

The csángó (chango) minority culture in Moldavia (Romania)

by András Barta
HUNSOR publication

The Csángós are one of the best examples of the beneficial effects of cultural diversity. This ethnic group has for centuries been living isolated from other areas, where Hungarian is spoken, in an area with a Romanian majority.

This resulted in the development of an ethnic isle with an individual, most specific culture, interacting with elements of Romanian culture. This is best illustrated with folk songs and ballads, which are living and developing even today. They show Hungarian as well as Romanian elements. In spite of the idea, that many Romanian scholars admit the Csángós' Hungarian origin: the official Romanian policy still denies the fact. As a consequence of the assimilation policy: 75 % of the Changoes has lost its Hungarian origin and language, but 25% of them still uses (Hungarian) mother tongue beside Romanian.

Social Background

The Csángó Hungarians live – almost exclusively – in villages. Only 1 % of them are intellectuals. 10 % of them are illiterate and 40% are half illiterate. About 10% of the young people graduate from high school and every 10th of them continues their studies at the different departments of universities/colleges.

Hungarian Csángós generally live on a low level of civilisation and they have to face many social problems too, because more than 60 % of the active men are unemployed. There are 3-6 children in an average chango family. The women generally work in and around the house in a patriarchal system. The families live mostly on farming but the soil is poor and life is a struggle for surviving, which results in a significant migration rate among the Csángós – usually to a Romanian majority area (promoting assimilation of the Csángó Hungarians to the Romanian majority.)

The Language of the Csángós

The ethnic group has been isolated from the Hungarian cultural development. While the Hungarian language went through a renewal in the 18th-19th centuries, this did not affect the language of the Csángós. Their oldest sub-dialect, northern Csángó, preserves numerous elements of the Hungarian language of the late Middle Ages. It also contains new elements (including lexical elements of the Indo-European Romanian language), specific to this language area. (Similarly, there are many Hungarian loanwords in the Romanian dialect of Moldavia.)

In Moldavia, the language of the school and the church is exclusively Romanian. Correspondingly, almost all Csángós are illiterate as regards the writing of their mother tongue. The Hungarian language survived for centuries as the language of the family and the village community. We witness now the speedy emasculation and extinction of the Csángó dialect. The authority of the Romanian language, learned in school, is much higher among young people, than that of the impoverished Hungarian, used in the family.

Folklore and Popular Ornamental Art

The Csángó ballads, folk tales, religious songs, funeral rites etc. are surviving items of

the medieval Hungarian culture, which in Hungary got overprinted by an intentional modernisation of the language and customs in the 18-19th centuries. The material culture of the Csángós: architecture, costumes, husbandry etc. also has preserved medieval features. All these are very valuable not only for the Hungarian culture in particular, but also for the European folklore in general.

A particularly fascinating and well-studied element of the Csángó culture is the popular music, in particular the folk songs. Since 1929 a high number and a very great variety of songs have been collected. In comparison with other areas of the region populated by Hungarian-speaking people, in Chango land the different sorts of old-style songs are more numerous both in absolute numbers and proportionally, while the new-style songs became widespread only during the past few decades. Most of the ballads date back to the Middle Ages, while the religious songs mainly to the 16th-17th centuries. Also the manner of presentation is archaic, full of ornamentation, testifying to the vivacity of tradition. With regard to their position (surrounded by ethnic Romanians) considerable Romanian influence has been recognized in their instrumental music and in their dances: a remarkable case of cultural interaction.

Mother Tongue Education

Though the Csángós are documented to have inhabited Moldova for seven centuries, they have never had the opportunity to learn their Hungarian mother tongue in school, except for a short period (1946-58). After 1989 they started to study Hungarian language in informal ways. Csángó parents teach their and other children at home, since the local scholar authorities do not allow to teach the Hungarian language in schools.

In spite of their repeated written requests submitted from 1996 on, and in spite of Article 32 of the new Romanian Constitution, the 36/1997 modification of the Law of Education no. 84/1995 and the 3113/31-01-2000 Ministerial Decree, they still have not obtained any kind of mother-tongue education in the primary schools of their own villages. Instead of implementing the instructions received from the Ministry of Education in Bucharest, the local authorities keep on exerting psychical pressure (intimidation) on the parents to withdraw their formally registered requests to obtain Hungarian-language teaching for their children.

Mother Tongue Divine Services

The independent Romanian State, established in the second half of the 19th century, granted them an independent Roman Catholic Bishopric in the town of Jászvásár / Iasi. Despite the Changoes demands, all divine services being held obligatorily in the Romanian language. The Chango students of the Iasi Roman Catholic theological seminar have been educated to become enemies of their mother tongue and to use exclusively the Romanian language while communicating with the Changoes. Priests coming from the Southern Chango areas (where Hungarian is still used in the families) are transferred to the North, where Hungarian is not used any more. The linguistic and cultural assimilation is promoted decisively by the Church as well.

After the Political Changes

The political changes after 1989 brought some improvement in the civil society. The Changoes have their own monthly journal (Moldvai Magyarorság, "Hungarians of Moldavia"), a Chango civil society has been established in Bacau, (Association of Chango Hungarians in Moldavia), young Changoes have their own organization (Via Spei) and several private foundations ("Szeret-Klészse" Foundation) serve their educational and cultural aims. Young Changoes also have the possibility to get fellowships for higher

studies in Hungarian language, in the Transylvanian region of Romania, or in Hungary.

by András Barta, Bacau

Source: *Financial Times.com*

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