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# An Analysis of Dance in Cuba: Flamenco

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## **Introduction**

Cuba is an island defined by its mixture of people, long inhabited by indigenous people, colonized by white Europeans and built by African slaves. Each of these people had their own culture, history, and music, which has maintained and fused over the centuries. This paper will look into and address how the development of flamenco in Cuba added to their music culture as well as how other ethnicities, such as Africans, have molded Cuban style flamenco. In order to answer this question we must first look at the history of Flamenco in Cuba as well as in Spain, the Afro and indigenous role in shaping the music culture in Cuba, and the overall view and opinion of Flamenco in Cuba.

## **Background**

Cuba, like other Caribbean and South American nations, is a nation that was shaped by those who colonized it. In 1492, the Spanish arrived in Cuba and soon after began to settle. With them, they brought their own way of life, art, culture, and of course slaves. Both the Spanish and the slaves quickly began to shape and define Cuban society and culture into a hybrid of the sophisticated European style and the Afro-indigenous tribal style. This unique culture can be often best expressed in the music and dance of a people. Flamenco, originally danced and brought over the Atlantic by the Spanish was quickly influenced by the Afro as well as the indigenous people of Cuba and has developed today into not only its own distinct style but has led to new dances being created that are specifically Cuban.

Before the presence of the Spanish in Cuba, the indigenous Taíno people thrived in Cuba and had a rich culture centered on religion and ceremony. Myths and traditions were perpetuated through ceremonial dances, drumbeats, and oral tradition. These people were deeply in tune with

each other through music and dance (Daniel, 1995). We can only guess on the form of the music of the Taíno people due to the lack of information left by the Spanish. However, it is known that the music of the natives is generally very simple and monophonic, meaning that it contains a single line that descends in its tone (Peñalosa, 2009). Sandra Spernacka says that “Cubans dance to live to dance and dance to live.” (2017). She suggests that naturally the indigenous Cuban people took to the new dances of the people who came to their island because for them it was in their blood and a large part of their lives.

The first colonies in Cuba began in 1510 and soon after slaves began arriving in the ports of Cuba. However, unlike other non-Hispanic Caribbean islands, Cuba for many years had a predominantly white settlement and a minority of black slaves. Because of this, at first Cuban dances were only small variations on the forms, such as flamenco, brought from Andalucía (Daniel, 1995). As the 18<sup>th</sup> century ensued more black Africans were coming to Cuba at the start of the sugar plantations in Cuba (Ortiz, 1987). This is where the traditional dances of the south of Spain, like flamenco, got their inherently Cuban nature. The presence of more slaves with more influence and freedom than one would expect began to become apparent in the dances of the island says Daniel (1995). These new styles changed in both dance and music. Notably the rumba, according to Ortiz may have come from fragments of dances remembered by the African slaves (1987). This dance was then picked up by the Spanish still flourishing on the island and taken back to Spain where the dance took on a more European and gypsy form called rumba gitana or rumba flamenco. In its original form it had very complicated rhythms but by the time it reached Europe had a more simple style. Another dance that travel back to Spain from Cuba was the Guajira. This word guajiro describes a Cuban farmer but guajira means a girl in the language

of the natives of Cuba (Bryant). The rhythm is similar to a traditional style of flamenco called the bulería but adds different instruments and accentuations (Bryant, n.d.).

One of the largest influences that brought about change in the Spanish flamenco style was the Afro-Cubans. Spernacka says about the Africans brought over as slaves, “Without their drums and their willpower to dance through the agonizing journey, many slaves may not have arrived to Cuba alive.” (2017). This need to dance and create music is what gave birth to the Europe-Afro fusion in the music and dance of Cuba. The slaves were made to dance in the European way, but as a subtle form of protest gave the dance and music their own style. They introduced new instruments like the bongos, tambourine, and the clave (Daniel, 1995). The rumba is a perfect example of how the music of Cuba, while inherently European, has African overtones. Other dances like the Contradanza, from the French Contradanse, was created with incorporated African rhythms. Further, the Danzón, Mamba, and Cha-Cha all soon followed the Contradanse. All of these dances had more sensuality and freedom than the traditional European dances and were considered scandalous due to its use of partner dancing (Daniel, 1995). However, these dances eventually made it back to Europe and are prominent dances in today typical ballroom dancing repertoire.

Flamenco in Cuba today has continued to mimic the trends of Flamenco in Spain. In Spain at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, musicians made Flamenco music a fun and popular music to listen to again. They did this by letting go of some of the more technical aspects, and instead focusing on the music being enjoyable to any listener. Flamenco dancing followed this trend and a much more casual and everyday version was formed. Additionally, while the Spaniards of the south, the Andalusians and the descendants of the gitanos or gypsies who originally brought Flamenco into being continued to dance in the most traditional style,

Flamenco has also become classicized. It was taught in schools by maestros and maestras, dancing Flamenco professionally became the careers of many dancers, and most significantly it started being taught in ballet schools. Today, the National Ballet of Spain primarily dances and is known for their Flamenco dancing, as well as their unique hybrid of ballet and flamenco in shows. It has become and dance for the elite and professional, where as its origins are rooted in taverns and pubs as a dance of the people.

Cuba impacted Flamenco so greatly that people back in Spain began to dance in the new Cuban style. This impact is referred to as “Cantes de ida y vuelta” – which translates to roundtrip songs (Bryant, n.d.). It describes the new styles that travelled back from Latin America, renewed and reintroduced to Spain. One of the largest aspects in which this can be seen is the music and the African instruments introduced into the flamenco style. Classically, Flamenco music consisted of only three parts, the cantaora or the singer, the guitar, and palmas or rhythmic clapping. Today, however, it is impossible to see a flamenco show performed without a cajón a wooden box used for percussion which has its origins as an Afro-Peruvian instrument. Additionally, in the more Cuban version, known as rumba flamenco, claves, congo drums, and maracas are added into the music and are all instruments of African origin (Peñalosa, 2009).

The earliest ancestor of the urban styles of rumba developed in slave barracks long before rumba as a genre became established. Additionally, the widespread yuka dance and music of Congolese origin was integrated, lending its percussion instruments and dance moves (Peñalosa, 2009). We also know that secret Abakua traditions rooted in the Calabar region of West Africa that prevailed in both Havana and Matanzas also influenced the development of rumba (Daniel, 1995). Dances like the Rumba are traditionally sung and danced in a duple-meter (e.g.  $\frac{2}{4}$  or  $\frac{4}{4}$  time), the African culture and style influences the music through the polyrhythmic percussion.

Rhythms in a either a duple-meter or a triple-meter (e.g.  $\frac{9}{8}$  or  $\frac{3}{4}$  time) correlative are played over the duple-meter and carries the rhythm that must be followed by others for the song. The presence of these syncopated rhythms is directly due to African religious and ceremonial music tradition. Rhythmically, rumba is based on the five-stroke guide pattern called clave and the inherent structure it conveys. David Peñalosa phrases it best saying:

“During the nineteenth century, African music and European music sensibilities were blended together in original Cuban hybrids. Cuban popular music became the conduit through which sub-Saharan rhythmic elements were first codified within the context of European ('Western') music theory. The first written music rhythmically based on clave was the Cuban Danzón, which premiered in 1879. The contemporary concept of clave with its accompanying terminology reached its full development in Cuban popular music during the 1940s. Its application has since spread to folkloric music as well. In a sense, the Cubans standardized their myriad rhythms, both folkloric and popular, by relating nearly all of them to the clave pattern. The veiled code of African rhythm was brought to light due to clave's omnipresence. Consequently, the term *clave* has come to mean both the five-stroke pattern and the total matrix it exemplifies. In other words, the rhythmic matrix is the *clave matrix*. Clave is the key that unlocks the enigma; it decodes the rhythmic puzzle. It's commonly understood that the actual clave pattern does not need to be played in order for the music to be 'in clave'” (2009).

## **Method**

Due to the nature of the question ‘How has flamenco changed Cuban dance and vice-versa?’ being a highly opinionated question the method of data collection was chosen to be primarily qualitative as opposed to quantitative. Research was aimed to be primarily conducted using interviews, observations, as well as self-immersion. However, once in country, it was hard to find bystanders who were willing to talk to you, and even harder to find people with an opinion or interest in Flamenco dance and music. This meant that all research had to come from

the professional dancers and musicians in the country. This proved to be just as difficult, and research while in country proved to be difficult and results and answers hard to come by. It was only through a series of emails and one live show that research was able to be conducted.

## **Results**

In Cuba, Flamenco music and dance has become exclusively classicized and danced professionally. This is different from Spain however, in that the dances that came from Flamenco have been strongly classicized but still continue to be dances in the streets and tablao settings. Rumba, is widely danced in studios and taught professionally, not only in Cuba but around the world. Flamenco in Cuba, has not taken over, as it has in Spain. In the National Ballet of Cuba, ballet is still the main form of dance with Flamenco taking a back seat. This can be seen in a quick search of their performance schedule. However, in recent years two notable companies have formed, originating from the National Ballet, that focus primarily on Flamenco and its conservation both in the traditional and Cuban form. The first company, Compañía Liza Alfonso, is a widely successful and acclaimed studio. Compañía Liza Alonso is very similar to that of the National Ballet of Spain in that they often fuse together ballet and flamenco. The Compañía Liza Alfonso is an expression of the mixture that characterizes the Cuban culture. Their shows fuse elements of ballet, flamenco, modern and contemporary dance, with Cuban and Afro-Cuban rhythms, which has led the specialized critics to describe their work as unique and different (Hernandez, 2015). This company is just as highly acclaimed as the National Ballet of Cuba and has travelled the world sharing the unique styles of dance in Cuba. However, due to its ability to reach such high acclaim as well as the over protective nature of the people and government in Cuba, it is not an option to simply visit and observe the dancers in the studio. Permission to enter the building is required and one must know someone who is a part of the studio already and



request the access weeks in advance. Due to this it was not possible to observe and interview the dancers of the Compañía Liza Alfonso. The second company, a smaller but still highly successful company, is the Compañía Flamenco Ecos. This company is unique in that they only dance Flamenco. The focus of Ecos is in traditional flamenco and its scenic expressions with additional representation in tablao performance, as well as theater shows where combined elements of traditional music and choreography modified into more contemporary setting (Kim, n.d.). Ecos was founded by a group of dancers and musicians; with musical roots to the Andalucía region of Spain who had the desire to “rescue the art of Flamenco in Cuba and promote as well as educate national and international audience in the Art of Flamenco.” (Ecos, 2015). While they focus on the preservation of traditional form of flamenco they of course have great love for their country and its own style of the dance. Rumba flamenco is the pinnacle of how the Cubans had a return impact on flamenco dancing and its music and is part of the company Eco’s points of preservation. Examples of their goals of preservation can be most clearly seen in their performances.

While they still perform in theatres and main stages, they stay true to the gitano style by giving performances in restaurants and bars. This company being smaller and less officially organized responded quickly to emails and was excited at the prospect of people wanting to learn about the Flamenco culture in Cuba. However, the company, during the duration of the visit to Cuba, was preparing for an event in Turkey and did not have time to accommodate a visitor. Again, interviews were not able to be held. Thankfully this same group performed regularly at a restaurant in Old Havana at a restaurant called Mesón del la Flota. It was during this show that the vast amount of research took place and where it became very evident the tone and influence Flamenco brought to Cuba. The show involved three dancers, two female and one male, and five

instrumentalists, a guitarist, a cajón player, a palmera, a clave player, and a flautist. From the start it was clear the influence of the Afro-Cuban culture. Clave and flutes are not traditional instruments to the art of Flamenco and is something that Cubans used to make the style their own. The clave is an instrument that is deeply rooted in African culture and provided very distinct Afro-Cuban rhythms to this flamenco performance. The dances however, were generally danced in traditional Spanish palos or styles. They simply had their own Cuban rhythmic style. Only once was a Guajira, the most popular and recognized Cuban flamenco style, danced. This made it clear that after the rumba and other traditional Spanish dances were created, flamenco was quick to return to its old ways. The music though, remained quintessentially Cuban (Ausbrook, personal communication, March 2017).

Aside from these two companies however, Flamenco in Cuba is not widely danced. It has taken on a very elite form in many ways. As mentioned earlier, if one does not already work for or dance for the company wants to visit the National Ballet of Cuba they first must get written permission to even be allowed to enter the building, similar to the Compañía Liza Alfonso. These restrictions cut off flamenco from the Cuban people and they now see it as a form of dance equal to that of the ballet, not something to be danced at parties. The company Ecos, is the most traditional and open company today in Cuba. They are open to other's interests in Flamenco as well as their company and sharing with as many people as possible Cuban and traditional Flamenco.

Today, most studios or schools around the country focus on teaching primarily the Cuban and Latin styles of dance. Signs can be seen outside many school both in and outside of Havana offering lessons in Salsa, Chachacha, Bachata, Danzón, and of course Rumba. In the small town of Viñales three signs advertising lessons in the traditional Latin styles were found (Ausbrook,

personal communication, March 2017). These dances hone in on the Latin and Cuban tastes and unique culture. While they originate in Flamenco and European dance styles they very quickly became their own, incorporating more sexual Latin movements and afro rhythms to the music. Flamenco in Cuba today is a refined art and enjoyed by few and danced by even fewer. However, those who have seen a show or have learned the dance take great pride in how the Cuban culture has changed as well as embraced the dance which became evident in the emails exchanged with the owner of the Ecos company.

The lack of access to flamenco dancing found during this visit to Cuba but abundance of the music that came from its origins shows quite clearly that flamencos impact was most strongly made on the music of Cuba not the dance culture. During the flamenco show at Mesón de la Flota, traditional flamenco guitar was the focal point of the music being danced to, whether the song was traditional or local. The only thing that has changed are the percussion rhythms and really shows how other styles of music were developed from the traditional flamenco style, one change leads to another and then another. This percussion rhythm, the clave predominant in rumba, also predominant in rumba flamenco, is what sets it apart from traditional flamenco. Rumba flamenco is the pinnacle of how the Cubans had a return impact on flamenco dancing and its music and is part of the company Eco's main points of preservation.

### **Conclusion**

In Cuba, it is hard to fully understand the public opinion of Flamenco dancing and its impact on Cuban society because there is no opinion. In the same way that most Americans have no strong opinion or love for ballet, Cubans are not all that enticed with flamenco. It is an elite

dance that is no longer danced at parties or celebrations, or casually at a bar. It is reserved for primarily the stage. However, on the rare occasion that flamenco is presented to the Cubans in a more casual setting for example as a small tablao style show in a restaurant, which can be seen in the Mesón de la Flota in old Havana, they find a connection to the dance and enjoy and partake in the performance and atmosphere. Cubans recognize the history and culture that flamenco has added to Cuban dance, however, it is not part of their everyday culture. This is the reason the company Ecos wishes to bring it back and preserve it for the Cuban people. The Cubans love for dance today lies in the more Cuban styles, or the style that were created by the Cuban people from the styles brought by the Europeans. The notably more intimate and flamboyant dance of the rumba embodies what it is to be Cuban and is much more loved by the people. Rumba originates in the northern part of Cuba, specifically Havana and Matanzas (Daniel, 1995). It is based on African music and dance traditions, as well as the Spanish-based *coros de clave* (where rumba got its duple-meter from). Rumba, traditionally played and danced by the poor African workers in the streets, is one of Cuba's most characteristic forms of music and dance. It is quintessentially Cuban and in one dance can perfectly describe the history, culture, and people of Cuba. For this reason, the Cubans still today have a great love and widely dance rumba, which is clearly not the case for flamenco.

While the culture and music of Spain, primarily flamenco dancing, did obviously have an influence and impact on the Cuban dance culture the Cubans have long since created their own style and culture. Sandra Spernacka says that "Cubans dance to live to dance and dance to live." (2017) She suggests that naturally the indigenous Cuban people took to the new dances of the people who came to their island because for them it was in their blood and a large part of their lives. In typical Cuban fashion, they quickly made what was different and foreign their own and

embraced it as the first steps to being their own people with their own style. Flamenco dancing in Cuba today is seen as the echoes of music and dance and of a people and cultures that continue to resonate with the musicians and dancers. While today, Flamenco is not as widely danced as Rumba or even more recent and popular dances to music such as Reggaetón. However, the Flamenco danced in Cuba shows how the Cubans are a people equally descendant of the Spanish and the Africans and is a seamless merging of culture and style.

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