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The approval of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003 promoted the international visibility for a variety of expressions which often arise in cultural minority groups, like Afro-descendants or indigenous groups, which in different situations have seen their right diminished to participate in cultural life, and whose expressions have sometimes been made invisible. The recognition and revitalising of the intangible heritage has led to important processes of cultural self-esteem and development in these communities.

Some organisations, like the UNESCO Centre Basque Country (Spain)\(^1\), have considered it necessary to carry out studies to analyse community’s participation in the expressions of intangible heritage, and to see whether the community participated under equal conditions in said expressions, paying special attention to the gender issue. During 2012, together with Signo - Centro Interdisciplinario\(^2\), we performed a project which specifically looked at the situation of the African descendant women in their participation in the traditional cultural spaces of the Afro community in Montevideo (Uruguay), focusing on the Candombe. We prepared the documentary “Memorias de madera y cuero: el candombe en claves de género y patrimonio” (“Memories of wood and leather: the Candombe in terms of gender and heritage”), which used workshops and interviews with the Candombe bearers to generate a common reflection about women’s participation in this expression.

The Candombe\(^3\), expression of the African descent communities of Uruguay, was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009 thereby making more visible the cultural contribution by the Afro-community, which makes up approximately 10% of the population of Montevideo. In Candombe’s inscription on UNESCO’s Representative List, the Committee stated that “inscription of the element would provide an important impetus to the visibility of intangible cultural heritage, creativity and dialogue between the diverse communities concerned, while strengthening its resistance to certain negative tendencies”.

The Candombe was also inscribed because it is a collective social practice deeply interwoven in the daily life of neighbourhoods. The Committee stressed in its decision that the “Candombe is a source of pride and a symbol of the identity of communities of African

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\(^1\) UNESCO Centre Basque Country (Spain): www.unescoetxea.org
\(^2\) Signo – Centro Interdisciplinario (Uruguay): http://www.signo.com.uy/
\(^3\) Candombe and its socio-cultural space: a community practice:
descend in Montevideo, embraced by younger generations and favouring group cohesion”.

In the documentary we see clearly how the people connected to the Candombe in Montevideo understand that what was once a ritual linked to the African descent community is now taken on by the entire population.

But as we know participation in cultural life is often a reflection of the inequalities in society itself. To put this case into context, we should point out that 1 in every 4 people of African descent lives in a poor household in Uruguay, which represents a clear social disadvantage vis-à-vis the non- African descent population, and that furthermore the percentage of women of African descent without their own income is three times higher than the percentage of men in the same situation, which shows that the afro-descendant women are particularly vulnerable to exclusion. Our starting point was that we needed to see if the participation of these women in cultural life, including the Candombe, was performed under equal conditions.

When we consulted the participants about how the women take part in the Candombe, they stated that it is a cultural practice which, even if there is higher participation of women in last years and their participation is constantly evolving, it is still not entirely egalitarian, particularly when it comes to some women deciding to play the drum which is an areas which was always restricted to men. One hears, “There is still prejudice, ah, women are not meant for this” (L. Rodríguez). At the Melaza drum parade, the only one in Uruguay made up entirely of women, they confirm that “the drum parades are mainly for men, and in general the drum leaders are men”, and that still nowadays when a woman wants to play the drum there are still occasions when “they are not allowed because they are a woman”, even if the situation has changed clearly during last years, showing a higher participation of women.

This allocation of different roles to men and women is inherited from history (“Since the beginning the males were the protagonists in the instrumentation”, O. Montaño), and reflects the differential roles which pervade other aspects of society. Hence, the possibility of playing the drum in the Candombe would be just another “scene” of life where the “women were not allowed to participate and men were part of it all”.

Apart from the group actually playing the drum, the characters in the parade are also key - the Escobero (Sweeper), the Mama Vieja (Old Mama) and the Gramillero (Medicine Man) -, and constitute together with the drummers the essence of Candombe and the soul of the parade. In these characters there has also been clear gender differentiation.

Previously a character played by a woman, the Reina (Queen), was central in the parade but this key character however lost force over time and just like the Mama Vieja character, full of wisdom and knowledge, the Reina of the Candombe became diluted which has not occurred with other roles allocated to women which do not contain those values.

Other characters, like the Gramillero, who has an in-depth knowledge about natural herbs, have become more powerful. In the documentary we identify for example that there are still nowadays objections to women playing the role of Gramillero. Women’s participation as other characters is however

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considered although they are not so linked to wisdom and respect from the community.

In short we see that although women do participate in the Candombe it is still often limited to certain aspects and those aspects which enjoy most prestige and social recognition, like the drum player or the “medicine man”, are still generally performed by men.

As opposed to this, various participants state that “the incorporation of women is something which cannot be stopped” and that “the characters are going to continue leaving their mark regardless of which person plays them, of whatever gender, depending on how they are born”.

Some reflexions

Intangible heritage concerns aspects of peoples’ lives which are essential for the continuity of cultural identities and social cohesion. Women’s role as identity bearers clearly contrasts with the fact that they continue coming across obstacles, because of their gender, which prevent them from fair participation in cultural practices. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights reminds us that we must promote the “elimination of obstacles (…) that prevent women from participating fully in cultural life”.

Within the promotion of intangible heritage, and given the key importance which people have in cultural expressions, we consider it necessary to analyse and pay attention to women’s participation.

We must not overlook the fact that promoting the community’s participation in cultural expressions from a gender approach does not only imply encouraging women’s participation, but will also require more holistic strategies and outlooks which allow for progress towards effective participation under equal conditions by all persons. We consider that women’s visibility and their participation is only a first essential step on the path towards equality and their full participation in the cultural expressions.

On this matter, the case of the project relating to the Candombe in Montevideo shows the importance given by the community of African descent to the international recognition from UNESCO highlighting the cultural tradition passed down over generations, and also shows the broad social participation in the Candombe.

WOMEN’S VISIBILITY AND THEIR PARTICIPATION IS ONLY A FIRST ESSENTIAL STEP ON THE PATH TOWARDS EQUALITY AND THEIR FULL PARTICIPATION IN THE CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS.

As affirmed by those participating in the documentary, women’s incorporation and participation is becoming increasingly more real and more common in the Candombe. We consider that experiences like this one, where the objective was to generate a joint reflection amongst Candombe bearers, is key in order to be able to identify, from the community’s own knowledge, how the community participates and the social evolution in this area, and to create guidelines and mechanisms to promote the participation by the entire community in the expressions of intangible heritage.

v General Comment no. 21, Right of everyone to take part in cultural life - art. 15, para. 1a of the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, E/C.12/GC/21/Rev.1.