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Lecții din Țara văilor nesfârșite: Ce pot învăța producătorii maramureșeni de horincă din distilarea ilicită a whisky-ului în Scoția secolului al XVIII-lea

Rezumat

Acest articol încearcă să traseze paralele între producția de horincă din Maramureș, România și distileriile de whisky ale fermierilor din Scoția secolului al XVIII-lea. Când whisky-ul a început să fie vândut în orașele Scoției și să nu mai fie produs exclusiv pentru consumul în familie, a stârnit interesul colectorilor de taxe din Londra. Acest lucru s-a întâmplat în perioada în care marii proprietari de terenuri încercau să evacueze populația zonei deluroase din nordul Scoției (the Highlands), pentru a folosi pământurile de aici la creșterea oilor. Aceștia au investit în construcția marilor distilerii comerciale ca să producă alcool pentru țăranii care fuseseră mutați. Din păcate, calitatea a fost cu mult inferioară, deoarece s-au folosit alte cereale, mai ieftine, pentru a suplimenta orzul tradițional. În cele din urmă, situația s-a reabilitat abia în 1915, când legea a impus o maturare de trei ani înainte ca o băutură distilată să poată fi numită whisky.

Articolul semnalează vulnerabilitatea producătorilor de horincă maramureșeni la schimbările sociale, precum și la standarde mai stricte de sănătate și securitate. Libertatea de mișcare la nivelul Uniunii Europene are ca rezultat emigrarea masivă a tinerilor în Europa de Vest unde aceștia învață obiceiuri incompatibile cu cele din țara natală. Dacă acest proces nu se va normaliza, cultura tradițională ar putea dispărea într-o generație. *Horinca* prezintă foarte puțin interes în rândul tinerilor, iar rolul acestora în producerea sa este în mare măsură respinsă. Articolul face recomandări cu privire la această deteriorare culturală, sugerând faptul că mai multă grijă pentru îmbunătățirea calității prin maturare ar putea duce la producerea de horincă și brânză cu potențial mai mare pe piețele din afară. În caz contrar, satele se vor confrunta cu un viitor incert, cu o populație în scădere și cu o pierdere a valorilor tradiționale.

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Lessons from the Land of the Glens: What can 18th Century Illicit Scottish Whisky Distilling Teach the *Horinca* Makers of Maramureș

Summary

This article seeks to draw parallels between the production of *horinca* (fruit brandy) in Maramureș, Romania and the farm whisky distilleries of Scotland in the eighteenth century. When the whisky started to be sold in the cities of Scotland rather than being only for family consumption, it triggered the interest of the tax collectors in London. This occurred at a time when large land owners were attempting to clear the Highlands of people in order to use them for sheep farming. They invested in the construction of large commercial distilleries to produce spirit for the displaced peasants. Regrettably, the quality was much inferior as they used other cheaper grains to supplement the traditional barley. This was only rectified in 1915, when the law required a three year maturation before a distillate could be called whisky.

The article suggests that the distillers of Maramureș are vulnerable to social change as well as tighter health and safety standards. The EU freedom of movement is resulting in mass migration of young people to Western Europe where they learn habits which are incompatible with those of their homeland. Unless this process is regulated, the traditional culture may well disappear in a generation. *Horinca* is of little interest to young people and their role in its production is largely rejected. The article makes suggestions in regard to this cultural depletion, implying that more care to improve quality through maturation could result in the production of brandy and of cheese with a market potential outside the area. Otherwise, the villages face an uncertain future, with a shrinking population and a loss of traditional values.

Lessons from the Land of the Glens: What can 18th Century Illicit Scottish Whisky Distilling Teach the *Horinca* Makers of Maramureș

In August 2008, I was staying with a family in Vadu Izei Maramureș. My host asked if I would be interested in seeing a traditional distillery owned by her uncle 100 m from the house.

At the time, I was completing a five year project, recording in photographs the last vestiges of traditional malt whisky distilling in Scotland. I had immersed myself in the complex history of distilling and had visited over 50 distilleries, seeking out the quiet corners, disused equipment and traces of long obsolete processes. I had no idea how much industrial archaeology would be revealed by this project.

So the invitation to view a traditional still in Maramureș was irresistible. But I could not have prepared myself for the scene with which I was confronted. It was like going back in time to a medieval painting. Elderly people sat clustered round the warmth of the fire while others busied themselves hauling buckets of fermented fruit pulp with which they filled the still. I was transfixed. What came immediately to mind was a well known painting by Edwin Landseer of a Scottish Highland family tending their whisky still hidden in a cave. As a photographer, I had that image in mind as I tried to capture the timeless atmosphere.

Horincie din Maramureș; foto: Ian MACILWAIN

Alcohol and its production is an age old craft in virtually every culture on earth. The ability of yeasts to create a product with medicinal and psychological benefits was realised thousands of years ago, although the agents responsible were not known until Louis Pasteur identified the processes of fermentation in 1857. The action of microbes on sugars in which they are turned to alcohol, is the same regardless of the carbohydrate in use. The only variant is the type of carbohydrate, which reflects the agricultural practices prevalent in a particular region. In Russia and Poland, potatoes are fermented and distilled into vodka. In Mexico, agave is fermented and distilled to Tequila. In Cuba and Barbados, the sugar cane crop is fermented and distilled to rum. In Scotland, the barley crop can be fermented only after it undergoes a natural process by which the carbohydrate is converted to sugar by the process of germination. This germinated barley is dried and crushed. A porridge is made with it, allowing natural enzymes to break down the starch to sugars which are dissolved before they can be fermented to alcohol. This process is known as mashing. An identical process is used in the making of beer where hops are added to the mash tun and no distillation takes place.

In Maramureș and other parts of Eastern Europe, advantage is taken of the natural yeasts which are present on fruit skins. When fruit is crushed and left at a moderate temperature for a few months, it begins a spontaneous fermentation. Eventually a cider will result with an alcohol content of around 6%. The final quality of the spirit distilled from this cider will reflect the fruit used, as some of the volatile esters are distilled with the alcohol and impart a distinct tang of pears apples or plums to the distillate. In Maramureș, this process of natural fermentation is extremely weather dependent. A cold winter will inhibit the fermentation, so the stills will not operate until the spring. In a warm late autumn, the fermentation will allow a pre-Christmas distillation.

The social function of the production of *horinca* is to bind communities and families together in shared activity. A still owned by a family will be offered to numerous other families who bring their fermented fruit pulp to be distilled.

There are many similarities between the fruit distillation in Maramures and the methods used by the family distillers in the Highlands of Scotland in the 17th and 18th Centuries. In both cases, the still is a copper vessel with a capacity of around 200 litres or less. In both countries, stills are formed of two parts - the large vessel or copper (*cazan* in Romanian) which sits over the fire, and the upper part, which contains a pipe at right angles to the still, down which the steam passes into a metal coil which is placed in a large vessel of cold water to condense the alcohol back into liquid form. The lower and upper parts are joined together with a seal made of clay in Scotland and flour and water dough in Romania. In both cases, it was recognized that the first part of the distillate is poisonous. It contains a high level of methyl alcohol and should be discarded. What is called the ‘middle cut’ contains the highest level of uncontaminated alcohol, but also the esters which supply the taste and character to the distillate.

The distillation of whisky in the Highland of Scotland was an old traditional family craft stretching back centuries. First mention of it in parish records is around 1490, although

its origins are certainly much older than that. The product was made in small quantities and was probably drunk largely without maturation. It provided a high quality cattle feed during the winter months, called *draff* or *spent barley*, and also allowed a pleasant interlude from the grinding poverty and hardship which was the daily life. It was only when conditions improved and surplus whisky found its way onto the local market, that it attracted the attention of the tax collectors. The union of Scotland and England in 1707 led to a move to equalise the taxation regime in both countries and also first revealed the social divide between the wild Gaelic speaking Highlands and the anglophile Lowlands, where most of the population spoke English. The Lowland Clan chiefs were mostly loyal to the 'English' king whereas the Highlands looked to the deposed Stuarts for leadership. This cultural divide is still very much alive in the Scotland of 2020, although its political ramifications are less clear. It was only the imposition of taxes on products for sale which generated the slow move towards making family distilleries illegal in the Highlands. Prior to this, family distilling had been as much a normal part of life as the growing of potatoes.

For the Highland distiller, the design of the still into upper and lower parts allowed rapid disassembly if a raid from the customs officers was imminent. The similar Romanian design allows easy access for filling and for cleaning. Most Romanian stills are equipped with a bevelled cog system attached to a bunch of flailing chains which can be kept in constant motion by turning a handle on the side of the still. In Scotland, this is called a rummager. It prevents the syrupy liquid or the fruit pulp from sticking to the sides and

The Irish Whiskey Still, Sir David Wilkie - National Galleries Scotland

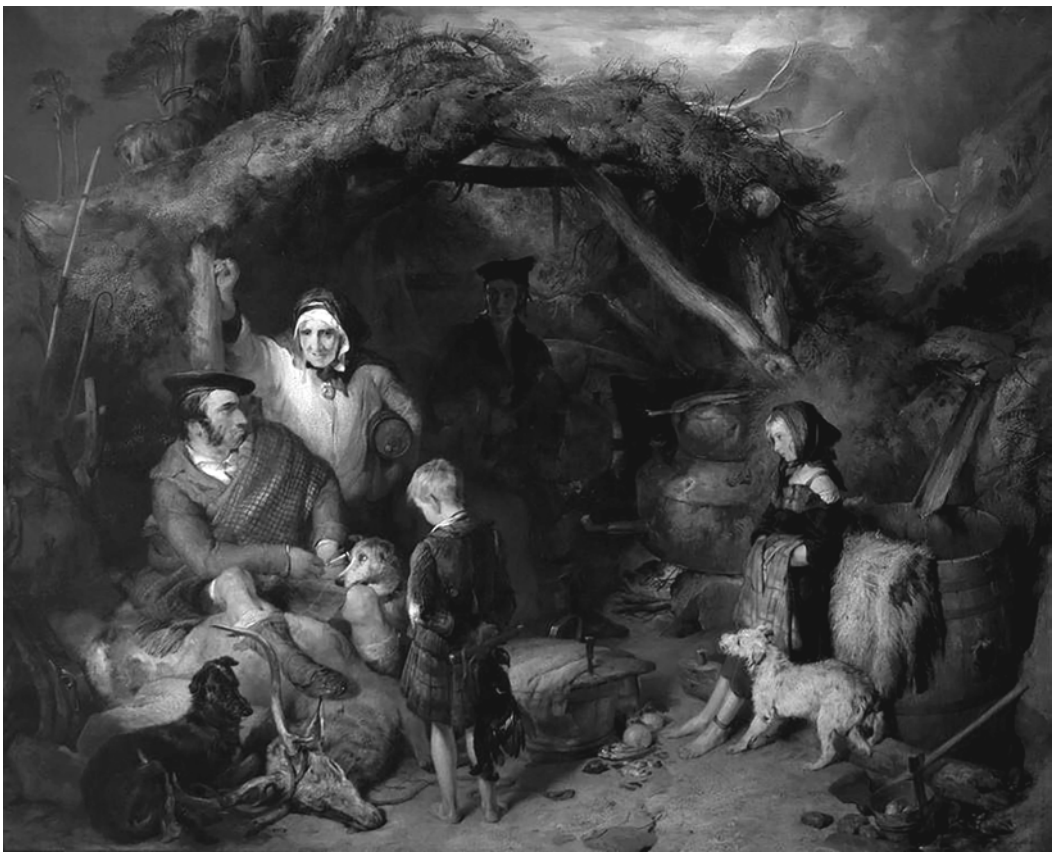
burning. Some of the higher end *horinca* cazane have mechanised this process with a small electric motor but there are still many where the handle must be turned manually for the two hours of the distillation. Rummagers are often fitted to commercial Scottish distilleries but the literature is unclear whether they were also used in the illicit stills.

The history of Scottish distilling offers many potential lessons for their distant cousins in Romania. In the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the level of poverty precluded anything more than a very family focussed distillation. As the community flourished, the quantity of distilling increased and began to attract the attention of government tax collectors who levied a premium on alcohol produced. Then began a game of cat and mouse between distillers and tax collectors which lasted 150 years. Stills were often located in remote areas in caves and inaccessible places. All evidence was quickly removed if customs officers were around. Houses were built with secret rooms containing a still. Alcohol was not only used locally but was taken south to the cities which formed a ready market. It was apparent that a good quality home produced malt whisky was of infinitely better quality than early commercial imitations. Big landowners sought licenses from the government to distill whisky in larger quantities but frequently resorted to the use of other cereal grains of inferior quality than the barely used by home distillers. The duty which they had to pay on their production also made the whisky more expensive than the product smuggled form the Highlands. Attempts to control production through large fines for illicit distillers might have worked had it not been for the fact that the whole of Highland society including landowners and the police recognised the superior quality of the illicit product and resented the attempts by the distant Westminster government in London and their agents in the Lowlands of Scotland to destroy the illicit trade. The roots of Scottish nationalism were very apparent in this divide between Lowlands and Highland, which resulted in collusion between the law and the producers who ‘bought off’ the half hearted opposition with bribes either in money or product. For large parts of the eighteenth century, the Highlands were essentially a ‘no go’ area for government agents. Their efforts at control only redoubled the efforts of the distillers to outwit them. It was estimated that more than half the whisky output in Scotland and most of the best quality emanated from illegal activities.

In the legal sphere, Ferintosh near Inverness and the Kennetpans distillery in Alloa, which was set up by the Stein dynasty in the early 18th Century, were shipping alcohol in volume to the English market to be made into cheap gin in London. This caused consternation in government circles, largely because they had failed to capitalise on its taxation potential.

These events took place against a background of large land owners wanting to use the Highlands to graze sheep ratter than to grow barley. The moves to evict tenants from their land and force them to relocate in the coastal strip became known as the Highland clearances. Some of the more astute landowners saw an opportunity and invested in the construction of large distilleries like Brora in Sutherland, offering employment to displaced Highlanders. A ‘stand off’ between distillers and excise officers lasted for a century. Only

in the early nineteenth century did things change significantly, when the government decided to dramatically lower the taxation levels and accompany this by a relatively cheap licensing system to officially accredit 'approved' distilleries. This had a catastrophic impact on illegal distilling which almost vanished over the next twenty years.



Edwin Landseer - Illicit still in the Highlands

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In Romania, the legal status of *horinca* distilleries remains ambiguous. Statements about legality seem to rest on the 'made only for personal use' condition but fail to recognise the use of *horinca* for barter, as malt whisky was used in Scotland for generations. Photographing dozens of distilleries in Maramureș left me with an abiding impression that the owners were apprehensive. Just the difficulty in persuading locals to divulge the location of stills spoke of 'keeping your head below the parapet'. So far, rather surprisingly, commercial distilleries have not in any way threatened the village producers. The only one I have visited in Sighișoara, is a small outfit which poses no threat to anyone. In my view,

there is far more danger from health and safety than in excise duty. The whole process of family distillation is fraught with potential danger from fire and explosion. The traditional method for evaluating the end of the useable distillate is to throw a cup of the liquid over the still and set fire to it. If it burns then there is useable alcohol in the distillate. This is relatively safe in experienced hands, but in the hands of novice distillers under the influence of alcohol as many are, it poses obvious risks. These are the sort of risks which cause health and safety inspectors to lose sleep!

The other threat to the distillers is from social change. I have yet to find a youngster willing to admit to liking, leave alone drinking, *horinca*. Rather like malt whisky it is a drink of the middle aged and elderly with little kudos for the young. I doubt whether there is anywhere else in Europe where an age old agrarian culture is being destroyed from within with such speed. Young people take advantage of EU freedom of movement to live and work anywhere within the union from Sweden to Netherlands to France. They return home not only with more money than they could possibly have imagined, but with their heads full of ideas imported from other cultures. The idea of taking on the family *cazan* has little appeal. Nor do they want to live in a traditional house and assume the responsibilities of a villager. They have frequently married outside the culture and in the face of opposition from bewildered family, they construct a large ostentatious house and paint it a garish colour in the middle of a traditional village. Even during the period of ten years which spans my renewed regular contact with Maramureș I have witnessed a contraction in the number of functioning stills. This has not been helped by erratic weather patterns and terrible fruit harvests over several years. I have had sobering conversations with a number of middle aged distillers. One bemoaned the fact that his son showed no interest in returning to the family farm from his home in New York. “I have everything ready for him”, he said mournfully. “There is a house, a small farm, a still and even a local girl keen to marry him. I can’t understand why he says he doesn’t want to return. He says he has an American girl friend and doesn’t want the girl I have found for him.” The look of bewilderment on his face spoke volumes. Suddenly, everything is up in the air. Looking at the workforce walking to the fields with their scythes over their shoulders it is difficult to avoid the impression of the end of an era, with so few young people amongst them.

Can the agrarian culture and more particularly the *horinca* production, survive this social transition? Personally I doubt it. Although the population successfully resisted collectivisation under Ceaușescu, they were at that time faced by external demands for change from a distant bureaucracy in Bucharest. The threat this time is much more subtle and erodes the cultural belief system from inside. In the past, the farm worker spent forty minutes in the morning putting on his traditional wound leather shoe called an opinci. Now it is easier to buy a pair of Kaufland Wellington boots for 5 euros. Small supermarkets are springing up in the villages, selling bottled water to villagers whose well water is pure and sparkling. The plastic bottles end up in the rivers, polluted by discarded rubbish in the absence of any developed system for recycling. At the moment, the continuing devotion to Eastern Orthodox religion even among the young, is one of the few social structures

mitigating against rapid change. Television, the internet and social media are ubiquitous. Even I am prone to export alien ideas to my numerous Romanian facebook friends entirely unintentionally like a virus being transmitted. It is the nature of the boundary-less world in which we live. In due course, it is bound to undermine the belief system and it is testimony to the strength of the religion that this has not already happened.

What can we learn from the Scottish precedent? The culture of Northern Scotland was destroyed by the Highland clearances. Mass emigration depleted the area of people, leaving the coastal strip as the only viable place to live north of Inverness. The big commercial distillers thrived but provided only a small source of occupation for the displaced population. Whaling and fishing remained the main employers in coastal areas. In the first wave of change toward the end of the ninetieth century the large landowning families invested heavily in the construction of legal distilleries. The discovery of blending, where the gentle but rather flavourless cheap grain whisky could be blended with the much more flavourful malt whisky, allowed a drink with a much higher level of consistency to be made at a much cheaper price and also designed for the taste of a specific market. The phylloxera mould in France largely destroyed the grape vineyards at the end of the nineteenth century and allowed a commercial opportunity for the Scots to move into the market vacated by brandy. The French took to blended whisky in volume and it has remained a large market ever since.

The second phase, from 1970, onwards has resulted from globalisation as large multinational companies have bought up the largely family owned distilleries as valuable components of a drinks portfolio. Volume has become increasingly important as new markets in India, China and Brazil have been developed. At the same time, a large group of whisky connoisseurs have become increasingly demanding of high quality malt whiskies, commanding very high prices to well heeled consumers in rich countries. There has been an explosion in capacity with the big distillers catering to the mass market and a plethora of small independents offering exotic wares to the connoisseurs. What however is apparent is the huge increase in mechanisation, to a point where a vast distillery can be run by just a handful of people using computer controls. The enormous expansion in number of distilleries has therefore largely been of benefit to shareholders rather than offering source of employment opportunities to remote areas.

What have been the cultural consequences of these trends? The multinationals have invested heavily in publicity advertising and lavish visitor centres. Tourists are regaled by the mystique of Whisky production with scenes of waving barley fields and old men turning floors of germinating barley. Through the wall, on the other side of the visitor centre, sits an anonymous factory devoid of personality where vast automated systems produce a veritable torrent of spirit destined for the markets of the far east. Has quality suffered? Yes it has. I have been honoured to sample some bottles from 100 years ago and less. Whisky remains in the bottle exactly as it was on the day it was bottled. Each bottle is like a time capsule - recording the practices and the components at the time it was made. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that there has been a deterioration in quality over the

last fifty years. So what we have is a kitsch industry wreathed in romance, but cynically manipulating a gullible public into parting with money to buy an inferior product. This is a generalisation and there are still plenty of exceptions thankfully.

What could be the effects of similar trends in Romania? The *horinca* produced by family farms is of very variable quality. It is rarely if ever matured. It has relatively little appeal outside its area of production. It is largely a drink of the middle aged and elderly and is of little interest to the young. Its function is largely symbolic, as a symbol of tradition, hospitality and generosity.

The whole culture, rather than the alcohol alone, is in danger. The promotion of Romania for tourism, shows a picture as distorted as that of Scotland promoted by the big whisky distillers. Very slowly the indigenous population are becoming aware of their interest to others. When I first visited Maramureş, it was quite apparent that the local traditions were kept alive as a means of social cohesion. The elaborate costumes and farming practices were pursued because they always had been, not because they were of interest to visiting royalty or package tourism. Watching a typical village move from an idyllic isolation to a tourist destination over a ten year period has been disturbing. The age old farming ways are being subtly undermined from within, as more and more houses are sold off to tourism and elderly people who kept the traditions alive either die or become unable to defend them.

Is there a Romanian equivalent of the sheep farming which was Scotland's downfall? Potentially big commercial farming could move in, but the rather unfavourable landscape makes that unlikely. More lightly is that the area will just become depleted of indigenous

La cazan în Maramureş; foto: Ian MACILWAIN

people as they move increasingly to the cities and the elderly die off. This has happened in parts of France where foreigners have moved in en masse into the vacated villages and created a false culture around kitsch memories of its past. In Romania, the empty villages of Transylvania resulted from the mass repatriation of Saxons to Germany, and have largely been filled by Roma. This is unlikely to happen in Maramureș, as the Roma population in the north is very small. What seems more lightly is that large areas of countryside will become emptied of people rather like the Scottish Highlands. The *cazan* is like a symbol of this culture. Its loss leaves the culture depleted and the social bonds weakened.

What will replace it? A false culture promoting an illusion of tradition is already sprouting up. The whole Dracula industry in Romanian Transylvania creates a fantasy around a mythical character who never existed in the form in which he is portrayed. Do the tourists care? Probably not. It is rather like with the whisky. If you have never tasted the real thing, you are unlikely to miss it. Maramureș could be successfully marketed to Western Europeans seeking a simple lifestyle. Unfortunately these people would have no cultural roots and would bring with them a completely alien set of traditions which would destroy what remains of the indigenous culture. We are already seeing this happening and conflicts are developing between this group of newcomers and the burgeoning tourist industry offering phoney 'memories' to the visitors. Soon, tourists will demand infrastructure as they have everywhere else. Leisure parks will appear offering 'genuine' cultural experiences staffed by rustic actors skilled in providing a romanticised version of the lost culture. *Horinca* will be offered as part of this world but little interest will be taken in its authenticity or means of production.

Is this outcome inevitable? No I don't think it is but to prevent it will require a far greater degree of regulation and control than currently exists. Planning rules are lax and rarely enforced. This will have to change. The indigenous culture's traditional methods need to be supported and not undermined. We can see examples of that happening in Transylvania under the auspices of the Fundatia Adept and Global heritage Fund. Problems in Maramureș are however cultural not architectural. Persuading the young emigrants to return and use their skills to start new employment opportunities is not impossible. I have seen it happen. It is not about preserving a culture in aspic but allowing it to develop the means for its own support. As an example, the making of local sheeps cheese is a subsistence cottage industry only just surviving. It could easily be matured into a more durable transportable product with a value outside Maramureș. This will never happen without investment. Has anyone ever tried to mature *horinca* to see if a more marketable product can be made? No-one could have predicted that the rustic home made whisky of the Scottish Highlands would become one of the world's favourite drinks and Scotland's biggest export. A decision in 1915 to prohibit the sale of 'unmatured' whisky led to the huge improvement in quality which we see today.

Maramureș is a repository for traditional ecological farming methods unequalled anywhere else in Europe. Its preservation is of paramount importance but its current status is seriously endangered.

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