Vôla Manganika Vôla: Money Creeping on Money

An ethnographic study of vanilla exportation in the Northern region of Madagascar.

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Introduction:
From ice cream to body lotion, everyone knows the taste and scent of vanilla, but where does it come from and what is the real cost? This study examines how vanilla production involves a variety of interests, mixed mitigation attempts, and ultimately questions the role we play as consumers.

Did you know:
- Vanilla is produced in at least 18 countries.  
- 80% of the population of SAVA (See Map 1) rely on vanilla exportation.  
- Vanilla is responsible for murder, fraud, sabotage, and corruption in the SAVA region.

Map 1: SAVA Region of Madagascar in Map

What is Vanilla?
Natural vanilla, the chemical that gives vanilla its distinctive flavor, is a substance intrinsic to the dried beans of the vanilla orchid (Vanilla planifolia).  
The cultivation and exportation of dried vanilla beans is an extremely intensive process, which requires hand pollination (see Figure 3), 8 months of maturation, and 3-6 months of curing.  
That’s over a year of preparation for a dried bean!

How does vanilla get here?
In the SAVA region vanilla exportation is organized in a pyramidal system. Individual growers cultivate vanilla beans. Beans are sold to importers finally distribute or system.

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Stakeholders and Concerns
Growers
- Chested by brokers  
- Vulnerable to bandits  
- Exposed to Environmental hazards and changes  
- Tension between generations  
- Overt amongst neighbors  
- Lack of means to produce/collect product

Producers/Collectors
- Navigating regulations/standards  
- Inconsistent quality from growers  
- Competition with thieves and bandits  
- Fraud and tricks by competitors and growers  
- Contract officials  
- Negotiating with exporters

Exporters
- Cost of transportation by air and boat  
- Intense competition abroad  
- Efforts to deal with some of the negative impacts have been created on all levels, however conflicting interests and investment in the current system hinder progress.  
- Attempts to mitigate negative impacts are stagnated by the exportation power structure and remain at one level of stakeholders  
- Growers bear the brunt of negative impacts from exportation

Environmental Impact:
- Frequent typhoons; climate change; erosion; irrigation; sterile soil
- Political inequality; Social divisions between Urban and rural, capital and provincial; Extreme economic disparity
- Inability to pay for basic needs; inflation and international competition
- Political instability; Inefficient bureaucracy; inconsistent of enforcement; corruption and instability
- Disturbing amongst
- Conspiracies; intentional sabotage of product and equipment; chearing and fraud

Limited Alternatives:
- No major universities; Few opportunities for educated youth

Decline in Quality:
- Little incentive to cultivate well; frequent fraud; picking early; curing in vacuum seal bags

Analysis:
Colonial laws and trade practices which favored French export of Madagascan Vanilla largely continued to be practiced after Madagascar’s independence in 1960. Periods of nationalization, market fluctuation, natural disaster and political crisis have created instability in the vanilla market.

Efforts to deal with some of the negative impacts have been created on all levels, however conflicting interests and investment in the current system hinder progress. Stakeholders and actors used language or discourse of blame to describe potential causes of negative impacts. Each saw himself as incapable of changing the attitudes or effectiveness.  

Further Questions to Consider:
- Who is culpable for negative impacts of the current exportation model?  
- What other strategies could be available for mitigating exportation?  
- Where should efforts be focused in the future to make the greatest impact?  
- How has exportation changed since 2015?

Mitigations & Complication:
International Aid:  
- International projects historically targeted priorities of importers and exporters exclusively  
- Diversity Production:  
- Growers turn to other cash crops like coffee, cloves, and cinnamon to attempt to produce finished product in country  
- Fair Trade Practices:  
- Sabotage of product and FROM labeling with “Madagascar Vanilla” and synthetic substitutes  
- Regulations/Associations:  
- Attempts to professionalize stunted by political scandal, and strategic intervention by outside parties  
- Farmers co ops:  
- Limited effectiveness in areas with existing communal cooperatives

Conclusions:
- Vanilla brings significant economic activity to Northern Madagascar  
- Historically great possibilities for economic development have not resulted in cooperation between actors  
- Growers bear the brunt of negative impacts from exportation

- Attempts to mitigate negative impacts are stigmatized by the exportation power structure and remain at one level of stakeholders  
- Growers, Collectors, Exporters continuously strategize and negotiate for needs, but are largely trapped by legacy of colonial extraction  
- Diversification may reduce dependence on the international market for growers, however more opportunities must be made available

Citations:
*All photographs and figures by Caellagh Morrissey unless otherwise indicated (2007)*

7. Cyclone Gilafilo worst in recorded History
9. Colonial laws and trade practices which favored French export of Malagasy Vanilla largely continued to be practiced after Madagascar’s independence in 1960. Periods of nationalization, market fluctuation, natural disaster and political crisis have created instability in the vanilla market.