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Reviewed by: Andrew Vorder Bruegge, Winthrop University

Rostas investigates a specific social dance form—the Concheros dance—that exists in Mexico City. She is a seasoned anthropologist who has studied and published extensively on Latin American religion and culture for several decades. Rostas’s research has
extended across topics from performance and invented ethnicity, and on to identity as well. In this study she seems particularly attuned to the apparent contradiction between the postmodern, secular, urban lifestyle of the people who perform the Concheros dances today and their passionate engagement in a premodern, rural, religious dance ritual. Her thesis springs out of this tension. Participation in Concheros dancing provides a personal fulfillment that contemporary urban existence has not been able to provide. Rostas observes that the dancing is an unmediated experience that physically revitalizes urban drones. The dancing helps them to open up their inner selves to the spirit world, whereby they attain a state of exaltation or ecstasy. In her analysis of this phenomenon, Rostas prefers to label this “transcendence” without connoting a sacred goal. Instead, she interprets the personal journey simply as a process.

In studying dance, Rostas encounters directly the difficult task of discussing an ephemeral human activity. She articulates a nimble theoretical model that allows her to analyze the rituals and the performances in a balanced way. She defines ritual/ritualization and performance/performativity as the two opposite ends of a continuum. The former enfolds a sense of rigidity or restraint, while the latter embodies spontaneity and creativity. She ultimately describes the Concheros dancing within this unrelieved tension. She interprets the leaders’ values, the dancers’ movements, their costumes, accessories, and preparations along this continuum.

The author observes that the majority of the people who engage in this ritual dancing are of a certain class. They seem to be gentes humildes, people who live marginal lives—underemployed, of low educational level, and with strong hunger for spiritual connection. They come together in these mesas, which function something like social clubs where they can mix with others who share their values.

Every aspect of the dances reflects this tension between conservative observance of traditions and innovative creativity of individual participants. Rostas marvels how the older, Catholic Concheros dancers can perform almost shoulder to shoulder alongside the younger, new age Mexicana performers at popular festivals. The two dance traditions feed on each other in ways that result in incremental, microscopic evolutions in their practices. These evolutions could occur in costume accessories, performance improvisations, vigil practices, banner designs, and group hierarchy.

The author divides the ten chapters into three sections. The first addresses the “Experiential Context,” the second presents the “Experiential Nexus,” and the third discusses “Power Concerns.” The text includes several dozen images that span several decades (dancers, vigils, performance spaces, and banners), a very useful glossary of terms, extensive endnotes that affirm the scholarly substance of Rostas’s research, a bibliography, and an index. These supplementary components comprise a full 25 percent of the book.

In the final section, Rostas provides the historical background of the Concheros dances. This placement of the past after the exhaustive analysis of the present state of the Concheros dances seems counterintuitive. I yearned to read this information at the beginning of the text, in order to have a sense of the roots of this social activity, especially because so much of the Concheros tradition weaves preconquest, Aztec religious values with Catholic theology. Clearly, the author did not intend to focus her analysis on historical evidence, for it is, indeed, an afterthought. It is valuable to note here, however, that this dance tradition dates to the early sixteenth century, thereby connecting this text, however precariously, to the interests of early modern scholars who subscribe to this journal.