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Title of the PhD work

Partir pour se définir. Technical innovations and production of significations within an Association of saffron producers in France.

Research questions

At the end of the 1990s, some inhabitants of the Southwest of France realized the presence of saffron in the old gardens of the region. Desirous of protecting a piece of their heritage they decided to boost the production of this spice. Since 1997, persons of various horizons (pensioners, pharmacists, cooks, teachers, farmers) have done everything possible to build up knowledge about saffron cultivation. At the beginning they had no know-how, they really didn't know how to produce the spice. They tried to cultivate the flower like asparagus or like strawberries which are the main production of the region. Their objective was to bring back the production of this spice and to obtain an "I.G.P." and a "Label Rouge". Different studies (genetic, agronomic, ergonomic and ethno-historical), 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. I did a first research on this revival in 2002. I did a research on the economic history of saffron in France in order to justify the geographical demarcation of the current zone of production. I used historical and ethnographical methods.

The results of my research do not coincide with the farmer's objectives. Actually, my work demonstrates that they cannot justify the revival of saffron in their region using historical data.

Even if the analysis of historical texts confirms the importance of saffron production during the XV-XVII centuries, the present revival is not so evident. Effectively, it appeared that the historical area of production was situated 100 km at the south of the present centre of the revival.

The results of this historical research enabled the actors of saffron revival to think about the reasons of their action: the historical impulsion of their production is not founded. In a way they have to find a new "pretext" to produce saffron. As I said, they had no know-how about the cultivation of the spice. So they thought that the exchange of knowledge with other saffron producers would help them.

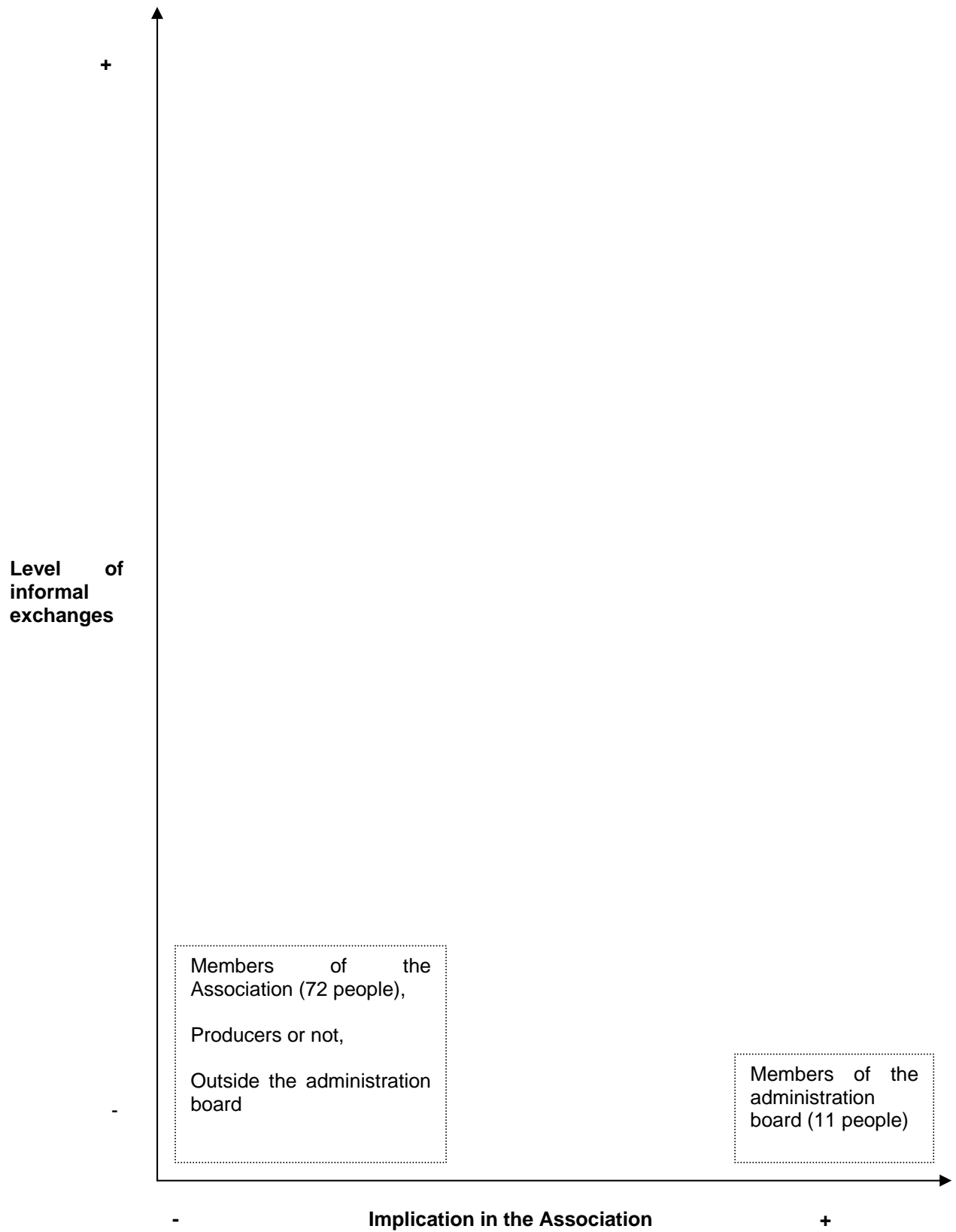
So they asked me to create with them an informal network of saffron producers including countries such as Morocco, Italy and Switzerland.

From this request I developed my first research questions:

- Saffron producers will have the opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences
- These exchanges will enhance mutual enrichment in every country
- The confrontation of knowledge will probably contribute to the creation of new production techniques, and strategies will probably emerge from these development summits to highlight the production of saffron

I organized the first meeting in Switzerland in February 2004. Twenty people of France came to visit the Swiss producers.

Before coming to Switzerland, the participants didn't know each other. As it is shown by the plan 1 below, there is no informal relation in the Association. Only eleven people are involved in the Association but they have no informal relations except the assemblies of the administration board. The producers meet each other once a year at the general assembly. They live in different regions of the Southwest, they don't have the same profession. The age of the participants varies a lot. The production of saffron is their single common point.

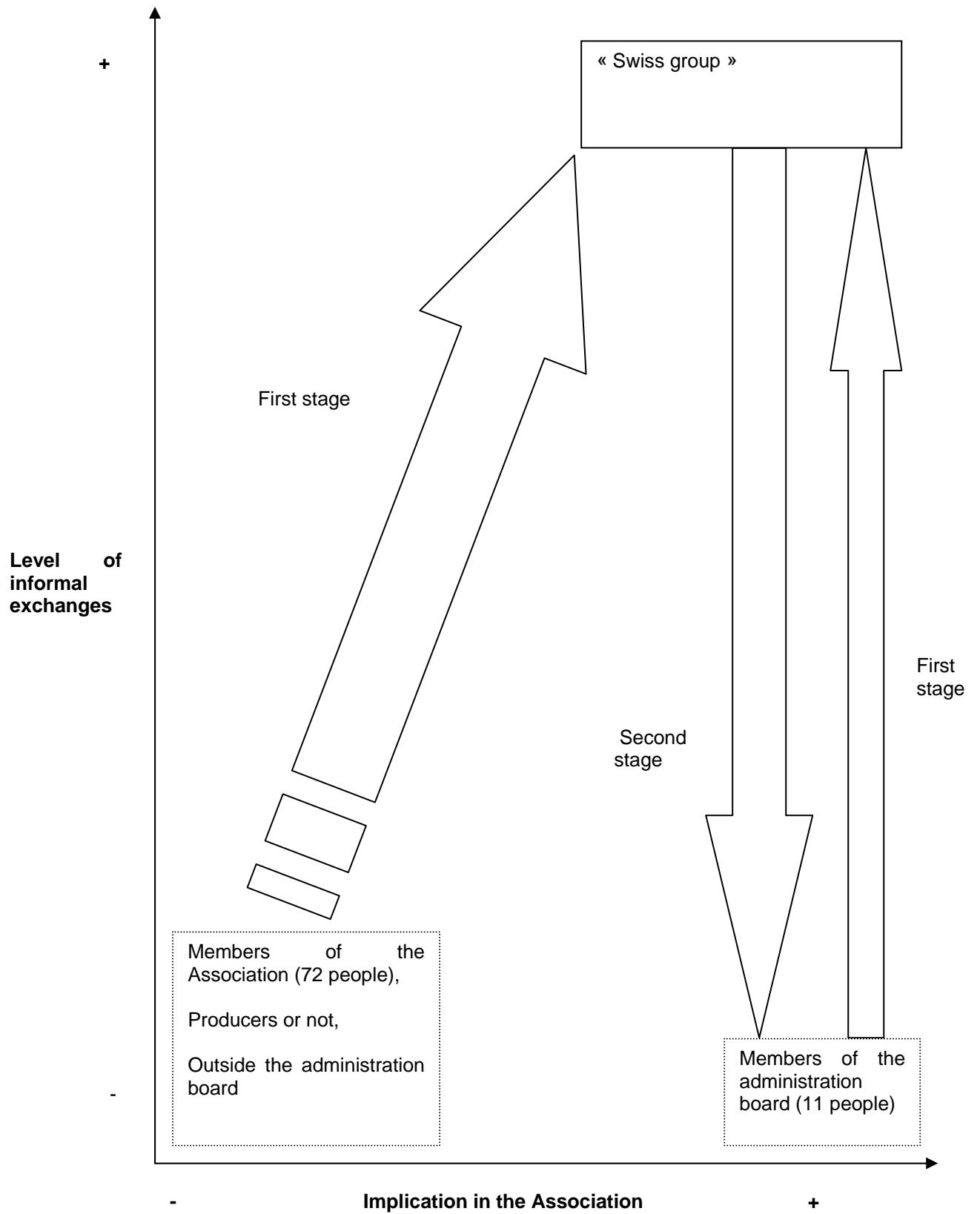


Plan 1. Situation before the journey in Switzerland

The logistic aspects played a role in the progress of the stay. They made a twenty-hour journey by bus to arrive in Switzerland. They slept in a kind of Bed and Breakfast, all sleeping in a dormitory. The nearness imposed by the context of the journey facilitated the exchanges within the group. They spent one day with the Swiss producers. It is important to specify that the Swiss were speaking German and that the producers had to appeal to translators to be able to exchange.

During that first trip I noticed that there weren't many exchanges between producers of both countries but that something was happening in the French group. The relation between the participants became friendly.

These first observations let me change my research questions. I decided to axe my observations on the French group in order to point the dynamics of sociability and to understand the way people create a common identity.

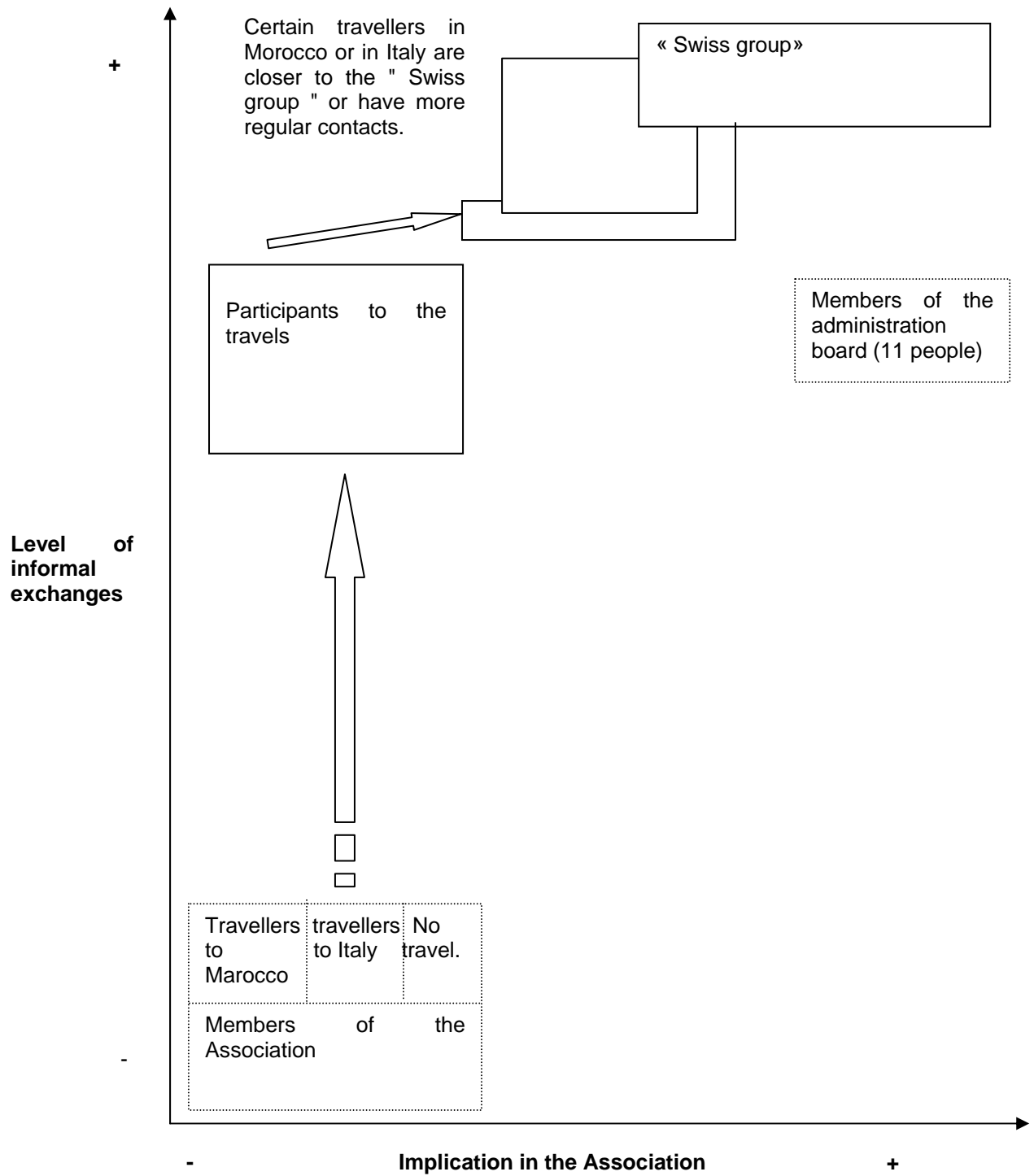


Plan 2. Situation after the journey in Switzerland

I organized a second meeting in Morocco in February-March 2005. Forty people participated to this travel. The logistic aspects were different from the first trip. We went by plane and slept in hotels. We spent two days with saffron producers. The director of the saffron cooperative spoke French. So producers could exchange information with him.

I observed the same kind of interactions between the French participants.

I organized a third meeting in Italy in March 2006. Forty people participated to this travel. They made a twenty-four-hour journey by bus to arrive in Italy. They slept in hotels. We visited saffron producers in Tuscany and Abruzzi. In Tuscany we met a producer who spoke French perfectly and in Abruzzi our guide and I made the translation.



Plan 3. Situation after the third journey.

The main observation

The dynamics I observed during the trips let me show how the off-centring, the fact of going away, makes it possible to reinforce the social relations between the individuals.

Methods and tools

The methodology I used in order to understand and to show the evolution of the relationships between the French producers is based on diverse disciplines.

First of all, I used classic ethnography. It means that I used a camera, a memo pad and a pen in order to transcript as much information as possible.

Secondly I used ethnomethodology, which is not the method of ethnology but a kind of sociology. This methodology allows me to analyse the social world in construction. The analysis of ordinary events underlines the way people construct and produce their activity in order to make it visible to other people.

In order to understand the signification the actor attributes to his action, I used the methodology named "cours d'action" developed by Theureau. This methodology is the result of the confrontation between the ergonomic analysis of the work and the researches in cognitive sciences. I specifically used one aspect of the methodology which is the "autoconfrontation".

After the trips I went to visit all the participants with the film I made during the stay. We watched the film and at the same time I asked many questions as: Why did you do this, what did you mean when you said that?

This methodology allowed me to understand the social construction in the group. Asking many questions let me understand the way the group constructed its identity and the way the sociability in the group and the personality of each member of the group influenced the choices.

Results (existing and/or expected)

The main results of my PhD work underline the repercussion of trips on a group of producers which had quite nothing in common. Before the travel, the producers were not implied in the association. Only ten persons, the members of the committee, were implied. They met each other during the meeting but they didn't have any relationship outside. There was no informal relation between the members of the Association. The trip to Switzerland allowed the development of informal exchanges between the participants and reinforced the participation at the committee. A new kind of relations appeared after the first trip. I noticed the apparition of "the Swiss group" which still exists.

After the trips to Morocco and to Italy, other people joined the "Swiss group" and participated more to the life of the Association. There are more informal relationships between the members.

So my PhD work shows that the fact of going away, changing the context allows people to create new identity references and contributes to the cohesion of the group. Today these aspects are important to define the objectives of the Association because they still don't know if they will benefit of the IGP label.

Discussion

In this paper I show you the repercussion of the travels on the social relationship in the Association. My presentation will focus on the repercussion of these travels on the technique aspects of saffron production.

We have seen that the interactions between the producers of different countries were reduced: they met each other during one or two days, they couldn't exchange much information because of the linguistic barrier. We could suppose that these meetings had no impact on the techniques of production. This first hypothesis is partly true: these exchanges didn't enhance mutual enrichment in every country. But I have noticed that these meetings had an impact on the way French producers consider their own practices.

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