

# The link between agriculture and local communities from Banat – a Review

Marcel Matiuti<sup>1</sup>, Carmen-Luminita Matiuti<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Banat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, Calea Aradului 119, 300645 - Timișoara, Romania

<sup>2</sup> Technical College "Azur" Calea Martirilor 64, Timisoara, Romania

---

## Abstract

Banat was the first Western Romanian region where towns and villages had straight streets, the church, the school and the town hall in the centre and a clear delineation of the perimeter of the town or village, with its surrounding agricultural fields. Part of the data in this paper comes from the Transylvanian Rare Breeds Association's database. Banat has been a model of regional development and of interethnic communities ever since 1716. The rural households in Banat have two or three yards and this model can be found in Central Europe as well. Owners in Banat preferred to take care of their animals themselves to watch over them carefully. On the borderline with Hungary, in Arad County, there is a totally different type of agriculture, namely one based on the existence of these types of shelters. At the shelter people raised cows, sheep, horses, chicken, geese, pigeons and beehives. All the field work was done according to a calendar which took into consideration religious holidays as well as certain days which were known to be significant. Old shelter is a model for organic farm. The only chance European agriculture has got is quality, and that goes also for Romanian agriculture, especially the one in Western of Romania. In Romania, the existence of modern farms is being encouraged, which have to have modern shelters, equipment and machines to be used on large areas. The erosion of the zoo-genetic patrimony in Western of Romania is obvious. Local breeds are being replaced with better imported ones but these have to be very well taken care of in order to reach their genetic potential. Banat was once renowned for its farms for processing animal products. In 2011 there are some units of processing animal and vegetable products in Banat, but these belong almost entirely to some transnational companies. Rich pastures and skilled locals have led to raising pure blood animals. Banat is an excellent region for crops and for raising animal due to its rich pastures, its geographical layout, the plain field and the water routes that can easily reach the Danube.

**Keywords:** multiculturality, preservation of genes, sustainable agriculture.

---

## 1. Introduction

After Timisoara's Banat was released from the Ottoman subjugation in the 18th century, Florimund von Mercy, the first governor organised a quick colonisation of this border region of the Habsburg Empire. This is how the region grew in population – in 1716 there were only 50,000 inhabitants, Serbian and "nationalisten or autochthones" [1] and developed

from a modest agriculture and moorlands to a powerful socio-economic area.

The Great Banat has an approximate shape of a square. After the First World War this region was divided between three countries: Romania, Serbia and Hungary.

Because the lifestyle of the inhabitants, the way in which the settlements are organised, and the traditions in Banat are very similar to those from the Arad region, we have also included the latter in this paper.

Banat was the first Western Romanian region where towns and villages had straight streets, the church, the school and the town hall in the centre

---

\* Corresponding author: Matiuti Marcel, Email [carmenmatiuti@gmail.com](mailto:carmenmatiuti@gmail.com)

and a clear delineation of the perimeter of the town or village, with its surrounding agricultural fields. Beside the favourable geographical layout, this region developed also due to the fact that it was directly governed by the House of Austria and proclaimed as the Crown's Chamber Domain in 1718. The Austrian administration elaborated the topographic map between 1769 and 1772. Having been colonised by populations from many European regions, Banat has developed strong and stable rural communities which had a wide variety of customs and traditions and which flourished economically, agriculturally and manufacture-wise due to an efficient administration from the Austrian House.

Part of the data in this paper comes from the Transylvanian Rare Breeds Association's database. This association has been a member of the DAGENE European Association (Danubian Countries Alliance for Preservation of Genes in Animal Species) since 2009. Its main goal is the identification, monitoring and preservation of the zoo-genetic resources in Banat and Transylvania. Within the association the Society for Etnozootechny (relationship of the human community-animals Traditional growth) was formed which has its own journal published in French "Journal d'Ethnozootechnie de Roumanie". We have also made use of the documentary material published in the Annals of Timisoara's Banat Museum, from the Schwab's Museum in Ulm and from the Open Air Museum in Illenbeuren, Germany. The data cover the Romanian Banat and the Arad area (Partium).

### **1. Old shelter - a model for organic farm**

Banat has been a model of regional development and of interethnic communities ever since 1716.

The rural households in Banat have two or three yards and this model can be found in Central Europe as well. The actual house is built on its length towards the street (in order to avoid a fire from spreading if that occurs) and it has numerous adjacent sheds such as the hay shed which is the tallest structure in the household because it was considered to be the most important. In Banat the hay shed was not built above the house only in mountain area. The advantage of the households with hay shed is that the owners can easily control and feed their animals. All around the village there used to be pastures and at the beginning of each

year the village's elders decided when and on which side of the pastures the cows and the sheep should graze. Every morning the village cows would be gathered in a herd by someone who would watch over them until the evening when he would lead them back to their owners. This tradition is kept to this day. Some owners of milk cows preferred to keep them in stables and to feed them with fresh green hay or grass. Owners in Banat preferred to take care of their animals themselves to watch over them carefully. The number and the quality of the animals has always been a pride factor for villagers in Banat, a certain social status. Girls' dowry used to be very much appreciated if it consisted of animals as well. Huts and shelters outside the village were not very common in Banat. Such shelters were usually in relation to the general system of sheep breeding namely their transhumance. For instance, the temporary summer shelter outside the village was only built in some villages in areas such as Almaj, Clisura Dunarii, Sasca Montana in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by sheep owners who had fled Walachia because of the huge taxes. They kept raising animals as they used to in their native regions, namely by means of transhumance: they led their animals through large field areas where human population is rare and where there is no delimitation between properties. Here there were many temporary shelters where one could find food storage for animals.

On the borderline with Hungary, in Arad County, there is a totally different type of agriculture, namely one based on the existence of these types of shelters. Villages such as Varsand, Pilu, Siclau and Socodor represent the type of field settlement, having a central group of households and another circular group surrounding the central one, for protection [2]. These are circular villages with defence ditches, most of them preserving parts of the so-called Traian's Wall of defence. Near the village there were the shelters at a distance of 1-3 kilometres. The household owners had their house and garden in the village. The existence of the shelters made it easier for people to raise animals and work the fields. The shelter was built in the centre of the property terrain. There animals were raised, products were prepared and the soil was fertilised by the animals' waste. Initially, the shelter was a temporary lodging for the summer but eventually it became a permanent one. Raising animals in a shelter was also a means of avoiding

illnesses and diseases which might have been spreading in the village, which was also the case for people. Because they were actually living in the shelter, people didn't have to go every day to the field because they were already there, they didn't have to lead their animals to the pastures because they were also there with them, especially since the village's roads were barely practicable in time of rain. Eventually, the centre of the village remained only as a place for social, cultural or religious activities, while the shelters were the workplace, although there was also a fair amount of villagers who didn't own a shelter. The shelters were made up of a building with 2-3 rooms for living, preparing the animal products and for tool storage. Near this structure there was the shelter for the animals, which was enclosed on three sides during the summer and totally closed during winter. There was also a well, usually dug at 6-12 m, which was periodically cleaned (of mud and plants) with quick lime. Around the shelter there was the terrain for ploughing, the hay shed, the pasture and the vegetable garden which was surrounded with trees (usually plum trees), vine and/or hurdle.

At the shelter people raised cows, sheep, horses, chicken, geese, pigeons and beehives. Up until the middle of the twentieth century, the cattle were mostly of the Transylvanian Grey Cattle breed. The oxen of this breed very highly appreciated for the level of labour they could endure. Between 1950 and 1960 the majority of shelters were destroyed and the Grey Cattle started to disappear as well. There were also Simmental milk cows. The milking was done manually but the hygiene was preserved in that the cows udder was always washed before milked and there was always fresh bedding under the animals. Milk was filtrated when it was poured into another recipient from the milking pail and then it was made into cream, butter or cheese. Cows and horses were well-groomed and taken care of. Horses were frequently taken to the nearby river, Crisul Alb, where they were led into water and washed. Depending on the season, the horses also had horseshoes put on. On cold winter days the horses were covered with wool blankets. The harnesses were qualitative so as not to do harm to the animals. The cows' and horses' hooves were periodically checked and cleaned.

All the field work was done according to a calendar which took into consideration religious

holidays as well as certain days which were known to be significant. The tools were adequate for field work and gradually some modern equipment was introduced: the threshing machines.

Sheep were kept on the pastures to graze until the first fall of snow arrived, after which they were taken to the shelter. Their mating was also planned, usually so that the ewes would give birth in January-February and that the lambs could be weaned around the 10<sup>th</sup> of May (or, more recently, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May). The milking of the sheep was done in an enclosure and from their milk the owners made different types of cheese. Curd was made after an old recipe from Varsand area: "the leaven is made from ground pig's stomach mixed with corn flour, vinegar and salt. This mixture is introduced in a clean segment of a pig's colon, which is sealed and placed above the stove. A thick liquid trickles down into a pan, turns into a jelly and is afterwards preserved in a dry place. A small amount of this jelly – the curd – mixes with a certain quantity of warm milk and transforms it into a type of young cheese in only half an hour. This cheese is then wrapped into a cloth and hung out so that the whey can trickle down. Out of this whey people make another type of light cheese, which is called "jintita" or "cureasta" and which is eaten either by people or given to animals, especially to pigs. The fermented cheese is minced, salted and then battered into cheese proper, which is then preserved in large special wooden pails. At the end of June sheep had their wool clipped manually (with a pair of scissors) by their owners. The resulted wool was washed several times with water from the well or from the Crisul Alb River. Then it was dried out in the sun, combed with a hemp comb, spun out and darned into blankets, peasant's trousers or coats. The resulting fabric was then beaten with a thick stick so as to become harder.

The pig breed which was primarily raised in this area was Mangalitza. The lard from this breed was used for cooking. Products similar to those in Central Europe were made out of Mangalitza's meat, using German and Hungarian recipes: ham, sausages, hog's pudding ("caltabos"), blood pudding ("sangerete"), pate ("maios"), aspic ("toba"), etc. The Slovaks from Nadlac have a special product called "Nadlac salami". All these products are frequently made with paprika. A lot of people raised geese at their shelters especially

for lard and meat but also for their down which was then used to stuff pillows and quilts, those being part of a girl's dowry. The goose was the traditional version for the Catholics and Protestants in the area when holidays came. The breeders in the area sold geese to stall owners in Arad.

In the 1960's the shelters and the implicit lifestyle began to be destroyed due to the co-operative organisations. The shelters were demolished so that the fields could be worked on larger areas and the whole land became property of the Agricultural Co-operation. Only some of the shelters remained unscathed because they were closer to the main road between Chisineu-Cris and Varsand but these became more modern and lost the traditional lifestyle which was once typical of the shelters. Still, taking the shelters as a model, the family farms still function all throughout Western of Romania.

## **2. Heritage preservation zoo-genetic**

The fact that the land is now divided into small lots can be seen as an advantage. Romanian state institutions support only big farms with a large number of animals because they claim that this is the only way to obtain a large quantity of products. But this wish of immediate profit will not benefit the national zoo genetic heritage which is in fact part of Europe's patrimony. Instead, it will only destroy the equilibrium of rural communities, having a negative impact on the economy of certain regions. There are farms where specialised breeds have been imported for their meat and which have been labelled as performing an organic agriculture. But organic agriculture is not done with specialised breeds; it is done with mixed breeds. The cattle breeds formed on the present-day territory of Romania are excellent for this type of agriculture. Europe's agriculture cannot compete with great American companies that own those huge hinterlands in South America where a very large number of animals are grown, without anybody having a problem regarding the animals' wellbeing or the quality of the products. In 2014 the milk quota will probably disappear as well. The only chance European agriculture has got is quality, and that goes also for Romanian agriculture, especially the one in Western of Romania. Economic competition, including agricultural one can be

seen in all European countries. For instance, in Baden Wurtemberg land, Germany, the number of dairies had shrunken by 72% from 1990 to 2011, according to Germany's Federal Bureau for Agricultural Policies Coordination. In Romania, the existence of modern farms is being encouraged, which have to have modern shelters, equipment and machines to be used on large areas. All these demands mean that the owners must make huge investments which will then be hard to be reabsorbed. The biggest problem, however, is the maintenance of the agricultural machines. In the case of this type of farms, one has to have qualified employees, with a bare minimum of agricultural knowledge or of how to use and maintain a tractor. There are no schools for mechanic qualification and the ones who do graduate such an institution are only looking to coordinate the activities in a farm, not to actually practice them [3].

The erosion of the zoo-genetic patrimony in Western of Romania is obvious. Local breeds are being replaced with better imported ones but these have to be very well taken care of in order to reach their genetic potential. Specialised breeds for meat or milk are preferred to the local ones. The Holstein cattle are indeed the global breed and the Canadian-American genetics is present in every country that this breed is being raised. Also, through gene flow, there has been a variety of cattle breeds imported for their meat. But for those owners who cannot afford big investments, the local mixed breeds are the ones who can offer them a larger range of products, given the fact that prices for milk and meat have been fluctuating and will probably continue to do so. There are numerous associations for cattle and sheep owners, but the only real interest of these associations is the money from the European Union. In Timis, for instance, there is the Milk Cow Owners' Co-operative where there are a number of farms with only a common thing: the fact that they sell milk on the same bill to another bigger farm where the milk is processed.

## **3. Traditional agro-food processing**

Banat was once renowned for its farms for processing animal products. Pork products such as ham, sausages, smoked fat prepared in traditional households were very much sought by foreigners who used to visit this area. In 1904 the

Slaughterhouse in Timisoara started to function, but now it is all ruins. In 1910 the Milk Centre in Timisoara was formed and the Milk factory produced cheese and butter for export. Everywhere in Banat there were associations for milk production as well as other units for milk processing where various types of cheese were made (for example at Liebling, Cosava, Brebu, Cornereva). In 1890 there was a Canned Meat Factory in Timisoara and in 1912 there were 81 butcher units in Banat as well as 472 butcher shops. In 1904 the Soap factory start its work in Timisoara, in 1914 there is the Curd Factory in Caransebes, in 1911 the Slaughterhouse in Lugoj and in 1912 the Korneli Factory for salami and sausages at Sannicolau Mare. Other animal products such as skin and wool were processed in other industrial units in Banat. Lugoj was a well known centre for skilled tanners and skinners. Since 1907 the Textile Factory in Timisoara which initially processed cotton, started processing wool and transforming it into qualitative fabrics. This factory was, at that time, the only factory of this type in Hungary. There was also the “Filatura de lana” factory in Timisoara where wool was being processed in order to be exported to other countries. In 1905 the factory “Matasea” (Silk) was inaugurated at Lugoj, with modern machines for that time. Banat was one of the few areas in Romania where, up to 1989, sericulture was being practiced. In 1743 in Banat 143000 mulberry trees were brought from Italy and planted for sericulture. This tradition was kept until 1989 when the only Silk Factory in Lugoj was closed. Nowadays sericulture in Banat is a thing of the past and the mulberry trees are almost extinct. Another interesting factory was at Periam where there was a centre for cloth painting (in blue) at Grunn, Barth and Ochsenfeld units, which was then transformed into the Periam Hat Factory. There were also units for processing vegetal products and for making alcoholic drinks (bear, starch, medical alcohol), cosmetics, perfumes and the Periam Steiner liquor. There were also factories where they made agricultural tools at Topleț, Anina, Resita, Gavojdia, Nadlac [4]. Together with the industrial and agricultural collapse in Romania, i.e. in 1989, all these processing units have disappeared with few exceptions, such as the modern slaughterhouse for pigs (10,000 pigs/day) in Timisoara, founded by the ex-Comtim.

In 2011 there are some units of processing animal and vegetable products in Banat, but these belong almost entirely to some transnational companies. The smaller and even fewer authentic units where milk and meat are processed produce small quantities of products which are of the same mediocre quality as those prepared in the bigger units.

In the few animal products sales organised in Banat, the products which have two layers of black smoke on them are presented as being “traditional products”, but the recipes for these products are mostly imported. Beside the fact that there are no original recipes for these products, there is also no adequate raw meat for them to be made. For example, the pig meat with an 8 mm layer of fat on it, coming from the hybrid pigs that have been industrially fed has modified organoleptic features and it is of no good for preparing the traditional ham or lard of Banat. Starting with 2009 there has been a trend in Banat that leads to a total modification of the traditional products: the Vietnamese pigs. These are supposed to have a healthier meat, although it smells of mud and it is flabby.



The reason why the number of processing units was enumerated was to demonstrate that the agricultural products in Banat had been processed in a qualitative way and that there was a good market for these products, including the export market. Also, there is a stark difference between those times and nowadays when the producers are the ones who have to go almost “door to door” to try and sell their products. The fact that in Banat there used to be a processing unit in almost every town or village makes it similar to villages in Germany, France, Austria and Italy. For instance,

agriculture in Italy is based especially on products obtained from the Cooperative Associations from various villages where old recipes are kept and enforced [5].

It is common in Banat for the landowners of an area smaller than 5 ha to complain about the fact that they do not have the necessary machines for field work. A possible solution would be that of the example in Germany, Austria and Hungary: there are societies which own agricultural equipment and which do the field work for the landowners in exchange of a sum of money or a part of the goods. In Banat there are no mechanized machines left so a lot of the agricultural work is done with machines from Hungary. The landowners and land workers in Banat have no chance of seeing how new technologies are applied in agriculture. That is why the state should develop some pilot-farms where new methods should be visible to everyone.



#### **4. Impact of climate change**

The works for hydro-amelioration started by the Austrian administration in the 18<sup>th</sup> century continued for years in order to make use of the marsh area in the Plain of the West. Dams were built along rivers and large ditches were dug for terrain drainage. The regularisation of the Bega River started in 1728 in the Faget-Chizatau section because it was necessary that there was a usable canal for wood transportation to Timisoara. In 1756 the canal was finished from Timisoara to Klek. Smaller rivers such as Niarad, Beregsau and then a bigger one, Timis, were regularised. The whole area was dammed, starting from the banks of the Mures river to Felnac and Tisa [6].

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, because of the drainage on the new surfaces, new crops were cultivated, such as cole, rice and tobacco, crops which needed a certain level of specialization. Rice cultivation was introduced in 1743 by Italian colonists. In order to obtain rich crops, workers used the alternative crops method. Green crops were also harvested on larger areas.

This flourishing economic development led to exporting agricultural products all around Europe. Laws which valued Banat's economy were passed; banks favoured animal owners who started to realize it was more profitable to keep their money in the bank. Beside the on-going development of the roads and railroads, water navigation took off as well as it was very affordable. In 1872 the Timis-Bega Canalisation Society was founded and in 1900 Timisoara Harbour on the Bega canal was inaugurated near the Modos railway bridge in order for goods to be transported to Tisa and then to the Danube. The harbour ensured that vessels up to 800 tons could transport goods on the river and it was considered to be one of the most modern fluvial harbours in Hungary. After Second World War Bega canal had a lot to suffer from bombing and then it required many restoration works. Complete bank-slopping for the canal was done between 1957 and 1958 but ever since then there was no drainage of the canal whatsoever and the goods transport stopped as well. Since then the canal has been used only for small boat competitions and for entertainment purposes. After 2001 there were many projects of rehabilitation going on because the canal had come to be impracticable due to massive mud deposits and toxic waste from various industrial units in the area. In 2010 a few works of drainage were made due to some European funds. The rehabilitation of the Bega navigable canal would have a major impact on a better collaboration with Danube's riverain countries. Also, the restoration of the Periam harbour would facilitate the transportation of the goods on Mures – Tisa – Danube.

In Banat there were no works of hydro-amelioration done after 1990. On the contrary, ditches were clogged and the banks were not cleaned anymore. Just as impracticable as Bega is the river Mures which often floods the settlements it passes by, some of which were completely devastated (Graniceri, Cruceni).

## **5. Necessity to implement projects for young farmers**

Young people in rural Banat were no longer attracted by agriculture and they preferred the city life (or going abroad) to that of the village. Since 1972 seasonal workers were brought in Banat from different regions in Romania to work the fields. As time passed by, they settled down in those villages and their number grew so much that after 1990 when the majority of the German, Serbian and other populations massively left Romania, they remained the actual inhabitants of the villages. There are also those villages where the inhabitants left almost entirely, thus remaining villages such as Secas with 3-10 inhabitants. The newly arrived population didn't preserve the traditions or the lifestyles in Banat, disregarding the local animal breeds or the local animal products which had brought fame to this region. From an economy based on using local resources and communities where people helped each other on various occasions (such as building a new house or rehabilitating a household after a disaster), the lifestyle transformed to something totally unknown to Banat. The newcomers took hold of the households and terrains of those who have left Banat. Moreover, there came the unemployed from the cities who returned to villages after the industrial collapse in Romania. These new inhabitants of villages in Banat, having scarce knowledge of agriculture, sold the terrains at under-price. Local breeds of animals were slaughtered; including the ones which belonged to elite farms from Lovrin's Research Station where there used to be a large number of Romanian Spotted cows of a great genetic value.

Nowadays we can speak of a new colonisation in Banat because the terrains which were sold by the new inhabitants have been bought by farmers from Europe (Germany, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Israel, Holland, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, France, Great Britain) who started to build modern farms for animal raising or crops or to rehabilitate former agricultural exploitations such as the Recas Wine Society or the Periam-Pesac Tree Society. Agricultural terrains in Banat have become places where genetically modified crops have been tested and bio-fuels obtained. Unfortunately, these things were easily accepted and not a single study was made on how they will affect people and animals, given the fact that the effect of the genetically

modified organisms on the genome's nutrition is still unknown, as well as their effect on the raising number of illnesses such as diabetes, allergies and liver malfunctions in small children; also, Alzheimer is more and more spread among elderly people.

Rich pastures and skilled locals have led to raising pure blood animals. The so-called "green road of meat" which divided into two in the mountainous region can still be the place for raising animals for meat. In Banat there is a tradition of fattening the animals on the pasture ever since the 19<sup>th</sup> century when people considered that it was not profitable enough to try and fatten animals in the stable so large enclosures were put up on the pastures where many animals could be taken care of (for instance 200 oxen could be looked out for by only 2 or 3 persons). At the same time, cattle raised on pastures were accustomed to transportation so they would lose very little of their weight. Their meat was also more qualitative than that of those animals kept in stables.

It is significant that for 35 years there hasn't been an evidence of an area animal raising and that the majority of the owners know very little of the local breeds or of the cross-border ones.

## **Instead of conclusions**

Banat is an excellent region for crops and for raising animals due to its rich pastures, its geographical layout, the plain field and the water routes that can easily reach the Danube. The 70% in rural Banat can be diminished by developing a special market zone which has to be closely related to the qualities of the local breeds of animals and to the traditional recipes.

The reality in which a single person owns large areas of agricultural terrain in a village where the majority dwell on a minimum household is unacceptable.

The loss of the traditional recipes is doubled by the loss of other cultural values of the Banat communities, leading to the loss of the entire community.

## **References**

1. Ehrler J. J., Banatul de la origini pana acum 1774, traducere C. Fenesan, Ed. Facla, Timisoara, 1982
2. Mătiuț Stela, Orașul Chișinău-Criș în memoria timpului, Ed. Univ. Vasile Goldiș, Arad, 2000
3. Database of Association Transilvanian Rare Breeds

4. Munteanu I., Banatul istoric, Ed. Excelsior art, Timisoara, 2007, vol. 2  
5. Annals of Banat's Museum Timisoara

6. Kakucs L., Contributii la istoria agriculturii din Banat sec. XVIII-XIX, Ed. Mirton, Timisoara, 1998.