

# A Shared Technique/Shared Roots? A Comparison of Kathak and Flamenco Dance History

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# A Shared Technique/Shared Roots?: A Comparison of Kathak and Flamenco Dance History<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

There is much mention by dance critics, scholars, artists and students about the similarities between the two dance genres kathak, the classical form which originated in Northern India, and flamenco, the dance that grew out of the Gypsy and Andalusian cultures of Southern Spain. The reason that is often superimposed upon the question of why these forms bear such resemblance to one another, is based on the commonly believed theory that the Gypsies have their origins from northern India. However, in comparing kathak and flamenco dance history, several additional cultural and historical commonalities are revealed. Although to identify what specific effects these various influences had on the dance would require years of intensive scholarship on multitudes of levels, nevertheless, to compare kathak and flamenco's dance history can provide a necessary first step.

This paper compares and contrast the historical development of kathak and flamenco dance as they exist in their present-day form. The paper investigates the two different human responses which each form emerged out of, and looks at common features in their historical development, such as, related cultural and religious influences, similar shifts occurring in dance performance context and dance form and function.

Additionally, an overview of speculated bridges linking kathak and flamenco are presented—these include both existing theories, as well as personal speculation. Although no attempt is made to find a definitive answer to the mysterious phenomenon of why kathak and flamenco share so many common technical features, some important questions and considerations are raised about existing possibilities, thus, providing a stepping stone for further investigation.

This paper encompasses a wide range of literary sources which include: literature on the historical and cultural background of each dance form, and literature on the history of the Gypsies and Muslim culture. This study adds to the limited body of literature on kathak and flamenco dance history, and serves as an initial effort towards a more complete cross-cultural study.

## Kathak and Flamenco Dance

Commonly shared features can be observed in kathak and flamenco on a dance motific level—such as, how the body is used in space, specific movement techniques and positions of body parts (as in, hands, arms, feet, whole body positions, turns). Similarities can also be seen on a structural level—that is, how individual movement motifs and patterns are organized into larger sections or parts of a dance (such as, sections emphasizing upper body carriage, footwork, or integrated full body movements).

Some of these shared features have already been noted by dance historians and critics. One example is Deborah Jowitt's 1974 review of a kathak performance by Birju Maharaj. She writes:

...the straight, fairly narrow stance of the dancers, the emphasis on rhythmically complex stamping, and the relaxed, weaving arm gestures that accompany the footwork are so like Spanish Flamenco dancing...

The resemblance to a Spanish "zapateado" was remarkable: the dancer's bearing and vigor, the way his body rode easily on his stamping feet, his focus and arm gestures that directed our attention—and his—toward that fusillade of rhythm. Except that Maharaj was not booted but barefoot, and his ankles bore six-inch-wide collars of bells [Jowitt 1974:44].

Let us turn now to the history of kathak and flamenco.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is excerpted from a Masters' thesis in Dance Ethnology which analyzes and compares kathak and flamenco dance technique. [See Phillips 1991.] Available at the University of California Los Angeles (U.C.L.A.) University Research Library, or the U.C.L.A. Department of Dance.

