

AGRITOURISM IN ROMANIA - THE SEARCH FOR SPECIFICITY

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ABSTRACT

Romania has become a renowned destination for those seeking a personalized tourism experience, as welcomed guests in the traditional household. Traditional Romanian villages with households, where authentic small farmer families have lived and worked for centuries, offer today a clear lesson on continuity, tradition, diversity and sustainability. Developing after the fall of the communist regime, agritourism has

been integrated organically in the traditional household, perfectly mirroring the agricultural realities and Romanian rural space. The specificity of Romanian agritourism is based on a fundamental trinity: a traditional farm household, rural activities, traditional art and culture. These components are also founded on elements which illustrate the complex reality of the topic.

INTRODUCTION

Several authors confirm that the end of the 19th century could very well be the period when rural villages started to exert a larger attraction for people living in the city, the inciting factor being a new-found nostalgia towards the places of birth (Sonnino, 2004; Sharpley and Sharpley, 1997; Butler et al., 1998). Journeys, visits, hospitalities have always been a part of the rural space and determined by the traditional holidays, tied to agricultural activities (changing of the seasons, return of the cattle from the summer alpine grazing, descending of the sheep from the mountain) or religiously motivated (church wakes, pilgrimages to holy places such as the "Holy See", Mecca, Jerusalem. The Swiss claim that rural tourism in Switzerland dates from 1842, when the British discovered in the Swiss Alps a fairy-tale countryside where cows grazed happily in evergreen pastures to the crystal voices of swift flowing streams in the mountains (Defert, 1966; Hunziker, 2000). The locals, aware of the positive effects of the touristic activity, made a sustained effort to

develop, diversify and to provide the necessary elements for practicing cycling, tennis and summer or winter sports. In the post-war period a competition between agriculture and tourism unfolds (Moinet, 2012), as well as a struggle between the generations: tourism required space from the agricultural land for buildings, roads, sport, entertainment; the elderly accused their heirs of squandering their good farming land, while the youth retorted by criticizing the inflexibility, conservative attitude and incapacity of the elderly to comprehend the shifting economic realities. In the 80s, in Austria, Italy, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Spain and France, touristic activities in the rural area were diversifying, gaining ground as sustainable means of income and agricultural holdings. In these countries, agritourism has led to countless important benefits through suitable organization and specific services (Rey 1985, Adamov et al., 2017; Santucci, 2013). The viability of many rural areas is under threat. If 20 to 30 years ago the development or rural

areas was synonymous with the development of agricultural production, now this is no longer the case. On its own, the policy of agricultural production has proven insufficient, as the share of agriculture is steadily decreasing through the lens of employment and sources of income of the local population. Agritourism is continually expanding all over the world and represents a supplementary source of income and job opportunities for members of the local communities (Iakovidou, 1997; Kizos and Iosifides, 2007).

An increasing number of foreign and Romanian tourists are attracted to the possibility of new experiences – life on the countryside in an authentic household. In Romania, agritourism emerged after 1990 and developed simultaneously with rural tourism. The traditional households illustrate the living

rural civilization of Romania and have astonishing potential for agricultural, touristic, social, cultural and economic development (Călina and Călina 2015). In a genuine traditional household, guests can enjoy the flavours of foods prepared from 100-year old family recipes with organic ingredients right from the farm, along with a good homemade wine; they can gain new insight and hobbies from pottery, wood or stone carving, glass painting, weaving, knitting; they can learn how traditional cuisine is prepared, how vegetables are preserved for the winter, how to make bread and cheese; they can discover the art of traditional medicine; or they can participate in traditional activities (tending to the crops, caring for the livestock, haymaking, picking wild berries).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

This paper will primarily focus on elements that provide the specificity and uniqueness of Romanian agritourism. Our research is part of a larger study of the 21 ethnographic areas that cover all the specific forms of terrain, from hills to mountains to plains, deltas and seaside (Maramureș, Oaș, Bârgău - Bistrița, Bucovina, Neamț, Harghita, Țara Bârsei, Bran-Fundata, Țara Făgărașului, Mărginimea Sibiului, Arieșului Valley - Țara Moșilor, Vlădeasa Mountains – Clujului Hills, Vrancea, Teleajen - Prahova, Rucăr - Muscelele Argeșului, Oltului Valley – Vâlcei Hills, Tismana - Polovragi, Mehedinți, Vlăsiei Plain, Danube Delta, Bleak Sea Area).

For realising the qualitative assessment, the following were used:

- observation and obtaining information – as a basic method, thus emphasizing aspects such as tourist environment and tourist resources;
- description, presentation of facts – as a means to present all the observed elements;
- analysis and investigation – these involve a set of instruments, techniques and methods that emphasize and explain the relations established between the various aspects of the touristic phenomenon.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Romania represents one of the oldest establishments in Europe, with villages developed on various forms of landscape from ancient times and a

sizable rural population (46% of the total population of the country).

The family, the household and working the land represent the same facets of the enduring miracle and

multimillennial evolution of the Romanian people (Bold et al., 2015).

Surviving even the communist regime, the traditional household represents continuity, tradition and especially the central pillar of the infrastructure specific to the rural area (Bohateret and Brumă, 2015), an environment that generates agri-food resources for the entire population, as well as the birthplace of crafts, culture and traditional art.

Starting from 1967-1968 actions were taken for identifying and promoting the villages with touristic potential, establishing the founding premises of agritourism and rural tourism in Romania. Touristic activities in the rural space were abruptly halted in 1974 when housing tourists in the small farmers' houses was forbidden.

The Operation Villages Roumains Association formed between 1988 - 1989 to protect the Romanian villages from the systematization of the former communist regime, contributed to stalling the destruction of the villages and acting towards relocating the traditional households. After 1992, it developed partnerships for the development of rural tourism and agritourism in the pilot areas: Bran, Bucovina, Maramureș, Valea Arieșului.

The Romanian Federation for Mountain Development created a policy and self-management that contributed to the development of agritourism in Romania.

In 2009, The Eco Rurals Association was founded, that united the small farmer families and all the people in Romania who practice or support the traditional ecological rural agriculture, being a member of the La Via Campesina international movement. The association fights for the right of small farmers to practice agriculture on a small scale and presently has 6000 members.

The 3.42 million traditional households, with an average surface of 3.65 hectares per holding (NIS, 2018), recently redefined as familial farms

(agricultural holdings without a legal personality), practice a friendly agriculture to the environment, currently hold over 5 million vacant rooms and a unique cultural heritage. On the level of the European Union, small-sized agricultural households represent 1/3 of the total existing number (Eurostat, 2016). Romania represents one of the last oases in Europe where one can find a sustainable rural civilization, unaltered by the vicissitudes of modernity. The agricultural system must be restructured for the small rural enterprises to survive. The traditional methods of practicing agriculture can be aided by a creative marketing strategy.

The structure of activities within the Romanian rural area may be described as such:

- Cultivation of land with traditional means and techniques usually represents a „novelty” for tourists travelling from one geographic region to another.

- Animal breeding takes on multiple forms, reflected in the way of building stables or in practices of pastoral lands. The inventory of specific tools used is also diversified, and the customs related to this occupation are some of the most picturesque.

- Logging and wood processing represent an occupation and a trade at the same time, the material being later transformed by handicraft processing in a very large number of domestic or decorative products (Cretu, 2013; Istrate, 1995). In Romania, Maramureș and Apuseni Mountains are the two model regions for this occupation. If in Maramures the population was specialized particularly in logging and wood carving (the churches and gates of Maramures are renowned), in the Apuseni Mountains, the craft of wood processing became not only a livelihood, but also a true artform. „Tara Motilor” was and still is the reference region of traditional wood processing in Romania, with its famous local centres at Vidra, Avram Iancu, Casa de Piatra, Ghetari, Vadu Motilor, Horea or Albac. In

Maramures, the localities where the carved gates can be found are: Ieud, Mara, Botiza, Slatioara, Giulesti.

- Fishing and hunting present ethnographic interest due to the use of different tools and techniques.

- Beekeeping is an activity from immemorial times. Its area of development is large, from the plains to the foot of mountains.

- Architecture and traditional installations affirm the genius of anonymous artist. The traditional architecture uncovers certain regional particularities, as expression of a certain harmony between beauty and usefulness. The gates carved with floral, solar or spiral shaped patterns from Maramures predict the rise of Brancusi's genius; the tall steeples of churches from Maramures, Salaj or Apuseni Mountains are native replicas of the exuberant West-European gothic style. Their construction, the material from which the households are built, and their appurtenances are a subtle adaptation to time, space and eternity. Traditional machines (windmills and watermills, whirlpools) in turn present a vast complexity and variety (Cândea et al., 2012, Călina et al. 2017).

- Gold trade was practiced by extractions from underground mining or panning for gold dust. „Roman fortresses” from Rosia Montana stand as a testament to the age and extensiveness which the occupation reached in the Apuseni, however the environmental damage in the last years of communism represent a significant loss.

- Pottery is an ancient practice, highlighted by the traditions of Romanian people in this handicraft and illustrated by the continuity of Dacian practices from which the technique of treating black and red ceramics was inherited. The large number of pottery centres and the variety of ceramics attest to the preoccupation and creative talent of Romanian handicraftsmen. Famous centres can be found at Vama (Țara Oasului), Sacele (Maramures), Corund (Transylvania Depression), Vadu Crișului, Baita de sub

Codru, Radăuți, Marginea, Horezu, Vladesti (Valcea).

- Customs are creative manifestations of rural spirituality, where different events in the life of the community or individual are considered symbols. They are associated with the succession of seasons (winter and spring calendar customs), family or individual events (birth or wedding customs).

- Clothes, dances and traditional songs in Romania represent veritable treasures in many of its numerous folkloric areas: Țara Oasului, Maramures, Salaj, Nasaud, Țara Motilor, Câmpia Transilvaniei, Fagaras, Banat, Secuime, Oltenia, Dobrogea, Moldova, Bucovina. The extraordinary variety of these three ethnographic elements in Transylvania, on the general background of common Romanian language and culture, without regional differentiations, can be explained by the long-lasting native population in the territory, but also by the occurrence of encirclements among the different native communities by penetration of the foreign element, such as Hungarian, and later, German, which conditioned a more closed development of the Romanian communities without external influence. The ethnographic area of Szeklers was outlined after their settlement at the eastern borders of the Principedom of Transylvania, in a region with a less dense Romanian population. Consequently, in all the countries of Transylvania (the notion of country does not have any political equivalent, only as a habitat and ethnographic entity), the developed folkloric elements have been preserved in their entire complexity. In places where such barriers were absent, the influences manifested without obstructions, leading to a great ethnographic uniformity (Moldova, Țara Romaneasca). The absolute originality of Romanian folklore is emphasized by its variety (with notable differentiations between one locality and another) and its exceptional conservation up to the present day. Popular costumes from Nasaud, Oas, Bucovina, Oltenia or

Muntenia are the hallmarks of spirituality of the Romanian countryman. From an agritourist point of view, the costumes, the games and popular songs are an exceptionally valuable resource which is rarely taken into consideration.

- "Nedeile" (pastoral festivals) are events with deep roots in traditions of the people, with the occasion of cyclical succession of seasons, of rhythmic reliving of old experiences and customs. In general, these unfold in spring, when nature reawakens. Almost each flower has its "nedeia" (pastoral festival): the flowering of daffodils gathers the people at Negruleasa, in Apuseni Mountains; the flowering of lilac at Ponoare in Mehedinti Plateau. The pastoral festivals are related to certain rituals of labour: sheep breeding, ploughing. Within this context there are pastoral festivals from the Outskirts of Sibiu, Bran-Rucar Corridor (Fundata, Sirnea), Hațeg Depression, Sub-Carpathian of Oltenia (Vaideeni, Polovragi, Horezu, Tismana).

- Fairs and exhibitions become, once a week, a month or once a year,

attraction centres for tourists, not only for commercial activities, but by the novelty of the exhibited products. These events can take other meanings, such as the „Maiden Fair” on Gaina Mountain, which is held in the second half of the month of July of each year (the first Sunday after the 20th of July). In the beginning, this represented the moment when the inhabitants from all the four parts of the Apuseni Mountain area met, to exchange products between each other, but also to arrange agreements and marriages between young boys and girls.

- Dedication days and pilgrimages concentrating yearly, regardless of religion, immense masses of people, and among them numerous tourists. Dedication days of churches and monasteries (Râmeț, Nicula, Tismana, Putna, Voroneț, Sucevita) have become a pretext for regional or local gatherings of tourists. Pilgrimage represents for tourism a resource of faithful people and appreciable income.

CONCLUSIONS

The combination of traditional household, rural activities and traditional culture give Romania a fascinating uniqueness.

The traditional household represents the habitat for the most varied activities: cultivation of land with traditional means and techniques, animal breeding, beekeeping, wood processing or pottery; it is the bastion where the most authentic spiritual values have been preserved: the gates carved with floral, solar or spiral shapes; the architecture of rural houses, winter and spring calendar customs; clothes, dances and traditional songs; it is the place where guests are welcomed in the best rooms, clean with a view of the street, where the warm and inviting scents of apples, quinces and basil fill the air, and are then served with the best traditional dishes, a real place

where one can relax in the shade of a locust tree.

Between these components there is a strong relationship and interdependence that if broken, can still be harnessed, but can never create anything sustainable.

Inside the rural household the agricultural activity is harmoniously combined with the touristic activity. Practicing agritourism helps the traditional household to exist, providing possibilities for the small farmer to obtain supplementary income without giving up his or her authentic way of life.

The specificity of agritourism will exist as long as the traditional household exists, to provide a timeless sanctuary for the man stuck in modern times, to give him or her a sense of identity and belonging.

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