



Sankofa Archives

Did You Know? Tidbits #7

“The Tango”

The word is of Bantu origin (from central and southern Africa) and means “drums” or “a social gathering with dances.”¹ Ricardo Rodríguez Molas, an Argentine historian, contends that the word “tango” is likely to be of African origin and that in certain African languages, it means “closed place” or “reserved ground.”² This dance form is based on various dances brought to Argentina by



African slaves and, according to Molas, was “originally performed in the slums of Buenos Aires in the 1860s.”³ In the article “Tango” in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, Aaron Myers writes, “The most popular Afro-Argentine dance was the *candombe*, which fused syncopated rhythms and improvised steps from various African traditions. According to early Argentine scholar of tango José Gobello, the *candombe* was the precursor of the tango.” He continues thus: “In an article published in 1913, Gobello wrote that the Afro-Argentines of Mondongo improvised a dance they called tango, based on the *candombe*. Some *compadritos* from Corrales Viejos, the slaughterhouse district of Buenos Aires, saw the dance, and soon after introduced it into their own community.”⁴ In many parts of Latin America, “tango” came to connote a place where blacks, both free and enslaved, gathered

together to dance, while in Argentina, “tango” came to be associated with black dances in general. “It was in this sense,” notes Collier*, “that the word eventually reached SPAIN, as a name for African-American or African-influenced dances of transatlantic provenance.”⁵

* Scholar Simon Collier

References:

¹ Cohen (Editor), Selma Jeanne 1998: *International Encyclopedia of Dance, Project of Dance Perspectives Foundation, Inc.* Volume 6, (New York: Oxford University Press), 91.

² Myers, Aaron, 2005: “Tango,” in *Africana the Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, Volume 5, Second Edition, (Oxford University Press), 121.

³ Craine, Debra and Mackrell, Judith, 2000: *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance*, (London: Oxford University Press), 466.

⁴ Myers, 120.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

Image: Scene of candombe, Montevideo 1870, source Archivo General de la Nación [Public Domain from Wikipedia]