

REVIEW: THE PERFORMING ARTS. John Blacking and Joann W. Keali'inohomoku, Eds. The Hague:Mouton Publisher, 1979. xxii + 346 pp., Illustrations, tables, index, biographies, \$47.00 (cloth).

It is not an easy task to do justice to a book like this. First, the attempt on the part of the editors and the ethnographic scope deserve applause. This collection of essays by 24 contributors is an outgrowth of a symposium on 'Performing Arts', which the editors organized for the IXth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Chicago in 1973. To bring together so many writings of so many different students of various countries is advantageous and should contribute to our understanding. It is an especially positive move to have included six articles dealing with East Europe. The title of the book 'Performing Arts', however, is a problem. It is not apt in the cases of the majority of the essays included, especially in the East European ethnographies on which I was asked to comment. This stems from the fact that in England and America we call anthropology a 'science of man'; in East Europe 'ethnography' and 'folklore' (with all their positive and negative aspects) are used to designate the study of man. In the light of this, it is much easier to understand why, for example, East European scholars are more interested in the diachronic investigations of cultural systems and not in the synchronic. Similarly, it is clear that issues of an epistemological nature are not an essential part of the publications of East Europe. This means that one can publish works and studies by simply presenting data without any statement of theoretical propositions.

The East European articles in this collection are exactly of this nature. They accumulate data and facts with strong diachronic overtones and without any questions of an epistemological kind. I do believe that the authors simply could not conceive of the 'western' notion of 'performing arts', since they do not address their topic in these terms. This problem presents itself in the cases of other articles as well. The idea of 'performing arts' means totally different things in East Europe than in the West and America; and, as it turns out, it means other things in Asia and in Africa also.

It is also an obvious facet of East European writings that most of the products of the people (all social institutions and cultural systems per se) are fitted into the two categories of ethnography and folklore. Customs, rituals, folk music and folk dance, are all seen as a part of folklore as such. Thus, in East Europe the 'folkloristic' approach is pertinent rather than, say, social, cultural, or structural anthropological approaches. The Volkskunde/Volkerkunde dichotomy as fields does exist: in the case of the former the subject of study is traditional European peasant societies; in the latter the focus is on 'primitives'. Consequently, the term 'folk', for example in folk music and folk dance, never raises any problem as to its meaning, scope and context, but it does for us. In the anthropological study of human movement and dance such a compartmentalization is a reflection of ethnocentrism, simplification of the problems, and narrowing of the theoretical possibilities for cross-cultural research.

One who is interested in East European (mainly Hungarian and Yugoslavian) folk dance research should consult the useful surveys of Kealiinohomoku (1972), Kaepler (1978) and Kúrti (1980).

Another problem with 'Performing Arts' is that I noticed the absence of Hungarian contributors in this volume. This is probably not the fault of the editors, but their omission is regrettable, for the Hungarian School of dance research as represented by Gy. Martin, F. Pesovar, E. Pesovar and A. Layni and others is at the most advanced stage of dance research in East Europe today. Knowledge of extant literature confirms this.

The most glaring oversight in the book to an East European student of dance is the careless handling of translations, credits for translators and the like. For example, the Romanian and some of the Russian translations seem cumbersome and redundant and do not appear to do justice to the original intent of the authors. These papers should have been much more carefully edited and translated. Furthermore, the noticeable lack of biographical notes of most of the East European contributors (out of the six authors reviewed only one has biographical information given about him) is questionable. Does this indicate negligence, professional bias or ethnocentrism, or (more likely) simply carelessness on the part of the editors of this volume?

With these introductory notions in mind let us examine the essays dealing with Eastern European traditions; their content, nature and contributions. E. Kh. Petrosian's article, 'Totemic Dances of Armenia' (pp. 67-72), deals with Armenian 'totemic' dances divided into four groups: dances related to trees, birds, fish and reptiles and finally pantomimic dances devoted to totem animals. Some major problems are related to this very classification and the implicit theoretical parts of the paper. For example, Petrosian says: 'Totemic dancing is a traditional form of religious culture with pronounced ethnic features' (p. 67). Isn't that obvious? Why would there be more 'pronounced ethnic features' here than in any other Armenian dances? Of course, there are more basic problems here, for there are no definitions of the concepts such as 'totemic', 'religious culture', and such. This would be very important since Lévi-Strauss dissolved this usage of 'totemism' as a viable analytic category (see Lévi-Strauss, 1963). Petrosian's grouping is nothing but a functionalist classification which does not work at all, for all the Armenian religious dances, as it turns out, are pantomimic.

There are other basic problems as well. Petrosian mentions that in the 'monkey dance', the part where the actor is 'juggling with the fruit' is nothing but a remnant of ancient fertility cults. This proposition, besides being an outdated Freudian idea, is not substantiated or analyzed at all. At another point, the author tries to describe dance movements with words (Labanotation is not used by Soviet scholars); this, of course, does not help the reader a bit, especially since French terminology, 'pas-chassés', is used. It would be curious to know, after all, if the Armenian tribesmen utilize the French terminology themselves.

All in all, Petrosian's article is very arid, no documentation is used, no ethnohistorical sources cited and no theoretical consideration is evident -- probably a 'Sachsian' evolutionism if any. Z.K. Hachatrian's essay on 'Traditional Armenian Wedding Dances' (1975) appearing in Sovietskaia Etnografia, is a much more valuable contribution to Armenian dance.

Probably the best and most enjoyable article from East Europe is that of O. Mladenovic, 'Kolo na Kolu' (pp. 73-77). The article is well-organized and asks questions about historical relations and the diffusion of a particular dance form, a theoretical concern so evident and frequent in East European scholarship. While discussing the role of dance in society, the author utilizes the outdated theory of Curt Sachs about the function of ritual dances (p. 75). Enough scholarly criticism has been made of Sachs (see, for example, Youngerman, 1974; Kealiinohomoku, 1972; Kaeppler, 1978; Williams, 1975) that no more need be said here, but one wonders how Kealiinohomoku could have edited a volume that uses these theories uncritically.

A bold but impossible task is M. Zhornitskaia's 'The Study of Folk Dancing in the Soviet Union: Its State and Tasks' (pp. 79-90), for the author is trying to squeeze a century of Russian dance study into eight pages. It is hard to tell what this article is about, whether it is an excerpt, a condensed version or just an introduction, for a much fuller, complete version by the same author appeared in Sovietskaia Etnografia (1975). This essay is more like an anthology that basically surveys the works that have been done in the various Republics, when, by whom, and what dances were recorded. Through this article we are introduced to the great achievements of Soviet dance scholarship. However, to the careful reader this work tells more about the serious shortcomings than the obvious merits. We are informed that the scientific study of dance in the Soviet Union is called 'choreography' and dance as such is considered as a part of 'folk art' and looked upon as an 'artistic creation' in which "poetry, choreography, and music were organically blended" (p.79). We also learn about the Soviet attempts to develop a sufficient dance notation system; and it seems that the so-called 'Lisitsian' notation has been adapted and is in use. The author does not mention Labanotation; of course, the usage of this 'bourgeois' system in the Soviet Union is inconceivable.

This article is not well organized either, for names of authors, works, dances and Republics just appear and are cited with no detailed analysis, introduction, or aim. In the middle of the article a superficial analysis of Yakut round dances is given; seemingly the author's own observations are introduced. For the author the 'structure' (not a defined concept) of these dances is explained by the "specific geographical and historical conditions in which they exist" (p. 84). I do not know if this is a result of negligent translation or the author's real intent, but it is hard to believe that mountains, rivers, steppes would determine any sort of dance structure. In short, my intention should be clear by now: that someone ought to make a thorough survey of Soviet dance scholarship and should justifiably evaluate its scope, content and premises.

The essay by K. Sikharulidze, 'Rituals and Songs of Weather in Georgian Poetic Folklore' (pp. 167-176), though very informative about an area largely unknown to western scholars, can be criticized in many ways, in fact, not so differently from my previous comments.

Let me illustrate this statement with two outrageous examples: the author connects weather and seasonality to agriculture and makes the profound statement that in societies in which agriculture is the major subsistence pattern, weather/seasonality plays an immense function. While it is true that seasonality is important in societies where agriculture is the key mode of production, this, by no means, should be overstressed, for seasonality plays just as important a role in hunting-gathering and pastoral societies. The beautiful study of Mauss on the seasonal migration of the Eskimos comes immediately to my mind.

Another example that illustrates the banal 'globalities' for which Soviet scholarship and this article is known is the following statement: "The belief in a connection between horses and the sea is common throughout the world" (p. 170). What horses? What sea? Where? What societies? Among the Hungarians, who are known as a nation of horsemen, I do not know of any such connection. I wonder what the Plains Indians would say to this claim also?

An article which is clear and shows consistency in its aim, preparation and content, is M. Andjelic 'On the Hungarian Variants of South Slavic Folk Songs and Tales' (pp. 177-184). Theoretically this article presents an interesting insight of present day East European folkloristic research, when it raises questions about conservatism, acculturation, change, adaptation and variation in folklore products. The author deals with the folklore of South Slavic populations in southern Hungary: its survival and revival under the influence of modern communication media. There can, however, be a slight argument over the author's theoretical proposition about change of culture under new socio-economic conditions.

The last article under consideration in this review is E. Comisel's 'The Rumanian Folklore Calendar and its Age Categories' (pp. 185-201). This is an important summary of customs and rituals that exist in Romanian society. I should say 'existed', for the author does not make a distinction between historical present and the ethnographic present. As a theoretical contribution, however, this essay is a total disappointment. It is redundant, filled with universalism and banalities; terms and concepts are not defined and are used very ambiguously: for example, 'systems', 'structuralism', 'methodology', 'calendro-cycle', and such. This work, like many articles written in Romania, aims at historicism and supports the overemphasized paradigm of the historical connection between the Romanian people and the Geto-Dacians. The author tells us that all these 'calendric customs' form a two thousand year matrix of culture (not one, three or five-and-a-half, but two thousand). Moreover, we are told that the Romanian folklore calendar as such "proves the continuity of the Rumanian's presence in this region" (p. 200). Anyone who is familiar with the century of warfare between the two epistemological paradigms (the Hungarian and the Romanian historical and social sciences) knows that the primary message in Romanian publications, such as Comisel's paper,

deals with ethnic identity and attempts to justify Romanian presence in the Carpathian Basin. This almost amounts to historical pietism, and to this reviewer undermines all 'scientific' effort and direction because of a failure to look for more meaningful avenues in the general pursuit of knowledge.

Methodologically, Comisel's article also fails in this respect. His system of classification is largely a functionalist one, as when he tries to group customs into age grades according to their time elements: i.e., pending when they are performed -- winter, spring, summer, autumn. Comisel also uses a superficial 1932 definition for age categories and seasonal cycles. Furthermore, some ideas of Mircea Eliade are introduced ambiguously in relation to ritual and religion, but are not justified as to why and for what purpose.

In sum, Performing Arts, while rich in ethnography, is misleading as titled. Out of the many East European contributions the two Yugoslavian essays stand out, but they, too, cannot balance the total disappointment and shallowness that the volume represents. The book does not help to bridge the gap that exists between anthropology, ethnography and folklore in America and East Europe. A few articles in this collection could stimulate some students but many will irritate others. One thing is definite, that this volume well illustrates the need for a cross-cultural and inter-disciplinary approach in the anthropological study of 'performing arts'. Someone interested in superficial data, facts, names of dances and customs will, I suppose, find enjoyment while glancing through these pages. A serious student, however, will be disappointed, especially at a cost of fifty dollars.

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