

Karoline Bahrs, University of Pittsburgh: *Cultural Memory and Intangible Heritage in the Dominican Republic*

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Abstract: Cultural Memory and Intangible Heritage in the Dominican Republic

In 2001 and 2005, UNESCO nominated two “cultural traditions” of the Dominican Republic as Intangible World Heritage, the *Cofradía del Espíritu Santo* and the *Cocolo* dance theater traditions.

Not surprisingly, the two “traditions” are highly different in their historical contexts, performance practices, and accompanying forms, but they are strikingly similar as formerly marginalized traditions within mainstream Dominican society due to perceived African derivation. Despite their differences, UNESCO and the Dominican nation-state collaboratively organized joint stage performances of these groups or of one of them with other artists.

Both, the choice of the two cultures as well as their appropriation as Dominican heritage shed light on social ambiguities in the national discourse: As African-derived expressions are widely negatively associated with threatening Haitian immigration and savage religiosity, the masterpieces’ emergence in the environment of sugar plantations shared with Haitian working migrants, for instance, is left out.

The two nominated “traditions” have symbolic power for social reconciliation and cultural memory in the Dominican Republic. Examining UNESCO video clips this paper asks what kind of information is represented by UNESCO and Dominican state and what is thereby constantly omitted.

In 2001, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) started to proclaim *immaterial forms of expression as masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage of humanity*. Social practices, rituals, festive events and cultural spaces were thus declared to be of universal value, as resources which have to be preserved for later generations. In this context, two separate traditions were honored as masterpieces in the Dominican Republic. The first was the cultural space of the *Cofradía del Espíritu Santo* (Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit), a brotherhood which was founded in the 16th century by fled slaves and people of the region, declared in 2001. The second masterpiece refers to *cocolo* danced theater performances by immigrants of the Anglophone Caribbean Leeward Islands which came in the 19th and 20th century - declared in 2005.

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Doing fieldwork in the Dominican Republic, I attended the honoring event of the *cocolo* proclamation in December 2005 and was surprised about the practice of joint performances of the two masterpieces. Although the two groups have a very different background, religious calendars and expressive forms, and their legacy in the country is of extremely different duration (more than 300 vs. ca. 100 years) the representations of the two masterpieces during this performative event clearly resembled each other. Parallels were particularly given within the focus on a leading voice of the eldest representatives (both already deceased), the separate demonstration of younger generations and the differences in attire of musicians and dancers. As clothing and accessories did not change throughout the short performances, each of the traditions appeared to be visually homogeneous. The entertaining nature of the event was illustrated by the fact that the seated audience applauded between the singular dances. Further, both masterpieces integrated features linking to the audience and location of the performance. For example, the singer of the *congós* replaced in his verse his rural origin Villa Mella with the capital Santo Domingo and greeted the city of San Pedro de Macoris - whose representatives are the *cocolos* and where the ceremony was held. Finally, close collaboration between Dominican cultural politicians and Dominican anthropologists became obvious, as they jointly represented the Dominican government on the stage.

This paper examines representations of the immaterial heritage forms which appear on UNESCO's sites on the internet, based on the idea that masterpieces' representations are generally organized in collaboration by UNESCO and the state. The UNESCO masterpiece program is based on the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* from 2003 which defines "representativity" as the fundamental selective criteria for a masterpiece. Representativity explained as "relevance for identity and continuity of the particular groups and minorities, has multiple validities on both local and global levels: On one hand it represents the "universal creativity of humanity",

and on the other the “cultural heritage of communities – and if appropriate – states” (UNESCO 2006: 4).

Representation of the nation-state is thus implied in the basic constitution of the masterpiece-program and interests of the state party are granted already in proposing the masterpieces. Overall, UNESCO and the Dominican state preempt rights of masterpieces representations in globalized and national contexts. Next to representativity a second criteria of masterpieces is the basic assumption of their marginalization. Regardless of all problematic UNESCO, state and anthropologists agree upon measures to guarantee transmission, one of them education. A central interest of safeguarding is the increase of understanding of the culture. With regard to the first masterpiece in the Dominican Republic the UNESCO – sites for example state “The permanence of the Brotherhood has been threatened by the lack of interest shown by the elite in cultures of African and mixed origin. Today, the acceleration of urban growth, migration, unemployment and the standardization of values is reinforcing prejudices and the lack of understanding of the Brotherhood” (www.unesco.org, accessed 11/01/2009).

What kind of information on the two Dominican masterpieces is distributed by UNESCO and - and also for - the Dominican state on the internet and what is thereby constantly omitted? Can short videos’ contents actually serve for an understanding of the reasons of marginalization of the cultural tradition, both in and outside the respective country? How do interests of the Dominican state and anthropologists meet in the proclamation and representation of the forms?

Representations of Dominican Masterpieces on UNESCO-Websites

Official videos published on the UNESCO websites include textual information on the masterpieces read by an English speaker (with sometimes bad pronunciation). First, we will discuss excerpts of the video of the Cultural Space of the Brotherhood of the Congos of Villa Mella and then compare its content to video excerpts of the second masterpiece, the Cocolo Dance Drama Tradition.

1. UNESCO-representations of the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit of the Congos of Villa Mella

Text read in English in the video:

“The Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit of the Congos of Villa Mella are specialists in music, dance and popular festivities. They perform at religious festivals and at the funerals of members of the community. The Brotherhood, which is nowadays open to both men and women regardless of origin, was founded by African slaves and people of mixed race in the sixteenth century. For historical reasons, the Brotherhood is an important element in the cultural identity of this community and of the whole region.

At the Festival of the Holy Spirit, celebrated at Pentecost there are prayers, dances and singing, accompanied by the music of the congos and a procession carrying the dove representing the Holy Spirit. The brotherhood also celebrates funeral rites with the congos. This occurs at the wake, during the procession to the cemetery and on the ninth morning when prayers are said in front of the three-tiered catafalque [...] Banko ceremony. On this occasion, all the guests dance to the music of the congos.

The brotherhood is essentially composed of musicians who play percussion instruments called congos, especially at festivals. The origin of these congos is in fact attributed to the holy spirit.” (www.unesco.org, accessed 11/01/2009).

The first part of the clip names a particular group, Enerolisa – Grupo de Salve de Mata los Indios or Salve Group of Mata los Indios which belongs to the community but does not represent the core group of the brotherhood. Further the genre salve is not particular to the cultural space in the Dominican Republic. The eldest and core members of the brotherhood, who also performed at the described Proclamation ceremony at the beginning of this paper, just appear at the end of the video along with a brief explanation of their instruments. This could leave the impression that the highly religious music and the small core group are not of the same importance as popular and communitarian religious festivities. This detail clearly shows inner conflicts which harm this community since the proclamation.

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The textual representation of the clip distinguishes the brotherhood as “cultural specialists” and highlights their importance in the community. The second part of the UNESCO text which was left out here describes a particular mourning, the banko ceremony, which is considered unique to the brotherhood. All together, the video represents a wide range of diverse musical styles and settings which effectively illustrate the specialist nature of the brotherhood and the particularity of the space. However, the historical reasons which make the brotherhood significant on the national level are not elaborated. The reasons for historical significance can thus be only understood in relation to the universal history of slavery.

The first part of the textual representation in the clip uses the denomination of “mixed race” for the *brotherhood*’s founders which vaguely refers to the unknown roots of people of slave ancestry but also conceals the deal of Haitians involved in the brotherhood from its foundation onwards. Slaves who had fled the French part (later Haiti) of the island founded a neighboring village – San Lorenzo de los Minas - in 1678, a fact which is due to impunity laws on the Spanish-governed part of the island. Between San Lorenzo and the village Mata los Indios where the *brotherhood* was founded developed strong cultural interrelations and both locations are part of the cultural space today. The given share of Haitians and Dominican-Haitians in the cultural space hints at the fact that the *brotherhood* could also be a multinational masterpiece. This is underscored by the fact that the region of distribution of the Congo brotherhood, in the north of the capital Santo Domingo, is to today characterized by Haitian immigration and the widely practiced Dominican and Haitian-Dominican *santería* (popular syncretic religion which is celebrated in *fiestas de palo* (musical gathering with *palo* drums).

However, Haitian influence in Dominican *congo* traditions is rarely discussed in the Dominican Republic. Anthropologists Edis Sánchez and Carlos Hernandez Soto who are both involved in the proclamation and transmission of the two masterpieces wrote in 2004 that Haitian influence is perceivable in the random substitution of Spanish exclamations in the lyrics. They also discuss parallels to

voodoo, but see *congo* drums clearly distinguishable from Haitian voodoo drums, arguing against assumptions of shared origins of the two religious expressions. What the authors in contrast see is a Circum-Caribbean context of the *congo* traditions, inscribing their study in the historical context of African slavery in Brazil, Cuba, Panamá and Trinidad (1997: 297).

2. UNESCO-representations of the *Cocolos* Dance Drama Tradition

The following paragraphs discuss UNESCO's video excerpts of the performance practice of the *cocolo* dance theater, proclaimed as masterpiece in 2005.

"The Cocolo dance drama tradition developed among descendants of British Caribbean slaves who had come to the Dominican Republic in the mid-nineteenth century to work in the sugar fields. Originally pejorative, the term "Cocolo", which refers to the migrants working on the British sugar plantations of the island, is now used proudly. This linguistically and culturally distinct community set up their own churches, schools, benevolent societies and mutual assistance lodges. Their most distinctive expressions, however, were annual dance drama performances.

This fusion of African and British cultural themes, and their adaptation to a Spanish Catholic milieu, is a salient expression of creativity.

Various Cocolo drama troupes used to perform at Christmas, on St Peter's day and at carnival festivities. In their performances, themes from various worlds are creatively united. Music and dance genres of African origin blend with dramatic plots, legends and figures derived from biblical and medieval European literature. These—include Christmas carolling, performances of string and plugged instrument, the so-called Niega business, involving masquerades and the staging of theatrical scenes such as 'David and Goliath', 'Moko-Yombi' and 'Cowboys and Indians'. Only one ageing troupe now remains" (www.unesco.org, accessed 11/01/2009).

The textual representation underscores linguistic diversity as well as institutional and creative accomplishments in the Dominican Catholic milieu. It does however not go into detail about the *cocolos'* religious background (which might have been highly influenced by missionaries). The cultural meaning of *cocolos'* organizations of mutual support is thus not understandable. Also, the textual representation by the UNESCO video generally conceals cultural parallels to the Leeward Islands St. Kitts, Nevis and Antigua, where related theatrical forms

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can be found. However, this is discussed among Dominican anthropologists (see Inoa 2005: 77-78).

With regard to the national context, the textual introduction also lacks the history of popularity of the *cocolo*-traditions in the Dominican Republic. The integration of *cocolo* danced theater into Dominican popular culture increased already in the 1950s, which is when *cocolos* changed their textual repertoire more and more into Spanish (Inoa 2005: 84). Another aspect which is missing is an association with resistance during the longstanding violent dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo (1930 to 1961) in the Dominican Republic which led to prohibition in 1958 (Corniel, 2004). This symbolic meaning is indicated by the fact that the *cocolo* dancers in national discourses are mostly called *guloyas*, which refers to one of their dances based on the saga of David and Goliath forbidden by Trujillo. *Guloya* thus primarily memorializes resistance of the past and symbolizes sympathy and identification on side of the Dominican society. *Cocolo*, in contrast, is still negatively associated with the history of Haitian workers on the sugar plantations. The aspect of shared history with Haitians is as in the case of the *congos* excluded from the description.

Finally, the *cocolo* masterpiece proclamation is result of a longstanding process of negotiation. Already in the aftermath of the Trujillo dictatorship, in the 1970s, Dominican intellectuals fostered *cocolo*'s recognition. Cultural representatives and politicians started discussions about the possibility of declaring the neighborhood Miramar as site for *cocolo* remembrance. Central interests were the economic support for the region as well as official recognition of the *cocolos* in the urban environment (Mota Acosta 1977: 136).

Particularly the last part of the video focuses on festivities and rites, showing creativity and diversity of the *cocolo* community. The latter is particularly emphasized by a long sequence of English singing during a performance of the David and Goliath piece. This is contradicted by the reasons of safeguarding which the UNESCO – sites refer to: “But although older members of the Cocolo community still speak Caribbean English at home, most have lost their ancient mother tongue and are monolingual in Spanish. Today, the Cocolo community

is scattered in different regions of the Dominican Republic, and most have assimilated into broader Dominican society. This development has made it more difficult for the older Cocolos to transmit their knowledge to younger generations, to retain their specific institutions and to keep the dancing drama tradition alive” (www.unesco.org, accessed 11/01/2009).

The contradictory emphasis on the English language of the *cocolos* in the video serves as symbol of continuous diversity and an identity-building migratory experience. A particular aspect of the *cocolo* community however, is thereby not mentioned, and this refers to the fact that particular dances are related to particular persons, which means that they tend to disappear when this leader dies.

Summary

Certainly, the different observations and following conclusions cannot serve as definite answers to symbolic meanings of the Dominican masterpieces. Nevertheless, regardless of specific musical and ritual contents I argue that there is a general pattern of selective representation of the Dominican masterpieces which relates to emphasis on universal aspects as diversity and general marginalization, both understandable from an outsider perspective.

The given selective information serve a general understanding: Although the two masterpiece traditions are different in their historical contexts, performance practices, rituals and localizations, they are also very similar as being expressions of formerly marginalized communities within mainstream Dominican society. Both masterpiece titles honor small communities which founded religious organizations of mutual support in order to survive labor conditions in slavery and sugar industry. Both textual and visual representations of the Dominican masterpieces emphasize their universal cultural value and the need for sustainability and thus facilitate also joint representations. However, UNESCO’s representations omit details which are of fundamental importance for understanding symbolic meaning in the national context of the Dominican Republic. Thus, they do not include conflicting national historical contexts or

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transnational capital investments which resulted in migration or indications of negotiation processes about identity, cultural or human rights and thus refer historical significance to a universal perspective (slavery and Diaspora / migration). The consequences of this omission of historical complexity leads to misunderstanding of the cultural forms, of the reasons for marginalization and the power negotiations and thus inhibits appropriate measures of protection and promotion – as impossible as this goal might be to reach. The central interest of safeguarding, an increase of the understanding of the culture is contradicted. Lastly, elusive representations limit the credibility of the masterpiece project and UNESCO's reputation.

This paper demonstrated through a case study the ideological interests in UNESCO's policy of Intangible Heritage. George Yúdice has written on the expediency of culture with regard to political objectives, particularly its common use in the function of a peace bringer (2003: 1-13). I argue that in the given context the nominations of these masterpieces serves UNESCO's interests in preservation of threatened cultural capacities on the global level, but on the other hand serves aims for social reconciliation and reflects renovation within Dominican national discourse. Dominican president Leonel Fernández who governs the country since 1996 has become known for his emphasis on the Dominican Republic as Caribbean country on one hand and for intense relations with the United States on the other. Both masterpieces symbolize general Caribbean historical patterns of African slavery and migration. In addition, however, president Fernández himself represents as immigrant returned from the United States growing Dominican "bi-nationality" (0.5 mio. Dominicans live in the United States in 2000, see Maingot 2004: 340) and this tendency might be effectively symbolized by an English-speaking tradition. However, the situation of the Dominican Republic could be more appropriately termed as of three nationalities considering the Haitian and Dominican Haitian populations of estimated 10 percent of the population. Today's Dominican society is also characterized by a conflictive transformation due to synchronous Haitian immigration and Dominican emigration. In sugar industry and

construction work one unofficially depends on Haitian work force but immigration is officially rejected and legalization policies, even for Haitian-Dominicans, have recently been reinforced (Newman, 2008). In this context, the preservation of two African-derived masterpieces might indicate an attempt to construct an explicitly non-Haitian but afro-Dominican identity.

Despite their differences, the two masterpieces are continuously jointly appropriated by the Dominican state. Principal goal of the Dominican Cultural Ministry is “to develop, promote and distribute the different manifestations of cultural and artistic expression” (Secretaria de Cultura, 2006). The Dominican State Party aims for transitions from individual/communitarian to collective-social memory by policies of instruction. The strategy of combining the two masterpieces is illustrated by joint educational projects of *cocolo* and *congo* culture held in schools of Villa Mella (Campos, 2009). Threatening growth of standardization and routinization is thereby given as both core groups do not integrate new forms. As *congo* traditions are not tied to single persons they might be more easily preserved. Nevertheless, their transmission and existence as living heritage will be never guaranteed and neither are peaceful results of safeguarding projects.

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