ELDERLY WOMEN IN A HUNGARIAN VILLAGE: CHILDLESSNESS, GENERATIVITY, AND SOCIAL CONTROL

ABSTRACT. This study considers the meaning of biological and cultural continuity, and the changing roles of older women in general and childless elderly women in particular in a Hungarian rural community, Cserepfalu. Data gathered from participant observation, life histories, and formal and informal interviews are supplemented with statistical, archival, secondary, and other documented material. After a glance at how childlessness is conceptualized in Cserepfalu, an overview of the social history, economy, demography, and ideology of the village is given. Then women's roles in the domestic economy, courting customs, and reproductive strategies are examined from a diachronic perspective. Finally it is suggested that, increasingly during the past four decades of radical, community-threatening social change, older women, including the childless, assumed the generative role of Kulturträger (upholder, perpetuator of culture). They endeavor to guard selected, emically meaningful elements from the past, labor to govern the present, and thus attempt to guide the young thereby ensuring the future of their community.

Key Words: adaptation to social change, women, childlessness, generativity, Hungary, East-central Europe, peasants; rural community, Kulturträger role of older women, ethnography.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Village Conceptions About Marriage and Reproduction

Between August of 1982 and August of 1983 I lived with a native family while doing ethnographic fieldwork in the Hungarian village of Cserepfalu. In the Summer of 1983, my two daughters and son flew from the United States to Europe and were planning to visit me. The villagers were looking forward to this event with almost as much anticipation as I. It became clear from the comments and questions of older village women that they were not simply interested in the “American youngsters,” but were also hoping to get acceptable answers to some of their most frequently asked, and evidently most puzzling questions. I had been asked repeatedly: Why are my children still unmarried? What is wrong with my son, who is not even engaged to be married at the age of twenty-two? And, particularly, what was the matter with my daughters? At the ages of twenty-four and twenty-one, they were considered to be “beyond flowering,” already in the wilting phase. Ideally, village women are not only married by that age, but are also mothers of young children. My standard reply to these inquiries was that my children are fine and healthy, but, like many young Americans, they are still going to school, and will marry, most
likely, and become parents in their late twenties or early thirties. However, it soon became evident from the women's comments, facial, body and hand expressions, that my explanations were simply not satisfactory.

My children were under explicit, careful, and nearly constant scrutiny from the moment they got off the bus in the center of Cserepfalu, until they left a couple of weeks later. During the first day they were merely eyed from a distance. Thereafter, they were approached and surrounded, examined and questioned. As the villagers, particularly older village women, circled around my squirming, red-faced, grinning offspring, they asked me to translate questions about their daily lives in America, likes and dislikes, dating habits, and marriage plans. Older women kin and neighbors of “my village family” came calling daily.²

After my children departed, the old women declared that, since — other than being too tall — they did not notice anything amiss with my offspring, there must be something really wrong with me: Why have I not established their future? Why have I not married them off properly, in time, before they “ceased flowering”? Thereafter I was questioned about the reputation, and the exact financial status of my family in America.

In complex, urban, industrial societies these queries may be regarded as tactless meddlings in family matters, private lives, and individual choices. However, in Cserepfalu, a small, close-knit, and, in some sense, a still traditional rural community, such inquiries and judgments are a perfectly ordinary part of daily life and discourse. They function not merely as instruments of communication, but as significant means of social control particularly in the most personally meaningful areas of life, such as marriage and reproduction. To render certain early marriage and propagation among offspring is not merely a familial, or individual matter in Cserepfalu, but a most decisive social, public, and community concern. Regardless of age, ability, or accomplishments, men and women who have never been married are addressed and treated as immature and incomplete individuals.

The villagers' reaction to my children openly displays two important sociocultural concerns: that people must marry and reproduce. Marriage is the very emblem of maturity in Cserepfalu and conveys the status of adulthood. Marriage forms the social and economic linchpin between the family groups of the bride and groom. Most importantly, marriage is the only legitimate social institutional basis for the biological perpetuation of the family, and, by extension, for the survival of the community.

In local perception, however, marriage alone does not transform a bride into a wife nor does it make a couple into a family. These significant status transformations can only occur through the birth of a child. While in the case of a healthy adult, being unmarried is negatively sanctioned, being married, apparently healthy, and childless is anathematized by village society. Older women in particular are the most articulate and the most explicit about this. They not only gossip surreptitiously about childless-