

Cultural Research and Intangible Heritage

By Sheenagh Pietrobruno

Abstract

Intangible heritage deemed worthy of preservation is often regarded as traditional culture that reflects the identity of a particular nation or group. Traditional cultures are distinct from commercial forms, which are transmitted and promoted via businesses, commercial establishments, and media. Research on culture reveals the way that a large part of the world's intangible heritage includes practices that interweave tradition and commodification as well as blur the boundaries between nations. As these practices do not fit into the clear categories of "traditional" or "national", they may not be considered for preservation in official project documents such as the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Many of these practices are being, nonetheless, stored today through the unofficial archiving of moving images on the Internet, facilitated by Web 2.0. Through the case studies of various Caribbean performing arts, this paper illustrates how cultural research can provide a comprehensive understanding of intangible culture in both its lived and digital contexts, knowledge that in turn challenges the process of categorization and the measures of preservation of intangible heritage proposed by UNESCO.

Keywords: UNESCO; intangible heritage; popular performing arts; tradition; commodification; video-sharing sites; *tumba francesa*; Cuban *casino*, salsa dance.

Introduction

In this era of globalization, there is growing fear that cultures around the world will become more uniform, leading to a decrease in cultural diversity. To counter this potential homogeneity, strategies have been developed to preserve those cultures whose very existence could be threatened. Living cultures are highly susceptible to becoming extinct. This heritage, referred to as “intangible”, includes oral forms such as languages, rituals, and the festive and performing arts. The fragility of intangible cultures lies in their being sustained through lived circumstances and stored in human bodies and minds rather than in documents, artifacts, and forms of media. To safeguard the world’s more ephemeral cultural forms and to maintain the diversity of the world’s culture, UNESCO has put forward its *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003).

The intangible performing arts that are commonly deemed worthy of preservation by organizations such as UNESCO are often those regarded as traditional practices that reflect the identity of a specific nation or group. Research on culture, nonetheless, reveals that intangible cultural practices may combine the traditional with the commercial. Furthermore, many intangible cultures cannot be circumscribed within the boundaries of a particular nation or defined group either in their contemporary performances or in historical developments. As certain intangible cultures do not fit neatly into categories of “traditional” or “national”, they may not be regarded as valuable heritages that should be preserved by institutions through funded projects or in actual archives or Internet archives. Many of these practices, nonetheless, are being stored today through the unofficial archiving of moving online images, facilitated by Web 2.0. Since its inception in 2005, YouTube, for example, has become a means for individuals to document, store and safeguard global performing arts outside of the jurisdiction of official, centrally structured organizations such as UNESCO. This study illustrates how cultural research can provide a comprehensive understanding of intangible culture in both its lived and digital contexts, knowledge that in turn challenges the process of categorization and the measures of preservation of intangible heritage proposed by UNESCO. “Cultural research” here refers to in-depth analyses of both the historical and contemporary development of cultural practices.

This paper progresses in various stages. First, a description of the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* is provided to emphasize how UNESCO defines intangible heritage as traditional expressions, developed without commercial interactions. Second, the claim is made that this convention, as well as the practice of classifying specific global intangible cultural forms as “masterpieces” or representative within the convention’s mandate to safeguard the intangible heritage of the world, produces assumptions and a system

of ranking that do not necessarily reflect the way intangible practices manifest in actual circumstances. These presumptions have led UNESCO to misinterpret the function of commercial influences within intangible heritage and not fully account for the global influences within cultural expressions as well as the fundamental changeable nature of culture itself. Although traditional cultures are often viewed as static and frozen in time, in their actual embodiment they undergo change and are influenced by outside forces. Furthermore, despite UNESCO's assertions that the strategies to preserve intangible culture challenge hierarchical structures, this convention produces underlying hierarchies by ranking the world's intangible culture and by not incorporating the "high" cultures of western Europe under the rubric of the intangible. Third, the examples of three performing arts – Cuba's *tumba francesa*, Cuba's *casino* and salsa dance – are put forward to demonstrate that in both their historical and contemporary contexts these performances can challenge the assumptions and hierarchies established through UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* as well as the list of masterpieces and the representative list. Fourth, it is proposed that the practice on the part of individuals to upload videos of performance practices on video-sharing sites, of which YouTube is exemplar, is becoming an unofficial means to conserve intangible heritage in a manner that more fully captures its developments in actual circumstances. YouTube, for instance, stores and preserves intangible heritage in a way that questions the viability of UNESCO's safeguarding strategies as realized through its convention to save the world's intangible heritage.

Intangible Heritage and Traditional Culture

UNESCO's mandate to preserve intangible heritage stems from an earlier proposal. In 1989, UNESCO tabled its *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore*, initiating a project that sought to preserve traditional culture and folklore around the world. This undertaking led to UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, adopted in October 2003 and entered into force on 20 April 2006 (Aikawa-Faure 2009: 13). In this convention, "intangible cultural heritage" is defined as:

[T]he practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO 2003)

The practices included within UNESCO's categorization of intangible heritage are oral traditions and expressions comprising language, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature

and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO 2003). Under the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention (ICHC), the understanding of intangible culture parallels our notion of the traditional in the sense that they both can be defined as customs and practices, generally associated with the identity of a particular group or community, which are transmitted from one generation to the next primarily within an oral context. The link between the intangible and traditional heritages in UNESCO's convention is further brought to the fore in the way that it has stemmed from its 1989 *Recommendation* to preserve traditional culture and folklore. The definition of "folklore" (or "traditional and popular culture") set out in the *Recommendation* has been used, according to Noriko Aikawa-Faure, former director of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Unit of UNESCO, to define intangible heritage in UNESCO's *Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, tabled in connection with a project launched in 1998 (Aikawa-Faure 2009: 40). The definition of "folklore" (or "traditional and popular culture") in the 1989 *Recommendation* is as follows:

[T]he totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community, expressed by a group or individuals and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally by imitation or by other means. Its forms are, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts. (Aikawa-Faure 2009: 40; UNESCO 1989)

Furthermore, as Richard Kurin states: "Most of the experts who helped formulate the Convention [ICHC] assumed that intangible cultural heritage is traditional culture and ruled out all sorts of things" (Kurin 2004: 69). The ICHC also suggests that the intangible cultures that are commonly deemed in need of preservation are primarily those regarded as part of tradition. Traditional forms are distinct from commercial ones, which are disseminated within and linked to various businesses, such as theatres, studies, clubs, and music venues, and which are often marketed and promoted through various forms of media, such as print, television, film, and more recently, the Internet.

The commodification of culture is often viewed as a process that sabotages tradition by altering or even corrupting its original expression. UNESCO calls this danger "folklorisation", which delineates the commodification of traditional practices into objects to be consumed by external audiences (Hafstein 2009: 106). For instance, the online description, featured on the UNESCO website, of the intangible heritage of the Mevlevi Sema Ceremony of Turkey (which includes the dance of the whirling dervish) describes how the commercialization of this practice in the tourist industry has resulted in the performance of more compressed and less complex ceremonies (UNESCO 2008a). During the secularization of the country in 1925, legislation was enforced that led to the closure of all the private spaces in which the Mevlevi Sema Ceremony took place, known as *tekkes* (dervish lodges), *zaviyes* (central dervish lodges), *ziyaret* (places

of pilgrimage), and shrines. In 1953 the Mevlevi Sema Ceremony was rekindled, with the restriction that it could be performed only in public settings conceded to by the Turkish government. Despite these restrictive conditions, ceremonies were still held privately (And 2005: 103). In the 1990s fewer limitations were imposed on the ceremony. Nonetheless, during the thirty years that this ceremony was held and practiced in secret, there was a greater focus placed on music and songs than on its spiritual and religious aspects, which have divested the performance of a significant part of its religious implications (UNESCO 2008a). The Sema Ceremony has since been further modified to make it an appealing spectacle for tourists. According to UNESCO, “Consequently, many sema ceremonies are no longer performed in their traditional context but for tourist audiences, and have been shortened and simplified to meet commercial requirements” (UNESCO 2008a).

Establishing Hierarchies and Divisions

To safeguard the world’s intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO has identified and proclaimed certain living heritages as masterpieces, of which the Mevlevi Sema Ceremony is an example. These masterpieces have been listed in its *Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, tabled in 1998 (Aikawa-Faure 2009: 13) and revised in subsequent lists set forth in 2001, 2003, and 2005. In November 2008 *A Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* was drawn up, which features ninety cultural forms, including the intangible heritages from the previous list of masterpieces (UNESCO 2008b; Aikawa-Faure 2009: 36). Aikawa-Faure asserts that the Proclamation of Masterpieces program and the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention were interconnected: the Proclamation of Masterpieces program acted as a stepping stone for the development of the 2003 *Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Aikawa-Faure 2009: 14). The process of setting up lists of intangible heritage as well as the content of these catalogues themselves reproduce an understanding of global culture that fosters hierarchies and divisions. The *Proclamation of Masterpieces* as well as its continuation in the 2008 *Representative List* place various cultural forms above others both within the contexts of particular nations and across the globe. Although the value of living culture in actual circumstances is generally determined by the people involved in its production and performance, UNESCO (which is made up of boards, committees, and delegates from numerous member states), has determined the quality and stature of the world’s culture. The change in name from a *Proclamation of Masterpieces* to a *Representative List* in 2008 is an attempt to move away from the hierarchy that is imposed by referring to specific intangible cultures as “masterpieces” (Hafstein 2009: 108). Nonetheless, the *Representative List* incorporates the masterpieces from the earlier *Proclamation* and is still based on a criterion of selection – that of representativity

– which, according to Valdimar Tr. Hafstein, is even more uncertain than the former criterion of excellence (108). These lists of intangible heritage create global and universal standards and in turn become a metaculture that stands outside the lived manifestation of culture (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004: 56). The cultures featured on these inventories become recontextualized into national classifications with regard to other practices within the same nation as well in relation to other “masterpieces” of the world featured on international lists (Hafstein 2009: 105). These lists remove specific cultural practices from their contexts and freeze them into either superior or representative artifacts to be preserved and admired. The idea that intangible cultures can be concretized into objects counters the very nature of culture, which is a living process and performance, constantly transforming and changing. Culture is not a fixed product that we attempt to take hold of, such as a text, code, paradigm, essence, or substance, but as Jonathan Friedman states, “a relatively instable product of the practice of meaning” (Friedman 1994: 74). Texts, codes, paradigms, essences, and substances are merely abstractions from lived productions and practices (103).

These lists of masterpieces generally distinguish culture along national lines since individual intangible forms are credited to specific nations. At the same time, these catalogues *do* take into account that a particular culture can be part of various nations. For instance, in the 2003 *List of Proclaimed Masterpieces(by country)* the language, dance, and music of the Garifuna are registered under the nation of Belize, with a supporting role assigned to Honduras and Nicaragua (UNESCO 2004). In the 2008 catalogue, this same intangible cultural heritage is equally accredited to four nations: Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. Other examples include the Baltic Song and Dance Celebration of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania; the Processional Giants and Dragons of Belgium and France; and the Kankurang, Manding Initiatory Rite of Senegal and Gambia (UNESCO 2008b). These classifications do recognize that a singular culture can be multinational, evolving in nations that are geographically close. However, they do not acknowledge the highly global nature of cultural forms that may have developed through extensive migrations of people and cultures across vast territories and regions and that could also be experiencing contemporary changes as people, commodities, and cultures move around the world.

UNESCO’s lists of masterpieces further reinforce the hierarchy between the West and the other areas of the world. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes: “By admitting cultural forms associated with royal courts and state-sponsored temples, as long as they are not European, the intangible heritage list preserves the division between the West and the rest” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004: 57). Examples of such forms in the 2001 and 2003 lists to which Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refers include the Royal Ballet of Cambodia and Royal Ancestral Rite and Ritual Music in Jogmyo of Korea (Republic of) (UNESCO 2004). Although the lists do include European culture forms such as the Mystery Play of Elche (Spain) and Opera dei

Pupi, the Sicilian Puppet Theatre (Italy), the high cultures of Europe are not included as part of the world's intangible heritage. The elite cultures of the West retain their privileged status in the sense that they are not characterized as oral, a quality that has been stereotypically connected with less developed cultural forms. The top and upper-class intangible arts of western Europe – for instance, classical ballet or Buckingham Palace's Changing of the Guard – are rarely regarded as oral expressions. The underrepresentation of western European "elite" culture in the *Proclamation of Masterpieces* and the *Representative List* could be a means to counter the bias on the side of western European culture in the World Heritage List (UNESCO 2009), a classification that dates to the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, adopted by UNESCO in 1972. According to many developing nations, the World Heritage List favoured western European nations by privileging the monuments and sites of industrial Europe (Aikawa-Faure 2009: 15; Skounti 2009: 79; Hafstein 2009: 101). The Eurocentric composition of the World Heritage List has been extensively noted (Arizpe 2000: 36; Cleere 2001; Yoshida, 2004: 109; Smith and Akagawa 2009: 1). Despite their potential to redress this imbalance, both lists of intangible heritage – the *Proclamation of Masterpieces* and the 2008 *Representative List* – exclude the high arts of western Europe from the domain of oral culture.

UNESCO's establishment of lists to preserve and safeguard intangible heritage is part of its praiseworthy projects to protect the heritage of the world for future generations. But the hierarchies and presuppositions established through these lists as well as the definition offered for "intangible heritage," which presumes a clear division between traditional and commercial practices, do not accurately reflect the way culture operates in lived circumstances. By using the example of a specific intangible form of culture featured in the *Proclamation of Masterpieces* – namely the *tumba francesa* of Cuba – I will show how cultural practices are not necessarily circumscribed within national or even regional boundaries nor clearly divided between the "high" culture of the West and the rest of the world. Furthermore, intangible cultural forms that may appear traditional could have incorporated commercial elements in their development.

Dismantling Hierarchies and Divisions: The *Tumba Francesa*

The *tumba francesa*, which UNESCO added to its *Proclamation of Masterpieces* in 2003, is a music and dance dating back to the 1700s that still exists in Cuba today. It refers to the dance culture created by Haitians of African descent who were brought to Cuba as enslaved peoples by the French colonials (Daniel 2002: 33). Known as *franceses blancos* in Cuba, the French colonials left Haiti either before or during the Haitian revolution; others came to Cuba to escape the United States' rule of French Louisiana and New Orleans (1803) (Daniel 2002: 31; León 1974: 8). These French immigrants and their enslaved Haitians settled in eastern Cuba, particularly in Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo. Haitians of African

descent, referred to as *franceses negros*, performed imitations, often light parodies, of the eighteenth-century court dances of France, such as the *contredanse*, quadrilles, minuets, and cotillions, to the accompaniment of drums as opposed to the string and wood instrumentation of the European tradition (Daniel 2002: 33). French colonial families introduced an aristocratic dance culture to Cuba patterned after court dancing in Europe that has been transformed into the *tumba francesa*. These French court dances, which had also previously been brought by the Spanish, additionally included the *contredanse*, quadrilles, minuets, and cotillions. Unlike the Spanish, who favoured the *zapateo*, a southern Andalusian dance tradition, over the court dances, the French settlers chose to emulate the luxuriance of the French court by maintaining these European social dances in the New World and performing them in the courtly style of a half-toe position, in which the body weight was centered on the ball of the foot (Daniel 2002: 32). Whereas the dances of the eighteenth century eventually became unfashionable in the ballrooms and salons of wealthy white Cubans, for more than two centuries among *franceses negros* they thrived in their modified forms in the *tumba francesa* (Viddal 2007). In the contemporary performances of the *tumba francesa*, which include four dances – the *masón*, *yubá*, *frenté*, and *cinta* – performers continue to don eighteenth-century attire. The *masón*, for instance, is performed today by a minimum of six or eight couples who incorporate various figures from the minuet and *contredanse* (Santos Gracia and Armas Rigal 2002: 160). Couples parade while executing curtses and bows as well as ceremonial and constrained dance steps. This embodied formality is set off by energetic and driving percussive music (Viddal 2007).

In combining instruments of West African origin with the dance vernacular of the elite court of France, the *tumba francesa* brings together the dance culture of “high” European society and the “low” culture of enslaved Africans brought to the New World. *Tumba francesa* is a Cuban tradition whose roots encompass diverse areas of the world that extend well beyond a particular nation or neighbouring nations: western Europe, especially France; Haiti; and Dahomey, West Africa, which is today the Republic of Benin. The *tumba francesa* is considered a traditional dance of Cuba, yet if we look closely at its history, commercialism is intertwined with its development. The French dances integrated in the *tumba francesa* were not “traditional” dances according to UNESCO’s description of this masterpiece of intangible heritage: “It embodies one of the oldest and most tangible links to the Afro-Haitian heritage of Cuba’s Oriente province and developed from an eighteenth-century fusion of music from Dahomey in West Africa and traditional French dances” (UNESCO 2008c). As previously mentioned, a traditional culture is often passed from one generation to the next within the community setting and outside of formal instruction and commercialization. Being part of the elite culture of the court of France, the dances incorporated in the *tumba francesa* were generally not handed down from

the older generation to the younger. These dances were transmitted through the global migration of culture. The European dances that arrived in Cuba and the Caribbean originated in Paris, the international capital of fashionable dances. Parisian styles spread throughout Europe and then to the Atlantic, first reaching the major port of Havana, Cuba (in addition to Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires), and eventually spreading to other cities, towns, and villages. Although European dances were initially learned by the upper class, they eventually trickled down to the lower social strata (Chasteen 2004: 116). They were often disseminated from the world's center of fashion, the court of Paris, to cities in Europe and eventually the New World via the dance lesson.

The instruction of European dance, according to John Charles Chasteen, has a deep history in Latin America. One of the first known teachers from Europe was a Spaniard called Ortiz the Musician, who gave dance lessons in Mexico City as early as 1519 (Chasteen 2004: 117). During the colonial period, dance masters taught international elite styles from Europe, such as the *minuet* and the *contredanse*, in urban centers in Latin America. Although they started providing lessons only to the wealthy in their homes, dance masters in nineteenth-century Havana also eventually gave studio classes to those who could not afford private lessons (117-18). Affluent whites were not the only ones who danced the European courtly styles: well-to-do blacks who could bear the expense of learning the upper-class fashions performed styles from Europe. Chasteen furnishes the example of a formal ball among prosperous blacks in the 1840s where dancers performed *quadrilles* and waltzes while paying careful attention to European rules of convention and etiquette (131).

Researching the history of the *tumba francesa* provides insights into the way this practice, regarded as a traditional form of culture, developed in part through the commercialization of the elite dance culture of Europe. Conducting research on culture blurs the clear distinction that has been set up between the traditional and commercial. Most "traditional" cultural forms have probably been intertwined with commercialism, at varied levels, at some point in their historical and/or contemporary developments. Similarly, the *tumba francesa* today is maintained by only three *tumba francesa* societies (funded by UNESCO and the Cuban government), whose audiences are primarily tourists. These societies' performances, which specifically embody the traditions of Oriente province in the eastern part of Cuba, are commercial spectacles marketed to tourists. As Grete Viddal notes, "Tumba Francesa societies are potential tourist attractions and may help the eastern region capitalize on its distinctive cultural patrimony" (Viddal 2007). Tourism and UNESCO's *Proclamation of Masterpieces* (as well as its *Representative List*) are in fact unofficially interconnected. One of the key reasons why states nominate traditional practices for inclusion in the *Proclamation of Masterpieces* is to promote tourism. An advantageous byproduct of these lists is that tourists are able to arrange their travel plans around given UNESCO

masterpieces, which in turn advances local economies and ensures the viability of intangible cultures (Hafstein 2009: 106).

Just as intangible arts regarded as traditional expressions may incorporate a certain level of commercialism, the commodification of popular intangible arts could reinterpret tradition. Conducting research on commercial intangible arts can dismantle the opposition between the traditional and the commercial by illuminating the way commercial cultures include tradition in their historical development and/or contemporary contexts. Hence commercial performing arts that incorporate the traditional may also be worthy of preservation. The value bestowed on commercial intangible arts often lies in their link to their traditional heritage rather than in their commercial aspects, which are often viewed in a negative light. As mentioned above, the process of selling culture is believed to lead to increased homogenization and simplification of traditional forms, which are often beheld as more complex and original expressions. Despite this assumption, research on culture reveals the way that the commercial and the traditional often fuse, blurring the distinction between these two categories. To place traditional culture above commercial forms becomes to a certain extent meaningless, as tradition and commodification may intertwine during the development of particular cultures.

Fusing Traditional and Commercial Culture: The Cuban *Casino*

To illustrate how popular commercial practices interconnect with traditional forms, I will use the example of the historical development and contemporary performance of a specific Cuban dance, the *casino*, which is regarded as the Cuban form of salsa. Despite its Cuban roots, the *casino* has been disseminated to the world and is performed in cities throughout the globe. The commercialization of this form has led to its global status. Cuban *casino* has become a worldwide phenomenon through dance lessons promoted at studios and clubs in cities around the world; it has also reached areas outside of Cuba via various forms of media, such as videos, film, television, and the Internet.

The *casino*, or Cuban salsa dance, has been flourishing and evolving in Cuba since the 1950s (Linares 1974: 200; Balbuena 2003: 43). The *casino* is today a Cuban dance disseminated to the globe as a fun commercial pastime and “sold” in the form of dance lessons to tourists visiting the Caribbean nation. This highly commercial dance, nonetheless, combines aspects of Cuban culture that could be regarded as traditional. Traditional cultural forms, as previously mentioned, are defined as practices that have been passed on from one generation to the next and that express the identity of a people – in this context, the African-derived heritage in Cuban culture. The *casino* is a genre that absorbs a diversity of forms from the rich repertoire of dances that thrive in Cuba. Various choreographic patterns from dances of Afro-Cuban origin, for instance, have also been integrated into the *casino*. Influences from Santería, the Yoruba-derived religion of Cuba, such as the

elegguá, *ogún*, and *ochosi*, are expressed in the *casino* (Balbuena 2003: 96). These dances embody the *orishas*, or spirits, of the Yoruba pantheon (Gillon 1984: 240). The *ogún*, for instance, is a traditional Afro-Cuban ceremonial dance that evokes Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron and war (Gillon 1984: 247). Elements from the rumba dances *columbia* and *guaguancó* have been absorbed into the *casino* (Balbuena 2003: 96). The rumba is an Afro-Cuban secular music and dance genre that summons African musical and dance vernacular and contains neither European melodic influences nor chordal instruments. The rumba was developed in the early nineteenth century by diverse peoples from West and Central Africa who were brought to Cuba as slaves (Pietrobruno 2006: 33). Movements and steps from the *makuta* and *yuka* have also been assimilated into the *casino* (Balbuena 2003: 96). The *makuta* and *yuka* were performed by enslaved people from the Congo and by their descendants (Santos Gracia and Armas Rigal 2002: 51). Furthermore, movements from other dances that preceded the *casino*, such as the mambo, *chachachá*, and *conga*, have also been integrated into the *casino* (96). The mambo and *chachachá* were popular in Havana and New York in the 1950s, yet their roots are in the late-eighteenth-century fusion of an elite French court dance – the *contredanse* – and an African-derived movement vernacular (Pietrobruno 2006: 38-47). The *conga* and *comparsa* are collective processional dances that originated in secular celebrations during the time of slavery (Martínez Furé 1974: 87) and were later used in colonial marches to display the heritage of ethno-cultural societies, called *cabildos* (Daniel 2002: 34). During the nineteenth century, black Cubans in towns and cities were given the right to form *cabildos*, composed of distinct “nations” or African ethnic groups, such as *congos*, *yoruba*, and *mandingas* (Martínez Furé 1974: 87). The *cabildos* offered a venue to preserve the sacred and secular traditions of diverse African groups, particularly the ancient traditional dances, which the onslaught of slavery had tried to obliterate through a brutal process of deculturation (Guerra 1993: 93). Despite being deeply rooted in the Afro-Cuban tradition, the *casino* is also linked to the elite French court dance of the late eighteenth century: the basic step of the *casino* stems from the European *contredanse*.

Research on the history and development of the *tumba francesa* and the *casino* reveals that they share some common characteristics. They both combine traditional and commercial culture, blurring the boundaries between the two. Their roots extend well beyond the borders of Cuba to France and numerous regions in Africa. These dances cross national and regional divisions as a result of extensive migrations that have marked the history of Cuba and the Caribbean in general. For instance, “traditional” African-derived culture was combined with the elite dance fashions brought to the New World via the transigrations of Europeans. These extensive cultural shifts may seem to be a specific characteristic of the Caribbean and hence cannot be generalized to culture in general. Rex Nettleford elucidates the way that, during the past five hundred years, the

Caribbean as well as the Americas have been marked by a “history of migration(s)” (Nettleford 2004: 78). Nonetheless, the idea that there could have ever existed traditional cultures that are solely the product of a uniform and bounded group is doubtful. Most cultures have been influenced by others. The belief that cultures endured that were not influenced by outside forces is for many a myth (Tomlinson 1999: 128-129). Arjun Appadurai questions whether there could have once existed a people who were completely sheltered from any foreign connection: the “native” as pure and isolated is a creation of the Western imagination (Appadurai 1992: 37-38).

By showing the similarities between the *tumba francesa* (an intangible culture that has been appraised by UNESCO as one of the “masterpieces” of the world) and the *casino* (a popular, commercial, global Cuban-derived dance that has not accrued much cultural capital at the international level), I have tried to question the value system that places one cultural form above others. I do not wish in the process of challenging the classification of masterpieces established by UNESCO to deprecate the artistry of the *tumba francesa*. It is a beautiful, intricate performance that emulates the creativity of black peoples of the Caribbean who created vital and original art forms by fusing the elite European court cultures with their African-derived heritage. The *tumba francesa* furthermore stands as a living embodied record of the cultural fusion between Afro-Cubans and Afro-Haitians resulting from the immense Haitian-Franco immigration to the eastern part of Cuba at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century (Boudreault-Fournier n.d.). From another perspective, perhaps one of the reasons the *tumba francesa* should be esteemed and listed as a masterpiece is to ensure that it is safeguarded. The *tumba francesa* is an endangered tradition that may disappear forever. Whereas the *casino*, as a worldwide commercial genre, is disseminated around the world and maintained through global practices, performances, media, and businesses, the *tumba francesa*, which achieved prominence at the end of the nineteenth century, is today nurtured and kept alive by only three *tumba francesa* societies, all founded following the abolishment of slavery in Cuba in 1886 – Tumba Francesa Society Santa Catalina de Riccis, referred to as La Pompadour; Tumba Francesa Society La Caridad de Oriente; and Tumba Francesa Society Sagua de Tánamo (Boudreault-Fournier 2005) – as well as a dance ensemble, the Ballet Folklórico Cutumba (Viddal 2007). The vitality of this intangible heritage would be at risk if not for the funding supplied by UNESCO. As Grete Viddal asserts: “In 2003, UNESCO partnering with the Cuban government proposed a six-figure funding package to help ‘ensure the viability of La Tumba Francesa’ under the auspices of the ‘Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage’” (Viddal 2007).

Commercialization and the Issue of Permanence: Salsa Dance

As a dance full of history, artistry, and beauty that incarnates the melding of European and African performances in Cuba, the *casino* is also one of the living treasures of the world's intangible heritage. One of the reasons perhaps why a dance such as this one does not figure on lists of masterpieces and is not funded by formal preservation projects is because it is assumed to be kept alive by commercial global media and by businesses. Protected by commodification and technology, its viability is not imperiled. This Cuban popular dance is nurtured by the worldwide demand for its performance as well as by the commercial organizations that foster it. Nonetheless, the question that needs to be raised is whether the assumption that the commercialization of a tradition ensures its sustainability is indeed valid.

The example of salsa dance illustrates how the commercialization of a performing art does not always ensure its continued existence. Salsa dance, as it is known today, developed in New York in the 1960s and 1970s through the involvement of people from diverse Caribbean and Latin American nations, most importantly Puerto Ricans as well as Americans of diverse backgrounds. During this period, salsa became an expression of Puerto Rican identity. Salsa from New York also transculturated first to the nations of the Caribbean basin – Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela – and then to Latin America in general, eventually becoming an expression of pan-Latino consciousness. Salsa dance is a traditional practice that first expressed the identity of Puerto Ricans and now expresses that of Latin peoples more generally. This dance and music have always been distributed through forms of media, the music industry, and dance institutions (Pietrobruno 2006: 49-53). The styles of salsa in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were far more varied than they eventually became beginning in the 1990s, when salsa was standardized into various key global styles – New York, Los Angeles, Cuban, and Puerto Rican – primarily for commercial purposes (64). Lise Waxer points out, for instance, that the salsa dance performed in Venezuela in the mid-1970s and the 1980s was so diverse that each working-class *barrio* had a different style of dancing (Waxer 2002: 230). It could be argued that the increased commercialization of the dance has led to its standardization. Nonetheless, salsa has always been a commodified practice performed in commercial venues, clubs, and dance schools. The salsa that was danced in the 1970s and 1980s was commercial despite having strong roots in Latin identity. The varied and diverse styles of dancing from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s have to a large extent disappeared from public performances. Only very few records store these periods in the history of the dance. The documentary film *Beats of the Heart: Salsa*, directed by Jeremy Marre, is a rare example that features vintage footage of the street-style of salsa in the New York of the late 1970s (Marre 1979). Commonly considered to be of low culture, salsa dance has not been valued enough to be preserved in official archives of moving images nor extensively documented in

print media. Consequently, the performance styles of salsa from past eras are held only in the bodies and minds of the dancers who once performed the steps and patterns of bygone days. The commercialization of culture therefore does not necessarily guarantee its staying power.

Performing arts that comprise the living cultures of the world are constantly in flux. They are forever changing, drawing from and reinterpreting past traditions. Their developments can combine traditional culture with commercial processes, as the commodification of culture is often interwoven with traditional heritage. Organized preservation projects such as that facilitated by UNESCO's lists of masterpieces have the potential to support only a few select cultural forms and thus could merely preserve specific national culture rather than sustain the processes and environment that enabled these heritages to originate, develop, and thrive in the first place. For instance, UNESCO's financing of *tumba francesa* safeguards this cultural form, but it does not necessarily nourish the cultural terrain that has enabled the creation of Cuban intangible performing arts. Cuban popular dances that have originated from the fusion of diverse heritages are continuously changing. The *tumba francesa*, whose performances are primarily showcased for tourists, may become a relic, surviving as a memorial of the past. The *casino*, by comparison, is an example of a contemporary performing art that evokes the rich and diverse heritage of Cuban culture while continuing to develop in contemporary circumstances. As previously mentioned, the *casino* builds on numerous past dance traditions, such as the *ogún*, *makuta*, *yuka*, *conga*, mambo, and *chachachá*, while constantly recreating new forms and patterns that reflect the contemporary world of its dancers. Preserving intangible culture as static performances in the hope of sustaining cultural diversity may do very little to foster the processes of change and regeneration that are needed to ensure cultural vitality and heterogeneity. As Yola De Lusenet asks: "Can a cultural process or an event that is continuously recreated actually be safeguarded without 'fossilizing' it?" (De Lusenet 2007: 176).

Video-Sharing Sites and the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage

In this century, intangible arts are being preserved outside the jurisdiction of official centrally structured organizations such as UNESCO. The participatory and social medium of Web 2.0 is providing a means to safeguard and preserve intangible arts that can capture their dynamism and diversity without necessarily rendering them static. According to UNESCO, "safeguarding" refers to those measures taken to assure and guarantee the viability of intangible heritage, measures that comprise "identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage" (UNESCO 2003). Through the social medium of Web 2.0, users are disseminating popular performing arts from the Caribbean in ways that echo

various safeguarding measures proposed by UNESCO. On video-sharing sites, in particular, users are uploading videos of countless performing arts. By uploading and viewing videos of Caribbean dance, the YouTube community, for instance, is unwittingly taking actions to safeguard global performing-arts heritage (Pietrobruno 2008: 3). Given its dissemination of intangible culture, and specifically the performing arts, YouTube could be viewed as an unofficial archive that preserves Caribbean dance (as well as countless global intangible expressions) through processes of identification, documentation, and transmission within the nonformal education medium of a video-sharing site. Whereas recognized institutions and organizations manage collections through set processes and practices and have the authority to acquire, appraise, and preserve their contents, online repositories of moving images operate with few structures in place to shape and direct their collections. Countless users create the online archive and determine its contents and value. The growing dance archive of moving images on YouTube is produced by the users themselves, who upload and download dance videos, tag uploaded videos with keywords, and link them to relevant and affiliated clips, as well as add to the documentation of clips by providing comments on featured dance videos (Gracy 2007: 184). Through online discussions, users become the curators. They are not consciously creating an archive of moving images; rather, through their engagement in other social activities and, in this case, dance-related practices, online collections are being formed. This archive of moving images on YouTube is therefore self-generating (196).

The collection of popular performing arts burgeoning on YouTube and other video-sharing sites is also a living archive that is continuously in flux, thus reflecting the nature of the intangible culture that it stores, documents, and disseminates. The intangible performing arts of the Caribbean, such as the Cuban *casino* (or salsa dance), are in continuous motion, building, changing, and adapting to the needs and creativity of the dancers. Living dance cultures can not be fixed and frozen but are constantly in transformation. Since the archives of popular performing arts produced through video-sharing sites are created by users themselves, these archives also have the potential not to become static. The new videos of popular actual performances that users from around the world are continuously uploading to the Internet can capture the diversity and fluidity of global performances. William Uricchio, for instance, has noted a convergence between the digital sphere and the oral circumstances in which intangible cultures thrive. He envisions both as “decentralized, networked, collaborative, accretive, ephemeral and dynamic” (Uricchio 2007: 20).

The following example of a selection of YouTube videos showing the Cuban version of salsa, the *casino*, as well as its roots provides an example of the variety and fluid nature of intangible performing arts captured on video-sharing sites. The Cuban salsa, which is less globally popular than the North American versions,

such as the New York and Los Angeles styles, is unique because it is danced in a diversity of ways: in couples using the closed social dance position; in two rows divided by gender, the male and female partners facing one another in a position called *en formacion de calle* (the formation of the street); and in the *rueda* (circle) (Balbuena 2003: 92). These variations of the Cuban salsa can be found archived on YouTube. For instance, the video “Salsa Cubana Dance Competition – Santiago, Cuba,” uploaded by boogalu productions in July 2007, focuses on an outstanding couple dancing in the closed social dance position who exhibit the fluidity of the Cuban *casino* style while performing in a competition in Santiago in 2003 (“Salsa Cubana Dance Competition – Santiago, Cuba” 2007). Dancing in a circle in the *casino de la rueda* can be seen in the instructional video “Salsa: Rueda Cubana,” uploaded by mmmduububu in July 2007 (“Salsa: Rueda Cubana” 2007). This video illustrates the nature of popular Caribbean dance, which is continuously evolving. Not only does this popular practice change at the level of corporeal movement, but the names given to particular dances also reflect current local and global social and political contexts. For instance, one of the names of a particular pattern that is announced by the caller of the *rueda*, who shouts out all the different dance moves and patterns, is “bin Laden.” Since Cuban salsa, or *casino*, has evolved since 1959 in almost complete isolation, it is distinct from salsa performed in North America and Latin America. The *casino*, as mentioned above, has absorbed a variety of dances from the African Cuban heritage (Balbuena 2003: 96), an example of which is a dance of Santería (a Yoruba-derived religion of Cuba) called the *ogún* (or *oggún*) (Santos Gracia and Armas Rigal 2002: 95-99). The video “Changó, Oggún y Ochún,” uploaded by fideo62 in February 2007, features in Havana a Santería performance of the *ogún* that has been incorporated into the *casino* (“Changó, Oggún y Ochún” 2007). The instructional video “Orisha Dance: Oggun,” posted by garitrek in April 2008, provides a more detailed dance demonstration of the *ogún* (“Orisha Dance: Oggun” 2008).

Does the safeguarding of intangible culture on the Internet counter the very essence of what renders a heritage “intangible”? It would seem that the criteria ensuring that an intangible culture remains “intangible” is that it is not concretized in media, which transform the ephemeral into fixed objects such as films, videos, DVDs, and CDs. Prior to the rise of digital media and specifically the social medium of Web 2.0, numerous intangible popular performing arts could primarily be viewed only in living circumstances. The emergence of YouTube in 2005, for instance, has brought about a change in the dissemination of intangible culture. Countless popular performing arts that have been neither widely transmitted in texts nor extensively recorded in other forms of media are being saved as online moving images by users and dance practitioners themselves. Many intangible arts were previously accessible only in live circumstances because they were not valued highly enough by the governing bodies of archives and libraries to be

considered worthy of preservation. This is the case for many Caribbean popular dance cultures, of which salsa dance is one example. In the contemporary cultural context, marked by the rising use of new media, intangible performing arts have become inextricably intertwined with the tangible. Both practitioners and fans are taking it upon themselves to unwittingly identify, record, preserve, and transmit these arts via their involvement in Internet-based cultural communities.

This fusion of the intangible with the tangible has not necessarily arisen with the recent developments in social media. Intangible culture has always been interlaced with the tangible (Munjeri 2004: 18). In its *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, UNESCO brings to the fore “the deep-seated interdependence between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage” (UNESCO 2003). Furthermore, this convention includes “the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces” as part of the expression of intangible cultures (UNESCO 2003a). The material and intangible always coincide even within expressions as impalpable as the performing arts: the movements and patterns of a given dance are stored and retained in the human mind and body (Skounti 2009: 77). Connections between the performing arts and tangible structures exist. For instance, the *orishas* – the spirits of the Yoruba pantheon embodied in Afro-Cuban dances such as the *ogún* – also find expression in African artistry far beyond the borders of the Caribbean nation. Werner Gillon illustrates that in Ekiti, in north-eastern Yorubaland (i.e., Nigeria), those whose livelihoods or pastimes involve iron still worship Ogun, the god of iron and war. To commemorate this god, for example, they create masks that are used in Ogun rituals (Gillon 1984: 247). Intangible performing arts also take place in buildings that may be historic sites. The Ballet Folklórico Cutumba, for instance, performs the *tumba francesa* in Santiago de Cuba’s Teatro Oriente, a dilapidated theater whose past luxuriance emanates through the faded velvet curtains adorning the stage and the intricate architectural work decorating the decaying walls (Viddal 2007). In the contemporary context, performing arts unfold in tangible actual places as well as in the cultural space of the Internet.

Conclusion

The arguments presented in this study demonstrate that unearthing the deep history and contemporary circumstances of cultural forms counters prevailing ways of viewing intangible culture. UNESCO’s categorizing of intangible heritage within the list of masterpieces and the representative list, as well as the definition of “intangible” advanced in the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, produces assumptions and hierarchies that do not inevitably capture the way culture thrives in actual circumstances. These stances include the division between the “high” culture of the West and the rest of the world, the separation between the traditional and commercial as well as the circumscribing

of cultural forms to national and regional borders, without a consideration of global influences.

One of the key presumptions analyzed in terms of detailed historical and contemporary perspectives is the separation between traditional and commercial as a means to distinguish culture. The *tumba francesa*, which was deemed a “masterpiece” in 2003, is regarded as traditional through the intangible heritage classification. An overview of *tumba francesa*’s historical and contemporary manifestations in Cuba reveals that in both its past and current performances, it has integrated commercial elements. To further illustrate that the distinction between traditional and commercial does not invariably apply to lived cultural forms, the example of the Cuban *casino* is put forward. Although the Cuban *casino* is generally considered to be a commercial practice perpetuated throughout the globe by media and businesses, it incorporates elements of the Cuban dance heritage that are considered to be traditional. Practices such as the Cuban *casino* and *tumba francesa* do not systematically fall into the grouping of either a commercial or traditional form. Yet the classification of cultures in terms of this division persists. The sorting of culture as either commercial or traditional is one of the criteria used by UNESCO to determine whether a practice is in need of safeguarding. Traditional cultures are deemed more fragile than commercial ones. The example of salsa dance is proposed to demonstrate the way that the commodification of culture does not necessarily assure its perseverance. Since its inception in the 1960s, salsa dance has been a popular commercial practice linked to dance and music industries. Nonetheless, the commercialization of salsa did not guarantee the longevity of its varied and diverse styles, which proliferated in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, renditions that have largely vanished from present-day public performances.

The details provided of various Caribbean popular performing arts illustrate not only that in lived circumstances intangible cultures do not as a matter of course conform to the division between commercial and traditional but also that performance cultures are constantly in flux. Contemporary arts are continuously interpreting past traditions to create current renditions. For popular performance arts to change and metamorphose into new forms, they require an environment that can sustain their development and transformation. Organizations such as UNESCO support the safeguarding of “masterpieces” or “representative” forms, of which *tumba francesa* is an example, which does not necessarily foster the cultural ground that enabled the creation of Cuban intangible performing arts in the first place. Preserving select intangible performances without the maintenance of the culture as a whole from which they stem could freeze them into static renditions, jeopardizing diversity and change. The preservation of intangible heritage through the participatory and social medium of Web 2.0 currently offers a vehicle by which to safeguard performance practices that can sustain their dynamism and potential for variation. Video-sharing sites, of which YouTube is a

pivotal example, provide an unofficial means to store intangible heritage. YouTube, for instance, becomes a living archive of Caribbean popular performances that can capture the continuous revision and multiplicity of forms that are an inherent part of intangible performances in lived circumstances. The preservation of fluid intangible heritage within the tangible means of fixed new media objects, specifically online videos, appears to counter the essence of intangible heritage itself. The standard by which a performing art should be deemed “intangible” is that it is not concretized in media, which reshapes the fleeting nature of performance into a palpable object. Intangible heritage is nevertheless inextricably intertwined with the tangible. Performing arts have been transmitted and stored through the physical body and mind, combined with artifacts and performed in designated buildings and sites.

UNESCO’s *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* largely disregards popular commercial culture as intangible heritage worthy of preservation as well as the pivotal role played by current collective safeguarding measures through Web 2.0. This research uncovers that the criteria for what constitutes intangible cultural heritage and its concomitant conservation strategies need to include popular commercial culture and media practices if the world’s intangible practices are indeed to be preserved for future generations. Many of the world’s intangible cultures are transmitted through popular intangible arts distributed through businesses, industries and diverse forms of media. Consideration needs to be given to their preservation, as commercialization does not necessarily guarantee their endurance. In addition, countless forms of intangible heritage are being preserved through online videos featured on video-sharing sites. These videos have the potential to capture the heterogeneity and fluidity that are intrinsic to intangible culture, attributes that are often compromised through the formal safeguarding measures proposed by UNESCO. The incorporation of the unofficial archiving of intangible heritage currently materializing through worldwide video-sharing services could enhance and enrich officially sanctioned safeguarding measures.

Sheenagh Pietrobruno, assistant professor of English at Fatih University in Istanbul, holds a PhD in communications from McGill University. She has been a postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths College. She is the author of *Salsa and Its Transnational Moves* (Rowman and Littlefield Inc. 2006).

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