

GSGS Research Grant Report

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Topic: Exploring Value and Values in Capitalist Motion Through the Making of Taste, Traceability, and Expertise: The Case of Philippine Specialty Coffee

Academic year: 2025-2026

Amount awarded: ₱150,000

Research Overview:

Globally, specialty coffee has emerged as a particular foodway and food system entangled within the complexities of modernity, globalization, and contemporary capitalist systems. Existing scholarship done in the context of several growing and consuming areas have noted the parallel existence of specialty coffee's capacity of being and bringing about "better coffee" vis-a-vis post-Fordist and neoliberal operations and the problems that come with it.

The research conducted through this grant directly connects with my on-going dissertation project that uses Philippine Specialty Coffee as a case to further elucidate the entanglement of specialty coffee with contemporary capitalism's operations. By looking into the circulation of specialty coffee material (e.g. coffee beans) and ideas (e.g. taste and quality, "farm-to-cup" narratives, knowledge and skills), I wanted to investigate how their entangled actors and processes create value – in the economic sense – and values – in the social, moral, political sense. Two inquiries structured my activities: First, how do the otherwise subjective constructions of taste, traceability, and expert knowledge become incorporated into larger social totalities as objectivized norms? And second, how do constructions of taste, traceability, and expert knowledge determine the worth/s of Philippine Specialty Coffee in different contexts.

Use of funds:

The amount awarded through the grant was used to cover travel expenses of three separate trips. The ₱33,638 was utilized for roundtrip airfare (Manila-Jakarta) and accommodations for the purpose of attending the World of Coffee Asia 2025 held at the Jakarta International Convention Center in Indonesia from May 15-17, 2025¹. ₱66,453 was utilized for roundtrip airfare (Japan-Philippines; Manila-Davao) to conduct the first leg of fieldwork from August 2, 2025-September 23, 2025. Finally, ₱49,909 was utilized for roundtrip airfare (Japan-Philippines; Manila-General Santos-Cagayan de Oro) to conduct the second leg of fieldwork from October 3, 2025-November 24, 2025.

Activities:

During the research period covered by this grant, multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in collaboration with several actors and stakeholders occupying different

¹ Attendance to this coffee expo was one of the activities done as part of my field mapping activities conducted from April 7, 2025 – May 27, 2025.

positions in the Philippine Specialty Coffee chain. These mostly involved – but were not limited to – coffee farms, roasteries and coffee shops, training facilities and educational institutions, and coffee-related expos and competitions. The intention was how such contexts and the engagements that transpire within them – and across them – contribute to the constitution of taste, traceability, and expertise. Likewise, I also paid attention to how such contexts and engagements were being shaped and influenced by notions of taste, traceability, and expertise.

My ethnographic fieldwork was structured to be both a literal and figurative “following” of coffee material and coffee ideas along the various engagements in their production, transmission, and consumption. The main purpose was to collect empirical data to be used in my PhD. dissertation. The trips also contributed to broadening the network of coffee actors that can possibly be consulted and collaborated with as I progress with my dissertation project.

Qualitative interviews and participant observation were the primary methods of gathering such data. 26 semi-structured key-informant interviews with a total of 31 participants and 1 focus-group discussion serve as one set of data sources. One more set of data comes from the back-and-forth informal interactions that arise organically throughout the daily engagements and coffee engagements of the many actors I’ve encountered and collaborated with throughout the fieldwork period. Finally, my own experiences and insights gained through participant observation ² tempered and informed further through conversation and validation with my co-actors stand as another set of data.

For the purpose of this report, I discuss 3 points below:

I. The situation at coffee farms and its relation to “quality”

Approximately 46 days of the total fieldwork proper were spent at coffee farms, most of which were spent in the Arabica coffee farms of the Municipality of Bansalan, Davao del Sur, Mindanao Philippines. Courtesy visits to the pertinent local government offices were conducted and a certification to conduct research in areas that fall under the recognized Ancestral Domain of the Bagobo-Tagabawa Indigenous Cultural Community was obtained from the provincial office (Region XI) of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples.

With respect to this coffee growing area, it was clear that coffee did not exist as its own isolated realm. It was very much entangled – with the economy of vegetable-cash crops that most if not all the farmers involved in coffee were also farming, with the stricter implementation of land-use and land tenure rules that govern protected areas and Ancestral Domains such that the legitimacy of their presence and activities seem to be facing precarious futures, with already strained social relations among farmers facing new tensions brought about by the currently prevailing market

² The extent with which this was done differed from situation to situation. In general, each instance can be described as falling within the spectrum of “sideline observer – involved volunteer – primary activity actor”.

dynamics of specialty coffee. Against this backdrop, “quality” and how to maintain or achieve it was an important concern because according to farmers – and truthfully, to all coffee actors – “better quality makes more money”.

Certainly “quality” is a fuzzy and ambiguous idea, with each actor and each context operationalizing definitions and standards in one way or another. For many of the farmers I collaborated with at least, they were adamant about their role and their contribution to a coffee’s overall worth. “Quality” originates from the kind of coffee trees (species and varietal) they had, the way they cultivated and maintained them (planting, pruning, fertilizing), and the manner of processing their coffee cherries into green coffee beans. As such, the extent to which things are unknown (they don’t know or are unsure of the pedigree of their trees) or uncontrollable (the weather and the temperature, pest infestations) are recognized by them to negatively affect their coffees. On this point, one question I am ruminating on would be how much “knowing” and how much “control” would be beneficial, and how much would result in subordination?

In comparison, the measurement of quality on the seems to be something perceived to be mostly outside of their hands. Cup scores given by Q-graders (coffee actors who evaluate coffee) are often used as a metric, as well as whether their coffees gain recognition in competitions or not. The prices their coffees go for tend to also be seen and used as a proxy for quality: very much, “that it makes more money means it is better quality”.

II. Making a cup of coffee: From Picking, Processing, Roasting, and Cupping

The extended period of stay at coffee farms allowed me to be present during the onset of the 2025-2026 harvest season – which came relatively late and as of this writing, is described to be lean compared to the previous year. During this time, I was able to pick, process, and roast my own lots of coffee with the collaboration and assistance of various coffee actors.

The experience made it clear that the kind of coffee quality that the specialty market demands – in the broadest sense – is meticulous and labor intensive. This is especially in the context of the Philippines wherein coffee production by small holder farmers (having not more than 3 hectares of land cultivated) is still manual, particularly in picking coffee cherries from the trees and sorting good cherries/green coffee beans from defective ones.

It also brought in view questions of access at farm level: to the baseline materials need for processing such as raised drying beds, to the knowledge, instruments, and time needed for taking constant measurements of sugar levels, pH levels, and moisture content that increase the possibility (but never reaching the level of 100%-certainty) for achieving a desired quality outcome, and to the linkages to buyers who

are in search of what one's coffee has to offer and – ideally – is willing to purchase it at the price that makes all the effort invested worthwhile.

Beyond the farms, such questions of for whom are there barriers and for whom there are none persist in the realm of roasting coffee, brewing coffee, and evaluating a coffee's qualities. All of these entangle with what goes on at the agricultural end of coffee production and are all inevitably interrelated. Nevertheless, all are markedly different realm of expertise.

Interacting with roasters, shop owners, coffee educators, and even members of the academe who have one way or another integrated some aspect of coffee – mostly in relation to the areas of science and business – entry and the building of credibility in these realms is greatly influenced by the amount of capital – economic and symbolic – that one can invest. To borrow a phrasing used by Clifford Geertz, would this mean that for specialty coffee, it's just capitalism all the way down?

III. *The collaborative co-constitution of taste, traceability, and expertise*

Taste, traceability, and expertise are, at their roots, subjective in that preference and agendas can never be decoupled from it. In continuing to investigate the dynamics of taste, traceability, and expertise in specialty coffee, one process that seems to be necessary for any of their iterations to gain currency – economically and symbolically – is for their characteristic “subjectiveness” to be obscured if not transcended, such that they reach a degree or status of “objectivity” even temporarily. Said another way, in many coffee engagements, the first step – implicitly or explicitly – is for them to determine which preference, or standard, or rubric, will serve as the basis.

Within specialty coffee, there is something known as “calibration”. For roasting and brewing, the act of calibration pertains to adjusting parameters to consistently achieve a desired flavor/profile in the output; in cupping or evaluation of coffees, calibration refers to how cuppers would attempt to align with one another – and with the head judge/evaluator in particular – so that they are on the “same page” to minimize discrepancy and bias in their evaluations.

At this point, I am considering the feasibility and appropriateness of theorizing the process of turning subjectives into objectives as “calibration”. This is still a work in progress and requires deeper analysis of the gathered data as well as related literature.