NEW PERSPECTIVES IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF HUMAN MOVEMENT

It is with pleasure that we introduce JASHM readers to a new writer, Dimitri Kostynick, who, together with colleagues located in different parts of the United States, is undertaking serious study of an important -- and fairly neglected -- genre of human movement systems in social and cultural anthropology, the martial arts. Mr. Kostynick is a student of Taoism and a practitioner of nui gung (more fully explained in his text), and because of this brings both an outsider's and an insider's point of view to the system(s) under investigation. Why is this important?

First, it closes an all-too-familiar gap which often exists in the movement professions: the gap between those who do and those who teach and/or write (pace, Bernard Shaw). Second, it affirms a realization (for non-practitioners and practitioners alike) that objective criteria are necessary, even for performers to recognize what experiences they are having. Third, Mr. Kostynick's article begins to "flesh out" a set of movement systems (i.e., t'ai chi, karate, Aikido and others) which are different from the dance and signing systems already discussed in previous issues of JASHM but which, because they are systems of human movement, use the same structures of interacting dualisms, the same spatial dimensions, the same laws of hierarchical motility, degrees of freedom of the expressive body and such. This will provide rich material for comparative studies in future.

Techniques of body control and methods of self-defense are learned by millions of people throughout the world. At times, and in specific cultures, these techniques have been formalized into a social institution (as in Japan), but they have also been known to remain free of institutionalization and class structure (as in China) where they are widely practised as means towards personal and spiritual development. The variety of uses and applications to which these techniques are put is fascinating, and Kostynick does a good preliminary job of sorting out the very complex history and development of some of these forms from their origins in Asia to their manifestations in western European and American contexts today. His (and his colleagues') task is only barely begun, yet it is an important beginning for social and cultural anthropology because many anthropologists (following Mauss) recognize that societies and cultures store a large part of their collective thought in sign systems other than those of spoken language (see Crick, 1976:65 and Mauss, 1964:125). Systems of body language(s) not only "encode" beliefs, they also provide the means to express them. We are fortunate to be able

to gain some initial insights into these beliefs, which in the case of the martial arts, pertain to aggression, killing, death- and beyond.

Kostynick's article is mainly descriptive and introductory, but it provides us with an entry point into a more general understanding of what the martial arts entail, how very different cultural attitudes towards the same form can be and how each form of martial art is a form of cultural knowledge. The subject is topical, because violence seems to have become a fact (especially) of modern life. It behoves us to examine and to learn more about the control of and attitudes towards personal and social violence. Kostynick's exegesis of the differences between cultural attitudes towards violence, towards life and death which are manifest, for example, in the differences between karate and gung fu, is illuminating if for no other reason than the fact that we can see how differently human aggression is handled in different cultural contexts.

Yet, in spite of the differences, it is clear that "aggression" has to be handled in the human domain as something other than a simple "fact of nature" because in the systems of martial arts under examination, the facts of language-use, spatial designata and features of human agency form an integral part of the objective criteria through which any individual's experience of "fighting", "self-defense" and "aggression" is understood without these socio-linguistic facts and criteria, the individual actor would not know what he or she was experiencing.

Human knowledge of the world comes to us through many channels and many mediums. Our first topographic knowledge of our many personalized worlds consists of a kind of spatial exploration of our own body and its limitations, then our immediate environment and its limitations. Gradually, we are introduced into the vernaculars of everyday body languages and their conventions. We learn to define ourselves and others as much through the syntactical strucutres and "grammars" of events as we do through speech, beginning with "standing", "walking", "sitting", "crawling" and all the rest. At the same time that we learn these and other actions, locations and spatial referents (the "deictic categories" and coordinates of our cultural and moral spaces), we learn the local system of relevances that are typical of our language and cultural setting. We learn the orientational metaphors that organize whole systems of actions with respect to one another. Many of these have to do with spatial orientation. We learn the obligations, freedoms, choices and constraints which constitute our moral and semantic spaces.

Kostynick highlights what to us is virtually axiomatic; that is, each individual user of a martial arts system may have a

unique, personalized model of what his or her movement experiences and manifestations consist; however, each user may or may not be cognizant -- even of other models of actions held by other members of other cultures -- far less those of his or her own. But it is just here that an anthropology of the martial arts (or of the dance or signing systems) becomes important. The body language(s) of the martial arts is not a function of the individual practitioner. It is true that many martial arts practitioners, like many dancers, actors and "movers", and many speakers, behave as if their modes of action are the most desirable, the closest to "reality" and such. This does not alter the fact that it is the anthropologist of human movement who, as a result of discipline and training, plus a far greater than average visual and spatial awareness, is able to transcend the particular models of specific systems, and who is able, in a clear and elegant manner to describe and explain to others of what these systems consist.

We look forward, with great interest, to the "nitty-gritty" descriptions, so to speak, of the rules of gung fu and other martial arts by Kostynick and his colleagues, because these kinds of descriptions will themselves constitute a theory of the society to which they belong. Such descriptions represent theories in a hard sense, because they are the socio-linguistic models of organization of human cultural and semantic acts/actions. We are interested in knowing the grammar of positional elements and movement elements that are used over and over in gung fu which identify those moves as gung fu and not something else. We want to know what the rules for deletion, inclusion and spatial manipulation are that are distinctive features of gung fu so that we can comprehend how and in what ways these compare and contrast with those of dancing and sign languages. We want to know how the movement elements are combined, how they accommodate "conjoining" and "embedding" phrases into larger sequences. We want to know how sequences of a martial art are matched with their correct interpretations by practitioners of the given art so that we can (perhaps) make some useful generalizations about the similarities or differences between these structured systems of human movement and those which we call "dances".

In other words, we are pleased to welcome Kostynick to a world of wider discourse: the anthropological study of human movement, and we hope that he and his colleagues find the interaction as refreshing and interesting as we have found his overview of the martial arts of China and Japan.

The Editors

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