

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

Miriam S. Phillips

This article originally appeared in the *Proceedings of the Society of Dance History Scholars: Dance in Hispanic Cultures* (Fourteenth Annual Conference New World School of the Arts. Miami, Florida 8-10 February 1991. Riverside, CA: Society of Dance History Scholars (pages: 47-53).

© No part of this document may be Xeroxed or reproduced in any way without permission of the author. Miriam Phillips can be contacted through World Arts West, San Francisco, California (415) 474-3914, or my writing: MiriamSPhillips@hotmail.com.

© Copyright by
Miriam S. Phillips 1991
All rights reserved.

A Shared Technique/Shared Roots?: A Comparison of Kathak and Flamenco Dance History¹

Miriam S. Phillips
University of California Los Angeles

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.

¹ 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.

Kathak

Kathak is the predominant classical dance from North India, its' traditional centers being in Delhi, Lucknow, Jaipur, Benares. The form as we know it today is an interweaving of Hindu and Muslim elements that combine narrative dance with "pure dance" movement (it is the later which I compare to flamenco).

The word "Kathaka" has been found in literary texts as far back as the Sanskrit epic, the Mahabharata (about second century A.D.) and referred to a wandering community of story-tellers who performed in village courtyards and in Hindu temples teaching the legends and epics of Hindu mythology through mimetic dance gesture, narration and song. Believed to be from the highest social class, the priestly Brahman caste, the kathakas also used the dance as a medium of worship and religious contemplation. Little is known about the form of kathak during this "Hindu Period" except that it embodied the most religious qualities at this time. Eventually, the name of the people who performed this narrative movement became the name of the dance form—kathak.

India came in contact with Islamic culture as early as the eighth century through Arab and Turk raids, and later, through the expansion of Muslim merchantery. However, it was not until the twelfth century that the systematic Muslim conquest of India began which culminated into the founding of the Mughal Empires of the 15th through 19th centuries [Lapidus 1989:438-441]. The syncretic nature of early Islamic culture blended with the already strongly developed Hindu philosophy and social structure to create a distinctive Indian-Islamic civilization, much of which was manifested through the arts, particularly, painting, poetry, music, architecture, and dance.

As great patrons of the arts, the Mughal rulers hired the "kathaks" to entertain them in their lavish courts. Consequently kathak underwent a tremendous transformation in form and function. The strict Islamic ideology which forbids the representation of God in human form forced kathak dancers to modify or disguise religious movements. Kathak became fully crystalized during this "Court Period," and many believe that the intricate and mathematically complex footwork that is so characteristic of today's kathak, as well as the emphasis on geometric form and design developed here. New forms of kathak dance/music genres also emerged which synthesized the Mughal's Persian-Indian sentiments. The declining financial support from the Hindu temples combined with the enthusiastic patronage of Mughal rulers, caused the locus of the "kathaks" performance to move from temple to court—shifting their role from devotee to entertainer.

In the later courts of the 19th century Nawabs of Oudh, some gifted dancers and teachers arrived to lay the foundations of the first formal lineages of kathak, which developed into the three distinct gharanas, (schools) of Lucknow, Jaipur and Benares—traditionally made up of familial lineages that are passed down through the males in the family; sons or nephews.

During the British invasion of the mid-eighteenth century, kathak suffered a period of waning and demotion. Essentially losing its "work place," that is, the Muslim courts, the kathaks had no where to turn but to the brothels and streets

Kathak's rise in status during the first part of this century was largely due to the attention it was given by such renown dancers as, Ruth St. Denis, Anna Pavlova, and Uday Shankar. After India's Independence in 1947, kathak received government sponsorship and gained national and international status. The shift onto the stage in front of a wider audience subjected kathak to modern trends of technical virtuosity and commercialization. New forms emerged: evening "ballets" based on Hindu epics, large group choreographies—all set within a secular context. However, at the core of kathak, a spiritual regard for the dance and a traditional modality of performance repertoire still remains.

Flamenco

Flamenco is an amalgamation of Spain's heritage, particularly that of Andalusia (southern Spain) and of the Gypsy's lineage. Many cultural groups left their imprint on Spanish soil from the third century B.C., culminating into the glorious Moorish civilization founded in the 8th century. The Moors—like their North Indian Mughal cousins, cultivated artistic refinement, particularly in architecture, poetry, music and, many believe, dance. Due to the economic wealth of the Moorish empire between the 8th and 15th centuries, and the contributions of the Sephardic Jews, Andalusia became regarded as the cultural center of the western world.

The Gypsies, who migrated from India to Spain in various waves, incorporated particular traits and customs from the peoples whose land they passed through, into their own already unique customs, language and way of life. Additionally, the Gypsies were most often met by extreme persecution, condemnation, and were forced to survive under the most adverse conditions.

The Gypsies received a short-lived respite upon their arrival into Muslim Spain. This did not last long, however, for Christian monarchs in the North began preparing to reconquest Spain. Demanding a religiously homogeneous Spanish society, Andalusia became the target of Christian attack during the Spanish Inquisition of the mid-15th century which forced Jews, Muslims, and Gypsies into conversion or expulsion, and even extermination. Over the next four centuries, the once prosperous Andalusia became the poorest, most underdeveloped region in Spain.

It was out of these extreme conditions of the persecuted people of Andalusia, and through a complex process of interaction between Gypsy and non-Gypsy, that the first semblances of flamenco sprouted. Vigorous separatism that once existed between Gypsy and non-Gypsy faded as the shared poverty and social marginalization of Andalusian populations generated the profound symbiosis of the gitano-andaluz complex. Gypsies, however, had an added burden of continued persecution enforced by the Spanish Monarchy, therefore, they continued to assert a defensive ethnic pride and maintained their own unique customs.

Flamenco dance and music was forged out of the inter-play of Gypsy traditions and Andalusian folk forms. However, the first contexts of flamenco performance appeared to have been private, deeply emotional events that were kept hidden within the seclusion of Gypsy familial gatherings, in which a unique sense of cultural identity was achieved. Early urban flamenco events took place in secluded rooms in bars, or in the patios of Gypsy dwellings. The most primary element of flamenco was the cante, which vocalized the long-felt sentiments of the Andalusian Gypsy. The dance emerged as an expression of the cante, and therefore, consisted of spontaneous, rudimentary movements of minimal length involving elements that, some believe, descended from Moorish influence: wrist rotations, fluid hips, and uplifted arms. Like kathak, flamenco became a craft passed down through familial dynasties.

The word "flamenco" did not come into use until the later part of the 18th century, and as in kathak, the word "flamenco" was used to describe the people that were performing this art form, such as in the Arabic "felag menju," "fugitive peasants," or as in "flamancia," denoting the kind of fieriness and brashness which became associated with the Gypsies and Andalusians.

The Spanish bourgeoisie initially looked upon flamenco with scorn considering it an activity of an outcast, hedonistic society. However, eighteenth century Romantic literature propagated an interest in flamenco through its depictions of the exotic Gypsy and picturesque Andalusian lifestyles. This interest eventually drew flamenco out of seclusion, and led to the opening of the first cafe cantantes, some of the earliest established commercial venues of flamenco performance.

The cafe cantante period of the 19th-\ centuries marked a dramatic shift in flamenco context and ultimately altered its form and style. Like kathak, flamenco shifted from a private, ritualistic, intimate art form to a public spectacle and form of entertainment. What had once been short, spontaneous, improvised vignettes of gestural movement with little footwork, now became longer choreographies involving virtuoso footwork, a more defined body line, the creation of diversified and complex dance movements, and the expansion of repertoire and styles.

With the advent of 20th century technological growth and mass-media, flamenco achieved national and international acclaim and shifted into theatrical settings. Throughout flamenco's commercial progression, however, there has always remained a core of traditional flamenco styles and contexts.

Comparative summary of kathak and flamenco dance history

Although the birth of kathak and flamenco emerged out of two very different human responses, they share some common features in their historical and contextual development. Kathak grew out of the spiritual expression of a particular community, or caste, of Hindu devotees of North India (the kathakas), whereas flamenco emerged as an outcry of the human suffering of an oppressed and depressed society in southern Spain, particularly that of the Andalusian Gypsy.

Kathak and flamenco share a similar progression of shifts in dance performance contexts and consequential changes in dance function and form. Both dance forms traditionally started out in more intimate, private settings, serving both sacred or ritual-like functions and a means of promoting tradition. Kathak, originally performed in Hindu temples and village courtyards, served as a form of religious worship and a means of maintaining Hindu religious tradition. Flamenco traditionally occurred in bars and in the courtyards of Gypsy families, and was used as a means of alleviating and transforming the pains of their condition, as well as reinforcing Gypsy ethnic identity.

Later both forms of dance moved to semi-public contexts and served secular functions as forms of entertainment or diversion for "foreign" audiences, or, those outside the traditional performance

community. Kathak moved to the lavish courts of the Mughal Nawabs and Hindu Maharajas, and flamenco moved into the smokey rooms and small stages of the cafe cantantes owned by non-Gypsies. These setting, geared for public spectacle, spurred the dance into a new creative impetus being that the attention was now on the outer look of the dance, rather than on the inner experience of it.

Prior to kathak and flamenco's ultimate popularization, both forms were viewed by the dominant upper class as being lewd, debauched activities for the degenerate. By the 20th century, however, kathak and flamenco had both arrived onto proscenium theater stages, being performed for large audiences. Both dance forms have been acclaimed a national dance form and, although flamenco is more popular or known than kathak, both dances have become internationally recognized.

Although no one knows for sure what the form of either dance form looked like in their early stages of development, it is considered that the gradual shift from private to public contexts catalyzed the dance technique to transform from a rudimentary, perhaps more gestural, spontaneous style involving little use of footwork, to one of great technical sophistication and a highlighted use of complex footwork.

Culturally, kathak and flamenco dance emerged out of a blend of several cultural and religious layerings. Kathak being made up primarily of Hindu and Persian-Muslim sensibilities, and flamenco wove together elements of Andalusia's early history including, from the Sephardic Jews, the Moors (incorporating Arab-Muslim style), the Christians, and the Gypsies—who carried an Indian heritage. The two cultural/religious influences that kathak and flamenco have in common with each other are the Indian (specifically North Indian), and the Muslim. Looking deeper into these cultural links perhaps could lead to some answers as to why kathak and flamenco dance share so many common technical features.

Speculated Bridges Linking Kathak and Flamenco

The purpose of this section is to present some hypotheses, personal speculations, questions and considerations as to how the shared dance elements between kathak and flamenco may have come about. I begin with what I call the "Gypsy Theory."

The Gypsy theory²

The Gypsies, considered a nomadic race of people who have descended from Aryan clans of northwest India, carry an ambiguous historical legacy. Many Gypsiologists believe they descended from the lowest castes of the Indian social structure, while others postulate they are from higher castes—even the priestly Brahman. Theories of Gypsy diaspora include tales of Gypsies fleeing India from Alexander the Great, being hired out as entertainers to a Persian kingdom, pariah tribes wanting to break free of the Indian caste system, mass exodus with Rajput soldiers in response to Muslim invasions, and so on [Clébert 1963:40, Grande 1979:40-47, Rishi 1976:55]. The dates attributed to these various tales of Gypsies' departure from India span all the way from 350 B.C. to the 15th century A.D., with most dates falling between the 5th and 10th centuries. It is possible, then, that there was not one, but several waves of Gypsy emigration from India.

Gypsy migrational routes once leaving India are also controversial, however, many agree that there were two distinct routes that they traveled on after entering into Persia. A northern route passing into Inner Asia, Eastern Europe, France, and consequently to Spain via the north; and a southern route running into Syria, Palestine, along the Mediterranean, to Egypt, North Africa, and possibly into Andalusia (although Spanish records only identify one Gypsy arrival).

The first question that must be asked in regard to a "Gypsy theory" is, how did the Gypsies come to be the bridge between kathak and flamenco? Certainly the descriptions written about the "kathakas" of earlier centuries, who are described as being a wandering community of dancers, musicians and story-tellers who entertained in villages, are reminiscent of descriptions of nomadic Gypsy tribes of dancers, musicians, monkey and bear trainers. The thought has crossed my mind many times how similar these two pictures appear, and I have sometimes wondered if the "kathakas" could have been Gypsies. However, given that the "kathakas" were considered to be from highest Brahman orders of the Indian caste system, and the Gypsies, generally—but debatably—are thought to be from the lowest castes, this probability seems highly unlikely. As mentioned earlier, there are scholars who consider the Gypsies to be from the higher Kshatriya or even Brahman castes which raises the question once more.

² I use the term "Gypsy" to encompass the various names of the nomadic clans (e.g. Luri, Banjara, Dom, etc.) who are believed to be the ancestors of what the Europeans now call "Roms," "gitanos," or "Gypsies."

Another notion is based on Indian Gypsiologist W.R. Rishi's theory in which he describes an important exodus of Indian Rajputs that happened in response to a 12th century Moslem invasion. He notes:

"In order to be self-sufficient and to allow inner mobility, [the Rajputs] attracted men and women from all the population groups which included...cow-grazers,...traders, horse-dealers,...blacksmiths,...magicians,...astrologers,...and of course there were singers, dancers,...reciters...and bear and monkey-leaders... And this is borne out by the different occupations in which the Roma [European name for Gypsy] are experts and engage themselves even to the present day" [Rishi 1976:55-56].

I ask, could these dancers have been "kathakas?"

I think the question of a possible relationship between kathakas and Gypsies bears weight for further investigation. One would need to identify much more specifically who the "kathakas" were, as well as, who the Indian Gypsies were, and on the migrational/emigrational routes of these people.

Another critical consideration in this "Gypsy theory" is that most of the dates given for their departure from India occur before the 15th century, or in other words, this was long before the Mughal empire was established in India. This means that if the Gypsies had any contact with kathak dance at all, it was before it became a fully crystalized dance form as it came to be during the Mughal regime. Therefore, another question arises: if the Gypsies came in contact with kathak, at what stage of development was it in, and what specific elements did they take from it? Given that the footwork of both kathak and flamenco developed at a later time, it seems unlikely that it was the footwork that they took—however, it is the footwork which is the most outstanding shared feature between kathak and flamenco of today.

In order to identify what specific dance elements may have been passed from one form to another, hard archeo-choreological and ethno-historical research would need to be conducted to find out about early forms of kathak dance, Indian "Gypsy" dance, and early flamenco dance.

The Muslim theory

A second theory I call the "Muslim Theory," is based on the idea that the Muslim culture is the bridge between kathak and flamenco rather than the Gypsies. Muslim contribution to both dance forms, via the Indian Mughals and the Spanish Moors, is significant. The hypothesis that the Muslims could be responsible for this bridge is rarely considered, however, personally, I think there is much validity to this idea, particularly since both Muslim groups descended from Caliphate lineages—who had a unique proclivity for the performing arts in their lavish courts. Furthermore, there are acknowledged Indian influences on many forms of Muslim art and poetry. What did the Moors receive of this influence, and what did they pass onto the later Mughal Empire?

Another possibility of a Muslim bridge between kathak and flamenco again brings in the Gypsies. First of all, many tales of Gypsy departure from India identify Muslims as being the cause, such as, Gypsy performers being sent to a king in Persia, Gypsies expelled by Muslim rulers, and so on. Secondly, theories on Gypsy diaspora commonly mention their contact with Muslims, there are tales of Gypsies fighting against Muslims, Gypsies fighting with Muslims against somebody else, and Gypsies contact with Muslims in Spain, etc.

Given that the Muslim expansion from the 8th through 18th centuries overlapped with the forenamed Gypsy migrations, and that both groups traveled over some of the same geographical areas, it seems likely that Gypsies and Muslims had continuous interaction with each other over centuries. Flamencologist Félix Grande has raised the questions: "One night, did they every sing and dance together? Did their mutual nomadic existence [and I add, interaction] provoke similarities in their forms of dance and music" [Grande 1979:53]?

In order to answer some of these questions, further research on Muslim political rule and dance of Muslim cultures at large is critical. Furthermore, a comparison between Mughal and Moorish cultures is essential, particularly dance research into the specific Mughal contribution to kathak, and the Moorish influence on flamenco.

