



Tryfon Bampilis. *Greek Whisky: The Localization of a Global Commodity*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2013. xvii + 228 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85745-877-3; ISBN 978-0-85745-878-0.

Reviewed by Yuson Jung (Wayne State University)

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## A Greek Fetish? The Social Life of Whisky

*Greek Whisky* is an engaging study about how an imported alcoholic beverage, namely Scotch whisky, has permeated the lives of modern Greeks. Although the title may suggest that the book is about whisky made in Greece, it actually examines the localization of a well-known global commodity. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Athens and in the island of Skyros as well as archival and media research, Tryfon Bampilis, who is native to these places, discusses the three trajectories he relates to the consumption of whisky in contemporary Greece. They include a trajectory of mediascapes, which explores the role that culture industry and marketing/advertising played in the popularization of whisky in Greece since the end of World War II; a trajectory of popular style and entertainment, which traces the prominence of whisky consumption in Athens especially in relation to the popular live music offered in various entertainment venues; and the trajectory of North Aegean alcohol consumption, which includes a detailed ethnography of the island of Skyros in which the author shows how whisky has interacted with the existing social structure, cultural values, and everyday practices. Here, Bampilis contextualizes the upward mobility of the island's laborers. These different trajectories all provide evidence of how whisky became localized and ultimately a "Greek fetish" (p. 206), as it has been replacing other traditional drinks such as wine, *tsipouro*, and *ouzo* in social drinking occasions.

The chapters in the book hang nicely together and are logically sequenced, making the book a good and

smooth read. The introductory chapter lays out different theoretical and conceptual frameworks—these are a bit lengthy and can be skimmed if the book is being used for teaching, but the remaining chapters are well constructed with informative details that should provoke interesting class discussion. The introduction frames the book and sketches the cultural context of alcohol consumption in Greece, which provides a backdrop to the ensuing discussion on the centrality of whisky consumption there. Drinking in Greece is a highly social and performative practice, and it is in this context that whisky consumption has gained its cultural significance. The first chapter explains the larger history of the imported spirits industry in modern Greece and documents the development of small importers and how they ended up being ousted by multinational corporations that control now about 80 percent of the industry.

Chapter 2 focuses on Greek films—especially from the "golden age" in Greek cinema from the late 1950s to early 1970s, where Scotch whisky is portrayed as a modern Greek drink. The author viewed more than eighty films from this period and offers a thoughtful cultural analysis in relation to modernity, cosmopolitan styles, and class distinction, which whisky came to symbolize in these films. Whisky is not always portrayed as a positive symbol in these films; rather, it represents both happy and melancholic relationships to modern life, and its consumption can express a sense of alienation and an experience of loss of innocence. In chapter 3, the process of localization intensifies by means of marketing and adver-

tising. Greece, the author informs us, is the only country in the European Union where there are no legal barriers or state regulations for advertisements of alcohol—hence the cultural branding of whisky. This process resulted in branded whisky-related items (such as ashtrays, cigarette lighters, bar towels, mirrors, and glasses) that became ubiquitous in the social life of many Greeks. Marketing and advertising efforts were not only scaled at the global and national levels but also at the more local level, reflecting the reproduction of class and gender differences in contemporary Greece.

The fourth chapter finally takes us to the ethnography of the social life of whisky in Athens. By describing the leisure life in the urban setting organized around night clubs (*bouzoukia*) where live Greek popular music is performed, Bampilis explains how whisky consumption in these venues has become an important performative and social practice, symbolizing a certain cultural style in which “high” and “low” class, the essentialized Eastern (oriental) and Western cultural traits, and performance of masculinity and femininity are contested, negotiated, embraced, and integrated. Here, cultural style can be conceived of as a performative competence and a mode of signification. For example, rather than consuming alcohol with food, which is the more traditional practice, patrons of these new entertainment sites drank whisky without food. It was also in these popular music halls/night clubs where the breaking of plates (often associated with “Greek tradition” of entertainment practice) was institutionalized. Important for the discussion of localization, whisky became entangled with the culture of contemporary Greek popular music, which expressed not only a modernness associated with the West but also an intimate connection to the Eastern (oriental) style, thereby simultaneously subverting the dominant notions of modernity. And finally, the anti-domestic discourse of breaking out of the system of family obligations and family values was reproduced through this new form of consumption. Whisky thus is related to a specific style of entertainment that is localized in the spaces of these *bouzoukia*.

The final substantive chapter leads the readers to a North Aegean island, Skyros. The author provides a rich ethnographic account of the history of the island to show how whisky not only became the national drink of Greece but also represented a particular form of modernity on the island. Here the localization takes place through laborers imagining an Athenian modernness. The author does not explicitly claim Skyros as a representative case of other North Aegean islands, but its re-

lationship to Athens and the sense of marginality deriving from this relationship could be extended to Greeks in other islands imagining a particular form of modernity. The laborers in Skyros were instrumental in making whisky a central beverage in the changing landscape of the island, where traditional and modern values are contested and negotiated. In essence, Bampilis argues that whisky is not merely a commodity but a thing “with which consumers imagine their lives, express their taste for modernity, and negotiate their own styles” (p. 8), and he demonstrates this by connecting the seemingly unrelated networks and sites of Greek cinema, advertising, consumers, multinational corporations, the cosmopolitan center in the city, and the island community.

Bampilis’s analytical frameworks and theoretical approaches are not particularly novel: he follows a line of anthropological studies regarding the global circulation of commodities such as sugar, Coca-Cola, or McDonalds food to show how economic globalization and modernity intersect with the process of localization.[1] His intimate knowledge as a native ethnographer, however, allows him to advance a convincing and detailed analysis of the complex process of commodification of whisky in modern Greece that aptly utilizes both historical and ethnographic evidence. Readers will be satisfied with the richness of data and contextualized interpretation that Bampilis provides.

While the author engages and discusses ethnographic studies on contemporary Greece and makes reference to other anthropological studies that follow commodity chains, there is surprisingly little reference to anthropological (or related social scientific) literature on alcoholic beverages and their social, cultural, and historical implications. Alcoholic beverages such as beer, wine, and cognac in different cultural settings have provoked questions concerning modernity and resistance similar to those that Bampilis discusses in this fine study, and the book could have benefited from comparative perspectives, such as those found in Thomas Wilson’s *Drinking Cultures* (2005), in explaining what makes the case of whisky in Greece so distinctive (or not). One other minor criticism regards the extensive use of Greek words in the book, the meanings of which are not always immediately explained. For better readability and for those readers who may not read the book front to back, it would have been useful to include a glossary or to follow the italicized Greek word with the English translation in parenthesis; the author does the latter occasionally but not consistently.

*Greek Whisky* makes a fine addition to the scholarship of consumption, globalization, food, and culture, as well as the anthropology of Europe. It will also have a strong appeal for qualitative researchers in marketing and a wider range of audiences beyond the academic community. I would recommend this book for both undergraduate and graduate classes, and it would make a compelling resource for continuing education classes, where Greece is rarely discussed in terms of consumption of modern global commodities.

#### Note

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