

Csango-hungarians for UNESCO's "Cultural World Heritage"!

a HUNSOR publication

Urbanization, forced assimilation and intolerance are depriving mankind of cultural diversity. Language is the depository of this diversity. Intolerant majority cultures use language as the weapon for ethnic cleansing

UNESCO, by declaring threatened cultures as World Heritage Culture, tries to stem this tide. They have been successful in various parts of the world. The Csangos, whose culture is threatened with extinction by an intolerant society in the midst of which they live, deserves the protection of the UNESCO imprimatur. But who are the Csangos and what makes them so unique?

Nestled amongst the eastern Carpathian Mountains and valleys live the Csango people. At seven hundred to a thousand meters above sea level, their tiny villages house a people whose culture and language are truly unique and multifaceted. There are several competing theories regarding their history but some ethnographers feel that they are descendants of the Hungarian Szeklers. The word "Csango" originates from an old meaning of a Hungarian word for wanderer. Having left Transylvania in the 1600s to seek their fortunes elsewhere, the Csangos settled in present day Moldova in an area that has served for hundreds of years as a trade route between Moldova and Transylvania.

Geographical isolation has been instrumental in preserving the Csango cultural identity. Although they speak an archaic Hungarian and are of Hungarian ethnicity, their dialect, lifestyle and customs are indigenous to the Csango people. Customs unique to the Csango people include the act of seeking a potential mate. Unlike in Hungarian and Szekler customs, the Csango young man goes directly to the home of the girl who invites him and the decision to go steady and eventually marry rests solely with the girl. Furthermore, if a young man favors a particular girl, he sends her coded messages in the form of folksongs, dances or ballads, and once again, it is up to the girl to decide the young man's fate. If she accepts his advances, she and her young man spend the entire night together in her room. Shortly thereafter, it is customary and practically mandatory that they the couple wed. In the unlikely event that they do not, they fall victim to the derision and contempt of the villagers.

The Csangos live off the land and furnish their homes with hand made items such as wooden tables, chairs and hope chests. Experts at weaving, the Csango women sew all the clothes, linens and blankets for their families. Up until the mid 1950s, the Csangos wore their traditional folk costumes every day. Even today, remnants of the folk costumes are still worn by men and women alike. The men's outfits consist of black wool tight pants, linen shirts adorned by a wide colorful woven belt, black hat and black high boots. Women and girls wear heavy linen blouses with embroidered shoulders, black skirts, aprons, black shoes or boots and kerchiefs on their heads. In the winter they wear embroidered leather jackets with lamb's wool lining.

Due to the dense forests and mountains, the Csangos make their living through animal husbandry, woodworking, pottery, weaving, fishing and some agricultural work. After a hard day of intense physical labor, the Csangos turn to folk dancing and singing as an outlet. Starting at an early age, the Csangos dance on a regular basis and oftentimes through the early morning hours. In fact, in the Fall, girls and boys gather to dance on a weekly basis, announcing the time and meeting place by yelling across the wide and deep valleys, their

voices echoing for miles. The dances are accompanied by a fiddler and a unique percussion-stringed instrument called the "utogardon." Influenced by two widely different European dance styles, those of the Central European Carpathian Basin and the Southern Balkans, the choreography is complicated and unpredictable. Most of the dance styles, however, find their origins in the Carpathian Basin and Transylvania. Due to the geographical location and isolation, there are 35 different types of dances that have been preserved in their original and archaic style, unparalleled and unique to the Csangos alone.

The Csango ballads collected by the famous Hungarian ethnographer, Zoltan Kallos, who lived with the Csangos from 1958-1966, reveal a beautiful and poetic style of Hungarian which is rarely spoken today, even in Hungary and Transylvania. The ballads preserve the unique dialect and style of Hungarian that was never effected/influenced by the modernization of the Hungarian language by Ferenc Kazinczy in the 1700's. The lyrics, rhythm, and style belong to one of the most ancient and archaic forms of Hungarian folk poetry. The topics include, lost loves, army life, grief, alienation and banishment. In addition to the ballads, each Csango composes his/her own personal ballad, called a "keserves", which tells of personal hardships, pain and triumphs. Unfortunately, this type of singing is facing rapid extinction due to Rumanian language assimilation policies, modernization and a decline in the Hungarian speaking Csango population.

In addition to their love of dancing and singing, the Csangos are devout Roman Catholics, even though they are surrounded by Orthodox Christians. It is not unusual for them to walk three to four hours to church services on Sunday. Since 1562 at Whitsuntide they make a pilgrimage to the village of Csiksomlyo and enact the "Passion of Csiksomlyo" during which time they pray non stop from Friday through Sunday to the Virgin Mary. This custom is considered to be one of the most important and holy holidays in the Csango person's life. In sharp contrast to their devotion to Catholicism, the Csango culture possesses a rich collection of legends involving witches, ghosts, crazed young women, snakes, dragons, devils, and goblins. It is no wonder that the people carve secret signs and symbols on the thresholds of their huts to ward off the evil spirits. The Csangos believe that the spirit of the deceased who never received his funeral rites roams the earth, moaning and groaning in the night. The people are warned never to answer the frightening noise, otherwise their souls will replace those of the tortured spirit's. The only way the restless ghost can find a successor is if he successfully scares a living person, to death.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the Csango people represent the cradle of the Hungarian culture, for it is they who have preserved the customs and traditions that have slowly transformed or disappeared from their closest Hungarian brothers and neighbors, the Szeklers of Transylvania. Their houses, furniture, knowledge of horticulture and agriculture, Middle Ages Catholicism, superstitions, folk customs and costumes, ballads, dances and folk songs, are not only esthetically pleasing, but also provide an opportunity to learn about the history and personality of this most vibrant and fascinating people.

The Romanian constitution guarantees to all citizens education at all levels in their mother tongue. The facts on the ground are different. In Moldova local authorities prevent Csangos from passing on the language of their culture. Instruction of the Csango language is not permitted in schools not even as a foreign language. An American Foundation offered to hire a language teacher to give instruction to those who are interested after school was prevented from doing so by the local authorities. The Csangos need outside help. Their culture is in grave danger. UNESCO designation as World Heritage Culture could be the first step toward its preservation.

All suggestions to be posted on:
S. Exc. M. Árpád Fasang UNESCO Ambassadeur
tel.: 33-1-4568-3532
fax: 33-1-4568-3533
email: dl.hongrie@unesco.org