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Introduction

When I arrived in the village of Imorona on the northeastern coast of Madagascar this last summer, several local vanilla farmers immediately started talking to me about a new project. They had decided to write and publish a small booklet about cultivating and curing vanilla beans, emphasizing organic techniques. The booklet would be made available to local farmers. I was already friends with many of the farmers who were organizing the book project, having previously lived with my husband in the town as Peace Corps volunteers. Returning to the rural village for pre–dissertation research, I was pleased to hear about the idea to produce a book about vanilla, as it continued the project I had worked on previously — to establish more direct linkages between rural vanilla bean farmers and U.S. markets, in part through assisting farmer groups to obtain organic certification.

Families in the village of Imorona, which has about 2500 residents, have been cultivating vanilla for approximately one hundred years. Most vanilla cultivators own their own small plots of land, and plant vanilla vines as a part of diverse and complex agroforestry systems which include rice, clove trees, fruit trees, coffee plants, cassava, sweet potatoes, and palm trees. The clove and vanilla harvests provide families with most of their cash income for the year. Over the past seven years, however, international vanilla bean prices have dropped by over ninety percent. This drop in the vanilla bean prices has significantly affected the ability of farmers to adequately provide for the basic needs of their families.

Acting Knowledge

As an orchid, vanilla requires constant attention and care and is considered along with saffron to be the most labor–intensive crop in the world. Working closely with vanilla producers in Imorona for two years, I began to notice certain characteristics of the knowledge and specialized skills involved in the delicate cultivation and curing process. Knowledge about vanilla is passed down through apprenticeship models, either formal or informal. Much of this shared knowledge is nonverbal — when showing me how to hand–pollinate a vanilla flower, for example, people demonstrated the process using very few words (Figures 1 and 2).

Throughout the cultivation and curing cycle there are many interactions between the senses and knowledge production. Successful farmers learn sensitive, tactile maneuvers at each stage of production. In hand–pollination delicate flower parts are pressed together with exactly the right degree of pressure. Vanilla beans are squeezed to determine their ripeness. Before blanching the green vanilla beans, farmers dip their hands into the hot water to gauge its temperature. Cured black beans are stretched and shaped and tied into bundles. Bundles are smelled...
and sorted by the strength of their fragrance. All told, each vanilla bean is probably touched hundreds of times before it leaves Imorona for other markets.

In producing vanilla, therefore, farmers must exercise their senses as a skill. Their ability to accurately monitor the information conveyed by the senses has important consequences on the quality of one’s vanilla harvest. These skills are learned over time through practice, experience, and mentoring. Vanilla production thus represents what Taussig (1992) calls the “tactility of knowledge,” whereby people know things through touching and experiencing them. The senses are thus for vanilla farmers “the switching place where the structure of experience and the structure of knowledge converge and cross” (Seremetakis, 1994). Over time, such uses of the senses become increasingly automated and habituated.

The knowledge of vanilla production also represents a form of “metis” knowledge (Scott, 1998). This type of knowledge includes practical skills, and is often referred to as know–how, common sense, or as having a knack for something. It is “acquired intelligence” that is plastic, adaptive and “exceptionally difficult to teach apart from being engaged in the activity itself” (Scott, 1998). It is also mostly passed down through oral forms, as opposed to written forms.

Writing Knowledge / Power

When I returned to Imorona last summer, I was therefore somewhat surprised to hear that the farmers were planning to write about their knowledge of vanilla farming. Farmers explained to me that they decided to embark on the project to teach other farmers, especially younger farmers, about the complicated process of obtaining organic certification. The previous year, when we had all worked together to obtain certification, we soon realized that the inspection process involved a large amount of paperwork. Recognizing that the process of organic certification largely depended on writing, the farmers responded by producing their own written document. The decision to produce a written document contrasts with the uneasiness that Imorona farmers often exhibit towards writing. Many individuals struggle with literacy and have come to associate writing and documents with cumbersome government bureaucracy.

Who has the power to write things down and to create the official written record often coincides with who exercises the most political and economic power in a society (Skaria, 1996). In the process of organic certification, for example, the inspector was the only person who wrote down information about the farmers and their fields; the farmers themselves only answered questions. Thus, by proactively producing a written booklet about vanilla, and by plan...
ning to make the document available to all Imorona residents, the vanilla producers could be seen to be balancing out the inequities of representation. They showed that they too wrote things down and codified knowledge.

**Translations**

A team of thirteen men and women was assembled to oversee the writing of the booklet. The team included older farmers from several local farmer associations, a representative of a local NGO, the two new Imorona Peace Corps volunteers, the local “wordsmith” who was known for his adeptness at speech making, the president of the local women’s association, and a local agricultural technician who had helped the farmers with their organic certification the previous year (Figure 3).

Overall, the book was an exercise in translating the métis knowledge of vanilla production into written form — something that is extremely tricky to do. This process of translation sparked a lot of in-depth discussions, as farmers compared their cultivation techniques with one another and debated which version was “best.” Thus, the plurality of techniques morphed into one “official” version. The knowledge recorded for the pamphlet also included quantitative descriptions and measurements. For example, when writing about blanching the vanilla beans, the farmers did not only write that one should test the water by hand, but also asked the technician what temperature the water should be. He told them, and this temperature was added into the description, thus creating a blend of métis and quantified “scientific” knowledge.

The farmers also learned from the NGO representative that vanilla was a vahiny, or non-native, plant. She explained that vanilla was originally from Mexico, and was brought to Madagascar by the French around 1840. In the draft of the pamphlet, the section on the history of vanilla left out the role of the French entirely — saying only that vanilla was a “child” of Mexico that “brought itself” to Madagascar. The removal of French traces from the vanilla narrative was also illustrated in the attention that the participants paid to the exact wording of the pamphlet. The group decided to use only Malagasy words taken from their local dialect. In their discussion, it soon became apparent that many of the words used for vanilla cultivation were actually French derivatives and not “real” Malagasy words. The participants debated over what Malagasy word to use for French terms such as “supple,” “orchid,” and even “shelf.” Especially interesting was the discussion on how to translate the concept of “organic” itself, commonly referred to as bio from the French biologique. After much discussion, the participants agreed to use the phrase voly–zanahary which means “crops from God.” The deliberate decision to remove all traces of the French echoed the observations of the anthropologist Maurice Bloch (1998) that, for the Malagasy, speaking in French is often associated with the experiences of colonial
subordination. Bloch also noted that the language of administration is often conducted in French, and this is certainly true of organic certification paperwork. By writing their own documents in the local language, rural farmers were claiming some power over how their knowledge was catalogued.

Projects aimed at making a population more “modern” often act as homogenizing influences, and this can partly be seen with this booklet project (Scott, 1998). Knowledge was quantified and taken out of its larger social and environmental contexts. One “official” version of how to cultivate vanilla was decided upon. Vanilla was no longer a multifaceted, socially significant entity, but a collection of specific, focused techniques. Although much of the “metis” details are lost in translation, I argue that the vanilla booklet does not signify an overall “loss” of metis knowledge itself. Rather, the process of writing the booklet represented a deepening of metis. Sitting in the room together, the participants learned a new type of “practical” knowledge: how to write a pamphlet. They were experimenting with ways to respond to the changing situations of the global vanilla market. In this way, the booklet exemplified the shifting, adaptive, multi-layered nature of metis in action.

The pamphlet project also illustrates how experimenting with new forms of knowledge can be both globalizing and localizing. In responding to the “global” discourse of organic certification, the booklet deliberately framed its discussion as local to Imorona. It did not try to erase the localness of the growers’ knowledge — in contrast, the booklet often made particular references to Imorona. The committee wanted to include photos from Imorona in the booklet, not generic illustrations. The project goal was thus not to erase “Imorona-ness” to make their vanilla global, but to emphasize the “on-siteness” of vanilla production. It was not a “shadow” of global discourse — a metaphor often used to describe African engagement with global entities (Ferguson, 2006). Rather, it was very much its own, active, deliberate production.

Conclusion

Overall, the strategic layers of action represented by this pamphlet suggest that rural farmers in Imorona are exhibiting proactive agency in a globalizing world. This agency is seen through the lens of vanilla production. Such power is often denied to rural Africans, who are instead described as being “swept up” in globalization in a way that they lose their sense of place, or as “being left behind” by globalization in a way that keeps them static. The vanilla book project, in contrast, can be seen as an attempt for rural farmers to put themselves literally at the center of global discourse. In writing about organic vanilla production, then, the thirteen individuals were experimenting both with knowing things and with ways of knowing things. Overall, we can hope that all this attention to knowledge will have some practical metis effect — namely, that the next round of the organic inspection will proceed smoothly, which will subsequently give families more viable options to find markets for their crops.

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References


