



Received: 03 September 2016
Accepted: 31 October 2016
Published: 28 November 2016

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CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | REVIEW ARTICLE

Flamenco dance. Characteristics, resources and reflections on its evolution

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Abstract: Flamenco is a way of life which is born from the necessity of a population to express itself. Due to the great impact which flamenco dance has had in recent years, it has become widely known and practised around the world. In 2010 flamenco reached a status that was never thought possible when it was named as a World Heritage Treasure. Because of this and the huge impact of flamenco in our time, the need to research this art is clearly justified. All types of dance truthfully reflect culture and society. Flamenco is no exception. The aim of this article is to clarify the most usual gestures and technical abilities of flamenco dance which preserve its essence as well as to favour an autonomous learning of flamenco. For this purpose an analysis of both the origins of flamenco and its main features and terminology has been developed. Subsequently, sources available for the improvement, development and learning of flamenco have been established, with a particular focus on technological sources. Finally, this article develops some final thoughts and reflections about the situation of flamenco and the problems it faces in different fields, the factors contributing to it and some proposals for its development.

Subjects: Arts; Dance; Physical Education

Keywords: flamenco; dance; research; terminology; Spanish flamenco dance

1. Introduction

Flamenco is a way of life which is born from the necessity of a population to express itself. It originates from popular and marginal roots that have developed throughout time. Nowadays flamenco

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Flamenco is a way of life which is born from the necessity of a population to express itself. Due to the great impact which flamenco dance has had in recent years, the need to research this art is clearly justified. The aim of this article is to clarify the most usual gestures and technical abilities of flamenco dance which preserve its essence as well as to favour an autonomous learning of flamenco. For this purpose an analysis of both the origins of flamenco and its main features and terminology has been developed. Subsequently, sources available for the improvement, development and learning of flamenco have been established, with a particular focus on technological sources. Finally, this article develops some final thoughts and reflections about the situation of flamenco and the problems it faces in different fields, the factors contributing to it and some proposals for its development.

has crossed frontiers and nationalities and has become integrated and recognised both at a national and international level.

Due to the great impact which flamenco dance has had in recent years, it has become widely known and practised around the world. Flamenco has reached not only theatres and social centres in general, but also primary and secondary schools and universities. In 2010 flamenco reached a status that was never thought possible when it was named as a World Heritage Treasure. Because of this and the huge impact of flamenco in our time, the need to research this art is clearly justified.

All types of dance truthfully reflect culture and society. The customs, religion, climatic characteristics, economic and geographic conditions, way of dressing, history, level of evolution, etc., are represented in a society's dance (Ossona, 1984). Flamenco is no exception. Flamenco is considered as a manifestation of the human form, culture and language, etc. of the Andalusian and gypsy populations (Moon, 2015; Roper, 1995). Thus, in order to obtain an adequate level of comprehension it is necessary to study its origin, principal characteristics and goals.

Flamenco dance is a form of body language and an integrated part of rhythm, uniting the most varied psychologically motivated elements with the art of movement and transforming the most spectacular skills into harmony and beauty.

The investigations and studies that have been carried out make it difficult to clearly define the true origins of flamenco. It dates back to approximately two hundred years ago, although its actual roots may go back even further.

The investigations and studies that have been carried out make it difficult to clearly define the true origins of flamenco. It dates back to approximately two hundred years ago, although its actual roots may go back even further (Navarro, 1993).

In order to learn the art of flamenco you must live and understand its true meaning, because it is the demonstration of a state of mind and of a different way of life. Flamenco has always been akin to a form of protest. This is reflected in the intense emotions that exist in flamenco (Caballero, 1988).

Rhythm and expressing feelings are the two most important aspects of this type of dance because they are absolutely necessary for its correct execution. It is essential to emphasise that this aspect of the performance also refers to the posture of the dancer and therefore, to the aesthetics and representation of the dance (Santaella, 2010).

With regard to its traditional and innovating character, flamenco is still developing in order to become universal. The new trends which are born from the blend of flamenco and other musical genres are meaningful proof of this development. This fact leads to a clash between purists—who try to maintain flamenco untouched throughout history—and people who are in favour of this evolution and transcendence beyond dancing, singing and guitar playing.

The aim of this article is to clarify the most usual gestures and technical abilities of flamenco dance which preserve its essence as well as to favour an autonomous learning of flamenco. For this purpose an analysis of both the origins of flamenco and its main features and terminology has been developed. Subsequently, sources available for the improvement, development and learning of flamenco have been established, with a particular focus on technological sources. Finally, this article develops some final thoughts and reflections about the situation of flamenco and the problems it faces in different fields, the factors contributing to it and some proposals for its development.

2. Origins of flamenco dance

Flamenco is a characteristic element of Spanish culture, particularly in the Guadalquivir area, in Andalusia.¹ Influences from different cultures can be found in its origins but it was in 1765 when flamenco really began to gain importance among other Spanish dances in schools. In those days, flamenco was mainly performed in backyards, selling fairs and private saloons at parties (Roper, 1995).

3. Main characteristics of flamenco dance

The practice of flamenco involves engaging in a physical activity which requires a degree of work that is comparable to any other high-level physical activity (Gonzalez et al., 2011) besides offering ample opportunities to develop critical and reflective thinking, citizenship and aesthetic and moral reasoning (Leonardi, 1999).

Learning flamenco requires motor skills entailing technique and separated movements (head, arms, hands, torso, waist, hips, legs and feet) which work simultaneously with a mime language that requires artistic expression and rhythm. In order to better profit from flamenco and to understand it, it is essential to clarify the main gestures and movements involved in flamenco. A short glossary has been elaborated below to explain some examples of these movements. They have all been described and proposed according to their special importance in flamenco dance (Brao, 2015; Cuéllar, Delgado, & Delgado, 1995; Vitucci, 2003):

- *Bailaor*: Flamenco dancer or performer.
- *Braceo*: The typical flamenco movement executed using the arms. This action varies depending on the gender of the *bailaor*. The women move their arms more slowly and smoothly than the men. The movement flows and originates from the centre of the back between the shoulder blades.
- *Cante*: Action and effect of singing popular Andalusian songs (*cantos*) or similar.
- *Desplante*: Irregular pose of the body of the *bailaor* in which he transmits arrogance, roughness and insolence.
- *Finger movement*: Finger movements are different depending on gender. In the case of women, their fingers are separated when moved but, in the case of men they are more closed.
- *Hand movement*: The hands are moved in circular movements both forwards and backwards.
- *Hip movement*: Movements that imply pelvic and hip shifting with respect to the upper part of the body. These can be lateral, circular, forwards, backwards or even a combination of these movements. Such movements are usually seen in flamenco dances executed by women, since they portray a certain degree of sensuality when dancing.
- *Hondo* or *jondo*: It is a term applied to *cantos* when expressed with deep or intense feeling and emotion.
- *Escobilla*: A set of consecutive *zapateados* (the sounds made by the feet) which normally progress from a slower to faster speed and from an easier to harder difficulty.
- *Duende* or *alma*: The literal translation of each word is the goblin and the soul, respectively. However, both terms are used to transmit the essence or feeling of flamenco.
- *Llamada*: This term refers to the verb “to call”. In flamenco culture it is used by the *bailaor* when he notifies the other performers that there will be a change in rhythm or a transition to a new part of the performance at the beginning or at the end.
- *Marcando*, *marcar* o *marcaje*: This movement consists in marking the pace with any part of the body in order to give instructions or to point out the order of certain movements. Although this is usually done with the feet it is not similar to a *zapateado*, since this movement is done to seize rhythm.

- *Palmas*: The sound obtained by clapping the fingers (usually only three) of the hand together with the palm of the other. This type of *palmas* is called *naturales*. Another type is *sordas*, where the palms are cupped together so that hardly any sound is heard.
- *Palo*: Flamenco has been divided into many branches or fields. Specific terminology defines *palo* as the *cante* (name given specifically to flamenco songs, *canto*) or dances which belong to one particular style. The main *cantos* are: the *soleá*, the *tango*, the *seguirilla* and the *bulería*.
- *Pitos*: Another method used to obtain both rhythm and sound. It consists in clicking the middle finger and the thumb together or the middle two fingers and the thumb. It is usually the *bailaor* who carries out this action.
- *Taconeo*: Term in flamenco dancing used for heelwork. Rhythmic patterns made with the heels.
- *Torsión* or *quebro*: Bending of the body.
- *Zapatear*: The action in which the *bailaor* stamps on the floor following the rhythm of the music. It varies depending on both the part of the foot employed to hit the ground and the executed movement. *Zapateado* is also the name of a rhythmic flamenco dance. The different movements are:
 - *Golpe*: The ground is hit with the whole sole of the foot.
 - *Planta*: The ground is hit with just the front part of the foot's sole.
 - *Puntera*. The toe of the shoe is used to hit the ground in this movement.
 - *Taconeo* (any variation): It is the heel which hits the ground in this movement.
 - *Chaflán* (in any direction): Fast movement of both feet, in which one slides and moves while the other hits the ground.
 - *Latiguillo*: It consists in dragging the sole of one foot while the other one stays still on the ground. The foot carries out a swinging movement from forwards to backwards while the sole drags on the ground, marking the rhythm.

The following are flamenco characteristics which are particularly noteworthy: the freedom and pride of the posture, flirtatious movements by the female, *desplantes* and the richness of bodily expression, sensitivity and profoundness of the movements. They are all extremely important and represent what is traditionally known as *el duende* of the flamenco dance. This *duende* depends on the expression, attitude and knowledge of the *palo* that is being performed, as it reflects the dance's character.

In general the man moves more arrogantly and in a masculine way, whereas the woman moves more naturally and sensitively. As explained by Alencar (2008), the feminine and masculine identities respect the natural biological character in flamenco dance. However, a recent study has shown that unfortunately nowadays there is a tendency to perform all kinds of dances with the same expressivity (Ordoñez, 2011a, 2011b).

In this sense, the dancer's body expression is essential, since the performer has to be capable of expressing feelings and emotions through the body and of expressing the dance's *alma* when dancing, touching, grabbing or caressing.

4. How to get more information about flamenco: Flamenco sources

Dance research in Spain has seen significant contributions in the past twenty years, especially with works that offer insight into the dances themselves. Great strides have been made in recent years in Spanish and flamenco dance studies. Spanish dance research contains a variety of media, including books, magazines, videos, films, compact discs, and scholarly articles and journals.

However, although there is an outstanding wealth of research related to flamenco, most is based on a theoretical perspective, mainly focused on historical and musical elements. This can be verified when analysing the *Web of Science* database in which a variety of publications can be consulted. However, most of them are presented in visual and audio format, and refer to historical and literary aspects.

Research on flamenco is fundamental in order to progress in this field, as well as to acknowledge the effort of *bailaores* and their work as performers. This has to be supported by works which may be of interest to flamenco teachers and which serve as an answer to the needs of students and dancers.

However there are certain resources, websites and studies which focus on its study and dissemination. The most relevant sources and webpages in Spanish appeared in the following sections.

4.1. La Agencia Andaluza para el desarrollo del flamenco

This entity, the Andalusian Agency for the Development of Flamenco, was created by the Department of Culture of the Regional Government of Andalusia in order to contribute to the research, consciousness, teaching, preservation, promotion and dissemination of flamenco as the singular cultural patrimony of Andalusia.

It coordinates and promotes policies related to flamenco, its preservation and dissemination, its integration into the musical market and international consciousness as a touristic and educational source. Its principal place of business is located at the *Casa de Murillo* Museum, in Seville (Centro Andaluz de Documentación del Flamenco, 2015).²

4.2. Centro Andaluz de Documentación del flamenco

The Andalusian Flamenco Centre is a service by the Department of Culture of the Regional Government of Andalusia which is located in *Jerez de la Frontera*. It was founded in 1993 and depends on the *Agencia Andaluza para el Desarrollo del Flamenco*.

Nowadays it is the largest building offering information and services on this art, and it is available to researchers, students and the general public. Each document is included in a database which is freely accessible on the internet. The main objectives of this Centre are to promote and protect the traditional values of flamenco, as well as to favour its investigation, restoration, teaching and dissemination through the use of specialised publications and activities. Finally, it also gathers and stores material and documents which contribute to perpetuating flamenco throughout the years.³

4.3. Alboreá magazine and Nueva Alboreá magazine

It is as magazine created to foster the development of flamenco, and nowadays it is considered as a reference concerning any aspect of the flamenco culture. It is edited both in PDF and digital format. It includes interviews of people of interest and publications about flamenco.⁴

4.4. Flamenco research magazine La Madrugá

It is a magazine specialised in Flamenco from many perspectives, such as music (singing, dancing and guitar playing), history, literature, journalism, sociology, philosophy and anthropology. It is intended as a platform for publications and allows free access to contents (Ortega, 2016).⁵

4.5. Journal of the Telethusa flamenco research centre

This magazine, which is specialised in flamenco, publishes the investigations carried out by the members of the Telethusa Flamenco Research Centre, although it is also open to external contributions.

The Journal's main objective is to help to develop and spread scientific knowledge on any aspect of flamenco, especially studies on physical activity and health and flamenco art and dance in general, in order to make up for a lack of public and academic support as a reference for flamenco investigations and studies.

The Journal is aimed at those who like flamenco dance and flamenco art, as well as dance in general (Revista de investigación del flamenco Telethusa, 2016).⁶

4.6. Ministry of education and science website

On the website of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports the folklore of Spain is offered as an educational source for teachers. Although this page gives a general view of all traditional folklore in Spain, there is a particular section about flamenco offering the possibility to listen to different *cantes*, reading scores, compounding guitar melodies, etc. It is well constructed and the content is perfect for educational purposes.⁷

4.7. Andalusia's website, flamenco section

Andalusia's website (Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, 2008) provides specific and complete information about flamenco singing, dancing and guitar playing. Although it is dedicated to tourism, there are sections dedicated to flamenco news, offers and experiences, events and guided visits. We can find also video clips and audio-visual sources.⁸

4.8. Flamenco website

It is a digital source (ADN Flamenco, 2016) which offers a wide range of information about flamenco and its most important facets: interviews, courses, news, flamenco fashion, artists, general media, etc.⁹

Other sources with the shared objective of spreading flamenco culture are: *Instituto Andaluz del Flamenco* (Andalusian Institute for Flamenco) in Seville, *Biblioteca Pública Francisco Villa Espesa* (Francisco Villa Espesa Public Library) in Almería, *Biblioteca Pública Provincial* (Provincial Public Library) in Cádiz, *Filmoteca de Andalucía* (Film Library of Andalusia) in Córdoba, *Biblioteca de Andalucía* (Library of Andalusia) in Granada, *Biblioteca Pública Provincial* (Provincial Public Library) in Huelva, *Biblioteca provincial* (Provincial Library) in Jaén, *Archivo Histórico Provincial* (Provincial Historical Archive) in Málaga, *Biblioteca Pública Provincial* (Provincial Public Library) in Seville and *Instituto Cervantes* (Cervantes Institute) in Fez, Chicago, Sao Paulo, Tokyo and Paris).

Finally, the National Institute of Flamenco, which is not located in Spain but rather in Albuquerque, New Mexico, whose mission is to preserve and promote flamenco throughout the world by educating the American family (National Institute of Flamenco, 2016).

5. Final thoughts

This article has analysed the characteristics of flamenco dance, its terminology and main sources in order to learn and teach it. Flamenco is a difficult form of art which transmits passion in each of its three components: song, dance and music. It is also a living art which represents a way of perceiving and interpreting life. Because of this, it needs to be continually updated in Spain. Improving the development and dissemination of flamenco does implies not only taking advantage of it as a tourist attraction, but also designing and implementing mechanisms to promote flamenco in the educational, research and new technologies areas. Below, we will reflect on each of these areas and the connections between them, although the research field has been established as the main aim of this article.

Regarding research on flamenco, there is no doubt that there are excellent opportunities in Spain to research the ethnographic aspect of flamenco (Jiménez, 2015; Thomas, 2002). However, it seems that the Spanish people do not know how to manage the opportunities of this field, since flamenco investigation is still in its initial stages and does not reach the level required by this art.

It is worth noting that Andalusia is the region in Spain with the best conditions as well as regulations which are supported by article 68 of the Spanish Law on Historic Heritage 2007 (BOJA, 19 December 2007). This means that Andalusia currently has a vast base of information, protection and cataloguing of the patrimony of flamenco, something that has been portrayed along these pages.

In this respect, although there are interesting sources of research, there are some traditional lines of argument focused on historical facts, such as the biographies of artists, and audio-visual records. Nowadays, there are few studies available which contribute to the development of flamenco dance

teaching both in educational and professional fields. In order to minimise this fact, several congresses and meetings have been arranged, some with virtual spaces focused on research and investigation, identifying researchers, lines of investigation and open-access online documents. These congresses try to point out the work of researchers and the low academic recognition existing in this field today.

This situation can also be explained by the problems surrounding ethnic prejudices in Spanish society, since flamenco is associated with low-class gypsy people, which diminishes the positive image that Spanish people should have of it. This, in our opinion, results in flamenco being relegated to spare time activities (fairs, flamenco festivals, extracurricular activities, etc.) which have nothing to do with its reality and learning possibilities.

This inefficiency also affects the tourist and educational fields. As Aoyama (2009) has shown, flamenco in Spain focuses on the cultural industry and tourists, and it survives and thrives through the combination of local talent, tourists, and the government subsidising the artists through state-sponsored spectacles. High-quality flamenco should be available in the tourist area. That is to say, flamenco should be taught in dance academies providing titles and certifications which prove the level of quality expected in these performances, shows and other events taking place in the industry.

Regarding the educational system, as has been seen throughout this article, flamenco dance has been included as part of the content of Andalusia's educational curriculum. However, it is clear that it is necessary to promote and encourage its teaching both inside and outside of schools (Pardo & Pacheco-Alvarez, 2014; Vargas & Fernandez, 2012). This is due to the fact that Spain's curriculum—and specifically Andalusia's curriculum—permits teachers to select contents, and therefore flamenco is subsequently excluded from classrooms. In this sense, it is necessary for teachers to receive better training, motivating them and making them feel secure when teaching flamenco.

Moreover, all aspects of flamenco—and concretely flamenco dance since it is the subject matter of this article—should have more presence thanks to the new technologies, which can be used as a resource to share and disseminate flamenco's traditional and rich culture as a characteristic element of Spanish culture and specifically of Andalusia.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, despite the fact that there is still a long path to travel in flamenco, its reality promises a bright future in terms of its artistic field and the rest of its components. Proof of this can be seen in some of the conferences that have taken place in Spain in recent years which approach flamenco from different perspectives including the new technologies, cultural heritage, education, research, tourism, media and cultural industry. This is possible thanks to the progress made in recent years, making it possible to change a genre which takes advantage of new formats to transmit tradition.

Funding

The author received no direct funding for this research.

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Citation information

Cite this article as: Flamenco dance. Characteristics, resources and reflections on its evolution, Maria Cuellar-Moreno, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2016), 3: 1260825.

Notes

1. On webpage Red 2000 (2016) which displays information about Spanish travels, regions, cities, coasts, islands

and culture. This information can be found in English, German and Spanish.

2. This information is also available in Spanish.

3. It can be consulted online on the *Centro Andaluz de Flamenco* website.

4. It can be consulted online on the *Centro Andaluz de Flamenco* website.

5. This information can be found in English and Spanish.

6. This information can be found in English, Japanese and Spanish.

7. This content is only available in Spanish.

8. All available in languages such as English, French, German and Spanish.

9. Online flamenco magazine and shop. This information is available in English and in Spanish.

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