

Anthropology Review Database

Krystal, Matthew

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Jack David Eller <david.eller@ccd.edu>
Community College of Denver

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ABSTRACT: Comparing four cases or traditions of 'indigenous dance'—K'iche Maya traditional dance, Native American powwow, folkloric dance, and 'Indian mascot' dance—this book relates dance to contemporary global processes of authenticity, identity, and secular ritual.

Almost exactly a century ago (1914) R. R. Marrett made the insightful and still timely observation that religion is not so much thought out as danced out. Here in the twenty-first century, only two adjustments are necessary to his statement—first, it is not only true of 'savage' religion but of all religion and second, it is not only true of religion but of many areas of culture and identity.

This is not to say, of course, that people cannot and do not think about their religion, their culture, or their identity. It is to say that religion or culture or identity does not depend on formal thinking and that we should never ignore the importance of dance—or more generally, of embodiment or, even more generally, of material expression—for creating, instilling, and perpetuating these phenomena. After all, Durkheim around the same time as Marrett also opined that it was ritual, collective physical activity, that most made religion real.

Krystal's new book does something quite clever with the question of dance: rather than providing a single sustained ethnography of one dance culture, he counterposes four different but clearly similar cultures or practices, not all of them entirely 'traditional.' These four cases or practices include K'iche Maya traditional dance, Native American powwow dance, folkloric dance (not always performed by members of the society represented in the dance), and sport-mascot dance. The connection between these disparate subjects is "how performers and audiences work on a common set of identity-related problems on a globe marked by rapid circulation of image and message and by relative ease of movement by people" (p. xv).

The book is organized into six named sections of two or three chapters each. In the first section, Introduction, Krystal makes his case for an anthropology of dance as social behavior, symbolic (although sometimes secular) ritual, representational communication, public performance, and identity formulation and expression. This allows him to discuss a variety of basic social issues such as ethnicity, identity,

and power. The chapter would be a fine orientation to contemporary anthropology for students and the general public, independent of but usefully exploiting the question of dance. The second, much shorter chapter raises the issue of representation and authenticity, two more central concerns of anthropology today. As he rightly comments, in a globalized and rapidly changing world, "the authenticity of a particular cultural behavior or cultural artifact is subject to regular judgment and contestation" (p. 31). However, often authenticity is a cultural discourse and preoccupation itself, or as Krystal says paraphrasing Graham, "a folk theory about the folk" (p. 36). One of the more thought-provoking things that Krystal notes is that "cultural outsiders are often quite confident in judging authenticity even when quite unfamiliar with the particulars of the practice in question" (p. 32). As we will see in a later chapter, non-members frequently have quite strong images (or stereotypes) of what an 'authentic' Indian or Indian dance is.

The second part, K'iche Maya Traditional Dance, focuses on Krystal's fieldwork as an apprentice at a local *moreria* or shop that provides the regalia for traditional dances. This location gave him unique access to the preparations for and performances of Mayan dances. His discussion necessarily includes an account of conquest and colonialism and the 'grafting' of European forms onto indigenous dance. Not surprisingly, "ethnic relations is a theme common across many traditional dances" (p. 47), like the Dance of the Mexicans or the Dance of the Conquest, which he describes in some detail. In this latter dance, he finds signs of "the political and religious dominance of the Other" together with "meanings of a clear Mesoamerican origin" (p. 56). In short, the dance (or drama/spectacle) surely references the Spanish conquest but it indicates that the conquest "does not lead to the religious changes envisioned by the Spanish religious institutions," instead offering an "alternate version of conquest" that "calls into question not only the colonial order but the states forged out of colonialism" (p. 60).

The fourth chapter (and second in this section) continues with this analysis, showing how the historical Mayan character Tekum Umam is represented in the dance but also appropriated by the modern Guatemalan state as a symbol of the state, as the "national hero of Guatemala" (p. 67)—despite the fact that he did all he could to prevent any such thing as 'Guatemala' from ever happening. Krystal relates this process to similar outcomes in the United States and elsewhere, where former enemies (like Geronimo or Sitting Bull) become icons of the societies that destroyed them.

Native American Powwow is the title and subject of the third section, beginning with a very short chapter on the origins of the powwow institution as an exercise in "the ongoing coexistence of diversity and commonality among Native nations of North America" (p. 95) as well as a sort of invitation to non-Native people to watch and join them. This is followed by a chapter on the contemporary traits, functions, meanings of powwow, detailing the standard powwow performance which is obviously in many ways far from traditional. Finally, the section ends with a third chapter, this one dealing with self-representation and 'multiplicity of meaning' in powwow, which Krystal identifies as operating on three simultaneous levels—"individual, intertribal, and national" (p. 129).

The fourth part turns to the topic of folkloric dance, which is 'about traditional identity/culture' although it is "performed by people who are not necessarily indigenous" (p. 145). In the very rich eighth chapter, he discusses how Westerners invented 'tradition,' sometimes as a claim to authenticity or 'difference' and sometimes as "fanciful and often unrestrained elite appropriation of indigenous forms," which even more ironically have "over time, been counter-appropriated by the non-elite

immigrants and even indigenous dancers" (p. 146). Yet folkloric and indigenous/local/traditional dance continue to be distinguished in a variety of ways, not the least of which is the 'professionalization' of performance through formal training and institutions like Ballet Folklorico. Krystal even provides an informative table listing the contrasts between native dance and folkloric dance.

In the next two chapters, Krystal further explores this appropriation and counter-appropriation, looking first at "transnationalism, the formation of pan-ethnic identity, and marginalization and discrimination as significant forces that inform and motivate folklore" (p. 164). He then goes 'back to the field' to consider 'indigenous folkloric dance' which would seem to be a contradiction until we realize that local people can and routinely do indulge in 'folkloric dance' for a number of reasons—in the case of the K'iche, "teaching and reinforcing local culture to its own community, presenting a positive image of K'iche culture to tourists and other visitors, and influencing the construction of Mayaness in arenas where non-indigenous dancers regularly present appropriated Maya forms" (p. 179).

Speaking of appropriated forms, fifth section turns to the dancing pseudo-Indian, Chief Illiniwek, mascot of the University of Illinois. After a chapter introducing the phenomenon of Indian mascots (common across college and professional sports, as with the Cleveland Indians, Chicago Blackhawks, and Washington Redskins) and the origin of University of Illinois' particular iteration, Krystal describes "the half-time ritual at the University of Illinois" and the "myths and mythic themes expresses in Chief Illiniwek" (p. 209). This provides a forum for him to analyze not only Indian mascots but the cultural meaning and function of sports in America, as 'secular ritual' and "stylized, nonlethal combat" (p. 211). Unfortunately, not only does the Chief become a (stereotypical) symbol of bravery and manly violence, not to mention the innocence and authenticity of native people, but, as in the case of all instances of war, the Chief becomes a concentrating point and vehicle for strong esprit de corps or *communitas* in Victor Turner's sense. Thus, it is harder than normal to break the bonds between the University and the Chief.

The thirteenth chapter is a short but entertaining discussion of the construction and contestation of Chief Illiniwek, whose vestments were literally commissioned from an Indian tribe—but not one based in Illinois! Instead, Lakota from the Pine Ridge Reservation were hired to stitch the Chief's costume, supposedly adding authenticity to the clothes and the character but reinforcing the preconception "that all Native people are Plains Indians" (p. 245). Then, as Krystal observed earlier, the non-Indian fans of Chief Illiniwek defend his authenticity as an accurate—and respectful—portrayal of Native people.

The final two chapters of the book fill the sixth part, making it a two-chapter Conclusion. In chapter fourteen, Krystal does a four-dimensional comparison of the dance traditions presented previously, which is also summarized in three tables. The book closes with a short chapter called Confusions and Conclusions, in which he reviews three 'basic confusions' uncovered in the material—the confusion of 'personal and stable' with 'authentic,' the confusion of 'actual social inequality' with 'ideal social equality,' and the confusion of 'naïve realism' with 'identity.'

This summary of Krystal's quite interesting and entertaining book perhaps makes it sound more technical than it actually is. The discussion is peppered with personal observations and descriptions from the field, set apart as italicized sections of a few or several paragraphs. The tone of the book is also more accessible than might seem likely from my description. In other words, while there are some

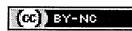
serious and sophisticated points made in the volume, they are packaged in a readable and likeable way that should appeal to students and general readers. And Krystal's choice to compare and contrast four traditions—at least one of which (mascots) should be familiar to most readers—rather than to do a standard ethnography of a single tradition gives the book a more brisk feel than more anthropological writings. In short, anthropologists of dance, of indigenous peoples, and of ethnicity/identity/authenticity and global process should find the book informative and amusing.

Reference

Marrett, R. R. 1914 *The Threshold of Religion*. London: Methuen & Co.

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