



Présentation / Intervention

2017

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How to cite

EL-WAKIL, Leïla. Migrating heritage : the reappropriation of tango through the UNESCO. In: Heritages of migration : moving stories, objects and home. Buenos Aires. 2017.

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:97427>

Migrating heritage: The reappropriation of tango through the UNESCO

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© Leïla el-Wakil, conference presentation showing some of the many ways of the tango from the very beginnings to present days.

Many authors have noticed the many lives of the Tango in several countries, a dance that “becomes like a phoenix, always dying, being reborn from the ashes of each of its countless declines” (Buch, 2014, p. 221).

My paper’s aim is to explore the phenomenon of re-appropriation of tango by Argentina and Uruguay through the listing of the latter as part of the intangible heritage World List in 2009. I focus on the question of the patrimonialization of the Rioplatense tango, and divide the present discussion in three parts: 1) Migration of the tango and its metamorphosis 2) The Argentina mania and its effect on the Tango culture 3) Unesco patrimonialization of the Rioplatense tango in 2009.

Migration of the tango and its metamorphosis

It is clear that years of migration have transformed the tango. There is not much left of the initial substance of the Rioplatense tango after its successive adaptations. Travelling from Argentina and Uruguay to France, England and New York, the dance was naturalized and trivialized, losing its original character – even though this original character remains hard to define, considering the variety of depictions of it. Jorge Luis Borges, who considers that the lyrics of the tango are a long civic poem” (Susti, 2014, p. 62) like the Illiad, tells us in his Third conference about tango: “This tango certainly was not exactly the same as the one of Buenos Aires or Montevideo or Rosario or La Plata bad houses. It is strange that in Paris the tango was cleaned up [...] the tango lost its “cortes y quebradas” [which provided the abrupt and chopped character in the dance] and turned in a kind of voluptuous walk.”¹ (Borges, 2016, p. 74)

Nevertheless, “Paris is usually considered the second capital of tango,” (Gomez Antonio, 2014, p. 118) because the *Ville Lumière* promoted the disreputable tango to a fashionable culture. From the Argentine side the migration of tango is usually positively presented as [...] “tango’s “conquest” of Paris.” (Gomez Antonio, 2014, p. 120) This idea is expressed through many songs; one of the most famous is The Song of Buenos Aires² written in 1932, which claims “This is tango, the song of Buenos Aires / born in the slums, now reigning in all the world”³.

When tango arrived in France right at the end of the First World War, introduced by well bred and good-looking dancers (« Niños bien »), it was preceded by its reputation of an outrageous dance with lascivious movements. However, Tango, disregarded by the Argentinian upper class, was applauded and captured by a cosmopolitan elite of world metropolis.

Paris and New York were fascinated by the sensuous character of the dance, as interpreted by Rudolf Valentino, the first sex symbol or Latin lover of the cinema’s story. He was performing on the music of the orchestra of Francisco Canaro in the film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKQ06jtaYvk>, consulted 5 April 2017) – the most successful mute film ever.

However, the tango soon was turned into a ballroom dance. It lost its genuine authenticity to become a repetitive steps sequence that any bourgeois couple could endlessly repeat. All the provocative poses were removed. The music also went through some changes. On the one hand, after the First World War in France, the accordion (until the fifties and sixties by artists like André Verchuren and Yvette Horner) replaced the bandoneon and the tango became tango musette, the dance characterized by a very tight abrazo and more simple steps. The song *J’ai pleuré sur tes pas* by André Claveau (1925) later influenced Tino Rossi and even Adamo (*Vous permettez, Monsieur*, 1964).

On the other hand, in 1922, the English dancers codified the tango dance as an international ballroom dance defined by a rhythm of 30 measures (that is to say 120 bits) per minute. As for the position of the two partners in ballroom tango, it had nothing to do with the Rioplatense abrazo anymore.

Due to these adaptations, the dance and the music of the tango did lose their Latin character. By crossing the Atlantic to become fashionable in the European and then American privileged societies, the migration of Tango deprived it of the sulfurous intensity of the original half-blood expression born in the poorest neighborhoods of Buenos Aires.

¹ “Ese tango, desde luego, non era el mismo exactamente de las casas malas de Buenos Aires o de Montevideo o de Rosario o de La Plata. Es raro que en Paris el tango se adecentara [...], el tango perdiera los primitivos cortes y quebradas (se hablaba de cortes y de quebraduras tambien) y se convirtiera en una suerte de paseo voluptuoso.

² *La canción de Buenos Aires*, Music by Orestes Cufaro and Azucena Maizani and lyrics by Manuel Romero, (1932).

³ “Este es el tango, canción de Buenos Aires / nacido en el suburbio, que hoy reina en todo el mundo”, in *La canción de Buenos Aires*, Music by Orestes Cufaro and Azucena Maizani and lyrics by Manuel Romero, (1932).

***Argentinamania* since the dictatorship time**

The political circumstances of the dictatorship in Argentina, which caused the exile of millions of people, raised a sympathy movement towards Argentinian refugees in Europe and particularly in France. The direct impact of Argentinian protagonists revived the culture of the Tango. The Sexteto Mayor, created in 1973, included José Libertella, bandeonist, Luis Stazo, bandeonist, Reynaldo Nichele, violonist Fernando Suarez Paz, violinist, Armando Cupo, pianist, Omar Murtagh contrebassa. The group of Argentinian musicians began touring through the world to play Argentine tango. Their most memorable performance took place during the opening of the *Trottoirs de Buenos Aires*⁴ in 1981 in Paris in the politico-romantic context of solidarity towards Argentine people.

The first significant endeavor to re-appropriate the tango was the creation of the show *Tango Argentino* directed by two Argentine directors, Claudio Segovia and Hector Orezza, accompanied by some Sexteto Mayor veterans. It was an amazing opportunity to present to the stunned Parisian public, and then to the New Yorkers and the rest of the world, the scenic virtuosity of tango that had so far been totally out of reach of the average people (<http://tango-sierre.ch/de-paris-a-sierre/> consulted 23 March 2017). Interpreted by the best Argentinian dancers of that time, the overview of the Argentine tango history struck the world and generated a new wave of worldwide enthusiasm. The six days representation took place in November 1983 at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, and the 3000 spectators enjoyed the revived original glaze of the Rioplatense tango.

At this time, the promoters of this dance didn't mention the Uruguayan influence in tango. However, many historians now agree to acknowledge that the first musical notes identified with tango were played around 1880 in Uruguay by African communities of Montevideo. But back in the 1980s, Buenos Aires monopolized the nickname of the "City of the Tango."

After the death of Carlos Gardel, the first tango singer, both countries claimed to be his birth or childhood place: The Uruguayans pretended he was born in Tacuarembó (Republic of Uruguay) and the Argentinians exhibited a birth certificate attesting Gardel's birth in Toulouse (France), reconstructing his childhood in the market neighborhood of Buenos Aires.

⁴ *Veredas de Buenos Aires* by Julio Cortázar and Juan Cedron

Tango inscribed as World Heritage (2009)

Both countries therefore experienced a long process of disempowerment with regards to tango during the twentieth century, due partly to their own disdain towards what they considered for a long time to be a poor and ill-reputed expression of culture.

The inscription of the tango on the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* was an occasion for both countries to reconcile, as they agreed that this culture "was developed by the urban lower classes in Buenos Aires and Montevideo in the Río de la Plata basin". As expressed on the Unesco website (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/fr/RL/le-tango-00258>, consulted 4 April 2017), this culture also resulted from the fusion between plenty of various origins and diverse social classes inhabitants: "Among this mix of European immigrants

to the region, descendants of African slaves and the natives of the region known as "criollos," a wide range of customs, beliefs and rituals were merged and transformed into a distinctive cultural identity." This could only become possible when Argentinian people were ready to acknowledge their black roots, as 40% of the population seems to have been black at the beginning of the XIXth century.

The inclusive character of the Tango culture is also highlighted and the community of people practicing celebrated: "As one of the most recognizable embodiments of that identity, the music, dance and poetry of tango both embodies and encourages diversity and cultural dialogue. It is practiced in the traditional dance halls of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, spreading the spirit of its community across the globe even as it adapts to new environments and changing times. That community today includes musicians, professional and amateur dancers, choreographers, composers, songwriters, teachers of the art and the national living treasures who embody the culture of tango."

Finally, the Unesco nomination file aims at relating the Tango phenomenon to a popular culture (a link that this dance may have lost as a result of its many migrations around the World). "Tango is also incorporated into celebrations of national heritage in Argentina and Uruguay, reflecting the widespread embrace of this popular urban music." This additional argument enables the Unesco to make tango correspond to one of the most fundamental reasons of creating intangible heritage, which is to protect a popular culture threatened of disappearing in the flood of globalization.

Should we give credit to this argument? How can Tango be compared, for instance, with the Merenge of the Dominican Republic (listed in 2010), or more interestingly with the Candombe, the other Uruguyan community practice also listed in 2009, on the intangible heritage list?

The Candombe is the musical expression of a black minority who performs on certain festive occasions. It is an Afro-Latino art form unique to Uruguay and the descendants of African slaves in the Southern region of South America. Drumplayers are walking in the streets on Sundays and Fest days to invite the public and the neighborhoods to the festivities. "Transmitted within families of African descent, the candombe is recognized as an expression of resistance as well as a Uruguyan musical celebration and collective social practice deeply interwoven in the daily life of these neighbourhoods. It is also a symbol and manifestation of the memory of the community, drawing former residents back on special days to the historical nucleus of candombe."

This kind of ancestor of the tango Negro, a kind of "cousin rhythm and dance," is still and active form of an expression of the history of the African slaves who were transported to southern America. While tango under Argentinian influence was deprived of all its black connotations until recently, candombe is obviously the Negro expression that was praised by the Unesco label. One cannot deny the politically correct aspect in the listing of both Candombe and Tango, as the world is largely unaware of Southern American culture that isn't steeped in the ancient roots of Indigenous people or European invaders and settlers. Candombe is a small step forward on the way of changing that reality.

The accession of the tango to universal heritage could be understood as a late endeavor to rehabilitate the disappearance of Black populations during the XIXth century. The movie *Tango*

Negro, The African Roots of Tango by Angolan filmmaker Dom Pedro explores the expression of Tango's Africanness and the contribution of African cultures in the creation of the tango. Tango was a reflection of the social life of the slaves that were taken to South America - including Argentina and Uruguay - mostly from central Africa, particularly from the former Congo Kingdom. Director Dom Pedro reveals the depth of the footprints of the African music on the tango in this rich movie combining musical performances and interviews from many tango fans and historians in Latin America and Europe, including the renowned Argentinean pianist Juan Carlos Caceres.

Should the World Intangible Heritage listing be about repairing the fractures made by history, and the denial of the black part of Argentina of a culture and a whole civilization?

The world heritage label certainly generated new waves of multilateral travel and migrations. Argentine and Uruguyan dancers leaving their native countries to settle all over the world as tango professors and the tango's aficionados flying to Buenos Aires and Montevideo in search of a "true tango". In Geneva, the Argentinian Alejandro de Benedictis generated a really successful trade around private and collective tango lessons. The tango amateurs of Almatango encouraged me and my partner to visit Argentina and discover some of the mythical milongas.

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