

Dance, Narratives, Heritage

Dance and Narratives

Dance as Intangible and Tangible Cultural Heritage

**28th Symposium of the ICTM
Study Group on Ethnochoreology
7–17 July 2014
Korčula, Croatia**

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**ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology
Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research
Zagreb, Croatia
2015**

Symposium 2014

7 – 17 July

International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM)

Study Group on Ethnochoreology

The 28th Symposium was organized by the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology, and hosted by the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in cooperation with Korčula Tourist Board

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Cover design: Maša Hrvatin

Cover photograph: Andrija Carli, © 2015, Turistička zajednica Dubrovačko-neretvanske županije

Printers: Denona

Printed copies: 200

© 2015, Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research

ISBN: 978-953-6020-98-0

Cataloguing in Publication Data (CIP) is available in the Catalogue of the National and University Library in Zagreb under the number 000909364



Hrvatsko povjerenstvo za UNESCO
Croatian Commission for UNESCO
Commission croate pour l'UNESCO

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

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TANGO, THE NOT QUITE INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

"The Tango" was declared UNESCO World Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2009, jointly nominated by Uruguay and Argentina. Tango Argentino's development began in the Rio de la Plata area, but in present times, there is much more to "the tango," on an international scale, than being a "sign of identity" there. An in-depth study of the discrepancy between the contents of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) nomination and the current international, cosmopolitan tango practice shows that several political and economic factors were the agenda behind the nomination, explaining the deliberate exclusion of facts. Furthermore, it can be seen that the evaluation practice for ICH nominations in 2009 could not provide a corrective, finally leading to the inscription.

Keywords: Buenos Aires; *tango*; Tango Argentino; Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH); UNESCO; cultural tourism

In 2009, the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage added "The Tango" to the Representative List of World Intangible Heritage of Humanity [UNESCO 2009a:online]. From an outside view, this seems to be a conventional course of events: A regional performing arts genre is added to the UNESCO list of intangible heritage and is then internationally promoted, to raise the awareness of its current state and practice. However, a closer, emic look unveils a substantial discrepancy between the *tango's* current manifestation, and the contents of the nomination. An in-depth investigation into this occurrence uncovers economic and political agendas behind the nomination and its acceptance, shedding light on the process that led to a considerably questionable decision.¹

"the tango" - not "tango argentino"?

In discourse about "tango," researchers and practitioners put emphasis on the differentiation between standardized *tango* and the historically older version of *tango* that derived in the Rio de la Plata region. The current disparity in terms of dance practice and movement repertoire is usually made explicit by using differing terminology, which is "ballroom tango" or "English tango" on one side, and "tango rioplatense" or "tango argentino" on the other. Nevertheless, the term "tango" without additional designation can stand for both genres, usually in situations where a differentiation is not necessary.

As stated earlier, the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (henceforth UNESCO) inscribed "The Tango" to the Intangible Cultural Heritage (henceforth ICH) representative list. However, the naming does not imply that all forms of *tango* are included here. The nomination states that "Tango is considered nowadays one of the fundamental signs of the Rio de la Plata's identity" [UNESCO 2009b:online]. This implies, that the Rioplatense version of the *tango* is the sole object of this nomination, referring to both its genesis and presence in the region. The most probable reason for leaving out the signifier "Argentino" to make the term non-ambiguous is, that *tango* was jointly nominated by Argentina and Uruguay. The alternative, more neutral term "Rioplatense" was probably not taken into consideration because it is mostly limited to intellectual discourse on the topic, which might have been confusing for *tango* practitioners and a broader public.

The performing arts culture of Tango Argentino consists of music, dance and poetry, all strongly connected to each other, with specialist, professional as well as

laymen practitioners active in all of these categories. Although Tango Argentino has its roots in the Rio de la Plata region, where it was developed into a genre mainly by migrants from Europe around the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century,² it is currently practiced internationally, mostly by members of urban elites in cities throughout Europe, the Americas, and Asia. Although local Tango Argentino dance and music scenes might be rather small,³ they are strongly connected to each other through media and travel. Some bigger scenes – both in terms of dance and music practice – are central in particular regions yet the geographic power center, considered to be leading in trends and values, is Buenos Aires. Tango Argentino is hence a prime example of a cosmopolitan genre [Turino 2003:61–62].

Possible reasons for the ICH acceptance

The current state of Tango Argentino practice is not a typical ICH performing arts genre, as defined in the initial convention from 2003, where ICH is regarded as "transmitted from generation to generation, [...] constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, [...] and provid[ing] them with a sense of identity and continuity" [UNESCO 2003:online]. What is assumed in this definition is the notion of *regional* manifestation and continuity of an ICH element. In addition, States Parties – as sole beneficiaries to nominate elements to the UNESCO ICH program – "are encouraged to propose national, subregional or regional programmes, projects and activities" [UNESCO 2014a:online], which means, that only elements that are practised on their territory can be nominated. Hence, if the element is practiced *internationally* – in more than the claiming states – and people of various origins and backgrounds identify with it, in a strict sense, it would not fulfill the ICH requirements. However, in 2010, the *flamenco* was added to the representative list; the way *flamenco* is practiced on an international scale, yet firmly rooted in its Spanish context, is very similar to the Tango Argentino case. Obviously, the ICH agenda is changing towards the acceptance of genres with a clearly defined regional history and an international current practice.⁴

Besides this current tendency, there are two hypothetical assumptions how Tango Argentino could nevertheless suit the criteria back in 2009. First, "community" could be defined more broadly, including *tango* practitioners from various backgrounds and origins. Following this premise, if the international *tango* community and their performing arts practice were the bearer of the *tango* tradition, which country would have the right to declare it "their" cultural heritage? Since international *tango* practice is in a continuous state of flux, with local scenes vanishing and rising again – due to various social, political or economic reasons – it would be impossible to decide which nations should be in- or excluded. This theoretical scenario is plainly impractical and would even counteract the idea of UNESCO ICH – where only state parties can nominate – in its current form.

A second assumption could be, that the *tango* practice in the Rio de la Plata region is defined as *one part* of the international *tango* culture. The nominated element should then appropriately be named "tango as practiced in the Rio de la Plata region", not "the tango". In addition, it should probably at least be acknowledged that the element is practiced on a much wider scale, as has for instance – successfully – been done in the *flamenco* nomination [UNESCO 2010:online]. It is likely, that in the *tango* nomination – where all references to the international practice of the genre have been left out, claiming a part of a culture as "the" culture – such references would have been considered not to be in accordance with UNESCO standards and demands, leading to a reject.

Albeit all of these obvious facts that could have prevented the inscription, Tango Argentino was added to the representative list. This instance is better understandable

through a short examination of the evaluation process. First of all, several key elements that are explicitly mentioned to act in favor of an acceptance have been made use of in the nomination. One of them is, that Uruguay and Argentina jointly nominated "The Tango" and thereby showed, that occurring conflicts about cultural heritage issues might be soothed with this declaration. According to several UNESCO public statements and publications, this is one of the aims in establishing the ICH program, encouraging multinational applications [UNESCO 2012:online].

In addition, it is important for the acceptance of a genre to have local organizations – as representatives for the "community" – that will be responsible for the monitoring and maintenance of the genre after its nomination. The application listed eight institutions from Argentina and nine from Uruguay, and a large number of potential projects to further nourish the *tango's* development and visibility, which for the committee obviously was a clear sign that the genre is sufficiently rooted in the community and an awareness about its state of being is present, both significant factors for an acceptance as for example Lixinski, focusing on the interplay between communities and state parties, has shown [Lixinski 2011:90]. But the most important fact that explains the acceptance although the contents of the application differs from the actual status of the subject matter is the evaluation process itself.⁵

In the course of the 2009 evaluation, there were no travels to location, and no additional research was initiated, let alone paid for. All six members of the commission who formed the Subsidiary Body responsible for evaluating all submitted nominations – and suggesting rejects and inscriptions to the commission – had to rely mainly on the contents of the application. Moreover, although experts could be appointed for advice on such decisions, there was no established process of reviewing the applications and their contents by experts of and in the field.⁶ Considering all of this, it might be understandable, that the decision was made in favor of "the tango" without the hesitation an expert in the field of *tango* outside of the Rio de la Plata region might have had.

The Subsidiary Body followed the nomination's terminology and argument in stating, that the *tango* is "one of the main manifestations of identity for the inhabitants of the Río de la Plata region" [UNESCO 2009c:online], thereby excluding *tango* practice outside of the region and by *non-porteños* from the declaration. Differentiating terminologically maybe done unconsciously on behalf of the Committee. We find the words "practice" and "identity" in connection to *tango* in the Rio de la Plata region versus terms like "adapted" or "known" for *tango* outside of the region [UNESCO 2009b:online]. The notion that the local practice is of higher value than the international practice is present in both the nomination and the acceptance.

Possible agendas behind the ICH application

Considering the particular wording of the nomination, an important agenda behind it was probably the urge to re-claim the *tango* as local heritage with the help of the ICH convention. This is done by describing the genre not in the way it is actually manifest, but in a way it is desired to be.

A further argument supports this assumption. Europe's intense influence on the Tango Argentino development in the twentieth century – inside and outside of the Rio de la Plata area – is left out entirely. Yet, at one point in the application, the fact that Tango Argentino is practiced in Europe is mentioned, but in such a way that it seems to support the heritage argument: "Europeans understand Tango as music of [...] a sensual dance in which the man leads the woman in a series of exaggerated movements, twisting her torso in a way uncommon in our cities [...]. As a consequence of this distorted image, it is vital to inscribe Tango [...] in order to secure its visibility as an essential expression and

authentic product" [UNESCO 2009b:online] This statement can be broken down to the assertion that outside (European) influences destroy the essence and authenticity of *tango*, an instance that should be counteracted by this declaration.

Apart from the fact that what the "essentials" and "authentic" features of Tango Argentino are is not discussed in the application, this assertion follows outdated concepts of culture and is not in accordance with current academic explanatory models. Moreover, it simply ignores the fact that the historical and ongoing interaction between American and European influences was and is essential, both for music and dance, for the development and current manifestation of the *tango* culture in Buenos Aires and elsewhere. In addition, there is no such thing as "the" *tango*: within the cosmopolitan *tango* scene, and in the Rio de la Plata region, different styles and sub-genres of Tango Argentino coexist. All of these have followers and critics, and a lot of debate about the originality or appropriateness of certain genres is ever active. In other words, what for one person is "Tango Argentino" might differ tremendously from the next.

As quoted above, the nomination states, that a "distorted image" of the *tango* is prevailing. It might be a noble cause to counteract this visual misimpression by promoting another form of *tango*, but doing so by declaring *tango* to be UNESCO ICH is probably naïve. Indeed, and unfortunately so, many advertisements and *tango* references outside, and sometimes also inside *tango* culture, make use of images from "tango fantasía" or "tango escenario", a *tango* style developed particularly for staged performance. If the movement repertoire of this style is compared with socially danced *tango*, it can be described with far reaching movements ("exaggerated") and a lot of turns, whirling, and acrobatic moves ("twisted torsos"). Such visuals of staged *tango* are the picture many non-*tango* dancers have of "the tango" [see Kämpfe 2007:87]. If the reason for the declaration was to cleanse the image of *tango*, this goal was not reached. It is rather obvious that any kind of media will not access different footage from their archives just because *tango* was declared UNESCO ICH, and marketing strategies will continue to provide their target audience with what they expect to see.

Apart from these two possible agendas – the reclaiming of a local heritage and the trial to recondition the Tango Argentino's visual image – there is one more agenda behind the nomination, which has been extensively elaborated on by the authors Schettini, Almarón, and Bracco. In their article, they analyze the connection of the application to tourism as an important economic factor for the Argentinian economy. Buenos Aires makes intense use of international popularity to advertise the city for cultural tourism. The *tango*'s authors convincingly show, that the actual reason for the nomination of *tango* for the ICH list can probably be found in economic reasons. They state, that to successfully promote a region in the very competitive and still growing tourism market, it has to have an elevated, marketable value. In cultural tourism, they conclude, it currently is common practice that nation states or regions will have their heritage (tangible and intangible) added to the UNESCO list to gain "accredited" cultural status, and they explicate that this is exactly what was intended by nominating the *tango* and thereby giving it "unquestioned legitimacy" (*legitimidad indiscutida*) [Schettini; Almarón; Bracco 2011:1044]. If this third reason and agenda is valid, it turns the original idea of the UNESCO safeguarding upside down: UNESCO is not providing service and help for a local heritage in lack of visibility; instead the UNESCO ICH program is used as a tool to promote an already widely acknowledged, lively and blossoming heritage, turning the heritage into a commodity for economic reasons.⁷ If this was the main aim and agenda behind the application, it succeeded. Numbers in tourism in Argentina are reportedly still growing, with more and more *tango* dancers from Europe, North America, and Asia traveling to Buenos Aires to experience Tango Argentino at the perceived core of the

culture. In addition, the UNESCO status is heavily used in international advertisements; the legitimization by UNESCO, as assumed, is a strong selling point.

Summary, conclusion, and outlook

Tango was probably nominated as UNESCO ICH for mainly two, closely connected reasons: first, to use UNESCO as a label of legitimization in order to boost international cultural tourism in Buenos Aires, and second, to re-claim the culture for Argentina and Uruguay. Due to a lack of review and evaluation possibilities, the UNESCO ICH commission had to rely on suggestions made by the Subsidiary Body, who based its evaluations mostly on the contents of the applications. The fact that Argentina and Uruguay put forward a joint nomination, in combination with the proper phrasing and emphasis on particular practices in the application, was the probable reason for the acceptance.

I conclude this chapter with a provocative quotation: "While the Representative List has contributed to increasing the visibility of the Convention and to raising awareness about intangible cultural heritage, its relative importance is overrated." This quote, which stems from the 2013 UNESCO internal evaluation report [Torggler; Sediakina-Rivière 2013], brings the whole ICH debate in connection to the *Tango Argentino* to a disillusioning point; if an element is nominated or not is not particularly important to the element itself, though the nomination process supports the visibility of the element – and the ICH representative list itself. Findings from the development after the *tango* has been declared ICH support this view: During the last five years, no changes in the *tango* culture – both inside and outside of the Rio de la Plata region – that could be directly linked to its status as UNESCO ICH surfaced, and it is unlikely, that this will change in the near future.

Endnotes

1. This article does not judge the concept or current practice of the UNESCO ICH program in general. Critique is aimed at the particular case of inscribing *Tango Argentino* in the representative list in 2009. I thank Naila Ceribašić for providing valuable comments and pointing out useful UNESCO documents for the preparation of this article.
2. For thorough investigations into the genesis and early development of the *tango* into a genre, see the overview of Hispanistic approaches by Kohan (2007), for references to the connections with European traditions, see Torp (2006) as well as Thompson (2006) for a focus on African elements.
3. See for example analyses of how the *tango* disseminated into Europe and northern America in the late twentieth century by Goertzen/Azzi (1999) or Kämpfe (2007).
4. According to Naila Ceribašić, the interpretation of criteria for the inscription of an element is not static but constantly developing with the aim to get "more and more clear"[Ceribašić 2014]; therefore decisions made in 2009 might not be based on the same assumptions and interpretations as current decisions, which explains certain trends and seemingly inconsistent determinations.
5. This part of my presentation is based on informal conversations with Wim van Zanten, the former ICTM representative at the UNESCO Commission [Zanten 2014], and Naila Ceribašić, the current ICTM representative [Ceribašić 2013, 2014].
6. This procedure is improved significantly by the new Evaluation Body, consisting of six experts and six NGO representatives, responsible for the evaluation of nominations for all four parts of the ICH convention's programs, see decision 9.COM 11 [UNESCO 2014b:online].
7. Also see literature on commodification practices in connection to cultural tourism, for example, Smith/Robinson (2009), Gibson/Connell (2005).

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