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Ethically Sourced Vanilla: Certifications in the production of vanilla in the SAVA Region of Madagascar

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Ethically Sourced Vanilla:
Certifications in the production of vanilla in the SAVA Region of
Madagascar

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Abstract:

Vanilla is an orchid whose beans are harvested after ten months on the vine. About eighty percent of the world's vanilla is produced in Madagascar and the SAVA region is the capital of vanilla production within the country. The changing demand of vanilla, damage from cyclones, and the three-year development of the vanilla plants before they begin producing beans causes a boom and bust cycle of prices of vanilla. Some organizations have tried to ameliorate the problems these cycles and low prices pose to vanilla farmers by creating certifications for companies that promise that they will not pay less than a certain price for vanilla. This is particularly relevant when vanilla prices are low. Other certifications are aimed towards ensuring environmental safety and fair treatment towards farmers. Examples include Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, and Organic. The effectiveness of these organizations and programs can be measured against efforts by individual companies to treat their providers 'fairly.' This study examines the effect of these certifications, company initiatives, and third-party interests in the production of vanilla and the efficacy of these parties in fostering the fair and sustainable production of vanilla.

Introduction:

Of all the crops in Madagascar, particularly of the spices and cash crops, vanilla retains a certain uniqueness that separates it from these other crops. Of the world's vanilla production, Madagascar grows eighty percent, with that production focused in the SAVA region of North-East Madagascar (Symrise, 2018). The tropical climate and constant rain of this region are optimal for growing vanilla. However, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the majority of the vanilla grown in Madagascar is not native to the island. Of the main varieties grown in Madagascar, the most common is *Vanilla planifolia*, known more commonly as 'Bourbon' vanilla, which originates from Mexico (Havkin-Frenkel and Belanger, 2011). Although there are

some varieties native to Madagascar, these beans contain less vanillin, the chemical compound that gives vanilla its unique and pleasing flavor (Borbolla-Perez, 2015). These varieties from Mexico, however, have much higher vanillin contents. But, in introducing Mexican vanilla to other environments, the insect that naturally pollinizes the vanilla flowers was unable to adapt. As a result, in all countries other than Mexico, vanilla blossoms must be pollinated by hand (Cadot et al., 2008). This is only one example of the elements that combine to result in vanilla as a time-intensive cash crop.



Figure 1: Vanilla 'Gasy' or one of the varieties of vanilla native to Madagascar. This vine is part of semi-intensive farming techniques practiced on the Agri Resources plantation in Ambohitsara as part of the project to maintain genetic diversity. Photo courtesy of author. 4/12/2018.

Because of the time-intensive nature of vanilla, it is not surprising that several types of synthetic vanilla flavors have been introduced into the market. In fact, the common figure bandied about in the vanilla industry is that ninety-nine percent of vanilla flavoring (for candles, candies, soaps, chocolate, baked goods) is synthetic with only one percent remaining pure, natural vanilla. Synthetic vanilla is often made from wood products, although it is possible to distill it from a wide variety of sources (Berenstein, 2016). Synthetic vanilla's main appeal is also the price difference: in years when vanilla prices are highest, such as now, a kilo of natural vanilla costs between \$600 and \$750 (Wiley, 2017). These high prices also reflect the high demand for natural vanilla, and so it remains highly unlikely that natural vanilla will lose value in the market economy. As Berenstein argues, natural vanilla as a commodity represents much

more than the pleasurable flavor for which it is known. Rather, vanilla largely underlies the vast majority of flavor profiles in the United States and is the most commonly used spice in the United States (Berenstein, 2017). Due to vanilla's popularity not only popular in the United States, but also throughout Europe and Japan, these markets have transformed vanilla over the last one hundred years into a truly global market commodity.

As Woodman discusses in his book, *Unfair Trade*, since the globalization of many food and luxury commodities, consumers have become increasingly disconnected from the source of their food. As a result, many commodities result in increasingly unfair practices towards farmers, factory workers, and any other producers in order to produce the cheapest product (Woodman, 2011). With vanilla, in particular, many inequalities exist between the producers and the other members of the vanilla industry. Vanilla prices fluctuate drastically which creates economic instability for the farmers. Compared to the recent high prices of above, as recent as 2005, the prices were as low as \$30 per kilo (Wiley, 2017). Ethical concerns regarding treatments of farmers of all industries arose in the United States following World War II, although the first certifications did not arise until 1998, with Transfair, now Fairtrade (Cater et al., 2015). Fair trade standards in particular have been implemented in Mexico, formerly the largest vanilla-supplying country of the world (Borbolla-Perez et al., 2016). Vanilla companies sourcing from Madagascar began the certification process around 2005 and the movement has been growing steadily since as clients create more demand for certified products (Cater et al., 2015). However, the efficacy of these certifications has not been thoroughly studied in the Malagasy context, nor have alternatives to these certifications been explored.

This study aims to answer the following questions: How is fairness perceived and implemented in the vanilla sector? Do certifications play a role? How so, and how are they viewed? Can conditions for vanilla farmers be more 'fair' and, if so, how?

Methods:

For this study, the main method employed was interviews of people all along the value chain of vanilla from farmer to collectors to exporters. These interviews are semi-structured, with a set of basic questions that were adapted and added to depending on the interviewee. Over the three weeks, representatives of eight companies were interviewed over nine interviews, as well as seven collectors, eighteen farmers and six interviews with other non-government organizations, certification agencies, researchers and other key stakeholders. These questions followed three general divisions of being aimed towards producers, collectors or exporters (see Appendix 1). However, for the exporters, the questions were more individualized based on prior research on the companies represented. Additionally, in order to facilitate a comfortable atmosphere, these questions were not always asked in order and often other questions were added. For some of these interviews, mainly with farmers and collectors who do not speak French, the aid of a translator was used to translate from French to Malagasy and Malagasy to French when needed. Notes were taken on the interviews, rather than recording and transcribing due to time constraints.

Most contacts were located locally in Antalaha, although trips to Sambava and Vohemar on a taxi brousse were necessary to interview other individuals. It was also necessary to travel Ampohibe and Ambohitsara, two rural villages surrounding Antalaha, to interview vanilla farmers. The trips to the rural villages were organized by Agri Resources and ProMaBio, as both companies had relations in these villages and could provide transport as well as some

background information on the village and the farmers with whom we could talk. This posed a question of bias as the subjects interviewed were not at random—they were either previously selected by the relevant company or associated with the company. Representatives of these two companies were also occasionally present during these interviews, which could have potentially changed the responses of the interviewees. Many initial contacts were provided by Barry Fergusan or my advisor, Hadrien Charvet. Other contacts were found through research, discussions with other contacts, or even walking around Antalaha. For some contacts not in the SAVA region (mostly currently in the United States or Antananarivo), the interviews were conducted over email, a phone call or Skype. While email was not quite ideal due to it being a less direct form of communication, it was at times more useful than phone calls as there were often difficulties with service and clarity on the phone.

Because this study relies heavily on human informants, consent and confidentiality are the two main objectives when dealing with any individual. This includes refraining from collecting names of individuals and working with my translator to obtain informed consent. Additionally, it will be vital to impress upon my translator the importance of confidentiality for them as well to not disclose information about the informants to others. For any photos taken, the interviewee was told exactly the scope in which this photo might be used and obtained consent orally.

Results:

The Production of Vanilla:

The first step to understanding vanilla sourcing and the ethical implications therein is to understand the overall process of producing vanilla. The genus, vanilla, is a vine of the orchid family. As such, vanilla vines are grown in concert with a ‘host’ tree, which supports the vine

and also provides the requisite shade and compost for the vine. In the planting process, a vine of about four to six feet long is selected and cut from an existing, healthy plant. In some cases, this is from another plant on the same plantation and in others, it is bought from another farmer or supplier. The bottom three or four leaves are cut off the vine to stimulate root growth and the vine is draped over either an existing tree or a sapling and the section bare of leaves is buried several inches under the soil, perpendicular to the guide tree. Then, the vine is affixed to the tree with twine or raffia. Often, two vines are planted together on the same tree.

For most varieties of vanilla, the vine starts producing flowers three years after planting. As described above, in Madagascar, these flowers are pollinated by hand, in the month of November. The window available to pollinate the flowers is short, as it must be the day the flower opens and workers usually operate between 5:00 AM and 10:00 AM every day of the flowering season to pollinate all the new flowers (Dairy Industries International, 2002). One practiced worker can pollinate up to one thousand flowers in a day (Personal Communication, 2/2/2018). Each flower corresponds to one bean produced, which generally grow in clusters on the vine. The beans grow and mature on the vine for nine months, to be harvested in July. The time before the beans to reach maturity is very important as this is when the vanillin develops in the beans. Premature harvesting is often a problem for vanilla, especially when prices of vanilla are high. In some cases, immature harvest can be a method of protection against theft of the beans, and in other cases farmers might harvest their beans early to be able to sell earlier, particularly in cases in which the sales from the last season were not sufficient, or the money not budgeted properly, or other unanticipated expenses arise (Personal Communication, 4/12/2018).

Beans are harvested by hand and are either sold green or kept by the farmers for several additional months of processing. During the preparation process, the beans are boiled at very

high temperatures and then the beans are dried under the sun. In recent years, other methods have been adopted, such as Floribis's 'quick' processing in which the beans are chopped before being boiled and dried in large machines. This process is energy-intensive, and produces a different flavor, but shortens the treatment process from five to six months to only two weeks and produces higher levels of vanillin (Personal Communication, 4/19/2018). The beans are also sorted based on size and some beans go through different processing to attain different levels of humidity to create different qualities of vanilla—red, black, etc.—to appeal to different markets. Often, more dry vanilla is sent to the United States whereas vanilla with higher levels of humidity are sent to Europe or Japan, although this depends on the needs of the clients.

The Economy of Vanilla

This brings us to the economy of vanilla. All of the vanilla produced in Madagascar is eventually exported, complicating the economics of vanilla with the global market. To fulfill the needs of the foreign markets, the general structure of the Malagasy vanilla market is as follows: foreign clients place orders with exporters based in Madagascar. These exporters employ collectors, sometimes providing them with money in advance to purchase the vanilla, sometimes not. These collectors often hire other intermediaries who may be located more directly in the countryside (who may then hire their own intermediaries in turn) (Personal Communication, 4/6/2018). Another option for exporters is to work directly with 'groupements' of farmers, which can be divided into two types. The first is a cooperative of farmers, which is generally more organized and profit based, wherein members pay fees to join and the cooperative sells all the vanilla of the members together. The second is an association of farmers, which retains more of the individuality of the farmer's ability to sell to whom they care to and is often remarked to be less organized. Many of these groupements are organized by vanilla exporters to consolidate

sourcing of vanilla (Personal Communication, 4/7/2018). However, much more common than these groupements are the individual farmers of vanilla, who sell their own product on the open market.

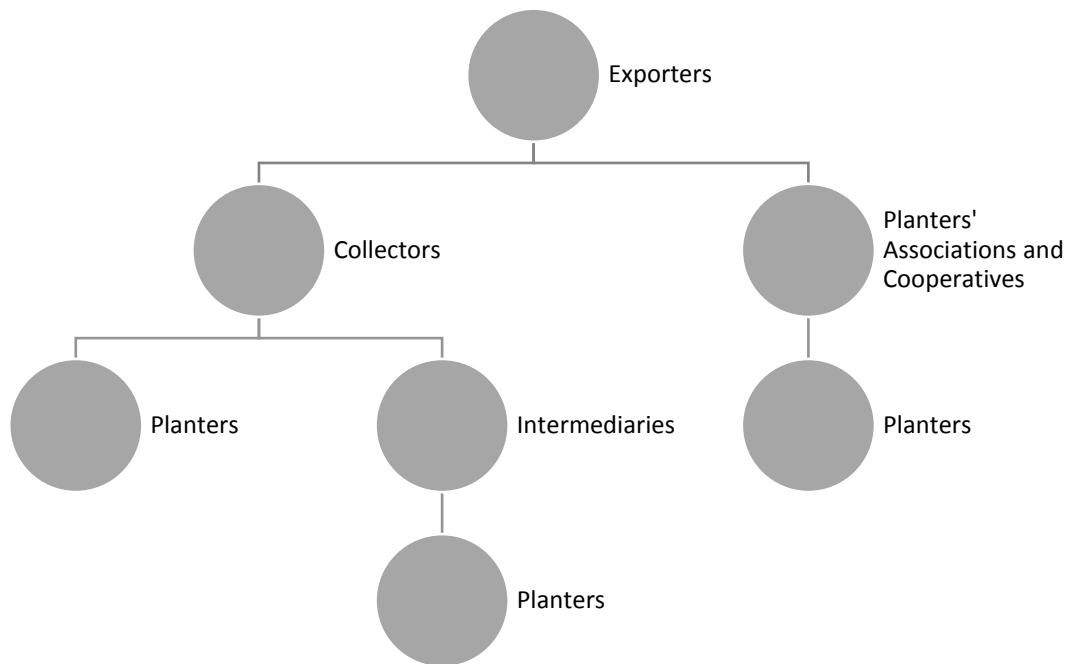


Figure 2: Hierarchy of the economy of Madagascar vanilla actors. Money flows from top to bottom. Quantities of each lower level depends on the exporter.

In years past, Malagasy vanilla was firmly regulated by the government. Prices were set by the government (which they still technically are), and the harvest and processing of the vanilla was also dictated by the government and so, more uniform. If the harvest was good, some vanilla would be stored against future years of potentially poorer harvests (Personal Communication, 4/16/2018). Thus, prices were stable and supply was relatively consistent. Foreign companies were taxed on their purchases of vanilla, and this money was reinvested into the quality of Malagasy vanilla. Then, in the early 1990s, the buyers requested a less regulated market in hopes to better their financial prospects. This wave of reform throughout Madagascar in the 1990s flowed in parallel with weak government intervention, or even outright failure (Cadot et al., 2008). And so, the market opened. In the years since, the Malagasy vanilla market has gone

through several boom-and-bust cycles in which several good years of production and high prices are followed by theft, early picking and general low quality of vanilla. Then vanilla production decreases, resulting in several years of financial difficulty for vanilla farmers (Kalisa, 2017).

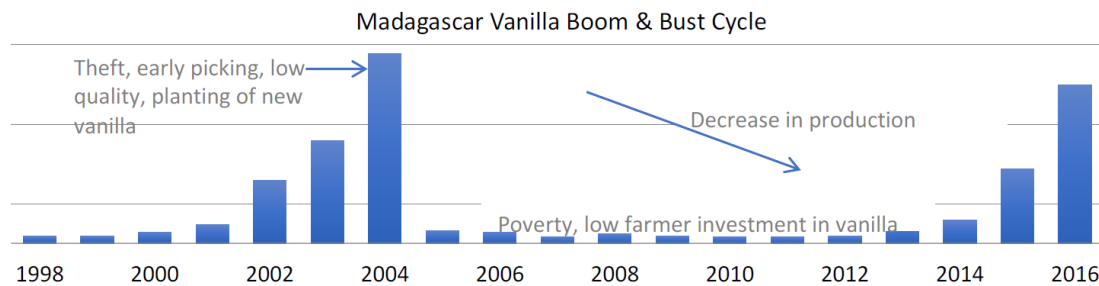


Figure 3: Madagascar Vanilla Boom and Bust Cycle from 1998 to 2016, plotting year against production of the vanilla. Source: *An Overview of Sector Governance, The Sustainable Food Lab.*

For the vanilla farmers, the main risks are these fluctuating prices, the theft of vanilla and the lowering quality of vanilla. These three issues are intricately intertwined. As shown in Figure 3, when production is flourishing and prices are high, the theft of vanilla is rampant. These thefts are generally of immature beans, thus lower the quality of the vanilla being sold. Additionally, one common method of protecting against thieves is the immature harvesting of the beans by the farmers themselves. Immature beans have a much lower vanillin content and are generally of poor quality (Personal Communication, 4/12/2018). In one interview, a researcher of vanilla asked exasperatedly something to the effect of, “Why do thieves take the immature vanilla? Why do people buy it? If we could stop the buying of immature vanilla, the problem of theft would be reduced dramatically!” (Personal Communication, 4/6/2018). However, when touring the facilities of one vanilla exporter, it was explained that the first step after the vanilla is received is to sort it into one of three categories: mature, immature and very immature. According to a representative of the facility, ninety percent of the vanilla currently on the market is immature, and so in order to fulfill demands, vanilla exporters have no choice but to also buy immature vanilla (Personal Communication, 4/19/2018). Low quality vanilla causes the price to decrease

rapidly. Even in times of low prices, farmers can be pressured into harvesting their beans early to receive some income during periods of financial need, even if this detracts from the price received overall from the crop.

Certifications:

One proposed solution to these boom and bust cycles is the implementation of certifications, such as Fairtrade, Organic, or Rainforest Alliance. As these are among the most common certifications, they were chosen as the focus of this research. Each certification has individual requirements and objectives, which will be enumerated below. First, the aim of Fairtrade is to enhance the ‘fair’ treatment of farmers. Just how to define ‘fair,’ let alone how to enact and enforce ‘fair’ behavior, is a weighty question. According to the Fairtrade charter:

“Fair trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency, and respect, which seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers—especially in the South. Fair trade organizations backed by consumers, are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade” (Charter of Fair Trade Principles, FINE 2014).

The certification process is completed by a third party, in this case Flocert, who conducts the audits of the company and farms. The checklist provided by Flocert for the Fairtrade standards of the “Small Producers Organizations Compliance Criteria” occupies 167 pages, with requirements ranging in topic from water usage to chemical products usage to labeling of Fairtrade products (Small Producer Organizations Compliance Criteria, Flocert 2018). While some products (such as cane sugar, bananas, and cacao) have individual requirements in this form, at present no requirements are unique to Fairtrade vanilla. The main benefits to farmers that this label provides are a minimum price for vanilla, a number deemed by Fairtrade as the minimum fair wage, and a premium paid to farmers per kilo sold, often distributed by Fairtrade through community development.

Perhaps the most widespread certification of Malagasy vanilla is an organic certification. While there are several standards of organic certification among different countries, such as the United States and the European Union, many companies (such as Symrise and Agri Resources) select the most strict standards across the types of organic standards. Once they adhere to those, they are then eligible for all the organic certifications applicable to their markets and clients (Personal Communication, 4/3/2018 and 4/5/2018). Organic certifications are aimed towards health of consumable products and sustainability for the environment. According to their website, the organic certification of the European Union has the following aims, “sustainable cultivation systems, a variety of high-quality products, greater emphasis on environmental protection, more attention to biodiversity, higher standards of animal protection, consumer confidence, protecting consumer interests” (EU, 2018). Organic certifications are also often administered in Madagascar by a third-party certification company called ECOCERT. According to a representative of ECOCERT, there are other accreditation organizations for organic available to the Malagasy. But, ECOCERT is the only one with an office in country, which enables them to build lasting relationships and is purportedly the reason they are the most popular in Madagascar (Personal Communication, 4/16/2018).

In practice, the most well-known standards of organic certifications are the prohibited use of many chemical fertilizers and pesticides. For the vast majority of Malagasy vanilla farmers, their product is organic in name if not certified as such. The organic certification is generally accepted as an accreditation of quality for vanilla, although that is not technically its purpose. Thus, the main differences between the certified and the non-certified is the access to certification (generally a financial constraint). According to the representative of ECOCERT, even if Malagasy vanilla is organic in practice, unless it is certified as such, it cannot be

marketed as organic (Personal Communication, 4/16/2018). This is mainly an issue because of exportation to foreign markets, as will be discussed below. However, one issue raised multiple times in several conversations with those involved in the vanilla production is that it is generally more difficult to buy already processed vanilla as certified organic. This is because a common contaminant exists in most farmer's households: their mosquito nets. These mosquito nets, often donated by United States non-profits to lower threat from malaria, are treated with a pesticide to kill the mosquitos on contact. During the curing process, farmers often leave the vanilla out to dry during the day, and then at night bring the vanilla inside and store it under the bed for security reasons. In the morning, when affixing the mosquito net, the pesticides are transferred to the farmer's hands and from their hands to the vanilla as they handle it. For green vanilla, this potential contamination poses less of a problem, as the waxy exterior prevent the pesticides from doing more than coating the beans. Then when the beans are boiled at high temperatures during the curing process, the pesticides are washed off. However, for already cured beans or beans in the process of being cured, the waxy exterior has been removed and so the pesticides penetrate the entire bean and cannot be removed (Personal Communication, 4/7/2018). This has been reported as a reason much of the vanilla on the market is currently purchased green by exporters and treated in their own facilities, although some other exporters refute this explanation.

The third most common certification in the Malagasy vanilla industry is that of Rainforest Alliance. As the name implies, Rainforest Alliance is a group focused on the environment and sustainable development, with particular interest in protecting the remaining rainforests and general biodiversity (Rainforest Alliance, 2018). In contrast to organic certification and Fairtrade certification, Rainforest Alliance conducts its own certification accreditation process. In discussion with a current auditor for Rainforest Alliance who also

works with an NGO, the criteria for Rainforest Alliance are “notably: the preservation of ecosystems, that of wildlife and conditions of fair work, the conservation of water and soils, etc.” (Personal Communication, 4/16/2018). Part of the Rainforest Alliance requirements that separate them from Fairtrade or organic are the required advances paid to the farmers for their products. According to a representative of Floribis, a vanilla exportation company based in Vohemar that in recent years decided to quit the Rainforest Alliance certification, these advances posed many problems for their company as a loss of revenue that was often compounded in their case by farmers receiving the advance and then refusing to sell their vanilla to Floribis (Personal Communication, 4/19/2018). This contrasts greatly with other companies, such as Symrise, of whose vanilla, most is certified Rainforest Alliance (approximately ninety percent of their vanilla) and are currently certifying less and less vanilla as organic (Personal Communication, 4/5/2018).

In conversations with farmers who were either members or prospective members of the recently created Planters’ Association with ProMaBio, the farmers were aware of only the organic certification. This knowledge was solely because of the work of ProMaBio and incomplete as the vanilla in this region would be certified as Fairtrade as well as organic. The sole exception being one farmer who had heard of the certification before, but knew little about it and had not been formerly certified organic. Of the thirteen vanilla farmers in connection with the Farmer’s Association interviewed, all reported that they believed the certification (namely organic) would prove to be beneficial to their farm and family. Several of these people professed to not being able to clarify why exactly, but four interviewees expanded along the lines that the certification would assure quality of their product and with the cooperative, or would help towards building lasting relations and stability. One farmer explained he believed the

certification would help as it provides a model for selling vanilla (Personal Communication, 4/17/2018). This response is relatively striking, as in another conversation with a farmer in a different town who was not associated with any cooperative responded that if he could make changes to the system of vanilla production, he would not know what to do as there are presently no successful models (Personal Communication, 4/12/2018). To the question of responsibility for the creation of successful, or at least more successful, models of vanilla production, the common answer was that the responsibility lies with the government. However, several of the collectors responded that it lies with the exporters. No one person or group professed to be able to change the vanilla production process for the better.

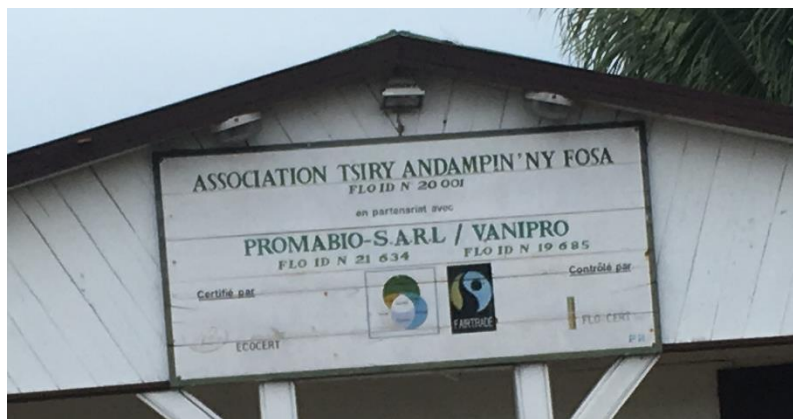


Figure 4: Sign of a Planters' Association partnered with ProMaBio and Vanipro with the certifications of the association. Photo courtesy of author. 4/23/2018.

Most farmers sold their product exclusively to the cooperative, a requirement of the contract. However, one farmer confessed to me and my translator that he did not sell all of his product to the cooperative, but he has to keep it a secret and sell what he has not given to the market secretively on the open market. He did not enumerate what would happen if he were to be caught by the cooperative, but that would likely depend on the contract the farmers signed with ProMaBio, to which I was not privy. My translator informed me that likely the farmer's membership would be revoked as well as potentially a fine (Personal Communication,

4/17/2018). Representatives of several companies denied that the recipients of advances or community development from the premiums paid by the exporters were obligated to sell to the respective company. However, this was contradicted between representatives within the same company with two separate exporters. Additionally, it is very rare and expensive for individual farmers to become independently certified (Personal Communication, 4/16/2018).

Considering the purpose of certifications as provided by the respective organizations, often these goals were redefined by the representatives of exporters interviewed. Or to be more accurate, the purpose of these certifications were redefined as they differ from their usage. The objectives enumerated by the certifications respective websites and through communication with them are overarching goals of ‘sustainability’ and ‘fairness’ but their direct actions are to support and to monitor. But this role of monitoring produces a well-needed effect of increasing traceability of the products. According to the FloCERT standards, “Products sold as Fairtrade as easily identified as Fairtrade in all sales documents (e.g. invoices, delivery notes etc.)” (Small Producer Organizations Compliance Criteria, FloCERT 2018). This is simply one example of the heightened traceability enforced with the certifications. Similar guidelines exist for the other two standards that require documentation and ideally fewer intermediaries along the chain of production so that the certification can be assured from production to exportation and beyond to consumers.



Figure 5: Examples of the certification cards for collectors. Photo courtesy of author. 4/9/2018.

Perversely, when representatives of the major companies listed below were asked why they became certified, every single one replied that their clients request certified vanilla and so that is what they provide. Interestingly, when asking collectors about their experiences with certification, they each withdrew their certification to sell vanilla as a collector (see Figure 4). This document contains two important numbers, the Nombre d'Identité Fiscal (NIF) and the STAT number (which acts as another form of identification). Of the five collectors interviewed, all collected organic certified vanilla, but only three took responsibility to ensure organic quality

themselves. The other two claimed this was the role of the exporters, as they would scan the vanilla upon receiving it to test if organic or not. While some exporters, such as Floribis, do have labs to independently analyze samples, the samples would have to be analyzed by ECOCERT in order to become certified and the farms that produce the vanilla should have to be audited by ECOCERT as well. This perhaps indicates a lack of understanding on the part of the collectors or perhaps unclear questioning on the optimistic side. Otherwise this could present a flaw in the actuality of the organic certification process.

Company	Certifications	Other initiatives/programs:	Interviewed
Agri Resources	Organic, Fair for Life, Fairtrade, Rainforest	Working on new certification with Sustainable Vanilla	Yes

	Alliance, UTZ, UUEB	Initiative to increase traceability	
Aust & Hachmann	Organic, Kosher	Philanthropic efforts such as Macolline and environmental education, and leprosy community support	Yes
Etablissement Germain			No
Floribis	Flocert, AAFEX, Eco-cert, UN Global Compact, NO LONGER Rainforest Alliance		Yes
GVAMA		Works exclusively with planters' associations	No
Lafaza	Flocert, ECOCERT		Yes
Nielsen-Massey	Flocert, Organic, Kosher 1320, Gluten Free		No
Produits Naturel de Madagascar (PNM)			No
ProMaBio	Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, Organic		Yes
Pronatec	Organic, Fairtrade, NaturLand		No
Ramanandraibe Exports			No
Soarary	Fairtrade, Organic, Sustainable Vanille		Yes
Symrise	Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, Organic	Rice advances Premiums Tree nursery to promote diversification of income of farmers and reforestation	Yes
The Vanilla Company	None		Yes
Vanipro	Fairtrade, Fema, Agriculture Biologique, Organic, Kosher, Global Contract		No

Figure 6: Vanilla companies researched and contacted with regards to this project. If interviews were unachievable, information from the respective website was sometimes substituted, although these websites are some cases undeveloped. Blank cells indicate no information available. Most likely, this would indicate that the certifications/other initiatives are absent, but this could not be confirmed.

Company Initiatives:

Also evident in many interviews with farmers, collectors and even exporters is the interchange between initiatives of the companies and the requirements of certifications. Symrise claims its place as pioneer of initiatives to treat farmers fairly, with the joint objective of enhancing the quality of vanilla as many of these initiatives incentivize or make unnecessary early harvest of the vanilla beans. The main three initiatives touted by Symrise media, representatives of Symrise and Symrise reports are the advances of rice in the ‘dead season’ when rice is expensive and the family is not bringing in any income as well as premiums paid to the farmers per kilo of vanilla bought and the collaboration on pépinières, or tree nurseries, which enable vanilla farmers to diversify their income with other products such as cloves, or coffee, as well as contribute to reforestation. According to one representative of Symrise, these are the main benefits to farmers from the company and the certifications are of ‘no use’ and are ‘just a piece of paper’ that do not even certify these effective actions listed above. According to this person, the certifications cause nothing but trouble, but Symrise still abides by them due to customer demand (Personal Communication, 4/6/2018).

Two collectors report distributing premiums for the vanilla provided by the company they collect for (Symrise and ProMaBio) and a third, who runs a larger collecting operation, gives out rice advances of his own. He buys the rice in the season when prices are lowest and stores it in warehouses (see Figure 6) and then sells it at no profit to vanilla farmers in need (Personal Communication, 4/11/2018). Again, this is an incentivization technique to prevent early harvesting of the vanilla as this removes the need for immediate income for food, one of the causes of early harvesting of vanilla that lowers the quality. For exporters, quality is the main objective and if producer’s lives are bettered in the process of obtaining higher quality products, this presents a win-win scenario. However, for other companies, such as ProMaBio and Floribis,

this search for better quality results in “routine activities” rather than projects. This involves intense screening of the vanilla and the preparation of the vanilla themselves to maintain quality and reduce risk of contamination (Personal Communication, 4/5/2018 and 4/19/2018). These types of actions do not produce more fair treatment for the farmers as this generally diminishes the market for vanilla prepared by the farmers, for which the farmers receive higher prices. Being able to prepare a portion of the vanilla themselves also enables the farmers to diversify their income so they do not receive all the proceeds of the vanilla crop within a couple weeks, as would happen if they were to sell only green vanilla (Personal Communication, 4/13/2018).



Figure 7: Storage of rice advances in the facilities of one collector in Sambava. Photo courtesy of author. 4/11/2018.

The other type of company initiative uncovered in conversation with vanilla exporters is straight-forward philanthropy. The primary example of this work is provided by Aust & Hachmann. According to a representative of the company, following the founder’s initial foray into sourcing vanilla from Madagascar, he wished to give back to the community. This return has taken many forms, mainly in the community development field. Some programs include development of the leprosy community and the establishment of an environmental education

opportunity for children, called Macolline. Aust & Hachmann has also funded the creation of several schools (Personal Communication, 4/18/2018). This is another example of how the initiatives of individual companies can bleed into requirements from certifications, as the premiums from Fairtrade are often distributed to the community in the form of community development projects, including schools and hospitals (Personal Communication, 4/16/2018). These projects are not necessarily directly related to vanilla, but are aimed towards raising standard of living and promoting better futures for the Malagasy in general, focused around vanilla farming areas.

Other Key Stakeholders

A third category of actor in the sustainable sourcing of vanilla which fills a varied set of roles would be NGOs. Many NGOs exist specifically in the Malagasy vanilla sector with objectives ranging from ameliorating educational opportunities for vanilla farmers' children to organizing traceability programs and working with the Malagasy government to enforce laws and regulations. One non-profit initiative similar to the actions of Symrise is a tree nursery on the road from Antalaha to Sambava. This pépinière is organized by the NGO La Graine de Vie (The Seed of Life) and funded by a vanilla exporter, La Vanille Fraise. This group raises seedlings of cash crop trees such as cacao, coffee and timber trees that are then distributed freely to any farmers who come and request them (Personal Communication, 4/10/2018). Looking at their log book of recipients of their plants, it appeared the majority of recent visitors were professors and researchers (like myself). Another NGO is the "Vanille Durable de Bemanevika" or Sustainable Vanilla of Bemanevika. According to one informant who works with this NGO and for Rainforest Alliance, she views the work of the non-profit to more directly impact the lives of farmers. The main projects in Bemanevika are the enhancement of school opportunities for the

children of vanilla farmers, which acts double to better the children's prospects in the future as well as reduce the child labor in the vanilla industry. The non-profit directly provides technical framing and social support to the vanilla farmers, specifically chosen as the beneficiaries of this program because players in the vanilla industry were those directly responsible for the creation of the NGO (Personal Communication, 4/16/2018).

One NGO, the Sustainable Vanilla Initiative, was created through the Sustainable Food Lab because they were approached by many vanilla merchants who were interested in creating changes on the industry level. The Sustainable Food Lab mainly works with smallholder farmers sourcing from the third world, such as Madagascar. However, the approach of the Sustainable Vanilla Initiative is through the industry, rather than ground-up with the farmers. Over seventy-five percent of the Madagascar-based vanilla companies are members of the Sustainable Vanilla Initiative and thereby supports and funds their work with the Malagasy government on regulations and enforcement of the already existing laws and regulations. As formerly mentioned, some companies such as Agri Resources, are currently collaborating with the Sustainable Vanilla Initiative on a traceability program. According to a representative of the Sustainable Vanilla Initiative, some of the changes needed would be to eliminate the middlemen and collect taxes from citizens as a first step to create a 'light' traceability of recording sales and getting licenses. The middlemen, such as the collectors and many intermediaries in the purchasing system, have little to no stake in the sustainability of overall vanilla production as their role is quite isolated from the mechanics of production and the demands of clients. This is one of the main reasons this NGO focuses on the industry as a whole, drawing upon the experience of exporters as well as working directly with the government to create institutional change (Personal Communication, 4/13/2018).

The only government sponsored organization I spoke with was the Centre des Services Agricoles (CSA). The CSA works in concert with the Ministry of Agriculture on the main crops of Madagascar (rice and vanilla featured prominently) as well as livestock. Their role centers on research and dissemination of information (or ‘vulgarization’ as the French say) to peasants. Because the CSA focuses most of its efforts towards crops and livestock that are used to feed farmers and their households, vanilla does not rank very high in its priorities. However, some of the initiatives include monitoring and research of diseases of vanilla vines—from collecting samples in the field to sending them to Antananarivo to be analyzed and perhaps find a cure. The representative of the CSA reiterated the lack of use of pesticides or chemical fertilizers and when asked about certifications, explained that the CSA distributes a certification “Fito Sanitaire” that is required for the vanilla to be exported. This certification applies primarily to the exporters as it authorizes the product to be exported, with the general goals of using only clean water throughout the vanilla growing and preparing process and other health related aspects of the production of vanilla. The representative listed the application of law, vulgarization of peasants and collaboration with the government as methods to ameliorate threats to vanilla production, but in responding expressed a separation between the CSA and ‘the government’ despite the fact the CSA is a governmental organization (Personal Communication, 4/5/2018).

Analysis:

The overwhelming sentiment of all the people spoken with from farmers to collectors, from exporters to NGOs is that certifications for Malagasy vanilla are better than nothing. They represent a step in the right direction. They show progress and a rising interest in ethical business dealings and a commitment to quality. But they are not the final destination or the pinnacle of success. They are, and should be, just the beginning.

As shown by the results above, there are many attitudes engaged towards certifications such as Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance and Organic. There are many issues and many benefits. Most exporters interviewed regarded the certifications to some degree as a box to be ticked before exportation, as evidenced by their simple responses that the certifications are what the clients demand. This is not necessarily antithetical to the efficacy of the certification, nor does it imply that the exporters are necessarily grudging about the certifications. Because it is becoming more and more popular among consumer demands, many exporters recognize the certifications as an extra price of production that allow them to compete in the international market. This is clear evidence of the purchasing power exercised by consumers, but also the distance between consumers (especially in First-World countries such as the United States and Europe) and the source of their consumption. Indeed, many of these citizens recognize the presence of injustices in the world as a result of their consumerism, and an increasing number of people are willing and able to pay more for ‘ethical’ products. But these consumers accept the proof of a label declaring a product as Fairtrade or Rainforest Alliance to indicate that the chocolate bar or coffee flavored with vanilla is the epitome of ethical consumerism. To paraphrase the sentiment of what the owner of Lafaza said in our conversation, “These certifications let us grapple with the question of fairness. But consumers need to challenge companies to prove their fairness beyond a label on their product. If the company is truly trying and exerting a concerted effort to be ‘fair’, they will have stories to share, they will be able to show a community, a farmer who is better off since working with the company.”

This leads to one of the pressing issues of the vanilla industry: traceability and trust. This is a purported objective of many exporters currently, but what does this truly mean? Transparency in the process of vanilla production, being able to follow one crop, one kilogram of

vanilla from farm to the consumer's kitchen. This would act to bridge the gap between producers and consumers, in following how the farmers are being treated, in making the process more 'fair.' Certifications certainly aid in this objective by creating a paper trail of the certified product. But, the system is not perfect and there are many ways that people in the chain can 'cheat the system' and mix certified and noncertified vanilla together under the same label. The role of collector, while currently necessary, nonetheless presents an illusory link in the chain of production as sometimes the chain is a direct, single link and in other cases, the number of links is unknown and so the product cannot be accurately traced. The grouping of farmers into associations and cooperatives shows a tendency of moving away from collectors and buying directly from the source, although with the requirement that the product is consolidated. However, considering that these associations do not provide sufficient product for many companies, either more associations would need to form or the collectors will continue to be necessary.

The question of agency for vanilla farmers in this process is also questioned by the results of this study. How do certifications interact or affect vanilla farmers' agency? As previously explained, the vanilla economy is highly individualized, from the individual farmers selling their product on the market, to the collectors that may delegate their collecting work to as many intermediaries as they deem suitable, to the exporters who must find their own clients to supply to. Certainly, exporters benefit from farmers relinquishing some of their individuality in order to form cooperatives and associations as this consolidates the product for the exporters to buy. Through these cooperatives, the farmers are able to become certified with the help of whichever company created the cooperative. In some villages, farmers have multiple cooperatives to choose from, in others (such as the one visited) only one exists and many villages have none. In selling

to cooperatives, the farmers are offered some assurance in their product, but are unable to sell any of their products on the open market to diversify their income. These associations and cooperatives are beneficial to farmers, but limit their agency and could potentially result in limited options for farmers interested in selling their product on the open market. Even for the farmers in these cooperatives, in future years the conditions in the contracts could become more demanding or more strict. This could result in the farmers being unable to turn to alternatives on the open market. While certifications could potentially check this future, they must be flexible to adapt to a future of uncertain conditions and potential injustices to farmers.

But certifications cannot be expected to be a panacea to all the injustices in the vanilla industry. Perhaps unexpectedly, the initiatives of individual companies can either make greater strides or extend the strides of certifications, as seen with the companies Symrise and Lafaza. Especially in the cases of these two companies, the initiatives are directly in response to the issues the farmers are facing. The rice advances Symrise and the collector in Sambava provide sustain the farmers in a basic manner during their ‘dead season’ which potentially are more useful than extra money as rice is more expensive during this ‘dead season’ than it is when the Symrise buys the rice. Although it remains unclear how Symrise’s premium differs from those of Fairtrade certifications, for example (perhaps it applies to all vanilla sold, not only that which is certified), the reforestation provides a two-fold benefit to the farmer’s future as forests increase rainfall as water transpires from the leaves and collects in the atmosphere. This rain is essential for the vanilla plant throughout the year. Additionally, vanilla as a sole mode of income is often insufficient, especially should prices decrease in the future. This income can be supplemented by the products from these trees. Similarly, Lafaza’s approach from the start was to provide a direct link from the Malagasy vanilla farmers to the foreign clients. Thus, since this company was

farmer-oriented, they were able to pay the farmers over twice market price, which contrasts with Fairtrade's price floor that only takes effect when market prices are below livable levels.

The last player that at points seems amorphous, at points seems the scape goat, and at times the missing piece to complete the puzzle is the Malagasy government. While the government is notoriously corrupt and the police force was not effective in preventing thefts of vanilla in any village I have visited (even in those not directly for this project), it is perhaps the easiest and most complex problem to be solved to 'better' the vanilla industry. As shown by the Sustainable Vanilla Initiative, often the laws that would benefit the vanilla industry are present, simply unenforced. In many conversations with key stakeholders in the vanilla industry, many blamed the government or placed the responsibility for creating a better system with the government. But, the same responsibility laid on the government by several exporters is the same responsibility that the collectors place on the exporters. For these responsibilities, namely creating a sustainable model for the future, they appear to be shifted up the chain until it reaches the point that is already broken. At which point, those below that link can absolve themselves of blame for not making change and simply add it to the long list of grievances with the government. This is not fruitful, but also results in difficulty establishing what role the Malagasy government should play and how to successfully compel it to fulfill these duties. This is a far-reaching issue, which requires cooperation and collaboration across many actors, industries and individuals to even begin.

Conclusion:

This study was greatly limited by time constraints. As most meetings with exporters were arranged around others' schedules, difficulties were encountered when certain companies replied too late to be interviewed for this project. Additionally, because the only trips to visit farmers

were sponsored by two vanilla exporters, there was limited randomness in the sampling and so responses were fairly uniform. In future studies, a larger emphasis on farmer's voices in a wider variety of villages could produce more meaningful results. An indexing of Planters' Associations and the contracts used could be a further course of study as well. Because prices for vanilla are presently high, farmers did not reflect on past situations and presented hopeful outlooks for the future. A comparative study taking place if prices were to fall again could potentially reveal to what extent the effect of certifications in a time of need differs from the awareness at a time when prices are high.

While the sampling is relatively limited, it would appear that certifications in the Madagascar vanilla industry present hope for the future but do not fulfill the intentions of their creation. To this extent, the high prices of vanilla play a role as well as the lack of awareness of farmers and collectors of these certifications. This presents a large flaw in the certification system, despite the benefits of certification in creating a more transparent economy. Company initiatives should be emphasized more to customers to further extend the transparency of relationships with farmers. Madagascar as a backdrop to this change produces further complexities of limited government support and efficacy, but should productive change be instituted here it could provide a promising model for other countries with similarly complex situations and markets.

Appendix 1:

Questions for planters:

1. Est-ce que vous vendez votre vanille verte ou déjà préparé ?
2. A qui est-ce que vous vendez votre vanille ? (Est-ce que vous vendez tous votre vanille avec la coopérative ?)
3. Comment est-ce que vous décidez a qui vous vendez la vanille ? Quels sont les options que vous avez ?
4. Pour quoi est-ce que vous avez choisi cette personne/compagnie/coopérative ?
5. Est-ce que vous connaissez les certifications come Fairtrade, Bio, Rainforest Alliance ?
Que pensez-vous de ces certifications ?
6. Quels sont les impacts des grands changements de prix de la vanille pour vous et votre famille ?
7. Est-ce qu'il y a des choses de la production de la vanille que vous voulez avoir des changements ? Lesquels ? Pourquoi ?
8. Quels autres produits est-ce que vous cultivez ?

Questions for collectors :

1. Combien des producteurs est-ce que vous travaillez avec ? Est-ce que vous achetez la vanille verte ou préparé ?
2. Comment est-ce que vous trouvez ces producteurs ?
3. Est-ce que les producteurs régulièrement vendent à vous ou est-ce qu'il y a des changements ?
4. A qui vendez-vous la vanille ?

5. Qu'est-ce que vous faites avec la vanille avant que vous la vendre ? Est-ce que la valeur de la vanille a des changements ?
6. Comment est-ce que vous décidez sur le prix de la vanille ?
7. Est-ce que vous êtes certifiée ou voulez devenir certifiée ? Pourquoi ou pourquoi pas ?
8. Qu'est-ce que vous pensez à propos des certifications comme Fairtrade et Bio ?

General questions for exporters (adapted and added to depending on subject of interview):

1. Est-ce que [compagnie] achète plus de la vanille verte ou déjà préparé ?
2. Vous achetez la vanille d'où ?
3. Est-ce que vous collecteurs sont indépendant ou juste avec [compagnie] ?
4. Vous vendez la vanille à qui ?
5. Est-ce que vous avez des certifications comme Fairtrade, Bio ou Rainforest Alliance ?
Pourquoi ou pourquoi pas ?
6. Qu'est-ce que vous pensez de ces certifications ?
7. Est-ce que [compagnie] a des autres projets/initiatives avec les planteurs ?
8. Avec les grands changements de prix de la vanille, quels sont les méthodes de [compagnie] pour se protéger/continuer la production ?

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