

Ute Rösenthaller

Branding Chinese Green Tea in Mali

1 Introduction

Branding spells out, builds up and enhances the properties of a product, a place, or an individual. It is a complex notion that is intrinsically connected with values, images, and assets, be they monetary and/or symbolic, social, or identity-related. These values also imply notions of ownership, especially in the commodity world. Branding connects conceptual ideas with the product as its added value, which concomitantly renders the brand its owners' exclusive property. The time, creativity, and money that they invest in building up the brand are legally acknowledged by intellectual property law that aims at rewarding owners for their efforts.

In the market, the added brand value becomes visible in sales figures that can considerably exceed the material or use value of a product.¹ The green tea sector in Mali is a good example. More than a hundred green tea brands are to be found on the *Grand Marché*, Bamako's largest market place, which has an entire section exclusively for Chinese green tea. These brands represent various varieties and qualities of tea, yet even those of the same quality have amazingly different brand values. The value of a brand is difficult to pin down and control, as it comes and stays "by the grace of God," as the Malian tea importers would say. As quickly as it has arrived, it might also disappear again.

This chapter examines what is at stake with brand-named Chinese green tea in Mali using the example of the *Achoura* brand. *Thé Achoura* is currently the best-selling Chinese green tea in Mali, adjacent countries, and the Sahelian diasporas. Its name refers to the tenth day of the first month in the Muslim calendar and resonates well with Islam, the religious affiliation of the large majority of Malians.

Based on research on markets in Africa and Asia since 2005 and on interviews with the most successful Malian tea importers, this study follows the creation and rise of *Achoura*, as well as the various challenges, including brand piracy, rumours, health issues, and envy, that it had to face. The chapter begins by discussing brand value and embedding the creation of tea brands in the history of the arrival of Chinese green teas in Mali via Britain and Morocco in the early 19th century, the emergence of Malian tea brands in the 1990s, and its becoming a national drink in the 2000s. It then presents the importer of *Thé Achoura* and the creation of

¹ See Nakassis, 2013: 114.

the brand in 2013, its success, and the challenges it had to face. Finally, the study discusses the package design and tea publicity that form part of the brand's regime of value.² The argument presented here is that brand value is complicated to manage and requires hard work, convincing brand strategies, and a portion of good luck to persist in a dynamic and competitive market.

2 Tea History and Brand Creation

When green tea arrived in northern Mali in the early 19th century, it was known as *ataya*, the Moroccan-Arabic term for tea. At that time, it was consumed only by Saharan traders and their guests in an impressive but exclusive ritual. Tea arrived on camel back across the Sahara, but little did people know that it had travelled across half the globe from China via Britain and Morocco to the Sahel towns. Only after independence in 1960, when the Malian president travelled to China and, with Chinese help, began to establish a small tea plantation in the country's south did the Malian majority become aware of its origin and became interested in its consumption. More tea was imported, and it was now available in several varieties indicated by numbers following the Chinese tea standards, of which a Chunmee with the number *quatre-mille-once* (4011) was the most desired. During that time, the state was the only legal importer of luxury products, including tea, sugar, milk, salt, tobacco, and canned tomatoes;³ private importation of these items was prohibited, yet a few brand-name Chinese green teas also appeared in Mali, smuggled into the country.

The boom of the green tea brands began only following the 1991 economic reforms that permitted private traders to import it. At first, as before, tea was imported in large wooden boxes, but soon importers created small 25 g packages that contained the exact amount of tea that was required for one tea ritual. Over the course of the 1990s, printed plastic sachets that were meanwhile in use were placed in folding cartons emblazoned with images and brand names. In the late 1990s, the first Malian tea brands were registered with the *Centre Malien de Promotion de la Propriété Industrielle*, CEMAPI, the local office for trademark protection.

In the following years, growing numbers of traders – Malians and a few Chinese – imported increasing quantities of tea. Each importer created their own tea brand, as the packaging took place right in the tea factory in China. Most of them

² See Appadurai, 1986.

³ See Takacs, 1991.

travelled themselves to China to select the tea and decide on a brand name and a package design that distinguished their tea brand from that of other importers. Importers now became owners of brands that were their exclusive intellectual property, an asset that they had to defend against competitors.

Consumers embraced the colourful packages, which lent more prestige than unbranded tea sold loosely. By selling the brand-name teas in sealed packages, however, the importers prevented consumers from gaining trust in them by inspecting the tea leaves and smelling their aroma before purchasing. Consumers had to invest a lot of trust in the importer and believe that the promise offered by the brand was reliable. They trusted their trader more than the package inscription and the related advertisement, if there was any.⁴ Word of mouth by other consumers and the recommendations of traders were important for a brand's success, more than the appeal of the colourful package design and the brand name. Wholesalers could exert much influence in making a particular importer's tea brand sell. Thus, whilst some importers were able to sell several shipping containers of tea a month, with a purchasing value of about 100,000 EUR each, others took several months or more to sell a single container of tea.

Success in making a tea brand sell and thus in creating brand value depended on a combination of understanding the tea market, guaranteeing stable product quality, handling one's competitors wisely, conversing with other traders, investing in social projects, counterbalancing gossip and rumours, and managing an extensive distribution network.

Even though the quality that many tea packages contained was the same or better, they would not sell but remain unsold in the warehouses of the many less lucky importers. In contrast, popular teas were already sold before the container load from China had arrived in the importer's warehouse. If this was the case, it reflected the popularity of a brand, but that condition could also easily create a surfeit on the market and subsequently a supply crisis, when, for instance, the arrival of the tea was delayed because the Chinese supplier had problems delivering the ordered quantity and the importer had already used the money of the wholesalers to order more tea to be sure there was no gap in the supply chain. If the tea did not arrive or contained poor tea, the brand value could drastically decrease and/or the importer easily be financially ruined.

4 See Fanselow, 2009; Applbaum, 2005; Rösenthaller, 2022.

3 The Importer of *Thé Achoura*

During the 2010s, about a dozen tea importers became successful in selling tea in larger quantities, managed to control the tea market, and, through their steady supply, contributed to making it Mali's national drink. Together they own an estimated one-third of the tea brands on the Malian market. The many other brands are owned by occasional importers attempting to emulate the successes of the influential tea importers. The story of the most successful brand of tea – *Thé Achoura* – will now be briefly related.

Achoura was created in 2013. At the time, the owner, a young man in his early thirties, was very successfully selling the brand *Taoudeni* that he had created in 2009 under the auspices of his older cousin, after having collected some experience as a simple salesman and in the business of another tea importer. He first invested the profits from the sales of *Taoudeni* in purchasing larger quantities of tea, then in warehouses for storing it and in lorries for transporting the tea from the West African port where it arrived to the warehouses in landlocked Mali. In 2013, he had saved enough to be able to create his own company and register the brand in his own name. He travelled to China to select the variety of tea he wanted for *Achoura*, in a quality that was suitable for Malian consumers: not cheap, but also not too expensive. In no more than three years, in 2016, this importer had constructed a huge new office building and then began to diversify his products. He created employment in rearing chicken and cattle, then also sold *Achoura* milk, so that if a problem developed with importing tea from China or with an unmanageable surfeit of *Achoura* on the market, he would be able to continue trading these other products.

With his two successful tea brands, he demonstrated that it was possible to bring a tea onto the market and quickly sell it in large quantities. Whilst other importers had large billboards and commercials on radio and TV, he did not even invest much in advertising. He only had small posters that he distributed among customers (Fig. 1). Other tea brands contained the same good quality of tea, but did not easily sell, so that their owners could not recover their investments quickly enough to continue importing more tea.

During several three- to four-hour interviews, the owner of *Achoura* was very welcoming, telling me about his tea business in his small office near the *Grand Marché*. He was born in northern Mali, had studied accountancy in Algeria, then during his work for another tea importer had travelled to China to visit tea gardens and factories and to select good-quality tea, until he began to work with his cousin, who granted him initial capital and documents for importation. These experiences enabled him to successfully place his brands on the market.

Once a brand has arrived in the mind of the people, the money flows, as he put it: “It is like a money-producing machine (*c’est comme une machine qui produit de l’argent*).”⁵



Fig. 1: Entrance to the office of the owner of Thé Achoura
Photo: Ute Röschenhalter, Bamako, 2016.

Soon, he was selling *Taoudeni* and *Achoura* throughout Mali and in adjacent West African countries, including Guinea, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, Mauritania, and Niger, and also as far as Central Africa (Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville) and even East Africa (Mozambique). Additionally, other traders conveyed the popular teas also to other countries in which it was not worthwhile to sell an entire container each month. Altogether, according to his own calculation, the owner of *Achoura* sells a monthly average of 40 containers, which makes him the most successful Malian, if not African, tea importer. With his enterprise, he also created employment for young Malians, fostered development in the country, and was known for philanthropic donations. Online media reported that in 2017, he was involved as the patron of an event, organised by *Miroir Media*, a global communication agency, during which 12 local enterprises were nominated for excelling in creating innovation, employment, and development, in social responsibility, or in environmental respect. For his generosity, the owner of *Achoura* was also awarded

5 This information is based on various interviews with the importer in Bamako in 2013 and 2016.

a trophy.⁶ Acknowledging his endeavours, one journalist wrote that this importer represented “the Malian dream. He started from nothing to now reign supreme in the tea market in Mali and in the international market. He employs hundreds of young Malians and invests heavily in social and cultural events, especially those involving youth.”⁷

4 Challenges the *Achoura* Brand Had to Face

One of the challenges was to manage brand piracy. Every tea brand, once it became popular – i.e. when more than five containers per month of it were sold in Mali – has sooner or later fallen victim to brand piracy. Brand piracy was more easily discovered when importers employed representatives in their widely dispersed distribution networks in the country and abroad. These were aware of the quantity of tea that the importer distributed and thus able to identify surplus sales of counterfeited tea and infringed tea packages.

Achoura was pirated, too. In 2016, a trader in a rural market was observed selling infringed *Achoura* in packages that had the same design and colours as the original, but its brand name was instead *Amine*. The seller was forced to disclose from whom he had purchased the tea, and, confronted with a high fine to pay, the pirate admitted his fault and promised to stop selling pirated *Achoura*. His excuses were accepted, as Malians prefer to solve such issues among themselves in an amiable way. However, sometime later, he imported again a container of pirated *Achoura*. This time, he was sued and forced to pay the damages.⁸ A similar case happened in 2016 in Bamako when a tea brand emblazoned with the design and colours of *Achoura* but with the name *Charifa* was found.⁹ In mid-2019, *Achoura* was again pirated by a Guinean importer. Once he was informed about it, the owner of *Achoura* travelled to Conakry to get hold of the pirate. The tea, which did not even have any health certificate, was confiscated and the trader sued. If he was not stopped, consumers could be deceived by the similarity of the design, notice the low quality and refuse to buy *Achoura* again or, worse, make its owner responsible for their health problems. The owner of *Achoura* then informed the Chinese government, which closed the factory that produced the counterfeited tea.¹⁰ In principle, customs officials and traders could, if in

⁶ See Sissoko, 2018.

⁷ See ndc-info, 2021.

⁸ For this published case, see OAPI, 2019.

⁹ Interview with the importer in Bamako in 2016.

¹⁰ See Traoré, 2019.

doubt, send the tracking number of the container load to China to inquire from which factory the tea was dispatched for verification, but they generally lacked the knowledge to differentiate between the various package designs. Consumers, too, often illiterate, did not read the brand name but asked for the package with that particular image.

Despite his generous and humble attitude, the owner of *Achoura* was also confronted with the envy of detractors. Someone had discovered packages of *Achoura* tea that contained toxic substances. The laboratory analysis of the *Institut national de recherche en santé publique* (INRSP) confirmed the suspicion in a report that was later published in social media and caused quite a stir. Images were posted that crossed out tea *Achoura* as poisonous. Some authorities even felt empowered to confiscate *Achoura* tea in various rural retail shops. The government became involved and eventually the knowledge spread that the shop from which the samples were taken had placed the tea on containers of pesticides, which contaminated the packages. Moreover, only these few packages of *Achoura* had been analysed from more than a hundred brands on the market. Behind the stir were individuals who intended to bring down the brand value and interrupt the importer's success.¹¹ The affair dragged on from October 2020 to February 2021 whilst the owner of *Achoura* defended himself against the ongoing social media reports and collected evidence of the background to the matter and commissioned tests from several independent laboratories, including in France, which clarified that the tea was non-toxic. On 4 March 2021, he organised a press conference and his lawyers announced the all-clear for the consumption of *Thé Achoura*. Only this one batch had been found which contained toxic substances.¹² During this complicated time, the owner of *Achoura* relied upon numerous friends in Bamako who continued to support the brand.

Rumours such as these are powerful and can easily destroy the brand value of a tea. Consumers can quickly decide not to purchase the brand again, as the toxic substances are not seen but perhaps tasted. From one day to another, a tea might become unsaleable, as has happened to other once-popular brands. Consumers were very sensitive to changes in taste and quality. It has often happened that a tea at first had good quality, and after some time either the supplier or the importer lowered the quality, and that meant the brand's end. This was especially the case when a tea had become popular and created a surfeit,¹³ i. e. when the demand was greater than the supply that producers were able to deliver and subsequently

¹¹ See Malikunafoni, 2021.

¹² See Adohoun, 2021.

¹³ See also Nakassis, 2013.

reduced the quality to solve the problem. In such a context, traders would say: “He [the importer] pirated himself (*il s’est piraté soi-même*).”¹⁴ Amazingly, however, the detractors of *Achoura* had been unable to reduce the brand’s value. Its owner defended himself with good arguments in the social and national media and maintained the trust of the consumers. *Achoura* remains to this day (still in 2023) the most popular tea brand in Mali.¹⁵

5 Themes that Tea Brands Communicate

The survival of *Achoura* was above all due to the agency, trustworthiness, and philanthropic donations of its owner; these were the basis of its brand value. Notwithstanding, a closer look at the meanings that brand designs and names convey will be of interest to understand the working of tea brands. The design of *Achoura* takes a straightforward approach: it is held in red and yellow colours and depicts a Moroccan three-legged teapot next to a glass filled with tea above a sand dune below palm fronds (Fig. 1). The brand name *Achoura* resonates well with Muslim beliefs, as mentioned earlier.

Different from some other tea packages – especially those owned by Chinese importers, which often depict tea plantations, Chinese-style architecture, or landscapes – not much refers to *Achoura*’s origin from China. The design rather alludes to the tea’s 19th-century provenance via Morocco, similar to many other package designs that depict Tuareg drinking tea in front of tents or camel caravans winding across sand dunes or that have names that refer to trading towns prominent at that time.

Still other brand designs and names have nothing at all to do with the product tea that the packages contain. These are the event-related brands commemorating national and global events that are of concern to Malians, such as the Gaza conflict in the mid-2000s (*Thé Gaza Super*), the creation of the independent television station *Africable* in 2004 (*Thé Africable*), the election of Barack Obama as American

¹⁴ See Rösenthaller, 2022.

¹⁵ Compare this incident to another example from Mali, in which a cultural entrepreneur lost all his brand value when he was at the height of his career and ready to establish his own independent radio station but – after the 2012 coup – was not granted a licence by the new government. In no time, his large fan community dissolved, the annual concerts based on his radio show could no longer be organised, and he could no longer sell the DVDs of each event or the fabric printed with his image that he had created for his fans to wear at the event. Cf. Rösenthaller, 2016.

president in 2008 (*Thé Obama*), or the fiftieth anniversary of Mali's political independence from France in 2010 (*Thé Cinquantaenaire*).¹⁶

Green tea advertising in the media and on billboards employs a different repertoire. The images displayed on billboards and in commercials focus mostly on the product itself and on individuals enjoying tea. When commissioned by Malians, these adverts do not refer to the Chinese origin of tea. A few have been observed that were commissioned by Chinese brand owners showing, for example, a Chinese woman pouring tea into a bowl, but such images do not resonate well with Malians' ideas of tea consumption. Malians consume green tea in an elaborate ritual that is performed in small groups of friends – never with Chinese people who do not drink the Malian brewed tea – and such scenes are shown in many variations in TV commercials. They present tea as a popular Malian drink, consumed by common Malians who generally associate tea with people from the northern part of the country. From there it arrived on camel back from Morocco across the Sahara. Unlike tea advertisement in Morocco, however, Malian publicity does not employ royal imagery. Traders from northern Mali are credited with having sound knowledge of good tea and being trustworthy tea sellers, whereas Chinese traders are stereotyped as selling cheap products. Selling cheap products has worked well for many commodities, but not for Chinese green tea, a sector that Malian importers were able to defend against their Chinese competitors.

6 Conclusion

The Malian green tea brands are a montage or bricolage of local, global, and regional elements that connect to the experience of local consumers but do not particularly acknowledge the Chinese origin of the product. All their design elements contribute to the value of the brand, but as the owner of *Achoura* ascertained: a tea package can have a beautiful design and a good-sounding name and there can be much advertisement for it in the media, but all these items are not what makes a tea sell. Word of mouth and the recommendation of the traders are decisive in convincing consumers of the good taste of a tea, together with the importer's trustworthiness and an efficient distribution network so that large – but not too large – quantities can be sold without creating a surfeit. All these issues form part of the brand value and need to be managed wisely, requiring what the owner of *Thé Achoura* termed the capacity of “mastering the work of tea.”

¹⁶ See the tea packages at Röschenhalter, 2021.

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