REVIEW ARTICLE

Body, Movement, and Culture: Kinesthetic and Visual Symbolism in a Philippine Community by Sally Ann Ness. University of Pennsylvania Press. 1992. 312 pp. Index. $16.95 (U.S. paperback) Contemporary Ethnography Service, #LC-92-15310. ISBN 0-8122-3110-4.

In the last chapter of this book, I found the answer to a mystery. The mystery to me was why the first chapter of the book was written at all. On p. 219, Ness reveals that Chapter 1 was a "semiotic answer" to the "central question of this study", which is to describe the "movement experiences" called *sinulog* in a Philippine city. Subsequent chapters offer different sorts of answers to the same inquiry, e.g. one that "focuses on the historical processes . . . revival, development, and evolution of the *sinulog*". The "ethnographic answer" focuses on the "significance of the *sinulog* . . . to understanding . . . the "Culture" . . . of the city and its inhabitants" (p. 219). These second questions, historic and ethnographic, are answered in a thorough and insightful manner; the first "semiotic" approach, I suggest, is a less successful experiment in some extra-anthropological endeavor.

Sinulog dancing comes in at least three forms in Cebu City. The most humble and seemingly oldest form is performed by female candle sellers (*tinderas*) in front and outside of the main cathedral. Petitioners to the Santo Niño, the principal religious figure in the community, buy a candle and the vendor herself then presents it to the divinity. She holds the candle at chest level, moves forward and back with a swaying gait as she offers it to the Niño statue within the cathedral.The performance is characterized as having "resilient phrasing", a term repeated throughout the book. For the *tinderas* it refers to the subtle weight shifts in the swaying gait.

Sinulog is also done by troupe performers engaged for religious festivals. These dancer/actors re-enact various scenes from Cebuano history, especially the arrival of Magellan and the Spanish, who introduced Christianity and the Santo Niño. Cebuanos refer to these religious pageants as *sinulog* also.

The third form of *sinulog* is the parade form, a very recent development involving carnival-like processions, floats and dancing groups. Organizations perform together, and a "re-invented" *sinulog* movement is again present. It seems to this reviewer that this is a fascinating, rich, goldmine of data that includes all of the classical anthropological parameters -- religion, class, ethnicity, gender, colonialism and modernization. Such a gold mine only deepens the mystery of the author's inclusion of the initial, tangential, first chapter and its later reiterations.

Among the peculiarities of Chapter One, I found some merely annoying and others positively misguided. For example, Ness describes what the process of

mastering a choreographic experience can mean to an ordinary American "culture-bearer", saying that "It is meaning that must emerge from personal and subjective reflection" (p.3). She describes learning a difficult modern dance movement in a Seattle dance class. What this has to do with a traditional Philippine *sinulog* performance is difficult to discern.

Is she suggesting that meanings revealed through mastering a choreographic experience in one culture are automatically transferrable to another? Or is she saying that experiences of dance classes, etc. in the U.S. are what lead someone to the study (understanding or appreciation) of dances of other cultures? While it may be true that the "experiences" which "test the limits of the normal constructions of the social self . . . are part of what draws an individual to the serious study of choreographed movement in contemporary U.S. society" (p. 6), none of the Philippine dancers she talks about are involved in anything like the formal study of modern concert dancing in the U.S.

Beyond such mismatched comparisons is a fundamental fallacy that crops up again and again in the book. In her own words, Ness's error arises from a determined search for meaning.

> The *sinulog* choreography as I came to understand it, was an expression of this urban world, a 'pressing out' or a symbolic extraction of that world's dynamics" (p. 17).

There is a fallacy here: a simplistic "life determines dance forms" error that doesn't bear close examination. Perhaps the silliest example the author gives advances an unexamined notion that architecture influences choreography. She says

> Abstract curvilinear forms employed in the parade choreography bore a marked resemblance to the floral patterns that typically served as borders around the stone relief figures of Philippine churches . . . The choreography in other words, tended to reproduce designs in the traditional 'incipient baroque' style. In this regard the parade *sinulog* choreography effectively symbolized on different levels both its origins and its present status (p. 201-202).

Ness confuses coincidental similarities of pattern produced by the technical limitations of stone-working and choreographic design as a mystical cultural meaning that transcends time, creative mediums, and cultures (Western buildings to Philippine dances and dancing). How many designs are possible in stone? How many are possible with moving bodies on a street?

In fact, if one wanted to defend a hypothesis regarding a presumed connection between dances and architecture, one would have to gather empirical

be to ask the choreographer "why do you use curvilineal patterns of moving bodies? What inspired you?" If the answer given supported the hypothesis, one could then count and categorize all examples of such "incipient baroque" architecture in the city in order quantitatively to establish that it is indeed the basis for a prevailing aesthetic. One could look out of the choreographer's window to see if he or she is unconsciously influenced by nearby architectural forms. No such empirical tests are offered, of course, and one is left to feel that these statements are the result of random casting about for "meanings" of the dance, dances and/or dancing. I will return to this point later on.

Ness makes similar false (and deterministic) connections between dance forms and other cultural practices. These are significant because out of them arises an essentially passive picture of Philippine choreographers and dancers. That is, they are manipulated by their society and their work is a simple reflection of relations with the Saint. Furthermore, even the language provides determining structural features of the choreography. In Ness's own words, first explaining the props used in sinulog performances, i.e. candles, swords, Niño effigies, etc.,

> Manipulation, in the most literal sense of the term was a key theme in the *tindera sinulog*, as it was in social life in general. People tended to have 'life in hand' . . . I rarely saw an individual moving from one location to another without a bag or a basket in hand (p. 122).
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> Likewise the behavior of the ideal visitor in social interaction resembled the behavior of the candle, buoyantly animated by its own impulses to action (p. 128).
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> The most basic differences in choreographic style among the three *sinulogs* could be understood as being . . . a reflection of the relation each practice established with the Santo Niño de Cebu . . . with the *tindera sinulog*, for example [the core of *sinulog* religious usage] the dancing exhibited formal characteristics most centrally concerned with internal dynamics of the body's torso or core (p. 224).

And the linguistic example given was as follows:

> The extent to which resilient phrasing influences Cebuano life . . . could best be measured by its incorporation into the vernacular language itself. *Sayawsayaw* [is an example of] reduplication. Highly duplicatable, quickened patterning was thus a mode of organizing social energy, both mental and physical, in time and space . . . In the *sinulog* performances, this phrasing style was perhaps the most powerful polysemic or multivocal sign evident in the performance process (p. 55).

Assuming this means that simple dance steps, repeated and speeded up, are a major symbol in Philippine dances, then we are left to wonder if this symbolic rendering means the same things in all the thousands of other folk dances where these devices occur. Furthermore, we may ask why the languages of those groups don't have reduplication as well.

Aside from her deterministic view of dance movement, there are many things about Ness's book that are well done -- and she raises some very important questions. In the historical description, Ness is very good at socio-structural analysis, for example,

> Just as the *sinulog* dancing of the *tinderas* was sometimes considered to be beneath the dignity of its customers, so too, taking part in the performance of the troupe *sinulog* was considered to be inappropriate for the members of its elite sponsors. . . The troupe *sinulog* ritual served two . . . social class functions. . . It reinforced a separation of the Cebu elite from the city's lower classes, and it helped to align the elite of Cebu City with the elite families of other regions (p. 171

Ness is at her best when she analyzes the structure and role of the second *sinulog* tradition.

> The troupe *sinulog* of 1983 and 1985 thus existed as a sort of intersection where the warrior and the saint, the local and the foreigner, the Christian and the infidel, the families of the poor and the rich, the colonial and the nationalist all assembled and confronted one another . . . Within it, diverse, contrasting, and even antithetical substances met, intermingled, and struck a fragile balance (p.174).

When describing the newest *sinulog* form, the parade mode, the author shows a fine sensitivity to cultural nuance.

> In 1983 the parade floats included "male transvestites . . . movie figures such as E.T., and dance girls wearing Las Vegas-like show girl costumes. Ironically in denying that the promotion was in any way imitative of borrowed models, a genuinely ancient characteristic of the city's culture was also denied. What was most artificial about the promotion at this point [in 1984] was the very idea, that imitativeness and borrowing were not central to the local lifestyle (p. 194-97).

Ness raises (and then skillfully discusses) questions that other anthropologists have touched upon concerning the dance, e.g. "What is 'authentic' about folk dances?"; "Why are people so concerned about the 'origins' of their dances and what are the ramifications of this concern?"; "How do choreographers of staged productions of folk dances arrive at their choreographies?"; "What is the influence of these choreographies on other dances -- public, private, social

or exhibition genres?"; "In historical processes of change and invention, how are dance forms selected to be 'reinvented' or to be forgotten?" "Why are some forms selected and not others?"

The author provides a partial answer to the last question. She says

> In working out a teachable rendition of the *tinderas*' performance, the instructors developed a . . . stepping forward and backward . . . pattern. One clear feature that did emerge . . . was the use of a hand prop, the candle (p. 187).
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> In this way a choreographer could develop a performance that looked completely different from the older forms, yet was about the older forms. In effect the *sinulog* code had allowed the choreographer to have their traditional cake and eat it too (p. 213).

The last chapters of the book provide a valuable descriptive account and comparative example of the history and development of the dance culture of a post-colonial developing society.

By the end of this book, I came to the conclusion that the mysterious first chapter is included because the author wanted to bridge a gap that has appeared in dance scholarship in recent years. On the one hand is the new and growing reflexive or experiential school, influenced by the intellectual trends of other disciplines, especially the American version of reflexive anthropology and post-modernism. This group focuses on how it feels to dance, what goes on *internally* or subjectively in the muscles, joints, personality and consciousness of the dancer. The opposite approach is a sociological one; dances are seen as group activities that are performed by certain sub-sets of a society, communicating messages to the members of the society about status, role, social transitions, change and so forth.

I think the attempt to reconcile such opposing analytical approaches has pushed Ness into some untenable conclusions. Determined to find both subjective and social meanings of the dance, she traps herself into highly suspect statements, i.e. choreography is inspired by architecture; linguistic patterns are repeated in dances; bodily parts are chosen as expressive instruments to correspond to history, moral values, etc.

As far as the anthropological study of dancing is concerned, the social kind of analysis is far from exhausted, regardless of what the rest of anthropology is doing. Few anthropologists yet realize that discovering that the cliché, "the dance reflects society" is re-discovering the wheel (see Kaeppler 1978: 45). It is an old, trite, worn-out *non*-explanation of the presence of dances in human social life.

Ness has gone beyond this level of analysis and discussed how humans consciously manipulate and select movement symbols for dances, how they ignore and change inconvenient or embarrassing facts and performance traditions to achieve the image they desire. Ness has provided a sterling example of the kind of dance study needed for the next phase in the growth of anthropological studies of the dance. Theory in the anthropological tradition grows out of cross-cultural comparison.** Good analysis, such as that provided by Ness in the final chapters of her book, are few and far between in the literature on the dance. One hopes she will pursue her examination of Cebuano dances from a sociological point of view, where her work is original, insightful and above all of comparative value to investigators of other forms of dancing.

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NOTE:

**Something impossible to achieve on the basis of misconceived "reflexive", subjective accounts, but the problem lies in the misinterpretation of what reflexive anthropology is. [The Editors].

REFERENCE:

Kaeppler, Adrienne. 1978. Dance in Anthropological Perspective. *Annual Anthropological Review*, 7: 31-49.