout the day based on the nature of the research, my status as a returned guest, and the social nature of the coffee ceremony. Coffee was a given, but Almaz would always be curious if other households offered me milk while out on my interviews. The group of cowherders commented on the role of cows and milk in Sidama society: "the number one is enset, and the second is coffee, and the third the cattle…second to God, we can worship this." Small humped dairy cows of the Zebu or Sanga breeds are status-symbols and economic livelihoods for Sidama families. The cows often live in the families' compound lawn and eat an assorted variety of corn stalks, enset fronds, and other vegetive matter. Participants would remark that enset was the most symbolically important plant due partly to its ability to feed both humans and cattle. Milk is precious because families often only own one to two cows, meaning that for much of the year the cow will not be producing milk if its pregnant. Fermenting sacks of coffee are usually present in a family's *sidaancho mine*, but milk is rare. From both my previous experience living in Tukko and the research period in 2025, I gathered that Almaz's question regarding milk was an inquiry into household's wealth and livelihood. Healthy, nursing cows are demonstrative of the income of a family. She would knowingly ask if Balaynesh or Bogale had milk to offer, based on assumptions of their relative wealth in the community. Other participants were occasionally also interested in who in the community had milk to offer me. Hosts offered milk mostly with meals and occasionally during the coffee ceremony. The Sidama, like most Ethiopian foodways, often eat off the same plate. Like food, hosts would offer coffee to everyone present, but milk intruded on the shared nature of consumption. Because of the finite amount of milk, usually I or my translator would be offered milk and no other members of a ceremony or meal. The women of

the house would present *adoo* in a long slender glass and the expectation was to drink the brimming beverage in one go. As an anecdote, it seems like a proffered water glass also bears an expectation to be drank all at once. Guests drink the liquids quickly and hand the tall glasses back to the hosts. *Adoo* is a slightly sour room temperature milk that has started to coagulate and contains chunks of charred *weira* wood. Women refire a large chunk of *weira* (possibly the East African Olive tree) and put the freshly charred piece of wood into a large *mindancho* of milk. Resting the *midancho* on a dried enset fibrous mat, the women of the house will rock the vessel back and forth vigorously. The *adoo* partly churns through this process developing a thicker consistency and contains specks of *weira* charcoal. Participants said *weira* helps flavor the milk and *weira* trees around Tukko bear the scars of hunks that are carved out of the trunks. In 2018-2020 and again in 2025, I felt awkward accepting the gift of an overfilling glass of milk as it was such a rich and generous gift. Unlike shared meals or the *buna* ceremony, I felt singled out as a guest whenever I was offered *adoo*. The hosts would usually watch expectantly while I chugged a glass of milk and smile. I remember one meal where I was stuffed with dry *waasa* and expected to chug two glasses of milk. Even though I was full of sour *waasa* and soured milk, it was clear that it would be bad manners to leave the glass unfinished. Reflecting on the shared liquid spaces of the Sidama it's telling that hosts freely share coffee and present milk in a more individual and singular fashion. Milk was also added to coffee on two occasions in Tukko. Beno served a delicious milky coffee with ground ginger which she called a *machiyato* (Amharic for macchiato). Another time, Tefera B.'s wife made a strong salty coffee with milk. These were special occasions and stood out from the many salted *cini*s I drank. The group cowherders said that "All of Ethiopia, the same coffee ceremony, but around Daye they use coffee as *machiyato*." They clarified that the milk is put in the kettle during the ceremony and agreed that the addition

of milk is tasty. The inclusion of milk in the *buna* ceremony differs from the understanding of espresso-based coffees that can be found in Ethiopia's larger towns and cities. Milk remains a noteworthy beverage to the community but also served as an element of personal household taste in the *buna* ceremony much like salt.

CEREMONY

The slightly abrasive question of enset vs. coffee opened more conceptual space within interviews. When asked about the Sidama cultural association with coffee, Tafasay replied, "For Sidama people the coffee is to solve their differences and misunderstandings – different things come together and drink the coffee and solve their problems. It's our social life, it's part of our social life." Even while inhabiting farmer spaces and asking agricultural questions, I found that with a little probing, producer-consumers articulated how the plant, beverage, and custom of coffee played a multitudinous role in daily life. In addition to the plant representing economic livelihood and the beverage embodying socialization, we were able to engage with concepts of addiction, respect, and communication.

I. ADDICTION

Lagesse claimed that the cultural context of coffee was hospitality, income, and addiction. *Süs* or addiction came up a few times in our discussions. I remember that I used to joke about my caffeine habit when I lived in the area from 2018-2020. My use of the Amharic word *süs* to describe my morning cravings would be met with smirks and side-eyes. In general, my language skills were a constant source of amusement; *süs* was usually used to describe more serious forms of addiction like alcoholism or khat-consumption. It made conceptual sense if not grammatical sense. Caffeine addiction is often an addendum to documenting or engaging with coffee studies: we focus on ritual, performance, or taste while chemical dependency is seen as tangential to

larger food-centric studies of coffee. When I returned to Sidama in 2025, I found it easier to discuss caffeine chemical dependency in relationship to changing health consciousness or translator-facilitated communication. Girma described the local taste: “Tukko’s taste is like alcohol, it makes like a drunk man…Like it’s strong, when the best girls boils best coffee: the first, second, third cup if you drink, it’s so strong like alcohol.” Girma also said he couldn’t remember that last time he didn’t drink coffee.

One afternoon, Tefera S. was immobilized with headaches after attending an early morning funeral in a neighboring town. Almaz, his wife, and Tefera S. had left early to make the commute, and she was unable to make the morning coffee. Almaz and other wives brought the traditional *borasamee* dish to the mourning household. *Borasamee* is a dish made from high quality enset root and clarified butter that is usually consumed only at celebrations, holidays, and funerals. While there was plenty of *borasamee* at this specific funeral there was no coffee to drink for Tefera S. Women could bring clay containers of *borasamee* to the funeral but would not bring thermoses of coffee. Due to coffee’s confinement to the roasting and brewing home hearths, there is less of a transportable role for coffee to play in Sidama foodways. Coffee operates as a home-based caffeination ritual, so especially during a funeral it would make sense that the woman of the house would be unable to provide coffee for all the mourners. Tefera S.’s immobilizing afternoon headaches show the disconnect between space-bound gustatory experiences and a more Western approach to coffee as easily accessible fuel. Other participants pushed back against the insinuation that they were chemically dependent on coffee. Tadesse said “if I need, I drink, but no coffee? No problem.” He said that if he had no coffee he would not suffer from any headaches. Contrasting Bensa and Tukko, Balaynesh said that she could drink

Tukko coffee all day, but Bensa beans would cause her to be too stimulated and have a stomachache.

II. RESPECT

Respect and care came up repeatedly in our discussions. Similar to the enset versus coffee questions, I tried to create comparisons between the Sidama coffee ceremonies and more mainstream Ethiopian coffee culture, which is heavily influenced by northern cultures like the Amhara and Tigray. While it replicates an unnecessary either-or modality on culinary and cultural distinctions, the question format allowed me to engage within the nebulous space of the coffee ceremony. The perception of ceremony is an outsider-biased perspective on a daily social norm that includes both customary and ritual elements. The ceremony is and is not a ceremony; labeling and dissection of culinary norms can heighten elements based on cultural abstraction. But by highlighting the differences between northern Ethiopian and Sidama ceremonies, participants played with distinctions within the social space. Meles and Barassa said "we farm the coffee, but they [northern Ethiopians] give big respect to the coffee." Interviewees discussed how the north was too mountainous and dry to grow coffee, so scarcity made coffee more valued. Meles went on to comment on northern ceremonies; "their ceremony is beautiful… [they] give more focused and concentrated coffee." Focus can mean that they add more stereotypical elements to the ceremony like incense, the *rakabot*, cut grass, etc. And in this case, concentration literally meant the grounds to water ratio, as he added "Sidama dilute coffee because they have bigger families and neighbors – so they add water." Gabre Mariam and his wife preferred coffee over enset when prompted, though they were audibly dismayed and amused at the question. Gabre Mariam said:

> I love and respect coffee…For Sidama society, coffee is backbone, the only income source is coffee, because of that I will give big respect for crops and I think I can prefer to handle the coffee and I love that.

He went on to say that "coffee is our breath…we give it big respect and it's a priority for our society." The refrain 'big respect' came up multiple times throughout the interviews. When 'big respect' was used for northern ceremonies, it meant that the ceremony space was more ornate than Sidama spaces. And when respect was brought up for the Sidama, it showed the agricultural-social-culinary continuum that the coffee-concept holds in lived reality. Girma contrasted contextual respect by first claiming that northern cultures had 'big respect' for coffee:

> In this area we have a lot of coffees, because of this we drink many times of day. But in the north, they have no coffee, but they bought coffee from the market and they give big respect because they have a small amount of coffee. They drink 1-2 times a day.

He went on to say that "they [the Sidama] don't give big respect" to coffee because they grow it and have no issue sourcing the beans." Barakat the translator pointed to a poster in Girma's house to illustrate the mainstream coffee ceremony influenced by northern cultures that we were trying to describe. The picture on the poster was like the types you see everywhere across Ethiopia in stores, bars, barbershops, and coffeehouses. The posters often have photos of women in traditional garb (usually Amhara or Tigray) pouring coffee from *jebena*s into *cinis*, and surrounded by ceremonial materials like popped popcorn, fresh cut grass, and a *rakabot* serving dais. Girma commented that "I don't prefer that one" regarding which type of coffee ceremony he enjoyed. He stated "we can use the oldest state of the coffee ceremony" showing that while Sidama may not give "big respect" to coffee due to growing the crop, the proximity and ubiquity of coffee allow them to engage with coffee in differently intimate ways than northern ceremonies. Lagesse stated, "Our culture and the north are different…they are good on the coffee

ceremonies especially in Amhara…our coffee ceremony is not good as the north." Goodness and respect seemed to stem from the pomp and circumstance attached to the ceremony.

The material conditions of the ceremony were one of the biggest differences between Sidama and normative Ethiopian coffee ceremonies. Lagesse said Amhara ceremonies often include incense, *kasar* (grass mat), *kitama* (fresh cut grass), *rakabot* (coffee stand), and a *jebena*. According to Lagesse the Sidama mostly used thermoses instead of *jebena*s during the ceremony, but he claimed the *jebena*-brewed coffee tasted better than kettle-brewed coffee. Most participants stated that thermoses or kettles are used daily to brew coffee, even though they preferred the taste of *jebena*s. It seemed that the "big respect" of mainstream ceremonies was linked to the use of *jebena*, not only for the aesthetics of ceremony but for the comparably better taste. Lagesse said that his wife only uses a *jebena* on holidays like New Year, Christmas, Easter, and Fichee-Chambalaalla. Of the dozens of people I interviewed, only Tafasay said that his wife used a *jebena* daily to brew coffee, in addition to a clay *mitad* due to the better taste. Interestingly Almaz said that her fifteen-year-old kettle was now like a *jebena* due to the seasoning of carbonized buildup on the outside of the kettle. She used the term *wefiram* to describe the strong, durable properties of the vessel. Girma stated that he preferred the local ceremony because he was drinking his own coffee, prompting the translator to comment that he was biased.

DISCUSSION

While coffee serves as the major cash-crop of Sidama I quickly discovered that the cultural association of coffee was layered within other value systems and connotations, to the degree that talking about coffee by itself within the Sidama society proved too often be an unproductive line of reasoning. You could not talk about the coffee agriculture practices without talking about corn or enset. Discussing the materiality of the beverage could turn into a discussion about hospitality and milk. In many ways my ethnographic research could fall into an oft-repeated paradigm in which an enthusiastic grad student attempts to pursue an exciting academic topic that has limited applicability or buy-in from a foreign population. Limitations and positionality aside, I believe the dialectic exchange about terroir and symbolic meaning with Sidama producer-consumers help to articulate local understanding of place-taste. My approach to coffee place-taste as a discrete object was proven wrong, but in the dissonance the research helps to portray coffee as a medium. The takeaways from this fieldwork can help to articulate the networks of meaning and taste that link place to coffee outside of empirical devices and Third Wave value systems. Perullo (2021) can serve as a useful guide to future understandings of coffee's truth-in-cup value in Third Wave settings while West (2012) and Fischer (2022) have demonstrated producers' valuations of coffee place-taste. Fischer (2022) outlines how Mayan farmers are cut off from urban Guatemalan tastemakers and the larger Third Wave taste regimes that they cater to. In similar ways, Sidama producers are also symbolically divorced from their exported crops. But Ethiopia's endogenous ceremony and embodied tasting history also serves to position Sidama producers as fellow travelers in an extractive capitalist system while not sharing the colonial coffee history of Guatemala (Fischer, 2022) or Papua New Guinea (West, 2012).

This research was originally biased to assume that local producer knowledge bases would unset Third Wave values, but reflexive ethnography has shown a continuum of shifting value along the coffee supply chain. Just as baristas and roasters materially change coffee and reify conceptions of the plant-beverage-continuum, so do producers. There are multiple ways of knowing the same coffee and in those varied approaches we come to see coffee more as a medium of exchange than a discrete, codified taste-object. Terroir helps to articulate both the fuzziness of this continuum of embodied taste, while also giving these concepts real-world cultural and economic resonance.

The Sidama association with coffee demonstrates the troubled nature of origin claims to terroir flavors, as well as demonstrating that the purity of sought flavors is complicated despite the best sourcing programs and terroir narratives. In this section I will expand on these dialogues of troubled terroir, liquid spaces, coffee-as-medium, flavor regimes; I will also argue that coffee should be perceived as a continuously adulterated substance. The takeaways from this research are still coalescing, but I hope to show that by the fixed assumptions of place and taste that are brought into food spaces can distort the terroir relationship. Terroir is a functional bad term for engaging with the people, place, product continuum that shape global foodways. Like many of the research participants told me: "If you want to talk about coffee you need to talk about X first."

I. TROUBLED TERROIR

Producer-consumers' interaction with terroir was not a direct analog with the embodied expertise of coffee industry tastemakers. The villagers of Tukko demonstrated a producer-consumer knowledge base that troubles the assumptions of tastemaking within the coffee supply chain. As coffee farmers they bring a different perspective of embodied tasting than Third Wave tasters through their daily connection with the plant and foodway of place-based coffee. This

research found that producer-consumers engage in discernment of taste and quality in their personal consumption of coffee. Farmers would say repeatedly they export the project varietals of *asïr* and *asïr-hulet* arabica and kept the *ïnat buna* for themselves. This demonstrated a value trade-off when it came to viewing coffee as a companion crop and as a tasted beverage. Project varietals took up less space in gardens and produced higher cherry yields, allowing the farmers to send more coffee to the *dïrijit*. On the other hand, *ïnat buna* was seen as old-fashioned with its large tree size that took up too much room in garden patches, grew too high, and produced too little. Hardly anyone grew full stands of *ïnat buna*, but when I asked about which varietal tasted the best, almost every participant listed *ïnat* as producing the most delicious coffee. Farmers would grow project varietals for export in their larger gardens while keeping some *ïnat buna* in their household adjacent plots. So, while Third Wave coffee tasters extol the unique place tastes of Sidama and use terroir to make land of origin claims, they are ingesting a co-opted plant that is a manufactured varietal grown within the last 50 years. Sidama producers are drinking the original variety that arguably has more historic and symbolic resonance for place-taste. And even while they enjoy *ïnat buna* and its taste, most farmers lamented its poor agricultural performance in relation to the project varietals. *Ïnat buna* demonstrates the complicated value system attached to place-taste: old-fashioned, unproductive, but delicious.

II. COFFEE-AS-MEDIUM

The coffee ceremony also acted as a similar space of reification to other coffee-tasting spaces. Whereas coffee cuppers use lexicons and embodied knowledge to attribute value to coffee, producer-consumers viewed coffee in relational terms that facilitated communal connection and sustenance. Liberman (2022) documents how professional coffee tasters in the Global North treat cupping as an individual process of knowledge (and value) creation. For the

Sidama the worth of their coffee lay in the socialization that it provides. Coffee ceremonies occur every day without fail; they are a constant in the social milieu of the Sidama. So much so, that even trying to tease apart greater meaning and symbols with participants encountered some resistance. Coffee is an intensely normal occupation and activity for Sidama and my efforts to essentialize coffee often fell flat. Again, the beverage-plant continuum is so interwoven and omnipresent in Sidama social worlds that separation and distinction of patterns did not come easily to participants. I was treating coffee as an independent object whereas the Sidama say it as a normal layered constant within their daily lives. The dissonance between fetishized exotic commodities and intensely normal, almost boring companion crops can show the value-added nature of coffee. Kao (2026: 15) asserts that "taste operates as a labour regime and a transnational coordination device, a system that classifies and produces, symbolizes and governs, and reflects inequality, as well as organising and stabilising it." This study aims to push back against the definitive taste power that Global North tastemakers possess, while also examining the role that producer-consumers play in tasting and reifying coffee. The historic and pervasive domestic consumption of coffee in Ethiopia presents an interesting opportunity to examine a rich local history of consumption in a coffee producing nation. The role of producer-consumer also helps to challenge the notion that producing and tasting coffee happen at two opposite ends of the global supply chain. Sidama farmers sensorially engage with their crops and their process of tastemaking deserves equal consideration with Third Wave tastemakers. Coffee shops, industry conferences and competitions, and cupping rooms serve as spaces in the Global North in which coffee becomes reified into a more-than-beverage concept that adds symbolic value to the drink. Viewing the buna ceremony as a space of reification can also add to the social capital and symbolic power of producers within tastemaking spaces.

I was approaching coffee as a fine-tasting object, but, in reality, it was more a medium of exchange. Our approach to coffee is informed by the constant presence and variety of green and desiccated beans in our daily lives. We can drink coffee from all over the world, but since we do not grow coffee at these latitudes, we treat it as an exchangeable object worthy of comparison and discretion. We need to be wary of object fetishization in both tasting commercial settings and within academic fields. 'Follow the Thing' methodology has been able to articulate the imbricated supply and value chains that link global objects, but I wonder if we are missing the forest for the trees? By holding onto distinct entities within food chains we can miss out on the network or flow that holds objects. Just as I tried and failed to explicate the coffee experience from the larger social world of the Sidama, professionals and academics risk missing out on necessary context by hyper-focusing on charismatic foods. Arguably, the context is more important, and Tsing and Bennett can help articulate the active nature of matter in relation to larger systems. Coffee is an object that can be tasted and quantified, but I also found that it existed more as a medium of experience in Sidama. This begs the question whether the empiricism that we bring to coffee reflects an intrinsic reality of the bean or represents a layered flavor regime that we impose on the object. Looking at coffee-as-medium rather than coffee-as-object also can demonstrate how coffee has acted as an adulterated substance throughout its entangled history with humanity.

III. ADULTERATED SUBSTANCE

There is an assumption in Third Wave spaces that we are just now starting to understand the 'true' nature of individual coffee tastes. Through improvements in production, sourcing, and processing, tastemakers argue that coffee tastes have never been more discernable. Liberman (2022) talks about truth-in-cup and Weissman (2008) discusses the Godshot – curated coffees

that link truth-claims and tasted experience in the Third Wave. Specialty coffee shops offer consumers the ability to consume micro-lots and to appreciate the distinct flavor of single origin beans. I was influenced by experiences with terroir-driven coffees and thought that I could understand the beverage better by going back to the source. In the field, my essentialism of coffee was quickly cut short by the inclusion of salt in every *cini* I drank. I came away from the experience thinking that coffee-as-medium can help capture the adulteration of coffee as a necessary part of the coffee continuum rather than a tasting behavior that falls into right and wrong. Third Wave values create binaries of correct and incorrect ways to buy, source, and drink coffee. But if we look back on the history of coffee beverages, we can see that coffee has always been subjected to flavor regimes, and the Third Wave turn towards fruity, single-origin varieties is no exception. By claiming to be now discovering the taste of coffee, we are falling into an unnecessary paradigm, and we must evaluate the truth of claims being made by Third Wave tastemakers. I believe that studying coffee as an adulterated substance could help tease apart flavor regime dynamics and trouble the assumed essentialism of coffee flavors. From its inception, coffee was not drunk "correctly." A beverage called *qishr* in Yemen and *hocha* in Ethiopia were made using coffee husks, and it's believed that this beverage was the precursor to coffee (Davis et al. 2020: 11). Coffee leaves were historically used to make a tea called *coti*, still found in various parts of Ethiopia (Davis et al. 2020: 11). Throughout our history with the beverage, it has been subjected to substitution and transformation. Various herbs, spices, and milks were used historically to flavor coffee, and we see this trend continued at Dutch Bros, McDonald's, or Dunkin' Donuts. Around the world coffee is an embedded and subjective experience. I must admit that I am repulsed to see the myriad options and syrups galore that Starbucks offers customers to put in their coffee. I take refuge in going to specialty coffee shops

and drinking stripped down espresso and pour overs. I do believe that this approach allows me to be able to get in touch with the undiluted flavor of single-origin beans. But it would be a historically and socially inaccurate claim to say that I've discovered truth-in-cup from these behaviors and flavors.

The Third Wave valorizes the assertion of unblended single-origin beans and makes implicit claims about returning to the original flavor of minimally processed coffee. But we can take a step back, even while sipping our coffees, and see that the Third Wave is the current manifestation of evolving flavor regimes. Its iterative nature is literally in the name. Third Wave tastemakers should realize the constructive nature of current taste regimes, taking into account the turbulent history of coffee-drinking and recognize the composite nature of the brew. Roseberry (2002) wrote about the rise of yuppie coffee houses in the 1990s and 2000s. While many of the claims regarding valorization and consumptive performance still hold true, Roseberry (2002) also notes trends such as spraying flavor additives to beans and the presence of Italian syrups at the then new hip café scene. Flavored coffee beans are passé to the discerning coffee connoisseur in 2026. Trends shift and change, but we should question the tendency to assert that modern versions represent new and definitive approaches to coffee. The assumption that current supply chains and material preparation of coffee represents the true nature of terroir-coffees should be met with skepticism. The grounds have always been adulterated, and, in the Third Wave, we are flavoring coffee with narrative and symbolic reification. If we realize coffee's larger history as an adulterated substance, skepticism does not lead to denigration of hipster values and truth-claims. Rather, we can approach the beverage from a nuanced perspective, seeing beans in the wider matrix of taste and alteration. I still dislike the milky, sugary concoctions that Starbucks or Dutch Bros create, but instead of thinking I know the true

nature of the bean, I acknowledge that this interaction with our co-constituting drug-food represents part of the commingled continuum of coffee.

Claims of correctness and purity should be evaluated as preference rather than truth in the wider world of coffee consumption. Purity is a flavor and this research butts up against the assumption that residents of Ethiopia, the land of coffee origin, drink a Platonic ideal of coffee. The coffee ceremony involves boiling coffee and salt, a combination that is anathema to Third Wave values, which seek the optimal cup of coffee. And it's harmful to assume that the coffee ceremony is quaint or exotic and that Third Wave roasters can help express the true nature of the exported Ethiopian beans. Both cupping space and ceremony space hold equal weight. I was initially taken aback by the presence of salt in most of the Sidama ceremonies I attended. Salty coffee conflicted with my understanding and approach to the implicit value claims I was making with this research: returning to the land of origin to drink renowned terroir-based coffee in an age-old ritual would deliver truth-in-cup. But my hipster sensibilities were ill-informed for dealing with the substance of coffee as a larger concept in the Sidama worldview. Sourcing and taste can still communicate how single-origin varieties articulate unique flavors without additives, but to assume the rightness of this approach misses the global history of "wrong" coffee. The binary essentialism of right and wrong are useless in understanding the role this drug-food currently plays and historically played in humanity's everyday life. Further research into adulteration could help understand that coffee has never been pure and to disrupt the assumptions and power dynamics of Third Wave flavor regimes that operate on terroir-based purity.

IV. LIQUID SPACES

Viewing coffee as a medium rather than a discrete substance can open more avenues of inquiry into the larger space of what I refer to as liquid studies. I rather naively use the term liquid studies to differentiate how the study of food can miss out on how liquids create morphable social experiences. It's well documented that food and dining experiences create moments of commensality, but further research could examine how liquids in particular shape social spaces. Lockwood (2012) and Stryker and Schmidt (2020) have demonstrated the way in which liquids both shape and are shaped by social interaction. I believe that this approach to social spaces can help explore the flexible dynamic that makes up most of the modern gustatory socialization. Beverages more often than meals serve as the modern means of engaging in social behaviors. Grabbing a coffee or a beer serves as daily casual entanglements with friends and acquaintances. It's an intuitive social norm even if seen as strange to be put into a liquid context. Over the course of this research period, I would try and fail to describe my mixture of thesis ideas on first dates. But regardless of half-baked conclusions, my dates would instinctively understand the liquid contexts of situations whenever I mused on the ramifications of asking someone to a coffee, after-work beer, or to split a bottle of wine. Much like a pitcher or wine bottle, liquids create space and spaces holds liquids.

As we've seen, food studies and other social science approaches have helped to demarcate the approach for studying normal practices that involve the most intimate and overlooked part of our daily habits. Rather than abstracting or valorizing the daily coffee habit, we can examine the inane repetition as part of a larger cultural value medium. It's no coincidence that of the six field studies in Ray Oldenburg's The Great Good Place (1989), only one site does not explicitly include a beverage-based venue: Main Street. And main streets invariably include

bars, cafes, or pubs – liquid spaces. Oldenburg helped to popularize the term third space into our everyday parlance and value system. Liquid spaces are intrinsically tied to the third space ideal in that represent casual areas of mild alteration and socialization. Lots of food studies scholars have looked at café culture and the larger alcohol-socialization complex, but by combining the spatial dimensions of liquid engagement future scholars could better articulate topics relating to historic dialogue, social patterns, and everyday media of exchange.

Even though the villagers of Tukko do not drink their everyday coffee from stores or cafes, their homes become liquid spaces whenever they are hosting the *buna* ceremony. Passersby and neighbors flow into the space in ways they could not during a meal or during other domicile activities. Here coffee acts as a medium of socialization that facilitates both conversation and stimulation. I'm not sure a hosted home-event like the *buna* ceremony can count as a third space, but coffee does allow for the home to become a liquid space in which it exists as a fuzzy beverage-based liminality.

CONCLUSION

This research came from the friction between local Sidama understandings of coffee and my initial approach to coffee tasting as both an academic and food professional. While there is ample room for future project development, I believe that this ethnographic friction helps to articulate the challenge that Third Wave tastemakers navigate as they taste and reify terroir-driven coffees. We've discussed how Global North tastemakers see themselves within a moralized economy in which they perceive a direct correlation between their taste regimes and improved financial livelihoods for coffee farmers through relationship coffee dynamics and terroir designations. But if we truly desire to enjoy coffee's place of taste, we should work to include producers' valuations alongside industry professionals' flavor narratives. I posit some gleanings from this research to augment how we engage with coffee terroir, but I also realize there are few pragmatic interventions to accomplish this shift in tasted meaning. Ultimately, I advocate for the transition of outdated Sidamo terroir naming and packaging to the Sidama appellation. Further research should engage with the complicated history of coffee in Ethiopian cultures and examine the heterogeneity of taste within the land of origin. Research into ethnic valuations of coffee and the coffee ceremony could complicate understandings of the Ethiopian-Eritrean ceremony complex, especially as increased urbanization and national unity efforts elide regional differences. My exploration of coffee helps to further the coffee value research of Fischer (2022) and West (2012), while playing with the distinctive reality of coffee as a native, endogenous cultural element within Ethiopian societies. Both Perullo (2016) and Liberman (2022) help to broaden the professional and connoisseur approach to fine tasting, but the producer perspective must also be included to understand or change coffee taste dynamics. My hope is that this research can serve as part of the iterative process of expanding the ethnographic

research of Global South producer-consumers as commiserate tasters of fine food commodities. Climate change will further threaten terroir, as Demossier (2026) and Wolkovich (2025) have shown, so it is important to fully articulate the range of flexible entanglement between the terroir triad as growing patterns change.

I must admit that I have a science fiction aficionado's adherence and adoration to neologisms and constructed words that can help world larger ideas. I've loved the creative devices that scholars in both the social sciences and humanities use to define new terms, often raiding Latin roots or subtly twisting other academic paragons' definitions. Foucault creates governmentality from government and mentality, which later becomes government-imposed environmental control through environmentality by Agrawal (2005). Haraway uses sympoesis to articulate the iterative process in which more-than-human networks create assemblages (2016). Not only does Haraway (2016) repurpose many terms to build out her theories, but she also contextualizes their importance in the age of the Anthropocene, another repurposed academic word. Terroir is a prime example of this phenomenon. As Parker (2015) demonstrates, the term has shifted and morphed within France and has continued to do so as its spread to professional and academic worlds beyond the Francophone sphere. Academics like words and seek to play with language to better communicate their thoughts and approaches. Liquid spaces and adulterated substances fall into a similar attempt to utilize definitions in service of expanding understanding to place-taste. Both concepts are attempts to engage with the porous, morphing nature of beverage-based social worlds.

Drinking terroir-coffees with Sidama producer-consumers helped to bridge the beverage social world that links the *sidaancho mine* coffee ceremony with the Global North's Third Wave value systems that influence how Sidama coffees are tasted globally. My research questions were

mused, ignored, morphed, and reinterpreted over cups of coffee with research participants. Whenever I would ask about how the *buna* ceremony engaged with Sidama valuations of place-based taste I came to understand that the reification of place-based taste did happen, but it was almost beside the point. Coffee existed on multiple planes of experience for the Sidama, so to limit the experience to just ceremonial spaces was doable, if salty; it just didn't capture the larger reality that coffee was socialization. Also place-based taste becomes more important in consumer and connoisseur-based societies that put value on a multitude of specialty food products. The Sidama producer-consumers drank their own labor and the labor of their neighbors; it was less attenuated and reified as a separate taste entity that existed in comparison to other coffees. My research question regarding terroir as narrative in the coffee industry was perceived as a form of symbolic value reification from which producers felt divorced. Their coffee is sold to co-ops or private distributors and then undergoes symbolic consolidation that is based on the farmers' place-based work, even if they don't reap the financial reward of such a narrative. But also, the constellation of layered meanings that came from the interviews demonstrated that place-based taste played an active role in local, everyday interactions with the coffee plant-beverage. I was able to see the larger contours of an endogenous coffee narrative through the stories, laughs, faux paus, and cups of coffee shared with research participants. My final question asking how terroir functioned in the farmers' creation of coffee was mostly met with polite silence and follow-up questions. Coffee is all pervasive entity and medium in Sidama lives, and place and taste were assumed givens in their worldview. How could the combination of place and taste not influence every interaction between producers and their livelihoods, crops, and daily cup? Here the framework of understanding coffee-as-medium instead of coffee-as-object can help to demonstrate that my approach to terroir as a distinct, bounded object missed the interwoven

network that the plant-beverage plays in Sidama. Participants pointed out the many reasons that Tukko was suited to grow coffee as well as their skillset to grow the healthiest coffee possible. The discursive social and sensory world of Sidama coffee was initially disorienting to the taste distinctions I had learned to value as a professional and as a connoisseur. But understanding the co-constituted role coffee plays in Sidama society allowed me to play in liminal areas that were limited by a truth-in-cup approach. I learned that coffee-as-object misses the network of agricultural, social, and sensorial that coffee plays in the daily life of producer-consumers. I originally wanted to represent producer-consumers as able discerners, akin to Global North tastemakers and coffee cuppers. Instead, I came to understand that an embedded and embodied perspective of coffee as plant, social medium, stimulant, and livelihood provides an expertise that goes beyond labeling certain single-origin coffees with distinct flavor notes. I hope to articulate this broader network-based approach to coffee through my musings on liquid spaces, adulterated substances, flavor regimes, and coffee-as-medium. Further work needs to be done to articulate these porous concepts that live in the weft and weave of human and more-than-human worlds. But at the very least, whenever you drink your next cup of coffee think of the imbricated realities that manifested that cup, as well as the fluid forces the constantly reshape our interactions with this drug-food. Take a sip and stay curious.

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