

# ASPECTS OF HOSPITALITY IN THE ROMANIAN SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

**Ramona VASILESCU, Luminița NICULESCU**  
„TIBISCUS” UNIVERSITY OF TIMIȘOARA, FACULTY OF ECONOMICS

**Abstract:**

*Hospitality can be conceived as a host of behaviors and attitudes rooted in the very basis of the human society. Among the aspects that have shaped Romanian hospitality are the preservation of good relationships with our neighbors, humanizing relationships with strangers, and an interpenetration of magical and divine elements.*

**Key words:** *Romanian hospitality, social domain, rural and urban environments*

**JEL classification:** M39 A13

Hospitality can be conceived as a host of behaviors and attitudes placed at the very heart of the human society. From the first hunters and grain pickers who had travelled all over the planet people learned that they needed to share their food with others and also to provide mutually advantageous work services if they wanted to be successful and enjoy prosperity – particularly in their relationships with complete strangers with whom they were bound to interact sooner or later either on a personal basis or on a communitarian basis.

According to the field to which it may be applied, hospitality may cover private activities, social activities and commercial activities. Activities pertaining to the social field include contacts with strangers, reciprocity – i.e., a situation in which two people provide the same help or advantages to each other, status and prestige.

There have been a lot of references to Romanian hospitality throughout history, many times influenced by the chroniclers' own interests as they were primarily concerned with furthering certain causes of their favorite local communities. Whenever those interests required promoting certain stereotypes, the Romanians were portrayed as cold, reticent, distant, and inhospitable people. Unprejudiced chroniclers who managed to overstep the bounds of stereotypes wrote admiringly both about urban and rural hospitality in Romania, praising the Romanians' friendliness and generous behavior towards their guests.

In the Romanian rural social environment, the magical and the divine are integrated in the concept of hospitality. In keeping with Romanian rural traditions, one's living space is a sacred area where no one can enter without the owner's consent (Vulcănescu, 1987: 451). Although accommodating strangers was not an obligation, there were rules rooted in the Christian faith, according to which declining to put up a stranger could involve in fact refusing to put up God Himself or even the Theotokos (the Holy Mother of God); rural legends held that they would often wander around from one place to another all over the earth in search of a quiet spot where they could rest. A refusal therefore could have serious consequences; it meant running the risk of discarding a potential direct relationship with God or with the Holy Virgin, who might take off heading towards somebody else's abode, thus implicitly turning their backs on the person who declined to provide them with a place to sleep.

Offering to accommodate a stranger also involved evaluating him, stepping beyond all prejudices and anxieties concerning the possibility that he might turn into a dangerous person – the whole experience being definitely more negative than positive. One of the terms that explains accommodating a stranger into your home is "to welcome

and to treat” him, ”to wine and dine” him – which involves ”to receive hospitably”, ”to feed”, ”to honor” the stranger, but it also signifies ”to make an unknown person more humane”, ”to humanize” a person whose appearance may be misleading, who may seem to be what he is not, or whose temperament, attitude and behavior may differ considerably from the temperament, attitude and behavior of his host. A stranger that has been received hospitably will also be treated kindheartedly. He should be honoured, fed, ”pampered” with a feast and entertained as a special guest; he should not be allowed to leave hungry or thirsty or dissatisfied with the accommodation services offered by the host.

Hospitality aims not only at maintaining close relationships with one’s relatives, neighbors and casual acquaintances or to feed strangers and pilgrims, but also at fulfilling charitable purposes. In the past centuries, there was a splendid Romanian custom that reflected the charitable disposition of our countrymen and served as a touching and emblematic paradigm of hospitality – placing jugs of water by the roadside in front of house gates. They were meant to quench the thirst of all those who happened to be on the road at night, crossing a particular town or village on their way to another town or village; maybe they were tired, hungry or thirsty. Wealthy inhabitants also left loaves of bread by the water jugs in case the strangers were hungry. In thoroughfares, young women offered water to passers-by, walking up and down through the crowd with their clay jars full of water, making sure no one was left dying of thirst (Hetco, 2001).

St. Paul said, ”Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2). Following St. Paul’s vibrant teaching, Christians have included hospitality in the class of most distinguished social virtues; by doing that, they honor themselves first and foremost, proving themselves truly religious people – that is, religious in deed, since deeds value much more than words spoken with a view to making a strong impression on whoever is willing to listen to them. Without the shadow of a doubt, extending hospitality to those who need it, receiving them with kindness, making them feel at home are nothing but philanthropic actions, manifestations of brotherly love. In fact, St. Paul’s teaching in Hebrews 13:2 echoes the wonderful call made by Christ the Redeemer who urges us to give food to the hungry, to give something to drink to the thirsty and to welcome strangers (Matthew 25:35). In another one of his epistles, the Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul also said, ”Contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers” (Romans 12:13).

The prophets of the Old Testament had a similar attitude towards strangers, emphasizing the need to treat them kindly, honor them, entertain them as special guests, making them more humane in some cases. In Job 31:31-32 we read, ”If those of my tent ever said, ’O that we might be sated with his flesh!’— the stranger has not lodged in the street; I have opened my doors to the traveler.” We should also remember the two angels that God had sent to Sodom to destroy it; warning Lot of the oncoming disaster, they urged him to take his wife and children and flee for his life, or else he would be consumed in the punishment of the depraved city. When Lot saw the two angels, before knowing who they were, ”he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. He said, ’Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.’ They said, ’No; we will spend the night in the square.’ But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.” (Genesis 19:1-3).

Hospitality has a specific social code that shapes human relationships (Mustață) in such a way that it hides all negative aspects pertaining to the status of a stranger. By extending hospitality, ”Romanian people discover the humane in a stranger right away

and uncover their own humanity in front of that stranger. By so doing, they transcend family bounds and all aspects that have to do with the village and with nation itself, and place themselves at the very heart of humaneness, which is a universal concept. <<He is a living soul>>, that's what a villager would say when the stranger he has accommodated is poor, troubled and depressed. One may even state that Romanians are overjoyed and somehow astonished to find out that humaneness may extend beyond the boundaries of family, village life and nationhood too" (Father Dumitru Stăniloae). In a relationship between host and guest, the evaluation is reciprocal (Trinitas, 2009). As for the differences between them, they may be due to cultural or social causes, but whatever the case may be, once they have been spotted they should be mutually accepted and tolerated for the sake of a peaceful, harmonious relationship between host and guest.

Following the mutual evaluation of host and guest, and the self-evaluation of each of them, both of them will observe several sets of rules that can differ in various parts of our country and can be modified in time. A common rule is not to refuse to offer drinking water to a thirsty man – whoever he may be. Anthropologists consider that asking for a glass of water is the best way to start a conversation with local people in a Romanian village. In the southern part of the country, the guest – who is usually a person neither related to the host, nor sent by a relative of the host – is received and feasted in the courtyard; he will definitely be asked to sit down at table, there is no way around it! Perhaps that is the reason why the inhabitants of Oltenia are not considered to be hospitable people – since they do not observe these rules. In other areas of the country, the host asks his guests to walk into the house and seats them at table there. In Moldavia, for instance, the host will not allow his guest to sleep outside even if the latter insists on it; if in the long run the host gives in and the guest has his way, he will be provided with a blanket or a quilt, as well as with a table and a chair – which basically means that the guestroom has been moved in the courtyard...

The fireplace or the hearth is considered to be a magical spot symbolizing the beginning of life itself since light and warmth come out of it; that is why it is perceived as the most private place in a house. Consequently, a stranger should not put on the fire in the fireplace or poke the fire because if he does that it means he wants to be master of the house. In order to maintain their reputation, single women – whether they be widows or have their husband gone abroad to work – do not receive guests inside the house even when they are kindly asked to do so; instead, they direct those who have asked her to put them up to another host, making sure that they will be well received and well taken care of.

Another hospitality rule was that the visitor should not eat with the host, but he had his meals in the best room of the house, which contained the nicest and most precious household items, such as: bed linen, carpets, rugs, embroidered pillows, etc. This room, which has been called "the beautiful room", "the front room", "the large room", "the guest room," has always contributed to enhancing the prestige of the owners of the house since it proved that they could afford a spare room. At any rate, it has been saved for guests or for receiving a priest, suitors or matchmakers, as well as for holding a wake over a dead family member. All these details tell us that the guest would never become a friend of the host right away; although he was received with kindness, treated with respect, fed and put up in the most elegant room in the house, he was kept at a distance and was not taken into the confidence of his hosts in the twinkling of an eye.

Still another aspect of hospitality is to protect not only the guest as a person, but also the personal objects that he is carrying with him. By the same token, he should be offered shelter in case his enemies are looking for him and he needs a place to hide – even if that implies a great risk for the host. There have been declarations bearing witness to the fact that after 1948, Romanian peasants offered hiding places to the

priests who were hounded day and night by the Communist authorities in order to be caught and thrown into prison; there they were going to suffer terrible tortures and be killed in the most cruel and wicked ways.

In an urban environment, "the beautiful room", "the front room", "the large room" or "the guest room" is the living room, while hospitality rules will be somewhat modified: for instance, the host will not offer his/her guest a glass of water, but a cup of coffee or of tea. As for the guest, whenever he/she pays social calls or social visits he/she should see to it that he/she will never show up unannounced lest the host be caught on the wrong foot; the host should be informed beforehand of the visit so that he/she might have time to have everything he/she needs in order to entertain his/her guests properly. Unlike rural hospitality, which does not require that the visitor should offer a present to the host, in the urban environment it is customary to offer symbolical gifts to one's host – that is, a bunch of flowers, a bottle of wine, a box of candies. We should specify that city people do not go out of their way to invite strangers to their house; in fact, they very seldom to ask an unknown person to call on them. They extend their hospitality by inviting visitors to pastry shops, cafeterias or restaurants

Although people receive and extend hospitality both in the rural and urban environment, while in most cities one's living space is almost a sacred place and one's relationships with strangers are more distant than in villages; admittance to one's "home" is gained under very special circumstances and only when and if the owner of the house wills it – as is evidenced by the diverse means of protecting oneself against intruders: the telephone, the interphone, the Web camera, etc.

## CONCLUSION

Hospitality is deeply rooted in the Romanian social sphere. The social changes that occurred during the Communist regime followed by the changes made during the so-called capitalist period after the 1989 overthrow of Ceausescu have led to considerable modifications in the extension of rural hospitality – even though in essence the mentality of the people has not really changed that much. Understanding the cultural aspects related to hospitality can be of help to entrepreneurs and investors in the field of agricultural tourism, particularly if they are not familiar with the rural areas in which they intend to make investments. Their aim should be to set up a business that will not come into conflict with the local people and their customs, and trade in their status of strangers for that of friends accepted by the local community; some of them may eventually gain the confidence of the local people to the point that the latter will send tourists over to their hotel or chalet or boarding house wholeheartedly and with feelings of real trust.

At the same time, an experienced tourist who travels throughout Romania should know that he can find a good boarding house if he had deciphered correctly an ambiguous or incomplete answer given by a local person to his questions; there is always a concealed message that needs to be decoded. For example, if the peasant hesitates in providing information about a particular boarding place in his village, it means that the place is not worth it, it is not hospitable at all: the food may not be fresh, the rooms may not be clean, the prices may be too high. To be sure, by carrying out extensive research into available sources, i.e., the Web pages that furnish information on Romanian hospitality, we may get the false impression that things have gone from bad to worse both in the field of urban tourism and in the field of rural tourism. Although negative remarks will be encountered more frequently than positive ones, there will always be someone who will direct tourists to a place where they will be well received and where the hospitality of their host will satisfy them.

At the present time, although many people consider that Romanian tourism is heading for disaster, a close cooperation between experts in the fields of tourism, marketing and ethnology would be warmly welcomed with a view to studying the way in which commercial hospitality, subject to charges, could modify and influence the social domain of hospitality in Romanian villages.

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