

Cultural heritage in transition: tourism, dance, and socio-economic change in Cuba

At a time of rapid change in Cuba's internal and external affairs, a time of social and cultural change which has brought the country into the spotlight, academic research can prove to be a valuable resource for policy-makers, travelers, students, and the general public with an interest in Cuba, as well as in current events that define history in the making.

Some of the milestones that marked recent transformations and brought Cuba in the foreground of public debate were the year 2006, when Fidel Castro, the country's longtime president, was compelled by illness to step down, and Cuba entered a new era of economic reforms which are slowly but definitively reshaping the relations between state, individual and society, and the year 2014, when Raul Castro and Barack Obama announced the renewing of diplomatic ties between the two countries, suspended in 1961. Two of the direct consequences of these turning points in Cuban history were a media explosion characterized by a sense of urgency to experience Cuba 'before it changes' and a significant growth in international tourism, grounded in romanticized and nostalgic visions, reinforced, in the Cuban case, by the assumption that the country has remained 'frozen in time' and isolated from the rest of the world for more than half a century.

As selling culture increases in importance, in light of rapid and dynamic change currently taking place in Cuba, intangible cultural heritage becomes a main resource that creates socio-economic revenue, framed by the transitions of late socialism and integrated in a complex network of tourism imaginaries and representations. These processes of representation are simultaneously cultural and political, and commodification of certain elements of the Cuban cultural heritage plays a key role in the development of the tourist sector.

Against this background, the main aim of this project is to provide an anthropological study on the touristic, political, and economic uses of cultural intangible heritage, by focusing on dance practices in order to advance a reflexive critique of the simplified dichotomization of socialism / capitalism, and to analyze how cultural resources become central to heritage industry in the wake of political and social change. The project advances the studies on cultural heritage in relation to three main directions: (1) tourism imaginaries and mobilities, (2) entrepreneurship, work practices and social change, and (3) performance and bodily practices.

The project discusses the political, economic, and social contexts, in which heritage tourism is embedded, analyzing the official and unofficial strategies that make heritage related practices available for the global tourism industry, and examines the meanings attached to performances by different groups, in order to define their relation to the idea of Cubanness.

The project advances the field of dance anthropology by focusing on the social meanings attached to dance practices in light of recent critical discourses on heritage, and provides a comparative extension to the studies of Caribbean heritage, by bringing forward a grassroots perspective, which is still under-represented in studies of Cuban heritage. It advances a not yet explored perspective on the uses of heritage and newly emerging work practices in the context of late socialism. Furthermore, parts of the project can turn out to be more than just an academic endeavor. It can be made available to operators in the tourism industry interested in developing a more reflexive and critical type of tourism, with greater awareness to local communities, which facilitates education on both sides (tourists and hosts). An ethnography-informed initiative of the tourism industry can prove to be an alternative to popular forms of tourism like pro-poor tourism, slum-tourism or voluntourism, niches that have become increasingly popular in the past years, however without bringing actual benefits to the local communities.

Research will be carried out in Havana and Matanzas, cities with very strong music and dance traditions, and the main focus will be on professional dancers who work with tourists, owners of private dance schools, policy makers and decision makers in terms of promotion of heritage, and tour operators who offer cultural tours with an 'experiential' component.

Last but not least, the project can be seen as a counterpoint in public debate, exploring new ideas, putting forward new perspectives. Counterpoint is the term borrowed from popular music and employed by Cuba's most prominent anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz, to narrate an allegorical tale of sugar and tobacco as main commodities that shaped society and, eventually, a nation. Counterpoint is the art of dialogue through contrast and opposition, inherent not only to scholarship, but to social and cultural change.