



Book Review

**Balázs, Lajos. *Amikor az ember nincs es ezen a világon*
[*What Makes You Feel out of this World*]
Csíkszereda: Pallas-Akadémia, 2009. 727 pp.**

Árpád KEMENES

Lajos Balázs's writing is part of a sequence of volumes in which the author provides an insight into the crucial turning points in the life of a Hungarian peasant community living in Csíkszentdomokos, a village situated in the Eastern part of Transylvania. After presenting a detailed, monographical description of the customs and rites connected to birth (1994), marriage (1995) and death (1999), in the present book Lajos Balázs highlights the sexual culture and morality among the people inhabiting the village.

The staggering amount of ethnographic material, which, as mentioned in the introduction, is the result of more than twenty years of field research, provides a meticulous description of the whole internal workings and organizing criteria of the interviewees' – and consequently the entire community's – sexual life. The approach to this sensitive topic adopted by the author is unique in the Hungarian ethnographic literature. Unlike the majority of the authors who have carried out research into this topic, Lajos Balázs does not try to draw an idealized picture of love and eroticism among peasants. Rather, he provides a bottom-view of the analysed problems by letting the interviewees talk about their personal experiences on love and sexuality. Thus he succeeds in recording some knowledge that has been handed over from generation to generation, but which is, at the same time, filtered through the personal life-experience of each individual. However, Lajos Balázs's writing did not appear "from the void". The guidelines stipulated by Gyula Ortutay in his essay entitled *A magyar parasztság szerelmi élete* [*Love-life*

among Hungarian Peasants] proved to be of major help for working out the methodology of the scientific study on sexual life among peasants. Another seminal work that had an influence on shaping the specific approach chosen by the author is Mária Vajda's essay *A parasztság nemi életének kutatása* [*Research into the Sexual Life of the Peasantry*]. The resulted approach reveals not only the social and ethnical characteristics of eroticism among peasants, but also its dependence on a number of geographical, economic, existential and historical factors.

The first chapters of the book highlight certain aspects of eroticism and sexual life as they manifest themselves in different periods of human life. After describing childhood eroticism, the author expounds on eroticism among adolescents and young people. One can find a detailed description on the environment in which children and adolescents can hear about sexuality, on the way they find the opportunity to discover its internal and external elements. The first signs of spiritual and bodily attraction towards people belonging to the opposite sex and the beginning of sexual life are also investigated in full detail. Special emphasis is laid on the role virginity used to play within the community, and on how people's attitude towards this issue has changed over the past decades.

After investigating the way eroticism and sexual life before marriage are approached by the people interviewed, Lajos Balázs provides a detailed inventory of the customs and practices connected to the bridal night, honeymoon and sexual life after marriage. The interviewees relate about problems newly married couples encounter during the process of initiation into the married life, about difficulties the young wife faces when she has to share the house with her in-laws, as well as about a number of disturbing factors that affect the sexual life of the couple. Separate chapters are dedicated to deal with the frequency of sexual life and with conflicts that stem from malfunctions of the husband-wife relationship such as cases of adultery or jealousy. The author also provides an account of the "symptoms" that signal the end of sexual life.

Apart from investigating the customs and practices related to the sexual life of different age groups, the writer also sheds light on sexual hygiene, on the social environment that favours the contraction and spreading of different sexually transmitted diseases, on practices of curing them, as well as on the community's attitude towards the person that suffers from a disease of this kind. Furthermore, a variety of contraceptive and abortive practices are presented in the volume, but not without mentioning the other side of the coin: the desperate struggle of some married couples for having an offspring.

Gossips, the impact of pornographic pictures and TV programmes, sexual deviancies, acts of perversion, as well as the way the people assimilate and comment on these experiences all have well defined roles in shaping the particular segment of culture into which the readers are initiated.

All the aspects of eroticism and sexual life presented in the volume converge towards the conclusion that there is a certain morality among peasants associated to each manifestation of sexuality, with its well defined social, economic and religious dimensions. It mirrors the living conditions, the traditions and the moral standards regulating these people's everyday life.