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Subli, by Mirano, et al.

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All the authors have recognized the historical role and social responsibility of the arts. They are for art that builds Philippine society. And the intended audience of this series can do best to foster this aim by acquiring the series. It might be financially too steep for an individual, but certainly schools and other like institutions should acquire the set. The set costs more than ₱2,000: seven tapes and seven monographs in all. I hope that CCP is planning a Filipino version of the series, and planning to air this on national television so that it can reach a wider audience, not just students and the culturati, but the Filipinos to whom these artistic expressions belong.

Enough now of all that breast beating, "We have no culture!" "We're a damaged culture!" Here's a lot to be mighty proud of.

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SUBLI: ISANG SAYAW SA APAT NA TINIG (ONE DANCE IN FOUR VOICES). By Elena Rivera Mirano et al. Manila: Museo ng Kalinangang Pilipino, Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1989. 107 pp. illus.

How does one capture in choreological symbols what movement is? How does one freeze in pictures what is live? How does one put into words what is ineffable? That is what *Subli* strives to do.

For most Filipinos familiar with the Bayanihan's fancy footwork, subli is the hat dance from Batangas. Mirano's book demonstrates that to think of Subli that way is to mistake chaff for grain. True, subli dancers wear hats. True enough, the menfolk wear bright red *kundiman* pants, and the women folk *saya* and *pañuelo*, appropriate costumes for folk dance. True, they weave in and out in energetic patterns to the syncopation of drums, reminiscent of tribal percussion music. But, what for all these movements? All these exertions?

Mirano tells us that for a true subli to take place at least eight hours is needed, not the quarter of an hour or so in a suite of lowland dances. Subli is not *divertissement*, or better still, subli is *divertissement* of the highest order — a religious dance that leads to ecstasy. Subli is performed in honor of the Holy Cross, *Ang Mahal na Poong Santa Cruz*, a religious symbol of dark hardwood, identified as *anubing* or *balayong*, venerated in the Batangas towns of Bauan, Alitagtag, San Pascual, Mabini, San Jose, Cuenca and in the barrio of Pook in Agoncillo. Easily the most famous is that of Bauan, now encased in a beaten silver reliquary, which the devotees call *Tahanan ng Poon*.

Subli is performed, the first of our voices (the performer's) tells us, as an act of thanksgiving, propitiation, petition or sheer worship. It leads to "gaan," an incredible lightness of being better experienced being difficult to put into words. The participants describe this experience, which in mystical writings is sometimes called consolation, as a state in which one's consciousness is so

heightened that one becomes aware of many things, and the extraordinary reveals itself in the ordinary.

The rest of the voices, the historical record, the ethnographer's notes, the musicologist's and choreologist's painstaking notations, are all footnotes to the primal record — the experience of the subli dancer.

The historical records, translations of Pedro Amuedo de Castro's "The Holy Cross of Bauan," and an excerpt from Wenceslao E. Retana's *El Indio Batangueño*, tell us that devotion to the Holy Cross began when the residents of Alitagtag planted a cross of anubing in 1595 to drive away the evil spirits that frightened the barrio folk. From that day on propitious portents were experienced by folks who approached the sacred wood. Retana finds no reason to doubt that the subli originated in Batangas and goes on to describe the dance. His words show that not much has changed since his days (1888).

One may quarrel with gaps in the historical research, or with the English translation of the Tagalog hymns, but these are small matters compared with what the book has done. For those who do not have the opportunity of witnessing a subli, Mirano's book is the closest one can get to it. It also demonstrates what research in popular customs and expression, such as dance, involves: an interdisciplinary approach combining the skill of a sensitive photographer, Neal Oshima; the precision of a choreologist, Basilio Esteban Villaruz, and the perceptiveness of a musician-cultural researcher. In fact, subli is the only Philippine dance expression that has been subjected to such thoroughness, and the book should show the way for other researches in the same vein.

The publication and launching of *Subli* took very important methodological steps forward. First, the book is bilingual, written in Filipino and English, which we might infer from the title. Second, after the book was launched in Manila, the book had a second launching in Batangas to be true to the philosophy that the fruit of research on popular culture should return to the people among whom the research was made.

Subli also raises the question of how faithfully professional and amateur dance companies recreate Philippine folk dances. Faithfulness has to do, not with the external form, but with the transmission of the *raison d'être* of the dance. If subli is a religious dance, and there are many more such religious popular dances, can the ineffable be communicated to an audience who, while wanting to appreciate, safeguard, or transmit Filipino cultural values, stands outside the proscenium?

Subli invites participation. The launching of the book at the Cultural Center of the Philippines brought subli participants to its marbled hall. There they showed that their dance was a step to a higher reality, and Mirano's book a step to that step.

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