

Sándor Varga. 2023. *Változások egy mezőségi falu tradicionális tánckultúrájában* [Transformations in the Traditional Dance Culture of a Village in the Mezőség Region]. Budapest, Cluj-Napoca: Hagyományok Háza and Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság. 294 pages.

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If a single term were to be highlighted from Sándor Varga's 2023 publication, it would be "transformation." This is not only because the term appears in both the book's title and in the titles of seven chapters, but also because it highlights a process that has increasingly characterised the research of Hungarian folk dance culture over the past one and a half decades.

Sándor Varga's book¹ is a revised version of his doctoral dissertation defended in 2012, drawing on more than 30 years of research. The book was published by the Hungarian Heritage House in Budapest, founded in 2001, and the Kriza János Ethnographic Society in Cluj-Napoca. This dual affiliation reflects the two sides of the author's professional life: fieldwork was conducted in the village of Vișea (in Hungarian: *Visa*), located 40 kilometres northwest of Cluj, in Cluj County, Romania, while the processing of the data and Varga's professional affiliation are connected to Hungary (Szeged and Budapest).

The language of the book is characterised by a blend of scholarly precision and readability, with personal anecdotes about field experiences often appearing in the footnotes. However, these recollections are by no means secondary—they weave a rich fabric of the village's traditions, bringing community members to life, and showing that fieldwork is far more than a mere systematic collection of data and presentation of dry information. These personal moments also testify to the researcher's gradual immersion in the field:

In another instance, when a local man in Țentea learned that we were foreigners, he insisted on treating us. We entered the tavern, where it turned out that no goods had been brought in for weeks—the last beer had just been consumed by another local man. After a brief discussion, he offered us the remaining half-bottle of drink, which we then shared in great camaraderie. This was the most delicious beer I have ever had. (p. 9, translation by the author)

In addition to the personal perspectives of the fieldwork, the amount of collected and processed data is impressive. Over the course of 30 years of research, Varga participated in 13 weddings, ten balls, six sheep-measuring events,² and several house parties and discos. He organised more than sixty dance recordings and was involved in recording nearly 100 hours of analog and digital video footage, featuring about 150 individuals and nearly all the village's dancers. He conducted interviews with more than 100 informants from Vișea—including Hungarian, Romanian, and Roma individuals—recording nearly 500 dance-related narratives.³ During the fieldwork, more than 10,000 photographs were taken and over 500 archival photographs were

digitised. The collected materials indicate numerous research directions: Varga has examined dance customs, dance etiquette, dance teaching, dance proxemics, shouted dance calls,⁴ and the use of dance-related vocabulary. He has done so using the tools of ethnochoreology, which combines a dance-folkloristic approach (describing dance materials, dance organisation, and dance events) with a dance-anthropological one (focusing on the dancer and the community). Through this dual approach, Varga introduced perspectives not previously applied in Hungarian folk dance research—an achievement highlighted by the committee of his habilitation presentation in 2023. Varga used multiple data collection methods. During his long-term fieldwork, he administered questionnaires, conducted participant observation (supplemented by the embodiment method, drawing on his practical dance knowledge), carried out semi-structured and narrative interviews, and applied dance filming, photography, and feedback interview techniques. Throughout his time in the community, he actively participated in the villagers' daily life and festivities.

Transformation is not only a central theme of the research, but it also characterises the researcher's perspective, underscoring the necessity of the long-term fieldwork conducted by Varga. One of the key merits of his work is that, in contrast to approaches that treat Hungarian folk dance as frozen moments in time, Varga takes a critical stance, interpreting the data within a broader context. He considers macro-, meso-, and micro-environmental factors into account, and embeds them within social, cultural, economic, and political frameworks, thereby approaching the subject holistically. For this reason, he begins his book with a thorough historical overview, incorporating aspects of microhistory and historical anthropology, as he regards these factors as having significantly influenced the dance culture of the *Mezőség* region (Transylvanian Plain)—influences that are still visible today. Varga intentionally does not confine his focus to “archaic” phenomena. He also examines 20th-century ballroom dances, the impact of the disco culture of the 1970s, and the revival movements linked to the staging of traditional dances. He does not overlook the effects of globalisation, the dynamics of economic crises and booms, labor migration, or the arrival of dance trends from Western Europe—all of which have shaped local traditional (dance) culture.

The 294-page book is divided into four major thematic sections. The opening chapters present the scientific approaches that frame the study and trace the historical and ecological changes that have shaped the local society. Varga then presents data on dancing, dances, the spatial organisation of traditional dance culture in the *Mezőség* region, the spatial practices of the dances in *Vișea*, and the changes in the dance repertoire over time. He then analyses the collected material in relation to the continuously changing context and explores the transformation of *Vișea*'s dance culture in the 20th century. The book is complemented by a photo appendix consisting of colourful images which, although only a small fragment of the researcher's collection, offer a glimpse into the everyday life, festivities, dance events, and social relationships in *Vișea*.

The latter aspect is particularly important, as the author has not only shared his research findings within the academic community but has also engaged with the community he studied, by applying the method of collaborative ethnography. This approach reflects the researcher's attitude, which Varga described as follows:

Neither during the fieldwork nor in the analysis did I deny my emotional and aesthetic bias toward the people of *Vișea* and their traditional dances. I never sought to maintain the illusion of objectivity with a so-called “value-free” researcher attitude. [...] Understanding *Vișea*'s dance culture through its own concepts was only possible by learning the local value system, and this only worked when, through dancing together or discussing dance, we “found each other with the informants.” (p. 30, translation by the author)

The quality relationships that developed over the years between the author and the group under study provided him the opportunity to continue the process of mutual reflection not only in the field but also during the process of writing. This illustrates the diversity and depth of the researcher's role, as well as the responsibility that goes beyond standard professional ethics. Alongside the scholarly demand for analysis, the researcher's empathetic relationship with the subjects of his research is also evident—a quality through which Varga firmly establishes himself as a 21st-century scholar. He demonstrates that change is not only recognised in the subject of study but also in the scientific paradigms themselves, and he positions his work accordingly.

Although the author has spent three decades researching the dance culture of the Mezőség region, he does not consider his work concluded. Returning to the field—either in person or through existing recordings—he plans to refine his observations on the use of space, exploring how individual dancers create dance in different proxemic situations, how dancers adapt to one another within the community, and how layers of social and cultural processes shape these practices. He also aims to describe the characteristics of the cultural relationships across different social groups. We eagerly await his further findings and strongly recommend reading his book.

NOTES

1. The book is written in Hungarian, with summaries in English and Romanian.
2. Prior to grazing, villagers measure for each owner their sheep milk-yield to decide how many times an owner can milk the sheep while they are grazed in the common herd during the summer season. This custom was of extraordinary economic significance in the communal life. The milk measuring is traditionally followed by a celebration featuring folk dance.
3. Varga (2023, 20-21).
4. The vocal prompts or exclamations dancers make during traditional dance occasions and during staged dance performances. These vocal prompts are often rhythmic and improvised.

