

HOW CHANGES OF AGE AND SOCIAL STATUS ARE MANIFESTED IN THE MOLDAVIAN CSÁNGÓ DANCE CULTURE

Abstract

Social structure of Moldavian Csángó villages is organized into groups according the age of the community members. Each life stage brings a different social status, which are manifest at the occasions for dancing. Formal and stylistic aspects of dancing reflect social status, and this correlates with manners and a system of norms for the dancer's behavior. The problem raised in this paper is only a minor part of an ongoing doctoral research project, which analyses the transformation of dance culture in Magyarfalu (Arini), Romania, from the 1940s up to the present day. In Magyarfalu village, dancing can be interpreted as a collectively agreed socio-cultural practice which is linked to specified space, time and participants. It symbolically refers to the community's social structure and generational distribution, and by representing, strengthening and asserting the social relations in public, contributes to the continuity of social structure. This research adopts a holistic approach to interpret the visible and hidden aspects of the dance culture as part of an interdependent whole, each element of which has a function. The present paper is aimed at introducing this functional complexity and interpreting how the representation of ageing and changing social status are applied during the dance events of Magyarfalu.

Keywords: age, functionalism, Moldavian Csángó, representation, social status

Introduction

The topic introduced in this paper belongs to a doctoral research started in 2015. The research focuses on the transformation of dance culture between the 1940s and 2010s, in an Eastern Romanian village, Magyarfalu,¹ populated by Hungarians. I would like to demonstrate the social embeddedness of dancing primarily through the representative practices of ageing and changing of social status, which are observable during dancing.

Conditions of participation in dance events organized in the village are age-specific. According to village terminology, *children* (*gyermekek*); *youngsters* (*fiatalok*); *girls* (*leányok*) and *lads* (*legények*); *newly marrieds* (*ifjú házások*); *marrieds* (*házások*); *elder marrieds* (*idős házások*) or *elders* (*idősek*) belong to different categories. Consequently, they may attend distinct dance events where *they are allowed to*

¹ This village is called Arini in Romanian, and as part of Găiceana commune, belongs to Bacău county which is in north-eastern Romania.

dance in their appropriate ways. Age and social status of community members, and especially marital status, strictly define the norms of dancing. This set of unwritten rules controls the dancers' behavior, and also correlates with religious life and the moral system established in the community. Manners belonging to the hidden part of dance culture apply in many cases to formal and stylistic aspects of dance creation, thus they become representational practices of the system of social norms in the community. Dance events of Magyarfalu can be explained as complex socio-cultural acts which reflect the community's social structure, and we can also assume that dances, beyond their representational role, have deeper meanings and functions within this structure.

Based on the above-discussed hypotheses, this short essay is aimed at answering the following questions: a) How does age determine the opportunities for taking part in dance events? b) At which events and with whom are people of different age groups and social status allowed to dance? c) What formal and stylistic changes are triggered by norms of dancing? d) What function does the representation of age and social status during dancing serve in the local community's social structure?

Scope of the research – field and community

The research area is Moldova (part of Romania) which extends from the Eastern Carpathians to the Prut River, and bordered by Bukovina to the north, Walachia and Dobruja to the south. Most settlements of Hungarian origin and with Moldavian Csángó population are situated in Bacău county, along the Szeret River. From among Csángós who migrated to Moldova from central parts of Transylvania in the 12th–13th centuries, and then from its eastern part (Székelyföld) in the 18th century, about 40,000 people still speak Hungarian.² Two elemental factors determine the Moldavian Csángó identity: their Roman Catholic religion, which distinguishes them from Orthodox Romanians living around them, and local identity [Pozsony 2005:148–149].

Magyarfalu is situated 60 km south-east of the center of Bacău. The population is approximately 1300 people, but due to intensive external economic migration, only about 700 persons live permanently in the village [Iancu 2013:58]. In this village, economic migration can be regarded as the most important factor behind the shaping of culture. This is grounded in wealth generation, which rapidly accelerates the modernization of their lifestyle. Permanent residents of Magyarfalu work as peasants in agriculture, cultivation and animal husbandry. The settlement is a dead-end village with a closed, cohesive community and a regulated lifestyle. Moral and legal orders originate from and are under the supervision of the church [Iancu 2013:60–62].

Research methodology

I have been conducting ethnological research among Moldavian Csángós since 2012, with a focus on their social structure and dance culture. My current doctoral research in Magyarfalu started in 2015. Since then, I have been spending 1–2 weeks in the village in every season, and in 2016, I conducted a three months fieldwork

² Based on research conducted by Vilmos Tánczos between 1992 and 1996, of about 240.000 Catholic Moldavians, around 62.000 people speak Hungarian. Since then, the number of Hungarian speakers has significantly decreased [Ilyés, Peti, Pozsony 2010:127].

stay. Archival materials (manuscripts, photo and film archives) constitute a smaller part of the resources,³ whereas the majority of the collected data comes from my fieldwork conducted in the village. My data collection techniques included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, photography and filming. Dance events that I observed and documented, such as the day of the village's patron saint, weddings, and balls, were organized by the local community. I participated only as a guest, a researcher, and a dancer, and did not take part in any organizational or controlling tasks. I tried to engage with a wide range of interviewees due to the complexity of the research problems and the extended timeframe: male and female inhabitants of Magyarfalva between the age of 18–98 were interviewed, and I was able to reach them through personal connections made in the village.

Framework interpretation

A holistic approach⁴ and functionalist perspectives of British social anthropology determine the frame of my research theme. The active person and his/her biological needs are the basis for Bronisław Malinowski, who engages with the bio-psychological strand within functionalism [see Malinowski 1944]. As a functionalist dance researcher, I consider this theory to be applicable mostly in undertaking a micro-level examination of a community. By micro-level, I mean the social network of persons belonging to the same local community, who know each other directly or indirectly. Micro-level research based on the bio-psychological stream of functionalism starts from the dancing individual and aims to give answer to the question of what social institutions are created in a given community by *dancing*, interpreted as collective response to needs [Szőnyi 2018:41–42].

The theory of structural functionalism established by Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown is based not on the individual, but on the system, the regularity of which is interpreted in the context of structure, process and function [see Radcliffe-Brown 1958]. I assume that this can contribute to understanding the role that macro-level processes, ecological, political, and social changes, play in culture shaping. Building on the notion of adaptation by Radcliffe-Brown, if we regard dance culture as a system of adaptation [2004:17–18], I strive to provide an answer to the question: during the transformation of dance life and dance repertoire, what internal (micro-level) adaptive responses were provided by the community to certain external (macro-level) mechanisms in order to preserve the continuity of local dance culture [Szőnyi 2018:42].

Relation between age, social status and dance

Below, I would like to demonstrate the relation between age and dance, taking into consideration the interviewees' narratives and personal experience gained during the dance events where I took part as a participant observer. Information coming

3 For my research, I used the collections of the following institute: Archives and Department for Folk Music and Folk Dance Research, Institute for Musicology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

4 Assuming cultural complexity, I think that chaining of a phenomenon has impact on all other elements of the socio-cultural system. According to Thomas Hylland Eriksen, to interpret a phenomenon in a complex way, we have to go beyond the one-sided causality analysis and rather focus on system-level interactions from a multi-dimensional point of view [2008:6].

from these two resource types cover a rather extended period of time, from the middle of the 20th century up to the present day. However, research results so far show that, while local dance life and dance repertoire went through profound transformation during this period, dance etiquette related to age and social status have barely changed. This implies that manners ruling the dancers' behavior belong to a deeper segment of the village's (dance) culture, so their transformation happens more slowly, and they serve an essential, organically embedded function in the community's social life.

In this village, *children* are not allowed to take part in regular dance events organized by community members or leaders, e.g. weddings, balls linked to the day of the village's patron saint, or high days of the year. Dance learning starts from early childhood and happens at home or at school, however, children between 3 and 15 are allowed to demonstrate their dancing skills only at organized dance performances or family occasions (e.g. birthdays, baptisms).

Participating in public dance events is allowed generally after confirmation, around the age of 15. The exact age may vary individually, as this ceremony is not held in the village every year. For this reason, confirmation is only a symbolic boundary between the categories of *child* and *youngster* in terms of dancing. In fact, *girls* and *lads* are considered to be *youngsters* until they get married and they are allowed to attend and dance at all events.

The age for getting married has changed considerably since the 1950s. In the mid-20th century, *girls* typically got married by the age of 18–19 and *lads* by 22–23. Today, however, it is not uncommon for *girls* to get married at 24–25 and *lads* at 28–29 years old. The number of years of youth has become longer, and manners that apply to youth as dancers has slightly changed: they are not connected to age as much now, but to the individual's status in the community, primarily marital status.

Only *youngsters* were allowed to dance at the weekly dance events, the organization and dance repertoire of which has changed remarkably over this 70-year period. Until the 1990s, these events were held in the village, so *marrieds* and *elders* could also attend, though these did not dance, but only talked, drank and watched the *youngsters*. Clubs with popular music appeared in major Moldavian settlements and towns after the change of the regime, leading to the demise of the locally organized weekly dance events. *Youngsters* of Magyarfalu visit these clubs and discos together, but the older categories of locals no longer accompany them. In this way, they are beyond the community's control.

Two categories of married people can be differentiated. Young couples without children are called the *newly married*. This period lasts approximately 1–3 years, during which young couples, just as *youngsters*, are allowed to take part in all dance events if they wish. The second group, the so-called *marrieds* are couples with children, who therefore have become full members of the community. They no longer attend the weekly dance events, only weddings and balls connected to major celebrations.

The last group consists of *elder marrieds* or *elders* whose children have already been married. It would be inappropriate if members of this group danced at balls, however, they are allowed to appear as participants and observers – when the ball is organized in the village. *Elders* are allowed to actively take part in dancing only at weddings.

I would like to give answers to questions raised in the introduction above, based on examples of weddings I observed between 2015 and 2017, as these are the occasions where almost all groups of the community, *youngsters*, *marrieds*, and *elders* are allowed to dance. Wedding guests form smaller and larger groups based on their age, and they separate from each other during the ceremony and other events, while talking, dining and dancing. Most dances of the Csángó dance repertoire are circle dances, but couple dances are also known. Each couple dance takes place in the frame of circle dances performed by persons of mixed age groups. In couple dances, *youngsters* are allowed to dance only with *youngsters*, and those who have partners dance solely with their girl- or boyfriend. Occasionally, *lads* ask their elder female relatives to dance with them. *Married women* dance only with their husband or relative, while *married men* are free to ask their elder female family members to dance. In general, *girls* and *married women* perform couple dances also with females their own age. *Elders* rarely perform couple dances, they rather take part in circle dances during which they form two or more circles on the dance floor, dancing with others their own age and marital status. Dancing sometimes occurs in concentric circles, in which case *youngsters* dance in the inner circle, and *marrieds*, together with *elders*, are in the outer ring.⁵ In the inner circle, dancers are arranged by friendship, while in the outer circle, family connections determine how dancers are aligned to each other.

Considerable differences are observable in how dancers behave and express their emotions according to age. Various conventions apply, and determine the representation techniques, formal and stylistics aspects of dancing. Performances of *lads* seem to be the most dynamic and spectacular, they make expansive gestures, dance complex motifs and rotate the circle rapidly. They are allowed to express their pleasure in dancing with rhythmical shouting or whistling. As they dance in the inner circle, almost full attention is paid to them, so they are in charge of lightening up the atmosphere. Sometimes *young married men* also join them, but after their first child is born, they are *pushed out* to the outer circle. They dance in a more sophisticated way, with a more energy saving style of performance, make smaller gestures, and no sound effects accompany their dance. However, their dancing style is regarded as active within their circle. There are always more persons in the outer circle as more generations belong there, which also causes the circle to rotate more slowly. It also means that dancers are pressed together, so extensive gestures and horizontal motifs that might have enriched the performance do not occur. Motifs performed by *married men* are built and extended rather vertically, and the pleasure of dancing is expressed by closing the eyes and making small fast head shakes.⁶ The dancing style of *unmarried girls*, *married women* and *older men* or *women* is passive, clean and elegant, their behavior is calm tempered, and the motifs they perform are much simpler than *lads'* or *married men's* motif repertoire.

The range of tools of expression, which dancers generally employ in accordance with their own age and marital status, could be extended by focusing on individuals and taking into consideration the person's additional roles in the community's social life. This cannot be described in detail here, so I have attempted to define only the

5 In other cases, it might happen that dancers form circles by gender and not by age groups.

6 From among the Moldavian Csángó settlements, I observed this trance-like expression of state only in Magyarfalú.

representation of age and marital status. Since a dance event in the observed village symbolically refers to the generational distribution of the community and the dancers' marital status, knowing and practicing local dances can be interpreted as a form of non-verbal communication which, besides expressing individual knowledge and skills, plays a role in local socialization and the creation of social connections. The community's set of rules and relations serves to uphold the norms, while the manifestation of dancers' changing status contributes to formalizing their new status and strengthening the village's internal hierarchy.

Deviating from norms of dancing, using the traditional tools of representation in an inappropriate way, has no direct consequences during the dance event. However, after the event, *elder women* of the village talk disparagingly about the dancer whose behavior was beyond the norms. This often reaches the given dancer and his/her family as a rumor, putting considerable psychological pressure on them. Talking about someone in this way controls and maintains the norms of dancing and contributes to strengthening the unwritten rules.

Conclusions

Strong connections between age, marital status and norms of dancing ensure the social embeddedness of dancing in the observed village. Dancing, interpreted as a socio-cultural practice, is controlled by the community, and its formal and stylistic aspects are determined by unwritten rules. The *proper way of dancing* – i.e. obeying the rules set for dancers – represents, legalizes and strengthens the age status, social status, and social relations among community members. Therefore, it plays a role in maintaining a harmonic social life and, consequently, sustaining the continuity of social structure. All this shows that the dance culture constitutes a complex system of social institutions and, by observing this system, we get closer to understand the social network, internal hierarchy and mentality of the local community.

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