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# INTANGIBLE HERITAGE IN GLOBAL SPACE: TRADITION AND THE QUEST FOR THE AUTHENTIC DANCE EXPERIENCE IN THE INTERNATIONAL WORLD OF TANGO

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## Abstract

The 'Tango of Argentina and Uruguay' was inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO in 2009 to be safeguarded as one of humanity's outstanding cultural achievements. Controversies and shortcomings related to the inscription have been pointed out by several scholars working on tango as a social phenomenon. Criticism concerning the nomination document and the decision about the inscription targeted two principal focus areas and were expressed from two different standpoints. Both miss the inclusion of living grassroots tango communities and what they stand for from the heritage definition of tango. This paper intends to connect academic and community reactions given to its patrimonialization with personal observations of recent trends in the international and especially in the European world of tango; particularly with the increasing presence of two-three-day international tango dance occasions commonly referred to as tango marathons or *encuentro milongueros*<sup>1</sup>. In the complex, multi-layered and multi-vocal global tango world these events have been associated with essential, authentic milonga<sup>2</sup> experiences, a sense of prolonged intimacy and community through shared dances and shared dance space.

**Keywords:** intangible cultural heritage, social tango, tango marathon, *encuentro milonguero*, authentic dance experience, dance anthropology

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This work targets the world of tango, a globally existing urban social dance subculture that originated in South America. The 'tango of Argentina and Uruguay' was inscribed in the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO in 2009 to be safeguarded as one of humanity's outstanding cultural achievements. The inscription document gave a narrow and deficient definition of tango that did not include recent developments of tango outside Argentina and Uruguay. I intend to connect academ-

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<sup>1</sup> Close embrace-style tango reunions, (Spanish).

<sup>2</sup> Traditional tango dance club, (Spanish).

ic and community reactions given to the patrimonialization of tango with personal observations of recent trends in the international, especially in the European world of tango, particularly with the increasing presence of two-three-day international tango dance occasions commonly referred to as tango marathons or *encuentro milongueros*. It is a closely related question what one can consider an authentic experience in the living, ever evolving globalized international world of *tango argentino*.

As several social dancers from the Hungarian world of Argentine tango related, the late 2000s and early 2010s saw the increasing popularity of a new type of tango activity in Hungary and Europe. Not only did tango social dancers frequent local clubs and tango events but they also started to travel to attend international tango reunions in Europe with the purpose of dancing with a select group of international dancers during an entire weekend. In December 2013, I had a long conversation with an affluent professional and also an experienced tango social dancer in her early forties. She led an intensive tango life, dancing several nights a week in local tango clubs, improving her dance by taking tango lessons, and travelling to international tango events regularly. She talked about her past and upcoming international tango trips vividly. During our conversation I raised the topic of the typical challenges of international tango festivals: the need for a prearranged partner for lessons, and the recurrent lack of balance between dance leaders and followers. She explained:

You need to be updated: tango festivals are not the Thing anymore. Nowadays we go to tango marathons, or even better, we go to *encuentro milongueros*. Fewer people attend; they are more intimate, gender balanced and strictly close embrace milonguero style. No lessons, no endless tango exhibitions, just a weekend of music on the dance floor. The last one I attended in Northern Italy... we enjoyed unbelievable hospitality from the local community of dancers. It was wonderful. They fed us the nicest home-made bites, organised our accommodation in their spare rooms; it had a friendly, warm atmosphere.

The conversation cited above drew the attention to an important recent trend in the international, particularly in the European world of Argentinean tango. A seemingly new type of event became widespread in the urban social dance subculture we both formed part of. The tango-related social practices and the authenticity referred to in the title may be connected to several aspects of tango, such as the level of physical movement or music. In this paper, however these terms refer to dance events where tango is realized as social practice and community activity.

## **2. THE RETURN OF TANGO IN BUENOS AIRES AFTER THE LATEST MILITARY DICTATORSHIP**

There is no space here to discuss details of the historical return process through which outdated, prole and socially outcast tango was re-appropriated by Argentine society after the last military dictatorship in Argentina from the mid-1980s (see also Morel, 2012). Suffice it to say that tango's return was in full swing by the turn of the millennium but international tango festivals, other mega events and tango championships were not yet part of the tango scene of Buenos Aires. That scene was characterized by the presence of traditional, new and even youthful alternative *milongas*

i.e. tango clubs; tango dance academies, a couple of tango-DJs, a growing number of tango orchestras and two tango magazines edited by *milonga* organizers spreading *milonga*-news and pieces of tango history. Compared to these developments, the last two decades witnessed even more important changes in the world of tango. Some of these changes are connected to the internet, YouTube, social media, the general access to video recording through mobile phones with good cameras, the possibility to slow down and dissect movement – these changes influenced many other subcultures involving physical movement.

### 3. EMPIRICAL DATA, APPROACH

The empirical foundation of this article is based on two decades of participation and the observation of tango worlds in Hungary, several countries of Europe and Argentina, complemented by personal archives of notes, photos, documents, music and additional tango paraphernalia.

Ever since I took up tango seriously in Buenos Aires in 1999, I kept a tango diary on a more or less regular basis. During the first five years the majority of notes described dance moves and techniques learned during dance lessons; and floor rules, codes of conduct and patterns of behaviour in the afternoon and evening *milongas* I attended in the Argentinean capital. Several diary entries depict the views on tango of Argentinean friends who never danced. Between 2004 and 2006 I made several interviews with dancers in Hungary about their personal identification with tango. This paper is based on field notes and observations made during and after trips to attend international marathons and *encuentros* in Italy, Austria, Slovenia, and Budapest.

Instead of looking at tango from the perspective of performative arts or dance science, this paper takes a dance anthropology approach to phenomena related with tango. Specifically, it is not the intentions and perceptions of staged tango performance but rather individual experiences and community practices of tango and their social context that have been of central concern.

### 4. ARGENTINE TANGO IN THE FOCUS OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Tango is a complex cultural convention associated initially with urban lower classes of the La Plata region. This convention incorporates several genres, music, lyrics, and systems of bodily movement, dance occasions or *milongas*, codes of behaviour and objects as well. Although tango's heartland is and most likely will always be Buenos Aires, it has become a global phenomenon in a dynamic process of constant formation, danced all over the world. Dancing tango has become part and parcel of the lives of tens of thousands of urban dwellers all over the world. There are several excellent ethnographies that transmit how learning the 'tango walk', the different combinations of steps, the innate logics of improvisation, the stepping to the beat and so many more tango related things may transform profoundly the lives and identities of neophyte and long-time tango devotees in different cities of the world (see for example Davis, 2015).

One may learn all this and much more about tango in and out of the River Plate region from the extensive literature that has accumulated during the last few decades. It is outside the scope of this paper to provide a history of tango research, nevertheless it is relevant to draw attention to the vastness of accumulated knowledge, the variety of topics, approaches and methodology applied to grab various aspects of the cultural convention of tango even before its inscription on the list of UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage in 2009.

Even before the recent pivotal revival and increasing national and international popularity of tango that gained momentum in the late 1990s, there were many Argentinean attempts to capture details of the waning tango scene in Buenos Aires. Volumes were published on the history of tango bands, the *orquestas típicas*<sup>3</sup> (Sierra, 1985), on tango lyrics (Gobello, 1997), and how they expressed an Argentinean masculinity (Archetti, 1999, 2003). An extensive tango inventory on composers, bands, clubs, and music was also published (Ferrer & del Priore, 2000), along with a volume on the life histories of famous tango personalities from the past (Anzzi, 1991), and a history of tango (Labraña and Sebastian, 2000). Rodolfo and Gloria Dinzel, a dancing couple who contributed substantially to the international popularity of tango, designed a scheme that intended to model the improvisation possibilities of movement in the dance form (Dinzel & Dinzel, 1997).

Intimately engaging and overwhelming an activity, later it captured the attention of several academics who made their own personal experience the point of departure of their research. The majority of these books and articles have, as their point of departure a personal dance experience from the global world of tango. Martha E. Savigliano's pioneering mixed-genre *Tango and the political economy of passion* (1995) was a fundamental project drawing the social history of tango in the postcolonial context of Argentina and its relations to world powers. The personal pursuit of tango as a dance form integrated in an Argentina suffering military dictatorship was innovatively depicted by dancer and anthropology professor Julie Taylor's book, *Paper Tangos* (1998). There has been a multitude of attempts in health science to study how dancing tango influences well-being, aging (Skinner, 2014) and how it may help combat Parkinson's disease (Lötzke et al., 2015) and depression (Pinniger et al., 2012), to mention a few examples. Nearly all personal experience-based works discuss how tango transforms dancers' personal identities (eg. Davis, 2015). Tango as a cultural code of behaviour was addressed by Kovács (2006). The gendered aspect of the convention of tango and the unequal power relations of tango dance clubs have been highlighted by numerous scholars (eg. Törnquist, 2013; Savigliano, 1995). Kathy Davis dedicated a long argument to resolve the gender paradox of tango explaining how a feminist sociologist can passionately love a dance full of gender inequalities (Davis, 2015). The connection of tango with migration, globalization and tourism has also been widely studied by Viladrich (2013), Törnquist (2013) and Stepputat (2017). The problem of authenticity arises frequently in the international world of tango as shown by Skinner (2019).

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<sup>3</sup> Traditional tango orchestras (Sp.).

## 5. TANGO ON THE REPRESENTATIVE LIST OF THE INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF HUMANITY

Argentina and Uruguay jointly nominated tango for inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and UNESCO inscribed it in this list in 2009. The one page UNESCO document that testifies this offers a brief and permissively, yet disconcertingly vague definition of tango (UNESCO, 2009c). It refers to its lower class immigrant origins, and to the genres (music, dance, poetry) it comprises. Moreover, it states that tango 'is practised 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' (UNESCO, 2009c).

Although the term 'identity' appears three times in the document, it does so in the context of the cultural identity of inhabitants of the Rio de la Plata region. The identification with the culture of tango and the popularity of tango as a system of bodily movement were much lower in Argentina by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially among the Argentinean middle classes, than it has been in recent years. Tango's waning popularity had been aggravated by the Argentinean military government that closed down traditional tango dance clubs as potential places of assembly during the 1970s and 1980s the (Savigliano, 1995; Taylor, 1998).

This apparent lack of interest and identification coincides with my personal experiences with middle class Argentinean friends and acquaintances frowning upon my neophyte enthusiasm for going to the *milonga* to dance at the turn of the millennium. For the older generations (people in their 50s to 70s at the time) *milongas* were socially unacceptable, prole places associated with lack of culture and petty crime. Nevertheless, they were a bit more permissive of taking tango lessons and listening to tango music. My mostly middle class friends of younger generations simply considered tango dusty and outdated. It was very unlikely for me to meet anyone in these circles of Argentines who ever intended to dance tango. Nor was it my impression that my *porteño*<sup>4</sup> friends identified with the culture of tango during the 1990s and early 2000s.

The visual images on the Tango page of the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage website (UNESCO, 2009a) present tango on the stage. One can admire the sight of a solo dancing couple, a team of young professional-looking tango dancers in a staged choreography, and tango musicians of different generations, famous tango singer Susana Rinaldi among them, spectacularly illuminated. These images depict an important aspect of tango, tango as a show, or the '*tango for export*', a magnificent phenomenon to be admired from a distance; but they are silent about constitutive and fundamental features of tango that have contributed to its incessant popularity as an urban dance subculture all over the world for many years.

Members of tango communities in Europe with decades of dance experience, local *milongas* with active tango communities may face this definition of tango some-

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<sup>4</sup>Resident of the city of Buenos Aires, (Sp.).

what puzzled. These not so new tango-colonies have offered important contributions to tango in terms of identity, community, codes of behaviour, and accumulated knowledge of dance and music. To give a specific example, dedicated *tangueros*<sup>5</sup> used to order their dance shoes from the Mecca of tango, Buenos Aires. That habit has been changing since extraordinary tango shoe manufactories have developed and flourished in Europe, especially in Italy, making them the likely first choice of many female dancers in Hungary, as well.

### 5.1. Problems with the definition of tango as intangible cultural heritage

Controversies and shortcomings related to the inscription of tango on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage have been pointed out by several scholars working on tango as a social phenomenon. Criticism about the nomination document and the decision making process about the inscription targeted two principal focus areas and were expressed from two markedly different standpoints. One of these that I would refer to as the critical voice of global tango representatives was articulated by ethnomusicologist tango scholar Kendra Stepputat (2015), and by dance anthropologist Jonathan Skinner (2019). Argentinean anthropologist Hernán Morel (2009, 2013, and 2017) took what I refer to as the national (Argentinean) tango representative's standpoint of criticism to explain conflicts and contradictions that arose in the Buenos Aires tango scene after the UNESCO inscription of tango in 2009. Stepputat and Morel both miss the inclusion of living grassroots tango communities and what they stand for from the heritage definition of tango. The problem areas highlighted in these works are also manifest in recent developments in the international and especially the continental European tango world in the preference for dance occasions embodying local tango community values, intimacy, and the reinforcement of traditional *milonga* codes of behaviour.

#### 5.1.1. Authenticity of the international tango world challenged

In her passionate critique of the deficiencies of the patrimonialization, or as she referred to it the "heritagization" procedure of tango, Kendra Stepputat (2015) makes several important points summarized as follows. Tango may refer to the Rio de la Plata region cultural tradition, but it also denotes a dance style composed of different movements in standard ballroom dancing, giving a possible way of confusion. The internationally applied prefix 'Argentinean' was not included in the nomination out of respect for Uruguay.

Although the inscription of tango followed the standard administrative UNESCO procedure, the content and emphases of the nomination document concerning the phenomenon of tango differed greatly from the actual manifestations of tango at the time of nomination. As Stepputat explains the performative artistic culture of tango comprises connected elements of music, dance and poetry, practiced by professionals and amateurs. She emphasized that although tango was indisputably born in the Rio de la Plata region, it has been practiced by individuals and

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<sup>5</sup> Social tango dancers (Sp.).

communities of mostly educated urban middle classes and upper middle classes in Europe, the Americas, Asia and Australia. Local tango communities are usually not very numerous, but they keep intensive regional and international contact with one another through visits and social media. They are also connected to the tango world of Buenos Aires via tango pilgrimages, social media and tango maestros travelling the world. This interaction has been going on and growing for decades. Stepputat rightly wonders why the local practice of tango dancing in the Rio de la Plata region is considered more valuable than the international one, which was left out altogether from the inscription of tango as intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

Stepputat points out that the UNESCO's intergovernmental committee to evaluate the nomination based their judgement on incomplete and, as described above, distorted information. No international tango experts were consulted, no fieldtrips made that could have raised doubts about the content of the nomination.

In line with her argument an additional comment should be made about the nomination document (UNESCO, 2009b:10-12), especially about the list of works on tango the authors of the document found important to refer to. As it was briefly outlined in part 3, the world of tango had invited substantial scholarly attention decades before the year of its UNESCO nomination. However, English language volumes on tango were not considered, nor were Argentinean Marta Savigliano's, Julie Taylor's, and Eduardo Archetti's epochal analyses included (see References). In general works on tango history, tango lyrics and music and works on *lunfardo*, the sociolect associated with the birth of tango, dominated the list of references. Local tango communities and dancers were missing.

Finally, Kendra Stepputat argues that the nomination and heritagization of tango was motivated by economic and political agendas that targeted expected income generated from increased cultural industry, and those agendas raise serious doubts about the inscription in its current form. The intentions leading to the nomination aimed at the reappropriation of tango as a strictly local cultural tradition with the help of UNESCO. These intentions led to presenting an imperfect, distorted image of tango that clearly favoured local goals.

The questions of heritage and authenticity of the global tango world and its actors outside the Rio de la Plata region is discussed by Jonathan Skinner (2019). He scrutinized the intricate and contradictory connection between someone's quality of tango dancing, his capability and skills of teaching the dance, and his tango authenticity. Skinner focused on teaching situations in which tango was communicated to students in England as geographically defined intangible cultural heritage, mysteriously tied to ethnicity.

### *5.1.2 Tango as intangible heritage: problems articulated from the point of view of the birthplace of tango*

Focusing his attention on the patrimonialization of tango and its consequences, Argentinean anthropologist Hernán Morel (2017) studied the interactions between cultural policies and the system of *milongas* in Buenos Aires. Morel describes a series of puzzling unexpected *milonga* closures ordered by city authorities that took place in

the tango world of the Argentinean capital between 2005 and 2015. The normal functioning of some old and traditional, and one may say emblematic clubs were also affected by these administrative measures justified by the alleged lack of security and missing permits of the venues. Morel analyses an act of public protest in response to these measures, a performative action that took the form of a dance event, an open air *milonga* in front of the building of the Ministry of Culture of the Capital where over a hundred members of *milongas* danced 'in defence of the patrimony' (p.123).

Morel's work articulated several local issues that arose after the inscription of tango on the list of intangible heritage. As he explained, the closures increased self-organisation and generated community action in the Buenos Aires world of tango. The administrative measures taken against *milongas* drew attention to the unreasonable regulations, clearly unaware of how the *milongas* and their communities actually operated in everyday life. Morel's observation also points to the yawning gap in the definition of tango as intangible cultural heritage. It shows that regular dance occasions, the physical spaces where they take place, the local communities they involve and the completeness of their values, social ties and codes of behaviour are fundamental and constitutive of what tango is<sup>6</sup>.

The fact the UNESCO ordered the preparation of an inventory of traditional Buenos Aires milongas in 2012 may derive from the first series of conflicts between *milonga* communities and city authorities articulated by Hernán Morel. The resulting report (Lacarrière and Maronese, 2013) provides the detailed description of six *milongas* of traditional Buenos Aires neighbourhoods. An evaluation of this work from an ethnographic perspective may spot a series of professional gaps; nevertheless, the inventory provides a basic view of the *milonga* organizers, the venue, the habitués, and some of the rules of behaviour that apply in them.

The other social dynamics Morel scrutinized was the expansion of international tango tourism promoted by the city administration and how local tango communities reacted to it. Ever since the beginning of the patrimonialization of tango, the cultural office of the city of Buenos Aires promoted tango mega-events, massive tango festivals and shows, international tango championships, and massive look-alike *milongas*. This generated mixed feelings among local tango *aficionados*<sup>7</sup> who had not been consulted. As Morel explained conflicts arose between the top-down measures trying to govern and control intangible cultural heritage as part of the touristic industry and the grassroots practices associated with it.

## 6. TANGO TOURISM AND TANGO MARATHONS

International tango tourism, trips made to other countries to dance and at the same time get acquainted with a foreign country, is a crucial constituent of the global phenomenon of tango, and it has been studied extensively from a variety of angles (Davis, 2015; Stepputat, 2017, 2019; Törnquist, 2013; Skinner, 2019).

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<sup>6</sup> It must be noted that in his critical assessment of the consequences of the patrimonialization of tango in Argentina Morel keeps silent about the omission of the international tango community from its definition. Nevertheless, both his and Stepputat's critical arguments point at the importance of local tango communities and the values they represent.

<sup>7</sup>Dedicated social tango dancers.



Argentina has been a highly privileged destination of tango tourism for dancers of all levels. Ever since tango was declared intangible cultural heritage, a massive local tourist industry has been expanding and catering for individuals and groups of tango tourists with lodging and food, dance lessons, tango shows, assisted visits to local dance halls and local tango shoe manufactories, and even with private dance partners, also known as taxi dancers to help visitors manoeuvre in the complex world of Buenos Aires *milongas*. The Argentina Tango website offers a good example of the variety of services offered, including, for example, packages for solo women travellers of different age groups<sup>8</sup>. Big international festivals and an annual world championship of tango (*Mundial de Tango*) organized by the cultural administration of the city of Buenos Aires are relatively new genres in the capital of Argentina, although the latter preceded 2009, the year of tango's inscription on the UNESCO list.<sup>9</sup> The introduction of regional semi-finals of the world championship of tango in several countries of North and South America, Asia and Europe started in the early 2010s.

Although it is not a focus of this paper to discuss the economic aspects of dancing tango locally or to travel internationally to dance, it needs to be pointed out that all these activities form part of the global industry of tourism<sup>10</sup>. Here only a brief reference can be made to its financial aspects, mainly to signal that attending any of the many types of international tango reunions involves substantial costs. Several authors discussed the social and economic characteristics of people involved in the social world of tango in Argentina and elsewhere (Davis, 2015; Stepputat, 2019). A complicated picture may be simplified by saying that moderately affluent, educated urban middle class individuals tend to develop a keen interest in this urban dance subculture.

Tango made its first appearance in Hungary in the mid-1990s as a summer course offered by the International Dance and Movement Centre (IDMC) in Budapest. Weekly tango dance clubs have been organized for over two decades in the Hungarian capital. On average, there were 8 regular evening *milongas* in Budapest in 2019 organized on a weekly basis. Three additional milongas were held monthly. Perhaps the economically least demanding way to tango is to take group classes from local teachers and attend local clubs.

The economic crises of Argentina contributed to a major outflow of its citizens towards Europe. Ever since the economic collapse of 2001 about 800 thousand Argentinians have emigrated<sup>11</sup>. According to the Spanish Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, there were 268,292 persons born in Argentina registered as residents in 2019 in Spain, the country housing historically by far the largest population connected to Argentina.<sup>12</sup> Several individuals from Argentina integrated in the Buenos Aires world of social tango decided to settle in Europe and turn teaching tango into an income generating activity during the early and mid-2000s. In 2019 there were two Argentinean tango

<sup>8</sup> ArgentinaTango website: <https://www.argentinatango.com/>

<sup>9</sup> URL: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_tango\\_dance\\_tournament](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_tango_dance_tournament)

<sup>10</sup> It is outside the scope of this paper to enumerate and critically discuss the entire range of possibilities to combine dancing tango with recreational trips. These may take many forms from trips aboard luxury cruisers through dancing at ski resorts during wintertime or spending a week at a luxury sea resort on a subtropical island.

<sup>11</sup> iProfesional, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ine.es/dynt3/inebase/es/index.htm?type=pcaxis&path=/t20/e245/p08/&file=pcaxis&dh=0&capsel=2>

teachers in Hungary offering tango classes to local students besides the nearly three dozens of Hungarians dedicating themselves to this activity on a regular basis. Attending a tango lesson with a pass was the equivalent of attending the cinema or a Pilates class with a similar ticket construction, about 2000 HUF or 7 EUROS.<sup>13</sup>

Attending *milongas* in Hungary regularly, one often meets foreign visitors. People who tango tend to visit local clubs wherever they go as tourists. This allows them to tango with new dance partners but it also gives them personal and intimate points of encounter with members of the local society. With an average of 1500 HUF or 5 EUROS *milonga* attendance in Hungary is fairly reasonably priced, even by Hungarian economic standards.

In contrast to local one-evening regular events, attending several-day-long international tango festivals, tango marathons, or *encuentro milongueros* often means costly trips abroad. These categories require explanation because their specific characteristics and changing roles in the international world of tango, I assume, are related to experienced amateur tango dancers' notions of authenticity in tango. This is considered an important point or rather a hypothesis, as so far it has been based on sporadic qualitative data.

Tango festivals used to be hegemonic international tango event type. During the early 2000s they dominated the Hungarian national and also the international tango market in Europe. To give an example from Hungary again, one of the first major festivals, *Kelet-Nyugat Tangófesztivál* was organized in Budapest in September, 2004 by a cultural foundation established by devotees to promote Argentinean tango in Hungary.<sup>14</sup> Festivals seem to have been losing territory in tango as more tango marathons and *encuentro milongueros* are organized internationally. Some of the dancers I consulted on the topic used the terms 'marathon' and '*encuentro*' interchangeably. Other regular marathon and *encuentro*-goers perceived slight differences between the two in terms of the age and dance level of attendants with marathons having younger people with more advanced dance skills. During an informal conversation a Hungarian *tanguera*<sup>15</sup> in her early forties defined the minute differences between marathons and *encuentros* like this: "I think marathons in general have a higher level of dancing, and it is more difficult to get accepted by the organizers. Encuentros are less competitive, and it's generally older people who attend them when compared to marathons. And maybe *encuentros* are a bit smaller. But maybe not." For the purposes of this paper I use the two terms interchangeably as they denote the same basic type of dance occasion.

Festivals and marathons or *encuentros* share several characteristic features. In general they are all 2-3-day weekend events centred on tango. They offer several dance occasions, *milongas*, musicalized by tango DJs. They target both the local and an international audience. Often unique venues with a special atmosphere house the event. Tango items such as shoes and clothes can be purchased.

But festivals differ from marathons and *encuentros* in important ways. Festivals may offer an impressive entry point into the world of tango for those who are just getting acquainted with it. The evening *milongas* at festivals often present live music. They are interrupted by tango exhibitions that often take the form of impressive

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<sup>13</sup> Source: [www.milonga.hu](http://www.milonga.hu) .

<sup>14</sup> Information available at <https://fidelio.hu/klasszikus/tangofesztival-a-millennarison-131704.html> .

<sup>15</sup> A woman dancing social tango (Sp.).

staged choreographies. Festivals tend to offer a full program of dance lessons that raises the problem of the dance partner for potential participants. Previous registration to a festival may not be mandatory; and there is generally no equal balance between dancers in the leading and the following roles. Festivals are often housed by bigger, although atmospheric venues that can accommodate larger crowds.

There is variation in size but marathons and *encuentros* rarely accept more than 250 participants; and some have their limit at 150 participants. Organizers generally promise an equal number of leaders and followers with a calculated proportion of locals and guests from abroad, along with 24 to 30 hours of dancing divided into five shifts of afternoon and night dances. Marathon and *encuentro* organizers tend to expect and insist on close embrace dancing and on arranging a dance partner using the *cabeceo*<sup>16</sup>, a face-saving wordless language of gestures typical of Buenos Aires *milongas*.

Name of international marathon or <i>encuentro</i>	Starting year	Times per year	URL
Noches de Hungría	2011-	1	<a href="https://noches.hu/">https://noches.hu/</a>
Royal Budapest Tango Marathon/ Primavera en Budapest Tango Marathon/ Amor en Budapest Tango Marathon	2012-	3	<a href="https://royalbudapest.org/">https://royalbudapest.org/</a> <a href="http://primaverabudapest.org/">http://primaverabudapest.org/</a> <a href="https://amorenbudapest.org/">https://amorenbudapest.org/</a>
Danube Tango Marathon/ Summer in the City/ Winter in the City	2015-	1-2	<a href="http://www.danubetango.hu">www.danubetango.hu</a> <a href="https://gab454.wixsite.com/danubetangomarathons/history">https://gab454.wixsite.com/danubetangomarathons/history</a>
Secreto	2016-	1	<a href="https://secreto.hu/">https://secreto.hu/</a>
Budapest Modern Tango Marathon	2019-	1	<a href="https://neotango.org/event/budapest-modern-tango-marathon-1-2019-11-08-2019-11-11-60/register">https://neotango.org/event/budapest-modern-tango-marathon-1-2019-11-08-2019-11-11-60/register</a>
Mascarada <i>Encuentro Milonguero</i>	2020-	1	<a href="https://mascarada-milonguero.blogspot.com/p/blog-page.html">https://mascarada-milonguero.blogspot.com/p/blog-page.html</a>

Table 1. Tango marathons and *encuentro milongueros* in Hungary (March, 2020).

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<sup>16</sup>Nod with the head (Sp.).

Table 1. shows how international tango marathons have gained ground in Hungary since 2011. There were nine such events organized in Hungary during the last 12 months.

Several contradictory social practices related to tango such as its assymetrical power relations defined by gender have been identified and addressed critically. Discussing the specificities of marathons and *encuentros* leads us to another controversial issue. Unlike festivals, marathons and *encuentros* are highly selective. Attendance requires formal application that is later evaluated by the organizers based on their individual judgement whom to admit. Popular marathons have a high rate of rejection. According to several Hungarian tango acquaintances, dancers in the following role face more difficulties getting admitted than leaders do.

From experienced dancers' perspective the existence of tango marathons is logical and natural. It is intriguing however, that this type of three day reunions to dance tango does not seem to originate from the Rio de la Plata region. Some of his friends, students and fellow dancers consider Eric Jorissen the inventor of the type of tango reunion that may be considered the "mother" of tango marathons<sup>17</sup>. Eric Jorissen immersed himself in the Buenos Aires world of tango during the 1980s when it was still defined by members of its old guard. He became the student and later the friend of Pepito Avellaneda, a much respected personality of the Buenos Aires tango world. On his return to the Netherlands he established the El Corte tango school and dance space in Nijmegen. Jorissen connected his tango world with principles of companionship and community, offering accommodation to their visitors in the tango venue itself. His school and the community of dancers and teachers around it organized the first marathon-style tango event in 1993.



Figure 1. The front and the back of the glass mat distributed at the *Noches de Invierno Encuentro Milonguero* in Rax, Austria in 2014.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.elcorte.com/what-else/history-of-el-corte>

The glass mat (see *Figure 1.*) prepared and distributed by the organizers of *Noches de Invierno Encuentro Milonguero* served a double purpose. It aimed at environmental sustainability by providing identifiable space for each participant's plastic glass to minimize waste. It also reminded the international community of *tangueros* of a number of community rules. These rules intended to regulate behaviour. They concerned the dance invitation; they emphasized the counter-clockwise direction of movement on the dance floor and the imperative of keeping a distance from the couple dancing ahead; and they pointed out the expectation of self-control over flashy footwork that might endanger the safety of nearby dancers.

Dedicated and experienced long-time tango social dancers in Hungary and Slovenia commented on having developed the need for more participative, communitarian tango experiences that they perceive as intrinsically authentic. The positive account of the tango marathon in Italy mentioned in the introduction referred to the *encuentro milonguero Trieste, Tango y Tú* that used to be organized annually in Trieste, Italy by a larger group of Italian tango friends. The social tango dancers of Trieste intended to create an informal international community tango experience. With its high level of informality and its supporting local group of friends as organizers, *Trieste, tango y tú* may not have been the most typical of marathons. Nevertheless, along with examples such as the El Corte community project in Nijmegen created by Eric Jorissen and his tango friends, or the Tango Nieve *encuentro milonguero* in Slovenia they represent a form of universal tango authenticity for some of the dancers engaged in the international world of tango.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This paper focused on academic and community responses to the inscription of tango on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. It outlined two parallel sets of phenomena in the world of tango. It took up the central line of criticism articulated by Argentinean and international tango scholars and by tango communities in Argentina and showed the increasing popularity of an internationally oriented dance occasion of the global world of tango, the marathon or the *encuentro milonguero* in the light of these critical observations. Multiple actors with diverse agendas, interests, identities, and aesthetic preferences shape, construct and reconstruct the multi-layered global world of tango. In spite of the many contradictions of these dance occasions related to their selectivity and disproportionate gender demand, experienced, non-professional social dancers show preference for *milonga* community related values and codes of behaviour that marathons and *encuentros* represent.

Tango scholars drew attention to the incomplete and biased definition of tango as intangible heritage of humanity and identified several problems. They pointed out the idealization of tango in its definition and the political and economic agendas behind its patrimonialization. The definition made scarce reference to tango dancing as a community practice full of connotations, social relations, and codes of behaviour. It also excluded the tango related activities of the majority of the tango dancing population in the world, those active outside the La Plata region. One may say that the nomination defined tango a cultural phenomenon but ignored it as a social one.

Tango had raised the curiosity of several scientific researchers. However, little of the knowledge social scientific scholarship gathered together on tango as a community-based social dance practice in Argentina or elsewhere got incorporated in the document that nominated it for inscription. Tango as music, poetry, staged performance, and a branch of Rio de la Plata history seemed to have dominated the tango view of the enactors of the nomination, leaving the everyday bodily practice and neighbourhood community activity somewhat aside. It must be underlined that it was the highly sophisticated and nuanced, improvisational, playful and ever developing dance tradition within the phenomenon of tango that captivated so many people and helped turn it into a global phenomenon. The international appeal of tango without the tradition of bodily movement would surely be more limited.

When tango was declared intangible heritage in 2009 the city took control of the tango-generated tourist industry. Yet it largely ignored the localities and communities of traditional Buenos Aires *milongas*, saturated with meaning and social bonds. Local tango communities in the two capitals were vaguely referred to in the nomination document but they were clearly not considered pillars of the heritage, unlike choreographers, orchestra leaders, and famous tango interpreters. This generated conflicts of power between Buenos Aires city authorities and the Buenos Aires community of *milonga* organizers and dancers. In time it also led to the intention on part of the UNESCO to gather more detailed information about local *milongas* in the Argentinean capital city which, in the long run may lead to a more precise and inclusive definition of tango – at least on the Rio de la Plata regional level.

Parallel to the launch of international festivals, championships and the official promotion of tango mega-events for touristic consumption, the time has come for international marathons and *encuentro milongueros* in the global world of tango. Marathons and *encuentros* along with festivals, luxury tango holidays and pilgrimages to the Mecca of tango, Buenos Aires all form part of the economy of tango tourism. They are all manifestations of a diverse, global, multi-vocal urban dance subculture full of contradictions, human encounters and dynamic harmonies. In this complex world *encuentros* and marathons have offered essential, authentic experiences with a sense of intimacy and community through shared dances and shared dance space.

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