The True Price of Quality: On the Infrastructures of Tea in Postcolonial Kenya

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Ultimately, the bottom line of competitiveness will be the quality of tea we produce. I therefore appeal to our farmers to strive to produce quality tea that will help fight poverty.

-Kenya's third president, Mwai Kibaki, 21st July 2011

In Kenya, tea is a "political crop" (Ochieng 2007). Tea is one of Kenya's largest exports and is an important foreign exchange earner and source of revenue. At the same time, tea is key to the livelihoods many smallholder farmers in central Kenya and west of the Rift Valley, so that the price of tea is a recurrent focus of political campaigns. Keenly aware of tea's political and economic value, county governments grapple with the national government over tea policy, while key industry actors challenge and resist attempts at reform. These politics around the "true" price of tea are situated in and regenerated through the infrastructures through which Kenyan tea is produced, processed and marketed.

In January 2020, in his State of the Nation address, Kenya's fourth president Uhuru Kenyatta informed Kenya of his commitment to tackling the problem of the low price of tea. His speech was aimed at the country's hundreds of thousands of smallholder tea farmers who collectively, as shareholders of the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA), produce 60 per cent of Kenya's tea. In contrast to his predecessor, Mwai Kibaki, quoted above, Kenyatta suggested that low prices were not a reflection of low quality. Rather, the true price of smallholder tea was being distorted by colluding interests at the Mombasa tea auction where much of Kenya's tea is bought and sold.

The President's speech came at a moment when tea was selling for record-low prices at the auction. It also coincided with the authors' fieldwork in Mombasa among the brokers who value tea (Skrydstrup), and in Kericho, west of Kenya's Rift Valley, on the multinational tea plantations and smallholder farms that produce it (Elliott). Drawing on ethnographic material from these sites, in this article we examine the conflicting truth regimes about the price of Kenyan tea that converge on debates about "quality". We make sense of these conflicting regimes through an analytical approach that foregrounds the infrastructures through which tea has historically and contemporarily been produced and traded.

This framed picture of Kenya's third President Mwai Kibaki comes into view for every visitor to the EATTA auction, as it hangs in the stair hall up to the theatre immediately after the restricted access entrance. (Photo: Skrydstrup, 2020).

The Mabroukie tea plantation in Limuru, central Kenya. Established in 1924 by Brooke Bond Kenya (later Unilever Kenya), Mabroukie was the Kenyan colony's first large-scale tea plantation replete with its own factory. While large, multinational tea plantations dominate the landscape west of Kenya's Rift Valley, Mabroukie today is the only multinational-owned tea plantation east of the Rift. (Photo: Elliott, 2018)

How tea moves: The infrastructures of tea

Tea's arrival in Kenya closely followed the establishment of the East African Protectorate in 1895. Initially a plantation crop, tea was legally restricted to colonial settlers and multinational companies. Following the Second World War and growing anti-colonial sentiment, moves were made to loosen these restrictions, and in 1954 the legal ban on Africans growing tea was lifted. The KTDA, mandated to promote smallholder tea production, was owned and controlled by the state in conjunction with multinational tea companies and determined who could grow tea, where and how tea could be grown, and was empowered to inspect, grade, accept or reject smallholder leaf (Ochieng 2010: 142).

Introducing smallholder tea production was a huge project that demanded significant resources and investment in infrastructure such as nurseries, factories and roads. KTDA's administrative powers, strict control and monopoly over smallholders became a source of contention among farmers who felt that their interests were not adequately represented. Contentions between smallholders, agribusiness and the state induced a number of reforms to the KTDA through the decades that followed the 1954 reform, ultimately culminating in KTDA's privatization in 2000 (Ochieng 2010). The Kenya Tea Development Agency, with the same acronym as its predecessor, was a private holding company owned by the smallholders who held shares in it, diminishing the government's role in the smallholder sector to regulatory functions.

Tea factories send the majority of processed tea for sale via the Mombasa tea auction, a trading platform which traces its genealogy to the East India Company's London Tea

Auction (est. 1679). By the mid-20th Century, trade peaked in terms of volumes handled, when about one third of all teas worldwide went through London. However, in Kenya a handful of tea producers, buyers and brokers formed East African Tea Trade Association (EATTA) and held the first tea auction in Nairobi in 1956. In 1969, six years after Independence, the auction moved to the shipping port of Mombasa, where it continues to this day as the largest tea auction in the world in terms of throughput. The London Tea Auction held its last sale in 1998 and Mombasa now claims to be "The New Rome", where all tea trails lead.

A multinational tea company's "buying centre" for smallholder tea in rural Kericho (Photo: Elliott, 2020).

Unilever tea factory, Limuru. Lipton is a Unilever brand which blends tea from a range of sources, including tea grown on its own and other multinational plantations as well as higher quality smallholder tea (Photo: Elliott, 2018).

In 2008, further measures were taken to liberalize the smallholder sector, so that multinational and private tea factories could also purchase green leaf from smallholders. Today, smallholder tea farming areas are dotted with buying centers for numerous factories, and individual farmers often supply multiple factories. New private factories have mushroomed off the back of the reform as investors compete for smallholder leaf. These new tea infrastructures overlay the late-colonial infrastructures described above.

Assessing qualities in aprons

In the course of Skrydstrup's ethnography at the EATTA Tea Trade Centre in Mombasa, he participated in several tea tastings performed by brokers as part of their weekly routine to prepare the sales catalogue for the auction. The tea taster would either be an apprentice or a certified taster. The taster would have an assistant who prepared everything: lining up about 250-350 different cups up in rows under standardized lightning, making the qualities of the dry leaves visible and comparable, the nose (smell) and appearances of the infused leaves and at the bottom the color, hue, saturation and taste of the tea liquid discernable for the connoisseur. Enter the tea broker in his tie and apron holding the "golden spoon". The assistant would then jot down the sensory/pallet experience for every cup captured in the tea lingo numbering several hundred terms, like bakey (overfired in the manufacturing process), malty (slightly over-fired teas, can be desirable), polyphenols (stringent compounds in the liquid). Brokers claim that a few master tea tasters are able to distinguish upwards 2500 different teas.

After the tea tasting, brokers compile the sales catalogue for the teas they have been appointed to sell. Tea lots are auctioned according to an "open outcry system", where the broker "reads the mood of the room", as described by one senior broker, and then tries to knock off the teas at the highest price. If there is no interest in a certain lot or the bids are too low, the broker is entitled to call it an "outlot" and defer bidding to the next auction. Apart from tasting, preparing catalogues and samples and knocking off teas "in the docket", brokers write market reports, undertake factory visits to advise on market trends and fine tune processing and often socialize in various sports clubs with buyers and blenders and other members of the so-called "tea fraternity" in Mombasa. One senior broker described the objective ethos of his profession in this way:

> I'm in tea and I don't want to go into politics. This is my work and this is how I do it. For me to do it, I've got to be qualified. I've got to have the know-how. I've got to be professional. And I've got to have the knowledge of the crop and I've got to have the knowledge of processing. That's it!

Generally, the brokers operate with an ethos of objectivism, professionalism and integrity, which is regulated by formal rules (the EATTA Rule Book) and more informal social etiquette, revolving around memberships in the prestigious sports clubs of Mombasa.

Above: Wesley from Tea Brokers East Africa Ltd. is tasting samples to prepare the auction catalogue. Notice the dry leaf on top, the infused leaf below and the liquid at the bottom. The broker assess qualities of all three states . Below: Mary, Joe and Cecilia from Combrok Tea Brokers Ltd are discussing whether a Pekoe Fanning One is bakey or not, meaning overfired in the manufacturing process (Photos: Skrydstrup, 2019).

"The President talked to the wrong people"

In the aftermath of President Uhuru's State of the Union address, which explicitly suggested that low prices were the result of unequal exchange relations within the tea supply chain, many brokers shrugged their shoulders and said that the President had "talked and listened to the wrong people". However, in closer circles, they could be more candid: "Don't you think it is contradictory," said one prominent broker and continued "when he [the President] says there are cartels where there are brokers, but states that he wants 80% of all our teas produced to be sold through the auction?" The broker provided the answer himself:

> As the President, he can't be contradicting himself. He knows there are cartels. He also knows that the farmer is not getting his rightful returns. But if you look at how much a broker is getting from the 480 million kilos of tea of which 70% goes through the auction: 0.75% in commission. What is KTDA earning for offering their service to the farmer: 2-3%. Then go and work out how much a farmer is losing because he has employed a broker who offers a service by displaying and continuously improving the quality that he is producing. So where are the cartels?

Across the board, brokers explained the historically low prices with reference to the forces of supply and demand and the critical issue of quality. In most of these storylines, brokers defined quality in agrarian terms, such as the weather, terroir and methods of cultivation and processing. Lamenting the current direction of the industry, a broker evoked a certain nostalgia for the time when there was stricter agrarian control: "In the past there were regulations. You could not plant a bush without a license. You could not establish a factory unless you had your own tea. This was 'the-old-set-up', as they say. But now tea is all over the place".

Asked about why Rwandan teas and small-scale KTDA farms in central Kenya fetched much higher prices at the auction than so-called plantation teas, a broker explained this with reference to the legacies of agrarian infrastructures:

> KTDA was set up with very high standards, defined by the Special Crops Development Authority set up by the British. When Kenyans took over, they continued to improve on those standards. So, a farmer would not be allowed to grow tea unless they followed the dotted line and in every aspect managed the farm. Today the standards of tea - particularly in Central Kenya - is amazing and remains some of the best in the world. (…) The plantations on the other hand, were set up basically to supply tea to the home market [implying the British Empire] and they were at that particular time focused on producing mass volumes, rather than good quality and that is the difference.

This justification for differential price formation at the auction with reference to the temporal trajectories of tea quality as an imperial and post-colonial project resonates well with Sarah Besky's work (2020) on the auction in Kolkata (India), where good tea quality registers as uniform, consistent and replicable on a mass scale. It follows that the tastings performed by the brokers in Kolkata and the associated lingo of briskness, brightness, biscuit and burnt in effect discipline and control the bodies of female tea pluckers on plantations thousands of miles away (Besky 2020: 49). According to Besky, this standardized quality reproduces the colonial plantation system and renders the Indian tea industry resistant to change and reform. In the Kenyan tea industry, quality seems more of a discursive/vernacular artifact that serves contemporary justifications of asymmetrical exchanges within the supply chain. Here, the disciplining in Besky's sense is rendered through the regulatory visits of brokers to factories to advise on manufacturing. However, brokers' differentiation between smallholder high quality and plantation low quality, broadly located east of the Rift Valley in central Kenya (where the tea industry is dominated by smallholders) versus west of the Rift Valley (where plantations dominate) sits awkwardly with Besky's argument about quality in the Indian tea industry.

Regarding this distinction between the quality of small-holder teas vs. the plantations, a prominent broker noted that the multinational plantations produce most of their teas through machine plucking, which is "the lowest of the lowest quality, as a machine picks everything". Here, the machinery/labor issue is the critical issue, however this distinction between the labor of the hand vs the machine in the making of quality amounts to more than different modes of agrarian production. It is an infrastructural layer produced by particular historical trajectories.

However, tea brokers in Mombasa do not speak in any unified and essentialized voice. Rather than the properties of soil, weather and good crop husbandry, another senior broker introduced the properties of markets to decode quality:

> Quality is relative to the market (...) What I do as a broker is to assess the capability of the factory to meet [different] preferences. And I'll advise them. If your leaf is not noticeably black, because you have used machines, I'll rather give you advice to make teas that are better in hue, which will attract the markets in Europe. If I look at your teas and they are almost jet black and labor is not an issue, then I'll advise you as a producer to make teas that will attract the Pakistani and Afghanistan markets. And they'll pay better anyway.

In this notion of quality, we begin to see something more than a uniform notion of standardized quality disciplining the bodies of tea pickers. We are led to see how the properties of markets and the performance of brokers to make such markets seem critical to understand quality as a process of qualification (MacKenzie, Muniesa & Siu 2007). In "The Economy of Qualities", Callon states: "All quality is obtained at the end of a process of qualification, and all qualification aims to establish a constellation of characteristics, stabilized at least for a while, which are attached to the product and transform it temporarily into a tradeable good in the market." (Callon et al. 2002:199). However, does this constructivist - and agnostic - notion of quality capture what is at stake? We are missing a deeper temporal dimension; the performativity of brokers is predicated on a layered tea infrastructure produced by colonial legacies through the coming into being of smallholders versus plantations and the stabilization of KTDA in postcolonial Kenya. Brokers' quality distinctions between "east and west of Rift" reproduce the dialectic between smallholder production and plantations, which constitutes part and parcel of this layered infrastructure of tea.

"We are not enjoying the fruits of our teas"

In spite of the emphasis on the superior quality of smallholder tea emanating from brokers' tasting rooms and the auction hall in Mombasa, this superiority was not reflected in prices paid to Kericho smallholders in early 2020. Elliott spent time with members of a smallholder cooperative supplying tea to a Kericho-based multinational, though many also sent tea to KTDA, other multinationals and private factories. A recurring theme amongst farmers was the question of why smallholder quality was not rewarded by price. As one farmer put it, "We should be earning more money. We are not enjoying the fruits of our tea. It's a lot of work on the ground".

From its inception in the 1950s, quality was at the heart of the smallholder tea project in Kenya and deemed essential to its success. The early smallholder tea project in Kenya was highly coordinated and controlled by the colonial authorities. In particular, emphasis was placed on "plucking discipline" and the "two leaves and a bud" that provided the benchmark for "proper" tea harvesting across the British Empire. As a result, smallholder tea was superior to plantation tea, where hired laborers were paid according to volume and thus incentivized to prioritize quantity over quality.

The job of producing quality tea in Kenya has been that of the smallholder. Critics of contract farming arrangements have argued that agribusiness shifts the burden of quality standards to smallholders while sector-wide low prices endure, whereas agribusiness profits from economies of scale. During Elliott's fieldwork, industry actors would often explain the quality disparity between plantation and smallholder tea through the romanticization of smallholder labor. "A farmer will look at it [their tea farm] like a pet", one factory manager commented. Yet, conversations with smallholders highlighted another side of the quality story. Many expressed frustration at KTDA's lack of flexibility and readiness to reject farmers' tea. KTDA was "too stuck on quality", one smallholder complained.

A smallholder demonstrating "two leaves and a bud" tea plucking (Photo: Elliott, 2020).

Since 2008, smallholders have been able to sell green leaf to factories of their choosing. Multinationals have proved popular due to their superior collection services, looser quality requirements compared to KTDA and, initially, decent prices. Recognizing the superior quality of smallholder tea, multinationals process smallholder leaf separately from that harvested from their own estates and sell it under its own "mark", typically at a higher price. Nevertheless, in the context of rock-bottom prices in early 2021, suspicion lingered among smallholder outgrowers about multinational companies' practices, such as mixing smallholder tea with plantation tea to improve its quality and suppressing prices paid to outgrowers. The Kericho County Governor presented an alternative interpretation for enduring low prices. Because multinationals such as Unilever produce tea on plantations in Kenya but also have subsidiary companies which buy Kenyan tea, he argued, this allows them to buy high quality smallholder tea at low prices which they can blend with lesser quality plantation tea.

In addition to the multinational companies, tea brokers were accused of distorting what the Governor described as "proper principles of supply and demand". Farmers east of the Rift received significantly higher payments, which the Governor hinted was due to ethnic favoritism among brokers who hail from central Kenya, a region that has historically been politically and economically empowered relative to other parts of the country. The Governor lifted the cup of tea he had been served by his secretary to his lips as he enacted broker tasting: "'25 dollars'", he pronounced. "Next, my home region: 'More polyphenols: 30 dollars!'". His critique attested to a theme that was reiterated throughout Elliott's fieldwork: that brokers' methods of valuation were not "objective" and thus could not establish "true prices".

The tea auction hall during primary grades on a Tuesday. Notice the monitors by the docket are black. During my first fieldwork in March 2019, they were live and recording all transactions (Photo: Skrydstrup 2020).

Waiting for "true price"

Through articulations about quality, as expressed by the brokers, smallholder farmers and County Governor cited above, conflicting truth regimes emerge about the price of tea. For the Kenyan President, the price of tea became a political, actionable problem, and his directive expedited a range of initiatives to restore tea's "true price". However, the multiple and divergent political interests at stake in Kenya's tea infrastructures make reform a complex task. In 2020, the government announced that all tea would be required to pass through the auction, reinforcing its place as obligatory passage point within Kenya's tea infrastructure. While the auction was widely suspected for its lack of transparency, it remained the key public infrastructure through which the government could govern the tea trade and facilitated the extraction of taxes and revenues from the financialization of tea. The Government's directive has met resistance from otherwise opposed parties, such as county governors and multinationals, who have an interest in maintaining or fostering direct sales mechanisms – that is, private infrastructure between producers and buyers – as a means of establishing higher prices.

As part of the government's efforts to recenter the auction in Kenya's tea infrastructure, an initiative to move from the traditional outcry system to a new e-trade platform has long been in the making. The rationale for introducing electronic trading is the expectation that an e-platform would bring transparency, more buyers in actual competition and thus higher prices and higher earnings to the farmers. Yet, the resistance to this new mode of trading among brokers, the Herculean organizational task of implementing it, the lack of stable digital infrastructures and COVID-19 has delayed the official launch date. As of yet, the tea trade is still waiting to be digitalized. As one broker said in a recent interview with a twist of irony: "We are still waiting for them to switch it on."

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*All photos provided by the authors.

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