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Tango as a Social Space in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1802

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Introduction

Archival research uncovered an 1802 date for a building in Buenos Aires used as a space for Tango gatherings and owned by an Afro-Porteña association ("porteño" derives from "port" and means an inhabitant of Buenos Aires). That date was older than other properties with club-house like uses in the city owned by Afro-Argentinian social organizations. Tango is a well-known music and dance tradition in Uruguay and Argentina today. The origins of Tango are subject to considerable debate. Some researchers advance a narrative of European roots to the tradition and performance. Others point to influences of African cultural traditions on the development of Tango, including derviation of the name. Accounts emphasizing Eurocentric perspectives were often entangled with nationalist ideologies in the country.

Tango is recognized as a National Music in Argentina and Uruguay and was added to the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization in 2009 (UNESCO 2025). Several community associations of free and enslaved Afro-Porteño people hosted social activities in Buenos Aires which included Tango dance and performance. Those spaces often appeared as mundane common areas, but served as important venues for Tango as special, performative spaces of Afro-Porteño sociability and music.

Spaces of Afro-Porteño Sociability and Music

Enslaved people were present in Buenos Aires since its foundation. The first archival descriptions of their forms of sociability and related spaces date to the late 1700s. The cult of San Baltazar was established at that time by the Catholic Church through the Brotherhood of San Baltazar y Ánimas. Activities of this cult were hosted from 1772 to at least 1856 in the

church of La Piedad, a small structure located in the city outskirts. The cult of San Baltazar was the first of the brotherhoods for Afro-Porteños. Archival evidence indicates that brothers in this group favored use of atrium spaces for devotions to the saint, accompanied by music and dance, instead of remaining still and silent during masses. This aroused the anger of the parish priest, who complained to the Cabildo and elicited defense statements by the brothers. The enslaved brothers used the atrium for dance and music because it was the only place where they were not repressed. Such insights into the history of urban spaces have been overlooked previously in national, historical accounts. It is important to understand these facets of Argentina's architectural heritage to understand the diverse, vernacular uses of the built environment by all populations (Schavelzon 2018: 75)

Devotees of San Baltazar and of other brotherhoods that were emerging at that time were grouped into social organizations known as Sites of Nations, Nations, Candombes, Tangos, or Drums, and institutionally called "African societies" by President Rivadavia's laws in the 1820s. These societies worked to counteract the isolating effects of slavery. To do this, these groups first met in open spaces, such as atriums, streets, squares, and empty lots in the city. They later met in locations they owned or rented. These societies and their buildings were employed to help members in sickness and to raise funds for burials. They held ceremonies to invoke the protection of spiritual figures and social gatherings with music and dances called Tango and Candombe.

At the same time, a large number of Afro-Porteño musicians also played ecclesiastical, concert, military, and salon music for the white society. The musical relationship between both spheres of Buenos Aires was far from harmonious. Complaints about "annoying noises" were frequently brought to the Cabildo and the police, and agents were sent to dissolve the "juntas" or "tambos." These circumstances created challenges to be confronted by those Afro-Porteño groups who wanted to express themselves musically. Many members of those societies were illiterate, and sought the aid of third parties to assist them in addressing the complaints by outsiders. Officials sought to maintain their rules of decorum and order and insisted that the music not become a "noise." The penalties were harsh, including 200 lashes and a month in jail in 1766 (AGN 8-10-3), or a month of public work in 1822 (Trelles 1859: 32). These regulations applied to both open and closed urban spaces.

The majority of the Nations, Tangos, or Candombes were located in an area that was part of what are now the neighborhoods of Montserrat, San Cristóbal, San Telmo, and Constitución (Figures 1, 2). In different times and contexts this area was also called Barrio Sur, Del Tambor, or Del Mondongo (after a type of food that the surrounding society despised). Archival sources at times refer to Afro-Porteño societies and these neighborhoods with overlapping names, such as Tango, Tambo, Tambor, Milonga, or Carnival Society. For example, in 1822 a man called Joaquín Bacero from the Polo Nation asked the police for authorization to dance "in the place called Tambo," and in 1830 "the free dark-haired man" named Antonio Caligas asked to do "a dance meeting known with the name of Tambor" (Trelles 1859: 425).

Figure 1. An abandoned Tango site on a city lot on Mexico Street in Buenos Aires around 1898. The remains of an 18th century house or room are located in the back of the space (Source: Archivo General de la Nación).

José Manuel Estrada, in his pioneering 1863 article entitled *Los Tambores*, observed:

> "Who has not at some time heard the rustic noise of the rustic instrument, to whose beat the blacks dance on the drum? Who has not been curious to see their amusements, or heard their elders speak of a day when the old black woman of the house was decked out in rich attire to be the Queen of the party? What doctor has not found on some occasion the whole tribe around a sick

> person or what lawyer has not testified to the best right of the Angolans or the Congos to the site, which is in the power of Benguela or Mataman? And yet, how few are those who know that these drums where *chicha* is drunk and wild dances are danced after perhaps celebrating a religious festival or delivering the corpse of a brother to the earth, are an admirable institution and that it comes to us from the past surrounded by sympathetic features anointed with the holy oil of gratitude! How few are those who have thought, listening to the compass of the drum, that those are the moans of a race . . . . Let's see what drums are. This association had as primary objects the help and mutual protection of black slaves; there the sick found brothers, the dying consolation, the dead prayers and the old charitable souls, who bending their heads to work provided resources for their manumission, inventing, so to speak, treasures destined to redeem the freedom of their brother. At some time the reader will have smiled observing the sweet treatment of the blacks among themselves, and perhaps he will have wondered why the affectionate epithets of father are lavished on the elderly, brothers on the young, and sons on the children. Those are the bonds of mutual love, formed in the drum, where they have laughed or cried together, or remembering the ardent nature that served as their cradle." (Estrada 1863: 16, translated by the authors).

Previous projects of archival research also uncovered discussions of such Afro-Porteño "nations" from 1858 onward (Cirio 2009). Previous research efforts also identified places affiliated with such nations, such as one associated with the Banguela Nation in 1807 and 1808 (Rosal 2009: 104-105; Parkhurst 2023). Recent investigations have now revealed a location dated to 1802 and more contextual evidence concerning the activities of these organizations. A document, found in the Celesia Collection at the National Archives, was written on December 11, 1802, in relation to the "appraisal and sale . . . of the house and tango venue." This record is significant in that it predates the previously known documents and also indicates the existence of two different things in the same place: a dwelling and a place for dancing tango. This separation was emphasized by stating that the separation was undertaken "at the request of all the brothers who have a share in said house, primarily in the land on which said house is built." In other words, it is a group of individuals who own a house and the land, as a community entity; and that the land was for dancing tango. The facade of the house was typical in the city, with a door and two windows "with good ironwork and thresholds," and the main space facing the street. The lot was very large, measuring about 50 meters in length, but

the total value of $536 was very low for the time, unless the construction was of very poor quality, or it was not possible to sell it in any other way because it was collectively owned.

There were nearly 100 Carnival Societies for artistic performances held each year between Christmas Eve and the Carnival. These groups employed performance aesthetics derived from Afro-Porteño and Latin-American traditions of the "candomberas" and some from European traditions of "musicals" (Cirio 2015). These societies typically had access to premises where they rehearsed and held music and dance classes to raise funds. Furniture was often spare (Anonymous 1920) and rooms on the premises were also employed in religious rituals of African origins, such as the "Dance of the Saint." The following chronicle provides clues to such sociability in spatial perspective.

> "We were given to know the last of the sites, that of the banguelas, in a festivity that offered us two curious phases of the social spirit of the race. The site of the banguelas was on México street, before Santiago del Estero, in front, precisely, of the Grigera musicians' little house. In the duck of the site, in the light of the stars, coconut drums and Chinese masterfully orchestrated a touch. It was the touch that, harmonized and danced, produces 'the saint,' a spiritual state so called that has the power to put those gathered in communication with all the absent brothers of the race. Among the public, lined up to the right and left, the path along which a woman was advancing, dancing, was left free, which she deposited on the altar, at the end of the little path, an offering, we think it was a coin. While this rite with an African flavor was officiated in the courtyard, in a brightly lit rectangular room ladies and gentlemen conversed, visibly waiting for the beginning of the dance to tonal music and current use. They dressed 'la dernière'; them, by etiquette" (Montagne 1926: 76, translated by the authors).

Some of the nations continued activities through the early 1900s, such as the Cambundá group on Chile Street in Buenos Aires, which may have been related to the banguela site discussed above. Other societies were converted into so-called Academies in the late 1800s. These were mixed social spaces for Afro-Porteños and other people from the surrounding area, where Tango and related genres were danced. Such was the case of the Black Slave Society, located on the corner of Pozos and Independencia Streets, where the Quizamá Society also operated. Those two grous were merged in 1878 and later coverted into an Academy.

Afro-Porteño Architecture and Urban Spaces

There are some studies on Afro-Porteño architecture focused on historical contexts, but few of them have focused on the materiality and spatial configurations (Rosal 2009; 2019; Schavelzon 2003). Such societies used structures designed and built by themselves and others. The most analyzed architectural examples were located in slave markets (Schavelzon 2003; 2014) and in *rancherías* (residences for enslaved persons) in church convents and religious properties (Page 2011). Very little attention has been paid in historical studies to the architecture that the Afro-Porteño community made in city spaces for their worship, social activities, and housing (Cirio 2002b; Cirio and Cámara de Landa 2021).

At first glance, house designs and facades in the city in the 1700s and 1800s had similar appearances (Rosal 2009). Residences differed, however, in regard to the ways people used the open spaces and main rooms. For example, the Tambor neighborhood hosted a large number of sites and houses owned or used by Afro-Porteño and Libertos. Yet, poor white residents also lived in the neighborhood. The main differences between the white and Afro-Porteño residential structures occurred in variations in the use of outdoors spaces. Afro-Porteño residents showed a greater use of those spaces for social activities. Researchers will not readily find evidence of this difference in the public archives. The permits issued by authorities in the 1700s and 1800s for construction and use activities typically did not address the uses of outdoor spaces surroounding the residences. Thus evidence of such differences should instead be sought out in other forms of documentary records, configurations of the built environment, oral history accounts, and archaeological investigations. For example, the "Capilla de los Negros" is a surviving building and site dating from the 19th century and located in the city of Chascomús, near Buenos Aires. This was a site of an Afro-Porteño social group. The building presents a common appearance and design. Yet the open spaces on the lots were used for social activities.

The systematization of different documentary sources allows us to better think about the neighborhood in Buenos Aires popularly known as Del Tambor between the end of the 18th century and the middle of the 19th century. Until now, the occupation of the Afro-Porteño population in Buenos Aires was believed to have been dispersed in the south neighborhoods of the city. As a result of a study of files at the National Archives, we can circumscribe this spatial distribution to a more limited area: ten blocks delimited by Independencia, Virrey Ceballos,

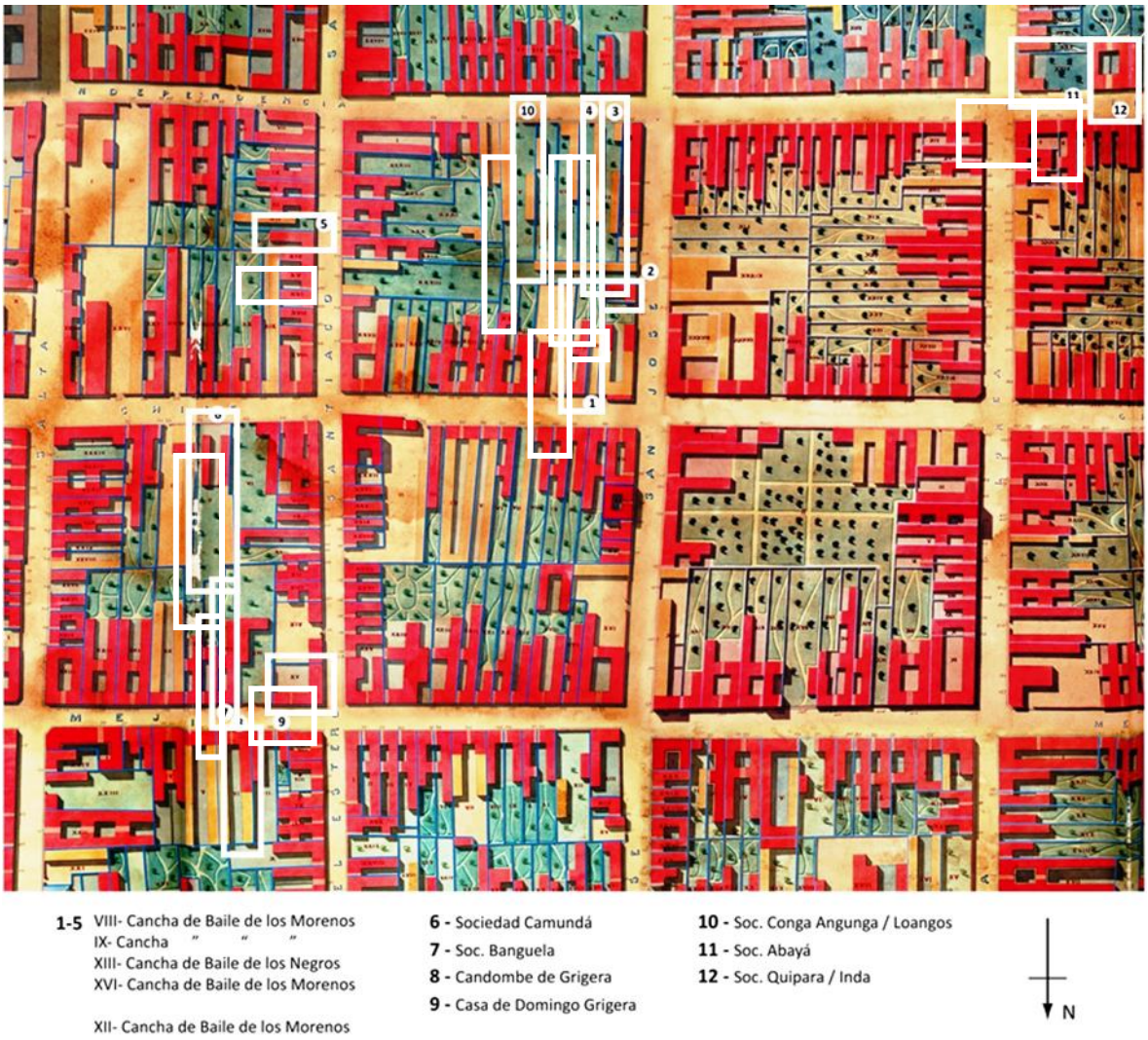

Figure 2. Afro *Nations* in the Montserrat neighborhood of Buenos Aires, described as *Cancha de Baile* or *Baile de Los Negros.* From leftt to right: Salta, Santiago del Estero, San José and Lorea (actually Sáenz Peña) Streets; from top to bottom, Independencia, Chile, and México Streets (Source: Cadastro Pedro Beare 1865-1870).

Venezuela, and Salta Streets. Located on Independencia Street were the Conga Angunga Society, in whose headquarters the Loangos Society operated until 1834, the Quipara in whose headquarters the Inda Society operated, and the Abayá, Auzá, Rubolus, and Angola groups. Located on Chile Street was the Camundá Society, whose funds also supported the Banguela and Society of Moors. On Mexico Street was the Banguela Society, the Grigera Candombe, a house of a well-known singer of that group, and the Mina Society.

Around 1865 the Pedro Beare Urban Cadastre map shows five lots referenced as “Cancha de Baile de los Negros” and “Cancha de Danza de los Morenos” in two blocks of the Del

Tambor area we describe above. Four of those lots were in the block bounded by Chile, San José, and Independencia Streets, with access through each of those avenues and with lot spaces touching on one another. All of those five lots show open spaces next to the buildings. The Cadastre map indicates that the buildings were made of wood or other, inexpensive materials, perhaps providing evidence of the economic challenges faced by the social groups using those lots. A building for another Nation was constructed, likely before the 1780s, at the edge of a lot on Santiago del Estero Street. There are few other references to Nations' houses outside the ten-block area we have identified and located in the northern side of the city. Therefore, it is possiblee that there was another area of association linked to the Afro-Porteños who lived or worked there. These included references to the Huembes Society, Carmen Society, and Mutual Help group.

Between Africa and America: Crossing Etymological Waters of Tango and Related Voices

The *Provincial Dictionary of Cuban Voices* is considered "the first lexicographical work on provincialisms in the Hispanic world" (Cárdenas Molina 1999: 52). This source defines Tango as a "Gathering of black muzzles to dance to the sound of their drums or atabales" (Pichardo 1836: 242). From there to the present most dictionaries agree in defining the word Tango that way, but not all of them. The *Dictionary of the Spanish Language* of the Real Academia de la Lengua Española included the word Tango for the first time in its thirteenth edition in 1899, as "Fiesta and dance of blacks or of the people of the town in America." The *Dictionary of Argentinisms* was prepared by the Argentine Academy between 1875 and 1879, and remained unpublished until 2006. This source does not describe Tango, but includes a definition of Tambo as "The meetings that black Africans make to have fun" (Barcia 2006: 298). Finally, *The Musical Interpreter*, a dictionary of music in four languages that Edelmiro Mayer published in Buenos Aires in 1888, defines Tango as "Song and dance originated by the black slaves of Spanish America" (Mayer 1888: 229). Returning to the *Dictionary of Argentinisms*, we highlight the time-period of its writing (1875 to 1879) and note that it also described Candombe as a synonym for drum. This source defined Candombe as: "House or place where blacks usually meet to have their parties. Dance of blacks from Africa. Candombe

neighborhood: suburb of the city of Buenos Aires, where these blacks have their rooms and dance meetings" (Barcia 2006: 154).

At this point it seems unnecessary to say that this trio of words—Tambo, Tango, and Candombe—as well as the culturally close Milonga, are derived from African languages and most likely from the Bantu language, as the majority of enslaved persons in what is now Argentina came from that region of West Central Africa. Some historians have instead associated these three words with derivation from European or Indigenous words. For example, so,e proposed that Candombe was derived from an amalgam of the Greek *melos* (sound) and the Latin *longa* (long) to connote a "long melody." But no explanation is offered of why Afro-Porteños, who were mostly illiterate and in oppressed social positions, would employ terms from such obscure, European sources (Wilkes and Guerrero Cárpena 1946: 66). Vicente Rossi (1926) wrote about the word Candombe in Brazil and Uruguay as a term among the "black Angolans, who created it" (Cirio 2021). Candombe more likely derives from the Quimbundo language with an older meaning of "words, talk a lot." This is how it appears in the *Arte da língua de Angola* by the Portuguese Jesuit Pedro Dias (1697: 7).

The word Tango may also have roots related to the Yoruba deity name of Xangó (or Shango), as speakers of the language were also transported to Argentina during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Candombe is similar to Candomblé, the name of a spiritual tradion among Afro-Brazilians, which incorporated elements of Yoruba and Kongolese beliefs. The words Tango and Candombe also relate to topynyms with African associations. For example, there are towns called Tango, Milonga, and Candombe. Other word version of Milonga, include Milongo and Mulonga and there are localities with these names in the Republic of Congo, and a town named Mulonga in Zambia. The toponymic associations extend to the names of Afro-Porteño Nations sites in Argentina: in Angola there are Camunda, Houmbir, Benguela, and Loango localities; in Ethiopia there are Abaya and Maji; in Kenya, Bamba; Macuácua in Mozambique; in Nigeria one of its states is Borno and there are Zongo and Calabar; in Congo there is Bayombe. Finally, Tango is likely derived from the word "ntangu" from the Bantu languages that can be translated as time, hour, and modernly as clock, as in the KiKongo language (Anonymous 1964: 42; Parkhurst 2023). All in all, it is suggestive to extend the word Tango to the Afro-Porteño period language as "time to do our thing, what used to be."

According to the *Encyclopédie Méthodique, ou, par Ordre de Matières* (1782), Tango is a "nation of blacks, in Nigricia, in the kingdom of Biguba, where they inhabit a country called Bartola" and the term goes back to the 15th century according to Portuguese sources. The Portuguese, who started the slave trade on the African Atlantic coast, called Tango-mãos their mestizos with Africans who, living in the jungle, supplied the black slavers from interior areas (Thomas 1988).

What the Afro-Porteños called Tango, Tambo, Milonga, and Candombe appears to have represented a space of social freedom and expression. Such a context allows us to understand the importance they assigned, and continue to assign, to the drum and its rhythms as a cornerstone of their heritage. An archival record dated January 1791 was initiated by Pablo Agüero of the Compañía de Negros Libres and "commissioned to collect fugitive blacks and govern their dairy farms." This undertaking followed the arrest of Bentura Patro (or Patron), a free Black from the Brotherhood of San Baltazar y Ánimas and the Brotherhood of Morenos de Guinea, and Manuel Joachin for going out with "plumage, a wooden sword and drums . . . all over the city and square how many blacks there are in this city to stir up . . . and they say they have a license" (AGN 12-9-13). From the material point of view, we see similar evidence with the discovery of a wooden sword dated 1850-1870, recovered archaeologicaly in San Telmo (Schavelzon 2003). Today, such ceremonial swrods are more often made of plastic and are wielded by the Cambara'angá, or Avatars of Saint Baltazar, in devotional centers in Corrientes State (Cirio 2003).

The *Antología del Tango Rioplatense* states that "We wanted to highlight the inadmissibility of the approach that claims to attribute an African origin or antecedents to tango" (Novati 1980: 2), arriving at the opinion that "There is not much to say about black tangos" (Novati 1980: 4). This and other works follow a dictum of the homogenizing program of a white Argentina and for this reason they choose a Eurocentric analysis understood as neutral or universal. But if we adopt an Afrocentric perspective is easy to understand the connections based on language, names, art performance, and heritage. None of this is completely new, but important information has been neglected in past discussions. Roberto Lehmann Nitsche studied the Afro-Porteños more than a century ago. His *Riddles from the River Plate* (1911) and *Erotic Texts from the River Plate* (1923) were published in German and with the pseudonym of Víctor Borde Robert in order to avoid a scandalous reception in Buenos

Aires. He provided this definition: “milonga, from the Bantu language, brought to America by African slaves, now designates singing, cantinela, not precisely a specific singing style in Argentina” often performed in open spaces in the cities (Nitsche 1923: 208).

The Tango Concept in an Afrocentric Perspective

We chose an Afrocentric approach to analyze and articulate the history of an Afro-Porteño Tango because it allows us to explain it with a lower degree of distortion. Adhering to Sidney Mintz and Richard Pirce (1977), Alejandro Frigerio proposed six characteristics that seem to govern the production of Afro-American performance art (Frigerio 1992-93: 57–58). They are not specific features, but rules, structures, principles, or values that are not always applied consciously, structuring the production of such manifestations. They are: the multi-dimensionality that occurs densely and on several levels at the same time; mixing genres that for us are different and separated one to the other; the participatory quality without sharp separation between performer and public; the ubiquity in everyday life where each individual is, potentially, a performer; the importance of the conversation between the performers; the interactions between drums, soloist and choir, soloist and instrumental response, dancer and drum, singer and drum, dancers and singers; the importance of the personal style in which, given the relevance of the conversational style, each performer is committed to greater and better performance promoting personal expressions (Frigerio 1992-1993: 62). As African-American performance art is almost always performed within a group, the participatory quality allows roles to be interchangeable. In this way, they act as the main socializing and unifying element, with general well-being a main, evaluative criterion. Beyond the fact that these characteristics are not present in all Afro performances, Frigerio observes that it is as a whole that they configure and grant that distinguishable character from others.

This perspective is oriented towards spontaneous performances in the usual contexts of their followers and for themselves. Tango’s multidimensionality is evident, with Tango manifest as a musical genre and the name of an intra-community social space (as also occurs with its equivalent terms). The lack of differentiation between performers and the public is based on how Afro-Porteños interacted in their meetings that had music as their epicenter, even more considering that Afro-descendants lived in those places, which is intertwined with the

third characteristic, ubiquity in daily life. From a Eurocentric perspective music is often conceptualized as a separate, leisure activity when people have free time or the resources to perform it; from an Afrocentric perspective music and dance have such vitality that they are unavoidable in daily life. The daily life of the performers via singing, drumming, and dancing is another way of communicating. The importance of a conversational style is evident in lyrics, configured as dialogues in Porteño Candombe (Cirio 2016). In turn, each performer, depending on her musical competence, develops a personal style that gives her a distinctive stamp. This is how one of the oldest current musical and dance styles of Tango arose, the Tango Canyengue, by the double bass player Ruperto Leopoldo *el Africano* Thompson and the composer and performer Rosendo Mendizábal, set the form of Tango which marked the beginning of the so-called Guardia Vieja period with the tango *El entrerriano* in 1897.

Lastly, Tango fulfills clear social functions: in the period studied it allowed Afro-Porteños to regroup by their Nations and to remember their heritage from Africa, which is one of Tango's meanings as "the time of the ancients." This functionality is still operative in the social sense the urban population assign today to the term Milonga as a space of sociability to which they go to dance Tango and related genres. Going to a Milonga is, as in the past, going to a space of sociability whose unifying element is an African term that is a social genre and not just a musical tradition.

Note

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