

Background

I learned about Obubu through one of those interesting random events of life. I was presented with some Obubu pamphlets one afternoon in the office of the International Programs in Cornell, I had just returned from India on a school trip and had visited several tea farms. I was naturally interested in them and started to browse through them, and was impressed with their high quality, and how the farm and the people were portrayed. I have always been interested in Japan, always felt a certain attraction towards its culture, its people and was intrigued with its agriculture. I always had Japan in my places to visit priority list, I wanted to go and understand how such a small country could maintain the lives of so many, be successful in its agriculture, and also hold a long history as a thriving nation. Somehow that day I knew that this was my opportunity. The more I learned about Obubu, its purpose and its mission, the more I could see myself sharing those goals on a personal level. That's why I came to Japan.



Image 1: My coffee farm in CR seen from the mountains. The yellow church lies in the middle of our town, surrounded by coffee fields.

Purpose

Any commodity's value chain is marked by at least three players : a producer, a trader and a retailer. In my family's coffee farm, we produce and process the coffee but we sell to a coffee trader. This coffee trader will take some of our coffee and mix it with other coffees, seeking the desired characteristics that he wants in the coffee. The coffee from my farm is then lost in a mix of other coffees, and our identity, so to say, is also lost in this blend. There are certain attributes to our coffee that cannot be measured by the coffee taster in the trading company; there are characteristics that cannot be measured by smelling or even



tasting our coffee. For example, who grows this coffee and who harvests it? Coffee is very labor intensive and some farms pay minimum wage and offer very bad working environments for their workers. They don't provide healthcare, access to schools for their families, or decent housing. Yet these farms can produce their coffee and sell it to the same trader, and he will mix that coffee with ours. My farm and the current administration took

in a very decayed farm seventeen years ago, no one owned their own house, they were owned by the farm, the school lacked professors and services like electricity and water were scarce. Our administration started a program of micro-loans to farmers, lending them money so they could buy the houses at very small amounts and still have enough for them to fix them and make them their home. The school was remodeled and with a new thriving community, educators were convinced of living here, and now there are enough professors for every child. The community has thrived and our farm is constantly helping them with their issues, and dealing with a local community board, designed to take care of their concerns.



My question is, why do we have to mix our coffee that is grown with the hands of healthy, happy people with that of other farms that do not respect their workers and still cope with the ancient model of the `plantation`? Besides the social aspects there are also aspects



concerning the environment, with our Rainforest Alliance certification we guarantee our responsibility for respecting the environment and producing a sustainable product.

With all these aspects taken into consideration, I struggle with the idea of our current trading system, and wonder why we still maintain our sales approach the way it is.

My purpose in Japan was to find out how a small farm, with only 2 hectares of tea production, could have such an amazing marketing system, how where they able to build a unique member based sales approach and establish an almost personal relationship with the person who is

ultimately going to enjoy their product. At the same time, I was very interested in learning about the farming of tea, and because practice is the best way to do this, I wanted to work the fields, understand how tea is harvested and also what are the most important aspects of growing high quality tea.

Past tea experience

There is no tea grown in Costa Rica, and not much of it is drunk either, as coffee is way too popular and takes its place. The first time I had tea was in Australia, during a semester abroad I did in my junior year of college. This is where I first understood the importance of tea in some cultures, I lived in a sugarcane farm for six weeks there and every day I would take a huge thermos full of tea to work. I rapidly became a fan of the drink and naturally started asking myself questions of how this tea was grown, where etc. In January, 2010 I joined a group of 15 Cornell students, 4 Cornell professors, 10 Indian students and 4 Indian professors, on a trip to southern India. The purpose of the trip was to visit several

facilities, institutions and farms that could offer us an insight into Indian agriculture. We traveled to the Nirgili mountains, in the province of Tamil Nadu; here we visited and stayed for four days in a small town called Ooty. Here we visited one specific farm that really marked my experience with tea. The owner was an old man, he had inherited the farm from his father, and produced high quality Indian chai in his 55 hectares. The



man was not only a good manager, he also had a deep understanding of agronomy and was a deep believer of organic agriculture. He revealed to us his secret recipe for making the best organic fertilizer, and most importantly he revealed to us his unique approach towards farming. He said that plants respond to impulses generated from all living things around them, and that if these impulses were positive then the plants would grow healthy. It was a very alternative approach, but it made sense because he had an almost loving relationship with the fields, and also had adopted the position as the savior of the town's people. He provided jobs, opportunities and security, and those who worked for him seemed happy; this was important since tea in India is harvested manually, and he believed if the workers were happy they would transmit positive impulses to the plants.

I feel like I can relate to that perspective, and I have seen it too, here in Japan. In a different way, because less people work the fields in Japan, and there is more reliance on harvesting machines, but those who do work the fields do so every day. Choosing this lifestyle I believe requires passion, and for someone like Aki-san that is devoted to the crop, this passion is rooted in hard work, and an ultimate connection between the farmer and the plant.



I believe the main difference in tea in Japan and in India is the availability of labor. Japanese tea growers rely on few working hands and need to harvest using

machines, this makes the job a bit more difficult. In a similar note, because Japanese fields need to be harvested with a machine, no trees can grow in between the tea, something which is very normal to see in India. These trees are also harvested for their wood in India, and are in constant rotation, ensuring the availability of a natural habitat for many bird species. Shade is also important for several Japanese tea types, trees would provide this and also provide other benefits, but since machine harvesting is obligatory, then this is an issue that marks a clear cut difference. Even though these differences are clear, I did find similarities in the people of both nations; tea represented their passion and they tended the fields with extreme care and took in their job as a part of their lifestyle.

Teachings

I have to admit that I didn't know what to expect when I first got to Wazuka, I knew that I was open to anything, and I think I showed this to the Obubu team. But I had no clue on what my



day to day would be like. I said I wanted to work the fields, but I didn't know what this would entail. So I held on to my instinct, one that told me that everything, everything contributes to ones learning, and that unfamiliar situations are able to test your ability to cope, tolerate, assimilate and react in ways that you have never reacted before. And so, day by day I discovered that working the fields is hard work, and it requires ones endurance, and strength to tolerate the elements of the weather and the obstacles encountered in the field. Teamwork is an essential aspect of Obubu's success. In the field Aki requires the help of his teammate,

Kenji, and they rely on each other for constant motivation, support and help when working together. I was a third set of hands, which was beneficial for them, I probably made jobs finish faster, and helped them do jobs such as carrying the harvested tea bags to the truck, a job that they would have done after finishing harvesting the field. I learned that tea can only

be harvested without rain, because if leaves are wet then those full bags would be impossibly heavy to carry up the sometimes steep slopes of the fields. The tea is then taken to a tea factory, most of the time we delivered to Himeno-san`s factory, but as Aki told me, he also



delivers to other factories, because even though they pay the same price, he is friends with the owners and feels as if he cant betray them, instead he needs to give some tea to all. There exists a certain brotherhood between tea farmers; Aki for example would not hesitate to help Osamu, as we did one day when Osamu`s team joined us and we first harvested Aki`s tea, and then Osamu`s tea. The sense of community here in Wazuka is also remarkable, the other day I

participated with a group of volunteers in a work camp, organized by members of the community, we were on the mission of liberating tea fields from weeds, and show a sense of solidarity with the farmers, and their obvious lack of labor. I learned valuable agricultural lessons, for example in combating weeds I learned that even though manual weeding requires lots of labor, it does give back with high benefits, since the plantation is given good

care, there is no secondary harm from herbicides, and maximum tea plant survival is secured. Furthermore, in tea and in coffee its important to realize that a young field of plants is the beginning of a field that will be productive for you for thirty or more years; so similar to how we would take care of a baby boy, we need to take care of this young plants so they grow to become healthy productive plants in the future.



In the office I also learned valuable lessons. Mainly because I saw how the constant communication and group effort made everything possible. The designated jobs of Matsumoto, Kaori and Kayo were well defined, and they seemed to have a good practice on what they were doing, as the work flowed fast and without many problems. Furthermore I want to say how much I admire the member sales system. I think its unique transparent trade, and it does encompass all aspects that I wish to follow in a similar way in my coffee farm. The system is transparent because members know everything from the farm, they know the people that harvested, they know who processed it, who packed it and



even sent it through mail. They also receive newsletters and other information through the dynamic website, and can count on the consistent quality of the product since they receive regular packages with more products. The members can then compare the product every two months and keep control of any irregularities in taste, and if so, can go to the website to see if any anomalies in weather or something else in production may have caused it.

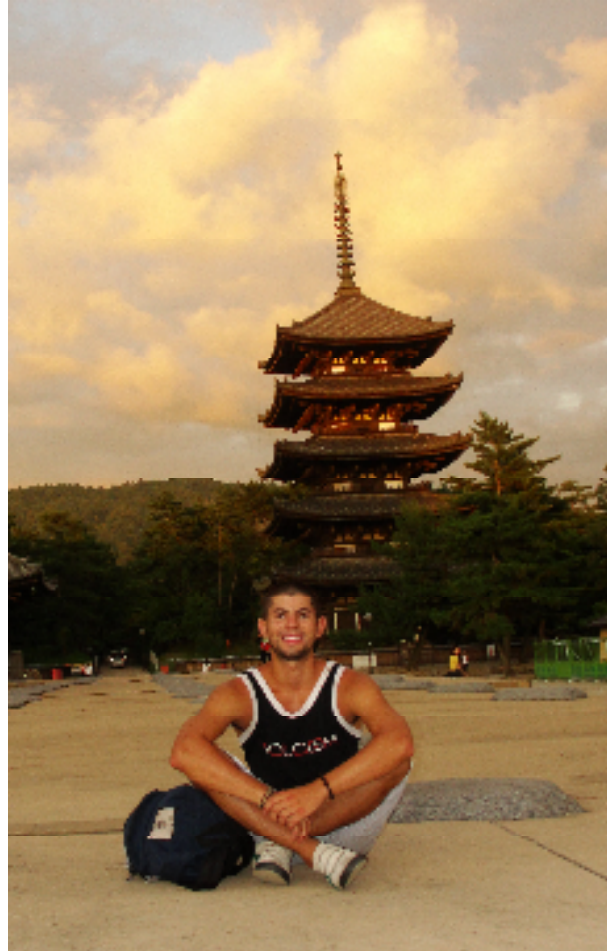


Finally I want to point out that this has been an ultimate cultural discovery experience. I have become in tune with the Japanese culture and its people, and I believe that this is a mayor accomplishment. It is important from someone like me, who studied International Agriculture, to actually come to a foreign country and test one's

knowledge of agriculture when presented with a completely different basis of customs and practices in the field. It is also important to give way to an important transformation as we put away the books, the knowledge and theory of University and transfer it to the practice of the field.

Future recommendations

When I first started talking with Ian, I never imagined that our relationship would escalate to this point. Even with me coming to Japan, it was all a big surprise, but I am glad that I came here. A future internship program here in Obubu would be extremely popular in Cornell. When you are a student, and especially in International Agriculture, you keep asking yourself why you are studying theory of farming from far away places in a small classroom in freezing upstate New York. Well opportunities like this one, where one can travel to a foreign country and really observe international agriculture at play, and learn from practice in the field, are what we as students seek. I believe that Obubu in the future can benefit from others like me, but needs to establish a system to evaluate the candidates that want to come to Japan. First of all, the idea needs to be spread in the Cornell community, through the International Programs office this can be accomplished easily. Then a sort of `application` should be designed; somewhere where the student can fill up a series of questions,



relating to the student's interests, experiences and purposes of participating in a program like this one. The terms of the internship should also be laid out clearly, since the student has to know that it will involve both office work but also field work. I believe its important to warn students that this field work is hard and that is very physical, and that even though is well-balanced with office work and free time, it can be very intense.

I believe it is also important for the Obubu group to decide what sort of intern can help them more, do they need a strong field worker, or maybe someone with more office kills. Or do they need someone that will have a specific task or project to develop during their time here. And last, I believe the only issue is the language barrier, which makes everything harder, and even though the Obubu group has good English, maybe someone who is learning Japanese could be more appropriate.

My last words...

I have had an amazing time here in Wazuka, I am glad I took the decision of coming here, it has represented a mayor learning curve for me and a life-changing experience that will stay with me for the rest of my life. The values and principles reflected by the Obubu group have given me a guide that I wish to follow, both personally, but also in my family's coffee business. I thank Aki for showing me the ways to become a good tea grower, for guiding me in the field and being an example of the dedication and passion that one must have when being a farmer. To Matsumoto for inspiring me with his unique ideas about how we should promote our products, deal with our buyers and envision a future with a more transparent, and fair way of trading our products. To Ian for being my bridge into Japan, the one who opened the doors for me for this opportunity, for his endless support and also for believing that I should be the first one to come to Wazuka and help Obubu. To Kaori and Kayo for their hospitality, endless attention in the office, and also for giving me the feeling of being always in a friendly place, and a home away from home. And to Osamu and Kenji for being two great housemates, for helping me out in the field when my muscles seemed to fail and for teaching me so much about tea.

These three past weeks have given me an opportunity to re-evaluate my past four years in University and to asses my future as a professional. After my time in Wazuka there is no doubt that agriculture is also a passion for me, and I take many teachings and positive memories from Wazuka that will stay with me forever! See you in Costa Rica when you come to visit me!

