

Revisiting moral economy and seeking mob justice: Security and the vanilla commodity chain in Madagascar

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Vanilla prices have reached a breaking point. In April 2017, a kilogram of high-quality *Vanilla planifolia* reached US\$600, representing a 14-fold price spike since 2013.¹ While price increases may present opportunities for downstream actors in the commodity chain, especially in Madagascar where smallholders produce 80 per cent of the world's supply, they also pose complex challenges for the market and individual livelihoods.

High prices have driven increases in early harvests of unripe 'green' pods, thereby diminishing quality.² Previous price spikes saw smallholders foregoing vital food crops desperately needed to make it through the 'hunger season' – the lean period prior to harvest when food is scarce³ and drive speculation and clearing of rainforests to tap into surging demand. This is especially troubling given that Madagascar's vanilla-growing region of SAVA ('the vanilla triangle') houses some of the world's most unique and threatened flora and fauna in the world.⁴ The recent price surge has been particularly egregious, exacerbating claims of child labour, worsening security concerns surrounding crop theft and violence, and increasing rumours of exporters' illicit connections to illegal rosewood harvesting.⁵

It is within this milieu that my research team and I were entering this past July. We were packed into a village home located in the heart of Madagascar's northeast 'vanilla triangle' trying to get some idea of material effects of the price spike. At first glance, the spike brought visible wealth as everywhere we looked we saw new consumer goods, including off-mark Chinese motorbikes, flashy neon-coloured sofas, tin roofing and solar panels.⁶ However, it has also brought a wave of insecurity and extreme anxiousness as many spoke of sleepless

¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/e0e2fc16-28db-11e7-bc4b-5528796fe35c?mhq5j=e1> (accessed 06/06/2017). Prices in 2013 were US\$42.8/kg (Informa UK Ltd 2016)

² High-quality vanilla is usually measured in vanillin content between 1.8-2.0%. Recent harvests have seen anywhere between 0.8-1.2%.

³ Locally known as '*periode de soudure*' (see Laney and Turner 2015).

⁴ Madagascar houses over 12 thousand plant species, 90 per cent endemic, and over 50 lemur species (Myers et al. 2000).

⁵ Patel 2008; Schuurman and Lowry 2009.

⁶ It is the country's second most exported crop with proceeds of up to...

nights in their vanilla fields attempting to ward off thieves who want to cash in on the high prices.

In fact, security concerns overwhelmed our conversations. For example, the head of the growers' association, Joseph, highlighted, '...that when there's a lot of money in the area, there is theft' and when a thief is caught, more times than not, they are compelled to '...take matters into their own hands'.⁷ When asked why the local police are not called, another grower responded: 'we do not trust the gendarmes...they are the ones who sell guns to the *dahalo* (local bandit)'. We then asked what they do if they caught a *dahalo* stealing their vanilla. Joseph replied with a straight but rather deadpan expression, 'dead immediately'.

Tragically, there is no shortage of such stories coming from smallholders and across the region. Ever since the price spike began in late 2104, there have been numerous media reports of *vindicta populaire* or 'mob justice' including threats, extortion, reprisals and murder by individuals and communities.⁸ Yet, while this uptick in violence deeply tragic and by no means trivial, it would be simplistic to chalk up these responses as irrational or chaotic actions taken by a desperate and precariousness peasant class. On the contrary, the almost mundane descriptions of reprisals to vanilla theft, and moreover, the lack of response by authorities described above, signals a shifting moral economy and real desire to seek out new forms of social justice.

It has been over 50 years since EP Thompson's adoption of the term 'moral economy' in his seminal essay (1971) 'The moral economy of the English working crowds in the eighteenth-century.' In it, Thompson describes the 'bread-wage' nexus and the condition of the 'rural underclasses' who were rioting in response to uneven taxation and unfair pricing of grain. Yet, the 'bread riots' caused by 'mobs' represented for Thompson, not thoughtless 'rebellions of the belly' but rather 'direct popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives'.⁹

Thomson's view is that there is a 'moral economy' based on identifiable and agreed upon '...social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions' playing out under a new political economy (1971, 79; see also Wolford and Keene 2015, 576). For Thompson, there was little doubt that direct action had popular support and was legitimised by an overwhelming belief that 'in times of dearth, the regulation of prices ought to be enforced, and those responsible in doing so must be held accountable' (1979, 113).

⁷ Anonymous interviews (July 16 2017)

⁸ Difficult to get accurate crime statistics on the actual number of deaths linked to vanilla.

⁹ This was not against wages as expressed in more nineteenth century direct action (1971, 79).

...one should not take an ‘economistic’ picture of the food riot, as a direct, spasmodic, irrational response to hunger – a picture which is itself a product of a political economy which diminished human reciprocities to the wage-nexus.

Thompson’s work on moral economy has laid the foundation for others concerning with social movements within times of economic change. Jim Scott’s ‘subsistence ethic’ of the Southeast Asian peasant also took on resistance symbols of ‘standards of justice and equity’ similar to that of Thompson. For Scott, small acts which countered standard economic activity was ‘not just a problem of calories and income but is a question of peasant conceptions of social justice, of rights and obligations, of reciprocity’ (1976, vii).

Nevertheless, while the concept of moral economy has emerged as a useful analytical tool drawing attention to ‘norms, values, and expectations related to the livelihoods of subordinate classes during major economic transformations’ (Neumann 1999, 37 see also Palomera and Vetta 2016; Wolford 2010; Kull 2004; Watts and Carney 2004; McCarthy 2002; Escobar 2001; Moore 1998; Peluso 1994), it has been less effective in addressing just and progressive outcomes and a means of restitution for lost or stolen property.

To do this we must turn to a wider set of literature situated within environmental justice (EJ) or as Schlosberg (2009) notes as a way of understanding ‘issues of equity, or the distribution of environmental ills and benefits’. Environmental justice historically has its roots within empirically focused case studies of toxic waste dumping in northern post-industrial contexts (mainly US) (Walker 2012; Bullard 2000) and its effects on disadvantaged communities of colour (Pulido 2000). Attempts by political ecologists and others to branch out at a more global south lens has made some nice inroads around different themes concerning the misappropriation of resources and benefit distribution in the global south (Schroeder 2008; Schroeder et al., 2010), including conservation (Martin et al. 2016; Fraser et al. 2016), uneven development (McDonald 2002) and climate change (Nixon 2011; Martinez-Alier et al 2016). Important theoretical interventions have debated the conceptions of distributive and procedural justice against a more representative important ‘third’ pillar of recognition and shortcomings, which account spatial and historical complexity (Fraser 2001). Others, meanwhile, seek to illustrate the ‘social, cultural and symbolic and institutional conditions *underlying* poor distributions in the first place’ (Schlosberg 2009, 518 emphasis in original).

The aim of the following paper is to discuss the impending security crisis surrounding the vanilla commodity chain through an integrated moral economy and environmental justice lens – two separate but interconnected literatures long overdue for critical side by side analysis.

Part one outlines our theoretical intervention and places for continuity and difference. We argue that conceptions of moral economy and peasant social movements and resistance could enhance within a full engagement with current economic justice literature, which for the most part fails to interact in any meaningful way. While moral economy provides a an appropriate backdrop to better understand shifting political and social changes during periods of major economic change, it is rather some of the more politically engaged environmental justice literature which can bring us across the ‘finish line’ in terms of finding potential just outcomes and progressive ends (Ferguson, 2015). In section two, we detail the vanilla crisis. The political economic and socio-ecological of vanilla security crisis provides a unique empirical lens by in which to explore these dynamics. We use Geertz’s (1973) use of ‘thick description to provide a detailed account of the material relations and cultural meaning of the crisis in the smallholders’ perspective. We draw on over 250 socio-economic surveys with Malagasy vanilla growers, small-scale farmers, and 40 semi-structured interviews with collectors, exporters, government officials and industry experts.¹⁰

Early results show that we entering a new political economy where neoliberal reforms in the past 25 years have shifted power away from what was a highly centralized market mainly controlled by the state and monopolized by a few international suppliers towards newly-empowered landscape of mid-level collectors and growers. This ‘power from below’ cannot be attributed to only one factor, but a number of multidimensional levers or mechanisms of access and control. For instance, the recent ‘rosewood massacre’ and the influx of new ‘hot money’ – cash which is now being laundered through the vanilla market– has transformed the vanilla market into a ‘salvage frontier’ (Tsing 2001). In this frontier, decrease in quality due to political economic, and political and ecological change has raised the stakes in a highly politically charged and now dangerous market where agricultural theft and environmental crime have become the norm in the circulation and accumulation of capital (Moore 2015). The discussion and conclusion draws out some of the main findings and develops some of the claims of justice from the smallholder perspective. We agree with Neumann (1998) that Thompson’s insistence that the moral economy ‘is continuously regenerating itself as an anti-capitalist critique.’ (1999, 42) and furthermore, ‘that there are situations where threats of livelihoods are so pervasive that gender, class, and generational conflicts are submerged and a broader solidarity emerges (1999, 42). In fact, ‘moral crimes’, as Peluso and others note,

¹⁰ This work was conducted over the 2016-17 vanilla campaign within the region of SAVA and in the UK and USA. The survey was administered by CURSA, a regional University based in Antalaha, Madagascar.

can be observed as a way to strike back against segments of state power, even with a 'highly differentiated peasantry' (1992, 11), but falls short of striving towards more progressive outcomes. We hope to counter this, and bring forward some justice claims 'from below' in hopes of highlighting just and fair ends.