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DANCE AS AN EMIGRANT: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BY SALSA IN BELGRADE¹

In Belgrade, Serbia, salsa was introduced in 2001 when a Cuban performed several basic figures at a seminar. A huge interest was ensued as well as the opening of salsa dance schools and organizing of salsa parties. This paper was created by observing and conducting field research in Belgrade from 2007 to 2012. The study deals with the factors that influenced the acceptance of salsa in Belgrade (and later in the rest of Serbia as well) and with the styles of salsa that are usually practiced here. It is especially interesting how Cuban instructors see their Serbian students. Did it come to forming of a local style? For some people in Belgrade salsa is just a dance while for others it has become a sort of life style.

Keywords: Belgrade; salsa; migration; intercultural communication

Introduction

In Belgrade, Serbia, salsa was introduced in 2001 when a Cuban, Miguel Rodriguez performed several basic figures at a dance seminar. A huge interest ensued as well as the opening of salsa dance schools and the organizing of salsa parties. It is very interesting that just a few Cuban emigrants succeeded to set in motion a great number of people in a geographically remote country and to have them dance salsa. This paper was created by observing and conducting field research in Belgrade from 2007 to 2012. The study deals with the factors that influenced the acceptance of salsa in Belgrade (and later in the rest of Serbia as well) and with the styles of salsa that are usually practiced here. I interviewed Belgrade salsa dancers, instructors, DJs (disk jockeys), and fans. For some people in Belgrade salsa is just a dance while for others it has become a sort of life style.

I give special thanks to the dance instructor Jovica Joca Martinović, salsa instructor and DJ Branko Šaponjić, salsa instructor Đura Gluvajić, salsa instructor Choma Sambu Garcia and to all salsa dancers for cooperating and providing necessary information for writing this paper.

Some general information about salsa

Salsa is syncretic dance form with origins in Cuba. It is a combination of various Latino and Afro-Caribbean dances. Salsa is popular worldwide. Salsa is open to improvisation and thus it is continuously evolving. New modern salsa styles are associated and named after the original geographic areas that developed them. There are often devotees of each of these styles outside of their home territory. Characteristics that may identify a style include: timing, basic steps, foot patterns, body rolls and movements, turns and figures, attitude, dance influences and the way that partners hold each other [Waxer 2002:3–4].

Today there are many various styles of salsa dancing because of geographical dispersion and cultural syncretism. The most well-known styles are Cali-style (from Colombia), Cuban-style ("Casino"), LA (Los Angeles)-style, New York-style, Puerto Rican-style. Salsa is normally a partner dance, although there are recognized solo forms such as solo dancing "suelta" and "Rueda de Casino" where multiple couples exchange partners in a circle. Salsa can be improvised or performed with a set routine, choreography, and freestyle [Wikipedia 2012:online].

There are a few basic steps of salsa. The most common is the three weight changes (or steps) in each four-beat measure. The beat on which one does not step might contain a tap or kick, or weight transfer may simply continue with the actual step not occurring until the next beat. The option chosen depends upon individual choice and upon the specific style being danced. One of the steps is called a "break," which involves a change in direction. Different styles of salsa are often differentiated by the timing of the break step (on beat "downbreak on 1" or off beat "up beat on 2"). After 6 weight changes in 8 beats, the basic step cycle is complete. While dancing, the basic step can be modified significantly as part of the improvisation and stylings of the people dancing [Renta 2004: 147–159].

In the original Latin America form, the forward/backward motion of salsa is done in diagonal or sideways with the 3-step weight change intact. In some styles of salsa, such as LA- and New York-style, the dancers remain in a slot or line (switching places), while in some Latin American styles, such as Cuban style, the dancers circle around each other, sometimes in 3 points [Renta 2004:150–152].

Every salsa composition involves complex African percussion based around the clave rhythm (which has four types). The key instrument that provides the core groove of a salsa song is the clave. It is often played with two wooden sticks that are hit together. Every instrument in a salsa band is either playing with the clave (generally: congas, timbales, piano, tres guitar, bongos, claves (instrument), strings) or playing independent of the clave rhythm (generally: bass, maracas, güiro, cowbell). Melodic components of the music and dancers can choose to be in clave or out of clave at any point. However it is taboo to play or dance to the wrong type of clave rhythm. While dancers can mark the clave rhythm directly, it is more common to do so indirectly (with, for example, a shoulder movement). This allows the dancing itself to look very fluent as if the rest of the body is just moving untouched with the legs [Waxer 2002:91–94].

Cuban-style salsa, also known as **Casino**, is popular in many places around the world, including Europe, Latin America, North America, and even some countries in the Middle East. Dancing Casino is an expression of popular social culture. The origins of the name *Casino* are derived from the Spanish term for the dance halls where a lot of social salsa dancing was done in Cuba during the mid-20th century and onward. Historically, Casino traces its origin as a partner dance from Cuban *Son* dancing, and its rhythmic body motions from Afro-Cuban *rumba* heritage. In the 1950s **Salsa Rueda** or more accurately Rueda de Casino was developed in Havana, Cuba. Pairs of dancers form a circle ("rueda" in Spanish means "wheel"), with dance moves called out by one person. Many of the moves involve rapidly swapping partners [Wikipedia 2012:online]. North American styles have different characteristics: **Los Angeles-style** and **New York-style** have different origins and evolutionary path, as the New York salsa is heavily influenced by jazz instruments in its early growth stage.

In Europe it has become very popular especially since the 1990s. Salsa surely owes its world fame to the movies *The Mambo Kings* (1992 drama film directed by Arne Glimcher and based on Oscar Hijuelos's 1989 Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Mambo Kings play songs of love*. The film stars Armand Assante and Antonio Banderas as Cesar and Nestor Castillo, brothers and aspiring musicians who flee from Cuba to America in the hopes of reviving their failed musical careers. The film is the directing debut of Glimcher and features Banderas in his first English language role) and *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999 documentary film by Wim Wenders about the music of Cuba. It is named for a *danzón* that became the title piece of the album *Buena Vista Social Club*).

Coming to Belgrade

Starting in 1996, dance instructor Jovica Joca Martinović organized courses of Latino and standard dances and dance nights in the Student Cultural Center (SKC) in Belgrade. About fifty people of both sexes and various ages (from students to fifty-year-old) would gather at dance nights every weekend. Martinović learned basics of salsa in 1997 in a dance studio in Canada but failed to get students interested in this dance. Every time he played music for salsa at his dance nights, the dancing space would become empty because nobody knew how to dance. In regards to the other dances, his students say that he has positive energy that inspires them to dance. Important person for salsa development in Belgrade is salsa DJ Branko Šaponjić. He started dealing with standard Latino dances in 1995. Crucial influence on his interest in salsa was the movie *Dance with me*, which he saw in 1998. Šaponjić was a rare exception, who tried to dance salsa in his own way at Martinović's dance nights.

Cuban Miguel Rodriguez held his first salsa seminar in Belgrade in 2001 at the Club of the Students of Technology, better known as KST. He lived in Sofia, Bulgaria, where he had a school of salsa. His Peruvian friend Hugo Canaza Vega who lived in Sofia with his Serbian wife recommended Miguel to Branko Šaponjić. Therefore, the Cuban salsa came to Belgrade with a Cuban instructor whom Serbs invited thanks to recommendation from a Peruvian. Few enthusiasts from Belgrade covered travel expenses and cost of the seminar. It is necessary to emphasize that those people experienced material hardships at that time and paying for the seminar was not a small sacrifice for them. A few more seminars followed [Blagojević 2012b:interview].

Arrival of Cuban band "Sabor Cubano" in 2002 was of crucial importance for an audience in Belgrade (and later the rest of Serbia) to get interested in salsa. They gave several concerts in Belgrade and other towns in Serbia together with a dance group. Few musicians decided to stay in Serbia and they formed band "Son Cuba Son." Arrival of these Cuban musicians initiated unbelievable interest in salsa. My interviewees explain it with the group's positive energy and authentic beauty of movements while dancing. Their dancing was *contagiously beautiful*. They played in different Belgrade clubs and their fans were following them. This band played in the club at "Radović" theatre in summer of 2003. It became a cult place for salsa dancers during 2004–2006, when Branko Šaponjić was selecting and playing music. Every weekend a hundred, sometimes up to 200 people would gather there. In the middle of 2006 the theatre was renovated and the club was closed. Then salsa dancers or *salseros*, as they call themselves, moved to club "Havana" and this is a cult place until today's day. It is in the heart of the city, offering visitors combination of live salsa music and DJs [Blagojević 2012b:interview].

One more person important for salsa spreading in Serbia is Cuban Choma Sambu Garcia. He came to Novi Sad in spring of 2004. By profession he is not a dancer but computer designer. He learned to dance in boarding school. Before coming to Serbia he lived in Sweden where he gave salsa lessons. The most difficult thing for him was to explain to Swedes that they had to relax and listen to the rhythm, not to count steps. Immediately after coming to Serbia he started schools of salsa and was throwing salsa parties in Belgrade and Novi Sad. For several years he organized salsa parties in "La Revolucion" club in Belgrade. He was holding that place with his energy and dancing. At Exit festival in Novi Sad he organized Latino stage. From 2005 to 2010 he gave salsa lessons at Joca Martinović's Beodens School. Now he has dance school Salsa Emigrantes in Novi Sad. (See Photo 1.) He held hundreds of salsa seminars in Serbia and in the region. Thing that he has to explain the most to his students at the seminar is the rhythm. He noticed two characteristic things for his Serbian students. First, if a student does not achieve everything the very first time he tries, he easily gives up. People cannot accept the fact that some things require more time and effort. Second thing is that once they

learn how to dance, they like to compete even at the parties when there is no competition dance. He considers this big difference between Serbs and Cubans, who regard dance as fun. The meaning of dancing for Cubans is to relax and have fun, while for Serbs it is to compete and show who is the best [Blagojević 2012a:interview].

From 2004 the number of salsa schools rises progressively due to increased interest of dancers. Some instructors emphasize figures, others rhythm of Cuban music and dancing technique and some try to balance those three elements and so on... One interviewee, a salsa devotee for many years, told me:

Advice for today's students is to go from school to school and check all instructors because everybody is good for certain things. Everything shown at the lesson by the rule has to be exercised a thousand times at the party because there is no better school of dance (and life) than dance podium. It is only needed to go out regularly and dance to the last breath. That is the only way to learn salsa. You have to completely succumb yourself to it and let it lead you [Cvijić 2008:online].

During the first phase the atmosphere at salsa parties was, as interviewees say,

packed with positive emotions, euphoric fun, good dancing with greatest salsa hits of that time, desire to come every Friday, Saturday and Sunday to the same place and do the same thing – dance salsa any way you know and can and become devilishly good in that, unity of the whole salsa community – and so on for almost four years! [Cvijić 2008:online].

Today one can dance salsa every day of the week in Belgrade. I mention just a few places: café "Havana," "Casa de la Musica" (former "Underground"), "Noar lounge bar" (former "Ineks"), KST (see Photo 2), "Sunset" bar at Ada and restaurant "Que pasa." Advantage of salsa is that as a dance it does not require much space. As opposed to waltz, samba or foxtrot, in salsa dancing the couple does not cruise the dancing area but dances using relatively small space, which gives this dance special touch of intimacy. Besides, the majority of my interviewees emphasize that salsa attracted them for the lack of strict rules, there are several various styles.

There are two schools of salsa dance in Serbia. Cuban style stems from Cuban dance professors, while Los Angeles and New York style are more popularized by domestic professors.

Competitions

In May of 2006 the first competition in *ruedas*, together with group choreography trade mark of Belgrade salsa, was organized. For the first time in Belgrade short salsa solo, light acrobation with afro-rumba introduction, was publicly performed accompanied with Celia Cruze's song *Azucar Negra*. Significance of this choreography was that it inspired others to turn to show business.

Changes in the approach were evident already at the next competition in December of the same year in SKC. Participants were better prepared for *ruedas*, they appeared in costumes and real competition spirit was especially felt during the contest of couples. First real salsa choreography for the dance couple was seen at this manifestation. It was interesting and well balanced connection of stage number and contest choreography. According to Dragan Cvijić, salsa community got used to relaxed, familial and squeezed

ambiance of the clubs. In the beginning the dancers did not feel all right at the big real dance space in sports hall before television cameras and unfamiliar audience [Cvijić 2008:online].

Seminars and conventions

Seminars and conventions represent special and a very important chapter of Belgrade salsa scene. In February of 2007 a group of salsa dancers from Belgrade attended a seminar in Slovenia. There they exchanged first dancing experiences and made first contacts with local dancers. After that, one group spent March salsa weekend in Sofia. Impressions were different. Common opinion was that salsa conventions were physically strenuous (tiring), but fun and socializing were special and unforgettable. European salsa theorist Manuel Mascarel held May 1st seminar in 2007. For the first time at that seminar Belgrade dancers had opportunity to officially and publicly hear short introductory lecture on history of Cuban dance culture where he gave partial answer to, at that time more and more loudly asked question, why dance salsa at all and what is the meaning of it [Cvijić 2008:online].

Dancers were able to perceive basic differences between relevant salsa styles. They became acquainted with concept of careful listening to the instruments in order to most precisely determine elusive rhythm of the music. At this seminar they learned how to use sudden pauses in music, changes in song dynamics and pace, how to enrich and refine their own dancing. This contributed to the development of their personal dance individuality and creativity. According to Dragan Cvijić, students at this seminar did not learn any special figures and combinations but they got important knowledge that they did not need them to dance well and enjoy. In September of 2007 first Salsa Convention Serbia was held.

Conclusion

During these eleven years which is how long salsa is present in Belgrade, many young and talented people entered the salsa story and left their own mark. I asked the salsa dancers as well as participants on a forum of one of Belgrade's salsa dance schools named "Ritmos Del Mundo" why they chose this dance, that is, *why salsa?* (See Ritmos Del Mundo 2011:online.) I find some answers from them:

Because it relaxes. Because it makes you move. Because it makes you laugh. Because it goes with music. Because it is a dance. Because it is a game. Because it is cheerful. Because it brings back smile to me, because it introduces me to wonderful people, because it helped me to understand some things in life.

Because Salsa is a dance that makes you complete, a dance started by emotions, a dance dances from the heart, danced by body and soul ... that allows you to lose yourself on rhythm (although now and then you can lose the rhythm) and you don't think of anything else, you forget about all the responsibilities, problems and everyday life ... you let music to carry you, a smile automatically sticks on your face ... and it is simply not possible not to enjoy...

Because I am going to classes after a hard day and again I become smiled and full of energy, because it set me free, it helped me to grow up and to become mature, it makes me happy and cheerful, and above all it makes me laugh. I think my life would be empty without Salsa and music. One of my friends told me: "I thought that I was the one who

loves music, but now I see I was wrong, you love all kinds of music and you can dance to all of them because it makes you complete, you fill it in your heart." And this is exactly why I dance, because it makes me happy and satisfied. So, dance when you are ill, dance when you are sad, dance when you are nervous, because there is a dance and music for each of these moods, and soon everything will pass and you will laugh again and be vigorous and cheerful.

Belgrade stage is dominated by Cuban salsa. Before Cuban salsa dancers came, Serbian instructors were trying for many years to teach Belgrade students to dance salsa without any success. As we saw, first Cuban salsa dancers came in 2001 and 2002. Although they were few, their energy and beauty of movements triggered hundreds of young people first in Belgrade and later throughout Serbia to dance salsa like them. This way the dance migrated with a few migrants.

Through salsa many made friends or started relationships, had a great time, traveled and understood that dance is a universal means of communication. Many conventions and workshops in the country or abroad and socializing with salsa fans from other countries followed. It can be said that today salsa in the dance field is the same as English in verbal communication. According to one Belgrade salsa dancer, "dance really helps us to become a better and stronger person; salsa is just one way to achieve that"

Endnote

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Photo 1. Sign for Salsa Emigrantes dance school in Novi Sad (photo by Gordana Blagojević, March 2012)



Photo 2. Sign for the KST student club in Belgrade
(photo by Gordana Blagojević, April 2012)

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