Uncovering the Essence of Flamenco: An Examination of Pure Flamenco versus Nuevo Flamenco

Melissa Penn

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Dr. Fawcett-Yeske
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Background: Flamenco is an improvisatory art form filled with emotion and guided by the spontaneity of the moment. The art of flamenco was derived from interactions with the Arab and gypsy population who migrated to Andalucía during a period of ethnic unrest. Flamenco is comprised of a complex unity of voice, accompaniment, traditionally the guitar, and dance. During this dark period, this tripartite art form emerged as an emotional outpour originally only presented in private locations allowing families to communicate with each other on a deeper level, expressing their duende (pain) in a communal setting. Although flamenco is a diverse and often disconnected genre, it holds several common characteristics such as the layering of intricate rhythms, repetitive rhythmic cycles, dissonance, use of enharmonic modes, improvisation along with the percussive accompaniment of the guitar and the dynamic jaleo, or “hell raising” portion which involves handclapping, foot stomping, accompanied by passionate shouts of support. Throughout the past 200 years, flamenco has acquired several different variations, expanding the audience through live performances or tableos and, at times, exploitation of ‘pure’ flamenco. The emergence of Nuevo flamenco has caused a cultural rift in the social roles expressed in flamenco, challenging male dominance while bringing women’s rights to the forefront of nineteenth century society.

Fieldwork: Flamenco is an art form that is driven by political change, deep passion and the search for an identity; it is a proclamation of culture. This fieldwork project explores variations of flamenco through the examination of specific types of flamenco. Guitarist Aaron Gilmartin is a living example of the musical fusion of flamenco guitar and the vocal cante. This fieldwork
project will also consider the role of dance and its relationship to the roles of men and women in Gitano society as the forms of flamenco change. Through the Maya Gracia Dance Company, this project will explore the spontaneity of the dance through spiritual guidance of the body and duende, as guided by an internal rhythm. The Maya Gracia Dance Company will provide a mixture of Nuevo flamenco forms as taught through a traditional manner, interweaving custom with a modern flare. By observing and experiencing the specific types of flamenco, this author strives to answer the question is there really a pure form of flamenco? What types of flamenco do you see the most in practice? Are the traditions still being preserved or are there hints of modernity present? Do you see a relationship between the way men and women are treated in society and the way in which the flamenco is performed? Through personal interviews and observing performances/rehearsals, this author will be able to effectively describe the emotional spontaneity that reflects the changing social roles in Spanish society.

Flamenco is an ever-changing art form which is known for its fluid movements, its dynamic rhythms and deep emotional connection to the performers who wish to immerse themselves, body, mind and soul into this distinct style. Throughout this fieldwork project, this author sought to experience flamenco in its purest state through the eyes of the ‘fathers of flamenco’ known as the Gitanos or gypsies. According to the gypsies in Southern Spain, the creation of flamenco was a result of the combined interactions between the Arab and Gitano populations who fled to Andalusia in response to widespread ethnic cleansing. In this instance, during the Reconquista in Spain, gypsies were banned to “gitanerias” or ghettos which isolated them from the outside world. Yet, however trying these conditions may be, the gypsies were able to turn their focus inward onto cultivating the art of dancing and music that existed between families; this isolation is believed to have led to the purity and untouched aspects of flamenco,
while leaving it open to exploration and interpretation in years to come. Also, the presence of flamenco music is felt cross-culturally; it is believed to have Jewish roots due to the occupation of Jewish exiles in Spain; their arrival was caused by an edict issued in 1492 by Isabella el Católica stating that all Jews who refused to convert to Catholicism would be expelled immediately. In addition to the gypsies who were expelled from India by Tamerlane in 1400, the Jews, gypsies and a wide array of diverse cultures were forced into this region on the southern tip of Spain to live together.

According to Gracia, flamenco is considered as an “outsider art”, passed down from generations to generations within families, reaching beyond the academic realm. Due to this tradition, there has been some difficulty in determining the essence of flamenco, yet Gracia assures that “a definite underlying structure” exists and it is within this mezcla of cultures, the words “of Flanders” hold the true origin of flamenco. This phrase as translated to “flame” serves as a way for the displaced cultures to fan their fiery emotions into an art form, preserving their past while dealing with their uncertain futures. Flamenco is also believed to be synonymous with the Flemish soldiers of the Spanish-Belgian territories which were “renowned for their self-confidence, style and ostentatious pride, all qualities that reflect the gypsy character”. Despite this diverse and often mislabeled disconnected genre, according to Maya Gracia, flamenco does possess universal characteristics including the venue, as described as the juerga, the duende, the cante jondo and the elements of the non-cante jondo, which are present in a wide-range of styles.

Each element is a critical component in the expression of pure flamenco. The juerga atmosphere envelops the randomness and spontaneity of flamenco, originally expressed among close family and friends in a private setting; the juerga is not only viewed as a sacred place but it
is a place in which musical greatness comes about, yet may be diminished by the slightest interruption. According to Gracia, the replication of the juerga is one of the greatest difficulties she faces in the studio, encouraging bonding while favoring small class sizes to create an intimate setting which cultivates spontaneity and beckons emotional expression, or duende. The duende is the key element in all great Flamencos, encompassing the “music, language, dance and culture” through a spiritual awakening. Typically, this emotional revival is dictated by the cante style.

In cante jondo, singers express a “pena negre” or black sorrow which is commonly portrayed through the repetition of “Ay” throughout the performance, signifying the “pains without possible consolation, wounds that will never close, crimes without human redemption…the lament of earth that will never be the sky, the sea that knows no limits, the goodbye eternal, forever”; in other words, Gracia describes it as “the exposure of one’s soul stripped bare”. The themes of the cante jondo provide a deep contrast between the mourning of death and the pain of love; Gracia cited a comparison from Gabriel Garcia Lorca stating that the siguieyera is “like a hot iron that burns the heart, throat and lips of those who pronounce it.”

(Unlike the fire-burning cante jondo, the non-jondo forms are known for their simmering quality) Unlike the burning themes of the cante jondo, the non-jondo styles are known for their cooling effect. The non-jondo consists of the cante intermedio and the cante chico, which are typically described as a worker’s lament, or love themes. The cante chico is the most widely danced form due to its buoyant feel and fast rhythms. The complex rhythms specifically associated with the cante chico give way to the compas, which refers to the rhythmic improvisation in comparison to the cante jondo which are centered around a palo seco style, without accompaniment and without compas. In terms of the vocal line, Gracia spoke of the
underlying importance of *la voz afilla* in the true and authentic expression of Gitano flamenco. *La voz afilla* is characterized by the raspy or even “cracked” quality of the voice, injecting it with “rajo”, or coarseness in the voice to create the classic Gitano *cante*. At times, the *cante jondo* is broken down even further into four overlapping categories which involve *coplas*, or free verses ranging from songs of amusement, of reconciliation, of anguish and of happiness over love preserving the natural and powerful spontaneity of the *juerga*.

Originally, the *juerga* was governed by the *cante* as flamenco only featured the voice, accompanied by the *palmas* (brisk light knuckle tapping) until the 19th century when guitar was integrated, beginning the era of “rock flamenco”. The incorporation of the guitar was once thought to be controversial as it was viewed as an interference in the preservation of pure flamenco adding a more technical and virtuosic flare. According to professional guitarist Aaron Gilmartin, flamenco guitar used to be played like the Nubian *oud*, very lightly and with a “plucking sound”. However, Gilmartin sites, “because of the influence of classical training, arpeggios and tremolos have been incorporated to create a technically-oriented style” leading to a more “concertized performance”. This virtuosity has placed more emphasis on the guitarist, moving away from the traditional form of accompaniment, altering the expression of the *duende*. According to Gilmartin, flamenco guitarists have typically been male reflecting the “machismo” as the art form became public, barring females from taking on an equal position as their male counterparts. In traditional gypsy society, women were never viewed as “confidants” of men nor were ever viewed to have the same capacity to take part in “male discourse.”

According to Gracia, flamenco is the “affirmation of the body.” The dance of flamenco is the “soul on fire”; it requires ornate footwork that is accompanied by quick syncopated hand movements/clapping of the palmas. In this instance, the dance form is truly considered as an art
form, and therefore the technique is critical and unmovable. Dancing is seen as a “lifestyle” serving as an outlet to inspire and preserve the feelings of passion associated with the Mediterranean culture. The basic movements encountered in the Maya Gracia dance studio are focused on the braceo region which consists of the strict and fluid hand/arm movements which are necessary to portray the passionate nature of the dance. The sculpting of these movements was a central point in the rehearsal, as the inner rhythm of the arms was offset by the intricate foot movements.

The strong positions were also highlighted as a symbol of the subordinate role of women, reflecting the powerful position of men in society. Women have traditionally taken on this role which was once believed to be secondary to the male guitarist and singers, dictated by the rhythms they produce. However, in recent times, flamenco has been seen as an expression of female independence and freedom from male dominance; in other words, an escape from gender roles. In a sense, the dances when specifically performed by women were developed to serve a more persuasive purpose; often the moves were seen as fierce and deep-seated accompanied by an intense gaze which never left the performer’s face. The footwork was another aspect which was highlighted by quick tapping movements of the zapateado involving the heel and toe creating an intense clicking along with the beat. This additional sound added another dimension to the performance, portraying the authentic combination of movement, and sounded rhythmic patterns unifying the art form.

Another aspect which contributes to the flavor of flamenco is the distinct regalia of the men and women. The female performers are adorned in long, flowing skirts with elaborate or solid patterns, fitted at the waist to maximize movement. This dress is typically accompanied by
a solid colored leotard or close fitting tank top, allowing for the most fluid and exposed motion. The women also have their hair pulled back or fastened in a way which highlights their face, leaving their expressions bare and pure. As for the shoes, boots similar to character shoes were worn with thick heels to emphasize the tap-work. The men dress in a similar fashion, wearing a solid, typically brightly colored shirt accompanied by dark pants with a deep vest or kerchief as well as boots. In terms of expression, dress is critical to preserving the traditions of flamenco as it allows a performer to “shed their roles and simply just be human.”

According to Gracia, “flamenco is simply an art of communication.” It is a powerful, compelling dialogue held between performers. It is “something that is in [a person’s] (your) blood, waiting to come out; flamenco is an art form that releases everything in a beautiful and glamorous way”. Gracia believes that flamenco cannot be restricted to Nuevo or pure flamenco, instead it is a reflection of the times and the empowerment of women. It is an art form which “embraces change without losing its intimacy and deep connection to the performers”. Flamenco is an expression of the self, in its purest state. It brings about a timeless release of emotions unlike any other art form as it is dictated by the spontaneity of the moment; no matter what the circumstance, it is a reflection of human nature and just how far we have come.
Figures

Aaron Gilmartin, Flamenco Guitarist
<www.aarongilmartin.com>

Maya Gracia, Professional Flamenco Dance Instructor
<www.maya-gracia.com>
Traditional footwork, *zapeatado*
<www.maya-gracia.com>

Nubian *oud*
<www.oud.gr/oud_arabe.jpg>

Traditional use of the
Traditional Performance of the *cante*
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Traditional Performance of the *duende*
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