

## **THE ENDEMIC ARGAN TREE AS A TOOL FOR TERRITORIAL MARKETING FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN SOUSS MASSA**

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### **Abstract**

Territorial marketing plays a key role in maintaining and boosting the attractiveness and competitiveness of a city, a region or a country. So, it is of vital importance to spot and identify the different assets and resources that make up the specificity of any place. The aim is to invest them in an efficient and effective territorial marketing which will in its turn result in tourism development. The present paper aims at studying the Argan tree, a UNESCO World Heritage, as an asset for tourism promotion in Souss Massa. Stakeholders should take advantage of the different stages that the Argan oil production goes through so as to convert them into various and distinctive tourism products. Such strategies are more likely to make the region appealing and attractive; and therefore more competitive. We combined the state-of-the-art with field observation to study and explore the uniqueness of the biotope, its importance in the eco-tourism and rural tourism and to demonstrate how Argan oil, the endemic terroir product, is important in the promotion of gastronomic, pleasure and cultural tourism in the Souss Massa region.

**Keywords:** territorial marketing, terroir product, rural tourism, Argan oil, ecotourism, tourism development, gastronomic tourism.

## **EL ÁRBOL ARGAN ENDÉMICO COMO HERRAMIENTA DE DESARROLLO TURÍSTICO EN SOUSS MASSA**

### **Resumen**

El marketing territorial juega un papel clave en mantener e estimular el atractivo y la competitividad de una ciudad, una región o un país. Por lo tanto, es de vital importancia detectar e identificar los diferentes activos y recursos que conforman la especificidad de cualquier lugar. El objetivo es invertirlos en un marketing territorial eficiente y efectivo que a su vez resultará en el desarrollo del turismo. El presente artículo tiene como objetivo estudiar el árbol de Argan, Patrimonio Mundial de la UNESCO, como un activo para la promoción del turismo en Souss Massa. Los interesados deben aprovechar las diferentes etapas que atraviesa la producción de aceite de Argan para convertirlos en productos turísticos diferentes y

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distintivos. Es más probable que tales estrategias hagan que la región sea atrayente y atractiva; y por lo tanto más competitiva. Combinamos el estado del arte con la observación de campo para estudiar y explorar la singularidad del biotopo, su importancia en el ecoturismo y el turismo rural y para demostrar cómo el aceite de argán, el producto endémico del terroir, es importante en la promoción del turismo gastronómico, de placer y cultural en la región de Souss Massa.

**Palabras clave:** Marketing territorial, producto terroir, turismo rural, aceite de argan, ecoturismo, desarrollo del turismo, turismo gastronómico.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Territorial marketing comprises different actions and tools together that aim at improving the attractiveness of a territory or an area in order to create new economic opportunities and productive activities. The objectives of territorial marketing are achieved when the working parties get actively involved in identifying the needs of potential and actual tourists, and come with new actions in order to meet visitors' expectations. This constant development of actions is what makes the area more competitive as it becomes more appealing to tourists and creates a prosperous environment for local businesses growth (Simeon & Buonincontri, 2011). In Morocco, seaside tourism used to be one of the most dominant attractions. From 1998 on, cultural heritage started to acquire as much importance as beaches (Yasin, Alavi, Koubida, & Small, 2011). Other sectors such as desert, health and rural tourism have gained position within tourism industry. Because of its geographical location, Souss Massa benefits from different types of tourism.

Besides, Souss Massa is known for the diversity of terroir products that can be used as a territorial marketing tool. Actually, thanks to the uniqueness of these products (reliance on a specific land, process of productions, scarcity and benefits), they are able to hold a high symbolic content.

They are part of the image and identity of a territory. Along with the different tourism products that the area has, they help diversifying the offer and add a competitive advantage to the territory. Promoting these products and their uniqueness is a way to draw attention to the area. The objective is to generate tourist flows and therefore attract national and international investments.

Argan oil is among the flagship terroir products of this region. In this paper, we will present how the characteristics of the region play an important role in the creation of a unique biotope. Then we will talk about how the different tourist sectors that can enable Argan oil to can participate in attracting more tourists and bettering their experience. The methodology used is a combination of the documentary literature review and field observation.

The methodology used for this article is the state of art accompanied by a non-participant observation of the field. This research aims to help us identify terroir products, more specifically the Argan tree and oil, as an instrument of territorial marketing, and understand better their importance in the tourist development of Souss Massa region. We have tried through this research to link the theories of some scholars with examples and evidences

related to Souss Massa’s tourism sector and Argan added value. Then, the outcomes can be applied worldwide to all the other terroir products with similar characteristics to Argan.

## **1. TERRITORIAL MARKETING AND TOURISM ATTRACTIVENESS**

### **1.1 Introduction to territorial marketing**

When we speak about territorial marketing, we refer to a specific territory. This one is considered as a development actor because it produces different resources in a social organization (El Khazzar & Echattabi, 2016; Kahn, 2010). A territory can have several definitions depending on the context: geographical, social, economical, etc. In marketing, this concept is seen as a constructed product that needs a selling and branding strategy. And that is why territorial marketing can be a set of tools for development through a comprehension and analysis of the territory in order to come up with communication strategies and to determine the target to attract: tourists, investors, students, companies, etc. (El Khazzar & Echattabi, 2016).

Several scholars spoke about territorial marketing as a way to attract new activities to the territory and to help local businesses in their growth. Chamard (2014) has included to these definitions the “hospitality” aspect. According to her, territorial marketing needs to help meeting public’s expectations by increasing territory’s hospitality. Regarding the topic of our paper, we will limit the public to tourists and define what the elements that attract them to a territory are.

### **1.2 Determinant of Tourism Attractiveness**

Tourism attractiveness is about offering a pleasant living environment on all social, economical and environmental levels in order to reflect a positive image of the region. These aspects are considered as levers of development in the tourism sector. In other words, tourism attractiveness is about the different attributes that a destination has and/or creates that allow it to have an important tourist flow (Hmioui & Haoudi, 2016).

As stated by Fabry (2009), a destination is considered attractive when it meets four major components:

- 1- The destination has a portfolio of natural resources with a comparative advantage;
- 2- The destination has to be able to come up with profit generating strategies;
- 3- The destination has to have the right to institutional and governmental support on all levels in order to implement important tourism schemes;
- 4- The touristic demand of the destination needs to be strong and targets both national and international levels (Fabry, 2009).

Tourists’ choice of a destination is based on natural and cultural resources. They both form the basis of the touristic attractiveness and the necessary added value for tourists flow generation (Hmioui & Haoudi, 2016). This first section of the present paper, will be devoted to dealing with the Argan trees and forests. They represent one of the major components of the natural resources that considerably contribute in generating added value. In the second

section, we will talk about the cultural added value that Argan oil offers to this region. The cultural aspects of a destination cover gastronomy, music, clothing, beauty rituals, language and accents. In this paper, we will focus on the new experiences related to food and beauty pleasures that contribute in tourism development in the region of Souss Massa and more specifically in its rural area.

Tourism attractiveness relies not only on natural and cultural resources, but also on the quality of infrastructure, accommodation and animation. Once brought together, tourist territory is more likely to meet and satisfy tourists' needs (Hmioui & Haoudi, 2016).

It is important to identify the unique element that differentiate a place from another, and thus give it a competitive advantage. That is why we chose Argan as the case of our work.

## **2. ORIGINALITY OF THE REGION FROM THE ARGAN PERSPECTIVE: THE EXCLUSIVITY OF A TERRITORY**

Terroir product is a term of a French origin. It refers to a product related to “a geographical area with specific geological, hydrological, soil and climate characteristics” (“Terroir,” 2015). The common use of this word in English usually refers to wine, but it actually includes a wide range of products that are produced uniquely in a specific soil or land.

Souss Massa is known for a diversity of the local products. Argan oil stands for an example of the widely produced ones. Due to the unique climate and soil of the Souss Massa region, Morocco is the only country that grows trees able to give this oil. This exclusive aspect that the country has makes the Argan oil rare and valuable (Evrard, 2010).

According to the Global View Research report of January 2014, Africa and Middle East are the biggest consumer of the Argan oil. Among this statistic, the rural population of Morocco represents the higher rate of demand of this oil. Moreover, the global Argan oil market is expected to grow at a CAGR of 19.6% from 2015 to 2022 by a raise of production of 4,835.5 tons in 2014 to reach 19,622.5 tons by 2022. (“Argan Oil Market Size To Reach \$1.79 Billion By 2022,” 2016).

### **2.1 History**

About thirteen years ago, Argan oil was used mainly by the Moroccan population for cosmetic and culinary purposes. In the early 90s of the previous century, other parts of the world such as Japan and Europe started discovering the virtues of this oil. Since then, the activity around Argan has flourished through switching between traditional modes of production led by women and partially industrialized processes within the field of cosmetic industry and agribusiness. Around the mid 90s, groups of women started to set up cooperatives with the aim of preserving traditional aspect of the Argan activity and the socio-economic development of the rural areas (Evrard, 2010). According to the statistics made by the Office of Cooperation Development in 2015, there are actually 299 Argan oil cooperatives that insure work for 7448 adherents (Office du Développement de Coopération, 2015).

## **2.2 Uniqueness of the Biotope**

The principal economic activity of Souss Massa is agriculture. The region is known for its wide Argan tree forests. Even though the Argan tree can be found in Mexico, the plant is still considered as a Moroccan endemic species since the only trees that can produce Argan are those that are grown in the Souss Massa region (Evrard, 2010).

The characteristics of Moroccan south west climate and soil offer the Argan tree the necessary conditions to prosper and have a lifespan of 200 years. This endemic tree has a high resistance capacity to extreme heat. Actually, it has an important atmospheric temperature range going from 3°C to 50°C. The Argan tree can stand neither low temperature nor snow. Yet, it can endure irregular rainfalls as well as long periods of drought. In fact, it is the long pivoting roots that can reach 30 meters that allow the tree to adopt a strategy of water saving and to have a long lifespan (Fahmi, Tahrouch, Bouzoubâa, & Hatimi, 2011; M’Hirit, 1998; Orwa, Mutua, Kindt, Jamnadass, & Anthony, 2009; Tonelli & Gallouin, 2013).

The south west region is known for the diverse Biological and Ecological Interest Sites (BEIS) and the Argan Biosphere Reserve (ABR) as declared by UNESCO in 1998 (“UNESCO - MAB Biosphere Reserves Directory,” 2002). The BEIS objective is the preservation of the biodiversity and ecosystem that include exceptional, rare and/or endangered species. Most of these sites cover wide areas of Argan trees such as Cape Ghir and Admine Forest. These sites are parts of the protected reserve of Argan. The approximate 20 million Argan trees cover 830,000 ha. The distribution of the trees starts from southwest of Tiznit to the north of Essaouira, and includes east and west of the Souss valley, covering plains, plateaus and mountains. These natural parks were created in order to preserve the different uses of this biosphere. Terroir products and ecotourism are among the uses of this area that play an effective role in the socioeconomic development of Souss Massa. (H. Aboutayeb, Beraaouz, & Ezaidi, 2016).

## **3. PLACE OF ARGAN TREES ENVIRONMENT AND ARGAN OIL IN TOURISTS’ ATTRACTION**

### **3.1 Ecotourism: Importance of Souss Massa Biosphere**

It is true the ecotourism is gaining popularity in the recent years, but this segment of tourism is not new. During the last centuries, it has been common for Western Europeans to visit Africa on the purpose of experiencing natural environment (Orams, 1995). While some see it as a way to be “responsible” and “sustainable” towards nature, tourism industry often associates it with adventure (H. Aboutayeb et al., 2016).

Doctor Nicolas Hetzer is one of the first scholars to guess this form of tourism. According to his statement in his initial article published in 1965, ecotourism is about lowering the impact on the environment, maximizing respect for the host culture, increasing economical benefits to local communities and maximizing tourists’ contentment. Hetzer confirms that by fulfilling these characteristics, we will be talking about ecological tourism (Ballantyne & Packer, 2013; Cheia, 2013; Hetzer, 1965).

And for Ceballos-Lascurain, considered as the “Architect of Ecotourism”, this type of tourism can be defined as “[...] tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed

natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals [...]”. He considers it as an opportunity to enjoy and connect with nature in a way that most people cannot do in their regular life or urban existences (Orams, 1995; “The ECOCLUB Interview with the ‘Architect of Ecotourism,’” 2006).

Based on these definitions, ecotourism is about discovering the wild nature and life of the rural areas without causing any negative impact on the environment.

In Souss Massa, tourism is considered as the second economic sector. With 38,800 beds capacity in 2016, the region covers about 16% of the accommodation of the country (Secrétariat d’Etat chargé du Tourisme, 2016a). In the ABR, due to the domination of the informal sector, it is difficult to draw up a list of the beds. Anyhow, with cross checking, the number is estimated to exceed 2500 beds. However, the country still did not reach its tourism potential fully. According to the tourism ministry, in 2016, 10.33 million non-resident tourists have visited Morocco. Most of them go to the imperial or coastal cities only. Nonetheless, as stated by USAID in their report on the promotion of rural tourism, two out of three tourists would prefer spending more time in rural areas (Chemonics International Inc., 2006; Secrétariat d’Etat chargé du Tourisme, 2016b). Moreover, according to the National Tourism Council in a research undertaken in 2002, 70.6% of visitors questioned think it would be interesting to discover the inland region of Agadir and to exchange with locals (Hassan Aboutayeb, 2014). In this respect, tourists’ interests go together with the ecotourism and the development of rural areas.

Although tourism in the rural areas is very vital as it helps preventing rural exodus by participating in the creation of new job opportunities, diversifying the economy and improving the infrastructures, it is still an unevenly distributed wealth as most of the profits go to the tourists’ origin countries or to the urban entrepreneurs in Morocco. For instance, in Souss Massa, the profits are concentrated mainly in Agadir and Taroudant (H. Aboutayeb et al., 2016; Hassan Aboutayeb, 2014).

In the ABR of Souss Massa, many sites are habitat for a large number of rare and endemic species. These places can represent the first attraction in the ecotourism segment. For example, the Admine Forest, in the province of Inzegane Ait Melloul, has large plains of Argan trees and several species of mammals, avifauna and herpetofauna species. During spring, the forest becomes an important attraction for local population seeking relaxation. In addition to that, the Ain Asmama is known for Argan trees being among the main tree species in the BEIS. It represents a tourist attraction of high importance with the Abdelmoumen big dam, waterfalls and beautiful landscapes (H. Aboutayeb et al., 2016). For tourists, these protected areas are the ideal place to observe nature. Lequin and Carriere (2004) stated that “The protected areas are territories with a strong ecotourism potential, they represent priority sites to attract clientele seeking “wild” nature and a sort of exoticism”.

As vital as tourism is in rural areas, it is also important to keep the balance between the biodiversity preservation requirements and tourists’ interests. Actually, among the constraints of the development of tourism in rural areas is the deterioration and perturbation risk increase of the wild fauna and flora. Economically, Aboutayeb speaks about the augmentation of the cost of living as well as the creation of instability in the market. To avoid

the negative impacts mentioned above, the implementation of ecotourism developing plans in rural areas should overcome the issue of lack of communication among tourism stakeholders in the ABR. That is why in 2010, the National Agency of Oasis and Argan Trees Zones Development (Known as ANDZOA) was created. Their Argan Tree Zones Rural Tourism Development Program aims at providing job opportunities and the development of natural sites, leisure activities and accommodation. So far, the ABR has attracted several investors that are mainly Moroccan and French. They have a great place in the augmentation of accommodation capacity and the creation of entities for rural tourism development (Hassan Aboutayeb, 2014).

### **3.2 Rural Tourism: Argan Biosphere Reserve’s Itineraries**

As part of their foreign development programs, The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) created 18 rural tourism itineraries all around Morocco. These itineraries highlight the unique character of each journey and encourage interactions between tourists and rural host communities. The aim is to attract more tourists to these areas and promote their economy and local products. 7 out of these 18 itineraries are elaborated around the rural region of Agadir. And one is particularly about discovering the Argan country. Actually, USAID used the Argan oil as a key element in the development of Agadir/Immouzer itineraries. According to Sam Stokes, a U.S. Department of the Interior expert in land management for resource conservation and recreation, the production of Argan oil itself is an attraction for visitors. In the Morocco Rural Tourism program, USAID assisted the Argan oil cooperatives, led mainly by women, to improve their offer. As the product was already there, the objective was to boost its marketing. They helped the cooperatives’ members to choose the right packaging, to include cosmetic Argan oil to their offer, to raise awareness about the benefits of this oil and to add signs that help tourists be directed to their production premises. Thanks to this program, the number of tourists increased significantly which helped improve the economy of this region and increase the value of Argan oil. Now, women in these cooperatives feel empowered as it has given them a direction in life and can plan for their family’s future (Chemonics International Inc., 2006). Other rural itineraries exist such as the three routes in the region of Souss Massa that suggest Honey, Argan and Saffron routes as tourist products.

Besides these three famous routes and those developed by USAID, there are a multiplicity of other itineraries in the ABR that are suggested by operator tours and travel agencies specialized in rural tourism. These itineraries can be done in different ways such as pedestrian, equestrian or biking ways. Anyhow, these products are still not as popular as those of Marrakech. For instance, this type of products in the High Atlas is highly diversified and presented on paper in a very attractive way. The lack of popularity in the ABR is mainly due to the fact that an important part of the tourism products are made and commercialized in the informal market (20% of the total offers (Hassan Aboutayeb, 2014)).

The itineraries in Souss Massa are considered as essential tourism products and need specific strategies in order to avoid the decline phase. Thus, in order to maintain the tourists flow, it is important for the region to instantly diversify the offer and enrich the itineraries with experiences, activities and interactions with locals and nature. Moreover, communicating the products and accommodations offers is also an important part of the attraction of visitors.

The ecotourism and rural tourism can be a source of income for country side as the value of the reserves can be used as a marketing tool to promote the region of Souss Massa, and thus attract more tourists. Though, it is important to maintain the balance between the protection of the biodiversity and the negative impact that tourism can have on the natural environment. That is why a sustainable territorial marketing strategy should be developed.

It is important to note that the activities that come from the Argan trees' production procedures remain the first source of economical income (H. Aboutayeb et al., 2016). Several itineraries are made around the Argan reserves, the traditional production process of the oil is used as an attraction for visitors and the benefits of the oil are promoted in order to attract tourists who are looking for new experiences.

### **3.3 Gastronomic Tourism: Argan oil for the seekers of authenticity**

Even if food is not the main purpose of traveling, it highly participates in the enhancement of the travel experience and participates more and more in the development of tourist industry. Actually, it is suggested that food take part of 25% of total tourist expenses (Hudman, 1986).

Gastronomy plays an important role in building the identity of a region and that is why, when traveling, visitors look for authentic local foods. For tourists, food is important in terms of discovering the destination's culture and forming its identity (Richards, 2003).

Etymologically, the word *gastronomy* comes from Greek words: *gastér* which mean "stomach", and *nómos*, "law" or "knowledge". Technically, it is the "law of regulating the stomach" (Jakša Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Gastronomy is defined in the Encyclopaedia Britannica as "the art of selecting, preparing, serving, and enjoying fine food". In classical works, it is seen as the best possible feeding way in order to maintain human's life (Brillat-Savarin, 2009). In other researches, gastronomy is related to food and culture at the same time. Culinary, another word used in the same context as gastronomy, comes from the Latin word *Culina* and *Culinarius* which mean kitchen (*Culinary*, 2017). This word covers foods, meals and food preparation methods which give to the country or the region a distinctive identity (J. Kivela & Crotts, 2005).

The author of "Culinary Tourism" Lucy M. Long (2004) was the first to suggest this term in 1998. She used it to describe the tourists' experience of foreign cultures through food. Gastronomy and tourism have a tight relationship. Actually, tourists do not have to eat only, but they also need to enrich the eating experience through food to make it a pleasurable and memorable moment. Food is not always the central point of tourists, but it contributes highly in the enhancement of their journey and the way they perceive the destination.

There is a close relationship between local economy and food. Actually, if the local resources come to achieve the objective of attracting tourists with the gastronomy, the local economy benefit from tourism, otherwise tourism will be harming the local agriculture and participates in the increase of imports, thus the local economy will not benefit from its visitors. Local food is based on local agriculture, hunting and fishing. Promoting local food in the right way will also promote these activities (Richards, 2003). That is why it is important to bring out authentic dishes that are based on local products.



*Authentikos*, Greek word from which *authentic* comes, means “genuine” and “principal”. Authentic can be defined as “not false or copied” and “having an origin supported by unquestionable evidence” (*Authentic*, 2017). In this context, authentic food is about the traditional recipes of a region that are preserved through time and are not tainted by the development of the food processing industries. Now, tourists look for hidden getaways where locals eat to avoid the mass tourist and try authentic food (Richards, 2003).

### 3.3.1 Tourists' motivation

It is easy to define gastronomy tourism. But it is not that easy for tourism marketers to apprehend the gastronomic product, just as it is not that easy for gastronomes to apprehend tourism. Thus, in order to meet tourists' expectations regarding food experience, the two sectors need to collaborate and combine their products for the sake of their businesses and the development of their area's attractiveness.

Gastronomy is among the motivations of tourists to visit a destination. Speaking of motivation, Hudson (1999) mentioned the push and pull motives where a person seeks escaping problems of their regular environment to obtain rewards through novelty and education. In the context of gastronomy, tourists try to escape their eating habits and having new culinary experiences (Fields, 2003).

Several studies have used Maslow's pyramid to understand tourists' motivations/needs. McIntosh, *et al* (1995) identified four motivation's categories: physical motivators – cultural motivators – interpersonal motivators – status and prestige motivators. We will present these four sections based on Fields (2003) analysis where he tried to explain them from a gastronomy perspective and we will also try to apply them to the endemic terroir product: edible Argan oil.

Edible Argan oil is considered as a magnet for tourists looking for new gastronomy experiences. The edible grade of Argan oil is part of the local food culture of Souss Massa. It is used as the basis of traditional Moroccan dishes, in recipes proper to the Souss Massa region like *L'bsiss* or *Idernan*, or simply as salad dressing or bread dipping (Mokhtar Soussi, 1960).

#### a) Physical motivators

Eating can be physical, but this category is about more than this. Physical motivators are about promoting novel eating patterns. For example, Italy and Greece are known with the “Mediterranean Diet” that features healthy, diversified and tasty food with positive impacts on physical conditions. This sort of promotion attracts tourists who are concerned by their health. Based on this and what was mentioned before regarding the exclusivity of a territory, edible Argan oil, along with other Moroccan terroir products, can be a great promotional tool for Souss Massa. Beside its nutritional values, the oil is very rich in effective and rare components that work against proliferation of cancer cells and prevention of cardiovascular disease. It is also scientifically proven to protect the organism from free radicals that damage body's cells and to be beneficial for diabetic people (Adlouni, 2010). As health concerns are growing, all these benefits combined in the oil can be appealing to the increasing group of tourists who are looking for healthy and safe food as well as new culinary experiences in developing countries.

b) Cultural motivators

Food contributes in a major part in the cultural distinctiveness and specificity of any region. (Beer, Edwards, Fernandes, & Sampaio, 2003). This category of motivators can be powerful pull motives as they take tourists out from their eating habits to a new and unique cuisine. Food can be a bridge that connects tourists with local culture. Several aspects of a culture can be combined in one meal: the quality of local produces, the way meals are prepared and presented, the way locals eat and the dishes and utensils used can all give an insight into the destination's culture. Yet, to achieve this, the cuisine needs to be traditional, authentic and not altered.

The traditional gastronomy of Souss Massa can have Argan oil inserted on all these levels to promote their cuisine. Actually, in the gastronomy of this region, Argan oil has an important place. It is used in its natural state for bread dipping or as an ingredient for a derived terroir product called *Amlou* (a liquid paste made of honey and grounded almonds). Both are part of locals' breakfast or late afternoon snack that go with Moroccan tea and different Moroccan pancakes. Argan oil is also used to dress Moroccan salads or to cook traditional dishes. The oil is known to enhance the flavor. Some of these meals are known to be prepared on special occasions. For instance, *Couscous* is prepared every Friday and *Berkoukes* during weddings. Like Argan oil, these artisanal recipes are also prepared with special techniques and specific tools (Mokhtar Soussi, 1960). The whole process is part of the region's culture and that is what makes it authentic and attractive to tourists eager to learn about food and customs.

c) Interpersonal motivators

Travels are considered by many as an occasion to socialize by meeting new people or strengthening family and friends bonds. This is to say that whether people choose to travel within a group or individually, it is always a pleasure for them to share the new pleasant experiences with someone else. And this is something that applies to new culinary experiences, too. Warde and Martens (2000) mentioned this in a research they have conducted in the UK. In terms of the contribution to eating out experience, the results showed that people valued the sociability aspect of the food gathering more than the quality of the meal itself.

Unlike the past times where the norm for family's members is eating together on a daily basis, this modern lifestyle changed people's eating habits and family gatherings around a meal changed fundamentally. That is why holidays have a strong social symbol: they give a time off for family's members to gather.

As mentioned on the previous motivators, Souss Massa's cuisine based on edible Argan oil has several delights to offer to its visitors. This oil also brings tourists to discover its traditional production process by visiting cooperatives that are led mostly by women and to socialize with people working there. Special events around Argan oil that involve food and music are organized within these cooperatives which can be a good way for people to meet locals as well as other tourists, and to create the feeling of belonging to a community (S. Nakhli, 2015). This is to say that whether tourists are traveling in group or solo, food gatherings encourage and facilitate social interactions.

d) Status and prestige motivators

Speaking of eating out, status and prestige used to be associated with chefs who have Michelin stars. Eating and being seen in a specific restaurant has always been part of status distinction (Richards, 2003). However, this distinction has been decreasing while the expression of the individual's identity through different lifestyle choices has been gaining more popularity. Bode (1994) have stated long before the postmodern tourism's form that gastronomy can be about a meal as simple as bread, cheese, apple and wine. If the food is fresh and of a good quality, the eater has the wisdom to sense it and has a friend to share the meal with, then gastronomy's factors are fulfilled.

In these postmodern tourism times, tourists look for experiencing new cuisine far from the mass tourists' places where food authenticity might be altered. Eating out when traveling is no longer about the prestige of the restaurant. It became more about the quality of the ingredients used and the meals prepared. The luxury is when tourists happen to try traditional and authentic food. Nowadays, many online guides help tourists find “hidden gems”. They help tourists localize small restaurants where locals eat traditional meals with affordable prices.

The Argan oil, seen as a luxury by tourists, has the characteristics of being rare, costly, healthy, nutritional, tasty and above all traditional (Adlouni, 2010; Ruas et al., 2016). All these aspects put together can deliver a new and unique experience to those seeking prestige while eating or those aspiring to achieve eminence and distinction through their eating habits and practices. This oil is used to cook a wide variety of dishes ranging from the simplest to the most luxurious traditional ones.

Therefore, according to this analysis of Fields (2003) and Argan oil's features, this unique product can participate in the satisfaction of the four motives of tourists' gastronomy and be used as a tool to attract tourists seeking novel gastronomy. The question is: does Souss Massa hospitality industry benefit from motivators aspects that this oil has?

### *3.3.2 State of Gastronomy Tourism in Souss Massa compared to other countries*

Several countries have special schemes oriented solely toward promoting their food heritage. For example, Jones and Jenkins (2003) spoke about how the traditional aspect of the Welsh food changed with the evolution of society. But actions are being undertaken in order to bring back the real Wales' food and to use it in a way to attract tourists. "A Taste of Wales" is a program that aims at marketing traditional gastronomy through the implementation of a wide range of activities. For instance, the Swamsea city holds a Cockle Festival annually that is sponsored by the program mentioned above. The point of this scheme is to promote traditional cuisine and produces by listing the main food categories and supporting the tourism agents that align with the initiative's objectives.

“A Taste of Wales” is a result of several previous initiatives. The change of programs helps the country to sharpen its actions and adapt the society's change. Another example of this is England that went from « Food from Britain » in the 1980s to « Taste of the West » in order to keep up the tourist product and to avoid the decline phase. While the first highlight the diversity of British food, the second one was introduced in order to remedy to the languishing phase by promoting food of South West of England. This program was

implemented by a group of producers and industries who are actively involved in the field of regional food industry. With the financial support of the Agriculture Ministry, the main aim was to promote the members' products and the food culture of the West Country through improving their competitiveness and professionalism. As a result, a new company, Westcountry Cooking, saw the daylight. Its principal objective is to promote the local food culture and culinary traditions of West England. Other projects followed on from the initial scheme such as production of cookery books and development of a local foods directory to help locals, businesses and visitors to localize and buy local food (Beer et al., 2003). Another campaign was launched in United Kingdom under the name "Eat the View" that tries to combine between local food and the countryside landscapes. So, despite its richness, UK's gastronomy has been undervalued for a long time, but several strategies were applied in order to promote its food culture (Richards, 2003).

Souss Massa has a rich and diversified traditional gastronomy. Yet, there is still an important space of development to value this touristic resource and to attract more tourists to the region. In Agadir, there is a yearly gastronomic event called "Les rencontres gastronomiques d'Agadir" (Gastronomic meetings of Agadir) that is supported by the Regional Council of Tourism of Agadir and the administrative division of Souss Massa. This event aims at bringing the Moroccan and French cultures closer and to give to Agadir a gastronomic identity. The 2017 edition included a special event about 150 *Tajines* to taste and another one for Argan oil and Saffron demonstration and tasting ("Les Rencontres Gastronomiques d'Agadir," 2017). In summer 2016, the Regional Council of Tourism of Agadir has also collaborated with the Moroccan National Office of Tourism in an online, TV and radio advertisings to promote the national tourism. The latter channel broadcasted several episodes about the different activities that can be done in Souss Massa. The third episode was about Souk El Had, the local market of Agadir, and gastronomy which covered restaurants, terroir products, Argan and Limoun Farm (F. Nakhli, 2016). Actually, terroir products of Souss Massa are mostly edible ones such as Saffron and honey. Thus, events including these products can also participate in the promotion of the region's food. For instance, there are national events organized in the region of Souss Massa like the National Exhibition of Terroir Products in Agadir and Honey Festival in Imouzer that are organized every year and that aim promoting terroir products of Morocco and on site tasting. The issue of these events is a weak online listing and promotion.

### **3.4 Health and Wellness Tourism: Argan oil and the wellness centers in Souss Massa**

From a wide perspective, health tourism can be defined as a type of tourism that is oriented towards pleasure and include a stress relief and pressure free aspects. As in any sector, the product is influenced by consumers and suppliers and thus, the tourist product in health tourism needs to have a medical aspect (Bennett, King, & Milner, 2004).

In his paper, Hall (1992) referred to Van Spielen's five components of health tourism:

- Sun and fun activities,
- Healthy activities but health is not the main purpose (sports and adventure activities),
- Healthy activities with health being the principle motive (travel to a different climate),

- Relaxation travel motives such as massage, sauna and other health activities (spa resort),
- Medical treatment.

Smith and Puczkó (2009) identified two types of health tourism: wellness and medical. The first type is related to holistic (spiritual, yoga and meditation) and leisure/recreation (beauty treatments, sports/fitness and pampering) activities. The second type of health tourism is about therapeutic (illness rehabilitation and healing/recuperation) and surgical (cosmetic, dentistry and operations) activities. These scholars also identified activities that are related to both types of health tourism such as therapeutic recreation, lifestyle rehabilitation and occupational wellness. Other activities mentioned are medical but still have a wellness aspect like Thalassotherapy and nutritional programs.

In this paper, we are leaning more toward the wellness aspect of health tourism. It is difficult to grab the definition of the term *wellness* as it has different understanding from a language to another. For example, in Hebrew, the word *health* is used to translate *wellness* because this latter one does not exist in this language. Also, Finnish language has not a direct translation of this term and *wellbeing* is used instead. It is same for Slovenian that use *well-feeling*. Other countries, such as France, Hungary and Germany, are unable to give an accurate translation to the *wellness* concept and chose, for marketing purposes, to integrate the English word to their respective vocabulary (Smith & Puczkó, 2009). Besides the translation differences, the meaning given to the word also change from a region to another. For instance, Smith and Puczkó (2009) cited Chan's (2007) research on Malaysians and their perception of wellness and health. According to Chan, in Malaysia, these words are related to stress release through body treatments and new sort of activities for tourists. It also includes cosmetic surgery. While in Eastern and Central Europe, wellness and health are associated to physical healing and this is due to the existence of medical waters and thermal spas in this area. And in Southern Europe, this word is more about seaside treatments where sunshine and sea air are the main focus.

Dunn (1959) was among the first scholars to define the philosophy of the word *wellness*. According to him, wellness is related to the person's wellbeing through a healthy mind, body and spirit, and the self-responsibility for a healthy lifestyle. Hence the definition of wellness tourism by Muller and Kaufmann (2000):

“The sum of all the relationships and phenomena resulting from a journey and residence by people whose main motive is to preserve or promote their health. They stay in a specialized hotel which provides the appropriate professional know-how and individual care. They require a comprehensive service package comprising physical fitness/beauty care, healthy nutrition/diet, relaxation/meditation and mental activity/education.”

According to these definitions, wellness tourism includes not only physical wellbeing activities, but also psychological and spiritual activities. Wellness tourists seek destinations that take them out of their daily life distractions and stress. These destinations have the particularity of being transcendent with unusual landscapes. That is why several wellness centers happen to be near the sea or on top of a mountain (Botton, 2003; Smith & Puczkó, 2009).

As this paper is about Argan oil and its contribution in tourists' attraction to Souss Massa, we will focus on the wellness type of tourism which is based on pampering and beauty treatments activities that are practiced in hotels, resorts, spas and leisure centers.

When it comes to traditional wellness rituals, it is considered that Morocco has a lot of similarities with the other North African countries than the other African or European areas, and this is mainly due to the shared Islamic culture. That is why health and wellness of North African countries are discussed as a single whole. In this space, during the Roman control time, bathing facilities were based on thermal resources. Greek influence also reached North Africa and had an impact on locals' lifestyle regarding health and wellness which is often related to therapeutic thermal springs (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009).

In the North African culture, there is a strong therapeutic bathing culture. Warm bathing is used for body and spirit treatments with skin exfoliation and massages. Products used in this practice vary from a country to another. For example, Egyptian use yoghurt and honey while Moroccan use black soap, Henna, and *Rhassoul* (Moroccan clay) (Smith & Puczkó, 2009; Staats, 1994). It is also believed that this process helps with deep cleansing and body beautifying which help reaching a high spirituality level (Smith & Puczkó, 2009).

In Morocco, part of SPAs and resorts treatments and paraphernalia come from the traditional Moroccan *Hammam* rituals. As it is stated by Staats (1994), this bathing process starts with a short moment of relaxation after the application of traditional black soap (a green or brown paste). Then a complete body scrub with a coarse mitt called *Kees* is done. Sometimes, bathers pay a worker in the *Hammam* to take care of this step and it often includes an intense and long massage. Other steps of the process include traditional terroir products such as the Moroccan clay *Rhassoul* to clean hair and purify the skin, and the Henna with herbs for nourishing hair masks. In the modern *Hammam* centers, this same process is applied using sophisticated equipments and other products are included to enhance tourists' experience, to meet their expectations and to increase the structure's added value. In these places, luxurious treatments are suggested using the Argan oil along with other special products such as floral waters, essential oils and clays.

These wellness centers offer different forms and length of treatments. They can go from couple hours sessions to couple weeks stays. For example, the British website "Wellbeing Escapes" suggests different destinations. Stays in Agadir are based on seaside resorts and offer a modern *Hammam*, body massages, saunas as well as yoga and fitness activities.

Being an endemic product of Souss Massa, the cosmetic Argan oil is included in the wellness centers to attract visitors looking for unique experiences as well as rehabilitating virtues of this terroir product. It is used in intense relaxing and healing massages, modern *Hammam* rituals and beauty treatments. These wellness centers are usually part of a luxurious hotel such as Riad Villa Blanche, Paradis Plage, Palais des Roses and Timoulay. They suggest treatments with the latest equipments as well as traditional body care using Moroccan products. For examples, among these manual treatments there are "Oriental massages" with and facial treatments with the cosmetic Argan oil. All these Spas and resorts addresses are

listed in Agadir’s website ([www.visitagadir.com](http://www.visitagadir.com)) that is available in French, English and Arabic which can be a great tool for foreign tourists to reach these places.

Souss Massa geographical characteristics can be a great asset to attract tourists interested in seaside or mountain resorts. The cosmetic Argan oil cannot be considered as the main tourist attraction, but can contribute in the enrichment of tourists’ experience. And that is why health and wellness centers need to work on the health information by communicating the oil’s virtues and to diversify the relaxation programs.

## **CONCLUSION**

Generally, Morocco enjoys a large portfolio of terroir products. The cultivation, production and marketing process of many of these products participate in the improvement of the tourism product portfolio and thus the territorial marketing. Actually, the ultimate objective of this type of marketing is to attract businesses to a territory and to promote a promising image in order to achieve local development (Texier & Valla, 1992). Being aware of the opportunities that these products hold, several firms and cooperatives has come into being.

In this paper, we have chosen to focus on Souss Massa and Argan oil because it is part of the Moroccan heritage and has been among women’s ritual beauty and cooking habits for many years. In addition to that, this oil is part of Souss Massa’s identity and culture. Its cosmetic and health virtues, as well as its rarity are what make foreigners curious about the ecology of the Argan trees and the production process of the oil. And that is what brings tourists to the rural areas of the region.

Argan oil is a strong factor for tourism development in the region of Souss Massa. Besides the ecological, rural, gastronomy and health tourism, Argan oil and other terroir products participate in the development of other niche tourism markets such as educational and business tourism. Actually, the richness of the biosphere of Souss Massa and the terroir products, especially Argan oil, give rise to several festivals, exhibitions and colloquiums. This type of tourism that is based on the creation of events is among the most important strategies in the development of territorial marketing (Ferrari & Resciniti, 2007). The use of unique local resources gives a great value to the region and its events as it influences the image positively and attracts investors and tourists with different motives.

Finally, we can conclude that Argan oil’s characteristics, history, benefits and uses have an important role in attracting tourists, and participating in the development of territorial marketing strategies that stakeholders can implement in several tourism sectors and activities.

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