

Migrating heritage: The reappropriation of tango through the UNESCO

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Abstract

Dismissed at the time of its emergence in the XIXth century on the shores of the Rio de La Plata as a dance of the Black and loose immigrant communities of Argentina, tango appears as a successful phenomenon on the European stages in 1930: Mistinguett interprets it in Paris. Later however, the dance will be substantively modified to join the row of the acceptable dances and become a “proper” ballroom dance assimilated to the western world. This disenchantment lasts for about forty years (1950-1990), until the Argentinian tango is rediscovered thanks to an itinerant show, Tango Argentino (Paris, 1983; Brooklyn, 1985). At this moment, Argentina and Uruguay wake up and demand to regain control of what they consider to be their cultural heritage. They apply to register the culture of the tango on the UNESCO list of immaterial world heritage, and obtain it in 2009.

It is thus through a process of dismissal, emigration, assimilation, and finally return to a certain authenticity that the Milonguera culture has become the pride of the Rio de La Plata inhabitants. In this complex process, which involves the transatlantic and transoceanic migrations of the actors, the dance, and the culture, how can we explain the paradoxical process of the appropriation of a heritage by a population under the influence of the foreigners' eyes? What role did the western world's craze for tango play in the reappropriation of this culture by his inventors? And finally, has the world heritage label helped further migratory dynamics of the tango culture and actors these last years?