

PhD Dissertation Theses

**Modernization Strategies and Traditional Ties:
Symbolic Borderline Cases of Social Transition in a
Csángó Community Located in Moldavia
(through the Example of a Woman from the Settlement
Lujzikalagor)**

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I. Dissertation objective and topic identification

The topic of this dissertation is one of the central issues in ethnographic research; namely, the clash between traditional and modern systems of values in a peasant society undergoing the process of modernization. More specifically, I will investigate the conflict between 20th-century (forced socialist or post-socialist) modernization and the Moldavian *Csángó* socio-cultural system, the latter of which has multiple cultural and language ties and continues to display archaic features even today. The notion of modernization in this case covers a complex system of economic, social, political, and cultural changes, which has confronted the value system, customs, and adaptation models available in the traditional peasant way of life. This is not an external, all-embracing, destructive, and consumptive imperative but rather the total of socio-cultural interactions between the peasant way of life and the contemporary cultural, social, and economic impulses.

The scholarly viewpoint according to which the members of genuine peasant societies are capable of socio-cultural adaptation represents a possibility through the course of which the confrontation between various values and the practice of the solution to the conflict situation can make sense resulting from a parallel recognition or understanding of the radical transformation of the world of the Moldavian *Csángó* people.

The objective of the dissertation is to examine the issue of adaptation to the transformation processes that take place in the macro-social environment and shape the local conditions. The quality and means of adaptation abilities is going to be presented through one of the possible interpretations of the symbolic and the “real” borderline instances in the social transition that has taken place in Moldavia during the past 60-80 years. The dissertation, which is based upon empirical field work and on the life-story method, aims to analyze the cultural and social processes that have promoted the application of modernization strategies to the status of legitimate practice in the Moldavian *Csángó* peasant society.

The analysis of socio-cultural differences and similarities is carried out by dividing the Moldavian *Csángó* existence into a number of time periods. The vertical temporal units identified in the analysis are marked by the pivotal events in the life of *Klára*, a woman from *Lujzikalagor*: the date of her wedding in 1967 and the date of her children’s migration abroad in 1997-1998. The intent of the dissertation is to examine the phenomena of the modernization process that filter through the life story of this woman. As a consequence, the focus of the analysis is exclusively on the variants of historical events and social changes physically perceived in *Klára*’s everyday life. The socio-historical time boundaries and

periodization (traditional, socialist, modern, and post-socialist Moldavian *Csángó* modes of existence), which were established artificially to adjust to the life path of this woman, appear to be a necessary procedure for the analysis as a configuration of comprehension. The thematic units of the dissertation have been determined by *Klára*'s individual ties and her cultural and social system of relationships. The analyses of the thematic groups explored at the personality level within the individual chapters are arranged in a chronological sequence.

The first chapter of the dissertation investigates how the cultural adaptation to the challenges of modernization transformed the social system of relationships (woman–man–child) in the family of the woman from *Lujzikalagor* and what sort of value conflicts it generated between man and woman as well as between parent and child. Furthermore, it explores how these conflicts were solved (for example, “two-dimensional moral value scale system”), and how the previously juxtaposed standpoints got to be aligned side by side within a complex system of interpretations.

The objective of the second chapter is to analyze how the radical forms of (forced and post-socialist) modernization restructured the social institutions of traditional peasant work, the experience of time, the sharing of labour, the gift exchange of work, and the social experience of poverty and wealth. At the level of individuals the shift in lifestyle and the transformation of the family life strategy executed as a consequence of adaptation skills and economic flexibility are interpreted here as a series of affirmative decisions rather than steps that one is forced to take.

The third unit of the analysis examines the way the church, religion, and the religious worldview are organized in the community of *Klára*'s family. This woman from *Lujzikalagor* is deeply religious; her religious conviction has developed as a result of a long process of learning and adaptation, and it continues to develop even today. For example, in her religious worldview, the universality of the basic principles of the Christian faith overrides the significance of differences between the various religious denominations, and the everyday practice of ceremonies following the Latin rites and the Orthodox Church services used in the interest of healing or recovery are forming a functional unit. She does not seem to be able to properly and satisfactorily (for herself) solve the conflict emerging between herself and her children due to the different value-systems coming from religious convictions. However, in a way that is resigned rather than exclusive, she recognizes and “understands,” comprehends, senses, and learns about the fact that, the commitment of her children towards a religious life has changed.

The fourth chapter can be divided into two parts. The first one of these contains a discussion of the contextual correlations of the abstract ethnographic qualities (conservative, introverted, self-segregating) associated with the socio-cultural practice of genuine peasant societies of archaic structure. In turn, the second one comprises the analysis of how adaptation works and how the culturally encoded adaptation skills and knowledge operate, illustrated through examples taken from the life of the woman from *Lujzikalagor*. The analysis also functions as an affirmation of how the characters in the genuine peasant world are active participants who are able to come up with affirmative adaptation in the system of interactions between what is “traditional” and “modern” as a response to the radical challenges posed by modernization.

II. An outline of the methods applied

The basis for the research material required for the completion of this dissertation is constituted by the data collected through ethnographical stationary field work conducted during 2006 and 2007 in the settlement called *Lujzikalagor*, Moldavia (Luizi-Călugăra, Bacău, Romania). The virtually continuous, empirical research of ten months is complemented by almost ten hours of life-path interviews taken between the autumn of 2007 and January 2008.

As there is a Moldavian *Csángó* woman in the focus of research, the complexity of the socio-cultural existence in *Lujzikalagor* is reflected through the everyday actions and social relations of this woman, Klára. As an actor determined by the family system of relations that this woman becomes, depending on the situation, an active, strenuous, or passive, observant member of the local community and the creator of Moldavian *Csángó* culture.

The examination of cultural adaptation and the analysis of the transformation of the social and cultural environment through the changing approaches of the individual are carried out with the help of the narratives of the woman, i.e., with the help of narratives that are considered to be one of the tools or forms of creating reality or meaning. The dissertation follows the tradition of *Csángó* research that focuses on the personality of individuals with the exception that the individual personality of *Klára*, the woman from *Lujzikalagor*, is not featured only at the level of data collection but the personal narrative also determines the perspective of the present analysis of the Moldavian *Csángó* socio-cultural existence.

The research focuses on the life story of *Klára*, a Moldavian *Csángó* woman. If, for a theoretical point of departure, we assume that the way of thinking and the worldview of any

individual would be fundamentally determined by their own socio-cultural relations, then the individual regarded “typical” within his/her community can provide an insight that is representative of the whole of the local cultural system.

Klára’s life can indeed be regarded “typical” within the *Lujzikalagor* community, for which reason the validity of all the strategies and practices that she applies to solve the cultural and social value conflicts surfacing at the personality level can in fact be generalized.

On the basis of the ethnographical premise, the woman from *Lujzikalagor* is present in her own Moldavian socio-cultural environment, as someone comprehending and interpreting in her existence. It is exactly from this premise that the dissertation sets out to examine the version of social and cultural reality according to which *Klára*, the individual considered to be typical, interprets her own culture and the conflict situations of social transition.

The means of facilitating the analysis and exploration of the operation of the adaptation ability are the life-story method and *Klára*’s narratives produced in both manipulated and natural speech contexts about a variety of different topics. The reconstruction of a given “stage” in the life story serves as a tool for the comprehension and consequent analysis of the dynamics of adaptation used during the course of the life path.

III. Listing of the results as theses

The field work experience and the analyses of life-path interviews involved in the dissertation contribute to the field of the ethnographical research of the socio-cultural environment of Hungarian peasant communities undergoing modernization through the introduction of the life-story method and by developing an alternative reading concerning the socio-cultural practices of the genuine Hungarian peasant societies that continue to retain an archaic structure.

The so-called *személyes szemüveg* [verbatim: personal spectacles] (as a perspective of analysis) seems useful in understanding the socio-cultural system characterizing the local community and its rearrangement through the everyday activities of the individual and manifested in the narration of such activities.

The personality-centered research of the Moldavian *Csángó* existence implements the practice of emic interpretation through the analysis of personal narratives. The analysis of the change of the interpretation concerning the cultural practices and of the Moldavian *Csángó* culture that is presented on the basis of the categories used by the woman from *Lujzikalagor*

confirms the presence of the culturally encoded adaptability while exposing the way this adaptation operates.

Undoubtedly, Hungarian peasant societies in the 20th century faced the paradigmatic challenges of modernization in numberless ways. Yet, Hungarian social sciences have basically retained two fundamental ways of reading this process: a slowly perishing peasant culture or the narrative of successful resistance or defiance. Nevertheless, there seems to be a third possibility of interpretation, too, which does not purport to deny the possibility of developing modernization skills and flexible responses to macro-level changes in genuine peasant societies of archaic structure. On the contrary, it aims to present the various types of cultural adaptation by investigating the actual ways practiced in this process of adaptation

This approach presupposes cultural practices and techniques to be at work that can solve the conflicts created by modernization impulses and radical cultural otherness, while at the same time, it does not attach value judgments and qualification labels to the new practices which develop as a consequence of adaptation. The narrative of the peasant society that has displayed a great degree of affinity to adapt in face of the challenges posed by modernization, which is not totally unfamiliar to us in the field of Hungarian ethnography, appears to question the presence of abstract qualities associated with genuine peasant societies of archaic structure (conservative, self-segregative, introverted). The narrative of the peasant tradition that is capable of displaying economic flexibility and culturally encoded adaptation contributes to the process of “taking away the magical features” attributed to these classical peasant societies by reviewing and overriding the romantic, idealized, and erroneously petrified stereotypes associated with their socio-cultural practices.

Both the narratives of the dissolving and lost as well as those of the resistant and isolated peasant societies consider the conservative, self-segregative, and introverted features to be applicable to Hungarian peasant societies. At the general level, these cover the following assumptions:

1. „*Homo conservativus*” – *the conservative peasant habit*

The *conservative habit* attributed to genuine peasant societies of archaic structure postulates the preservation of the currently operating social system and relations together with the already existing cultural system. Furthermore, it implies a conscious opposition to experimentation aiming at the admission of “the modern” and a reservation towards all practices that may not directly fit into the system of local traditions or into the framework of the interpretation of the world determined by historical processes and individual experience. Further assumptions: the current world is the “best of all possible worlds”; everyday actions

are controlled and guided by the *urge to preserve*; the notion of timelessness of customs; reverence towards authority; conservative sense of time – the concept of the ethnographical present tense; the static and fixed image of peasant society; a religious worldview.

2. *The introverted and isolated peasant society*

The other genuine feature that the narrative of loss and successful resistance associates with peasant societies undergoing a process of modernization is: the *introverted aspect*. This aspect assumes that the traditional world of the peasants is the natural and social domain of inherently reticent and *introverted* people. In addition, peasants and farmers deliberately refuse to seek external contacts and they live their quotidian life guided by the *desire to be isolated*. As a consequence of this isolation, they are also uncorrupted and immaculate. In this image, the quality of being introverted is equally valid for all the fields of society, culture and economy. This means that it represents a distinct and impermeable demarcation line between the peasant society and the social reality outside the village boundaries.

3. *Consciously sustained segregation*

The assumption according to which genuine peasant societies of archaic structure separate themselves from their environment by deliberately implementing a range of *self-segregative* practices identifies the population of villages as the victims of economic, political, and cultural changes or as the passive recipients of the impacts of transformations. In this context, the implementation of socio-cultural separation is a consciously applied cultural pattern of behavior that functions as a routine cultural practice in the life of the community. The idea of purposeful isolation however does not seem to be relevant only in a geographical sense but also covers the general way of thinking as well as the ordinary practices of the local existence. Still a further degree of consciousness is presupposed within the establishment and maintenance of spatial and cultural boundaries, while isolation is regarded to be a culturally encoded approach in the micro-world. Further presumptions: the concept of the unified quality of the micro-world.

According to the findings of the dissertation, the above stereotypes are not valid, or can only be valid to some really restricted sense. In the dissertation, the narrative of the affirmative adaptation practice of the Hungarian peasant communities are modeled by *Klára's* life story. The analysis of the existence of this woman from *Lujzikalagor* presents in context the interactions of modernization and the *Csángó* peasant routine, the value conflicts thereof and their solutions, as well as the strategies that are experienced as far from being forced. The basis for the analyses that shed light on the way adaptation works or culturally encoded ability and knowledge operate is composed of the examples taken from *Klára's* world. The following

contains a summary of the most important findings and the theoretical conclusions of the dissertation:

1. *The alternative of “modernization”*

One of the characteristic manifestations of the interactions between modernization processes and peasant culture, or between macro-social changes and local existence, is the acquisition of modern technical equipment or appliances. Following this occurs the obviously well-known phenomenon that peasant societies in the process of modernization either use these very seldom or not at all, or they may use them for something entirely different from their original function. This practice focuses our attention to the clash of traditional values and the values conveyed by the modern set of articles, at the analysis of which light is shed on how the differences between value systems are smoothed out (for example, by symbolic acts like the construction of a bathroom) or new approaches are fitted into everyday life.

The acquisition of previously unfamiliar goods prompted by a community demand and the general application of new customs and patterns of behavior in everyday practice are also connected to the “*prudery*” guiding the individual acts. The social control generated in the local *Lujzikalagor* quotidian communication situations does not only sanction with prohibitions or advice the people who behave in a way that would not conform to the ordinary patterns or would go against the norms but would also discipline the lack of adaptation to the changing conditions or the lack of acceptance of following the use of articles admitted and applied within the community. Social control in this case is quite complex: on the one hand, it validates and operates conformism and traditions, while on the other hand, it contributes to the general spreading of changes, for example to that of technical innovations and the more recent factors of the way of thinking.

2. *The modern structure of ordinary morality* – A two-dimensional moral value scale system

The experience from field-work and the analysis of *Klára*’s life story demonstrate that the traditional and post-socialist sets of values that conflict each other at several points are organized into a unity within a complex system. It is in the interest of harmonizing the differences in the points of view of moral sets of values that the *two-dimensional moral value scale system* starts to operate.

The *two-dimensional moral value scale system* is the practical model of solving the confrontation between the modern and conventional values, which differentiates not only between the norms applied in practice at the level of action and those concerning ethics in an abstract fashion but also expands the knowledge of “what” and “how to do it” with the

information of “where” the given moral example can be followed in a way approved and accepted by the community of *Lujzikalagor*. This sort of relationship differentiates between the norms and practice within the expanded socio-cultural horizon from a geographical aspect. One example for this is the issue of cohabitation before marriage which *Klára* at present accepts as a theoretically correct and exemplary form of meeting other people in order to find out about the other partner’s personality. But it is acceptable for her only abroad. Which means that we can in fact witness a special sort of situation in which what is accepted and even approved in speech acts as a pattern of behavior, like for example, cohabitation, may not be put into practice just anywhere. To the discrepancies between the norms and the social practice in this model, the current or actual local physical space (*Lujzikalagor* and the Romanian city, or the foreign metropolis) is added as a factor that determines behavior.

3. *Moldavia and “presence-existence” in the multiple cultural-linguistic tie*

The Moldavian *Csángó* socio-cultural reality is a social space that generates *multiple cultural and linguistic ties*. It requires a constant ability to find one’s way between two cultural systems of relationships in the same physical environment, i.e., between the differences of the *Csángó* and the Romanian cultures; expecting any individual to participate and come up to the challenges posed by the *Csángó* and Romanian cultural systems. The condition for successful orientation in the social sphere is the correct use of the socio-cultural sets of knowledge of both worlds and the creative, “optional” and situation-dependent application of the cultural information sets.

Today the social reality of *Lujzikalagor* is decisively characterized by the in-betweenness of cultures, the uniquely coloured the network of *Csángó*-Romanian cultural peculiarities. In the socio-cultural existence of these people, there are organically parallel but functionally differing communal traditions side by side, operating within identical geographical frameworks. In the micro-environment (in the village and also in the city, *Bákó* – Bacău, that is organically related to the local world), the transit between the *Csángó* and Romanian cultures is a routine and natural possibility. Thus, the simultaneous and continuous presence in both cultural media, i.e., the doubled presence in two differing cultural traditions, is a given possibility.

The multiple linguistic and cultural ties generated in Moldavian *Csángó* existence have facilitated the solution of symbolic borderline situations connected to the issue of modernization in *Klára*’s life on a number of different occasions. This socio-cultural setting or milieu did indeed support the activation of affirmative peasant adaptivity to a great extent. For example, the tolerance encoded in the multiple ties and the lack of absolute exclusivity

made it possible for the woman to fit the Orthodox practice of healing into everyday social reality as a natural part of her religious worldview. It was much more a case of the process of identification than the practice of creating boundaries that could be observed when *Klára* took a common platform with the person and the activity of an Orthodox priest serving in *Erdély* due to the reasons of “common faith” and the universality of Christian religious principles.

4. “*Compound non-synchronism*” – a structural feature of Moldavian *Csángó* existence

People in the Moldavian *Csángó* micro-world had to face a number of new cultural, social, and economic influences in the time period following the change of the political regime. However, modernization did not pose a singular challenge for the entire complex peasant socio-cultural set of knowledge at once but rather shaped, and continues to shape to this day, Moldavian social reality gradually, through a series of interactions. The conflicts generated by intensive and quick changes dissolved in various parts of the local culture differently, at varying degrees of intensity. The discrepancies concerning the time and the way of adaptation to these make it possible for us to observe the process of coordinating the individual practices that are characteristic of specific time periods of social history.

On the basis of the experience gathered during field work, it may be stated that at the present time, in Moldavian *Csángó* villages, a special case of “non-synchronism” can be observed, which we might term combined or “compound non-synchronism”. The notion of “compound non-synchronism” covers socio-cultural systems that operate simultaneously side by side, the same way as the term “non-synchronism” (known in ethnography by Bausinger) does. The differing social and historical horizons are located in the socio-cultural space of non-synchronism intertwined with each other and forming a peculiar unity. The population of *Lujzikalagor* realized this unity within their experiential horizon concerning their own existence consciously and under pressure at the same time by coordinating the various norms and the occasionally contradictory experiences.

The attribute “compound” is supposed to call attention to the fact that Moldavian *Csángó* existence has a multiple structure, in which sometimes there might be multiple differences in level between parallel socio-cultural arenas within the system of the chain of socio-historical places that we interpret as development. Structural complexity then highlights the simultaneous piling of socio-cultural systems identified with different socio-historical time-periods, as well as the combination of elements of varying diachronic depths. The arenas or stages of Moldavian quotidian existence may be associated with/to a variety of forms of differing historical dimensions and experiential horizons: 1. traditional ~ “village, local”; 2.

socialist modernization ~ “Romanian urban due to socialist urbanization”; 3. post-socialist ~ “Romanian urban following the change of political regime”; and/or 4. late modern, or post-modern ~ “western European metropolitan” sets of values (or socio-cultural layers representing specific cultural practices) transmitted by one’s children working abroad.

The notion of “compound non-synchronism” identified as a structural peculiarity of Moldavian socio-cultural existence illustrates the multi-layered structural stratification characteristic of Moldavian *Csángó* culture today, while it expresses the simultaneous presence of various, historically different, experiential horizons at work in everyday existence in *Lujzikalagor* arranged in a complex system. This phenomenon, the simultaneous conglomeration of cultural systems, historical time dimensions, and experiential spaces fundamentally determine the systems of relationships between individuals, the communal responses to modern challenges, as well as the relatively flexible and affirmative but also selective adaptive approaches.

IV. Publications of the author related to the topic of the dissertation

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2009b Testek – tisztaság – modernitás. Kulturális és társadalmi összefüggések Moldvában a „báje” kapcsán, in: Juhász Katalin (szerk.): *Tiszta sorok. Tanulmányok a tisztaságról és a tisztálkodásról*. L'Harmattan – MTA Néprajzi Kutatóintézete, Budapest, 159-171.

2009c „*Felkelnének az öregek, lássák meg, milyen jó élni most...*” Modernitás és migráció összefüggései Moldvában, in: Diószegi László (szerk.): *Moldvai csángók és a változó világ*, Teleki László Alapítvány, Nyugat-magyarországi Egyetem Savaria Egyetemi Központ, Budapest-Szombathely, 123-136.

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V. Further publications of the author of the dissertation

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2004a Nelimarkka-Museo. Possibilities and Function of a Provincial Museum in the Exchange of Cultural Products, in: Miklós Cseri – Zoltán Fejős – Zsuzsa Szarvas (eds): *Touristic Construction and consumption of culture(s)*, Budapest-Szentendre, 199-207.

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