

THE CSÁRDÁS OF MAGYARÓZD VILLAGE AS AN EXAMPLE OF TRANSGRESSING SOCIAL NORMS: TOUCHING

Abstract

Hungarian research on folk dance has not yet dealt with women, gender roles and body politics. I examine how gender and sexuality operate as social constructs in a Romanian, Transylvanian village society, particularly in the dance tradition in the 20th and 21st centuries. According to my hypothesis, dance as a social phenomenon can include all the gender norms that have a place in the society. In this paper, I explore the question of whether dance involves only gender norms of everyday life or can it function as a context where behavioral standards are different, and social borders can be crossed. As an example, I focus on the acceptability of a particular kind of touch during dancing. In what ways are dance interactions different than the situations of everyday life?

Keywords: Transylvania, women, men, gender, touching

Introduction

In the course of my university studies, it often caught my attention that in Hungary, the relations between men and women have never been clearly defined, analyzed and interpreted, neither in Hungarian dance folkloristics, nor in folk dance education, which are based on a historical-geographical and structuralist research approaches. Historically, Hungarian dance research has been man-centered – androcentric,¹ therefore, most of the informants were men. A man can never experience the situation or the role of a woman, and vice versa.

According to the hypothesis of my doctoral research, dance may include all those gender norms that are present in the whole society. The question is: which social expectations apply? In other words, how are the images and the roles of women and men constructed? This leads me to the question of whether dance situations maintain everyday gender norms or do they sometimes involve their own peculiar boundaries. Touching limits can serve as an example. While dancing, the dancers are allowed to touch each other in ways that would not be allowed in other social contexts. Insofar as dancing situations differ from common circumstances, how can dance be seen as adding something to everyday life? Which indications or signs in a dance can be interpreted as expressions of an individual's sexual identity and role? Is it even possible to interpret these signs and understand them? I seek answers to these questions during my PhD studies.

1 *Andros* means *man* in Greek [see Hylland-Eriksen 2006:164].

I am going to introduce briefly only one relevant aspect of the above questions: the problem of transgressing a social norm. A more detailed analysis and description on this topic is given in my dissertation, the complete analysis would exceed the limits of this paper. I am aimed at answering the above-mentioned questions on the basis of the dance culture of a Transylvanian, Hungarian-populated village in Romania, Magyarózd (Romanian name: Ozd).²

Literature

Reviewing the Hungarian studies in dance anthropology and dance folkloristics, it becomes immediately apparent that the analysis of dance and its social contexts has not yet paid enough attention to the men and women who compose couple dances.

Judith Lynne Hanna published a relevant book in 1988, under the title “Dance, sex and gender: Signs of identity, dominance, defiance and desire.” According to her, we can understand each other by the terminology of socio-cultural gender. She argues that there is an under-recognized opportunity in dance, which “tells us” what it means to be a woman or a man [Hanna 1988:3]. Hanna does not consider the gender expressions of dance to be intentional, she regards them as sometimes unintended [2010:212]. In other words, dancing is an action during which the gender roles and symbols become clearly visible, but the individuals do not apply them deliberately.

Judith Lynne Hanna, professor at the University of Maryland, notes that dance and sexuality use the same instrument, that is, the human body, and she considers dance and sexuality to be inseparable. However, the gender expressions of a dance are sometimes unintentional and unintended [2010:212]. Consequently, dance can be interpreted as an intimate movement (compared to the social interactions of everyday life), as an expression of affection and, to a certain extent, sexuality. If we would like to understand how this intimacy gets articulated in dance, we have to identify and interpret those phenomena that can provide us with additional information.

In her 1990 book, Jane K. Cowan dwells on the question of how non-verbal communications, especially the body-related forms, can be interpreted. She also attempts to understand the codes necessary for interpreting the human body [1990:25].

Márta Belényesi, a Hungarian dance researcher, regards the Székely dances of Bukovina as follows: “Both types³ of dance events used to be the most natural forms of interactions between the two sexes: [...] for the two chosen youngsters, this became the most uninhibited and free opportunity to interact.” [1958:78].

In my opinion, consistent with Judith Lynne Hanna’s position, taking into consideration dance life in the village, it is clear that dance and dancing are deeply connected with sexuality. I do not, of course, claim that sexuality comes to the fore to the same extent in each dance of the repertoire, nor that drawing the attention of the opposite sex is the main function⁴ or role of every dance. However, observations confirm that couple dances and sexuality cannot be separated.

I generally agree that dance in this culture is an intimate moment (compared to the social interactions of everyday life) an expression of affection and, to a certain

² For more about the village, see Fügedi 1990, 2005, 2006, 2007.

³ Sunday’s dance event and balls.

⁴ Vivien Szőnyi deals with the function of the traditional dance in Moldova region, Romania [2014, 2018].

extent, sexuality. If we want to explore nuances and meanings related to this intimacy, we must develop methods for dance analysis that have not yet been used in Hungarian dance research.

I participated in and observed dance events in Magyarózd, conducted interviews and had informal chats with local and revival dancers to compare the attitudes of these two groups. I also felt it was necessary to extend the pool of my informants to understand this particular situation in context of a wider spectrum of Hungarian folk dance cultures. In addition to the Magyarózd locals, I conducted interviews with dancers from the revival movement who frequently danced with local informants, as I expected that their female /male experiences can help me to understand this issue more broadly. In my dissertation, I provide a detailed explanation of differences between the two contexts, but in this paper, I indicate only a few characteristic divergences and trends.

Csilla Könczei turned my attention to several issues relevant to the above-mentioned informant groups during the analysis and interpretation, as she told me that the urban female researchers of the 1980s were experienced by the villagers as very unusual. She even supposes that men conceived these women to be scantily dressed due to their urban style summer clothing, e.g. shorts and tops that were unconventional in the village in that time. In addition to that, female researchers behaved differently than women customarily did in the village. I mean, they initiated conversations, asked questions to the locals, and they may have differed in their confident demeanor from the typical and conventional females in traditional roles. What Sándor Varga told me during one of our conversations is also significant: it was unusual that the members of a certain age group danced with someone who belonged to another age group, as during his fieldwork conducted from the 1990s, he and his colleagues always asked the elders to dance in order to learn from them. The female revivalists that I interviewed were often younger than the village men they danced with.

Touching as a possible transgression of social norms

To reveal the intimacy of couple dances, it is crucial to observe and analyze the different ways of touching. Rules of physical contact are socially determined, and these principles are known and applied by the members of each society. In Transylvania, couple dances performed in close hold provide an opportunity for touching the partner. Now the question arises whether only those touches are present in a dance which are integral parts of the movement process, or these gestures bear such additional meanings that are not absolutely necessary for dancing but they are still frequently performed.

According to one of my informants from Magyarózd, all touches were natural and organic elements of the dance. If it is so, then the movements I considered to be transgressing were legitimized by the society, the village community. Is it even relevant to discuss that a border crossing move is accepted by the community? If it is, can this move be regarded as border crossing?

In dances performed in close hold, dancers touch each other's entire arms and body from the back till the hip lines. Women informants from the revival movement mentioned several times during our conversations that when they were dancing with Transylvanian local informants, their partners (their male partners in most cases) touched their breasts, and this happened to all of them. "We don't get it like

this, but in a completely different way. You do not take it as an offence or, I don't, something like that [...]" [Á. M. 2018].

I tried to discuss about this theme with some male informants from the village and from the revival movements too, but only one man answered to my questions, the others ignored the existence of this phenomenon, and one of them said to me "I have no opinion and experience of this touching" [Sz. Sz. 2018]. The one man who answered me mentioned stories and situations about these transgressions, so he was the only one, who did not deny it.

Analyzing these movements, it is crucial to examine whether these gestures were one-way border crossings, or did women sometimes touch the intimate parts of men while they were dancing. A revival informants told me about a rural situation:

I don't know, I don't remember a story like that. It was more harshly judged also among women, when someone touched a man in a different way. [...] Then I always saw that women were falling for the musicians. It was somewhat admiration, so they did such things that the musicians liked. Being a handsome man was not necessary, but I don't remember if women were in high delight for anything. /How did this manifest?/ In the way they hosted the musicians. They paid special attention to them by serving food and drinks. [...] I don't know why this came to mind now. Or their gazes, or they were kind to them, but, of course, it happened that they were not [T. B. 2018].

Sándor Varga discusses that at the weddings in Visa, village (Transylvania, Romania) women were allowed to behave freely in the early morning hours. It frequently happened this time that "women kissed the musicians' lips or they pasted banknotes to their foreheads in the heat of entertaining" [Varga 2007:93].

In relation to the musicians, border crossing was observable for women. "A musician who provides service for the dancers has always been regarded highly valuable for the traditional village community." [Pávai 2013:80].

I attempted to introduce in nutshell the border crossing movements of dance (non-exhaustive list).

As their name indicates, my revival informants learned dancing within the frame of this movement in an urban atmosphere, where the dances of different dialects are taught by dance instructors during assemblies, so the learning process was different than in traditional villages. Consequently, they acquired the entire dance repertoire, but they did not learn about the society and environment to which a given dance belongs. These dances were taken out of their original context, so the hidden meanings and the moves or gestures of metacommunication were lost. These aspects can bear additional meanings only if their original socio-cultural frame is known or they appear therein.

In short, touching a breast or a bottom belongs to the 20th century dance culture of Magyarózd in which these acts are acceptable in certain situations. The local informants did not express any distaste while we were talking about this topic, though an open discussion would be inappropriate. If we still regard dance as a part of the society, it means that people living in a certain community learned the frame and the boundaries of a given dance supposedly without being aware of this. Of course, these boundaries are not fixed and settled borders, as they are constantly being negotiated.

Informants from the revival movement were socialized in a completely different society in which different boundaries for appropriate touching were set for dance and society, but they still wanted to acquire the peasants' dance culture. When the revival informants, who were socialized in a different way, start dancing with the locals, these different sets of norms encounter each other. It happens that an act perceived to be insolent and inconvenient for someone who comes from the urban milieu can be experienced as a normal element of dancing by the traditional dancer.

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