

How Can Anthropology Contribute to the Expansion of Saffron Production?

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Abstract

This article focuses on the anthropological aspect. That means, I have chosen to understand one aspect of saffron production. By using the concepts and methods of anthropology I apply anthropotechnological methods to analyse the sociocultural context of saffron production and to highlight local specificities of technological processes. This method is especially useful for perceiving the sociotechnical differences between saffron production techniques in different countries.

My scientific goals are to understand the way each community will integrate novelties while at the same time maintaining their local specificities. In other words, I want to understand the local dynamics of saffron development in the context of international trade.

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses **on** the anthropological aspect. That means, I have chosen to understand one aspect of saffron production. By using the concepts and methods of anthropology I apply anthropotechnological methods to analyse the sociocultural context of saffron production and to highlight local specificities of technological processes. This method is especially useful for perceiving the sociotechnical differences between saffron production techniques in different countries.

The project I will outline in this article started in 2002 and will probably end in 2007. Therefore, I will not present you the results of my work but I will explain how an anthropologist can contribute to the expansion of saffron production.

My first point is about the origins of the project and shows how I took up the request of saffron producers. My second point is about method. The third point is about my scientific objectives.

ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

An Ethno-Historical Approach to the Revival of Saffron Production in Southwest France

Since 1997, farmers from the southwest of France put enormous effort into building up knowledge about saffron cultivation. Their objective is to bring the production of this spice back to southwest France and to obtain an "I.G.P." and a "Label Rouge". A range of studies (genetic, agronomic, ergonomic), commissioned by I.N.R.A. (Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique), have been carried out over the past few years in order to help them to reach their objective. In 2002, responding to their request, I carried out a study using ethnographic and historic methods, by first researching the economic history of saffron in France in order to justify the geographical demarcation of the current zone of production. Secondly, I used ethnographic methods to understand the symbolic value of saffron in this area.

Historical Analysis and Its Implications

While the analyse of the historical texts confirms the importance of saffron production during the XV-XVII centuries, the present revival is not clearly inscribed in this logic. It appears that the historical area of production was situated one hundred kilometres away from the present centre of the revival.

Thus the results of my research do not coincide with the farmer's objectives.

Indeed, my work demonstrates that they cannot justify the revival of saffron in their region using historical data. As it is the case for other revivals in France, these farmers appeal to the notion of *terroir* which is linked to the traditions of a specific area. How are they defining a *terroir* when their production cannot be link with the traditional cultivation in this region?

This conclusion does not so much call into question the saffron revival in the southwest of France as it implies a redefinition of the area of production named “safran du Quercy”. If the promoters of the revival delimit a larger production area, they will be justified in using the historical argument for marketing purposes.

A New Request

When I presented my results to the producers in October 2002, they were troubled. At that moment, I realized how important saffron was for them, how much energy they had invested in this revival. I therefore decided to continue to work with them. As an anthropologist I had to understand exactly what they needed. This involved long discussions of their objectives.

I analysed these conversations and highlighted their main requests:

- The first is to favour recognition of the quality of local saffron in the eyes of the consumers.
- The second is to improve the image of saffron.
- The third is the creation of an informal network of saffron producers that includes countries such as Iran, Morocco, Spain and Switzerland.

METHODS

In order to respond to these requests, I set about anthropological methods of investigation. I first entered into contact with saffron producers from other countries (Switzerland and Morocco). I wanted to know if they were interested by the request made by French producers. These first contacts allowed me to see that producers from different countries had a common objective: to develop saffron consumption through a trust relationship with consumers.

Presently, all the producers I have met are interested in being members of an informal network of saffron producers in order to think about the question: how can we improve saffron's image?

Thus my first task is to undertake fieldwork in each country. This involves living with producers for a few months, observing their practices and understanding the symbolic value of saffron. This will help me to understand the diversity of production techniques, of social organisation and of traditions, which can be mobilized to improve saffron's image.

The second step will be to organize meetings between producers from different countries. This will allow me to analyse how each community will integrate their experience and how these international meetings will influence local development, my ultimate scientific goal.

Scientific Goal

My scientific goals are to understand the way each community will integrate novelties while at the same time maintaining their local specificities. In other words, I want to understand the local dynamics of saffron development in the context of international trade.

Let me illustrate my project in Figure 1. (Illustration of my project)

An Example

Take the question of expanding the harvest period for saffron as presented by J.L. Guardiola during the 1st International Symposium on Saffron Biology and Biotechnology in Albacete: How are producers going to integrate this new technology? Following their local specificities, they will probably have different attitudes. See Figure 2. Different

ways to integrate new technology)

CONCLUSIONS

I have tried to demonstrate how an anthropologist can contribute to the expansion of saffron. My project has a clear objective: to contribute and to accompany the creation of a network of saffron producers. This will lead me to be a *médiateur* between the different communities of producers. Such a network will give them the opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences. These exchanges will enhance mutual knowledge production in all countries. I believe that the confrontation of knowledge will contribute to the creation of new production techniques and strategies to highlight the production of saffron will emerge from these development summits. In fact, the producers and I want to contribute to improving saffron's quality in order to develop an international image of the product. This will be done by maintaining the specificities of each country according to their socio-economic environment.

Figures

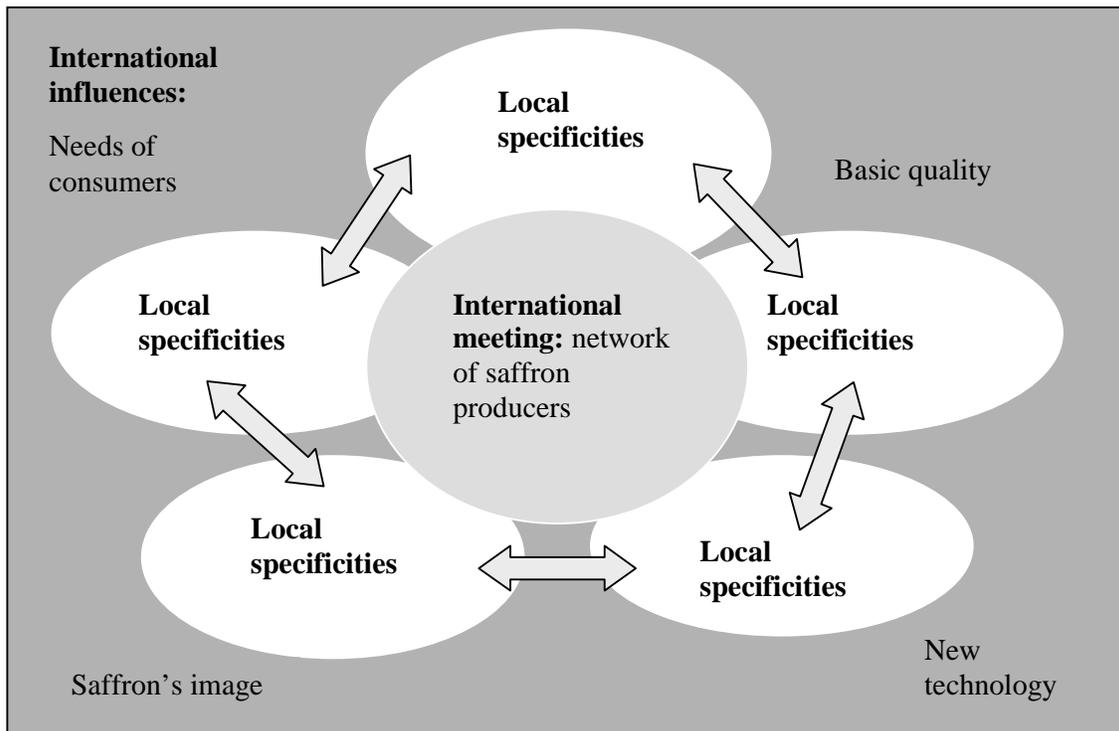


Fig. 1. Illustration of my project

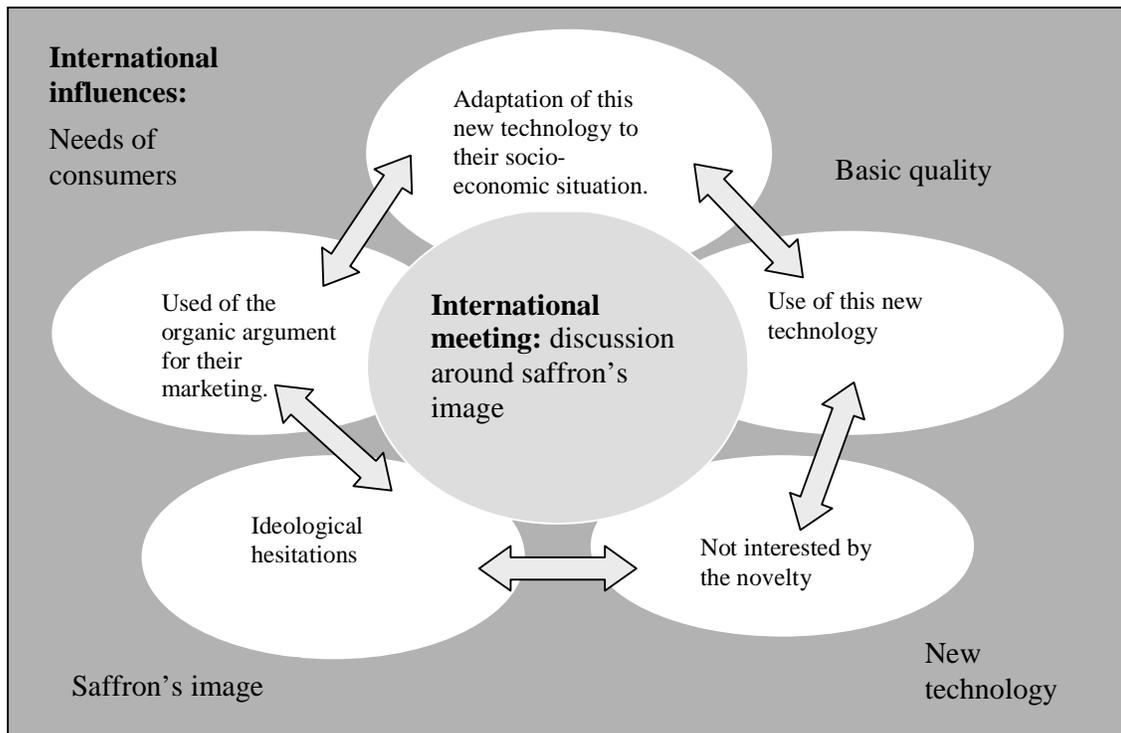


Fig. 2. Different ways to integrate new technology