

DANCE, SENSES, URBAN CONTEXTS

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TANGO JOURNEYS – GOING ON A PILGRIMAGE TO BUENOS AIRES

Traveling to tango events is fundamental for connecting the international *tango argentino* dance community. In particular Buenos Aires, considered to be the cradle of *tango argentino*, is a prominent travel destination for tango dancers from all over the world. It is striking to note the similarities among individual journeys to Buenos Aires and concepts of pilgrimage. This paper examines the impact a pilgrimage to Buenos Aires has on the body, mind and social status of a tango dancer. In addition, it is shown that the tango pilgrimage can be considered to be an integral part and important element in the formation and preservation of the social structures and hierarchies within the international tango dance community.

Keywords: tango argentine; pilgrimage; international scene networks; Buenos Aires

*Tango argentino*¹ dancers are travelers. A local *milonga* with relatively advanced dancers, who know each other well but did not meet in a while, could involve the following conversation:

"Have you been to some *milongas* recently?" "Yeah, I was in Carynthia at this lovely festival, but the *milonga* was not so good, many beginners, and I knew all of the good dancers." "Oh, too bad. But didn't you get into this *encuentro* in Northern Italy?" "Yes! That was tango heaven. So sorry you could not come – but where did you dance recently?" "I went to Berlin last month and checked all of the *milongas* there. The best dances I had for a long time were in this little, traditional *milonga* in the city center – almost felt like Buenos Aires!" "Oh right – you went to Buenos Aires for some weeks last winter! I wish I could go there some time soon!"

This fictional dialogue touches on several important issues that define and shape not only individual tango dancers, but the international tango dance community outside of Argentina as a whole. Traveling to tango events, and in particular, a journey to Buenos Aires, is an important part of a tango dancer's life. In fact, this particular journey has such an importance, that it can be considered a pilgrimage. In this paper, I will first address how traveling is connected in a complex way to the structure of the international tango community. The main topic will be to discuss how journeys to Buenos Aires change the body, mind and social status of tango dancers. Finally, I will show how the social structure of the international tango scene can better be understood through the phenomenon of traveling in general, and the Buenos Aires pilgrimage in particular.

Why do *tangueros* and *tangueras* travel?

An important part of being a *tanguero* or *tanguera*², is to dance with new people. Of course most tango dancers also enjoy dancing in their local community, but this might not be

¹ Please note that when referring to the genre, throughout the text the term *tango argentino* is used. For the sake of readability, this has been reduced to "tango" whenever it is used as an adjective (e.g. tango dancer, tango music).

satisfying in the long run. The potential thrill of getting to know a new dance partner and discover new physical communication and dialogue options in the close embrace dance connection, coupled with the possibility of getting into a flow³ feeling with an unknown partner, causes them to dance in other locations than their home tango scene as often as possible.

Dancers may also go on a journey to rejoin tango dancers they have met before, and with whom they enjoyed dancing. Often, tango dancers will choose to travel to tango events not only because of the location and particular promotions, but also because of the presence of their favorite tango dancers. Connected to this is the need to meet tango dancers at the same level of expertise. For advanced *tangueras* and *tangueros* in particular, it might be difficult to have enough dance partners to train and dance with in their home community, because small local scenes tend to be very heterogeneous in terms of skill level. Hence, as soon as they have reached a certain level of dancing skill, tango dancers will start to travel, and through this, strengthen the ties of the international tango network.

Finally, tango dancers might want to take classes with renowned tango teachers who are not available in their local community.⁴ Accordingly, when asked why they travel, tango dancers will state that they wish to dance with known and unknown people, to take classes, or to escape the low dancing level of the local scene.⁵

Tangueros and *tangueras* travel to festivals, *encuentros* or tango marathons in order to satisfy those needs. Festivals usually last a long weekend and include evening dances (*milongas*), daily classes with renowned teachers, tango cafes (afternoon *milongas*) and often at least one evening with live music and a tango show dance. Festival tango audiences are very mixed in terms of skill and style. Tango marathons are also weekend events, but they are composed of *milongas* only, daytime and evening. There are no live musicians and no tango classes, the only featured artists of marathons are invited and celebrated tango DJs. The average level of dancing at a marathon is usually higher than at festivals – some tango marathons are limited access events, with an equal leader/follower quota and a basic check of tango experience. Finally, *encuentros* are restricted elite tango meetings, very controversially discussed. Similar to marathons, these tango meetings also last a weekend and focus on day- and nighttime *milongas* with professional DJs. Tango dancers have to apply to take part, and since there are many more applicants than spaces available, it can be difficult to secure access to an internationally famous *encuentro*. The level of social dancing at *encuentros* in Europe is

² A tango dancer who frequently dances at *milongas* is a *milonguero* / *milonguera*. Since this term – though possibly the most appropriate – is not yet common in European tango networks, the alternative designation *tanguero* / *tanguera* will be used throughout this paper.

³ The concept of flow has been developed by Csíkszentmihályi [1975] to capture the different state of mind that occurs in moments of intense practice of and full immersion in an occupation or art. For an analysis of flow moments and the implications of close embrace practice in *tango argentino* also see Zubarik [2013].

⁴ Another, more intense form of learning with tango teachers of one's choice is to go on organized tango holidays. The concept of such holidays is that a group of students joins their teachers on an "all inclusive" holiday, which typically includes a stay in a hotel, daily classes and evening *milongas* as a package.

⁵ For a first introduction into the international scene structures of tango dance practice see Stepputat [2015:337].

reliably high, which is one of the important reasons why tango dancers who have become members of these networks prefer *encuentros* to all other international tango dance events.

Traveling to Buenos Aires

When asked in an interview, if he had been to Buenos Aires already, an experienced tango dancer stated: "No, I have not done that part of the journey yet. But I will..." [Lee 2015 5:19].

The city of Buenos Aires is unquestionably the cradle of *tango argentino*, where migrants from Europe – mostly Italian – together with American locals and African former slaves developed a new style of playing music and dancing to it, roughly around the turn of the 20th century (e.g. Torp 2007). Although other cities were also involved in developing and fostering the style further – for instance Montevideo and Paris – it is Buenos Aires that is associated most with tango "authenticity".⁶ Buenos Aires is inseparably linked to the genesis and history of *tango argentino*, but it is also considered to be the most important city for *tango argentino* today, with a most lively, active, and large tango dance and music scene – the biggest worldwide – comprised of dancers of all ages and social backgrounds, supported by many tango schools, private teachers, musicians, *milongas*, *prácticas*, concerts, and so forth. Buenos Aires is therefore highly attractive to many tango dancers from outside the city, because here, dancers and musicians will find all the important elements of their culture in the most intense and conveniently accessible way. Further, above the attraction of the large present day tango scene and the historical tango connotations, the "concept" of Buenos Aires bears even more that attracts tango dancers to travel and stay there.

Howe, in her article about queer pilgrimages to San Francisco states: "Anthropologists have, for decades, noted how places are made mythical through the telling of stories and the singing of songs" [Howe 2001:35]. This phenomenon is very obvious in a city, which is connected to *tango argentino* so intensely that more than 30 tango songs are dedicated to it.⁷ One such example is the famous "Mi Buenos Aires Querido" from 1934, with lyrics by Alfredo le Pera, composed and sung by Carlos Gardel. The piece has become popular as the title song of a musical film from 1936. The first stanza includes the following lyrics:

[...] Hoy que la suerte quiere que te vuelva a ver ciudad porteña de mi único querer y oigo la queja de un bandoneón dentro del pecho pide rienda el corazón. [...]	[...] Now that my fortune has me seeing you once more, the only city that I've ever hankered for, hearing the plaintive bandoneon, my heart inside me wants to break out on its own. ⁸ [...]
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⁶ Though written almost 20 years ago and in its analysis predating current cosmopolitan tango phenomena, the article "Globalization and the tango" by Goertzen and Azzi accurately describes tourists' search for tango authenticity and nostalgia in Buenos Aires [Goertzen, Azzi 1999:70–72].

⁷ This number was found on Todo Tango, the most comprehensive online archive of tango music, lyrics and general information [Todo Tango ≤ 2017].

⁸ Translation by Coby Lubliner [Lubliner ≤ 2017].

The song is not only a praise of Buenos Aires the city, it also links the city to *tango argentino* in two aspects: Musically, because the song is a *tango canción* (sung tango), written and performed by the most important and famous tango singer, Carlos Gardel [Collier 1986; Ruffinelli 2004]. Semantically, because the lyrics mention the primary tango instrument, the *bandoneon*, as a metaphor for the city's voice. The first stanza also includes lyrics that convey exactly what is needed to mystify a place and make it particularly attractive to members of the tango culture: Idealization and romanticization of a past that can be reconstructed in the present, associated with a longing to be there, or more precisely, to return. It is not necessarily contradictory to think of "returning" to a place one has never been to. A community that is spread over urban areas in a vast number of countries, and that is, in accordance with Turino, a "cosmopolitan cultural formation", has no "homeland" [Turino 2003:62].⁹ But apparently, communities of any form do develop the need to have a place or homeland, which they refer to, mystify and strive to visit.¹⁰ Although members of such cultural formations may not originate from this place, they can feel their culture or religion does, and hence 'returning' there can become an important part of the practice as members of the community.

A further aspect is the wish to get as close to a real or imagined past as is physically possible. Rountree [2002] emphasizes that a journey to a particular pilgrimage site is not only based on the wish to visit the present location and its features, but also to connect to the past and an often romanticized and idealized bygone time: "The site provides the constant, material link between the past and present worlds" [Rountree 2002:484]. This certainly applies to Buenos Aires and visiting tango dancers in search of the *Época de Oro* (golden age) of *tango argentino*. The *Época de Oro* is considered to be roughly from the mid-1930s to the 1950s [Link, Wendland 2016:137–199]. In most professional *milongas* today, anywhere in the international tango scene, only music from this period is played. In addition, the past 10 years have seen a strong increase in dance styles which try to adapt, copy or reconstruct tango dance styles that predate the more modern developments of the late 1980s. These earlier styles, termed *estilo milonguero*, *estilo apilado*, *estilo del centro*,¹¹ focus on close embrace, intense bodily communication between dance partners, and rather small movements. Currently, most experienced *tangueras* and *tangueros* follow this trend and put their focus on the intimate knowledge of the *Época de Oro* tango music repertoire and the danced embodiment of this music in close embrace style. The *Época de Oro* is the idealized past of the current international tango culture, a past the present-day tango practitioner has not been a part of, but wishes to have been. Consequently, Buenos Aires, the city where this past took place, is the best option and physically closest connection a *tanguero* or *tanguera* can have to these

⁹ The international tango scene can also very fittingly be identified as a cosmopolitan cultural formation as defined by Turino in his 2003 article [2003:61–63].

¹⁰ For several examples of pilgrimage journeys to mystified places see Howe [2001] for the case of the San Francisco queer community, and also the phenomenon of the *hajj* carried out by Muslims from Southeast Asia [Miller 2006] or Turkey [Delaney 1990].

¹¹ See Krüger for an analysis of close embrace compared to open embrace tango dance styles [Krüger 2012:188–195]. Also see Sabá for some – debatable – descriptions of these close embrace styles [Sabá 2010:71–78].

bygone times. Of course, this past cannot really be there, but it is felt to be embodied in the current tango practice – here in the true sense of tango as intangible cultural heritage.¹²

When looking at the journey to Buenos Aires from an analytical outsider perspective, and also, by experiencing it as a practicing insider, it quickly becomes obvious that the journey means more than going there for *milongas* or intense classes. If the journey to Buenos Aires is endowed with mystical and romanticized meaning, and possibly even spiritual value for some members of the tango culture, can the journey be seen as a modern pilgrimage?

Traveling to Buenos Aires: tourism or pilgrimage

Anthropologists have debated whether pilgrims are tourists and tourists are pilgrims for more than three decades (e.g. Turner, Turner 1978). This topic, including different philosophical approaches, has been comprehensively reviewed by Rountree [2002:477–478]. She concludes that it is generally agreed upon that pilgrimages and tourism journeys do not constitute a dichotomy, instead pilgrimages of today can be seen as a form of tourism. In addition to this, the term pilgrimage in the 21st century is often used in a broader sense, including for instance spiritual and 'fandom' journeys that do not necessarily have a religious connotation. Within this field of pilgrimage traveling, it is hard to differentiate between modern, secular pilgrimages and regular journeys within the realm of cultural tourism.¹³ Richards defines cultural tourism as "the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs" [Richards 1996:24]. Cultural tourism is of growing importance within the tourism industry, and it caters to the needs of culturally interested people who have the finances and mobility to go to such places that "satisfy" their interest. This is certainly also the basis for pilgrimages, but in order to be defined as a pilgrimage, I argue that a journey needs to involve more connotations than "cultural interest" for the traveler, a few of which I will address.¹⁴

Many cultures and religions have their own forms of pilgrimage, and every pilgrim will have a different experience, which is in fact one of the basic features of a pilgrimage, as Bohlman points out: "pilgrimage is a complex phenomenon, with each pilgrimage by definition individualized" [Bohlman 1996:375–376]. Yet several general features that can be found in all forms of pilgrimage allow a phenomenon to be termed "pilgrimage" instead of regular cultural tourism. I want to quote Rountree, paraphrasing Morinis: "the pilgrimage is a journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal" [Rountree 2002:482]. This certainly applies to *tangueros and tangueras* traveling to Buenos Aires, as has been shown above.

¹² For an analysis and critique of the declaration of tango as intangible cultural heritage by the UNESCO see Stepputat [2015].

¹³ A very recent edited volume focuses on the diverse motivations for modern pilgrimages, or, as the editors call them in the title, "sacred mobilities" [Maddrell, Gale, Terry 2015].

¹⁴ Financial aspects surrounding a pilgrimage are a further, very broad topic. Due to limited space these important aspects of pilgrimage traveling must be excluded here. For general insights into the business surrounding an organized pilgrimage see Miller [2006], for monetary impacts on the visited places see Stokes [1991]. Stepputat [2015] has addressed the issue of how the "authenticity" factor and the phenomenon "tango" are used in advertising journeys to Buenos Aires.

A further important part of any pilgrimage is the personal transformation it causes in the pilgrim [Howe 2001:42]. A journey to Buenos Aires, as I will show in the following, bears diverse forms of individual transformation that in my view qualify it as a modern, secular pilgrimage.

Transformations: body, mind and status

The individual transformation of a pilgrim is an important part of his or her journey. Of course, the transformation may not be felt, achieved and sustained equally by all pilgrims. In general, a transformation can occur mainly in three aspects: the body, the mind, and the social status in the community. In the following, I will look at these three aspects separately and show how they can manifest in tango dancers' pilgrimages to Buenos Aires.

The changes in tango dancer's bodies are the first and most obvious to occur. *Tangueros* and *tangueras* who temporarily stay in Buenos Aires strive to dance there as much as possible. Most take an incredible number of classes and private lessons throughout their stay, and go to *prácticas* and *milongas* almost every day. By means of this intense training, their style of dancing might change drastically, and their skill level tends to rise significantly – much faster than it could back home in their local community. Accordingly, a *tanguera* who had been to Buenos Aires several times stated: "Three weeks in Buenos Aires is worth three years back home!" [Scheiber 2015]. Tango pilgrims will therefore embody their experiences in Buenos Aires directly and continuously through a change in their dancing skill.¹⁵

An additional, very strongly embodied moment, which is desired on tango pilgrimages to Buenos Aires is the increased experience of flow at a *milonga* (see Czíkszentmihályi 1975). Although every *tanguero* and *tanguera* strives for those moments of full immersion, they might not come as often as wished (and for some, not at all). A feeling of flow is an idealized outcome and most intensely hoped for from a dance at one of the tango homeland *milongas*. Whether or not *tangueros* and *tangueras* will experience more flow moments in Buenos Aires, the embodied experience of intense training is a given, and its impact generally remains for a significant time even after the return home.

Transformations in the mind are much harder to see and grasp, but definitely exist. As stated before, the pilgrimage experience is an individual one, and the effects on the mind of a pilgrim can diverse. But what probably all tango pilgrims have in common is a personal increase in insights into the Buenos Aires tango scene, and thereby the possibility to talk about the city and the experiences from an individual perspective.

Changes in attitude and increasing insights probably occur at every cultural tourism journey and are not unique features of pilgrimages. Yet they are the basis for a definite transformation in the state of mind in at least one aspect, which is self-esteem. Tango dancers who have gone to Buenos Aires will, consciously or unconsciously, experience a rise in "tango self-confidence". Their perceived rise in skill and experience, coupled with a certain pride of having made the journey to Buenos Aires, leads to more confidence in their tango abilities and personal tango development.¹⁶ An increased tango self-confidence is not only felt internally,

¹⁵ Embodiment of experience is a very common feature in pilgrimage reports, see in particular Rountree [2002].

¹⁶ For a general introduction into shyness as opposed to self-confident behavior, and the corresponding body language, communication and social rules, see Crozier [1990; 2001], also Manning, Ray [1993].

but can also have effects on daily tango life. I would like to give one example from personal experience: After I went to Buenos Aires for three weeks in summer 2015, I was invited to many more dances with good dancers at *milongas* back in Europe, even if the other dancers did not know me or had not seen me dancing before.¹⁷ The correlation between the pilgrimage experience, perception of it by the pilgrim and reactions towards the pilgrim by other dancers, are not causally verifiable, but they are significantly supported by my own observations and similar descriptions from fellow tango dancers throughout central Europe. My assumption is that recent Buenos Aires travelers carry themselves differently, probably more upright, with a firm gaze and "knowledgeable smile", grounded on a certain pride of now belonging to those who have been to Buenos Aires, and in turn, a higher tango self-confidence gained through the pilgrimage experience. Such difference in physical appearance may cause other tango dancers, consciously or unconsciously, to judge the person to be a better tango dancer, worth being invited to dance.

Finally, there is a significant change in the social status of a dancer within the tango community. Tango scenes are always structured hierarchically. The rank of a scene member generally depends on her or his skill in dancing, involvement in the local scene, and duration of membership.¹⁸ In addition to these aspects, there is also the perceived difference between those who have been to Buenos Aires, and those who have not. This is very much in accordance with organized pilgrimages as for instance the Muslim pilgrimage *hajj* to Mecca. According to Delaney, a *hajj* "significantly changes the status of a person, and with that [...] the daily life. Highly regarded, respected, treated differently" [Delaney 1990:520]. Similarly, although a tango journey bears no religious connotations, after the return from Buenos Aires, tango dancers are treated differently in their tango community: with "more respect" and "in higher regard". Special treatment of people who have made the journey to Buenos Aires contributes to and manifests the social hierarchy within the local scene.¹⁹ Although no *tanguero/a* will openly judge a tango dancer who has not been to Buenos Aires, there are ways in which those who have made the pilgrimage show their status and their "insider" perspective, consciously or not. Status manifestation behaviors include dialogues on *prácticas* or *milongas*, during which tango dancers ask each other questions about their trips, compare experiences with teachers in Buenos Aires, share stories about particularly well-known *milongas* and good or bad dance experiences, or present their newly bought shoes and dance wear. While doing so, they might not only exchange stories, but also rank and judge others'

¹⁷ Asking for a dance at a *milonga* is currently mostly done by a ritual exchange of glances by a leader and a follower. If the follower looks at a leader (*mirada*) the leader can answer with a nod (*cabeceo*) – both are in agreement that they want to dance with each other. Only then will they walk toward each other and start to dance. This ritual for inviting someone to dance has the great advantage that nobody is publicly humiliated if a dance partner refuses an invitation. On the other hand, *mirada/cabeceo* (in circumstances where dancers do not yet know each other) is mainly based on the visual appearance of potential dance partners.

¹⁸ For an introduction into scene structures and the establishing of hierarchies therein see Hitzler, Niederbacher [2010:186].

¹⁹ Of course all statements made here are generalizations and simplifications. Such structures might not be present in all international tango communities, for a variety of reasons.

tales in relation to their own, and thereby, validate their own experiences and their gained status in the group.

Another obvious manifestation of the importance of the trip to Buenos Aires within the tango community in relation to social status is authentication, in particular for those tango dancers who aspire to a professional career as a teacher or performer. They must make the pilgrimage, in part, to legitimize and authenticate their status as advanced, knowledgeable and serious tango dancers. Of course, this authentication – as 'authenticity' in performing arts in general – is not a measurable, objective term. Instead the presence or absence of authenticity is a negotiable entity, based on the judgment and valuation of both the practitioner and the observer.²⁰ In the case of *tango argentino*, the tango community and potential tango students mostly assume that teachers from Buenos Aires have greater skill, because of their embeddedness in the 'original' scene and perceived closeness to the source of the tango. If teachers cannot offer such a 'certificate of origin', the next best thing and only option is authentication by traveling to Buenos Aires.²¹

A last point I want to mention is the issue of relics.²² Pilgrimages often involve returning with material goods connected to the experiences, insights acquired or status gained [Rountree 2002:480]. In religious pilgrimages, such relics can include all kinds of personal keepsakes or souvenirs catering to the taste of the pilgrim. Tango dancers have their relics too, which include particular tango practice dance wear, fancy *milonga* dresses or pants, and especially, many shoes.

Authority of interpretation

Few tango tourists would call their trips to Buenos Aires pilgrimages. The ethnographer should not argue with this emic perspective. A cultural studies perspective however, might endow more interpretive authority to the researcher, allowing us to see structures, concepts and phenomena other than those, which the studied group may be aware of. The researcher adhering to this approach could therefore state: a tango dancer traveling to Buenos Aires is undertaking a pilgrimage without knowing, or at least, without being aware of the resemblance the journey has to a pilgrimage. Being a *tanguera* myself, I do not want anybody to tell me that I am a secular pilgrim if I don't consider myself to be one. To solve this conceptual, emic/etic and analytic/experience dilemma, it might be helpful to phrase the phenomenon in a less judgmental, more rhetorical way: Tango journeys to Buenos Aires bear definite features of secular pilgrimages, although they might not be perceived to be ones by *tangueros and tangueras*.

Summary and conclusion: Impact for understanding the tango community

The aim of this paper was to look at the journey to Buenos Aires as an important part of the international tango culture. I have shown that the journey bears a strong resemblance to the

²⁰ For a thorough, general discussion of the authenticity issue in the performing arts see Gibson, Connell [2005].

²¹ Performers who work interculturally are often judged from ethnocentric or orientalist biased perspectives. For a short historical overview of the phenomenon see Grau [1992:13], for possible authentication strategies for performers also see Brunner, Parzer [2011:161–171].

²² See Trainor [2010] for an introduction into the meaning and use of relics.

phenomena of modern pilgrimages, especially through the perceived mystification of the city through stories and songs, the experienced link to the past (*Época de Oro*) through the place, and the transformation of the tango pilgrim in terms of body, mind, and social status in the tango community.

Although the tango journey to Buenos Aires can be considered a secular pilgrimage, *tangueras* and *tangueros* may not consider it to be one. Much more important than deciding whether it is a pilgrimage or not from an analytical standpoint, is to look at the journey from a phenomenological point of view, and from there, determine the impact of this journey for community formation and as it shapes the scene-inherent social structures.

The international tango scene is very hierarchically organized, with elite structures on a local and international network level. A socially accepted and generally desired pilgrimage, that changes the social status of a tango culture member significantly, and dividing people into those who have been and those who have not, strongly reinforces the hierarchical social structure of the scene. Thinking of the journey to Buenos Aires as a pilgrimage helps to explain how elite structures and hierarchies within the international *tango argentino* scene network are shaped and retained.

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