

Report on the 25th Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology, held in Kuala Lumpur

The 25th symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology was a momentous occasion, the first held outside Europe. Although this meant that a number of regular attendees were not able to participate this time, many new members were introduced to the study group and both new and old members were enriched.

The week-long event was superbly organized and hosted by the Cultural Centre of the University of Malaya and the Ministry of Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage of Malaysia under the leadership of long time study group members Mohd Anis Md Nor and Hanafi Hussin and their colleagues on the program (Chao Chi-fang, Anca Giurchescu, Andrée Grau, Judy Van Zile) and local organizing (Sukarji Sriman, T. Premalatha, Leng Poh Gee) committees. Held August 10-18, 2008 at The Royale Bintage Hotel Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, the symposium focused on two themes: (1) Transmitting Dance as Cultural Heritage and (2) Dance and Religion.

At the opening session ICTM President Adrienne Kaeppler presented the keynote address focused on "Lakalaka and Mak'yong: A story of two masterpieces" from Tonga and Malaysia respectively. The two had been selected as part of UNESCO's Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity Masterpiece Program. In honor of the occasion, students from ASWARA (National Academy of Arts and Heritage) presented an excerpt from the Mak'yong repertoire. Mak'yong was also explored later in the week by the Malaysian scholar Joseph Gonzales in a paper entitled "The gender constructions in the contemporary performance of makyung." The role of UNESCO and the masterpiece program was explored further in a very informative panel entitled "Intangible cultural heritage: mediation of knowledge or nationalistic competition" presented by Egil Bakka, László Felföldi, Georgina Gore and Andrée Grau. There were two other panels, one focused on "Changing models of Cambodian classical dance pedagogy" (Toni Shapiro-Phim, Penh Yom and Sophiline Cheam Shapiro) and the other on "Transmitting dance as cultural heritage: Embodying identities in movement" presented by three Norwegian scholars (Anne Margrete Fisvik, Turid Schjønshy and Siri Mæland). In addition 35 individual papers were presented.

The majority of individual papers focused on Theme I, with many addressing the construction and management of cultural heritage and others focused on heritage and tourism. Presenters included Alcedo, Backer, Buckland, Burridge, Čaleta, Dankworth, Dinçer, Dunin, Gonzales, Ivanova, Jacinto, Kaeppler, Kubinowski, Moen, Muliati, Nahachewsky, Niemčić, Özturkmen, Quintero, Premalatha, Rowe, Schwoerer-Kohl, Suharti, Teodoro, Tuchman-Rosta, Utama, and von Bibra Wharton).

One of the questions raised by the topic of "heritagization" discussed in many papers was "Who can construct heritage?" (National authorities? Cultural leaders? Financial interests? Academics?) as well as the question of whether "heritagization" is good or bad. The papers concerned with heritage and tourism mostly contrasted non-tourist and tourist settings and some addressed the conversion of cultural capital into economic capital. The question of whether academics can or should help "fix" the "problem" when heritage becomes tourist dance was also raised.

A smaller number of papers focused on Theme II (Dance and Religion). Some presented ethnographic studies on Indonesia and Malaysia (Dea, Nor, Widaryanto, Yusfil) while others focused on Croatia, Mexico, Tajikistan and British Hindu worship (Bonfigliani, Hinz, Zebec and David). Some of the themes explored included: movement as the reflection or enactment of cosmology or changing social conditions; gender, class and ethnic differentiation or syncretism; the etymology of knowledge systems related to the practice of bodily movement, especially in the Muslim world; and embodied manifestation or kinesthetic cultural expression and its interpretation.

Most of the papers have been published in the proceedings, which were ready just in time for the ICTM biennial meeting in Durban, South Africa in July, 2009. Details on how to order the proceedings will be available on the website.

In addition to the daily paper presentations, the organizers provided an array of experiences for the participants, including an evening hosted by the Temple of Fine Arts, an Indian cultural center, which included dinner, an opportunity to observe a dance class in session and a performance on the rooftop by the talented dancers and musicians who are active at the center. For many participants the opportunity to view a performance by the students of the University of Malaya's Traditional Dance Ensemble was a special delight, particularly since most of the performers were also taking part in the symposium each day as student attendees. These same students were also gracious and hospitable guides when we had the opportunity to explore Kuala Lumpur's night markets later in the week.

As is customary, paper presentations were set aside one day for an excursion that took us by bus to the southern state of Johore, home of Zapin dance. After a sumptuous feast, musicians and dancers from two local groups performed several forms of Zapin for the symposium members. We had the rare opportunity to watch our colleague and host Anis dancing with his former teacher and informant. Everyone had an opportunity to learn some Zapin steps and dance Joget before boarding the bus back to Kuala Lumpur. En route we stopped in Malacca, where we enjoyed a traditional Straits Chinese tea and a brief chance to explore the picturesque neighborhood. My own personal favorite was the evening the students from the University of Malaya taught us steps from several Malaysian dances. Later in the evening there was also an opportunity for some of the participants from other countries to share dances.

A business meeting was held the morning of the 5th day while the afternoon was devoted to meetings of several of the Sub-Study Groups. A report about the business meeting was completed by Ann David and has been circulated through ETNOKOR, the study group's listserv.

A closing discussion of the two themes was held on the last afternoon. As is often the case, there wasn't nearly enough time to explore the two themes fully or to do justice to the rich material presented over the course of the week. Listening to Andriy Nahachewsky's summation of Theme I and a listing of questions and issues raised, I was struck by a great desire for more time to settle in and try to tackle at least some of the points being raised with the common base of material and ideas presented at the symposium and the ability to draw on the myriad of experiences represented by the scholars in the room. Some participants pondered how the study group might find more time for discussion at future symposia, perhaps by limiting the number of full papers and having others give brief remarks or updates that could then lead to more discussion. This is an issue that will no doubt continue to be explored by the study group board and future organizing committees, particularly given the size of this study group which is one of the largest in the ICTM. The next study group symposium will take place in Třešt', Czech Republic in July 19-26, 2010.

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