

## **ESTABLISHMENT OF THUJA LABEL : WHAT DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS FOR THE MARKETING PRACTICES OF THE HANDICRAFT OF ESSAOUIRA'S MARQUETRY <sup>1</sup>**

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## **ESTABLISHMENT OF THUJA LABEL : WHAT DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS FOR THE MARKETING PRACTICES OF THE HANDICRAFT OF ESSAOUIRA'S MARQUETRY**

**ABSTRACT:** The woodwork of thuja in Essaouira is one of the main crafts in Morocco. Certainly marquetry reflects both cultural and artistic identity of the city, considering the talent and ancestral knowledge of craftsman working in marquetry. Yet, the production units encounter a considerable number of difficulties among which insufficiencies within marketing practices. Consequently it is obvious that major improvements are needed, and supportive solutions must be provided in order to improve the Essaouira's marquetry, as a symbol of the entire province. Thus, the establishment of Thuja Label is a necessary measure that would be the key in ensuring sustainability of this vital craft. The main purpose of this paper is to study marketing practices' current state of the production units in the marquetry of Essaouira, therefore to recommend remedial actions likely to raise them up to the required functional level.

**Key Words:** Thuja, marquetry, marketing practices, Thuja label.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Essaouira has a rich craft heritage characterized by differentiating know-how. It is distinguished from other Moroccan cities by its history and culture coming from different civilizations and ethnic groups. Thereby, the products of the marquetry meet the needs and expectations of customers who seek authenticity and originality. In this context, the Ministry of craft and Social Economy pays particular attention to this profession.

In this regard, and within the framework of the labeling strategy for the craft sector, the Ministry has programmed in its action plan the creation, alongside the national label, of labels for the key professions, in particular Essaouira's marquetry label. It aims to promote and protect crafts with a strong cultural content against counterfeiting and unfair competition.

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Indeed, the craftsmen markers of Essaouira master perfectly the different techniques of production and manufacture masterpieces due to their ancestral and unique talent. Notwithstanding, they encounter several problems that hinder their evolution.

Therefore, the production facilities operating in the marquetry sector in Essaouira must improve their marketing practices to obtain the label "THUYA D'ESSAOUIRA" so that they can stand out by the superior quality of their products and reposition themselves so as to penetrate the target markets in a sustainable way. Hence, the aim of this article is to study these marketing practices in order to identify the gaps and to suggest the actions to be implemented for their enhancement.

To achieve this objective, we have structured our work in two main axes:

- In the first axis, we will approach the conceptual framework of our research.
- The second axis will be devoted to the presentation and analysis of the marketing practices of Essaouira's markers and the actions to be carried out for their improvement.

## **2. CONCEPTUAL APPROACH**

### **2.1. Meaning and roles of labels**

According to the Computerized French Language Treasure, the term "label" means a sticker or strip of paper put on a product and giving indications such as its name, origin, composition or use. Affixed to a product, it attests to its superior quality, it draws attention and distinguishes it from others by referring to values that bear meaning for the citizen (Chameroy, 2013).

A label is defined by the Computerized French Language Treasure as a "distinctive mark created by a professional trade union or a parapublic organization. It is affixed to a marketed product to guarantee its quality, even conformity with manufacturing standards". Subsequently, in order to have a label, the manufacturer must respect established rules (standards or specifications) in order to ensure the quality of the products.

According to Larceneux (2003), the label is a "credible signal, which, as a communication tool, aims to inform the consumer about unobservable dimensions of the quality of a product or a service provided by a third independent party." (Chameroy, 2013). Therefore, in order to move from the mere promotional distinctive sign to a genuine proof of the primacy of the product, there must be a control by an independent third party in order to guarantee the superior quality of the product. In this sense, the definition given by Chameroy (2013) further develops this aspect by indicating that the label "formalizes the assessment and the guarantee of a trusted third party on one of the dimensions of the product / service and / or how to assess it, in accordance with specifications".

From a marketing point of view, in addition to the role of the label as a promotional object, it is also the guarantor of a superior quality proved by an independent third party and based on a precise specification (De favereau, 2016). Thus, when a production unit is labeled, it must comply with all the requirements stipulated in the label's specifications.

The labels arose between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Since then, they have continued to multiply and spread while affecting various markets (culture, tourism, health, food, education, automobiles, etc.) (Chameroy, 2013). However, labeling is gaining more and more interest due to the globalization of trade and the accrual of crisis in the financial, food and health fields. Indeed, the growing importance of signaling quality is due, on one hand, to the recurrence of these crises, which are accompanied by a demand for transparency and traceability, on the other hand, the difficulty of assessing the quality of products (Chameroy, 2013).

The proliferation of products places the consumer in a situation of hyperchoice and also leads to hesitation, difficulty in understanding the offer, uncertainty and sometimes dissatisfaction (Larceneux et. al., 2007). Indeed, the more products are numerous, the more delicate the choices and the more the decision to purchase becomes complicated, even painful (Tavoularis et. al., 2007).

Therefore, whatever the criteria on which the purchase decision is based (price, quality, respect for the environment, etc.), the use of indications that may guarantee the merits of this decision is essential. Hence the need to establish a sufficient level of confidence without which the act of purchase cannot be accomplished (Chameroy, 2013). Hence the importance of establishing labels to differentiate the products and guarantee their quality and origin in order to assist the consumer in making the purchasing decision.

Moreover, a recent study affirms that labels are perceived more as a guarantee of quality than the big national brands (Tavoularis et. al., 2007). Indeed, one of the first criteria used by the consumer to differentiate one product from another. In fact, in a competitive environment, the use of labels becomes essential to distinguish competitors as they convey the image of a superior product and give the consumer the feeling of a safe and reasoned choice (De Favereau, 2016).

## **2.2. Crafts in morocco and its labels: case of Essaouira's Thuja**

In Morocco, the craft sector reflects the country's ancestral cultural wealth and is one of its socio-economic pillars. Indeed, the sector accounts for 19% of GDP, provides 2.5 million jobs, what constitute of 20% of the labor force (Provincial direction of the ministry of crafts and social and solidarity economy in essaouira, 2013). Consequently, it takes a very important place in the enrichment and the flourishing of the territory, particularly at the socio-economic level.

Indeed, in 2014, the Craft sector with strong cultural content shows sustained growth for most of its economic aggregates. Compared to 2013, turnover grew by 7.5%, reaching 21.85 MMDH. Employment grew by 2.5% to reach almost 405,000 craftsmen today. The added value generated is 13 MMDH, which reflects the capacity of the sector to support the performance of the Moroccan economy (National observatory of crafts, 2015).

Similarly, for Essaouira, crafts is undoubtedly part of its soul, it occupies a preponderant place in the economy of the Province (31% of the province's labor force works in the craft sector) (Provincial direction of the ministry of crafts and social and solidarity economy in essaouira, 2014), crafts is an actor in the local life which, through its activity, stimulates the economy and employment and plays an essential role in favor of the socio-economic development of the Province.

The marquetry constitutes the cultural and artistic identity of Essaouira. Since crafts are not only a collection of activities and products but also a civilizational vector that carries the cultural and artistic traits of a people and a nation (Ministry of tourism, crafts and social economy, department of crafts and social economy, 2004). This is also the case for marquetry, established in Essaouira in the 19th century by European renegades converted to Islam and known as *laâllouj*, which is a refined and prestigious specialty of Essaouira, of which it is in Morocco the capital uncontested (Sibony, 2004).

Indeed, marquetry is one of the cultures of Essaouira's major terroirs, its products account for 90% of crafts exportation. It is an essential element in the social economy and solidarity of the province of Essaouira, (3,500 craftsmen, 10 cooperatives and 18 professional associations) (Provincial direction of the ministry of craftsmanship of the social and solidarity economy in essaouira, 2015).

With the aim of preserving crafts with a strong cultural content against counterfeiting and unfair competition, to increase the notoriety of Moroccan crafts and exacerbate their influence on international markets, the Ministry of crafts and social and solidarity economy has set up a national strategy for the labeling of crafts (2014), in response to the strategic objectives of the 2015 vision. The rationale is to create and anchor a brand image that is in harmony with the new positioning of Moroccan crafts, a craft with a strong cultural content, modern, authentic and conveying values of creativity, quality, innovation and respect for the environment.

In this sense, the Ministry has programmed in its action plan the creation, in parallel with the national label and the regional labels, labels for the leading professions, in particular the Essaouira's marquetry, in order to support the marketing efforts of the production units so that they can penetrate the target markets on a sustainable basis, since their major concern remains the commercialization. The latter are therefore called to improve their marketing practices in order to benefit from the "THUYA D'ESSAOUIRA" label, which will give a vibrancy to the products of the marquetry, and thus make the Essaouira's thuja a geographical reference. It will therefore guarantee the customers the origin, the quality of the articles purchased and the conformity of their manufacture to the standards of environment, safety and ethics.

However, the success of this label depends on the commitment and the concrete involvement of professionals of the marquetry sector in Essaouira. Indeed, the label "THUYA D'ESSAOUIRA" aims to support the marketing efforts of production units so that they can penetrate the target markets on a sustainable basis. However, the latter are technically strong (mastery of all manufacturing and finishing techniques), however they suffer from shortcomings in terms of management and commercialization.

In this way, craftsmen markers will be called to improve their management practices, in general, and their marketing practices, in particular, in order to obtain the "THUYA D'ESSAOUIRA" label in order to support their marketing efforts and enable them, consequently, to distinguish themselves by the superior quality of their products and to reposition themselves so that they can penetrate the target markets in a sustainable way by improving the attractiveness of the brand image of the Essaouira's marquetry which has made reputation of the city for centuries.

Hence the necessity to analyze the state of the marketing practices of the production units operating in the marquetry sector in Essaouira and to suggest, therefore, the actions to be implemented to remedy the obstacles that hinder their flourishing.

### **3. EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE MARKETING PRACTICES OF PRODUCTION UNITS OPERATING IN THE MARQUETRY SECTOR IN ESSAOUIRA**

#### **3.1. Methodology of the study**

The objective of our study is to understand the marketing practices of the production units operating in the marquetry sector in the province of Essaouira. To achieve our goal, we conducted a qualitative study based on a structured interview guide around the following axes:

- Human resources and the place of marketing within production units;
- Marketing mix.

The interviews with the managers of the production units lasted an average of one hour and enabled us to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the marketing practices of the production units in the marquetry sector in Essaouira.

#### **3.2. Synthesis of the results**

### 3.2.1. Human resources and the place of marketing within the production units operating in the marquetry sector in Essaouira

The analysis of the internal organization of the production units enabled us to note the following:

#### ❖ Human resources :

- The cooperants are master craftsmen and possess a great competence, an ancestral know-how and a strong ability to adapt to the requirements of customers.
- Shortage of executives with a university level in production units.
- Several craftsmen have benefited from the national literacy program. However, there is still one part that is illiterate.
- The willingness of craftsmen to participate in continuing training. Indeed, the production units benefit from the training programs organized by the Ministry of crafts and social and solidarity economy for the benefit of craftsmen.
- The ability to work as a team among craftsmen. However, individual work still persists in most markers.
- Lack of management skills and marketing techniques.
- The working conditions of the production units are often inappropriate: narrow workshop space, pollution problems (waste, dust, noise ...).
- Awareness of the markers of the importance of work within the production units in order to pool their means and skills.
- The disinterestedness of young people in craft trades.

#### ❖ Marketing manager in production units:

The majority of production units operating in the marquetry sector in Essaouira have a marketing manager. But in most cases, it is the head of the production unit who takes on this role. Similarly for the marketing and promotion of products, the majority of the production units have a manager dedicated to these tasks. However, they do not have a formal business structure.

#### ❖ Existence of a marketing strategy:

The majority of production units report having a marketing strategy. However, the latter is not well defined and formalized and does not have an annual marketing plan.

#### ❖ Market research:

All production units report that they do not carry out market research despite acknowledging their importance in setting objectives, market segmentation and customer targeting. This explains the absence of formalized marketing strategies within the production units.

#### ❖ Target markets :

The majority of production units favor the domestic market for the commercialization of their products (90%) at the expense of the foreign market (10%).

#### ❖ Positioning :

Regarding positioning, the majority of the production units are positioned first in upmarket then in middle-market. These results confirm the general trend of the sector. Indeed, in recent years, the craft has moved from the "downmarket" segment to the "middle-market" and "upmarket" segments.

### 3.2.2. Marketing mix

The analysis of the marketing mix of production units operating in the marquetry sector in Essaouira enabled us to note the following:

#### ❖ Product :

- Thuja wood is the main component in marquetry products, Morocco has 700 000 ha, what constitutes 80% of the thuja forests of North Africa. In the region of Essaouira, the area occupied by the thuja is about 96 000 ha, ie 15% of the total area of the province and 35% of its forest area. In the region of Agadir, the thuja is mixed with the argan tree and occupies an area of about 20 000 ha. It is also found in the provinces of Marrakech, Khemisset, Taza and Oujda (Sibony, 2004). The other types of wood used by markers are lemon, acacia, mahogany ..., used primarily for decoration. It should be noted that the thuja grows slowly. Indeed, it is only after more than 100 years that the tree reaches 10 to 15 meters and becomes exploitable. It should also be noted that the life expectancy of thuja is 400 years (El jouali, 2003).

- Approximately 30% of the products are manufactured on customer orders, 60% are destined for sales on the local market (bazaar, tourists, ...), while 10% are destined for export.

- The combination of marquetry with other crafts

- At the beginning, the work was 100% manual, now the markers use, more and more, machines (circular saw, defender ...) which represent a saving of time, effort and money. However, we note the persistence of the often use of rudimentary equipment which affects the quality of manufactured articles and the productivity of craftsmen.

- Absence of a real and effective control of the quality of the manufactured products.

- Waste wood at sawing level and tower machines.

- Gaps in varnishing techniques (revising the technique of the varnish to the buffer by a more efficient method since sometimes the products become dull after a few months).

- Lack of an efficient technological solution for the drying of wood (absence of pretreatment of the wood to guarantee a better quality of the products produced).

- The reproduction of the models of the city of Essaouira by the craftsmen in other cities.

- The offer is diversified and the products of decoration remain the most produced articles by the craftsmen, followed by the sculpted objects.

- The nobility of the wood used (thuja), the reputation and esteem for Essaouira marquetry items (reflects the cultural and artistic heritage of Essaouira) constitute strategic assets to face competition from products of the other countries (China, Indonesia ...).

- The furniture and decoration sector is mainly nourished by the creation and the continuous development of new design. Unfortunately this condition is greatly lacking among the craftsmen which penalizes the development, as it should be, of the crafts of the wood, among others, the marquetry of Essaouira.

- Inundation of the market by downmarket products with derisory prices.

- Lack of innovation (reproduction of articles: same shape and same pattern).

- The non-existence of official standards that determine the quality of marquetry products.

- Lack of information on developments in the sector, particularly new collections.

- Financial support from the Ministry of Crafts and Social and Solidarity Economy for the benefit of the craftsmen markers of Essaouira through the acquisition of technical equipment.

#### ❖ Price :

- The products generally have a good quality and price ratio. However, there are several factors that influence prices. For instance, thuja imported from other regions such as Khemisset has a poor quality and requires pretreatment. The price of the thuja's wood is variable and relatively high, due to the persistence of clandestine and parallel market, etc.

- Absence of the display of prices.

- Lack of consistency in prices of identical items.

- Low structuring of the markers limiting their power of negotiation with the marketing relays.

#### ❖ Distribution :

- The majority of production units have a "push" strategy because they mainly use the sales force and the distribution network to promote and sell the product to the final consumer. This is normal since communication in general, and advertising in particular, which is the basis of

any "Pull" strategy, requires large budgets that are not available to those production units which suffer from difficulties in accessing financing and, consequently, the sales force. In this regard, the Ministry of crafts and the social and solidarity economy is making major efforts, through LA MAISON DE L'ARTISAN, in the communication and promotion of Moroccan crafts for the development of the market of marquetry at national and international level.

- The distribution policy is focused on selling via intermediaries as the most important distribution channel (bazaar). These are short circuits with only a small number of intermediaries. At the same time, the majority of production units have set up showrooms for final consumers. About 60% of the products produced are sold to intermediaries (bazaar), 30% are sold directly to consumers and 10% are exported.

- ❖ Communication :

- Exhibitions, fairs and trade shows are the most effective means of promotion used by the production units for the marketing of their products. The latter participate in events organized at regional, national and international level in order to develop their activities abroad, to learn about innovations and trends in different markets, and finally to monitor the competition.

- Financial support from MAISON DE L'ARTISAN for craftsmen to participate in exhibitions organized abroad.

- The marquetry label of Essaouira will protect the Essaouira's markers against counterfeiting and unfair competition.

- The use of the means of communication for the commercialization of marquetry's products remains very low. Indeed, communication actions are very limited. This could be explained by the limited financing capacities of the production units.

- The markers benefit from the efforts made by LA MAISON DE L'ARTISAN to promote crafts (advertising, support for participation in fairs at international level ...).

- The existence of websites for the promotion of Essaouira and its marquetry.

- The inefficient use of social networks and new technologies.

- The ignorance of the interest and impact of the use of the means of communication to boost sales.

- The lack of competence in communication skills.

### 3.3. Recommendations

In order to improve the marketing practices of the production units operating in the marquetry sector in Essaouira, certain measures must be put in place for the improvement of this profession which constitutes the cultural and artistic identity of Essaouira:

- Encourage innovation in order to enrich and renew existing product lines while preserving the authenticity associated with Essaouira's culture, civilization and lifestyle.

- Establishment of partnerships with designers for the creation of new collections of products and make them available free of charge to markers.

- Carry out specialized studies to find technical solutions to reduce the response of thuja's wood to climate changes.

- Sensitization of thuja's forest operators to good practices for cutting thuja's trees to rationalize their exploitation.

- Prohibit the use of thuja's wood in firewood to avoid degradation of the cedar forests.

- Rationalize the use of thuja's wood by developing veneer techniques.

- Use of new products and varnishing techniques to prevent the products from becoming dull after a few months.

- Develop the combination of marquetry with other Moroccan crafts: jewelery, leather goods, etc.

- Increase and promote commercialization spaces for marquetry products, especially in rural areas, to increase the traffic of buyers (local and tourists) while ensuring the attractiveness of existing spaces.
- Establishment of services facilitating the act of purchase in all the sales areas.
- Develop and promote fair trade for the benefit of markers especially in rural areas.
- Sensitization and supervision of production units to benefit from the transversal program (income-generating activities) of the National Initiative for Human Development.
- Conduct reevaluation actions (open days) of the marquetry, as cultural and artistic identity of Essaouira, to the young people and to motivate them to learn the craft, thus ensuring the transmission of knowledge to future generations.
- Facilitate the access of production units to financing (banks, micro credit, etc.).
- Creation of incubator of production units in the marquetry sector to promote the development and structuring of the sector, in view of their ability to combine traditional craft skills and modern techniques, which will lead to upmarket production, new prospects in export and financing.
- Introduce marquetry products into modern distribution networks and prospect new sales networks for these products, especially internationally.
- Avoid the intervention of several intermediaries in order to better control the distribution.
- Support for the creation of sales areas for marquetry's products in existing and future tourist infrastructures.
- Carry out promotional and communication campaigns on the Essaouira's marquetry, the different types of masterpieces produced by the markers, their ancestral and authentic know-how and the nobility of the wood used (thuja).
- Creation of a website on the marquetry of Essaouira presenting its history, the types of products manufactured, and the addresses of the production units operating in the marquetry sector in the province of Essaouira. It aims to inform potential customers (including domestic and foreign tourists) about the specificity of the products and the heritage and historical dimension of the Essaouira's marquetry, and to orient them, therefore, to the points of sale / circuits and facilitate the act of purchase of the products.
- Organization of competitions with prizes awarded exclusively for the Essaouira's markers as previously (Tahar Mana Award for the best thuja's wood product, organized in Essaouira in 2008 by the State Secretariat at the Ministry of Tourism and crafts) in order to enhance the profession and encourage innovation.
- Encourage craftsmen to create new products with high added value such as wooden jewelry, in order to conquer new markets.
- Organization of awareness days on standards and good practices in the field of health and safety in the workplace and pollution problems (waste, dust ...).
- Organization of a functional literacy program and continuous training sessions for the benefit of markers to strengthen their technical (conception and design, processing of raw materials, sawing, sanding, plating, finishing, etc.) and managerial skills (entrepreneurship, marketing and sales techniques, communication, etc.).
- Promoting and valorizing the Essaouira's marquetry through the annual organization of fairs, shows and exhibitions at the national and international level dedicated exclusively to marquetry's products.
- Organization of communication days on the financing possibilities and programs available to the markers.
- Encourage and support the markers to use social networks to promote their products.
- Organize visits between the production units operating in the marquetry sector as well as in other sectors in order to promote the exchange and sharing of experiences.

- Conduct campaign of communication to sensitize tourists to the impact of the purchase of marquetry's products on local sustainable development, given their strong territorial anchoring, and on improving the quality of life of the markers.
- Organization of visits / initiation workshops to the marquetry for tourists in order to discover the various steps of manufacture of the marquetry's products. This will allow tourists to acquire knowledge about the different products, while inciting them to buy.
- Study the possibility of creating a festival for the promotion of local products of Essaouira, especially those of marquetry.
- Organization of promotional campaigns on Moroccan and foreign target markets, to build the brand image of the Essaouira's marquetry and anchor it to the final consumer.
- Integrate Crafts into the institutional communication of Tourism: (in terms of promotional campaigns, tourist brochures, etc.)
- Organization of events to convey the image of a modern and authentic marquetry
- Integration of workshops and points of sale of the marquetry within the tourist circuits.
- Organization of meetings with the distribution and commercialization networks in Morocco and abroad, aiming to get them to meet the actors of the sector, to introduce them to the products of the marquetry, and to encourage them to refer these products in their points of sale.
- Support to markers by technical equipment enabling the reduction of waste during the different steps of wood processing, improving productivity and quality of products.
- Creation and equipment of a professional training center by apprenticeship in the rural community of Ounara will enable young people from rural areas to be formed in crafts, in particular in marquetry, in order to ensure the succession.
- The establishment of the THUYA ESSAOUIRA label will enable the marquetry's products to be radiated, to permanently penetrate the target markets and to preserve this national heritage by protecting the Essaouira markers from counterfeiting and unfair competition, and thus making the appellation of Essaouira's thuja wood a geographical reference. It will therefore guarantee the customers the origin, the quality of the articles purchased and the conformity of their manufacture to the standards of environment, safety and ethics.
- Construction of infrastructure projects (craft complex, craft villages, area of craft activities including a center dedicated to thuja wood trades, etc.), will allow, on one hand, the improvement of the productivity and the working conditions of the artisans, on the other hand, the valorisation of craft products and the creation of a tourist and market dynamics favoring the attractiveness of the province.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Enormous efforts have been made by the Ministry of crafts and social and solidarity economy to promote the essaouira's marquetry. nevertheless, the potential and strengths of this trade, which reflects the cultural and artistic identity of the province, are not yet well exploited. Hence the need for production units to efficiently integrate the market and to face competition. Thus, the establishment of the "THUYA D'ESSAOUIRA" label will give a radiance to the marquetry's products, protect this national patrimony against counterfeiting and unfair competition and make the appellation of Essaouira's thuja wood a geographical reference.

Indeed, since the current marketing practices of the production units operating in the marquetry sector in Essaouira are very limited and suffer from several shortcomings, the establishment of the "THUYA D'ESSAOUIRA" label is essential for the preservation of the trade since these production units will be required to upgrade their marketing practices to be labelled "THUYA D'ESSAOUIRA". The latter will reinforce their marketing practices and

will allow them to distinguish themselves by the superior quality of their products and to reposition themselves so that they can penetrate the target markets in a sustainable way by improving the attractiveness of the brand of the Essaouira's marquetry, a flagship profession with a strong cultural content, both modern and authentic and conveying values of creativity, superior quality, innovation and respect for the environment.

At the same time, it is necessary to make tourists aware of the different types of masterpieces produced by the markers, highlighting their ancestral and authentic know-how, the nobility of the wood used (thuja), and the role played by these products in the local sustainable development given their strong territorial anchorage. In addition, workshops and points of sale of the marquetry must be integrated within the tourist circuits in order to reinforce the complementarity between the sector of tourism and craft and to boost the marketing of its products.

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