Dance as culture: appropriating ethnochoreology on dance research in the Maritime-Malay societies in Southeast Asia

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Introduction

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, ethnochoreology or dance ethnology dominant disciplinary homes of ethnology and anthropology have invariably expanded to include sub and cognate disciplines of anthropology, sociology, folklore studies, cultural studies, performance studies and history. This has brought new fields in enquiry in dance studies and has enabled ethnochoreologists to reinvent their scholarship beyond the conventional discourses of history, ethnography, notation and aesthetics. I began to look into issues of the dancing body while examining methodologies for contextualizing cultural and first person experiences of dancing, and analyzing and interpreting cultural representations by and for the dancing body. This has brought me to evaluate and appraise theories about the dancing body as cultural constructs and as experience, which focus on the dances of the Malayo-Polynesian societies. Twenty years of research and documentation on Malay dances (Malaysia, Indonesia, South Thailand and Philippines) to elucidate meaning, intention, analysis and cultural evaluation of culturally structured movement systems within the Malay psychic has brought me to question my understanding of dominant theoretical positions and situate the theoretical framework that have shaped my research and writings. Structured movement systems are systems of knowledge, which are a product of action and interaction as well as processes through which actions and interaction takes place. Being intangible and transient in form, structured movement systems (dance) are visual manifestations of social relations, which deals with matters of consciousness and structured content that are both performative and phenomenological. Alan P. Merriam(1974, p.17) in his arguments conclude that “dance is culture and culture is dance” whereby the “entity of dance is not separable from the anthropological concept of culture.” To embrace the notion of dance as being a cohesive and integrative part of culture, the concept of dance culture has to be understood. Kalinohomoku(1974, p.99) defines dance culture as “an entire configuration, rather than just a performance··the implicit as well as explicit aspects of the dance and its reasons for being; the entire conception of the dance within the larger culture, both on a diachronic basis through time and on a synchronic basis of the several parts occurring at the same time.”

Matters of consciousness may be dealt with philosophically by looking at the structure

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1) This paper has been adapted from an earlier paper presented at The International Conference on the Conservation and Popularization of Pangalay and Related Asian Dance Cultures in the Philippines in 2007(2007b).