Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, 4, 2 (2012) 322-340

Proxemics of Fate-Changing Rituals

Spaces and Fates in Csíkszentdomokos

Lajos BALÁZS

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania
Department of Humanities
balazslajos@sapientia.siculorum.ro

Abstract. The rites of passage are actually organized around biological events. But since these rites – birth, marriage and death – are fate-defining turns in a person's life and that of a human community, they are events that generate culture. The individual passes from an earlier stage into another biological, social, spiritual, behavioural, etc. state. These passages also have countless spatial elements, which spiritualise during the rituals and they become regularising and conscience-bearing factors, symbols of expressive culture.

Keywords: the threshold of a house and that of a church, courtyard, street, crosses by the road

1. Introduction

Space elaborated in folk culture as a physical and a conceptual entity cannot be compared to any other culture's conceptual system. Within the spiritual world of folk culture spaces do not have a measurement unit, they cannot be expressed through anything: they do not have length, width or surface.[1] Their majority has a physical, pragmatic reality, but within a given situation and time, given actors will move within these spaces, thus physical spaces become abstract, spiritual ones, they are filled with magic powers. They become fate-changing spaces, even though

[1] The same complexity can be witnessed when defining folk time-categories.

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

they were not elaborated with this specific objective in mind, but with the aim to respond to everyday needs. This constitutes the proxemics of folk culture: the relationship of man and space, of space and man, which is never random or desultory. We may even talk about their specific dialectics. These spaces are more like witnesses to the fact that something has happened to someone in that space where it was meant to, and from that point on this person's fate has changed: socially or biologically or spiritually. They cannot be unequivocally called symbols or symbolic entities, as it happens in the case of the arts. Or can they be identified as metaphors leaning towards allegory? Are they magic spaces or personified systems of spiritual registers, social responsibilities, permissions, prohibitions, interactions, and taboos?

What I am certain about is that within my research, the spiritual sphere of fate-changes – as a directing principle – has brought to the foreground the endless series of **space-situations**.

What kind of spaces do I have in mind?

The correlation of a particular fate-change and space can be identified in the fratricidal struggle of Cain and Abel. (I dare mention a Biblical example due to the fact that almost in its entirety the Old Testament is the synthesis of those times' folklore.[2]) The Biblical story is more complex than it might seem. In my opinion, we have to notice in it not merely the fact of fratricide, but also the fight between two ancient professions – raising animals and tillage; the divine, the highest power's preference for one of them (raising animals, i.e. a former state) against the other (tillage, i.e. a new state). We witness here the clash between the nomadic versus the settling usage of space, two alternatives that have defined the global fate of mankind (civilization alternatives). Here, from the perspective of my research, I would like to focus on the belief of the contamination of space by innocent blood. "Then He said, What have you done? (…) So now you are cursed, alienated, from the ground that opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood you have shed. (…) If you work the ground, it will never again give you its yield. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth" (Genesis 4.10.) Frazer quotes beliefs from Upper-Senegal according to which, on the one hand, the insulted land must be tamed with sacrifice, it must be placated; on the other hand, the murderer must be banished for three years (ibid. 41). The question arises: which one is the more serious offence: fratricide or the social chain reaction of the blood for blood folk law principle that might potentially be started and end up in mass famine as the land infected with blood will not yield. (For, as it is known, the Earth has a soul!) Divine judgment seems to consider fratricide as the more serious offence. But as God is really knowledgeable about folk culture, about its spirituality (it is about an extremely important and general "state-political" issue), He is rational, "He placed a mark

[2] Proven by Sir James George Frazer's *Folklore in the Old Testament*.

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

upon Cain so that whoever found him would not kill him," and decides to ban him to an unknown place. Consequently, the people of the area are saved from famine (see Genesis 4.).

Csíkszentdomokos,[3] my research area, which is one of the largest village communities of Ciuc region, also offers a similar situation. On the 3rd of November 1599 in Pásztorbükke (a side of this village), two local men – András Nagy Kristály and Balázs Ördög – killed the fleeing Endre Báthory, Cardinal and Prince of Transylvania. The village expiated with a two-hundred-year fasting, a Papal curse was placed upon it (Cain was cursed by God!). According to communal memory, the land around Szentdomokos and Felcsík (the northern part of Ciuc Basin) yielded nothing but "weed" for seven years. Famine had ruled until an expiatory pilgrimage was initiated. This has been sustained on the location of the murder, with the participation of the entire population of Felcsík. This proves how a local crime has become a collective crime (to use a nowadays fashionable expression), whose spiritual burden and shadow must have originated from some kind of feeling of guilt of mythic origin. According to folk myth, in order to terminate the divine punishment striking the entire region, one night the criminals – after having received their reward from the Romanian Prince Mihai – vanished from the village under mysterious circumstances (my own sources), just like the Biblical Cain disappeared from the region of the blood-infected space.

Following these two examples of the spiritualised space archetype – one ancient and another quite recent one – I wish to focus on the latter. We can list several spaces from Csíkszentdomokos and from elsewhere that have a function in human fate-changes:

- First, I would like to mention the waters of the Jordan that oddly enough, lead us again into Biblical space. My research shows that the souls of people from Csíkszentdomokos cross the Jordan when leaving the earthly shore for the shores of the otherworldly spiritual space. To make the dead able to guard off and defeat the water stream, even today a candle-stick is put into their coffin or grave.
- I also mention the otherworld's concept of space where earthly spaces and human behaviour are recognisable both geographically and socially.
- I may mention the three-way junctions, crossroads, locations of predictions and of benefic or malefic magic practices.
- Or we can speak of those mysterious spaces functioning in the world of Orthodox black magic (Moldova), that people from all over Szeklerland – regardless of their level of education – would visit. (I am not familiar with its spatial depth in Transylvania).

[3] In Romanian Sândominic (Harghita county, Romania).

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)



Photo by the author

- Or we can mention the "sacred land" and "sacred roads" of the cemetery and its separate lot assigned for those who committed suicide.
- We may talk about the threshold as the universal motif of the border of spiritual space.
- Or the space in the house below the icon where the newly-weds are seated.
- Or that lot of grass that is not cut because a certain lad has first had the desired girl there, that is where he "wiped the dew off her".
- That small natural hemp that the fiancée receives from her parents and where – in harvest time – she goes with her fiancé for a so-called "first lovers' meeting".
- The banned spaces of fairytales, banned parts of the forests guarded by giants and witches (space-cameras of mythic times), banned rooms in castles, river and lake beds the borders, thresholds of which – if crossed by the wanderer or fisherman and hunter – will cause him to either face great dangers or die.
- The mystical spaces of church- or chapel-buildings, their magic selection,[4] the cult of cultic spaces that have been pilgrimage sites since the Middle Ages.
- Symbolic gardens, estates, where the golden apple grows but every night the crops are tithed by menacing beings, etc. These spaces function as the school of character, loyalty and property-protection.
- The dark forest where nine lads were transformed into stags. This is the place from where – due to their wanderings – it is impossible to return to conquered and achieved civilization. Bartók's *Cantata Profana* warns

[4] See the Romanian ballad The Monastery of Argyas.

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

humankind of this type of regression, of this space and of falling back into it – in my interpretation.

- I could talk about the delimited sacred spaces of the church that can never be joined into one, within which one of the lovers "was laid to rest in front of the altar/The other laid behind the altar" (*Vadrózsák* 1975: 37).
- Or about the space beyond the village border where the third son always goes to fulfill tasks and missions beyond his family's needs, skills, everyday necessities, and from where he later returns with his acquired wealth, knowledge, experience, and last but not least, his biological "bank" renewing his community's genome.

This rapid inventory does not at all intend to be a demonstration of power. It may be linked to all the fate-changing events: it is obvious that every change in space invokes personal or communal fate-change, or vice versa: wanting a change in fate will mean wanting a new space as well. My main intention is to illustrate the relation between space and personal change of fate, but also how specifically this develops in the culture modelled by a certain social environment itself, and not by institutions. The examples above as well as the analysis to follow are meant to prove that with regards to this issue we may speak about a unified perspective, cultural plurality and continuity. To me these examples provide a coherent background for the understanding and analysis of physical and mental spaces, proxemical observations and interpretations arising within the system of customs related to birth, marriage, and death. It might be clear from the above that in any folk culture, in folklore the subjective image of a space is dominant, and that this is similar to the symbols of folk culture: they serve interests. Therefore, they are dynamic and modifiable. They are primarily not physical entities but forms of consciousness or spiritual states.

2. Ritual spaces, ritual borders

Bernea argues that spaces are linked to life, but they also carry meanings that belong to the realm of the spiritual (1985: 104). Proxemical observation studies the repetitious, purposeful, functional sign- and symbolic code-system of space usage (see Keményfi 2002: 139). I believe that the subjective image of spaces, space-elements of fate-changing rituals that I wish to conceptualise here includes both these approaches.

In principle it may already be stated that the physical/mental/spiritual space of action is important not merely in the case of religious, social or secular events, where and from where certain communities communicate, but also in the case of fate-changing rituals (see the initiation of the child by the roadside cross, home

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

bunning,[5] christening at home, circling around the dying person with a candle in hand, etc. The latter are distinguished from the former in that these are important mainly from the viewpoint of the individual in the transitional ritual, not from the community's viewpoint, and in the fact that they send messages about the relation of the individual and the community. Therefore they are indispensable parts of the individual fate-change. Without going round the traditionally repetitious ritual spaces and passing through the ritual borders fate changes do not gain their convened legitimacy. This is proven by the fact that occasionally – according to the law of tradition – the right to the active usage of changing sites is withdrawn. Therefore, in order to announce the illegitimacy of a "non-honest" change of fate, those trespassing against tradition are punished with the withdrawal of their right to use that space. I am talking here about the communal space-handling of illegitimate children, illegal marriages, death by suicide, etc.[6]

In what follows I take into account the representative mental spaces of fate-changing rituals, borders, proxemic elements, in other words, those everyday space elements that, within the unfolding process and time of fate-changing rituals, are transformed into ritual spaces.

The **house**, in the simplest terms, is the space of long-term everyday profane existence. During the fate-changing rituals as well as at the time of religious events it "gains sacred content, it gains another quality, rising above its profane environment" (Bartha, quoted in Keményfi 2002: 139). The transformation, the metamorphosis of the house is not only a mental issue: during fate-changing rituals – and let us regard this period as a festive one – the surface of the house is transformed as well, it is made festive, as it is to become the site of the individual's unique festivity. Its quotidian living space quality is suspended, it is transformed into a festive space, it is synchronized with the festive clothing of the individual, which is also a unique type of clothing. When the individual's personal fate-changing rituals are over, and he/she is initiated into his/her new environment, everyday, quotidian state of the house is reinstated.

The house is the space from where the newborn is taken for christening, with a "memorandum of intention" phrased before stepping over the threshold as a border: "We are leaving with a pagan, we are returning with a Christian". After the church ritual this is also the place where they announce the individual's spiritual transformation: "We left with a pagan, we have returned with a Christian." And from this moment on the house and its inhabitants are no longer threatened. Thus, the main focus is not the fact that this is where they take the baby from, as they could not take him/her from anywhere else, but that the closest living space turns

[5] The bride's hairstyle is changed on the occasion of the wedding, her long plaited hair being arranged in the form of a bun.

[6] These penalties belong to the realm of folk legislation, therefore, they must be discussed separately.

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

from a state of chaos into a space of cosmos, they are not "living under the same roof with a pagan" any longer. It is the specificity of birth as a transition custom and series of rituals that all three stages of the transition – except the church ritual of christening – take place within the same house and that the new state has a perspective of several years. Therefore, a separate ritual of initiation into the house has been developed, the religious initiation ritual is doubled in the central space of the house.



Author's photo



Illustration: Ilona Boér Lenk

I interpret the custom of hiding under the table from Csíkszentdomokos as illustrating that the newborn must be attached spiritually and with a magical bond not only to his/her social and religious community, but to the community of the house, to the family and to the house itself. Eliade argues that "for a religious person his/her house is really in the center of the world", that "the house is an existential and sacred space … that creates manifold transcendental links" (1987: 38). Thinking more about it: if the house is the center of the world, then in every traditional community the center of the house has always been the table.[7] The table is a piece of furniture endowed with the power of sustaining family cohesion, family hierarchy, and the power to socialise. Taking into account also the mysticism of the circle, in my opinion, it must have been important to initiate the "Christian" into the family circle as centre, symbolised by the table. It seems odd how in the initiation story of one of my informants (a 76-year-old male) the house as an element of space plays a much more important role than anything else: "We

[7] "Certain objects of the house … fulfill sacred functions. These are the *table* (emphasis is mine), the fire, the fireplace, the stove." (Pócs 1983: 191)

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

brought a pagan over to Christian belief, and *a new Christian entered the house*. Others extend it even more, but in the end there still has to come the phase when the pagan child is *brought over* (emphasis is mine) to the Christian belief, and the Christian child *enters the house*." (emphasis is mine) Thus, the initiation ritual taking place in the house is the ritual of a desire, of the desire for the return of cosmic peace.[8]

Thinking about the relationship between fate-changing rituals and the house, I have come to the realisation that in the case of death – partially – the reverse of the above takes place. In this case the house gains a more emphatically festive character, its internal rooms, parts are transformed so that the dead can be located in the "*clean room*"[9]: a space that he/she could use and indulge in the least in his/her lifetime. As soon as the dead person is taken out of the yard, the spirit of death is banished from the house: each cover of the catafalque is turned upside down, each door and window of the house is opened lest his/her spirit or anyone else's could come back, so that death should avoid the house, it should not come for a new person living within it.

No doubt, the social meaning of weddings is of primary importance, more important than in the case of the other two transitions.[10] They result not merely in a change in social status, but weddings are also the most organised, the largest in scale, and ritually they involve the largest transition in space as well. The spatial reference of the transition is enlarged to the house and the yard. Thus the two defining spaces of the fundamental social link and the borders delimiting these from other spaces – thresholds, gates, stairs – become the main elements of the rhetoric and ideal of separation and initiation rituals. A state of dependence on space and borders is established. Leaving the spaces of the former state and crossing their borders are almost equal in importance with enunciation: each of them constitutes a preliminal, intermediary transition. The rite of marriage is the climax of the liminal state, of the transition, but the gradual separation from the society of lads and maidens is prepared by the breaking down of spatial boundaries. I would like to draw attention to the parallels of the "visiting process", more specifically the qualitative transformation of the two individuals' emotional and social approach and the gradual conquering, and abandonment of spatial borders. We talk about the freedom to come to the gate first, then up to the house, and then

[8] Summarizing European research, Éva Pócs claims the folk concept according to which the house is the model of the universe, the microcosm is not simply a small part of the whole, it is not one element of the universe, but rather a reduced copy that reproduces the whole (see Pócs 1983: 193).

[9] This room that is usually in the front part of the house functions as a "representative space" in Szeklerland but also in the home culture of the entire Hungarian peasantry. The denomination comes from Katalin I. Nagy (1981: 143).

[10] An excellent study regarding the relation of house and wedding was published by Elek Bartha (1983: 381-388).

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

into the house, as well as their prohibition. “They did not enter the house soon. Only to the gate. Not beyond the gate! At least a good couple of weeks were needed, no matter how close the youngsters were. Then the lad dared enter, and with fear invited the girl to the dance. He still had to go back a good couple of times till he could ask the parents to be allowed to enter the house freely.” “In my time it was customary for the parents to first consider the economic factor. After the issue of property was cleared, the parents gave permission for courtship. From this point on the lad had free entrance into the house.”

Thus, the gate, the yard, the threshold, the house are spaces and borders of social, emotional and economic interests: they are sovereign territories of the bride and her family. This is why the lad intending to court and the wedding party coming for the bride may only enter and approach the bride after having fulfilled certain conditions (see, for example, tests of strength, tests of intelligence: conundrums, etc.). The progress in being accepted into the yard or the house illustrates the advance, stagnation or regression of the state and position of choosing a partner.

Inside the threshold certain locations of the house interior are endowed with a specific value during the wedding. The “clean room” mentioned above is the space of the main wedding table. Before the wedding, this is the space where the bride’s outfit is exhibited before being taken away, this is where documents are drafted, this is where the bride is dressed, this is where the women gather until the wedding party arrives, and as it is a representative space, this is where the representative guests of the wedding are seated. The second room is where the more distant relatives are seated as well as the neighbours, friends, youngsters and children.

In Csíkszentdomokos the concept of the house, the space of the house is synonymous with that of the family. Thus, there is an interesting parallel between the facts that while the girl’s family is not a final community for the girl, the family home is not viewed as a final home either. In this sense, some verses from the bridal farewell can be perceived as a lyrical statement:

Ma virágzott éltem derült hajnalára,
Bíztam én magamot Isten parancsolatjára,
Akadtam életem jövendő párjára,
Akarok indulni annak szállására.

‘Today my life has flourished to its bright dawn,
I have entrusted myself to God’s commandment,
I have found my life’s future partner,
So I’m about to go to his lodgings.’

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

Even more emphasis is given to the finite time connected to the parental home and family in the Ágsíratő (bridal farewell):

Adjon Isten lelkem-szívem édesapám s édesanyám!
Fogadjanak bé csendes hajlékjokba!
Nem kérem sokára, csak egy éccakára,
Hogy alhassam ki magamot szívem nyugalmára,
Utajára.

'Good day in God, my soul and heart Mother and Father!
Please, take me into your quiet shelter,
I do not ask for much, but just for a night,
So that I can sleep till my heart rests
For the last time.'



Bridal farewell (illustration by Ilona B. Lenk)

The leitmotif of the bridal farewell that the leaving daughter utters within the threshold[11] is the separation from the house: "And now farewell to you little shelter, /Where I have spent my youth so far…" The house she has lived in so far is

[11] In recent decades on the porch, on the stairs or before the exit door, so that the wedding party may also hear it.

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

an unproductive nest from the perspective of the maintenance of the species. The exchange of houses implies the fulfillment of a social mission, with severing as well as setting roots. Every change in space – Bernea argues – means a separation from the past, and at the same time, naturally, it involves suffering as it is followed by adaptation to a pastless, rootless life (1985: 34-35).[12]

The threshold of the house. The threshold, in general, increases in spirituality in the liminal phases of fate-changing rituals – including intermediary, preliminal states. The social reality of the transition, a momentum of this is realised first through the synchronisation of stepping over the threshold as spatial displacement and the emotive reaction to the ritual text or formula. When going to a christening, before stepping out of the house they announce: "We are leaving with a pagan, we are bringing back a Christian", and upon return, in the moment of stepping over the threshold, they announce this formula in the past tense, thus announcing that the transition has taken place. The threshold moments of the separating rituals linked to death are the lowering of the coffin into the grave accompanied by ritual crying, the moments of uttering broken farewell words. From this moment on inclusive rituals start. Before the war, at weddings, in the moment of stepping over the parental house's threshold the bride announced:

Úristen, hozzád nyújtom szavamot,
Mert szüleim házából kiveszem a lábomot.
Nyújtsd ki jobb kezednek sugarát,
Viseld az én szüleimnek öregségben jó gondját.

'My God, to Thee I raise my words,
As I am leaving my parents' house,
Hold out the ray of your right hand,
And take good care of my parents in their old age.'

Thus, in the space of fate-changing liminal rituals from Csíkszentdomokos the threshold is a border representing ideological, emotional oppositions.[13] The physical threshold's and any border's spiritual content is special because it marks

[12] Bernea differentiates between the spirituality of a peasant and the one of a person linked to an urban house: "Citizens do not preserve any longer the house's moral substance", but "peasants feel deep sadness for the house in which they were born and have lived, if they are forced to leave it."

[13] The bride's exit text, her farewell uttered on the threshold has similar content – in its intention and message – to the engraving on the Szekler gates: e.g. "My God, be with me in my exit, guard me and bless me upon my return" – and to the faithful Jew's words uttered upon his exit through the main gate: "May God protect me as I leave and upon my return, from now on till forever" (van Gennep 1996: 32).

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

the phases of the symbolic spaces of social transition and change in status,[14] and they illustrate the transition by creating sacred moments. If these do not exist, the mystery of rites is not realised at the level of consciousness simply because the ideological, sacral transition is not realised in its physical reality and dimension. No spiritual vibration occurs either in the initiands or in the participants that will convince them of the fact that at certain points, in certain moments something has happened. They need to realise that starting from that moment the individual is already different from the old one, he/she is not what he/she used to be, he/she has a different social status. (I could illustrate this with the church's ritual-diminishing practice, especially in the case of a church christening.) The spiritual role of even one second of suspension, crossing spaces, waiting is of utmost importance in all transitions. Turner draws attention to the fact that the initiand's status in liminality is different as in these phases the individual "is located in the in-between spaces of the social structure (…), on the margins of society" (2002: 139). (Certain border- or separating lines may also be harmful: for example, the balk of the house below which the newlyweds are not to sit as this might lead to their divorce.)

Stepping over the threshold has also another type of emotive (desire) and spiritual charge: the way one steps over the threshold has the power to define one's future, it may influence the spouses' relationship with each other, their life together. One has to step over the threshold with the right foot in order to assure luck, happiness. Even today the bride is reminded of this in an emphatic way: "Once she stepped out, she should not look back, she should not step back, otherwise she won't be lucky." Coming out of the church and while entering the new house the bride "must not step onto the threshold … Whoever steps on it is not a good one … The one who steps over it will be humble … The bride should step quietly into the new house and then they are going to have a peaceful life." In Csíkszentdomokos people believe that whoever is the first to step onto the threshold will be the master of the house.

While studying van Gennep I noticed a quite special, this time entirely symbolic threshold-phenomenon within weddings rituals in Csíkszentdomokos. He argues that "we must interpret any ritual that presupposes passing between an object cut into two, or *between two branches* or *under some kind of object* (emphasis is mine) as a direct rite of passage based on the idea that we step out of our former world in order to step into a new one" (1996: 28). This takes place in Csíkszentdomokos in the "ágsírató" (bridal farewell) ritual of the bride, when she steps out of her state as a girl, leaving behind and saying goodbye to her gender community, as well as on her wedding day when she leaves the parental home and she steps into the groom's house, her future home. In each of these cases she passes

[14] Stepping over the threshold means entering a new world. It is an important act of marriage, inclusion, coronation, burial rituals (see van Gennep 1996: 29).

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

between two pine branches and with this and other proxemical elements and borders a quality shift occurs in her life.

An almost identical path is taken by the groom. A fate-changing ritual within a fate changing ritual! In the van Gennepian concept, in Csíkszentdomokos the bride's transition is more complete with her not only passing between two pine branches but also under a pine garland adorned with white flowers. Thus, it becomes a spatial symbolic visual ritual of her stepping out of her virginal state, also linked to the house (emphasis is mine). At the same time, this latter ritual also links, unifies the two branches.

I interpret the neighborhood as a social environment, a socialized space, as a ritual space and institution that in Csíkszentdomokos, and in Szeklerland in general, plays a role in all three fate-changing rituals discussed here. We are talking about an especially interesting communal cell and space within the construction of the village as a social system that is stable and mobile at the same time. Every family's neighborhood expands in principle to eight families on the right, left, and opposite (number nine is the symbol of excess!): this is the stability factor from the perspective of a family, but the periphery of family borders has further links, which signals the mobility of the institution of neighborhood. Bernea phrases it appropriately when arguing that "the neighborhood is a social entity that operates between the family and the village" (1985: 40).

From the perspective of space, the neighborhood is the lengthening of the family space, and as such, based on the reciprocity principle, it functions as primary support in organizing fate-changing events, in undertaking their tasks, in knowing their secrets. Therefore, the neighborhood becomes the primary interactive space of fate-changing rituals.

Within the use of space of fate-changing rituals the road – the physical course of the transition – also plays an important role that carries spiritual meaning. The road offers the possibility to present the transition to the community, it is a means of representation in front of the community, it gives an opportunity to the community's information in an open way: who the godparents are, how many they are; what quantity and quality the bride's dowry is, what the composition of the wedding party is, the number of people following the coffin to the cemetery, etc. The road is also the course in the passing of which the initiand is/might be exposed to most injuries, most offensive or harming practices. Bridges, junctions, road narrows mean/might mean delays in progress not only from the perspective of the traffic, but also in the progress of the transition.[15] The mentioned road-elements are potential sites for enacting abuses, unsuccessful rituals.

[15] In folk belief these locations are sites of different actions, experiences, acts, favorable media for enacting magic rituals (see Bernea 1985: 52).

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)



Wedding and funeral processions (the author's photos)

The road is in relation with direction that in the case of transitions bears psychological importance. In other life situations going in the wrong direction may easily be corrected, but a mistake committed during transitions becomes a spiritual burden for the individual, and collective memory will remember such mistakes for a long time.[16]

The **circle** – primarily in spiritual folk culture – constitutes an imagined spiritual spatial form, in the words of Aniela Jaffé[17] "it is the symbol of our ancient self … that includes the relationship of man and nature's entirety" (1993: 240). Within the separation and initiation rituals of all three fate-changes the circle is a complex ritual symbol. In Csíkszentdomokos they walk in a circle with the baby in hand after the Christening or with the bride around the altar after the marriage ceremony, a newly freed mother walks around the roadside cross with her baby, they draw a circle with candles around and above the dying person, as if they were attempting to illustrate with further examples the universality of the circle-symbol: "The practical basis of the belief in magic circles is that the circle is the most natural form of defense, of defensibility" (Hoppál and Jankovics 1995: 128).

Why is the circle a spiritual space in fate-changing rituals, and why do the protagonists of transitions have to circle around these devotional objects and sacred locations? Why is the ritual circling a repetitious symbolic motif of fate-changing rituals in Csíkszentdomokos? Instead of a clear answer, a few analogous examples from great cultural circles may help understand further secrets of the human soul and of human desires.

In the entire Hungarian custom-world one may find countless examples of circles drawn, dug, plowed, walked around something – the house, the sowing, the village, the pasture, etc. – and beliefs linked to these. Éva Pócs argues that

[16] "Regress is a torturing factor" (Bernea 1985: 59).
[17] Jung's disciple.

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

"remains of the archaic worldview are preserved in those beliefs according to which the own, known world, the microcosm – the village and its borders – is surrounded by the space of foreign, supernatural beings, that of the dead and of ghosts. This archaic universe may be described with the oppositions like 'this worldly–otherworldly', 'alive–dead', 'inside–outside'" (1990: 619).

This belief prevails in the circling of the dying person as well: it is a specific ritual of circling, of periphrases in Csíkszentdomokos.[18] Evil cannot invade the fire circle drawn with candles, thus it has no power over the soul, it is forced and driven back into the sphere of the "periphery". However, it has to be mentioned that while the known examples of *encircling* protect earthly life, existence, *circling* in Csíkszentdomokos protects the soul's otherworldly existence. We might even say that they protect the unknown from the unknown. And as they perform this on the threshold of the great unknown, we may consider it a preventive ritual.[19]

Seemingly, salvation is the opposite of circling: the purifying woman with her baby circles around the roadside cross three times and says a prayer. Who and what is in need of protection in the ritual of purification? To my knowledge, Hungarian folklore studies have not given a satisfying answer to this question yet. Maybe because they are not familiar with this ritual method of purification, of initiation in Csíkszentdomokos.

Therefore, I am quoting Aniela Jaffé. In *The Symbology of the Circle* she argues that "the symbol of the circle, no matter of the number of its variations, always refers to the one basic reference of life, to its final wholeness… In the discourse of psychological symbology, it expresses the unification of opposites: the unification of the ego's subjective time-bound world with the objective and timeless world" (1993: 240-241). Can we detect in Jaffé's theory of the circle some other, maybe philosophical essence of the *circling* from Csíkszentdomokos? Isn't its message reference beyond the closed perspective of the Hungarian village community? If I view circling as an intention to unify life and death, the world of the living with that of the dead, finite earthly life with the timeless, endless life of the soul ("time-bound life,… timeless life…"), then our answer may only be "yes". I believe I am not exaggerating when saying that the custom and ritual of circling from Csíkszentdomokos both in its ceremoniality and in its spirituality constitutes the resonance of a kind of universal worldview, otherworld-philosophy.

[18] I have found four data similar to the circling ritual in Csíkszentdomokos: the dead, the catafalque, the dead person's house is circled with lit candles: Kunt 1987: 115; Jung 1982: 127; Dobossy 1989: 118; Virt 1987: 33-34. However, the MNL (Hungarian Folklore Lexicon) and MN (Hungarian Folklore) do not mention these.

[19] Based on oral accounts of locals circling is also a ritual illustrating a state; as to the question "How is the patient feeling?", depending on the patient's condition, they may answer: "They have already circled him/her" (meaning that he/she is dying).

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

Concerning the ritual of purification I turn to Jaffé again, whose study also suggests that the circle also symbolises the fact or the idea of belonging to something: "(…) In the discourse of psychological symbology, it expresses the unification of opposites" (ibid. 240). Thinking about this only seemingly simple interpretation, I have again been astonished by the depth of the symbols, and I have come to the realisation that when the bride and the baby circle around the altar, when the impure woman with her baby circles around the roadside cross, probably and intentionally notions such as girl and woman, pagan and Christian, former and impure due to giving birth, thus opposite entities are leveled off. And all this takes place with the intention or the *desire* of an alliance with something – the new community, belonging to something – to the new community, a return to the natural course of life – the purified woman. "The circle is the symbol of our ancient self – that encompasses the relationship of man and the whole of nature" (Jaffé 1993: 240).

Discussing further about the perspectives of the symbol of the circle and its centre, we have to notice that within the ritual of circling the dying person occupies the center of the circle because he/she is the one who needs to connect to the other world, the world of the dead. In the case of the purification ritual, however, they circle with the baby around the cross as a sacred symbol, which they want to connect with. The first serves man's connection to the abstract world, the second one to the visible world. In this interpretation Jaffé's argument is a direct hit, according to which the design of the mandala follows the design of a sacred place/space the centre of which links it to the other world" (1993: 244).[20]

In the ritual of circling round the roadside cross, beyond desiring the transcendental world, I also sense the prevalence of another, deeply human desire. I am thinking of the desire to belong to a given physical space, that in Eliade's interpretation is also a sacred space exactly due to the symbology of the cross, and at the same time, "the Centre of the World" (1999: 238). But in Csíkszentdomokos its palpability should not be neglected either. A cross set up within a village community has a certain memory of some kind of space occupation, thus it has a myth.[21] In principle a community occupies a land only once, but the community of the former occupants/of the protectors of all times must be continuously renewed: that is one of the secrets of survival. Therefore, the act of occupying the land must be continuously ritually repeated, through which a secret bond and spiritual

[20] "Mandalas often boldly tend to collate or unify seemingly irreconcilable oppositions and bridge hopelessly huge abysses" (Jaffé 1993: 124, translation from the Hungarian version).

[21] "The Spanish and Portuguese conquistadores took into their possession the islands and continents discovered and enslaved by them in the name of Jesus Christ. To prove their acts they *set up crosses* (emphasis is mine), but through this act they also ordained the new land: setting up the cross meant repeating the Christening (the creating gesture), which meant a 'new birth.'" (Eliade 1998: 26-27)

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

alliance between the first occupants and their descendants comes into being, even at the level of small territories. This aspect, this spiritual sub-stratum of the ritual deviates, or goes beyond the notion of "the sanctified world" and its magic-religious content. Beyond its undeniable sacred content, the space-occupation ritual in Csíkszentdomokos also intends the acquisition of the right to use a space in front of the community. From this perspective I can discover a further, specific aspect of the newborn's social initiation. The circling may stand for the spiritual proclamation of belonging to the community and to its space that must be communicated to the community through a ritual. Modern psychological research shows that individuals living in a cultural context based on mutual dependency (like our community) must show themselves, they must demonstrate that they are members of the community.[22] Showing the self may be interpreted as the basic philosophic principle of fate-changing customs. The woman going to her purification must return to her community, and she can publicly declare this through a ritual. At the same time, she also initiates her baby into this space: into the spiritual sphere of the space marked by the cross, into its human community, so that the baby should be considered its member.

A further important issue is **time** as a philosophic category from the perspective of ethnography. We must know and we may not disregard the fact that displacement within space also means and presupposes displacement in time. This reality prevails also in the three fate-changing customs constituting the subject of my research.

In the case of **birth** we can speak about the "pre-natal space", but also about the nine-month pre-natal time. The first category was created by the American researcher, Andrea Andrek, who argues that "pregnancy is a person's first individual ecological situation, while the womb is the first ecologic environment" (1996: 9). To this analogy and parallel to this, I find it necessary to focus on the second. I would only like to hint to the fact that the individual's womb-space and -time status is a factor generating great spiritual culture and knowledge, and the fact that folk culture discovered centuries ago what medical science – prenatal research – realized only in the 1960s: the fact that there is a continuous living relationship between the fetus and its natural, social, cultural environment, in which the role of the mediator is played by the mother. In its concepts I believe this knowledge to be very modern, its specificity being that it has been phrased in beliefs.

The **search for a partner** and **marriage** can only be understood within the dialectics of space and time, from childhood sweethearts to the dusk of sexual attraction. In every folk culture maturation into a young adult, biological and social puberty, the progress of spiritual development goes parallel with the conquering

[22] See Nguyen Lun Lan Anh–Fülöp Márta (eds.) 2003: 209.

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

and living in ever larger concentric circles of abstract time and lived spaces, with the dismantling of spatial prohibitions and spatial taboos.

Regarding **death** as a fate-change – as there exists a large number of commonplace statements linked to it – I would only like to add that it brings about an irreversible space- and time-shift in our lives, but from the perspective of culture, specifically folk culture, it is not a vacuum-like state: it creates different interpersonal, spiritual, behavioural, familial, etc. spaces and social space-relations.

Whenever the ritual of walking through the traditional and conventional spaces of fate-changes is neglected, it will lead to harm and the reclassification of these transitions. Within peasant culture, on the level of linguistic communication, this state surfaces as follows: "the child was given a name, like a dog" "the youngsters got together, like dogs," "the dead was buried like a dog."

3. Conclusions

All in all, what will be the message of these spaces regarding our human existence when the caesura of the naming process are left out, when folk theology, practical and living dogmatism do not apply, when marriages are sealed in the ice-chapel near Bâlea Lake high up in the Carpathians, on submarines or airplanes, when the ashes of the dead are spread into space or into rivers from airplanes or scattered onto the water streams of fountains (and I have not even mentioned the multiplying burial chapels and their soul-baring function, that seem to be extensions of the hospital where one dies without love)? All these distortions of space may be the topic of a future study.

Translation by Boróka Prohászka Rád and Zsuzsanna Ajtony

References

Andrek Andrea. 1997. A kompetens magzat. [The Competent Fetus.] In Hidas György (ed.) *A megtermékenyítéstől a társadalomig* [*From Fertilisation to Society*]. Budapest: Dinasztia.

Bartha Elek. 1983. A lakodalom és ház kultikus összefüggései [Cultic Relations between the Wedding and the House]. In: Novák László – Ujváry Zoltán (eds.) *Lakodalom* [*Wedding*], 381-388. Debrecen.

Bernea, Ernest. 1985. *Cadre ale gândirii populare româneşti. Contribuţii la reprezentarea spaţiului, timpului şi cauzalităţii* [*Frames of Romanian Folk Thinking. Contributions to the Representation of Space, Time, and Causality*]. Bucureşti: Cartea Românească.

Eliade, Mircea. 1987. *A szent és a profán. A vallás lényegéről* [*The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*]. Budapest: Európa.

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)

Eliade, Mircea. 1997. *Az örök visszatérés mítosza* [*The Myth of the Eternal Return*]. Budapest: Európa.
Földessy Edina. 1999. Magrebi esküvő. [The Wedding from Magreb.] In: *A megfoghatatlan idő* [*Elusive Time*]. Néprajzi Múzeum, Tabula Könyvek 2: 259-281. Budapest.
Frazer, Sir James George. 1995. *Folclorul în Vechiul Testament* [*Folklore in the Old Testament*]. Bucureşti: Scripta.
Hoppál Mihály, Jankovics Marcell et al. 1993. *Jelképtár* [*Dictionary of Symbols*]. Budapest: Helikon Kiadó.
Jaffé, Aniela. 1993. A vizuális művészetek szimbolizmusa [Symbolism in the Visual Arts]. In: Jung, C. G. *Az ember és szimbólumai* [*Man and His Symbols*], 231-251. Budapest: Göncöl Kiadó.
Jankovics Marcell. 1998. *Mély a múltnak kútja* [*Deep is the Fountain of the Past*]. Debrecen: Csokonai.
Keményfi Róbert. 2002. Lokális vallási modellek szerkesztési lehetőségei [Possibilities in Designing Local Religious Models]. *Néprajzi Látóhatár* [*Ethnographic Horizon*.] 11 (1-4): 137-156.
Kriza János. 1975. *Vadrózsák. Kriza János székely népköltési gyűjteménye* [*Wild Roses. János Kriza's Collection of Szekler Folk Poetry*] (ed. József Faragó). Bukarest: Kriterion.
Nagy Katalin I. 1981. A paraszti kultúra tárgyainak továbbélése [The Survival of the Objects of Peasant Culture]. *Folklór-Társadalom-Művészet 7*. [*Folklore–Society–Art 7.*], 131-156.
Nguyen Lun Lan Anh–Fülöp Márta (eds.). 2003. *Kultúra és pszichológia* [*Culture and Psychology*]. Budapest: Osiris.
Pócs Éva. 1983. Tér és idő a néphitben [Space and Time in Folk Belief]. *Ethnographia* 94 (2): 177-206.
Pócs Éva. 1990. Néphit [Folk Belief]. In: *Magyar Néprajz VII* [*Hungarian Folklore VII*]: 527-586.
Turner, Victor. 2002. *A rituális folyamat* [*The Ritual Process*]. Budapest: Osiris.
Szent Biblia [*The Holy Bible*]. 1989. Budapest.
van Gennep, Arnold. 1995. *Riturile de trecere* [*Rites of Passage*]. Iaşi: Polirom.

BDD-A7533 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:56:30 UTC)